



The Business Of Tennis

Embrace Pressure

Michael Chang 08.22.08, 6:00 PM ET



As the best tennis players in the world get ready for the U.S. Open, it's hard not to reflect upon my 16-plus years on the Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP) Tour.

One might think those 16 years would feel like they were dragging on, but for me, they went by in the blink of an eye. One day, I was the youngest male Grand Slam champion at age 17, and then, before I know it, I was one of the oldest players on tour, trying to put names to all those new faces in the players' lounge. Welcome to professional sports!

Like a few other well-known athletes, I experienced a great deal of success at a very early age. In fact, I hold many "youngest ever" records on the pro tour. But with great success comes loads of pressure: Pressure from the media, from fans; pressure to perform, to succeed, to live up to expectations; pressure from sponsors and event organizers, and of course, from your opponents. And how you handle all that pressure becomes the greatest test.

Every player on the ATP Tour can hit a tennis ball well--make that *exceptionally* well. Hard, soft, high, low, with topspin, slice, backspin, right to left and left to right--you name it, they can do it.

So what separates the best from the rest of the pack? Sure, some of it is talent, hard work and execution. But a lot of it comes down to this: How do you handle the pressure?

It's very hard to teach someone how to deal with pressure. The best way is by being placed in the same situation time and time again until you find a way to overcome it. Some players never find that ability. Champions find a way, secure it within their memories, and draw upon those memories whenever the game or match is on the line.

For me, dealing with pressure had to do with focus. On the tennis court or off, if I want to achieve and succeed at something, I must be focused. And for the professional tennis player, distractions are a dime a dozen.

You wonder what others will think. Or worry about what will happen after the match. Who will be watching you play? What will the media say? What will I say in my post-match speech? Am I playing well enough to satisfy my sponsors' expectations? Am I starting to feel tired? What about my injury? What about that bad call I got? What will people think of me if I win? Or worse yet, what will people think if I lose?

My mother, who traveled with me for the first four years of my career and was my mentor and confidant, recognized that I had many of these distractions in my mind early in my career, and at times, they would prevent me from performing at my very best. So she challenged me:

"Michael, you're concentrating too much on what other people think, and because of that, you're losing focus. Let's get one thing straight--you *can not* please everybody. To please everybody is to please nobody."

Distractions never deal with the "now." In fact, most distractions can't even be addressed while you're out on the court. The key is to stay focused, keeping your eyes fixed on the prize. Recognize your opponents' strengths; exploit their weaknesses. Concentrate on the positive, not your errors.

By answering my mother's questions, I began to learn to deal with pressure. If I found myself losing focus, I'd kick myself hard. Eventually pressure became something I looked forward to, because I knew it would bring out my very best.

Did it mean I would win every time? No, of course not--no one wins every match. But it did mean that when it counted, when the pressure was really on, I was up for the challenge and welcomed it.

To some, pressure is something to be avoided and feared. But to the very best, it's a sign that you've arrived at what you've been training so diligently for, a chance to showcase all the talent and abilities that God has given you. Embrace it and stay focused.

In 1989, Michael Chang won the French Open at age 17, becoming the youngest-ever male winner of a Grand Slam singles title. He was recently inducted into the International Tennis Hall of Fame.

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