

# gaining CONFIDENCE

by Noel Callaghan

For most tennis players, being confident means believing that they can and will succeed. However, if there is uncertainty, it also means that there is doubt present in the mind and doubt, of course, cannot exist at the same time as confidence. This up and down confidence pattern in the player's psyche is known as a "fragile" form of confidence. The fragile roller-coaster confidence appears when everything is going right on the court, and the player is hitting some pretty good shots and some nice winners, the momentum is in a confidence mode, but as soon as something goes wrong, in creeps some negative thoughts, the pendulum swings the other way, and there goes the confidence. Falling victim to self-doubt, anger, and feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem is prevalent in competitive junior sport. So the question is how players can train their mind into having a more "permanent" form of confidence. The excellent news is Mental Toughness is learned; it's not inherited. All types of competitive Sport is about learning to deal with challenges and obstacles. Firstly a player can learn the wrong kind of confidence when they are praised and criticized based solely on an outcome. Young players are influenced by our feedback and parents, and sometimes even coaches teach (unknowingly) the wrong type of confidence. When a player hits a nice winner he or she is praised – this telling the player they are good when the player misses or makes an error, they are criticized – this telling the player they are no good. This type of criticism or praise during this critical period of a young player, who is still trying to grasp this craft, unfortunately creates players own sense of self-confidence and self-esteem or lack of it. So as parents and coaches, we must praise much more than we criticize. Not every ball is under the player's control, because if it were there would be no unforced errors ever.

Strong and permanent confidence is created when we praise more than we criticize and when we praise the player based on their abilities and skills, this praise will help the player to trust their expertise and can learn that some errors are just part of the game. Players also need to give themselves a break and don't be so hard on their own errors, turn the thinking around – weed it out and replace it with positive talk.

A player needs to be able to control their effort and attitude, but sometimes this is not easy, particularly if



they are upset or frustrated. When negativity enters the mind, the goal is for players to realize that this emotional state is not going to help their game or the outcome of the match. So how do they deal with it, the negative thoughts need to be replaced with positive, what you think – is how you'll act. eg., if you hate running and the thought enters your head of "I'm tired, I'm bored, I hate running, this is awful," replace it with "I love to run" and "my body is strong, I feel great." Putting these words in your head will make a huge difference with your attitude, and players need to adapt this same train of thought to help their game on and off the court.

With mental training and lots of positive coaching, players do get good at becoming aware of their emotional and negative thought patterns and can change them consciously, almost as soon as they appear - but as we know, even the best players in the world are still not able to do that all the time and every time.

Obviously, for a player to improve, they need to work on weaknesses not only with their technique, but also to become better in controlling emotions, to try to have better awareness of thoughts and rid themselves of self-criticism as they need to remember no tennis player can play the perfect game. They need to continually practice on becoming much more mentally tougher. Don't look at negatives from an error, try to find the positive as sometimes an error can actually be a good error. Especially as a junior, a player should not be expected to play above their means or ability, as long as they are giving 100%, moving well, technically sound, good footwork and never giving up, this is all fantastic and deserves our praise, especially if they remain mentally strong. The more the young player can practice and train, and the more they participate in match play, the better they will obviously become. Through hard work and good mental toughness on and off the court the player will no doubt reap success, and we all know that success breeds confidence.