

Winning at Petanque – It's All In The Mind.....isn't it?

Keeping the mind quiet, calm and clear thinking in the heat of the contest keeps you in the game

"It's all in the mind," is a phrase often used in reference to sporting performance, with inference that it can be a telling factor on the end result, particularly so when very well-matched opponents are each seeking to gain the edge over the other. Doubtless followers in all sports will know about those teams/players who seem to have a good habit of just coming out on top when it counts, whereas conversely others (chokers some might say) never seem to get over the line, even when in pole position and so nearly home and dry.

Well, sports performance and achievement is obviously not entirely governed by what's going on in one's mind, when physical attributes, skill, technique and possibly stamina, to name just a few, might also be vital factors in deciding the final outcome. But how to ensure the neural pathways linking brain and body are working efficiently and how to ensure that the best decision as to which skill is the appropriate one to be drawn on in the intense heat of the contest, are questions answered by the degree to which a player has the ability to keep a calm and clear mind with all cognitive processes operating at optimum level. It was Rudyard Kipling who wisely attributed much importance to one's ability to keep his head when all about are losing theirs. And it's not at all about burying one's head in the sand when something uncomfortable or threatening is looming, but rather having the capability to maintain a calm mind, to see the true nature of what exactly is occurring and being able to respond appropriately and well, efficiently using all the resources available in a positive way.

Petanque is a "closed sport," similar to others such as gymnastics, diving, archery, shooting and curling etc, where the player doesn't need to react quickly or instinctively in order to counteract and thwart an action of the opponent as happens much of the time in "open sport" such as rugby, football, hockey and cricket for example. Whilst this sense of personal control and responsibility may well be advantageous in some way, it can also bring its own problems; it can mean that there's more scope for the mind taking over with negative thoughts, as the player has more time to consider what to do next and how to do it. Additionally, the mind has time to perhaps dwell on a mistake just made and to think about all those, "what ifs," that tend to come to the fore, despite best efforts to keep them firmly shut away, "in their box."

To stay in the contest with a fair chance, the player must avoid the syndrome of, "Brain Fade," ie having an upset and chaotic mind, often resulting in mental anxiety and worry, with consequent ill-judged decisions and actions leading to poor performance.

(keep it together/don't fall apart/don't let the wheels come off/stay in the game)

How can the player deal with difficult circumstances, not allow them to exert a negative effect on the mind and adversely interfere with performance? Well, the best way would be for that player to alter the circumstance or make those bad things go away of course, but not everything is possible; things aren't always under the player's control eg interfering noises and other activity in the vicinity, an opponent who's on top form, difficult weather and ground conditions, personal problems that keep coming to mind and negative thoughts bringing anxiety and agitation at a time when it's the complete opposite mental process that's required.

To be able to control any such negative thoughts, prevent them from adversely affecting performance, to keep the player focused on the here and now, to enable the mind and body to relax and operate in harmony, may not always win the contest; those two imposters, triumph and defeat must always be confronted and dealt with by any sportsman, but at least the player gives himself a chance to perform somewhere near his optimum.

There are well recognized techniques which can help in this respect and which are often used by those involved in competitive sports: relaxation, controlled breathing, concentration, visualization and following a personally adopted and habitual routine for example. These can be worked on and practiced. The player may be able to allow himself to enter into the frame of mind where a relaxed performance and a free mind just let it happen. ("in the zone" is a term often used for this state of mind when the performance just seems to flow)

In modern times it's notable the prevalence of sports psychologists to be included among the support team of many elite professional sports players. It's this support that has become such an invaluable asset for the top competitors, when the mind must be controlled and thoughts clarified and channeled in the best positive way possible. For the amateur/junior level player, such back-up is not usually available; it's not even possible to have the helpful presence of a coach at all times. Therefore, it becomes even more important that players are able to do this job for themselves.

Once the player is aware of what can cause this bad and unwanted effect on his mind, then perhaps the advantage has already been gained, and a step towards the winning line has been taken.

The 3 causes of "Brain Fade" and allowing the "Bad Mind" to take over:

1. What's happened in the past. Being adversely affected by what's already happened and gone, and having negative thoughts affect what's happening now or next, is obviously a bad thing. You've just played a couple of bad deliveries and are now beating yourself up and crying over the spilt milk that you can do nothing about. Negative thoughts might start telling you that your technique is wrong, you always crack under pressure and even

that you're a bad player who can't win this one. What's happened?....you've probably now programmed yourself into playing the next boule badly too.

2. What's going to happen next and/or in the future. Allowing yourself to be adversely affected by imagined thoughts of what the consequences will be if you fail: losing your place as the prime team shooter, being dropped from the team altogether, having to face others and tell them you lost, knowing they'll have been talking about you. These are all unreal thoughts and must be banished from the mind immediately. Stay in the present, don't take that fear trip into the future, separate real from the imagined and deal with the situation in hand.
3. Things in the present which might be annoying and disturbing. If you can't stop or change them, can you "flip your view," turning them into positives now working in your favour? Perhaps the unpleasantness of some distraction could be seen as a good thing, for example people moving around and making noise on a crowded playing area during a tournament could be a distracting difficulty. However, the same situation could be viewed as a welcome opportunity to gain experience in concentration; it might be seen as a positive for the player who focusses even more fully on the shot to be played and so eliminates the distraction and thereby plays an even better shot. It's the player himself who has the power to exert a calm and free mind; that player doesn't allow external distractions to impede on him and negatively affect his performance.

It's when you are able to exert control over the way you see the situation and not let the situation control you, that you allow yourself the chance to stay in the game until it's all over.

When the end finally comes and whatever the result, you'll have the satisfaction of knowing that you gave yourself a fair chance by keeping a calm and clear mind. It was your opponent that you were up against and not both an opponent plus your own "bad self" you had to compete with.

Can you be your own master on the piste?

Can you control your mind, banish anxiety, think clearly under pressure and play your own best game?

It's certainly a challenge for many players in the sport, but make sure you beat it with winning Petanque skills and the right mental approach.

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(ref Gallwey W. T. "The Inner Game of Tennis" Pan Books 1974)