

Areas of Improvement Series – Have a Positive, Professional Attitude

By Mark Dickson

I am often asked by young tour professionals and highly ranked juniors, “What can I do to improve my game the most and reach the next level of competition?” The specific answer depends on the individual, but these are some of the immediate areas for improvement I evaluate and focus on:

1. a positive, professional attitude
2. serve & return of serve
3. footwork & fitness
4. shot selection & tolerance
5. match flow momentum
6. concentration & between point routine
7. opponent scouting skills

Having a professional attitude, using positive self-talk, controlling body language and emotions and learning to love adversity are the most neglected areas I see at every level of competitive tennis.

Being unprepared, having temper tantrums, giving less than a 100% effort, arguing with opponents and tournament officials, complaining about everything and making excuses about losses are just a few signs that a player lacks a professional attitude and is severely limiting his or her chance of success.

Players have a responsibility to give 100% effort to improve all aspects of their game and become self-aware of how damaging their behavior can be to their enjoyment and success. Many players make the unnecessary mistake of focusing predominantly on tennis and fitness for many hours each week while focusing too little on the emotional side of the equation.

Players should strive for a professional attitude in every practice session, match preparation and competition. No exceptions. It’s imperative for players to get into the habit of preparing for practice and match play sessions just as they would prepare for their biggest tournament match.

Positive self-talk, arriving early and prepared, proper warm up, visualization of the patterns most likely to be played and practicing positive body language should be mandatory parts of every practice. Players should learn to control their verbal and non-verbal on-court emotions during practice or risk being assessed penalty points by their coach.

Just like other habits, gaining control of emotions and dealing with adversity can be challenges at first but are major parts of having a professional attitude.

My college coach at Clemson University, legendary 4-time National Coach of the Year Chuck Kriese, loved to say, “Make adversity your best friend.” Coach Kriese’s players learned to look forward to pressure situations under the most challenging conditions and over 45 of his players went on to play professionally on tour. Learning to love adversity is a skill every player needs to perfect and makes competition and all the hours spent training so much more enjoyable.

Not all players will become tour professionals, but every player can and should be responsible enough to have a positive, professional attitude to reach his or her maximum potential. An unprofessional attitude shows a huge lack of respect for oneself and one’s opponents.

In subsequent columns I’ll discuss some other areas of improvement I mentioned earlier in this article. Until then, practice your positive habits 100% of the time, develop a professional attitude and learn to love adversity. You’ll enjoy how much better you feel and how quickly your game improves.

Mark Dickson grew up playing junior tennis in Florida and is Director of the Mark Dickson Tennis Academy in Sarasota, Florida. A former US Open singles and doubles quarterfinalist, Mark achieved ATP Tour world rankings of #12 in year-end prize money, #32 in singles and #23 in doubles. Internationally recognized for his coaching and motivational skills, professionalism, positive attitude and serving ability, Mark is a 10-time winner of professional tournaments around the world, 3-time sportsmanship award winner, 3-time All-American at Clemson University where he was ranked # 2 in singles and #5 in doubles in the United States and ITCA Senior Player-of-the-Year. For over twenty years, Mark has been a coach and mentor to players seeking to improve their games. He has had juniors ranked #1 in the world, #1 in the United States and #1 in Florida as well as tour professionals travel to train with him in Sarasota. Mark is a Certified Professional by the ATP Tour, USPTA, PTR and Pat Etcheberry and a Sport Science Level 1 Coach. He is a member of the ATP Alumni, USTA High Performance Coaching Program, US Open Final 8 Club, Australian Open Last Eight Club and Clemson University Hall of Fame. Mark is a frequent public speaker, writer and motivator to junior tennis players. Mark can be reached online at www.markdickson.com or at 941.356.4932.

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