

Why elite athletes should develop mindfulness to up their game

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Athletes at the very highest level of their sport face the challenge of performing consistently under pressure amid many potential distractions, including performance anxiety, crowd behavior, their own and others'

expectations, and the responses of their opponents.

The performance of players in the [2023 Australian Open](#), for example, demonstrated the [psychological factors](#) needed to succeed at elite-level tennis.

It had plenty of exciting moments that are the hallmarks of a great tournament. Andy Murray made an [astonishing comeback](#) from two sets down against Thanasi Kokkinakis, following his long recovery after major injury.

Rafael Nadal exited in the second round of his first major slam after the birth of his child, due to ongoing injury—reports described him as being [mentally destroyed](#). And Novak Djokovic became the only male player to win three consecutive Australian Open championships. The Serbian recently shared that he has "learned the strength and resilience to bounce back from adversity."

One of the key characteristics of resilient athletes is their ability to focus on the moment. As a researcher in high performance and resilience—[defined](#) as the "role of mental processes and behavior in promoting personal assets and protecting an individual from the potential negative effect of stressors"—my work looks at understanding this important quality and examining ways to improve it in athletes.

Performing under pressure

This focus and resilience was embodied by the 2023 Australian Open women's champion Aryna Sabalenka, who won her first grand slam despite losing the first set of the match. More recently, however, she appeared to buckle under pressure at the Indian Wells Open championship, against the composed and focused Elena Rybakina. Sabalenka seemed to dwell on her double-fault errors, which led to her

attempting more risky and inaccurate ball strikes.

Two of the men's game's greatest players in recent times, Nadal and Djokovic, have been described as having the ability to "[play every point like it's a match point](#)." This ability to perform consistently at the highest level can be underpinned by a [psychological state](#), ability and skill called [mindfulness](#).

Mindfulness is understood by researchers and sport psychologists as "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally." The notion is rooted in meditative practices in [Buddhism](#), and has drawn the attention of sport psychologists in western society over the last decade.

Recent [research](#) has shown that mindfulness training—both sitting and active meditation practices—can allow athletes to be present in the moment, and to access optimal states of mind such as confidence and self-belief.

It can also help regulate the emotions by monitoring and channeling them in a way that enhances performance. And it can help athletes reach a state of "flow," which I describe in my [research](#)"—meaning being completely in the moment and performing with clarity, fluency and ease.

Focus and intense emotions

These psychological factors are crucial in sports like tennis which require players to focus on performing at their best during each point, while "letting go" of previous mistakes. This ability to accept intense positive and negative emotions, and to avoid worrying about past mistakes or future performance, can allow athletes to experience mental clarity and focus on their performance in the current moment.

[Research](#) has found that mindfulness training is a promising intervention that can improve confidence, self-belief and flow.

I work as part of team that seeks to evaluate the effect of both "traditional" mindfulness, such as sitting meditations, and "active" or "applied" practices, such as engaging in mindfulness while playing sport. We have been researching this in swimmers, with promising findings in pre-elite athletes, and we plan to do the same with elite athletes who compete in other sports including tennis and cricket.

Our [research](#) has found that mindfulness can improve an athlete's "action awareness"—their self-awareness of physical movements or actions, and their ability to be in the moment and possess clear goals. These factors are likely to lead to thinking clearly, performing consistently, and being technically and tactically aware in each tennis point, for example.

With the development of ever more sophisticated technology, sport psychology is entering a particularly exciting period that will see further opportunities to help athletes develop their resilience and improve performance under pressure.

For example, the growing accessibility and sophistication of virtual reality (VR) adds another useful tool. Tennis players and other athletes can be immersed in virtual performance environments where auditory and visual distractions and pressures can be introduced to test their resilience.

The use of VR simulations are particularly useful to monitor and assist athletes to practice mindfulness under "controlled" conditions, while sport psychologists monitor their responses and improvements.

Recent [research](#) from Queen's University Belfast and the University of Limerick has shown that VR methods can simulate or replicate real-

world performance anxiety and pressure in a [controlled way](#), allowing progressive and managed exposure to stress.

This can help the [athletes](#) get used to states of anxiety that are typical in [high-performance](#) sport—and to practice sport psychology techniques like mindfulness to manage them, in a way that ups their game.

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