Roger Federer's psychological game made him Wimbledon's best male player—the secret to his winning mindset

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Last month, eight-time Wimbledon champion Roger Federer gave a commencement address to graduating students at Dartmouth University. During this speech, he used "tennis lessons" as metaphors for coping beyond university and moving on to a life that is less familiar. Although in his 25-minute speech, he never referred to them explicitly, Federer had a deep appreciation of the psychological principles that supported his lengthy and successful career as a tennis player.

"Roger will be the favorite for the first two hours, then I'll be the favorite after that." These were the words an unnamed opponent taunted Federer with early in his career at the Italian Open.

Although initially confused, he soon realized that any professional tennis player should be able to play well for the first two hours. In this period, you are fit and sharp, but after that you get tired, your legs get wobbly. And crucially, he suggests, your mind starts wandering. It was vital that a young Federer realized that the course of a tennis match was demanding not just physically, but also psychologically.

This was a lesson in mental toughness. It's a skill people can hone using something psychologists call the 4C model, though Federer hasn't directly named the model when talking about his tactics. The 4C model involves focusing on control, commitment, challenge and confidence.

It involves having a sense of control over your thoughts, emotions and behavior in challenging situations. Those with high levels of mental toughness can regulate their reactions to stress and maintain focus and composure under pressure. Becoming mentally tough helped to prevent Federer's mind from wandering when tired—potentially towards self-doubt—and promoted his focus and concentration, even when his mind and body were exhausted.

Later in the speech, Federer spoke of experiencing self-doubt right at the
beginning of a match. He was referring to the Wimbledon final he played against Rafael Nadal in 2008. At the time, Federer was five-time champion and chasing a record breaking sixth consecutive title. By contrast, Nadal had lost the previous two Wimbledon finals to Federer.

Given this context, it may be surprising to hear that Federer felt as though he had already lost in the very first point of the match. But across the net he saw an opponent who had, just a few months before, beaten him in straight sets in the French Open. Another C of the 4C model—confidence—was low.

Federer said that it took him until the third set to remind himself that he was the current five-time champion, by which point he was already 2-0 down. This act of self-talk is a mental strategy employed by sportspeople to enhance their confidence. He challenged the negative thoughts that told him Nadal was "hungrier" and "had his number." This is another insight into Federer's mental toughness, and how he employed self-talk to combat low confidence and improve physical performance.

Potentially the biggest secret to Federer's great success, though, came from his outlook on each point he played in his career. He told the Dartmouth graduates that in his career he won almost 80% of matches—but just 54% of all points he competed for. This was a reminder that even the very best tennis players win only approximately every other point. The greatest players are those that are used to accepting failures as well as their successes.

An acceptance of setbacks is a major trait of successful sportspeople and can act as a motivator for continued development and success. As Grand Slam titan Novak Djokovic told CBS in 2023: "The difference, I guess, between the guys who are able to be the biggest champions, and the ones that are struggling to get to the highest level is the ability to not stay in those emotions for too long."
As the Wimbledon final approaches, try to pay attention to how many points players are achieving over the course of a match. Notice how the players respond when they lose points and how they may be talking to themselves during the match. Above all, remember that every player will experience self-doubt—but some will deal with it better than others.

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