

What it takes to SUCCEED in any field

Lessons from Centre Court



As Andy Murray demonstrated at Wimbledon this year, success in any chosen field depends on conquering psychological interference, argues Jane Renton.

Andy Murray has finally triumphed. He is the first British male tennis champion at Wimbledon since Fred Perry 77 years ago. Gone is the sulky, sullen boy “nursing his wrath to keep it warm”, as his fellow countryman Robert Burns might have put it. The mental fragility evidenced in petulant outbursts have been mostly contained and replaced by a far cooler customer, and one deadlier to his opponents.

Apart from a few wobbly moments during a tense quarter-final against Fernando Verdasco, when the Scotsman lost it momentarily (swearing more at himself than anyone else after losing his first two sets to an opponent), he did, in the main, cut an entirely different figure on the courts this year.

Even Virginia Wade, the last British player to win a singles title at The Championships 36 years ago, was rooting for him. She previously criticised him for “acting like a drama queen” in a game against Jarkko Nieminen in the French Open last year. Now, she sees a more mature talent. “It would be fabulous if Andy could win, he is so dedicated. He studies the game and has worked so hard on his game to eliminate weaknesses,” she told the *Daily Mail* just days before his final victory.

But there is more to it than that. Murray has always been dedicated to his sport – perhaps too dedicated in a counter-productive way. Rather, he has been able to conquer his constant fear of failure that has so often dogged him on and off the court. It is no accident that for the past year Murray has relied on the services of Alexis Castorri, a sports psychologist. She was recommended by his coach Ivan Lendl, who won eight Grand Slams and was helped by the same woman.

Talk to any successful sportsman or woman and they will tell you that victory comes when the mind is as still as a pond. In other words, the “gremlins” – which include the onerous weight of other people’s expectations – sitting on your shoulder issuing bossy instructions, need to be pushed firmly aside.

In short, Murray has become a proponent of “The Inner Game” first observed by another tennis-playing sportsman, Tim Gallwey. A former captain of the Harvard tennis team in the late 1950s, Gallwey was invited as a young man to Hyannis Port by a fiercely competitive patriarch Jo Kennedy, who wanted him to help aspiring president JFK and brothers Robert and Ted perfect their game.

Gallwey’s great discovery came through realising that many of the people he coached were being hindered by the technical advice he was proffering. The directions he was giving not only confused the recipient but also made them tenser.

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“I realised that my well-intentioned instructions were being internalised by my students as methods of control that were compromising their natural abilities,” he said.

This anxious state of mind, so evident in many of Murray’s past performances, was very different from the quiet focus anecdotally reported by the world’s top athletes or for that matter a top musician, or surgeon “in the flow” of their sport, art or endeavour.

Gallwey identified two personalities in every individual, Self 1 and Self 2, both invariably at war with each other rather like Sméagol/Gollum in *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings*. Self 1 is basically a pleaser, someone who is trying to impress, or obey those in authority, whether as a child obeying instructions from a parent or teacher, or as adults trying to obey our bosses. Self 1 is constantly at the beck and call of external perceptions and expectations.

Self 2 represents our essential human self, with all the inherent potential we are born with. It is Self 2 that keenly watches the trajectory of the ball in tennis and allows the brain to calculate the eventual parabolic curve. It also allows the brain to issue hundreds of non-verbal communications to scores of muscle groups to hit the ball and send it to its desired location. Self 2 is also witnessed by the child absorbed in play, or rather self-learning.

While Self 2 embodies our ability to learn and grow any of our innate talents, Self 1 constantly interferes. It mistrusts Self 2 and tries to control it with commands and fear.

Gallwey also used this breakthrough insight to transform the workplaces of several major international companies in the 1980s including that of AT&T, which was facing major market change with the break-up of its telecoms monopoly in America. His message is equally if not more relevant today.

Growing societal inequalities and economic malaise on an almost global scale can no longer be resolved by governments alone.

In fact, the economist and UN advisor Professor Jeffrey Sachs recently talked of “profound political confusion” and a near-breakdown of political leadership.

“Our governments have neither the scale, financial means, knowledge nor interest in facing up to these problems,” he recently told an audience at the Royal College of Engineering.

Meanwhile those running businesses mostly pride themselves on having moved some way from the old industrial processes espoused by people such as Henry Ford. Best-employer lists constantly boast of the perks and financial rewards offered by companies to ensure happier workplaces and higher productivity.

We may have moved into a technology-based society but that does not necessarily make us knowledgeable or wise. In fact the way that many companies motivate and organise their people is positively counter-productive. As Tim Gallwey asserts, just focusing on better productivity or performance won’t necessarily deliver the desired outcomes. Why? Because doing so ignores the human element. Man may be born free but everywhere he is in chains, and nowhere is this more true than in many modern workplaces.

Leaders capable of dealing with today’s very real challenges, whether political or economic, must focus on removing all interference that stops those who work for them from delivering their best performances. They must become facilitators rather than “bosses” while still holding those around them accountable for delivery.

That means removing the fear that makes people act defensively, not creatively. It also means affording those around them permission to be themselves, to rediscover their true inner selves. It allows freedom to make and learn from mistakes. Only through doing that, as Andy Murray has recently discovered, comes the opportunity to move forward. Winning the Inner Game not only brings personal fulfilment but the chance to resolve more of the world’s problems than we are currently able to.

Jane Renton is on the advisory board of Performance Consultants International, a global leadership development consultancy led by Sir John Whitmore and Tim Gallwey which works internationally in 40 countries.