

Visualisation in Tennis: Utopia or Reality for Juniors?

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Among the many mental training techniques available to the tennis coach, visualisation offers multiple advantages on the technical, tactical and mental levels. Before explaining in detail the various practical applications of visualisation, it is important to define the concept itself.

Visualisation is a process whereby internal images are produced consciously.

YOU CAN ONLY VISUALISE SOMETHING THAT YOU HAVE SEEN BEFORE.

For example, if you ask a child who has never seen a serve in his life to visualise a service action, he will not be able to do it.

When a tennis player has an external visual reference, he can form mental images according to two different modes:

1/ The 'dissociated' mode. The player pictures himself playing as if he was his own spectator.

2/. The 'associated' mode. In this particular case, he pictures himself as the actor of the situation that he is visualising.

Let us now examine the practical applications of visualisation and first of all in the technical field.

On this subject, we can mention a very interesting phenomenon known as the '**Carpenter effect**'. An individual watching a tennis match or demonstration experiences an electrical brain and muscle activity, which brings into play the muscles and brain areas that are actually activated by the players being observed. The neuromuscular programme being activated during the external visual observation means that the observer will experience sensations similar to those of the model provided he then takes his racket and plays. Many young players thus learn by unconsciously imitating models that they keep on observing, unaware that they are using the Carpenter effect. This was for instance the case for Pete Sampras who was technically inspired by a videotape of Rod Laver that he was constantly watching.

Instead of simply relying on the natural phenomenon that is mimetism, visualisation with a technical aim involves consciously repeating in one's mind strokes that have been observed by following a very precise routine:

1. Spectator of the model:

I replay the film of the chosen model in my mind.



2. Spectator of myself:

I replace the model. I picture myself playing like my model.

3. Actor:

From the two previous steps, I repeat technical movements by shadowing strokes.

The technical image is recorded in the head before going to the muscles. This conscious effort of mental repetition facilitates technical learning.

In a different way, the coach can use visualisation to prepare a match on the tactical level.

To start with, he devises with his player a precise plan of action taking into account the strengths and weaknesses of both the player and the opponent. Then, he asks his player to imagine that he is standing courtside watching his own match in anticipation.

Being in the place of the spectator makes it possible to approach the match with the perspective and clear headedness required to hone one's tactical choices. The player can also mentally put himself in the place of his opponent. He 'becomes' his opponent and imagines that he is playing against himself, which allows him to anticipate his opponent's potential tactical choices and to find the right answers. The player can make use of the same type of visualisation in the course of the match during the changeovers to 'stand back' and find tactical solutions.

Finally, visualisation is an excellent way to get ready mentally for the different scenarios of a match. To begin with, the player can visualise a **dream scenario** where everything goes well. His tactical plan works perfectly. The match goes off according to plan and everything runs smoothly. In this first type of scenario, the player pictures himself as the winner. He therefore puts himself in a state of confidence to approach the match. Then, the player visualises a second scenario: the **nightmare scenario**. Nothing goes right. He does not feel the game. He has absolutely no rhythm. The tactical plan that he had considered proves to be completely unsuccessful. Both the audience and the umpire are against him. And to crown it all, his opponent is playing some incredible tennis. In the face of so many difficulties, the player has to picture himself calm, in control of his emotions, ready to face adversity and determined to play point by point until the end of the match. In this second scenario, the player can imagine himself losing 6-0, 6-0 after fighting until the very end. He can then accept the notion of defeat.

Precompetitive visualisation is a way to foresee a tennis match. But between what is expected and reality, there can be a big difference. Visualising both the dream scenario and the nightmare scenario allows a player to have two extreme points of reference corresponding to the potential outcomes. The player thus has the possibility to build up his confidence while releasing the pressure. He is ready for the best and for the worst. The reality of the match will lie somewhere between these two extremes.



The next time you find yourself in practice or before a match, if you hesitate, in your role as a coach, between a long explanation and a visualisation exercise, remember that **'an image is worth a thousand words ...'**

CONTENT OF THE PRESENTATION (60 MIN ON COURT)

1. Make visualisation concrete for kids:
 - basic visualisation drills
 - pedagogical means
2. Practical applications of visualisation with juniors:
 - accelerate technical improvement
 - develop tactical abilities
 - build up self confidence
3. Pre - match visualisation:
 - visualise the match from different perceptual positions
 - 'visualise' the tactical match plan on court