

All in the game

His voice over the telephone line was not able to hide excitement, “*sir, mein jeet gaya.*” he said.

“Oh... Great! Congrats... you were in my mind since morning... Morning papers had declared the title clash between you and the first seed...” I said.

“It was tough... In fact, the last game stretched up to 16-17. However, I could hold myself” he continued his briefing.

Next day mornings had headlines of a career best win by a promising, young badminton player.

When I started working with young badminton players, four years ago, many of the players were skeptical. The importance of mental toughness and emotional regulation was alien to them. Their previous exposure to sports psychology was both, theoretical and boring.

Keeping that canvass, behind us, I had focused on ‘difficult situations’ and ‘difficult moments’ and soon I was able to captivate their attention. Skeptics were fast turning into students. Even their body posture changed during my ‘lectures’, which were actually chatty interactions, dramatized to hold their interest. Because they could identify with whatever I was saying, they started expressing their desire to come for individual sessions.

Thus began my relationship with this budding, talented player.... He is extremely gifted, nimble footed and with a good physical stamina. Somehow, his emotions used to hinder in between him and his deserved success. He used to be anxious at times, angry sometimes and would give up too easily at other times.

Our first session was a great learning experience for both of us. We were talking about his rise on the badminton courts, how everybody started voicing their expectations about him, including his parents, teachers, friends & coaches. Right at that time, his performance started declining. “I get tensed up” was all that he could say. We visualized some of his tough matches; I guided him by my words to rekindle the memoirs by a method called ‘camera check’. We started with his routine, the night prior to an important match.

When we went through the ‘images’ in slow motion, we could reach to his thoughts on the night before that match, on the day of the match and just before the match, the ‘build-up’ of some themes in thinking was now apparent to him as well as me.

...This is a crucial match, I must win

...I MUST WIN... I MUST WIN.

...If I loose then??

...A loss!!.. A LOSS!.. LOSS!!

...Defeat at the hands of THIS opponent??

...What a shame

...Finished... KHATAM!.. Oh No...

...I MUST WIN

The same loop of thinking used to reverberate repeatedly with increasing intensity until it became threatening to his concentration. A lapse in concentration used to cost him, not only the 'point' concerned but also a huge loss in his morale.

We had diagnosed the condition.

"When you started playing, had somebody really ordered you to play this game?..." I inquired in a low, concerned voice.

"No.. It was just that I was fascinated with the racket and the shuttle.. So, I continued", he said.

"And in your school days after that?" I asked.

To rise early to go to practice was never a problem with me. It still is not, I play because I want to play"

And why do you want to play?

Because, I love my game. I enjoy my game, he gave a spirited reply.

Aren't those very things missing on the night before the match and then onwards?

There was a long pause...

"When enjoyment, fun, happiness disappear, an ordeal begins, which generally has a sad end", I said.

"I guess, I know, what you are saying", he said.

"You have opted for a career in this game because it is your choice, and you have made this choice because you love your game, you enjoy your game, your proficiency is a proud and pleasurable asset of your personality. Every moment on the court should bring you a fresh lease of happiness and satisfaction.... Despite results. In spite of results", I said.

"Despite results"?, he asked.

"Results are important but not at the cost of process satisfaction.. When you maintain and nurture happiness in the process of playing, you tend to come closer to desired results. So, start with theme of "I love my game" and replace, the thought 'I must win' to "I will do my best because I enjoy doing my best", and we have to repeat and reinforce this theme in as many ways a possible.

"How"?

By utilizing it in day-to-day practice. Practice and tournament are not two separate watertight compartments. One can imagine oneself in different playing situations and can repeat the theme in mind. Write the sentences on a paper & stick it at important places in your home for reminders".

"I can use the backside of our front door, so when I am leaving house. I will know, also, I can rewrite the important sentences in my diary. I can document my experiences and monitor the change in myself". Now he was getting ideas.

"When the going gets tough, the tough get going... because they believe in enjoying and learning from the process". I summarized.

"But what about opponents??", he said

"What about them"? I smiled back.

“I get tensed up when I have to play with a player of similar caliber... when the player is well above me, I am BINDHAST and usually play well. When the opponent is a novice, still there is no problem, but when it comes to a player who’s more or less equal, there is a big problem”.

“An opponent becomes a problem only when you make him a problem. Mark my words, my opponent is nothing but an instrument for me to show my excellence”

He repeated the sentence softly and observed with a grin, “This means, even if my opponent plays well, it is an invitation for me to play better”.

“Yes... your opponent is not your enemy, but your instrument, make best use of it” I remarked.

“I had never thought this way”, he honestly said.

“Thinking makes the difference, forceful negative thoughts can take you off track. Therefore, forceful positive thoughts will definitely keep you in good spirits”.

He nodded enthusiastically.

“A win does not make you ‘THE GREAT’ player, a loss does not make you, ‘THE WORST’ player, if you learn from both, you tend to become a better player”

“You coin very good sentences”, he admired.

“Thanks, but the goal is to put it firmly in one’s memory and not to show exuberance of language, relate everything to your goal”.

I have discovered my goals, sir! One is, to try my best every time, this is my action goal... and second, to derive satisfaction and happiness from every moment on the court... that is my emotional goal:

“Love all.. Start...”. I said with a pat on his back.