

GAME SELF

When you watch top players, one thing becomes apparent. Each player has their own unique 'package'. Even when you can't see their face, their play, attitude and body language give away who they are. They have a distinctive "Game Self".

Their strategies may be modified against different opponents or on different surfaces, but their basic Game Self remains constant. **The better players *impose themselves onto their opponents***. When they don't play well it is usually because they got away from their Game self. When they perform well, you will often hear comments that reflect how they maintained their Game Self (e.g. "I played *my game* today").

The Game Self has a number of components ("identities") that make it up:

1. TACTICAL IDENTITY: The tactical identity has two components that describe how the player likes to play the game.

(a) Game Style: This is where on the court they prefer to play. The 4 basic Gamestyles in tennis include:

- **Baseline 'Counter-puncher'**
Someone who likes to stay back and retrieve the ball to force opponent's to 'beat themselves'
- **Aggressive Baseline**
Someone who likes to stay back but forces the opponent by taking time away through hitting with power or taking the ball early
- **All-Court Player**
Someone who is comfortable in all areas of the court and will come to net to finish points or force the opponent
- **Net Rusher**
Someone who takes (or creates) every opportunity to come to the net. Especially off the serve

(b) Tactical Priority: This is how a player prefers to win points and challenge their opponent. There are 4 basic Tactical Priorities:

- **Precision** (prefers to move opponents around and place the ball to challenge their movement)
- **Power** (prefers to add pace to shots and challenge the opponent's timing)
- **Consistency** (prefers to make opponents earn every point by relentlessly returning the ball)
- **Time** (prefers to challenge the opponent by, modifying the time between shots. For example always taking the ball early or, "mixing it up" by changing spins, speeds, looping balls, etc.)

2. EMOTIONAL IDENTITY: These are the attitudes they bring to a match. Key words that describe a player's Emotional Identity include: "positive", "confident", "aggressive", "patient", "calm", "nice", "resilient", "combative" "a fighter", "tough", etc?

3. MENTAL IDENTITY: This is how their mind operates in matchplay. Key words that describe a player's Mental Identity include: "focused", "never gives up", "smart", "analytical", "creative", "intense", "anticipates well", "good sport", etc?

4. TECHNICAL IDENTITY: These are their stroke strengths. Do they have a "big forehand" or a "big serve", "penetrating volleys", "excellent timing", "mixes it up well", "steady", "consistent", etc?

5. PHYSICAL IDENTITY: This is their physical strengths. Key words that describe a player's Physical Identity include: "big", "strong", "tall", "fast", "quick", "agile", "can run forever", "chase every ball down", "great endurance", "have good reach", "hard worker", "powerful", "coordinated", "good hands", etc?

Diversification before Specialization

For developing players (under 14 or has not played for more than 5 years), it is important that they **not** be funneled into a Game Self too early. This may cut off any real choices they may make later on. Developing players need to be exposed to all the different identities. They should especially be taught to master the different tactical and technical identities. Once they can do everything adequately (called "diversification"), then they can focus on their particular strengths (called "Specialization"). One shouldn't be a baseliner because they can't volley but because they prefer to win points at the baseline.

During the development process, players need to be trained to adopt positive or empowering identities. Typically, players come with identities that disempower them. For all the positive key words listed above, there are negative counterparts (I am clumsy, have no feel, am inconsistent, stupid, uncoordinated, a choker, etc.) These should be challenged and replaced. Just like any stroke, identity training takes time and repetition.

Making a "Game Self" statement

To help a player stay on track and maintain a strong sense of self, it is helpful to make a Game Self Statement. It is like a company's "mission statement" that is used to keep the decisions and directions of the company on track. For tennis players it can be used to generate the right emotions and attitudes before and during matches. Reviewing it can help keep a player confident when a match starts to slip away. Here are some keys to keep in mind when creating your Game Self statement:

- Make your statement by choosing some of the key words from each identity that describe you best. Using all the identity categories is not required. Just use the most dominant ones. Remember, players are defined by what they *are* rather than what they *are not* (e.g. "not a power player", etc.)

- It may be helpful to identify with a professional player who you play like. How would you describe their Game Self?
- The statement should be maximum 2 sentences long to be easily memorized. It should be put in a prominent spot for easy reference (on your tennis journal cover, on a laminated sheet kept in your racquet bag, etc.)

Here are some examples:

I am a:

"Patient baseliner who fights for every point and uses precision to move the opponent around."

I am a:

"Smart all-court player who finds opponent's weaknesses and uses the whole court by aggressively placing the ball."

I am a:

"Intense power baseline player who likes to end points quickly by using my forehand and serve to punish opponents."

I am a:

"Power baseliner who always stays focused, keeps the ball deep, and plays consistently aggressive."

I am a:

"Athletic net rusher who likes to power the ball into the corners and finish points at the net."

Now it is time to make up your own.

My **GAME SELF** Statement:

I am:

Evaluating success

Typically, you will play your best tennis to the degree that you maintain your Game Self. In other words, the more you clearly define who you are, and play like 'you', the better you will feel about your play. Start evaluating how well you played based on how well you maintained your Game Self. Use a simple 1-10 scale (10= *"I totally played my game "*. 1= *"I wasn't me at all"*). Avoid getting sucked into opponent's games (e.g. they 'push' the ball so you push, they hit hard so you hit hard, etc). Aspire to impose your strong sense of self onto your opponents. Players with a strong sense of Game Self compete more confidently, solve problems better, and enjoy the battle of competition more.