



Tennis Tensions

Dr Tudor Rickards

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Tennis Tensions is a case study of forty critical matches played in the course of the US Open in September 2015. It examines the tensions revealed, in order to understand the factors influencing a drop off in performance. This is the tournament in which Serena William is competing to achieve what became known as The Serena Slam, winning all four Gram Slams in a Calendar year. The pressures to succeed are even more intense than usual. In the Men's tournaments, other stories develop. The top seed and favourite for the Singles title is Novak Djokovic. He becomes the prime target for a crop of emerging young talents seeking to beat the top gun. Roger Federer who is trying to add to his record haul of Grand Slam event victories also has Novak in his sights. Rafa Nadal is fighting to return to form after serious injuries and an extended layoff. The great Bryan Brothers are suffering a dip in form, and are in danger of failing to win any of the doubles trophies in the four Grand Slam events of the year. How do players cope with the tensions of the moment and deal with performance anxiety? Popular strategies include hiring a mind coach, injury time-outs, mini-explosions of temperament, racquet abuse, sometimes including self-abuse. Roger Federer even reveals an innovation known as SABR (sneak attack by Roger). Sometimes the tactics work, sometimes they don't. During the inevitable rain breaks, the author gives his imagination free rein. He speculates on the nightmares of a player about to take on the all-powerful Djokovic having lost to him many times in the past. From a monastic study room in a Dutch University, during a nocturnal session, he builds a personality around a Dutch broadcaster he dubs Helga of Hengelo. Helga seems desperate that a prolonged match will not keep her working through the night by going into a third set. During another rain break, when a Presidential candidate arrives, the author imagines that it would take an assassination attempt foiled only by the heroism of a player, to steal the headlines from Serena Williams. The tournament moves to its gripping conclusion for Serena, Novak, Roger and others who win sensationaly from their position as underdogs. Can anything be learned outside the lofty regions of elite tennis? The surprising answer is yes. The roots of tension are shown to lie in the same basic psychological structures shared by top athletes and social tennis teams alike. These apply to far wider sporting and business decisions in which tensions may cloud the thinking and actions of those involved. Tennis Tensions is part of the Leaders We Deserve monograph series. Read it for interest or personal development or as materials for study within formal courses on sports or business psychology.

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