

HOW TO WIN

by
BILLIE JEAN KING

Tennis star Billie Jean King reveals her winning formula for the benefit of prospective winners everywhere.

Maybe the reason I love to win is because it hurts so much when I lose. And I can't stand pain. You may call it neurotic, but when you think about it, almost anybody who has been successful in life—in sports, the arts, business or everyday living—suffers pain when they lose.

To be a winner you must have total self-awareness. You've got to be aware of how much training your body needs, how much practice you need, and how much time you need to prepare yourself mentally.

Most people understand the need for training and practice, but they don't know what I mean by mental preparation. By that, I simply mean, *Imagine yourself doing something right!* This applies to all of the goals you might want to achieve in life, but let me give you an example of how it works for me in tennis.

Before I serve, I may say to myself, "I'm going to serve the ball to the backhand court, deep, in that corner, within two feet of the line."¹ And I form a mental picture of myself doing it. All of this occurs to me in a couple of seconds as I bounce the ball twice before serving. Almost always, I place the ball where I intended it to go. But by then, I've already set my mind to how I'm going to return that ball when it comes back over the net.

One thing I've seen time and again on the courts is this: A person will get up to serve. And I can tell by her face that she's clutched—she imagines herself double faulting²—and sure enough, she double faults! Better she should envision herself placing that first serve directly into

1. *backhand court*... within two feet of the line, a difficult shot to return.

2. *double fault*, in tennis, the server is given two chances to make a good serve. Failure to do so, called a "double fault," results in a point being scored by the opponent.

Adapted from "How to Win" by Billie Jean King from *WomenSports Magazine* (June 1974). Reprinted by permission of *WomenSports Magazine*. PHOTO: Ken Regan/Camera 5.



the service box.³ That's mental preparation.

Mental preparation also means

3. service box, in tennis, either of two forecourt areas on the receiver's side near the net, which are equal in size and share the same boundary, a line twenty-one feet from the net and parallel to the net. A serve must bounce in the opponent's service box directly diagonal to the server to be "good."

narrowing down that court to your whole world. It's too easy to think about other things, so you've got to discipline yourself to concentrate on the job at hand.

Anything that gets in the way must be expelled from your mind. This is why I often reprimand myself out loud on the courts when I'm not happy with the way

I've hit a shot. This doesn't please the crowd any—they can't imagine why I'm mad at myself, especially if I've made the point—but it sure expels the anger, leaving my mind free to concentrate on the rest of the game.

Mental preparation also means knowing your opponent. Before a match, I mentally run through the strengths and weaknesses of the person I'm scheduled to play against. I try to recall how they handle certain kinds of shots, and this helps me prepare my strategy. But I think a person can also spend too much time thinking about the player on the other side of the net. If I really have my game together, if my shots are going right, I'll give the other player trouble even if she knows just where the ball is going every time.

Mental preparation also means reviewing in your mind after a game what went right and what went wrong. Most players, after they win, say, "Whew, that's over." I do too. But that's not enough. When you think about the match afterward, know why you won, not just why you lost. Unless you're critical you can get a sense of false security that you're playing well. (The truth might be that your opponent just couldn't find it that day.) Naturally, I think a lot harder about a match that I lose, even though it hurts.

Once you gain an awareness of your training and practice requirements, and

once you get your mental preparation together, then you've got to discipline yourself. Discipline is the secret of all champions, again not just in sports, but in all life. Discipline means giving things up. For most people, the sacrifice is time—you time you spend drilling and rehearsing rather than partying. Sometimes it seems that my biggest sacrifice is vanilla ice cream.

In Houston, preparing for my match with Bobby Riggs,⁴ I came in for a great deal of criticism from the press and my friends because I was not available for interviews or parties. However, I knew that only through preparation and self-discipline would I be able to be in the best mental and physical condition to win.

I know myself. I must get eight to ten hours of sleep every night. I must work out for a half-hour every day with weights for my knees, even though it's boring. I've had surgery on both knees, and if I don't work out, I know they're going to hurt the next day. I must keep a routine schedule, eat regular meals, and drill, drill, drill four to six hours a day on the tennis courts. Lastly, I need at least an hour each day for my mental preparation. Discipline is the key to fulfilling this regimen. Since it hurts so much to lose, I rely on my self-discipline to get me through the boring moments.

4. *Bobby Riggs*, on September 20, 1973, in a much publicized tennis match, the author beat Riggs—6-4, 6-3, 6-3—in Houston.

So I've set up a system of rewards to relieve the tedium of drilling. I'll say to my partner, "O.K., our goal today is to hit the ball twenty times—twenty forehand cross-courts, back and forth. I owe you a drink (or an ice cream, or a movie) if I miss first." And so we hit a lot of balls in a short amount of time, concentrating the practice. Other times we'll practice backhands, or serves, or just try to keep the ball in play.

I've found that it helps to have measurable goals, otherwise you end up begging the question.⁵ Most people say,

5. *begging the question*, assuming without proof the answer to a question in dispute.

"I want to play better." Better than what? You should analyze your game and concentrate on drills to correct the thing you're not doing as well as you might.

I guess what I'm basically talking about is self-awareness. Until you know who you are—your strong points and weak points, both physically and psychologically—your skills will be confused and random; one brilliant shot followed by three duds. You won't know how to analyze, how to correct, how to concentrate. Start with yourself, as honestly and completely as you can, and the rest will follow.

Comment

1. According to Billie Jean King, why does she love to win?
2. List three ways the author prepares mentally for a tennis match. How does this mental preparation help her game?
3. Do you agree with her conclusion that you must "know yourself" before you can become a winner? Explain.
4. Think of a sport or activity with which you are familiar and be ready to tell whether Billie Jean King's formula would be useful for you.