On the Firing Line (Eighth in a series)

Mental and Emotional Skills

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May be learned just as certainly as
Physical and Technical skills.

Many years ago, I had the distinct pleasure and privilege to meet and chat one-on-one with Arthur Ashe. He was the first black athlete in professional tennis and devoted his later life to numerous causes. Some say the pinnacle of his tennis career was in 1975 when he defeated Jimmy Connors for the championship at Wimbledon. Others say it was his spectacular win in the U.S. Open in 1968 – as an amateur. Since 1997, the U.S. Open championship finals are played in a stadium that bears his name. He was very well read, thoughtful and articulate, and an international ambassador for his sport and country.

A model of decorum, his demeanor on and off the court was above reproach. He said that some of the keys to his success were the mental and emotional skills that he had learned. He firmly believed that these skills could be taught just as certainly as physical and technical skills.

Because of his race, he developed in the sport under constant scrutiny. Thus, he was taught at an early age by his father and by his first coach to always maintain his composure. For 8 summers, starting at the age of 10, he saw a sign on the wall that read: "Those whom the gods wish to destroy they first make mad." He also came to understand that he could learn from his mistakes and rattle his opponents at the same time. He embodied the concept of our sport's "Eights are you friend."

[Dr. Johnson] instructed Arthur and his other young charges to … smile at their mistakes. Ashe still does. It drives teeth-gritting, racket-throwing opponents to distraction. "They think I must be goofy," Arthur says. [SI 1966]

Ashe learned his tennis lessons – and his life lessons – under a system of strict discipline. And he thrived. He knew that to excel he had to learn and work hard.

He was taught some basic strokes by a young player named, magnificently, Ron Charity. What Arthur received from his father wasn't quite encouragement. Call it surveillance. Once, having thrown his racket in frustration, Arthur heard the screen door slam and looked up to see his father bearing down on him. He has yet to throw his second racket.

Ashe never chafed under his father's rules or under those of his coach, Dr. Robert Walter Johnson Jr., of Lynchburg, Va., who took him in during summers after Arthur was 10, adding him to a stable of young black players. Johnson insisted that in tournaments his boys play any shot that was an inch or two outside the line as if it were in. Johnson shaped much more than Ashe's game. [SI 1992]

He learned to go above and beyond and he learned the value of remaining calm.

"We were taught table manners and the strictest etiquette and that unshakable Oriental calm," says Ashe. "But I also noticed that control was [darned] effective. Other players' fathers were always telling Dr. Johnson, 'My son was going to pieces. Your player never changed expression.'" [SI 1992]

Paradoxically, we often dwell too much on our score or performance between shots – especially the poorer ones – and do not apply enough calm determination, focus, and will power to the actual shot delivery. Nor to our planning and training. One cannot think clearly, solve problems, and perform if angry or upset.

Ashe was the best at leaving every shot behind. He played each stroke as if it were for life and death and then instantly abstained from regret or celebration because there was another shot to play. It was inefficient, even self-destructive to waste energy raging at himself or his opponent or the umpire, even though to do so is wholly human. Too, he learned early that his unnatural cool was often so unsettling that it could be a tactical weapon.

So at his best he was a wonderful paradox. Compared with the antics of his racket-throwing, blaspheming opponents, Ashe's blithe shrugging off of errors and injustices seemed almost lackadaisical, as if he didn't care. Yet his was the truer picture of focus. He cut his losses and moved on, unharmed by them. [SI 1993]

Ashe cared about his image, not out of vanity, rather out of a sense of pride and respect for those from whom he had learned and for those who had gone before him. We do well to emulate his example. Displays of anger or profanity do not become the athlete or the sport.

Are there differences between mental and emotional skills? Mental skills include focus, awareness, and visualization while emotional skills include calm, positive energy in the face of adversity, and confidence. Though closely related, they are as separate from each other as are the closely related, yet different, physical and technical skills.

Remember the new competitor on the Ohio State University women's air pistol team that was mentioned in the previous installment of this series? At one point in practice, at the 2000 NRA Collegiate National Pistol Championships, she fired a 3. She turned around and her coach gave her a big, beaming smile! Later, she would tell me "…when I saw that smile I knew everything was fine." She returned to her shooting as if she had fired a 10.

Tennis, anyone?

References:
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[SI 1992] Moore, Kenny – "Sportsman of the Year" – Sports Illustrated – December 1, 1992
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All from: http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/tennis/features/1997/arthurashe/

The "On The Firing Line" series is published by the national governing bodies for Olympic shooting in Japan and the USA, and has been adapted for archery as "On the Shooting Line" published by USA Archery. Olympic Coach Magazine, the National Association of Soccer Coaches, and others have referenced selected articles. The entire series is available online at www.pilkguns.com.

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(Biographical information as of October 2009)