

Relax and Win Essay

By David Bailey



The ability to relax is a skill and fundamental to success in tennis.

Much of what I believe has been influenced by two brilliantly thought-provoking books –Relax and Win hence my title in homage and thanks to Bud Winter and Warrior Walking by Josh Holzer.

I believe in going to the experts in the field and learning from their ideas.

Bud Winter says: “Relaxation is the key to championship performance in whatever you do. Use it!” Bud trained his track and field athletes to relax, and they ended up winning 37 WORLD RECORDS. Nothing is a better testimonial to the art of relaxation than success like that.

The Foundation Principle

The foundation principle of The Bailey Method is relaxation.

Many balance principals such as:

- Vertical body axis
- Calm mind
- Steady head
- Level shoulders
- A wide base
- Weight centred
- Sinking of legs
- Good use of the kinetic chain
- Early racket preparation

All stem from the ability to relax!

Relaxation is the key element to being balanced. Balance is critical for excellent tennis play at every level and one of my favourite aphorisms which I see proved in all my lessons is – “If you fix the balance, you fix the swing”

Along with balance, relaxation gives your play beauty, grace, and efficiency.

People love watching players who are relaxed, look at Roger Federer. He is poetry written with the human body. I have always believed that "Balance is beautiful". A fine player is a pleasure to watch. They appear alert yet relaxed; they seem very calm and balanced with everything performed at a controlled speed. They are totally focussed yet stay loose and play with effortless effort.

Proven Facts through Research

Let us look at the facts about relaxation and its effect on athletic performance.

In his book 'Relax and Win', a worthy mantra for any sports player, Bud Winter speaks of how he was employed to train World War 2 fighter pilot and to scientifically research the effect of relaxation on their performance. Being a fighter pilot is one hell of a stressful job, where your life is on the line every working second, not to mention that you are fighting for the freedom of your country. Here, after extensive research, experimentation and strictly controlled conditions are his findings. You will notice that I have related his pilot results to tennis!

Being relaxed –

- Makes you **more efficient physically** (tennis is a physical sport)
- Gives you **faster reactions** (tennis is a reaction sport)
- Makes you **think more clearly** (tennis is a thinking sport)
- Gives you **better recall** (tennis involves tactics based on observation)
- Adds **energy to your stamina tank** (tennis is an endurance sport)
- Keeps you **cool and poised** (tennis involves decision making under stressful conditions)
- Aids **coordination and timing** (tennis is a very coordinated and difficult sport to learn with a high reliance on precise timing)
- Makes you **focus better** (tennis is a game of vision flexibility.i.e., focusing in close and out into the distance)
- Helps you **concentrate harder** (tennis is a game too often riddled with concentration errors)

- Helps you **calculate more quickly** (tennis is a game of quick calculations and decision making)
- Helps you be **more creative** (tennis is a game where you must adapt and break your opponent's rhythm.... if things are not going well, you must also change your game plan)
- Relaxation **breeds confidence** (tennis is a confidence sport)

These findings blew my mind when I first read them. WE must give the ART of relaxation the respect that it deserves.

Trust in Relaxation

After Bud Winter completed his extraordinary breakthroughs in his research with fighter pilots, he took his newfound knowledge back to the athletic track. He got his runners to do 3 things only-

1. Run at 80% of their top speed
2. Relax the jaw and
3. Keep the hands limp

Now this was very hard for many of the athletes because it was not in their nature to do this. They had been brought up in the culture of "No Pain, no Gain", "110 percent effort", "Train harder than your rivals". The proof was in the findings. Jaws hit the ground, cries of "It can't be!" resounded when the athletes, with a full chest of air, jogged back after their 80% effort. They had broken their personal best times.

Bud taught them to trust in relaxation.

I say this to my clients:

"To move without flaw, remember the 80% law."

Another one of Buds' sayings was:

"Work at your fastest controllable effort" ...I love that quote!

He would also say:

"Watch out for the sleepy looking guys with limp hands and loose jaws"

Wow does that remind me of Pistol Pete Sampras before he delivered his great serve. It always looked like he was about to nod off and then he would serve a swinging bullet that would defy physics and break off at incredible angle having the best players in the world scratching their heads??

Getting relaxed!

So, what are some things we can think about and check on to get relaxed?

How do these check points relate to tennis?

When playing tennis, relaxed form comes from 7 key areas –

1. **Jaw flopping loosely** – a lot of elite athletes stick their tongues out, McEnroe, Sampras, Michael Jordan all come to mind. Martina Hingis smiled when she played.
2. **Hands are like rag dolls** – keep the forearms strong, get the tension out of the muscles directly involved in the task in hand. Good hands = loose hands. Hold the grip at only 3 out of 10 tensions, like holding a baby bird with love and tenderness.
3. **Wrinkles nonexistent on forehead** – When Roger Federer plays tennis, he has a motionless face and very still head on contact with the ball, so noticeable because he does it so much better than the rest. There is absolutely no tension in his movement, he glides, he is smooth, Roger just floats across the court. Like my favourite mentor, the fabulous martial artist Bruce Lee, says: “Be like water my friend” and Roger flows better than anyone.
4. **Shoulders low to the ground and relaxed** – To be relaxed on court you don’t want to tense the upper body and if you have low shoulders it will free up the muscles around the spine thus giving you better upper body

rotation. This is critical for switching on the core muscles of the body and thus helping to generate power.

5. **Weight is centred in quads (front of thighs) not lower back** – If the weight is “sunk” and “sits” into the quads then not only does this load the legs it also takes the stress off the lower back. This prevents lower back strain and allows better range of motion around the lumbar spine. This thus means fewer injuries to the lower back. Having good angles in the legs allows gliding and flowing around the court. Loading the legs gives you better power and balance because it lowers your centre of gravity. Think of a skateboarder when he hits a bump in the road, he immediately sinks into his legs to regain balance and control over his body.

6. **Rib cage is held up and body beautifully aligned** – There was a car advertisement which sticks in my mind. Its catch phrase was “Alignment equals Balance and Control”. Think of a spinning top. As soon as it loses its vertical axis it starts to wobble out of control. A simple way to gain alignment is to lift the ribcage and sit the head on the shoulders as if being held by a string.

7. **Keep the base wide** – If you keep the base wide, not only does it give greater stability it also encourages better body alignment. Compare a Ferrari to a tractor, one hugs the ground, and the latter bounces up and down like a turbulent cork.

Relaxing under pressure “Think Fundamentals”

All the relaxation key points above are skills that need to be practiced so they become natural when playing under pressure. Playing in a tournament is never the same as a practice match. You can't be thinking about too many things. It all comes down to trusting your training. When I talk to my players about tournament play, I like to them to emphasise good form fundamentals –

1. Watch the ball intently
2. Keep the feet wide
3. Split the step
4. Stay low
and most importantly
5. Relax with Humble Confidence (believe in yourself and respect the game and your opponent)

Relaxed tennis will soon become a habit pattern that holds up under all conditions.

The Natural "Keep to the Simple"

Most of us must learn to relax until it becomes so ingrained that it happens automatically. The objective is to have no tension in movement. Being relaxed in motion is very different to being relaxed when still or sitting or lying down.

The important thing is to learn the 'natural' way of doing things. Every person has their own "What feels natural" or "What they feel comfortable with". It is all personal and unique.

'Natural' comes from personality type, body types, previous coaching, parental influences, even your heroes as kids. It is the coaches' important role through communication, asking the right questions, researching, absorbing, and rejecting to find out what works and feels good for a particular person. A player will never use anything that doesn't feel natural and works for them.

I love this quote by Josh Holzer!

"It is possible to lose track, take a wrong fork, trip and fall, and even get caught in the elements. So, the best advice I, as merely a fellow traveller, can give is to KEEP TO THE SIMPLE. Remember, rely on the basics, and your journey will be as comfortable as nature allows."

The Key

In conclusion, being relaxed is certainly essential to playing great tennis and having smooth, flowing movement around the tennis court.

Remember, a lot of players no matter what their standard all should have a mantra or a saying to help focus their minds during a game. For me, it's the simple but strong two words from Bud Winter "Relax and Win".

I agree with Bud when he said – "Relaxation is the key to championship performance in whatever you do. So, use it"!