

# Fire and Ice

By Alistair Mc Caw

Ever heard the expressions: "A cool head wins a hot game" or "cool as a cucumber". Staying calm or being cool. It's so easy to talk about it, but being out there on the court trying to stay calm when a bad call has gone against you or when you've missed that easy put away is another story. I don't have enough fingers on 2 hands to count the amount of matches i have watched where a player is clearly physically, tactically and technically better than his or her opponent, but lost that match on "losing their head".

Over the last couple of years, I've read books on sports psychology and on the performance mindset. This subject intrigues me because many of the world best performers be it in business, entertainment and sports have this in common.

Seeing that i have only worked hands on with sports athletes, it seems to be the least practiced of the 4 major units that influence athlete performance, those being: *Your chosen 1.sport [Training, Competition], 2.Nutrition, 3.Recovery and 4.Mindset.*

Top performing athletes put in endless hours of work into their training, spend countless money on supplements or sports equipment and even buy the latest Britney Spears CD , but won't spend 20 bucks on a mindset book or attend a meditation class once a week.

***" I know some professional athletes would rather spend 20 bucks on a Britney Spears CD than a mindset book or meditation class"***

The ironic thing is this: When i ask athletes what percentage of their performance is mental versus physical i have never gotten a reply less than 70%.

Yet when I ask how much training they have received on how to use their mind and how to develop its potential, most of them answer - none!

When discussing "self control" or " mindset" i like to refer to the 3C's: *Confidence, calmness, and concentration.*

## **Confidence**

Confidence comes from knowing you've put in the hard work to enable you to perform at your potential. When you are fit, you don't need to worry about how long or intense the match is going to be.

Confidence is about practicing positive self talk, continually encouraging yourself and being your own self motivator.

Confidence is about backing yourself no matter what the score or situation is, believing that the match is only over once you're under the shower.

In essence being confident helps you to stay calm under pressured situations.

## **Calmness**

It seems like some of the best performers in world sport never get frustrated, but believe me they do.

I've seen Federer totally lose it, but did it when the camera's were turned away and the crowd loudly cheering. His opponent didn't see or hear it.They are human beings like you and me and get angry from time to time. However the big difference is that they have taught themselves to stay calm during periods of stress and pressure.

They practice staying calm and controlled.

Notice i say it takes PRACTICE, like everything else you learned to perform your sport. However they do need to release it in some way.

***Mindset control takes practice just like your physical, nutritional, technical and tactical elements.***

### **Concentration**

When you are more calm you are able to concentrate better and maintain a higher level of focus. One system that works well is having trigger words or phrases you say to yourself in a match like "I'm cool under pressure" or "I'm calm and controlled" can help you stay focused and concentrated.

Being angry and losing your temper only distracts your concentration and focus and gives energy to your opponent. Think about it in the reverse, when you see your opponent pissed off, it only makes you feel more confident and energized, right?

***You only give your opponent extra energy when you show signs of anger and frustration.***

I compare having a temper is like a boiling pot of water on the stove, bubbling and spitting until the lid blows off.

As I mentioned in the beginning of this article, it's easy to tell someone to stay calm, but when the pressures on it's a different ball game altogether.

Being a performance coach and working with all types of personalities, I understand that some of us are naturally calmer than others for example, you can't expect to have two athletes like a Roger Federer and John McEnroe following the same guidelines to staying calm. It won't work.

In my experience working with some athletes in this field is that a reverse effect can happen. The athlete tries to stay calm but in the process lose their competitive fire. I call this the **fire and ice** theory.

For the athlete the goal is to find the balance between staying calm and not losing the intensity and aggression whilst competing.

They must become more in control of their emotions.

***Every athlete's goal is to find the balance between staying calm, but still being fired up for the challenge. I call this the fire and ice theory.***

You see when you're really angry or pissed off, you can literally feel it simmering inside yourself until a boiling point. I believe that you need to release that built up anger.

The best way in my opinion and experience is to release it in a more positive way. But how?

Next time you feel it coming, try hold it back and wait for a point in the match, preferably a big point that you win and then let yourself go.

It might be a scream of "come on" or an action like clenching your fist, but the very fact that you are releasing this built up anger in a positive manner will help you calm yourself to a certain degree. Another advantage to this is that you aren't showing or giving your opponent any signs of self doubt or anger after losing a point, but rather turning it by making a statement that you are fired up for the challenge.

### **Don't try this at home kids!**

Another way that I wouldn't endorse to 99% of you and especially to kids, works for athletes such as Marat Safin and Serena Williams

- breaking a racquet. I can just hear you now, Here's this guy writing about staying calm and he mentions breaking a racquet, is he nuts?

I can tell you that for these kind of personalities, getting it released once is better than moaning and mopping for half the match.

But please don't tell your sponsors, parents or coach I recommended this!!

However, the best way is to practice staying in control is by channeling your negative energy

(anger, frustration) into a more positive energy by following the 3C's - Confidence, Calmness and Concentration.