



# Toughening Up

Providing young players with the tools to build resilience can help them bounce back from any difficult situation – both on and off the court. **By Jane Taylor**



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For young Frenchman Gael Monfils, the transition from junior to senior success meant matching his physical strengths with mental ones.

I've had an interesting journey since an acute shoulder injury forced my retirement as a professional player at the end of 1997. The following year, I accepted a Bachelor of Teaching/Bachelor of Health and Physical Education placement at the University of Newcastle. After graduating at the end of 2001, I started as a Health and Physical Education Teacher at a school in the Gold Coast Hinterland in January 2002.

I thoroughly enjoyed my time teaching and getting to know the students; however, in June 2004 I went to a MindMatters workshop and this proved to be a turning point in my life. In September 2004, I won the position of QLD State Project Officer for MindMatters. Ever since I have been in this position, I have been reflecting upon the skills that I gained from being a professional athlete and the skills and characteristics that MindMatters aims to teach and model to young people.

## Maximising Opportunities

As a professional athlete, I tried to do my best with the talent that I had been given. There were many ups and downs but I was fortunate to have people around me who really cared, and were there when I needed them. In my current position, I continue to have this supportive group of people who treat me with respect and help me through the tough times.

In both experiences, I've been given the opportunity to evolve as a person and develop my personal strengths, which is why I am passionate about this resource and the philosophy underpinning it.

MindMatters is a resource and professional development program that supports Australian secondary schools in promoting and protecting the social and emotional wellbeing of members of school communities.

The resource acknowledges we all need to develop "emotional and spiritual resilience which enables us to enjoy life and survive pain, disappointment and sadness. It is a positive sense of wellbeing and an underlying belief in our own and other's dignity and worth." (England Health Education Authority, 1998).

So what does this really mean and how can we teach and model the skills and attributes required to enhance resilience in our young people in a safe and supportive environment and enable them to enjoy life and survive adversity?

According to Benard (2004): "Personal resilience strengths are the individual characteristics associated with healthy development and life success." These personal strengths do not cause resilience, but are the positive developmental outcomes that demonstrate that these innate individual characteristics are engaged.

## Keys to Personal Resilience

The four categories of personal resilience strengths are:

- **Social competence:** communication skills; being responsive to others; having empathy and caring for others; forgiveness and compassion.
- **Problem-solving:** planning; flexibility; help-seeking; critical and creative thinking.
- **Autonomy:** a secure sense of identity; self-worth; initiative; ability to cope; sense of humour.
- **Sense of purpose:** hope for future; personal goals and values; sense of faith; connectedness with others.

To develop these innate personal strengths and produce good developmental outcomes, young people need to be in a nurturing environment. Some of the environments the young people are involved in include schools, families, and communities (including sporting clubs).

A nurturing environment is one where the young person experiences caring relationships, high but achievable expectations and authentic opportunities



Barbara Rittner, pictured with young German charge Anna Lena Groenefeld, demonstrates the key coaching quality of communication.

MICHAEL KIENZLER, GETTY IMAGES

to participate and contribute (Benard, 2004).

## The Role of the Coach

Apart from family, friends and peers who can impact upon and play a very important role in the athlete's environment, the person who will have the most impact on a developing player is their tennis coach. So what can tennis coaches do to support the social and emotional wellbeing needs of their athletes and develop a player's innate personal strengths?

Some strategies may include:

- ◆ Develop and implement processes and practices to encourage connectedness. If a player is traveling away to a tournament, for example, identify some people they may be able to practice with. If they are traveling overseas, give them some telephone numbers of other Australians in the area they are going.
- ◆ Express and model empathy. If an athlete is talking to you about an experience, listen to the athlete and try to understand and share your athlete's feelings.
- ◆ Plan goals with the athlete. Sit down with the athlete and talk through their goals and identify if they are realistic in the timeframe available.
- ◆ Work on personal relationships as well as relationships between young people and parents or external

support agencies. Identify a team of people, which might include a fitness trainer, sports psychologist, parent and/or school teacher, who can help the athlete achieve their goals and model effective communication skills.

- ◆ Provide young people with multiple opportunities and contexts in which to experience feelings of competence and/or develop competencies. For example -give constructive feedback and realistic praise to the athlete.
- ◆ Establish processes, practices and relationships that enhance self-esteem and promote positive coping strategies for real life situations. This could take the form of suggesting the athlete keep a diary/journal to reflect on their thoughts and feelings and help them identify strategies to cope with these feelings.
- ◆ Enhance opportunities for the athlete to make real-life decisions and have a say in their training and tournament schedules. For example – allow the athlete to lead a training session.

It is my hope the tennis community can work together to develop the innate personal strengths of young people and contribute to the development of well-adjusted human beings. ●

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