

The
Mentally
Quiet
Athlete



Fred Gratzon

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THE MENTALLY QUIET ATHLETE

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*This book is dedicated to my father, Edward Gratzon,
and to those who are looking for a deeper secret to athletic excellence.*

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CHAPTER ONE

The Mysterious Old Man

He who flows as life flows needs no other force.

Lao Tzu

I shook my head in disbelief. It just didn't compute.

Why would three buff high school kids play doubles with such an old man?
I asked myself.

Are they so desperate for a fourth they had to kidnap some geezer from a senior citizen bingo game?

Then it came to me.

Oh! Nice. They're giving grandpa a little exercise and fresh air before they wheel him back to the nursing home.

The point started with one of the young bucks hitting a blazing serve to the

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old man's partner. As his partner returned the ball, the old guy slid up to the net.

What are you doing? Don't you know it's dangerous up there?

The old guy looked like he was asleep on his feet. Fortunately, his opponents were purposely avoiding hitting the ball to him.

Thank goodness they're protecting him.

But suddenly, one opponent viciously whacked the ball right at the old man. I gasped.

They're trying to kill him!

Before I could move a muscle to save him, the old guy nonchalantly flicked his wrist, redirected the screaming bullet, and slipped it between his opponents catching them both flatfooted.

"Love-five," he said matter-of-factly as he spun on his heels and retreated to the baseline to receive the next serve. I was stunned . . . relieved . . . and intrigued.

Captivated, I took a seat in the stands.

The three young athletes played intensely—crouching, pouncing, bouncing, swirling, straining, sprinting, sweating.

The old guy, however, stood calmly, patiently waiting for his moment. If he were in a library picking out a book, he would have looked just the same—never moving a muscle until that perfect moment arrived.

His strokes were simple, fluid. Yet they were surprisingly effective, matching whatever the situation called for.

He was always in the right place at the right time. He had plenty of time to

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get to every ball. And when he had to move quickly, he never seemed hurried—yet somehow he always arrived in time.

He uttered no sound. He wasted no motion. He never got out of breath. And he never worked up a sweat. Amazingly, he consistently hit winners.

I had never seen anything like it. Spellbound, I lost all awareness of time and place.

My ringing cell phone brought me back to earth. It was the auto repair shop telling me my car was fixed and I could resume my cross-country trip.

I was reluctant to leave without any clue to who the old man was and how he was able to play the way he did. But, it was late and I needed to get a quick dinner since I was anxious to squeeze in some more driving time after this unplanned half-day interruption.

I climbed down from the stands and went to retrieve my car.

CHAPTER TWO

An Immediate Transformation

A good athlete can enter a state of body awareness in which the right stroke or the right movement happens by itself, effortlessly, without any interference of the conscious will.

Stephen Mitchell

I stretched myself awake.

Where am I? . . . Oh, yes, I had dinner in the hotel's restaurant and suddenly didn't feel like doing any more driving so I checked into this hotel.

I immediately remembered the old man and his unique style of playing tennis which I'd witnessed the day before.

I continued thinking about him through my early morning swim in the hotel pool and during breakfast. And he was still on my mind as I packed my car, checked the map and GPS, and started driving through town toward the

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interstate highway.

Impulsively, I took a quick detour and swung by the tennis courts. They were empty.

Then out of the corner of my eye, I saw the old man wheeling a cart filled with yellow tennis balls out of an adjacent shed.

I've simply got to speak to him.

I quickly pulled into the parking lot.

I jogged up in time to see him greeting a young, powerfully-built man in his early twenties. It looked as if a tennis lesson was about to begin.

So the old guy must be a coach.

"Mind if I watch?" I called out.

The young man shrugged and the Old Coach gave a tiny nod, so I took a seat in the courtside stands.

I heard the young man complaining about his backhand. When in college, it was more than adequate to beat his peers. But now that he had turned professional and was playing better players, his opponents were feasting on it.

"Okay, let's warm up first and then we'll fix your backhand," said the Old Coach.

The Old Coach stroked the ball over the net to begin a rally. He moved the ball with ease from one side of the court to the other to get a good idea of the Young Tennis Pro's game.

The Young Tennis Pro fired one bazooka blast after another at the Old Coach.

His backhand was crisp and accurate, but nowhere near as lethal as his

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free-wheeling forehand. Even still, I was convinced any amateur tennis player would have traded his or her first born for such a “weak” stroke. It seemed to me that you could crush just about anyone with it.

After a few minutes of warm-up, the Old Coach called the Young Tennis Pro to the net. I expected to see the Old Coach give a demonstration of some aspect of the backhand he wanted the Young Tennis Pro to perform.

But surprisingly, the Old Coach gave no such demonstration. All he did was talk.

When they resumed their positions on the court and started to rally again, something extraordinary happened. The Young Tennis Pro’s backhand seemed like it was let out of a cage.

Whoa, the so-called “defective” backhand has just turned into a death ray!

The ensuing tennis was riveting. At the end of the session, I hustled over to the Old Coach.

“I’ve never seen such a quick transformation in a tennis player,” I said after introducing myself. “What did you teach him to improve his backhand so much?”

The Old Coach looked at me for a moment and answered simply, “I fixed how he waited for the ball between shots.”

Caught off guard by his unorthodox answer, I was speechless for a moment. Then I stammered, “Isn’t waiting, well . . . just waiting? How is it even *possible* to *wait* wrong?”

The Old Coach was obviously amused. “There are many different ways to wait. How you wait determines how good your next shot will be. The way he was waiting when the ball approached his backhand was sabotaging his stroke.”

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"It was?" I asked astounded. "How?"

"It disrupted his timing and reduced his fluidity and power," he answered. "Once we adjusted how he waited, he started hitting the best backhands of his life."

I'd never heard anything even remotely like this before. Every coach or commentator I'd ever heard had always talked in mechanical terms when explaining why an athlete's motion was not effective. No one had ever pointed to how an athlete waited between shots.

I would have dismissed what the Old Coach was saying if I hadn't seen the dramatic turn-around with my own eyes.

"Let me get this straight," I asked. "You didn't ask him to make any mechanical adjustments to his backhand?"

"No, I didn't have to," the Old Coach shook his head. "If you wait properly . . . the perfect stroke happens naturally. It's really quite simple."

"It may be simple to you, but to me the transformation was pure magic!" I declared. "Could I ask you a little more about your approach?"

"Well, I'm pretty hungry right now and I was planning on going to lunch. If you'd care to join me, you could ask your questions then."

"Wow," I said. "I'd love to. My treat."

As we walked to the restaurant, I nervously thought about my travel plans.

This diversion won't disrupt them too much. After all, I've got to eat, don't I? I'll simply make up the time I'm losing now by driving later into the evening.

Content with that resolution, I entered the restaurant without a concern.

Summary

- How you wait determines how good your next shot will be.
- If you wait properly, the perfect motion will happen naturally.

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