

## What a Player Can Learn from Watching the US Open

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The 2004 US Open was a very exciting tournament full of surprises and excellent tennis. Many great matches were contested on Ashe and Armstrong stadiums, as well as the outer courts. We spent a lot of time observing many great players in the junior and main draws. Coaches, players, and parents can learn a great deal watching other players compete. We certainly learned a lot this year! You can learn how players deal with adversity; change their style depending on the flow of the match; or remain calm under pressure. Here is a sample of what we learned from some of the most intriguing matches at the Open.

*Adapt to the changing weather conditions (Agassi and Federer)*

In the past few years players at the US Open have dealt with long and numerous rain delays. For many players this is a major distraction leading to less than their best tennis. One of the best matches of the men's tournament occurred under the worst wind conditions we have witnessed. Dealing with the aftermath of a Hurricane blowing through Ashe Stadium, Agassi and Federer battled in a tight five set match. Despite the gusts of wind, both players maintained their focus and played very good tennis. How did they do this? For sure, Agassi and Federer adapted to the gusting wind conditions. Their footwork was excellent as they took the small steps to adjust to the abnormal flight of the ball. The following are suggestions for any player dealing with poor weather conditions.

1. Understand that the conditions affect both players. Do not allow the weather to beat you!
2. You will need a high tolerance of mistakes; you are not going to play your best. So don't let the perfectionist in you ruin your performance.
3. Look and listen for weaknesses from your opponent if they seem to be getting frustrated dealing with the conditions. Is your opponent looking to the sky? Yelling at the wind? Checking the court with their shoes? When she does this, her focus is not fully on the match. Pounce on your opponent right away by attacking their serve and/or coming to the net.
4. Practice in bad weather; this is the best way to become an all-weather player!
5. Have a plan for rain delays. Know what you will do during this break from play. For example, you should know what you want to focus while waiting for the match to begin. Is it best for you to stay focused on the match while waiting, or should you relax and plan to refocus prior to the start? How you approach the delay depends on how long you think it will be, but we suggest that you attempt

- to stay focused on the match during very short delays, and for long delays find activities that will take your mind off the match. Then plan to refocus in the 15 – 30 minutes prior to the start of play.
6. Have a plan or strategy to deal with all the different situations that might arise. What will you do if the wind gusts at 30 mph?

*Start fast; finish strong (Federer v. Hewitt, Davenport v. Kuznetsova)*

In the final weekend, two very interesting matches displayed the importance of momentum in tennis. In the semi's, Davenport and Kuznetsova met in an up and down affair. Davenport went out fast (6-1) but was unable to keep the momentum and Kuznetsova gained control of the match in the 2<sup>nd</sup> set and won the match fairly comfortably. In the men's final, Federer started very fast against Hewitt at 6-0, but in this case was able to continue dominating his opponent (won the third set at love as well). How was Roger able to maintain momentum while Lindsay could not? Why was Svetlana able to change momentum when Lleyton could not? We cannot say exactly why, but here are some suggestions for juniors to get a fast start out of the gate and also for those who often get an early advantage only to see it slip away.

*Start Fast:* The match begins the day before.

1. Scout the opponent so you know the best way to attack their game. If she has a weak backhand, attack it early and often. Have a game plan!
2. Be fully prepared by preparing your equipment and getting proper food and rest.
3. Know your pre match schedule, including when you will wake up, eat, etc. Have a pre match routine and follow it!
4. Be ready to go from the first point by bouncing on your toes to energize.
5. Have a focused warm-up. Think about your game and how you will play out your plan.

*Finish Strong:* Maintain focus to keep the momentum.

1. Focus on what is important – playing the game. Attempt to focus only on the present and stop any thoughts that you have about past mistakes, the future outcome of the match, or analyzing too much. Have a mental cue such as a “stop” that blocks these thoughts from distracting you.
2. A junior should continue to attack and play his game style. When you have the lead do not pull up, keep doing what got you the lead.
3. Be prepared for shifts in momentum. Understand that an opponent is probably doing everything he can to gain control. Do not overreact to shifts in momentum. Instead, a junior should focus on his game plan and playing his game style.
4. When you have lost momentum it is easy to get frustrated. Instead, a junior player needs to refocus by taking more time between points to prepare to play the next point with full intensity and focus.

*Go for your shots when you are not getting the calls (Serena Williams in the controversial match vs. Capriati)*

The most controversial match at the Open pitted Serena Williams against Jennifer Capriati. In a tight match, Serena hit several balls that were in, but called out. Serena handled this situation with class; however it may have affected her willingness to go for her shots. A little more conservative play from Williams was all Capriati would need to win the match. What should a junior do if she is receiving awful calls? Obviously, the situation is different in juniors because there are rarely line judges; the opponent has to call the lines at most tournaments. Nonetheless, it is most important that the player focus on what she can control.

- Focus on playing the point aggressively and avoid thinking about what could go wrong during the point. Think “hit out” instead of “don’t miss” or “don’t hit near the lines.”
- Accept mistakes and move on. No player (or line judge for that matter) is perfect.
- Understand that the only way for you to win when you are playing a great opponent is to play “all out.” Pulling back or playing to not lose will lead to poor performances and probably losing.
- Handle yourself with class and dignity even when you think you are receiving terrible line calls.
- Ask for an official to watch the match. This should help you to feel more comfortable in hitting your shots.

## Conclusion

Tennis is a very exciting sport to watch. The players are great athletes and have tremendous levels of fitness and strength. However, there is a lot more that is going on to the trained eye. The mental battle that occurs often determines the result of a match. Watch how the great players approach various match situations with success. This will give you a good idea of how you might want to approach these situations. So, when watching your next match, look for the mental dynamics that underlie the score.