



# The Winning edge

A losing streak can be a slippery slope – easy to get on and tough to get off. **ROBERT DAVIS** explores how to help a player regain their winning edge.

**R**eferring to the emotional roller coaster that is professional tennis, there is a saying on the ATP Tour: 'Little time to celebrate, and no time to cry.' As tennis players often play several weeks in a row, and are constantly competing on different surfaces with different balls in different cities, consistency is always a challenge.

A player might win one week and lose the next and before he knows it forget how he ever won in the first place. Add niggles, injuries and personal issues to the mix and capturing that elusive 'winning edge' is far from easy.

Still, some players do. Back in 1977 Guillermo Vilas won a record 46 matches in a row. Ivan Lendl followed with 44 in 1981-82. And most recently, Novak Djokovic with 42 in 2011. However, there is another, lesser known, streak of 26 wins that David Goffin put together last year that illustrates best the most common way a player gets back to winning ways.

In late 2012, Goffin entered the world's top 50 for the first time. He hovered there treading water for a few months, but started sliding down the rankings and by the end of 2013 had dropped out of the ATP top 100. Last July, Goffin was forced to play Challengers due to his ranking. He quickly

won three tournaments in a row; Sheveningen, Poznan and Tampere, a total of 15 matches over three straight weeks.

Goffin did not stop there, gaining entry to the ATP Tour event in Kitzbuhel as one of the last and lowest-ranked players in the draw. How did he do there? You guessed it; Goffin won five matches and his first Tour event. The Belgian went on to win six matches (including three qualifying rounds) before big-hitting Jerzy Janowicz stopped his streak at 26 in the quarterfinals of the ATP Winston-Salem event. Goffin had clearly not lost his skills when he dropped down to the Challengers; he had merely lost his edge.

In early December of 2001, Paradorn Srichaphan, then ranked No.129, played his last tournament of the year, a \$25,000 Challenger, at home in Bangkok, Thailand. Srichaphan would save match points against Peter Luczak in the first round and go on to win the one and only Challenger title of his career. Then exactly three weeks later and without playing a match in between,

Srichaphan reached his first ATP final in Chennai. Did some part of his game magically improve, allowing Srichaphan to jump from Challenger champion to Tour finalist in three weeks?

It becomes increasingly obvious that a player's schedule has a lot to do with it. For example, top ranked ITF juniors usually win matches or even tournaments at the Futures level while still competing in the juniors.

In the juniors their egos are getting massaged with relatively easy wins and that has a certain carry-over effect into the Futures. As was the case with Marcos Baghdatis in 2003 when he won the Australian Open boys' title and a couple of months later his first ITF Futures in Greece, dropping only one set in five matches.

Then there are some less obvious ways to obtaining the winning edge.

In October of 2013, Grigor Dimitrov had spent most of the year ranked between Nos.29 and 48. Then he hired taskmaster Roger Rasheed as his coach. They began their relationship at the Stockholm Open. Seven days later, Dimitrov picked up his first ATP singles title. Dimitrov continued to rise under Rasheed with hardly a bad loss while collecting three more ATP titles and a semifinal spot at Wimbledon, where he lost to Novak Djokovic. It is highly unlikely that Rasheed whipped out a magic wand and waved it about Dimitrov's head.

What is more likely is the so-called Pygmalion Effect; basically, the greater the expectation of the teacher, the better the student performs. Rasheed's reputation for exceedingly high expectations for his players and himself is well-known in the locker room.

In contrast to the importance of high expectations, here are two examples of no expectations at all.

In 2009, Guillermo Garcia-Lopez was losing more matches than he was winning. As the first-round losses piled up during the clay court season, so did the tension between Garcia-Lopez

**David Goffin (above) got on a roll in the Challengers; even Rafael Nadal (right) is not immune to dips in confidence.**



and his manager/coach, Juan Manuel Esparcia. "I felt like he (Garcia-Lopez) was getting close to breaking through, but he just could not put it together for the whole match," remembers Esparcia. "We were having some tension off the court and I suggested that he go play Kitzbuhel alone or take a friend so our relationship could heal."

There must have been some healing powers in that cool alpine air as Garcia-Lopez won his first ATP Tour event in Kitzbuhel the one week of the year that his longtime coach was absent.

Despite never having advanced past the third round of doubles at Wimbledon and never having won an ATP Tour doubles event, Johnny Marray became the 2012 Wimbledon men's doubles champion, with partner Frederick Nielson. Marray and Nielson had never even played a tour match together and their rankings were so low that they needed a wildcard to gain entry into the main draw. Marray and Nielson sent shockwaves through the tennis world by defeating one seeded team after another while winning four out of their six matches in five sets.

"I had played Wimbledon a lot of times before and I never really felt free or loose because I wanted to do so well there and I was nervous," says Marray. "But I had been seeing a mental coach prior to Wimbledon and he helped me to focus on enjoying the game and not getting bogged down about results. I hardly saw Freddie (Nielson) except

prior to the match. It was his first ever Wimbledon experience and he was really enjoying it which rubbed off on me as well, I suppose. I just sort of threw up my hands in the air and went with the flow."

High expectations or low expectations both seem to work. But what happens when neither is helping? Or for that matter when nothing seems to be working? Losing matches can be a bit of a slippery slope, easy to get on and tough to get off.

In 1999, Vince Spadea, then ranked No.22, began a losing streak that reached 21 matches in a row. And in 2012, Donald Young lost 17 straight matches. In 2007-08, twins Sonchat and Sanchai Ratiwatana got hot and made finals in three out of four ATP doubles events, winning Bangkok and Chennai. For a brief period they were one of the hottest doubles teams on the ATP Tour. Then they lost their confidence and did not win another Tour match for 16 months.

No one is immune to the effects of losing more tennis matches than they win. One of those effects is indecision. Another saying among pro coaches and players, regarding shot selection: 'Even bad decisions are better than *indecision*'. When the confidence goes, everything else seems to follow.

After losing to Fernando Verdasco in Miami this year, Rafael Nadal told the press:

"I am feeling that I don't have this self-confidence that when I hit the ball I am going to hit the

ball where I want to hit the ball, to go for the ball knowing that my position will be the right one."

How can a player fix it? By getting back to basics. Sometimes the simplest advice seems to work best.

When Srichaphan was out of sorts and down two sets to one and 5-1 in the fourth set in a Davis Cup match versus Uzbekistan's Oleg Ogorodov, Srichaphan's uncle yelled out, "Hit it hard, Paradorn... but in!" Both the crowd and Srichaphan erupted in laughter and the Thai ace won the next six games to level the match before winning the fifth set 6-4.

Somdev Devvarman tells of the time that he was slumping and Tony Roche gave him some advice. "He told me to work on my weaknesses," recalls Devvarman. "But work on my strengths more. I did just what he said and it helped me to get back to what I do best. Immediately, I started winning again."

When Venus and Serena Williams were young prodigies, most if not all of the American tennis industry criticised their father, Richard Williams, for withholding the girls from junior tournaments. The consensus was that talented as they were, they would never learn how to win. Hindsight has proven that father knew best in this

## Winning Back

Lost your winning ways? Some steps to restoring them could include:

- » Return to basics – the simplest steps are often the best.
- » Be decisive. Indecision from lack of confidence is the greatest contributor to a losing streak.
- » Acknowledge your weaknesses, but work on your strengths.
- » Stop pressuring yourself. You're more likely to win in tennis if you're enjoying it.

particular situation, and that while the Williams girls may not have learned how to win in their formative years, neither did they learn how to lose.

There are no absolutes in coaching, and helping a player discover the winning edge is more about which philosophy the coach and player adhere to. Raise expectations and increase pressure like Roger Rasheed, or remove expectations and decrease pressure like Juan Manuel Esparcia? Both styles were effective with their players at that particular time. Other times, circumstances force players to drop down to lower tier events where they have a better chance of picking up wins and rebuilding their confidence, like Goffin did. Or you can do what Marray did while winning Wimbledon: smile, enjoy the game and take it easy. **ATM**



Serena and Venus Williams never played juniors.



Grigor Dimitrov, coach Roger Rasheed and the Pygmalion effect.