

As the tennis season approached in the Australian summer, it brought to mind various matches I have watched over the years, both in Australia and from overseas tournaments, where a lesser ranked player will find themselves holding a winning position against a more highly fancied opponent. It is heartbreaking to then see the lower ranked player fail as nerves, expectations or simply lack of confidence overcomes them. One might say the better player managed to find a way to win on the day, but how much did the lesser player contribute to this win? How much did they let the circumstances of the moment impact upon their performance? How often do we as players lose to another due to personality factors, or to pre-conceived perceptions regarding these players, whether it is their playing record or other factors.

Our self-talk, that little voice inside your head, often creates doubts about our ability to perform in certain situations. However doubts are not always created by our own experience or from believing that an opponent is better ranked than us, or has a great playing record against us. Some doubts can come from a casual comment from partner or a previous encounter with an opponent.

This brought to mind two situations of a slightly different type from my own experience. The first was from several years ago when my partner and I were drawn to play against a player who had a reputation for being quite garrulous at the table—so much so, that his opponents often found the constant rambling off-putting, and many didn't play at their best against him. Anyone who has played against me knows I am not the quietest person at the table either, so when my partner told me about him, my response was 'no worries - he's met his match'. And so in the match as he carried on with his rambling at the table, I countered with my own share of rambling right back at him, and we went on to defeat the pair in that event. I have a good playing record against this player, since I refuse to allow his tactics to distract me.

Not everyone can cope with the ramblings so a good tactic I have seen some players use when asking the players to desist from talking hasn't worked, is to simply put their cards on the table and wait until the distracting player stops talking. Ensuring you have your own tactic to deal with these players is very important for your performance.

The second situation concerned a partner of mine who had a poor set against a player and commented afterwards that the player was a person they particularly disliked playing against. How much did the distraction represented by the dislike of playing against this person influence my partner's performance? How often do we allow an opponent to create a negative mindset, or to distract us at the table.

These types of distraction are quite common, and less experienced players often allow relatively minor things to distract their focus. After all, it is hard enough to play well, remember all your system agreements, count the cards during play, and work out how to declare/defend the hand without distractions adding to the difficulty. Even experienced players will sometimes have problems in these and similar types of circumstances.

Whilst these and situations like them can prey on your mind, particularly if you lose to the players involved, you can use some basic methods to ensure you perform at your best, and avoid letting your previous experience distract you from the task at hand. In my view, using a cue-word to get you focussing on the hand, and off the opponent is one tactic you could employ. (See *ABF Newsletter November 2015 on Maintaining Focus*)

Managing your approach to matches against players who annoy or distract you is extremely important to ensure you perform at your best. Keeping your mind focussed on the match at hand, the cards and the contract you are in or defending, and off things like the player who talks too much or the pair/player you personally don't like will help ensure you achieve your goals at the bridge table — whatever they might be.