

The Mental Game - Stopping Negative Thinking

I hate playing in no trumps. I don't play well against Pair x. I have heard comments like this from many players. Whether you verbalise this or simply think it, the same effect on your mind will apply. A key issue for many sports people is the little voice inside the head that prevents a competitor from winning. In this article I'd like to focus on that little voice and the negative thinking that usually accompanies it.

The negative voice creates doubt in many different circumstances for competitors in all sports: - In high jumping it might be: "I've missed this height in the past"; in shooting "I always miss my last shot" or "I always miss my first shot"; in running it might be "I'd better not miss this start". The "not" word, or its various facsimilies create nothing positive in the mind which just focusses on the "miss the shot" part and ignores the "not" word. The common "little voice" phrase in bridge goes something like "I hate playing in 1NT", and after you have gone 1 off saying to yourself (or aloud) "I always mess up 1NT". When you fail, the little voice says "yep that is just like me". This type of reflective comment simply reinforces in your mind the negative thinking and increases the likelihood of failing the next time. A negative mindset does nothing to help you make your contract. Overcoming these negative thoughts is critical to successful performance, and approaching the competition with optimism is not always enough. A life-time of the "little voice" is sometimes hard to overcome, and for those players who may enter a match with an initial positive focus, the experience of one or two perceived "bad" boards cause the "little voice" to re-appear. These players often find themselves in a mid-match slump from which recovery is impossible. So a solution for the negative voice might be worth considering.

In addition to using positive commentary such as "I can make 1NT", or "I can beat this pair", competitors sometimes like to have a procedure to help stop these negative thoughts.¹ One option widely used is known as "the rubber band" method which is outlined below.

1. List at least five types of negative thoughts that commonly occur for you in bridge.
2. Put a rubber band (or wrist band) around your wrist that fits snugly, and which can snap, and wear it all day every day. Choose something that you feel comfortable wearing around. (Note if you feel uncomfortable wearing something like this all the time, you could choose to wear it during play & score-up sessions).
3. Whenever you are aware of negative thoughts, the band should be pulled and released so that it stings your wrist. This means you are punishing or distracting yourself for a negative thought. It is a "thought-stopping" procedure.
4. After each time you have flicked the rubber band, execute a positive thought relating to the same situation. So if the thought that occurred was "I always mess up", change the thought to "I usually make".

This concept of thought-stopping for negative thoughts (I always go off in 1NT) followed by a positive thought (I can make 1NT) should mean that over time your negative thoughts lessen, and after a period of time you will find you have no negative thoughts and you can stop wearing the rubber band.

Stopping negative thinking will be instrumental in improving your overall performance, and assisting in your success at the bridge table.

¹ Source: www.scatt.com. SCATT (Shooter Computer Assisted Training Tool) was a Russian developed training system that I used extensively in shooting. The Russian shooting team was a highly successful outfit winning many world championships and Olympic Games. Unfortunately the range of articles which were available on their website are no longer available.