

Wednesday, January 30, 2008

### The Inner Game of Tennis

Random House recently sent me a copy of W. Timothy Gallwey's classic "The Inner Game of Tennis", so I suppose it's only fair that I say a few words.

I'm not much of a tennis player, and probably never will be. I likely won't join a club and thus worry about my placement on the club ladder. I probably won't play in tournaments. I do like hitting a tennis ball with A from time to time. All of this might make one think that I wouldn't get much out of a book about how to master the mental side of tennis, but of course, as you might predict from my paragraph and sentence structure here, that's not true. Gallwey's techniques, if you can call them that, are explicitly meant to be applicable to all kinds of sports and all areas of life. The basic take away is "stop letting your conscious take over". That is, don't think about your technique, don't think about the last shot you missed (or made), don't think about anything -- just do it.

The key reason why Gallwey advocates this method is because he believes the part of your mind that controls your body during physical activity can't be made to understand the verbal language employed by the other part of your mind. Your body doesn't really understand "bring the racket back higher" -- it understands how it feels to bring the racket back higher and can replicate that motion as long as it doesn't have some inner voice shouting at it "higher higher higher!" (Or an ultimate frisbee example: your body doesn't understand "elbow out on the flick!" -- it understands how it feels to throw with the entire arm unconstricted, away from the body, without the whole upper part of your arm locked to your ribs.)

As for how one is supposed to learn basic technique, Gallwey essentially advocates a combination of feeling it out for yourself, seeing what works, and watching other people. In the last, the key is not analyzing what they're doing and trying to translate their motion into language: don't go, "Ah ha, he brings his left foot back to that angle to prepare his forehand". Instead, just do what he did. Let your body emulate the motion.

One does occasionally get frustrated reading the book because Gallwey makes it all seem so easy. Anyone who has tried to "just relax" or meditate or any other kind of activity where you have to turn off or ignore the constant babbling of the conscious mind knows how difficult this is. Gallwey does acknowledge that it takes a lot of practice, a lifetime of practice, really, but he doesn't really give much in the way of tips on how to accomplish this centeredness he advocates. (Of course, you should probably expect that he wouldn't -- after all, Gallwey's entire system is dependent on the idea that these things can't be translated into verbal language, so of course he can't tell you how to let go of the conscious mind.)

Feel free to skip right over Pete Carroll's new foreword. It adds nothing to the book, and was presumably only written so that Random House could slap his name on the cover.

Posted by Jason Wojciechowski in Books at 19:39