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MINDSET

Jackie Reardon & Hans Dekkers

A mental guide for sport

*Recommended by Richard Krajicek, Leander Paes,
Rohan Goetzke, Stanley Franker and many others*

The proceeds of this book will go to the Mindset Foundation which supports young South African women to further their education.

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MINDSET AS AN ADVENTURE

This book is intended for sports people and coaches of all levels. Reading this book is like going on an adventure. The adventure consists of finding a different way of dealing with the mental side of sport. We hope and believe that a real adventurer will become a better player and gain more enjoyment from time spent on the sports field after reading this book. Step by step, we aim to help you gain more insight into your game. We want to teach you to exploit your positive qualities and to recognize and change your negative sides, whether you are a beginner or a professional sportsman or sportswoman, a club coach or someone who coaches professionals. What we hope to achieve is that even in a difficult match or a demanding training session, you will get a kick out of your new-found ability to relax and concentrate at the same time, and to get the best out of yourself.

Why is this book called *Mindset*? A ‘mindset’ is a way of thinking. A mentally strong player has a particular way of thinking, which we call ‘action thinking’. We refer to the opposite way of thinking as ‘story thinking’. This book explains how story thinking can be changed into action thinking.

More and more players now realize the overriding importance of the mental side of sport, and know that you can improve your game immensely by working on it. Dwelling too long on your mistakes, focusing too much on the score, playing against yourself: everyone knows that these things happen during matches, causing you to tense up and make unnecessary mistakes. Of course technique is an indispensable part of the game at every level, but our emphasis here is on the mental side of sport rather than technique. The understanding you can gain here can

certainly be used while you are working on improving your technique: you can learn to make the improvements you want in an enjoyable way. You do this by changing the habit patterns of your mind. We shall give you tools that will help you to set about improving and strengthening your mental powers. The key is to invest instead of to consume. If things are not going smoothly, trying to solve the problem by going off to take a few extra lessons is a form of consumerism that can have the opposite effect. You can't expect a few hours of coaching to produce results without actively investing in your own plan for mental development.

Mindset will teach you how to conquer your fears and to calm your thoughts, using action thinking. In the tension of a match (or in the stress of everyday life) you may often find that you lose the sense of ease with which you perform to the best of your ability. Deploying the right instruments can evoke action thinking. During the game itself, scanning and zooming (observation) take over, and thoughts become subordinate to feelings (bodily awareness). We shall be basing ourselves here on the scientific work of Robert Nideffer to clarify this process. In our view, all thoughts should be disengaged once the action in the match has begun. Decisions should be taken instinctively. This may sound exaggerated or even peculiar, but if we listen to what leading sports personalities say about a 'flow', it always comes down to the same thing: 'I didn't think, I acted.' *Mindset enhances instinct.*

Mindset has developed a vocabulary that is concrete, simple, modern and accessible. It is 'accessible' in the sense that the terminology is neutral/objective rather than confrontational. Take this example. A coach saying to a pupil that he is 'in story thinking' will have a very different impact from saying that his play is far too tense. We have seen in practice that this makes a world of difference. In fact we have even heard pupils of different sports telling each other that they were 'in story thinking', without any of the depressing, frustrating overtones that usually accompany such situations. In other words, this terminology tends to motivate people instead of making them feel hurt or put down.

And since the vocabulary is simple, it soon becomes clear where the work has to be done. It also gives the pupil more insight into his or her own responsibility. Better self-management gives people the energy they need to make changes.

Mindset provides sports coaches with a general framework for communicating with their pupils, using one or two words instead of complex sentences. This makes it possible to communicate about the mental side of the game in a specific and tangible manner.

In this book, our philosophy is applied to sport. But the two mindsets, story thinking versus action thinking, can be applied to any activity, using sport as a metaphor.

Consider, for a moment, the different ways in which someone may make music. The story thinker plays notes. Technically, everything may be perfect, but there is not the slightest bit of feeling in the way he plays. The action thinker interprets. For him, the notes are just a basis to go on. 'That was played with great feeling' is a comment that has nothing to do with story thinking and everything to do with action thinking.

The same applies to communication. Sometimes you may fill in all the gaps yourself when someone is trying to tell you something. What you hear fits precisely into the image that you already had of the person. This is the story-thinker's judgment. It may turn out to be very surprising if you listen with more empathy and try, without making any judgement, to understand the real motives behind the person's words. You may suddenly realize that you've never listened to him or her properly before, with the action thinker's attention, but were already thinking up your own story or answer while he was still speaking.

We do not claim that our approach is the one and only way of achieving your potential in sport. Many roads lead to Rome. We are convinced, however, that everyone who adopts an open mind to our approach can benefit from it and become a more complete sportsman. The inspiration for this book was drawn from over a hundred tennis holidays in the past eighteen years, the insight training of S.N. Goenka ('Vipassana'), The Seven Habits by Stephen R. Covey and the books of Eckhart Tolle. These were the signposts that helped to keep us on course. Another source of inspiration was 'The Power of Full Engagement' by Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz. Their ideas and approach helped to shape our ideas for the personal success plan (PSP), which at the end of this book will help you choose a single mental goal that is most relevant to you .

Our method is not based on scientific research, although numerous academic studies and sports psychologists support our approach. What

matters to us is that we have received positive feedback not only from academic circles but also, and most notably, from the world of professional sport. Mindset has been officially integrated into the training system of the Dutch tennis federation, and a great many professional coaches in a wide range of sports have praised the practical usefulness and accessibility of the Mindset method. Now that the book is available in an English translation, we are also receiving a growing stream of enthusiastic reactions from countries around the world. We have been flooded with e-mails from recreational players saying that they have made amazing progress since applying the Mindset principles. For years now, Mindset training sessions have been producing immediate and astonishing results.

MINDSET IN A NUTSHELL

OUR PHILOSOPHY

All around us, there are signs of a movement away from the lifestyle and way of thinking that are associated with the rat race towards a more conscious way of living and thinking. Mindfulness, slowing down the pace of life and stress management are all terms that no longer sound vague or esoteric. We call the traditional mentality of judging, rationalizing and attachment to the past and the future ‘story thinking’. The new way of thinking that *Mindset* advocates is governed by observing non-judgmentally, visualizing and focusing on the here and now. We call this balanced mindset ‘action thinking’.

By changing your mindset, you will get the best out of yourself, and you will find yourself able to do far more than before with the same level of skill. Getting into a flow is within anyone’s reach, provided you know what to focus on. *Mindset* is a mental guide that teaches you to change from story thinking into action thinking. You will learn how to be in the here and now, and to conquer the interference coming from the ego. Winning from within yourself will become more important than winning from your opponent. Once you have mastered this way of thinking, you will always be able to give your best performance.

Someone who could serve as a good role model to everyone in this respect is Roger Federer. He says that in the course of his career he has increasingly learned how to relax and how to play one point at a time. He states quite literally that he finds it more important to outperform himself than his opponents. Other sportsmen in whom he recognizes the same mentality include the golf legend Tiger Woods, the amazing tennis icon Pete Sampras and the Formula One racing driver Michael Schumacher.

In all four cases, their success comes from a constant drive to perform at a higher level rather than to win from an opponent. They have learned to improve their own concentration to a level at which their achievements derive almost entirely from action thinking rather than story thinking. It hardly needs to be added that it is also their natural talent, self-discipline and determination that have made them better than the rest.

In general we tend to resist change, because our usual patterns feel comfortable; changing patterns requires energy and effort, and is sometimes painful. We are always searching for excuses to avoid change. The only way of changing old patterns into new ones is through practice and repetition. Every day you practise means progress. This is an essential element of the Mindset philosophy. Shifting from story to action thinking does not mean that we have to turn our thoughts off altogether, it means finding new patterns to help us switch off the 'noise' of story thinking. Only then can we learn how to focus to the best of our ability. This book does not pay much attention to technique or tactics, but strangely enough, everyone who reads it will discover that they make progress in both these areas. The explanation for this is that the mental side of sport is simply the overriding factor.

In story thinking, there is a big difference between winning and losing; the result is quite obviously either one or the other. Action thinking makes it possible to win every time. If you are bogged down in story thinking, you have simply won or lost, in sports terms, according to the scoreboard. In action thinking you can win twice: from yourself, and in addition, sometimes from your opponent too. You win from yourself if you set realistic goals for yourself beforehand, in a match as well as in a training session, and achieve them by carrying out your plan consistently and with discipline. You will learn to experience this as a victory. Eventually you will start to realize that winning from yourself is more important than winning from your opponent. And with this attitude will come a new feeling of self-confidence.

'My only goal is to win this match.' This is something you will hear sports people of all levels say more frequently than almost anything else. And the funny thing about this statement is that it essentially has no content at all. This winning does not serve any goal, no specific plan has

been mapped out that can be worked on, it does not provide any guidelines as to what you hope to achieve, and all it does is add tension. Bettine Vriesekoop (twice European table-tennis champion) wrote the following comment in response to the first edition of *Mindset*: ‘If you think in terms of winning or losing you’re always in a position of dependency. If you give quality to all your actions, the results will come by themselves.’

Mindset is not about learning a few useful tips, although there will be a few of those along the way. It is about something much more important. It is about changing our whole way of thinking about sport and about ourselves.

FEELING (BODILY AWARENESS)

The magic word that will enable you to discard story thinking and shift to action thinking is feeling. The method explained in *Mindset* will teach you exactly what this feeling is: a concentration form based on bodily awareness, and how you can use it to change.

One of the most familiar sporting experiences, something that everyone has felt from time to time, is tensing up and choking. You try desperately to remain light-footed, but stay rooted to the spot. A growing sense of confusion sets in; you have no idea what you should do with the ball. Thoughts keep flashing through your mind. This is the story thinker. An action thinker activates himself by using trigger-words, breathing techniques and rituals. This shifts his focus to the visual, without thoughts intervening and paralyzing him.

The methods briefly referred to above are a few of the instruments that will enable you to shift from thoughts to the feelings that go with action thinking. Everyone will recognize these tools, but very few find them easy to apply. People are constantly surprised that negative emotions keep getting in the way. And they have no idea what to do about it, what sort of training might be useful. Even Federer used to have trouble with his emotions.

According to Federer, finding a way to calm his mind has been of crucial importance to his career. He used to experience his matches as a series of emotional peaks and valleys. Each one completely exhausted him. Whenever he won two matches, he knew he was bound to lose the next.

‘I had to learn how to relax’, says Federer. ‘Instead of going through a constant emotional roller-coaster, I had to stay calm. Play one point at a time. Concentrate on the ball. Since I have learnt how to do that, my career has taken off amazingly. These days I feel just as relaxed on as off court. I also enjoy playing much more’.

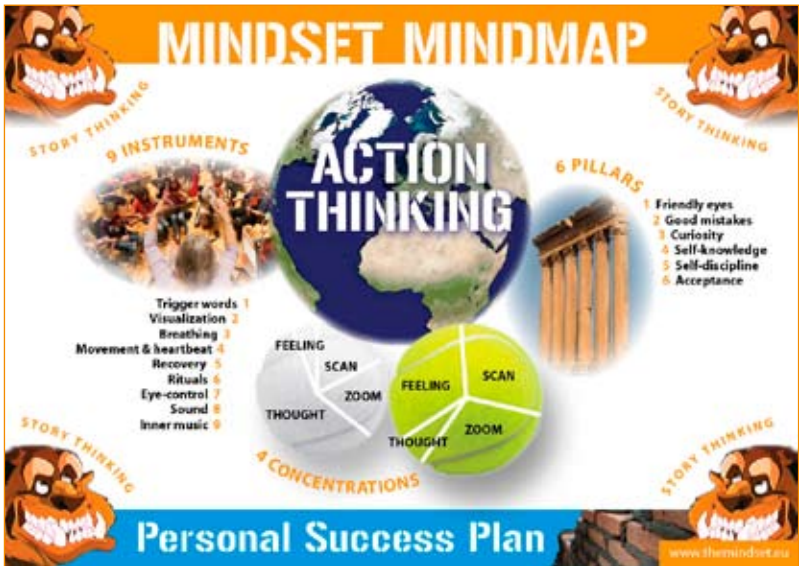
Roger Federer after winning his third US Open title (The People’s Daily, September 12, 2006)

We cannot emphasize enough that ‘achieving the right feeling’ is a process that cannot be evoked simply by using a few devices on the sports field (with instruments such as visualization, trigger-words, breathing and rituals). The learning process begins elsewhere. It is only when you have achieved a change in mindset that the ‘instruments’ that can be deployed during a match can be really effective and enable you to shift into action thinking. In other words, if you want to achieve the right feeling during sport, you have to lay the foundations in everyday life. That is the essence of the personal success plan that is presented for you to use in chapter 9. There are no quick, short-term solutions although you will notice immediate results. Mental growth is a process of consciousness-raising. The foundations on which you can build this growth are the six pillars, the four concentration forms and the nine instruments.

OUR METHOD – AN OVERVIEW

The aim of Mindset is to provide a method that will enable people to develop mental resilience both in matches and in other situations. The method aims at consciousness-raising, with the ultimate aim of acting unconsciously. Eventually you learn to act on the basis of feeling and intuition.

The basic conditions that are mentioned below are the six pillars that underpin our method. We regard these six pillars as universally applicable.



We shall return to all of them many times throughout the book. The Mindset Mindmap above will also be clarified throughout the book.

Personal development can make or break progress in sport. There is growing appreciation today for the fact that personal development in other areas of life is crucial to improving your mental powers in your chosen sport.

THE SIX PILLARS

1. Friendly eyes
2. Good mistakes
3. Curiosity
4. Self-knowledge
5. Self-discipline
6. Acceptance

1. Friendly eyes

Friendly eyes and good mistakes are the two most important ‘pillars’ on which to base your development as an action thinker. They are the foundation of achieving a balanced mind: action thinking. If you look with

friendly eyes, objectively and non-judgmentally – not just at yourself but also at the world around you – emotions will lose their power over you. This will make you less vulnerable, since you will not take everything personally. Here is an example: ‘If my opponent tries to disrupt my game with intimidating comments or behaviour, I shall not get irritated or see it as a personal attack. I will not let it influence me. In fact I can even understand why he or she might act that way.’ Another example: ‘If I get furious with myself for playing way below my standard, I will understand that I am doing the best I can at this given moment.’ ‘Friendly eyes’ is a state of mind that every sportsman should pursue.

2. Good mistakes

If you boldly pursue a specific goal, you may not succeed straight away. In fact it would be quite odd if you did not make a few mistakes along the way, before you succeed in making a change successful and permanent. If someone walks off the court or field in disappointment after losing a match, he may deal with the defeat in two different ways. He can learn from what happened, seeing the match as a ‘good mistake’. He can remind himself that progress is not always immediately visible and carry on optimistically down the path of personal development. Or he can look at the defeat as a personal disaster, which will close off ways of learning from it and make progress impossible. ‘Good mistakes’ is a way of reasoning that makes every situation a learning experience.

3. Curiosity

If you are curious about how you behave on and off the sports field, you will gather information to help you enhance your performance. This curiosity may be about how you are playing, and how your opponent is playing, but also about the emotions that come to the surface. Self-management begins with curiosity, and this includes open questions. For example asking your coach: ‘What do you think the best way is for me to improve mentally?’ The brain can be trained, just like a muscle. So curiosity is very valuable, since it leads to new discoveries that can help you to make changes. Once you realize this, there is no longer any such thing as failure. ‘Good’ and ‘bad’ become meaningless concepts: there is just scope for growth. Curiosity leads to self-knowledge.

4. Self-knowledge

Self-knowledge grows through shared knowledge. Self-knowledge does not only come from solitary reflection; more importantly, it comes from asking for open, honest feedback, for instance from your coach or teammates. Self-knowledge will always remain limited if you are not open to the opinions of others.

Self-knowledge is an essential part of setting goals, since you need to know what is within your own capabilities. Everyone who is involved in sport needs to set a mental goal as well as setting goals in technique, tactics and fitness. It is crucial to choose a goal that is specific and achievable. What exactly are you demanding of yourself, why, and how are you going to go about it? From this situation you can really start changing things to your advantage.

5. Self-discipline

Letting go of old patterns creates space for change. Deploying new patterns calls for self-discipline, for which patience is absolutely essential. We all realize this, but how do we muster the energy to remain disciplined when the going gets tough? Reflecting on a daily basis about what you want to change and what your long and short term goals are, will motivate you to carry on. Realising what value this change will bring can make self-discipline a pleasure. We feel the need to emphasize that self-discipline is the only real discipline. The sportsman needs to find the fire from within himself, only then can a real change take place. The fact that you are doing everything that is within your power, gives you the fuel to continue and produces the beginnings of acceptance.

6. Acceptance

Once you are aware of what you need to work on and accept this, there will be more space to focus on your strengths. You can use your energy to focus on the positive instead of fighting the negative. This generates a sense of calm, as a result of which your self-confidence will grow. You will be more appreciative of your efforts, which will diminish frustrations and fears and increase your enjoyment. Your self-respect too will be boosted. This will improve your performance and make you into a more balanced player.

THE FOUR CONCENTRATIONS (ATTENTION CONTROL)

Only once the athlete has understood the concepts of the six pillars, will he be able to work efficiently on the four concentrations (attention control). Concentration is the most important aspect of all sports, but if this is not combined with a balanced mind (six pillars) it can never be 'purely' trained as the mind keeps getting in the way of focus. There are four forms of concentration, scan, zoom, feeling and thought. Feeling is supported by the nine instruments. This will all be clarified in chapter 5 and 6. It is enough to say for this moment that a balanced mind is needed to be able to concentrate. Concentration and a balanced mind are therefore inseparable. These are the two wings that make a bird fly. If one of them does not work the bird cannot fly.



MINDSET AT ITS BEST

The 2008 Wimbledon men's final match between Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal set a new standard. Not just because the tennis itself was of an unprecedented standard of technical brilliance, but also, and more importantly, because we saw two players who could serve as examples to anyone in terms of mental resilience and sportsmanship. There was no petulant throwing of rackets, no swearing, and the opponents treated each other courteously at all times. In the speeches they made afterwards, both expressed their sincere admiration for the other.

The most striking thing was the extraordinary poise with which both men responded to the difficult points in the match. In the terms of this book, they displayed acceptance: they did not dwell on mistakes or questionable umpiring decisions, but played each individual point without allowing themselves to relapse into irritation or disappointment.

Their performance provides the living proof that acceptance does not mean hanging your head in resignation. On the contrary, it enables to ensure that your focus never slackens.

Nadal lost the third and fourth sets in the tie-break, which included the loss of two match points in the fourth set. When asked after the match how he had coped with these setbacks mentally, he used the word 'acceptance' twice, as if it was the most normal thing in the world. When the interviewer asked him if he had felt 'depressed' or that it was a nightmare and how he had dealt with this emotionally, he looked surprised and laughed. 'Why should I feel down? I am playing well; I accept that I lost two tie-breaks and lost two match points. I just have to keep fighting and keep a positive attitude.' In the fifth set there was not the slightest sign of any mental dip or reaction.

For this alone, he deserved the title.



STORY THINKING

FEELING

1. Negative
2. Uncertain
3. Giving up
4. Impatient
5. Hesitant
6. Listless
7. Stubborn
8. Fearful
9. Predictable
10. Dependent
11. Distracted

INSTRUMENTS

1. Negative trigger-words
2. Haunting images
3. Rushed / irregular breath
4. Paralysed
5. Restless
6. Rushed or no rituals
7. Distracted eyes
8. Distracting sounds
9. Noise in your head

THOUGHT

Past and future
Judgmental
Hostile
Too many thoughts
Irrational

SCAN

Distracted by:

- Spectators
- Another court
- Moving objects other than the ball
- Difficult weather

ZOOM

Distracted by:

- Opponent: arrogant, irritating, overwhelming
- Clothes / rackets
- Coach / parent / spectators
- Facial expression; aggressive, unfriendly, off-putting
- Body language: way of counting, swearing
- Opponent's comments
- Bad bounces

WHAT DO YOU



ACTION THINKING

THOUGHT

Present
Non-judgmental
Observant
Tactics:
Clear and decisive

FEELING

1. Positive
2. Self-confident
3. Perseverant
4. Patient
5. With conviction
6. Motivated
7. Flexible
8. Courageous
9. Creative
10. Autonomous
11. Focused

INSTRUMENTS

1. Trigger-words
2. Visualization
3. Breathing
4. Movement & heartbeat
5. Recovery
6. Rituals
7. Eye control
8. Sound
9. Inner music

SCAN

Focused on:

- Opponent's position
- Opening in the court
- 'Mirroring' your position in the court
- Surface of the court
- Weather conditions

ZOOM

Focused on:

- The ball spin, direction, height, speed, depth
- Opponent grip, shoulders, position of feet, angle of racket
- Coach/parent/partner for encouragement
- Opponent's body language (physical and emotional state)
- Racket strings

CONCENTRATE ON?