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A Wimbledon victory – was science the secret behind Murray's success?

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Andy Murray's Wimbledon victory earlier this week was, in many ways, unsurprising. He was long regarded among many tennis fans and experts as a highly talented tennis player. However, until last year, his talent and incredible determination had proved insufficient to secure a grand slam victory.

The turning point in Murray's career was the appointment of Ivan Lendl, a tennis legend in the 80s, as his coach in 2012. Under Lendl's guidance, Murray won the 2012 US Open and the Gold Medal in the London 2012 Olympics. Working with Lendl, Murray's training started to include sports science support in terms of rehabilitation, nutrition and psychological preparation, to a much greater extent.

Before Lendl, Murray was dismissive of sport psychologists' input on the grounds that they could not offer him any useful advice, having not experienced the same pressures he encounters on centre court. With Lendl's encouragement, Murray began meeting a sport psychologist. Unfortunately, in sport there is still a widespread perception that seeing a sport psychologist is a sign of mental weakness. This is far from the truth; sport psychologists help athletes optimise their performance by teaching them important mental skills (eg, positive self-talk), helping them with motivation or stress-related issues and discussing broader life issues that can impact on sport performance.

Murray has been very complimentary of Lendl and they have a mutual respect for one another. The coach-athlete relationship is paramount to sporting success. Research carried out at the University of Birmingham has shown that coaches who are supportive of athletes' efforts, offer constructive and honest advice, listen to their athletes' opinions before they make a suggestion and use a non-pressurised and non-judgmental language are likely to support an athlete's inner motivation for sporting success.

In interviews Murray has praised Lendl for changing his 'mentality' in match situations. Members of the press have applauded Murray's resilience. After all, coping successfully with national expectations for a British Wimbledon men's champion – following 77 years of disappointment – is not for the faint-hearted!

Mental toughness represents a collection of personal resources that allow individuals to regularly attain and sustain performances to the upper limits of their abilities, regardless of circumstances encountered. Mentally tough athletes do experience setbacks. However, they can bounce back from failure and remain positive, determined and confident.

Murray's performances, including at the recent Wimbledon final, showed ample signs of mental toughness and inner determination to persist and succeed. Our research has shown that mental toughness is partly influenced by a coach's motivational style. When coaches use non-pressuring language, show personal interest and invite athletes' input, their athletes are likely to report high levels of mental toughness. However, being mentally tough does not mean that athletes should be inflexible with their goal striving.

Sometimes, it is important to re-prioritise goals. For example, Murray decided to drop out of the French Open this year after an injury, letting go of his goal of playing in four grand slam finals in a row. But this decision allowed him to recuperate in time for Wimbledon this month, and secure his place in history.

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