

Bronxville Living

ATTENTION STUDENT-ATHLETES: *Get Out of Your Head!*

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Photography by Raya Cottrell

Mental strength is something I understand because I've lived both sides of it. When I was younger, I lost matches not because my opponent was better, but because I let frustration, fear, and negative thoughts take control.

Later, as a college tennis player, I learned how to use my mind as an advantage instead of letting it work against me. Tennis was my main sport, but now I work with athletes of all ages and across many sports, and I see the same pattern everywhere: **Talent matters. Training matters. But attitude is what holds everything together.**

Mental strength isn't built overnight. It's built one choice, one practice and one moment at a time.

I teach this to the athletes in the junior tennis program at TI Academies, where I work, now.

Mental strength doesn't mean you never feel nervous, angry, disappointed or afraid. It means learning how to respond when those emotions show up.

Athletes will always face things they can't control. Bad calls happen. Mistakes happen. Tough opponents happen. Pressure happens. The strongest athletes learn to bring their focus back to what they can control.

That's why one of my favorite phrases is: **Control the Controllables.**



2. SELF-TALK: SPEAK TO YOURSELF LIKE A COACH, NOT A CRITIC

Negative self-talk — I can't do this. I always mess up — puts your mind in the wrong place. If you keep repeating what you don't want to happen, your body tightens, your confidence drops and your focus disappears.

Strong self-talk doesn't mean lying to yourself. It means speaking in a way that gives you direction, confidence and control.

Instead of saying, **Don't miss**, say, **Commit**.

Try creating a cue word you can return to in pressure moments:

- **Breathe**
- **Attack**
- **Commit**
- **Compete**

1. BODY LANGUAGE: ACT STRONG BEFORE YOU FEEL STRONG

Body language is one of the quickest ways to influence your mindset.

When athletes drop their heads, slouch their shoulders, walk slowly or show frustration, they're sending their brain a message: I'm defeated. But when they stand tall, keep their eyes up, move with purpose and reset quickly, they send a very different message: I'm still here. I'm ready for the next play.

A few simple resets can make a big difference:

- Stand tall.
- Keep your eyes up.
- Take one deep breath.
- Relax your shoulders.

3. ROUTINES: CREATE CALM THROUGH REPETITION

Pressure feels bigger when your mind is scattered. Routines help bring your focus back to what you can control right now.

The best athletes in the world use routines before serves, free throws, penalty kicks, races, games, practices and big moments. A routine doesn't have to be complicated. It just has to be consistent.

Create a simple routine you can use before every important moment. It might include:

1. One deep breath.
2. A physical reset, such as bouncing the ball, adjusting your shirt, clapping your hands or resetting your stance.
3. One cue word.
4. One clear focus for the next action.

That's how mental strength is built — and how you become not only a stronger athlete but also a stronger person.



Mental strength is built in the mind and shown in your actions. The more you train it, the more it becomes a part of who you are.

Rei Pelushi is an expert in mental strength & performance. With a deep understanding of mindset development and human behavior, he helps athletes build confidence, resilience and the tools to perform at their best.