

Wimbledon Saturday, Monday–Friday **BBC1, BBC1 HD, BBC2, BBC HD, BBC red button, Radio 5 Live**

WHAT IS THE secret formula for winning a tennis match? A crushing serve? Devastating ground shots? Or the ability to return everything your opponent throws at you? According to Novak Djokovic, the world's number two player, it's none of the above. "Everybody's hitting the ball well," he says. "Everybody is physically fit and practising for hours and hours every day. But the bottom line is that this is a mental game. The winner is the one who wins the mental battle."

Is he right? As a man who went on the most devastating run of wins in recent times – 43 matches on the bounce, including the Australian Open in January where he beat Andy Murray in the final – Djokovic knows plenty about winning on the tennis court. But does mental strength really make the difference between winning and losing? According to three experts who spoke to *Radio Times*, yes it does.

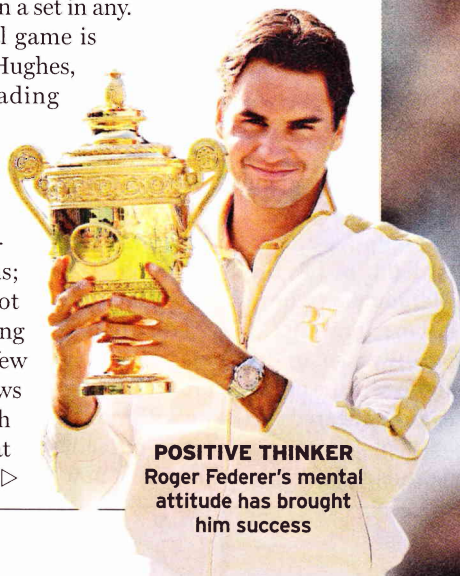
Dr Steve Bull has been Team GB's head psychologist at the past three Olympic Games. He is a man who believes strongly in the impact that a good mental attitude can have on performance. "The mindset of Roger Federer and Rafa Nadal is incredible," he says. "Federer is simply unflappable and full of self-belief, and beating someone psychologically when they're that positive is very difficult. You can't throw them off their game but they can easily throw you off yours."

Federer's positive approach is best illustrated by an incident in 2007 when he was filming a commercial for Nike with Tiger Woods. Given his script for the ad, he insisted on changes. He demanded the copywriters use the words "I love winning" not "I hate losing". Asked for an explanation he said, "One is positive, it's about wanting to be the best, one's about fear of being the worst. I'm positive."

Federer is not alone. Nadal also has a mental approach that is as rigorous as it is uncompromising. Before the French Open final, when it was feared rain would disrupt the match, Nadal said: "If it rains it is good for my game, and if the sun is shining it is good for my game."

So what about Murray? He went into Wimbledon this year fresh from a victory at Queens that must have given him a psychological boost. As Virginia Wade commented, "Nothing succeeds like success, and if you can see the light at the end of the tunnel, you work that much harder. I think he's so close to winning a major." But Wimbledon is a tougher tournament than Queens and Murray doesn't respond well when the pressure's on. He's reached three Grand Slam finals, lost all of them and failed to win a set in any.

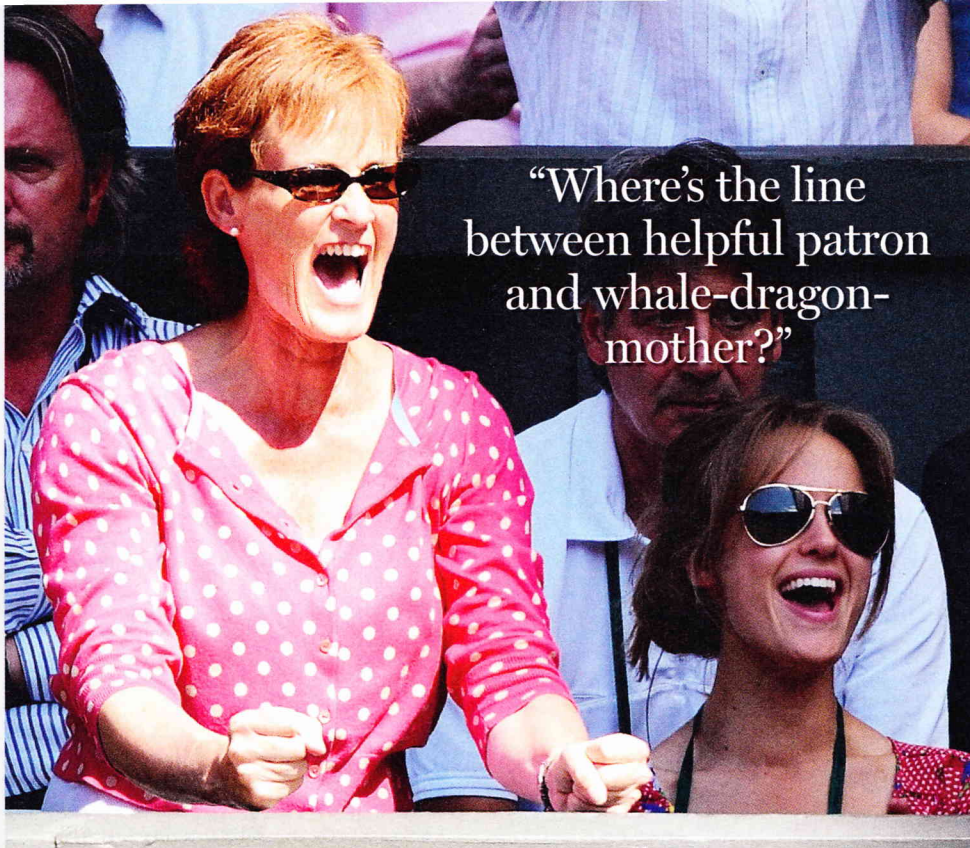
"Murray's psychological game is not strong," says Damian Hughes, one of the country's leading sports psychologists who set up his own consultancy, Liquid Thinking. "He's all over the place. You see him getting frustrated. He retains emotions; you see him play one shot and can tell he's still thinking of the missed shot from a few minutes ago. Federer draws a line in the sand after each point. Murray can't do that and you can see him ▷



POSITIVE THINKER
Roger Federer's mental attitude has brought him success

What makes a WINNER

Rafa and Roger have proved they've got what it takes – but has Andy?
Alison Kervin asks the psychologists



“Where’s the line
between helpful patron
and whale-dragon-
mother?”

Murray’s mum knows best

Stop sneering at Judy, says Libby Purves



Are there any more heinous words to apply to a young man than “apron strings” and “mummy’s boy”? Boris Becker didn’t quite use either in his recent sneer at Andy Murray, but he did announce that Britain’s number one was “maturing slowly” and that the proof is “how close he is still attached to his mother, Judy”. Miaow! Following that, a torrent of media joyfully used the apron-string words and excoriated Mrs Murray for watching him, punching the air, doing his management chores and – temporarily – standing in as coach.

The criticism seemed a bit misplaced. She was a Scottish champ herself once, taught her small boys and supported them as juniors – parents have to. But many onlookers seem to prefer mothers of starry young men to stay home, occasionally looking up from the knitting to say vaguely, “Well done, dear.”

Otherwise they’re “pushy” and “dominant” and stand accused of making their children live out their own dreams.

Some, of course, do – whether in sport, showbiz or academe. They are like Mama Rose in *Gypsy*, or the mad touchline soccer-moms and amateur Tiger Mothers whose children we rightly pity. But others are just reasonably helpful: even in tennis, Maria Sharapova, Martina Hingis and Monica Seles were coached by parents. And even if the Williams sisters’ dad Richard seems over the top, you can’t deny his influence has worked. Interesting, though, that we seem to be more comfortable with parents supporting daughters than when a mother does the same for her son.

The old mummy’s boy jibe cuts deep: any of the sneerers who look up for long enough from

the sports pages could find the father of psychiatry Carl Jung going on about the male hero’s need to escape the “whale-dragon-mother” who saps his strength. Becker is clearly a bit of a Jungian.

But where’s the line between helpful patron and whale-dragon-mother? All women have to find it once their children start winning prizes. How proud should you be, how much should you urge and sacrifice, how overwhelming should your interest and support be?

In theory it’s an easy call: never be more ambitious than the child, never assume success is for ever, don’t take credit, listen to what they really want, never let their victories be essential to your own self-esteem. And above all, accept it if they decide to give up. If Andy Murray suddenly decided to retrain as a librarian, Judy Murray would just have to handle it. And probably could.

But in practice, it’s not that easy. Sons in particular are a mind-altering drug for many women, from the moment they shoot up tall and you gaze up and say, “Whoa! I grew that great big bloke!” When they start bringing home trophies and being swooned over it must be heady indeed. You have to be careful. So I applaud sensible Mrs Murray for saying that if Andy wins a Grand Slam she’ll celebrate, but “if he doesn’t, well, we’ll still be there”.

Meanwhile, there’s no harm in punching the air.

◁ getting anxious. You can literally see it.”

David Brown, who runs the Academy of the Sporting Mind, puts it more strongly: “Murray chokes. He behaves like a 15-year-old, not like a world-beating champion. He can be sulky, yet off court he is jolly and friendly. This is odd and indicates something’s not right with his mind-set. He shouldn’t be that vulnerable.”

So how can Murray put things right? “He needs to control his game by maintaining his own positive language – physical and verbal,” says Hughes. “Borg was a master, as is Nadal, who has his routines – hitching his shorts, bouncing the balls – that are his way of reassuming control before he’s ready to play again. McEnroe did it through his ‘hissy fits’. He would delay while he appealed a decision and his opponent, who had been in the flow, would get frustrated and lose his rhythm and McEnroe would be calm and ready to play,” says Hughes.

BROWN HAS OTHER ideas: “I think it’s to do with his mother being with him on court that makes him behave like a petulant teenager.” This echoes a view aired recently by Boris Becker, who suggested that Murray would never win a Grand Slam while his mum remained such a big influence. “He needs a psychologist to work with him,” continues Brown. “I’m not saying he needs to be mentally tougher; toughness is not necessarily the right thing for everyone. It’s about finding what’s right for his personality. The Lawn Tennis Association has just one part-time psychologist. They’re not taking it seriously.”

Psychology has been an important part of tennis for years. Billie Jean King helped Martina Navratilova to return her focus onto the 1982 Wimbledon tennis final by “getting her mind into the now”. Before the game, Navratilova’s focus had started to slip into the past (worrying about previous failures) and into the future (what the consequences of a defeat would mean) before Billie Jean asked her to describe the wallpaper in the changing room. It brought her into the present.

But British players, according to the experts, have not had strong mental games because they’ve never taken it seriously. Nadal, Federer and Djokovic have grown up understanding psychology in tennis. Their coaches are well versed in it, and as they were learning to hit the ball as young boys, they were also learning to respond well mentally to the demands of top-level competition. Not so Murray. “And it shows,” says Brown.

If Djokovic is right, and the winners in tennis are those with the strongest mental games, isn’t it time we changed our thinking? We need to incorporate good psychological practices into the sport from the start, so we are training the young hopefuls of today to become the champions of tomorrow.



Stuart Hall returns next week