Among the many mental training techniques available to the tennis coach, visualization offers multiple advantages on the technical, tactical and mental levels.

Before explaining in detail the various practical applications of visualization, it is important to define the concept itself. Visualization is a process whereby internal images are produced consciously.

You can only visualize something that you have seen before. For example, if you ask a child who has never seen a serve in his life to visualize a service action, he will not be able to do it.

When a tennis player has an external visual reference, he can form mental images according to two different modes:

1. The ‘dissociated’ mode. The player pictures himself playing as if he was his own spectator.

2. The ‘associated’ mode. In this particular case, he pictures himself as the actor of the situation that he is visualizing.

Let us now examine the practical applications of visualization and first of all in the technical field.

On this subject, we can mention a very interesting phenomenon known as the ‘Carpenter effect’. An individual watching a tennis match or demonstration experiences an electrical brain and muscle activity which brings into play the muscles and brain areas that are actually activated by the players being observed. The neuromuscular programme being activated during the external visual observation means that the observer will experience sensations similar to those of the model, provided he then takes his racket and plays. Many young players thus learn by unconsciously imitating models that they keep on observing, unaware that they are using the Carpenter effect. This was for instance the case for Pete Sampras who was technically inspired by a video tape of Rod Laver that he was constantly watching.

Instead of simply relying on the natural phenomenon that is mimetism, visualization with a technical aim involves consciously repeating in one’s mind strokes that have been observed by following a very precise routine:

1. Spectator of the model: I replay the film of the chosen model in my mind.
2. Spectator of myself: I replace the model. I picture myself playing like my model.
3. Actor: From the two previous steps, I repeat technical movements by shadowing strokes.

The technical image is recorded in the head before going to the muscles. This conscious effort of mental repetition facilitates technical learning.

In a different way, the coach can use visualization to prepare a match on the tactical level. To start with, he devises with his player a precise plan of action taking into account the strengths and weaknesses of both the player and the opponent. Then, he asks his player to imagine that he is standing courtside watching his own match in anticipation. Being in the place of the spectator makes it is possible to approach the match with the perspective and clear-headedness required to hone one’s tactical choices. The player can also mentally put himself in the place of his opponent. He ‘becomes’ his opponent and imagines that he is playing against himself, which allows him to anticipate his opponent’s potential tactical choices and to find the right answers.

The player can make use of the same type of visualization in the course of the match during the changeovers to ‘stand back’ and find tactical solutions.

Finally, visualization is an excellent way to get ready mentally for the different scenarios of a match. To begin with, the player can visualize a dream scenario where everything goes well. His tactical plan works perfectly.

The match goes off according to plan, everything runs smoothly. In this first type of scenario, the player pictures himself as the winner. He therefore puts himself in a state of confidence to approach the match. Then, the player visualizes a second scenario: the nightmare scenario where everything goes wrong.

In this second scenario, the player can imagine himself losing 6-0, 6-0 after fighting until the very end. He can then accept the notion of defeat.
Yoga and Tennis

By Kawaljeet Singh (Director of Coaching, Chandigarh Lawn Tennis Association, India)

INTRODUCTION
The growing popularity of yoga in all spheres of life has definitely extended to sport, and more specifically, tennis. By combining means that develop specific components of physical fitness with meditation and concentration techniques to relax and focus the mind, the integration of yoga into tennis training can complement other physical, technical and tactical training protocols.

YOGA AND TENNIS PLAYER DEVELOPMENT
Yoga can play a vital role in player development, especially if it is introduced from the early stages of a player’s career. Age becomes an important criterion for integrating the breathing system so intrinsic to yoga, as experience has demonstrated that such breathing techniques essential for all asanas (exercises) in yoga are learned with greater ease in childhood. In application, learning to breathe correctly can help players to keep their bodies relaxed and minds optimally functioning during matchplay.

CHILDREN AND YOGA
Children should learn some basic yoga exercises as part of an exercise routine that may be performed a couple of times per week. Benefits of yoga for children include:

• It helps children improve their flexibility and become more aware of how their bodies function.
• Introduces children to breathing exercises that are very important in advanced yoga.
• It can be enjoyable for children to experiment with new and different ways to relax.

PERIODISATION OF YOGA PRACTICE
As yoga is a practice that can be continued throughout a tennis player’s life, its integration can be considered in terms of pre-competition (i.e. development), competition and post-competition (post-career) phases.

In the pre-competition phase, where tennis skills are being acquired and developed, yoga can complement the holistic development of aerobic and muscular endurance, flexibility and mental toughness. During this stage, relaxation and breathing techniques, which will be central to future success in competitive tennis, can also be built into regular coaching.

The exercises during the pre-competitive stage are very simple and quite similar to regular callisthenics exercises. Focus however must be placed on ensuring correct breathing.

1. Rotation of all joints with proper breathing.
2. Balance Asanas:
   a) Tree pose.
   b) Taar asan or Palm tree pose.
   c) Natraj pose.
3. Basic breathing exercises.
4. Relaxation asanas (exercises).

In the competition phase, regular yoga practice can play an invaluable role in facilitating mental equanimity during and between matches, while also enhancing a player’s physical well-being and regenerability. More broadly, the benefits of yoga during this phase can be summarised as:

The next time you find yourself in practice or before a match, if you hesitate, in your role as a coach, between a long explanation and a visualization exercise, remember that ‘an image is worth a thousand words…’