Do you strive to be perfect in all things that you do? To hit the perfect shot; to play the faultless game; to write the best blog; to do the flawless interview; to look picture perfect?

If you aim for perfection, then you will most likely:

- Fail to reach your (unrealistic) goals
- Be unhappy and dissatisfied
- Feel that your best is never “good enough”

“Perfect” is to be entirely without any defects or mistakes; to be absolutely excellent or ideal to the point where there cannot be any further improvement or higher position. It is clearly impossible for a human being to be “perfect”!

The hours you spend striving for perfection and to reach unrealistically high goals negatively affect your inner peace, happiness and self-esteem.

High standards are fine; perfection is an unreasonable goal.

- Champion tennis players strive to achieve their potential as a player and as a person.
- Champions aim for excellence in all they do; excellence is realistic and achievable; perfectionism is not.

You are only Human...

It is part of the human condition to have failings, weakness, deviations, imperfections, and mistakes...and it is acceptable to be human!

Tennis players are at risk of being caught in the “perfect trap” as they constantly compete against and compare themselves to others- it is the nature of an individual sport.

- A player may believe her ranking, media portrayal, financial position or popularity is the true measure of her value. These beliefs are not true!
- This negatively affects her ability to develop a healthy and stable identity, and will result in her happiness, moods and self-esteem swinging up and down according to her results. This is not a desirable way to play or live.
- It is important for a tennis player to aim to achieve her best. This includes to set realistic goals that require effort but are reachable. Champion players do this.

Champions accept that they will make mistakes; that not everything they do will go according to plan- they know it is impossible to be “perfect”. Instead, they learn from their errors.

These healthy goal-oriented players bounce back quickly from disappointments and accept constructive criticism. This ability helps their tennis game and their self-esteem.

Perfectionists, however, often do not feel satisfied, even when they have done their best. For example, they play their best tennis; lose a close three set match to a more experienced, high-ranked player. They deserve to be proud; however, frequently perfectionists will feel like they failed or that they “should” have done more.

They are afraid of failure and experience mistakes and criticism as devastating.

These worries will block them from reaching their potential and result in self-doubt.

Perfectionists also may project their unrealistic standards on others, and can be angry and upset when others also fail to reach them.
Faulty Thinking

Like other self-defeating behavior, perfectionism is associated with distorted or untrue beliefs, such as:
- **“All or nothing” thinking:** If it’s less than perfect, it’s worthless. This is clearly untrue!
- **Fear of disapproval:** Acceptance from others is very important for perfectionists. However, they often push others away while trying to hide their very human shortcomings.
- **Focusing on “shoulds”:** Thinking they “must”, “have to” or “should” achieve a rigid standard that is unrealistic and set impossibly high, perfectionists put excessive pressure on themselves.
- **Negative comparisons with others:** Everyone has strengths and flaws. Someone else’s good traits in no way decrease yours. Negative judgment of yourself in relation to others reduces your feeling of security and self-worth. Perfectionism, fear of failure and insecurity are often linked.
- **Focusing on the negative:** There is negative and positive in every situation. Perfectionists often focus only the negative aspects of the situation and this will lead to pessimism, dissatisfaction and being down on themselves.

All these faulty beliefs and thinking can result in many negative effects. Possible damage caused by perfectionism includes:
- Low self-esteem
- Depression, anxiety or panic attacks
- Frustration and anger
- Inflexible approach to problems and to life
- Inability to act or delay in action (procrastination)

Escape from the “Perfect Trap”

You don’t need to be stuck in the “perfect trap”! You can learn to live a more satisfying life and reach your goals. You can replace damaged and faulty thinking patterns and beliefs with healthier ones. Start with these simple steps described below:

- Be kind to yourself. It is human to make mistakes. Treat yourself with kindness and forgiveness as you would a close friend.
- Set realistic, “humanly possible” not “superhuman” goals. Set realistic and flexible timelines to achieve your goals. Be willing to change and adapt your plans if they are not working.
- Be a student of the game. Learn from qualified people who will help you improve technically and tactically. This helps you to evaluate your success in terms of your effort to reach objective goals and not if you win or lose. (Read the January 2003 topic, “Set Goals for Success”).
- Reward the progress you make towards your targets. Treat yourself to time out with friends; a luxurious beauty session; a good book or new music; or enjoy a walk in the park.
- Practice patience and reduce the need to achieve and do everything right now.
- Learn to accept and love yourself as you are. Regularly remind yourself of your best qualities and achievements.
- Enjoy your successes with healthy pride- you did it!
- Let go of rigid judgment of your performance. The important thing is to be heading in a positive direction.
- Learn to stop negative thoughts and replace with positive alternatives to block unhelpful thinking patterns.

If you need more guidance, counseling and behavior modification techniques can help. These are specialist skills used by qualified psychologists and experienced counselors; ask the Director of Athlete Assistance or one of the Primary Health Care Providers (PHCPs) for more information. They can help you find a suitable specialist to help you.

“Have no fear of perfection... you’ll never reach it.” (Salvador Dali, Artist)

Choose your Support Team Wisely

Healthy individuals and champion players surround themselves with a healthy support team. They select realistic people who are not perfectionists in their own lives.
- Choose support people who will forgive and forget mistakes and failures.
- A healthy support team will reward your sincere best efforts and provide positive reinforcement for positive changes, no matter how small.
- Listen to your support group if they say that you are “too hard,” or “too idealistic” in your expectations. Take their advice and learn to be kind to yourself and set more realistic goals.
- Select trustworthy and qualified professionals who will provide constructive criticism and help you learn. Choose open, honest people who have a genuine interest in your personal and professional growth and your health and well-being.