INTRODUCTION

- It is widely acknowledged that athletes who experience excessive stress often show signs of burnout and perform at lower levels.
- Furthermore, burnout may be associated with dropping out of competitive tennis altogether.
- This study was intended to help junior tennis players recognize and alleviate the signs and symptoms of excessive stress. It was hoped that by teaching a group of players a broad range of coping skills (e.g., relaxation/breathing techniques, thought-stoppages, positive reinterpretation) reductions in stress would be observed.
- It was also hoped that an increase in positive emotions and confidence and decreases in negative emotions and anxiety would occur throughout the course of the intervention.

SAMPLE

- Participants for the study were 5 junior tennis players (3 males and 2 females) with an average age of 11.6 years.
- These players had been competing, on average, for 10 years and indicated that their highest state USTA rankings were between 2 and 347.
- With the exception of the 347th ranked player, all participants were ranked in the top 30 in the state of Florida.

RESULTS

Confidence

- Four of the five participants showed an increase in confidence over the 2 month intervention period.
- All five players indicated they had learned important psychological skills that they felt could be easily applied in tennis competition and practice.

Anxiety

- There were mixed results in the effectiveness of the intervention on competitive anxiety.
- Three players showed increases, while 2 layers showed decreases in anxiety over the intervention period.
- The increases in anxiety could be due to an increased awareness of anxiety symptoms because of participation in the study or players may have been engaged in more frequent and challenging competitions (which could have been more anxiety provoking) at the time of the second assessment.

Mood and Coping

- There was also variability of the use of coping skills and in players’ mood over the intervention period.
- This inconsistency could be due to individual needs for coping, responses to individual performance, changes in coping skill awareness, etc.

PROJECT METHOD

- The players were interviewed and completed a series of surveys that measured factors such as sport-related confidence, anxiety, coping, burnout, and mood so that the intervention could be personalized to the athletes’ individual needs.
- With this information, a six session intervention was conducted with each player over the following four phases:
  (a) the establishment of a warm collaborative relationship between players and the consultant
  (b) education of the underlying principles and philosophy of the program
  (c) coping skills training (e.g., goal setting, imagery, relaxation techniques)
  (d) transferring coping skills to real life situations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- It was concluded that junior tennis players can benefit from structured psychological skills programs in terms of performance, anxiety, and confidence.
- A minimum of about 10 weeks may be needed to gain substantial effects from the program.
- The participant who seemed to respond most positively to the psychological skills program had participated in a similar program in the past.
- Therefore, prolonged and/or frequent exposure to a program (e.g., integrating the mental skills training into one’s regular tennis training) may lead to increased beneficial effects on players’ confidence, anxiety, and overall performance on the court.
- Increasing players’ awareness of coping skills alone may not be sufficient.

CONCLUSION

- Teaching players to transfer coping skills onto the court and into daily life is an essential component in any psychological skills program.