

# **The Zone**

**By Barney Tanfield**

Brilliance in our game is a myriad of intangible qualities including but not limited to: being particularly ingenuous, charismatic, resourceful, showing extraordinary perception and exercising incredible dependability under pressure. We are incessantly searching for these qualities each time we play. Often times, rather than finding them we find anxiety, impatience, haziness and a handful of other unhelpful emotions. Our struggle for brilliance is chronic and unquenchable. Attempting to eclipse these physical and emotional whirlwinds you will find the beginner player, your long tenured veteran and your world-class professional.

Recently, I had the opportunity to sit down with Dr. Dan Laukitis, a Clinical Psychologist and affiliate of Columbia University. Besides being at the forefront of his industry, Dan is an avid Real Tennis player. As an adjunct to his clinical work, Dan regularly works with athletes competing in a number of different sports. His background working with athletes as well as his work with members of the general public make him an extraordinarily interesting person to us. It is perhaps the first time ever that a specialist such as Dan has offered such valuable insight to the game of Real Tennis. Dan's commitment regardless of his clientele is toward progression. He describes the purpose of his work, "All goals share the basic aim of improving the quality of your life, whether you are lost and in crisis or functioning well and seeking optimal health or peak performance".

One of the most poignant aspects of our conversation was in regards to the junction where great play and positive mentality intersect, a place people commonly think of as "the zone". I had always imagined "the zone" to be a place that we stumble into when a series of existential happenings aligned for us. I generally had thought this zone to be a place of good fortune rather than a place one could put oneself. Dr. Dan's approach is that the zone is not an erratic or mystic place that we happen upon, but rather a place we can create through practice and discipline.

Dan believes the emotions that discourage us and the negative thoughts that pollute our minds are not toxins but opportunities. "Energy in the body is a good thing even if initially it appears in the body as anxiety, doubt, or stress". Dan says physiologically your body cannot actually tell the difference between good and bad energy. Negative energy can be transformed into positive energy and can ultimately be used to fuel the play and results we are eager for. "Rather than feeling nervous you should feel excited, rather than feeling anxiety, you should feel opportunistic". Dan likes the slogan "crowd out doubt", which nicely sums up the mentality being endorsed. Your ability to put a positive spin on all energy and emotion is the critical piece of this puzzle.

The ability to change your mind about itself is provocative at the very least and a revelation if fully realized. "The key is to create a mentality that approaches what we experience in the zone". If we can transform our emotions successfully, we can mimic the zone and essentially create or at least fabricate it at will. Even if players are able to successfully achieve this transformation, twenty percent of the time the results will be astounding. No longer is the zone your four minute mile or perfect game, it's a time

and place accessible to you on a regular basis. Perhaps envisioning our zone as our neighbor and not our Narnia is where we should start our search. Dan describes playing Real Tennis as “an opportunity to do things well, meaning right, meaning the way you learned to do it, not better than ever or anything special, but the same old proven techniques you have trained into your mind and body”. To Dan the zone is not a place where dreams and miracles take place, it is a place we can access and sustain through concentration and discipline.

While we often think of brilliance as an elusive trait, much of it can be generated from within. This ability may be equally if not more important than the aggregate of skills we generally think as critical for all around excellent match play. Finding our zone regularly and reliably is the task. Brilliance is a place of poetry and genius and a place we mostly think of as alternative to our existence. The things that make up the zone are around you and accessible perpetually. Perhaps in Real Tennis the most important part of being extraordinary is being for the most part very ordinary.