

Close the Practice-to-Match Confidence Gap

How to Bring Your Practice *Trust* Into Your Matches

The 14-Day Install Program

by Brent Abel

24 USA Gold Balls in Singles & Doubles

2023 ITF World Doubles Title

ITF World #1 Doubles / #3 Singles

50+ Years Coaching Career

I'm a tournament player.

I help league and tournament players close the practice-to-match confidence gap — so they bring their practice *trust* into matches.

More stroke technique is support, not the foundation.

1. The Gap You Already Know

You know the exact feeling. You work like a dog in practice.

You put a cone out there with a practice partner or a ball machine and hit a gazillion crosscourt forehands.

Every 15th ball or so you knock that cone over. The target landing spot gets smaller. After a while you feel like you'll never miss another forehand.

That's just one of many Reps sessions where you get that ... *I've got this* feeling.

Shoot, you even play practice points and sets and that forehand still feels like a weapon.

Then tomorrow is league night or the first round of a tournament.

The night before — or certainly the morning of — doubt creeps in. Now it counts. The spotlight is feeling really bright.

The match starts. Even just before in the warmup, that forehand didn't feel like it did Thursday.

Last night's doubt has hardened into a mild panic. The scoreboard is suddenly a problem. It never was during those Reps sessions.

The swing gets tentative. Tight. No freedom. You're hoping not to miss.

You grind through the match and wonder:

Where in the heck did that great practice feeling go? What happened to it? Why does this happen to me? This sucks.

Get in line. That gap between practice and the posted match score is real. It's common.

The first tournament match I played a long time ago was brutal.

I lost 0 and 0 in about 35 minutes to a guy I practiced with every week. In practice we were dead even. We split sets all the time.

In the tournament there was zero crossover. My gap was as wide as the Grand Canyon.

2. Why More Drilling Doesn't Close the Gap

What I eventually found is this.

Stroke-technique sessions are an enhancement. They are not the foundation.

Without trust as the floor, the drilling does not hold up when the score is posted.

Trust gets built on purpose. It is not a woo-woo feeling you hope shows up after enough baskets of balls.

“Find the Zone” is hype. You can hunt that monk-state all day. What works in real matches is tangible and more repeatable.

Bridging the gap is a short self-talk message you read until it becomes the default — what Dr. Nate Zinsser calls winning the First Victory.

When I committed to a daily First Victory, practice started making it *into* posted matches.

That was the missing piece. Drill sessions got a new job. I stopped hoping a boatload of balls would manufacture match-day confidence.

Technique stayed. It just went back to support.

3. The First Victory

The biggest missing piece for me was the First Victory, as Nate Zinsser lays it out in *The Confident Mind*.

He takes it from Sun Tzu:

“Victorious warriors win first and then go to war, while defeated warriors go to war first and then seek to win.”

That quote opens and closes the book. The First Victory is the inner win *before* you step on court or into the gym.

It is not the score. It is victory over doubt, worry, and uncertainty so you walk on already decided.

Zinsser’s working idea of confidence: a sense of certainty about your ability that lets you stop supervising the swing and let it come out.

If you walk in asking “what might happen,” that doubt shows up as physical hesitation — eyes, feet, the whole body.

Winners decide *this is my moment* and then compete.

Losers show up and hope to find belief once the ball is in play.

First Victory = the same short message, repeated.

Not whatever sentence you invent each morning. One script. Written from proof. Read it 3x a day for 14 days. Especially the night before a posted match.

At first the certainty will not be there. Read it anyway. I had to. After years of drilling and never closing the gap, I was done avoiding the mental work.

You fill in the blanks today. Then you freeze the page.

4. The Script — Fill This Today, Then Don't Rewrite It

Copy this into your phone. Print it. Set three reminders: morning, afternoon, night.

How to fill in the blank

Use Thursday practice proof, not Saturday hope.

One shot or pattern you already hit during practice when the score wasn't posted. Short. Concrete. Present tense.

Do not write "I never miss" or "I always close." If you can't point to last week's practice, it doesn't go in the blank.

Now. Print out the next page. And/or copy & paste into your phone.

Today I claim the First Victory before I practice, play, or train — certain of the game I already have, independent of the posted score.

I walk on with gratitude for what tennis gives me.

I let go of today's results. The outcome is data. I use it to get stronger and smarter.

On Thursday I own this shot: _____

[PROOF — one pattern from practice. Example: I play my crosscourt forehand with margin / I play my return of serve down the middle]

That shot confidently comes with me into the match.

I count my contacts with the tennis ball. Eyes on the ball through the hit. Soft hands. I exhale out through contact.

I run my between-points routine at every point — control emotions, physically recover the body, decide how the next point starts, then a calm “*Here we go.*”

No matter the score, I trust my ability to fully compete and tactically problem-solve with the strokes I have.

I keep my body fit for tennis. I play with efficiency and conserve my fuel tank. I am fit enough to be able to confidently compete ... even if the match goes deep into a final set.

I bring an even-keel attitude and a real love of the game.

Let's roll.

Pocket read (after parking the car before the match / changeover)

First Victory first.

The scoreboard will take care of itself.

[same PROOF line] _____

Eyes on the ball. Exhale through it.

Between points: reset, recover, decide, here we go.

Compete. Problem-solve. Count. Repeat.

Let's roll.

Fill in those blanks today. Then do not improve this script for 14 days. Rewriting is shopping, not installing.

5. Check Your Email Every Day for 14 Days

This file is the map.

The next 14 emails are the install.

Read the script 3x a day. Open every email. Not every other day. Not only the night before a match.

If you only keep this PDF, it stays theory.

Skip a day and you're back to hoping practice shows up.

Day 1 is already on the way. If it isn't in your inbox in five minutes, check spam. Still missing? brent@webtennis.com

6. Four Tools That Live Inside the Script

These are not a second foundation. They are what trust looks like on court. They already sit in the words you just wrote.

The 70% stat (stay in the point)

Craig O'Shannessy: about 70% of points in competitive matches are a total of four shots or fewer. I've charted a few of my own matches. Same number.

Double fault = 0. Ace or a missed return of serve = 1. Serve plus a return of serve winner or missed server's shot = 2. And so on.

Winning that stat is huge. It does not mean becoming a pusher. It means high-percentage shots to fat targets until he misses or the court opens up.

Make your first three shots. It's okay if they come back. Body serve. Next right up the middle. Then take it from there.

Going for panicked winners early on ... and you're trying to end the *rushed feeling*, not playing the 3 shots math.

Tentative scared players hunt a hero ball so the scoreboard will shut up. That's how Thursday tennis never makes it into the match.

The counting method (eyes and contact)

Say ONE at the exact moment the strings go through your serve. TWO at your next contact. THREE at the next.

Not before. Not after. At contact.

Counting knocks stroke-coaching out of your head and puts you on the ball.

Add a natural exhale *through contact* when you say the number. Inward grunting is fighting the ball. An outward exhale releases it.

A stationary target (Ralston's window)

Dennis Ralston beat "keep away" out of me in Austin. Because an opponent is a moving target. You can't control him, so you rush to not let 'em touch the ball ... and miss near the lines.

Hit through an imaginary window that's above the tape — same idea as the white line on a backboard. On the wall you never aim at a moving body. You aim above the line.

Stationary window. Full swing. Early shot choice lock. That's Early Target Lock in the script.

The 4 parts between points (the 80%)

On average, about 80% of match time is spent between points and on changeovers. Let your mind wander then and low-confidence thinking moves in.

Four parts ... between all points:

1. Calmly control your emotions immediately after the last point
2. Recover physically with 3 deep breaths
3. Decide how you're going to start the next point
4. A calm "*Here we go*"

That is the BPR in the script. Don't invent a new speech at 4-all.

7. How You'll Know It's Working

Not the trophy.

Look for this:

- Your swing still has length at 4-all
- First serve is still a consistent first serve
- Targets stay fat & stationary even after a miss
- You trust yourself with certainty at the end of sets and the match

You can not get the 'W' and still keep installing.

The scoreboard is the second victory. Your repeated First Victory message is when practice makes it *into* the match.

8. Match Week

Night before

Just like every night right before bed ... Read.

Do not rehearse a possible loss. That movie is the leak. Lights out after reading your First Victory. Trust it.

Morning of

Read.

After parking your car

Pocket version read once.

Warm-up

You are not hoping practice shows up. You are arriving with practice already installed.

During the match

80% is between points. Same exact four parts ... after every point. You trust your certainty no matter what the scoreboard shows.

After

Without considering the final scoreboard, what one specific thing did you do well? Next practice is to repeat more of it.

9. Match Trust — Four 1:1 Private Sessions

OPTIONAL: If you want the floor checked against *your* posted matches: four 30-minute calls.

1. Script from proof. Reminders on.
2. Night-before.
3. After a real league or tournament match. Trust signs vs scoreboard story.
4. Lock. Same script. Simple plan. When you may change a line.

These are not general lessons. It's personal. Stroke technique still stays as support.

I offer this after you've started the 14 days — not before day 7. Reply to brent@webtennis.com to any install email when the timing is right.

10. Start Today

Don't let this be another week of hoping your practice shows up — and once again it doesn't make it into your match.

Start the 14 days *today*.

Fill in the blanks. Set the three reminders.

Read it 3x today. Don't rewrite it.

Skip a day and you're back to hoping practice shows up.

Open tomorrow's email.

Keep Workin'.

Brent

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