

Excuses, Excuses: Inside the Mind of a Complainer

As rational creatures, humans have the unique ability to reflect on their personal successes, and they can identify with gratitude the reasons for their successes.

Unfortunately, humans have the corresponding ability to complain and offer excuses when things don't go their way. But why do people do it? More specifically, why would a tennis player—who already faces the mental demands of concentrating on shot after shot in a competitive match—take the time and energy to complain about a line call? Or why would a frustrated amateur feel the need to make excuses as to why he's not in the professional ranks? What lies behind the human drive to complain and make excuses?

In order to use the psychology of a tennis player to gain insight into human psychology in general, we'll first need an accurate picture of the mind of a tennis player. Obviously, it would help if we could draw from the thoughts of someone who works closely with actual tennis players. And if we're going to get input from a tennis professional, we might as well opt for the top coach in the world. That would be Brad Gilbert, who has coached two players to a #1 ranking (Andre Agassi and Andy Roddick) and whose advice is sought by players and tennis federations around the globe. Brad was himself a top player in his own right, winning twenty ATP tournaments and achieving a #4 world ranking at one time. If there's anyone who understands the mentality of a tennis player, it's Brad Gilbert.

I had the chance to talk with Brad about this issue of complaining and excuse-making. His insights proved helpful to me in understanding some of the reasons why players

might complain about things like missed line calls. And I was left with no doubt about the self-destructive nature of excuse-making. As we go along, I'll draw from some of the comments he offered, indicating them with italics.

The Fact of the Matter Is: That Call Merits Complaint!

The first and most obvious reason why a player might complain about line calls is that the calls *really are* going against that player. If someone plays in enough competitive events, then the statistical odds are pretty good that some of these matches will be unbalanced in terms of the calls that go for or against the player.

I played in 800 matches. Sure, there are days when everything seems to go against you. And there are days when things seem to go for you as well. There were times when my opponent kept arguing over everything, and you begin to think, "Maybe I am getting a lot of these calls."

So, sometimes complaints on the tennis court are straightforward observations of objective facts. Line judges and umpires don't always make correct calls, and sometimes a string of incorrect calls go against a player. At such times, it is understandable that a player might seek to draw this fact to the umpire's attention. A player might do this because he is angry and wants to make a retributive comment on the umpire's competency; or he might do it more shrewdly as an attempt to influence the umpire's

future rulings on close calls. But as far as the player's initial belief about the repeated, unfavorable calls which led to the complaint, this belief is simply an observation of objective facts.

Sometimes it can *seem* to us that we're observing objective facts, when really our own intellectual limitations are influencing what we believe. An honest attempt to assess a situation is no guarantee that we will not be prone to errors in the way we draw inferences. When people observe an equally-weighted coin land on "tails" three times in a row when flipped, there is a common tendency to expect that the next flip of the coin is probably due to land on "heads". But of course there is no "law of averages" whereby the result of the next flip of the coin is in any way influenced by previous results. Similarly, volunteers in psychology experiments may be asked whether the births of six children in a family are less likely to have the gender sequence of BBBGGG than the sequence GBBGBG. There is a tendency for many people to answer that the first gender sequence is a less likely scenario than the second. Because the first sequence seems less representative of the random process by which gender is determined, these people accordingly see the first sequence as less likely to occur. But of course each scenario is equally likely to occur. These kinds of mistakes in drawing inferences and reaching conclusions are limitations on our ability to think rationally. They are actually therefore forms of irrationality.

Lest we think ourselves above such rational shortcomings, we would do well to consider the many ways in which all of us at times succumb to powerful imagery. Have we ever been surprised to learn that an actor was, in real life, quite unlike the character he or she played so well in a TV series? But in having our belief about an actor dispelled,

we must concede that our belief was originally formed despite knowing that actors are paid to play specified roles, not simply to portray their real-life personalities. Have we ever heard a stirring rendition of the national anthem at a time of national crisis or mourning and become more resolved in our belief that we live in a great country? But of course the emotional impact of a song is no good reason to think that a country is or is not great.

Frequently, it is the *vividness* of evidence that leads us to give that evidence a certain weight we would otherwise not give it. As the psychologists Richard Nisbett and Lee Ross have confirmed through experimental testing, “The news that a bank in one’s neighborhood has been robbed just an hour ago is more vivid than the news that a bank on the other side of town was robbed last week. The former bank robbery, accordingly, is likely to have a greater impact on one’s views of the seriousness of the crime problem in one’s city or the need for stiffer prison sentences for bank robbers.”¹ Any number of everyday examples abound where the vividness of evidence causes us to form beliefs we would otherwise not form. A married couple may continually have to compromise about what sporting events to watch on television, with the woman always wanting to watch tennis and the man always wanting to watch football. Perhaps the objective fact is that their history of compromising is such that each person has had an equal number of instances watching his or her preferred sport. Due to the vividly remembered frustration associated with those previous times when one had to defer to the other person’s preference, though, each person may earnestly believe that he or she is the one who has done the majority of the compromising in the past. Such differences of opinion are surely

common to us on a whole range of everyday issues; and these differences reveal that we are probably not as “objective” in evaluating evidence as we think we are!

There are certainly instances where the vividness of a bad tennis call might understandably stick in a player’s mind. Who can forget John McEnroe’s famous outburst at umpire Ted James during the 1981 Wimbledon tournament: “You can’t be serious, man. You cannot be serious! That ball was on the line. Chalk flew up! It was clearly in. How can you possibly call that out? How many are you gonna miss?!” A call like that sticks in our minds. And as with our earlier example of the married couple watching sporting events, most any call going *against* a player will be felt more deeply, and remembered more easily, than a call that goes *for* the player. So it would be understandable that a tennis player might commonly perceive the bulk of an umpire’s missed calls as going against him, when in fact his perceptions are explained by his emotional responses and not by the simple facts themselves. Indeed, I would have thought that some players might genuinely come to believe that a particular line judge or umpire is “out to get them.” But Brad Gilbert is dismissive of such an idea.

You can’t be a champion and have one ounce of that way of thinking. None of the top players think like that. No one thinks the umpire is out to get them, or the world is out to get them. You can’t think like that and be a champion.

So how do we explain a player complaining against particular umpires, as John McEnroe did in his animated pledge to an umpire at the 1986 Paris Open: “You’ll never work

another one of my matches!”? Is it a matter simply of a player not having confidence in the umpire’s overall competency?

Yeah, umpires are going to miss calls, and players know that. But no one is going to think in terms of some conspiracy theory. You’ll get a [lousy] call. You’re going to get some bad calls. There’s obviously such a thing as human error. I think technology is helping to eliminate some of that.

This last reference to technology includes Hawk-Eye, a computer recreation of a ball’s flight path, which is now used in major tournaments as a way of appealing line decisions. If the possibility of human error remains a concern for tennis players, then players would consider the introduction of Hawk-Eye to be a good thing, right?

Interestingly, Roger Federer has openly lobbied *against* Hawk-Eye, stating publicly, "I think it's nonsense anyway in the first place."² But what reason would Federer have for opposing Hawk-Eye, given that its sole design is to increase the overall accuracy of line calls? To answer this question, we’ll need to explore a different kind of reason that lies behind the complaints of some tennis players.

Complaining and Eliminating the Distractions

What makes Federer’s attitude toward Hawk-Eye so odd is that, as the current best player in the world, he seemingly has more reason than anyone to avoid the possibility of a

match being influenced by human error or anything else besides the sheer performance of the players. But Federer seems truly to despise Hawk-Eye, telling an umpire during a Wimbledon 2007 match that Hawk-Eye is “killing me” and asking (out of exasperation more than hope) if it could be turned off.

Of course, one explanation of Federer’s attitude would be that he simply thinks Hawk-Eye is not in fact providing accurate results. His complaint at Wimbledon followed a controversial line call in his finals match against Raphael Nadal in which Federer was absolutely convinced that a shot from Nadal, which landed a few feet from Federer, was past the baseline. He remarked after the match, “I told the umpire I was happy Nadal was going to challenge because I knew the ball was out. Then to see that it was in on a 30-all point, which was such a huge point, I was shocked....The umpire told me, too, he saw the ball out. He couldn't believe it was in.”³ Other players also have at times questioned the accuracy of Hawk-Eye. Nadal himself, in commenting on another of his own matches during the same 2007 Wimbledon tournament, admitted, "I think the Hawk-Eye has mistakes sometimes." And indeed, because Hawk-Eye only reconstructs—rather than photocopying—the ball’s likely landing spot by taking trajectory data and computing statistical likelihood, there is no 100%, conclusive proof that a Hawk-Eye call will be accurate. So perhaps we might think, following from our discussion in the previous section, that Federer’s objection to Hawk-Eye is primarily a reaction to objective facts involving machine error.

This explanation, however, is far from complete. To begin with, it is far from clear that Hawk-Eye gives inaccurate results, even in cases where the human eye seems to suggest otherwise. Dr. Paul Hawkins, creator and managing director of Hawk-Eye

technology, assures us that his line-calling system has undergone more than a thousand tests, and “We’ve gotten every single one of the tests correct.” He acknowledges that within Hawk-Eye’s computations there is a margin of error of less than 4 millimeters. And so while admitting that Hawk-Eye “isn’t infallible,” he quickly adds, “but it’s pretty damned close.”⁴ In response to Federer’s description of the specific line call in his match with Nadal, Hawkins contends that the ball was indeed “definitely in.” He explains that when a tennis ball touches down, “The ball will be in contact with the ground for about 10 cm. In the very first impact, it will compress so that the bottom half is flat. Then it will start to roll and skid and uncompress.”⁵ The result is that, because the naked eye does detect the skidding of the ball, we will not typically be able to discern exactly when the ball first made contact with the ground. Even a television freeze frame may show a ball after it has skidded for several inches, making a ball which actually touched the baseline upon impact *seem* long to television viewers who are watching a replay.

Although Federer may not have reflected on the intricacies of Hawk-Eye technology, he would surely have to concede that, at the very least, Hawk-Eye provides an accurate result more times than not. So, his adamant resistance to Hawk-Eye cannot be explained simply by an appeal to some perceived machine inaccuracies. What seems a more likely explanation is that Hawk-Eye has become a distraction to Federer. That is, it is just one too many things to have to worry about while on the court. Federer seemingly wants simply to concentrate on playing the match. Andy Roddick defends Hawk-Eye, saying that it helps keep umpires “in check a little bit more.” And Lindsay Davenport agrees that “it takes a lot of pressure off the umpires to try and make too crazy of a call and interject.”⁶ But Federer complains that Hawk-Eye, in taking pressure off the umpires,

puts it *on the players*. Here is Federer's take on the effects of Hawk-Eye: "Now [the umpires] can hide even more behind these calls, that's for sure. It makes it really hard for us. Of course, we would like to be able to rely a little bit on umpires as well. They tend to now just let us do the work, you know, the tough stuff. They let us get embarrassed basically."⁷ Federer is alluding to the fact that appeals to Hawk-Eye are made by players during a match, with each player allocated a limited number of appeals that can be made. He finds it irritating that, as a player, he is forced to do a job he sees as the responsibility of umpires. The whole system seems to distract him from what he's always done in competitive matches: focus on playing the next shot and find a rhythm of play that is comfortable. Plus, let's face it: Federer is simply not very good at knowing when to challenge a call by appealing to Hawk-Eye. During the 2006 U.S. Open, when he was first given the opportunity to use Hawk-Eye, he made 17 challenges during the course of the tournament—and he was wrong 10 times. So, in addition to the added responsibilities placed on players of deciding when to appeal to Hawk-Eye, a player may be faced with questioning his own eyesight! In the end, Federer's ardent complaints about Hawk-Eye seem best explained as a reaction to what has become for him a big, ongoing distraction.

The link between complaining and feeling distracted may account for quite a lot of the outbursts we witness from tennis players. In asking Brad Gilbert about his own squabbles with umpires, he had this to say:

If I felt something was not right, I'd want to be heard. But then I'd go on. If I felt like I wasn't being listened to, then I'd get upset. I wanted to be heard.

It is indeed a basic human need that others at least hear and understand what we're saying. We often speak of the need to "get something off our chests." And once we do that, we're usually able to move past the issue and focus on the next task. Without expressing ourselves and being understood by others, we may continue to dwell on the issue in a continually self-destructive manner. So perhaps many of the outbursts we witness from tennis pros are simply attempts to get an annoying line call "out of their systems" so they can then re-focus their attention on the task at hand.

Complaining as Self-motivation?

It is one thing for a player to have a brief outburst that serves as a way of eliminating a potential distraction as he re-focuses his attention on the match. It is quite another thing to have an ongoing argument with an umpire during which one becomes more and more upset. Such sustained complaining would seem naturally to provide *more* distraction to the player, instead of helping to eliminate it. Yet, I have heard more than one tennis commentator suggest that players like John McEnroe may have sometimes *looked* for a controversial call as a way of "firing themselves up" during the course of a match. Is it ever the case that arguments are intentionally sought by players as a way of motivating themselves to concentrate and play harder?

Brad Gilbert thinks this is an unlikely suggestion. He doubts that even McEnroe ever went *looking for* an argument with an umpire. Certainly,

I never went looking for it.

But what of this idea that a player, by drawing from the emotional energy of a confrontation with an umpire, could actually become inspired to play better?

For 99.9% of the people that doesn't work. There are a select few who can do that, who are true genius. They can get [ticked] off, and when their opponent starts to react to it, they can then raise their game to another level. It's genius. But that's one in a million. For the rest of the people, once they start complaining, their games go right in the [toilet]....For me, when I got [ticked] off, I'd play worse.

So although it seems likely that players might have an outburst as a positive way of letting off steam so that a perceived bad call won't continue to distract them, it seems unlikely that anyone would actually *want* to believe that the calls in a match are going against him.

Admittedly, in team sports like football or basketball, a team coach may tell his players that other people are hoping the team fails and that the league referees, influenced by public or league pressure, probably aren't going to do them any favors. This occurrence is evidenced by the frequent statement from players after winning a championship: "They said we wouldn't do it, but we proved them wrong!" (It's never been clear to me who "they" are; but that's another matter.) Such a scenario seems best explained in terms of a coach trying to instill an "us against the world" mentality so that the players set aside egos and work together for a common purpose. In other words, the

coach tries to foster team unity by designating common enemies. Perhaps this approach is effective in some cases as a way of team-building. Nevertheless, in the context of an individual tennis player, this kind of mentality that “the world is against me” seems utterly incapable of providing the sustained motivation one needs to reach the top. Consider again Brad’s assurance that, when it comes to the idea that others may be “out to get us,”

You can’t be a champion and have one ounce of that way of thinking.

Becoming a champion in tennis requires years and years of physically grueling and mentally taxing work.

What people don’t understand is how incredibly difficult it is to be a top 5 player. It takes an incredible amount of work, and an incredible mental effort to do it.

An “us against the world” mentality may help a basketball coach focus a team’s attention for the playoffs, but over the long haul it simply is not compatible with the kind of drive and focus needed to become a tennis champion. To those who make a habit of blaming others and making excuses, Brad’s response is simply,

I don’t want anything to do with people like that.

Whether the context is the short-term effects of getting caught up in an argument with an umpire during a match, or whether it is the long-term effects of associating losses on the court with unfair treatment from others, complaining is a self-destructive practice for the serious tennis player. No tennis player who has achieved anything noteworthy will *want* something to complain about as a way of self-motivation toward success.

Experiencing Relief Instead of Disappointment?

An interesting psychological possibility arises when we consider a scenario in which a person benefits in some way from a line call that goes against him because he actually *doesn't* want to win the match. On the surface, this scenario seems far-fetched. But a recent admission from Andrea Jaeger seems to raise some questions about the mixed motivations people are capable of having. Andrea Jaeger was a teenage tennis star in the early 1980s, becoming a finalist at the French Open (at the age of sixteen) and at Wimbledon, and earning a #2 world ranking. She has since become a nun, and has devoted her adult life to helping children living with cancer. Andrea admitted recently that she never wanted the spotlight of a top-ranked tennis star and that she sometimes intentionally didn't play up to her abilities. For instance, "The second pro tournament I ever played in, I was 14 and beat a few seeded players, one of whom, Wendy Turnbull, took out a bottle of wine in the locker-room and asked me for a corkscrew. I thought, 'Oh, she's having a drink because I beat her? I've upset her? I don't want to have to deal

with this all the time.' That haunted me my entire career. Every time I played her from then on, I tried to give her the match because I felt so bad.”⁸

Of course, this is not to say that Andrea *regularly* shied away from winning. She was, after all, known for her frequent flare ups when line calls didn't go her way. And, interestingly, her attitude toward Wendy Turnbull helped at times to *strengthen* her resolve to win: “At Wimbledon in 1983, Billie Jean King beat Wendy Turnbull and whoever beat Wendy, I always had to beat them because it bothered me so much. When we were going on Centre Court for our semi-final, a lady offered her a towel and Billie Jean said, 'No, I won't need one. I'm not going to sweat in this match.' I thought, 'Not only did you beat Wendy, now you've said this so I have to try hard.' So I went out and beat her 6-1, 6-1”.⁹

It is remarkable that Andrea could have had the success she did enjoy on the court if there was even the very occasional time when she intentionally didn't play to her own highest standard. But what for our discussion is most crucial is the question of why in the world she would be ambivalent about winning. Watching a defeated opponent open a bottle of wine is hardly cause to re-think one's career goals. Andrea's recent admissions, though, extend to a range of issues having to do with her extreme discomfort at the ruthlessly competitive approach of her father and coach, Roland.¹⁰ She has lamented, “We didn't really have a father-daughter relationship; we had a father-coach relationship.”¹¹ And she recounts stories such as the time her father hurried her into the family car after losing at the U.S. Open—not even allowing her to shower—and drove the 1,000 miles home, berating her during the drive.¹² Andrea was always more interested in helping children than in achieving fame and fortune on the tennis court.

Certainly, she resisted her father's apparent mindset that these goals should be pursued with single-minded focus and at all costs. When former rival Chris Evert heard of Andrea's decision to become a nun, she remarked, "Andrea has found her niche, her calling in life. I don't feel she was cut out for cutthroat competitive tennis. She never looked very happy."¹³ Perhaps, then, some tennis players really *don't* want, on some level, to win matches; and so they actually are relieved when a close line call goes against them.

In noting that this desire may occur "on some level," I mean to draw attention to the fact that we can have desires of which we're not fully, consciously aware. For instance, a son may not see that his rebellion is in part an attempt to get his parents to listen to him. A daughter may not see that her eating disorder is in part an attempt to gain some control over her life. Frequently, our motivations are mixed. A recent college graduate may enter medical school believing that she is motivated by a desire for financial stability, a desire to develop her abilities in a meaningful way, and a desire to help others in need. All these motivations may be present. It may *also* be the case that she believes that her parents, who are both physicians, will approve of her if she follows in their footsteps. Although she may not *recognize* that this last motivation is indeed partly responsible for her decision, it may nonetheless be a contributing factor.

Given the complex nature of human motivations, we can easily imagine a case in which someone is motivated to do *one* thing, while also desiring (at some psychological level) to do the very opposite. In the case of Andrea Jaeger, this seems to be the case. The competitive spirit of a professional player was clearly present when she played (and evidenced by her outbursts at umpires when things didn't go her way). At the same time,

by her own admission she felt a deep uneasiness with the competitive atmosphere of the professional circuit and at times became aware of her own desire not to see an opponent lose. Perhaps there are budding tennis players today who, as was the case with Andrea, have a desire on some level to rebel against a domineering parent-coach or against some other aspect of the demands of competitive tennis. There may be a part of them that therefore experiences relief when a shot of theirs is called out and they go on to lose a match. Certainly the case of Andrea Jaeger provides insight into the truly mixed motivations that people can have.

Why Excuse-Making is So Prevalent

Most any budding tennis player with such mixed motivations will probably be a player you'll never hear about. It is a marvel that Andrea Jaeger could have been a top pro for a while with her ambivalent attitudes. As mentioned before, it is incredibly difficult to become a top player in tennis. Brad Gilbert notes how tennis is very different from team sports.

I don't tell people not to go into tennis, but it's not like other sports like baseball or basketball where there are lots of other people who are at the top. To be a Grand Slam champion takes incredible talent and toughness. It is so, so difficult.

In sports like baseball, basketball, and football, there may be dozens of players who are widely viewed as elite, championship-level players. But there can only be one winner of a Grand Slam tennis event, the pinnacle of tennis success. In terms of sheer numbers, there is far more room to be an all-star caliber player in a professional team sport.

And think about all the college players who were good enough to be all-stars on their teams and they're at the end of the bench in the pros!

Indeed so, and success at the college level in a major team sport may gain a player the kind of notoriety that opens up marketing and business opportunities, even if the player never establishes himself at the professional level. Clearly, the same cannot be said for collegiate tennis players.

Given the extremely small number of tennis players at any one time who would widely be recognized as among the elite of the professional ranks, the odds are exceptionally long for anyone hoping to gain fame and fortune by means of playing tennis. Yet, the ranks of junior tennis leagues continue to swell. This leads to the question that so many players and their families will inevitably face: What happens when things don't work out as we had hoped?

To be sure, the prospect of unmet expectations can be difficult for the family of a tennis player to accept if that family has invested a great deal of time and money in the player's development.

Parents invest in their kids, and their kids work hard, and they think they're owed something because of all that. They have this expectation that their kids are going to be champions. They all expect great things for their kids. And parents should want great things for their kids. But guess what, there are 300,000 other kids who are working hard. What about them?

So much of the time there simply is going to be no real prospect of a young tennis player developing into one of the elite, tournament-winning players on the professional tennis circuit.

Look, you need a certain gene pool if you're going to be a champion. If your parents are short, or if your parents are thick, and you want to be a tall, seven foot basketball player, it's just not going to happen.

Yes, there may be any number of budding tennis players who are really good athletes and who possess above-average mental toughness. But nearly all these hopeful tennis prospects may yet fail to possess the rare combination of physical skills and mental abilities that set apart the very top players in the sport.

When young players do not progress as they or their families expected, the most obvious explanation would be to reflect on what we have already noted: it simply is incredibly rare for any person to make it to the elite level of a tennis champion. But of course it may be difficult to accept that one's hopes and plans—along with one's investments of time and money—have no real chance of coming to fruition. Faced with

the uncomfortable thought that one has invested heavily in an ultimately hopeless cause, alternative explanations may be sought.

Parents invest all kinds of money in their kid's future, and they want results. If things don't go well, they'll find some excuse.

For parents who have already invested heavily in their child's tennis development, it is understandable that they would resist admitting that they have overestimated their child's athletic potential.

Psychologists have documented how people can sometimes go to extraordinary lengths in order to avoid uncomfortable conclusions. Tennis parents, like anyone else, can turn their attention away from the thought that they might be wrong in their analysis, choosing instead to reflect only on the evidence which supports their position. So, parents might quickly change the subject when a tennis coach mentions that their child's serve and foot speed are not improving much, instead asking the coach to repeat the positive message that the child's drop shot technique is really coming along. Parents can explain away evidence which undermines their favored conclusion by describing it as an anomaly. So, parents might explain a child's losses in terms of temporary and uncharacteristic lapses, with the child's few outstanding matches held up as the norm. In the end, there may be any number of things which parents may say to themselves and to others as a way of both keeping alive their dreams for their child and justifying their decision to invest in their child's tennis career.

While it may not be too surprising that people can lie to themselves rather than tell themselves the truth, what is particularly interesting is that people often end up *believing* the lies they tell themselves. The act of lying to others or to oneself involves our *pretending* that things are a certain way, even while we know (or at least secretly fear) deep down that they are not. And psychologists have shown that this phenomenon of pretending can actually have powerful effects in terms of people truly coming to believe what they once only pretended to believe. In everyday language, we sometimes talk of people “convincing themselves” of something.

To see why the act of pretending can be so effective, we will need to recognize that a good deal of what we believe about ourselves comes from how we observe others behaving towards us. A toddler who is not treated by others as though she is valuable and loved will grow up with a negative self-image. Psychologists have shown through experiments that the complex nature of social interaction can blur the distinction in our own minds between how people are relating to the “real us” and how they are relating to the persons we are pretending to be.¹⁴ As a result, we may come to believe the things we were once only pretending to believe. If parents act as though their child is surely destined for tennis greatness, and if enough people relate to them over time as parents of a child destined for greatness, then they can become genuinely convinced that they *are* in fact parents of such a child.

In addition to the effects of making a pretense for *others* and then observing their behavior as they relate to us, our observations of *our own* behavior—as we pretend that something is the case—can have surprisingly strong effects on what we come to believe about ourselves. At first glance, it may seem odd to think that parents could simply *act*

as though they were the best evaluators of their child’s potential as a tennis player—and by observing their own behavior come to truly *believe* this about themselves. Consider, though, a fascinating story told by Sigmund Freud that shows how people’s beliefs about themselves really can be based on their observations of their own behavior. Freud describes an experiment he witnessed in which a hypnotized subject was ordered to open an umbrella five minutes after awakening. The subject carried out the instruction and was then asked why he was acting in this way. Freud reports that “instead of saying that he has no idea”, the subject felt “compelled to invent some obviously unsatisfactory reason.”¹⁵ Specifically, the subject claimed he wanted to make sure the umbrella was in good working order (which is a motivation we might naturally attribute to any person we observed opening an umbrella indoors). Freud’s example seems to show that people’s understandings of their own motives can indeed stem from observing their own public behavior. If parents of a tennis player act as though they are the best evaluators of their child’s tennis potential, then they can come to believe this. Subsequently, if the opinions of coaches, talent evaluators, and so forth conflict with the parents’ conclusions, then these other opinions will naturally be viewed as flawed in some way.

Brad Gilbert does not think that players themselves are typically the ones who go to elaborate lengths to find excuses when hopes and expectations for player development aren’t met. Rather, his view is that the caretakers of the tennis prodigy will be the ones who tend to cultivate the mentality of excuse-making.

I think it usually comes from outside influences—parents, or even doctors [i.e., sports psychologists]—who find something to complain about and some excuse to make.¹⁶

If parents can convince themselves that their child has more promise than his match results thus far indicate, and if they convey this idea repeatedly to their child, then it is understandable that the child will follow suit in seeking to blame someone or something else when match results don't do as hoped.

Do these excuses sometimes fly in the face of any reasonable assessment of objective facts?

You wouldn't believe the people that phone me up or visit my website and whine and bitch about everything. It's always some reason why they or their kid isn't progressing or isn't where they should be.

Once a person starts down the path of making excuses, Brad sees this as a sure-fire indication that the person will never become a champion. Again, Brad's attitude toward excuse-makers is simple.

I don't want anything to do with people like that.

Philosophers and psychologists may find it interesting to explore the various motivations and strategies people have for avoiding tough truths about their own limitations. But it's understandable that a tennis coach like Brad Gilbert, who wants to work with champions, would have no interest in such things. After all, the coach is the one who has to deal with the actual person day after day. And the simple fact is that any real-life psychological

issues the player has—whatever the cause of these issues—hamper a coach’s efforts to help mold a player into a champion.

Like you said, I’m a realist. I’m dealing with the person. It sounds like they’re dealing with the reasons behind the person.

And this is fair enough. Philosophers may seek to analyze and systematize the possible reasons why a player may make excuses—an exploration that reveals interesting possibilities about the human penchant for selective evidence and self-delusion. But a coach ultimately confirms the fact that excuse-making is an obvious sign that a player lacks the mentality to become a champion.

¹ Richard Nisbett and Lee Ross, *Human Inference: Strategies and Shortcomings of Social Judgment* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1980), 49-50.

² “Federer attacks Hawk-Eye,” *Herald Sun* (January 18, 2007).

³ “Federer’s HawkEye frustration,” *Herald Sun* (July 9, 2007).

⁴ “Two British scientists call into question Hawk-Eye’s Accuracy,” *Associated Press* (June 19, 2008).

⁵ “Hawk-Eye creator defends his system after Federer’s volley,” *The Times* (July 10, 2007).

⁶ “Two British scientists call into question Hawk-Eye’s Accuracy,” *Associated Press* (June 19, 2008).

⁷ “Federer attacks Hawk-Eye,” *Herald Sun* (January 18, 2007).

⁸ “Why I became a nun, by former tennis star Andrea Jaeger,” *The Mail on Sunday* (April 19, 2008).

⁹ “Why I became a nun, by former tennis star Andrea Jaeger,” *The Mail on Sunday* (April 19, 2008).

Interestingly, the next match for Andrea, the 1983 Wimbledon final against Martina Navratilova, is the one match for which she has drawn the most attention in claiming that she purposefully tried not to win. For her reasons, see “Jaeger’s confession – I Let Martina Win the Title,” *The Daily Mail* (June 4, 2008). Available online at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sport/tennis/article-1031959/EXCLUSIVE-Jaegers-confession--I-let-Martina-win-title.html>.

¹⁰ See Andrea Jaeger, *First Service: Following God’s Calling and Finding Life’s Purpose* (Health Communications, 2004).

¹¹ “Jaeger now in service to next calling,” *USA Today* (March 9, 2007). Happily, Andrea and her father reconciled later in life.

¹² “Why I became a nun, by former tennis star Andrea Jaeger,” *The Mail on Sunday* (April 19, 2008).

¹³ “Jaeger now in service to next calling,” *USA Today* (March 9, 2007).

¹⁴ See Daniel Gilbert and Joel Cooper, “Social Psychological Strategies of Self-Deception,” *Self-Deception and Self-Understanding*, ed. Mike Martin (University Press of Kansas, 1985).

¹⁵ Sigmund Freud, “The Interpretation of Dreams,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 4 (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 148.

¹⁶ As to Brad’s view of sports psychologists in general, let’s just say he’s not a fan.