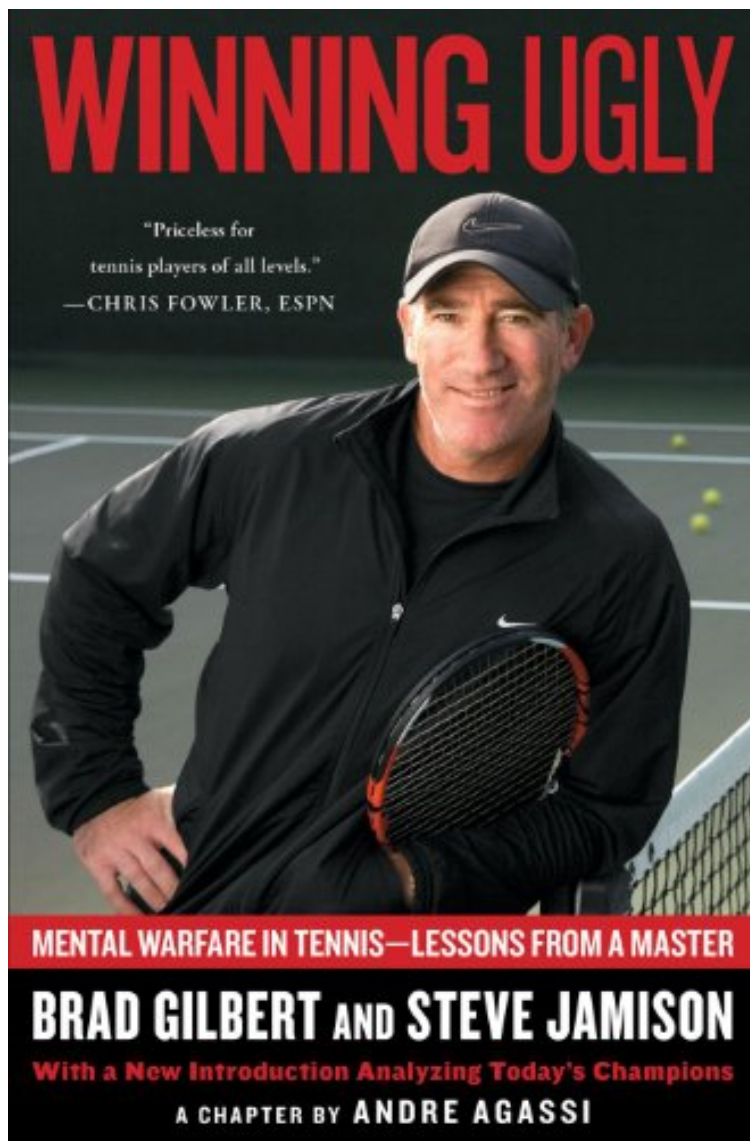


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Winning Ugly: Mental Warfare in Tennis-- Lessons from a Master (English Edition)



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurThe tennis classic from Olympic gold medalist and ESPN analyst Brad Gilbert, now featuring a new introduction with tips drawn from the strategies of Roger Federer, Novak Djokovic, Serena Williams, Andy Murray, and more, to help you outthink and outplay your toughest opponentsA former Olympic medalist and now one of ESPNs most respected analysts, Brad Gilbert shares his timeless tricks and tips, including some real gems (Tennis magazine) to help both recreational and professional players improve their game. In the new introduction to this third edition, Gilbert uses his inside access to analyze

current stars such as Serena Williams and Rafael Nadal, showing readers how to beat better players without playing better tennis. Written with clarity and wit, this classic combat manual for the tennis court has become the bible of tennis instruction books for countless players worldwide.

Chapter 1 Mental Preparation: The Pre-Match Advantage

Turning Pro: Young and Innocent

One of the first lessons I learned when I turned pro in 1982 was how much of an edge could be gained before the match even got started. It became obvious to me that for the best players in the world their match had begun a long time before the first serve. They came ready to play and wanted to grab me by the throat as soon as they could. As a member of the tennis teams at Foothill Junior College and Pepperdine, I liked to just show up and play. I'd settle into the match mentally and physically during the first set. A lot of times I could get away with it because my opponent was doing it too. Do you approach your matches the same way? On tour this wasn't such a good idea. The slow start didn't work against McEnroe, Lendl, Connors, and some of the veterans. By the time I got settled into some of those matches, the match was already over. One time I started out by losing the first sixteen points of the match. It was over so fast I almost didn't need to take a shower afterwards. Brutal -- I was learning the hard way. The top players came expecting to have me for lunch, and they'd been thinking about taking that first bite since they found out I was on the menu. Four or five games to work up an appetite? They arrived ready to eat. The main course? Glazed Gilbert. Being down a couple of breaks early, with no rhythm, no plan, no continuity, put me at too great a disadvantage. I was clobbered regularly by the smart guys on tour. They knew something I didn't.

Start Your Match Before It Begins

What I discovered by looking, listening, and losing was simple. The guys making money out there started honing in on their target (me, for example) before the target was even in sight. The smart ones were consciously and subconsciously reviewing information about the opponent ahead of them as soon as they knew who that player was. The process began hours before the match. The smart players wanted to seek and seize advantage as early as possible. And they wanted to do it in as many ways as possible. For them, one of the big opportunities was good mental preparation. And that means early mental preparation.

When Does Your Warm-up Begin?

Let me tell you when the warm-up doesn't begin. It doesn't begin when you arrive on the court. It may for your opponent, but it shouldn't for you. A smart player starts to prepare for the match on the way to the match, or even before. The warm-up should continue on into the locker room and out onto the court. The warm-up begins with your brain. Your mind is usually the last part of you to get activated (if it gets activated at all). Players stretch incorrectly for a minute, hit a couple of forehands, and three serves, and it's "Let's start." They barely warm up the body, but that's more attention than they give to their mental preparation. The mind is a terrible thing to waste, and tennis players waste it all the time. Get into the habit of evaluating your opponent and thinking about the match before you arrive at the court. If you drive to the match your car is the place where your warm-up begins. If you walk to the courts, then the sidewalk is where it happens. No matter what, your warm-up starts on the way to the match. For me it can begin even earlier than that. The night before a match I'll be in my hotel room thinking about the next day's competition. I'll actually play points out in my mind. I can see myself making shots and winning points. I visualize points we've played in the past. I'll see myself making specific shots against that player. It's almost like watching a videotape of segments of a match. In the morning I'll continue the process. That little five-minute warm-up you see before a match begins for the players on tour is probably misleading. It looks like we just trot out to the court with that big bag over our shoulder, hit for a couple of minutes, and start the match. For most of us the process has been going on throughout the day -- hitting, stretching, loosening up, a massage, and most of all, that mental review.

The Pre-Match Mental Checklist

Whether I won or lost to a player in our last match, I want to think about the reasons. How did I beat him? What does he do with his shot selection and pattern? Does he attack? Is he a retriever? Does he serve big? What's his return of serve like? Did I make mistakes against him last time? What kind and why? What shots are his best? His worst? Was he forcing me to do something that bothered me? Does he start strong and get too cautious on pressure points? Was it a close match? Were the points long? I review everything that pertains to my opponent's game (as far as strokes and shot tendencies are concerned). It is also important to consider the "personality" of the game your opponent produces. What does he do to affect the atmosphere, mood, or tempo of the match? Is she very slow between points? Does he get emotional? Does she protest a lot of calls? Is he great when he gets a lead, but not so great when he's losing? Do your opponents give you a lot of small talk on changeovers, taking your mind off the match like McEnroe tried to do to me? Do they always show up ten minutes late? Do they rush through the warm-up and want to start the match as soon as possible? Prepare yourself mentally for the "stuff" certain players bring with them into the match. I want to be mentally and emotionally set for the fast play of Andre Agassi or the

deliberate methodical match tempo of Ivan Lendl. I want to be ready for the temperamental outbursts of Connors and McEnroe or the stonefaces of Michael Chang or Jim Courier. It makes a big difference to me because I'm better able to control my own game plan, tempo, and composure if I know what's likely to be happening on the other side of the net. Believe me, it can make a huge difference, as you'll see later.

The Game PlanThis process of review will lead me right into the equally important process of planning my strategy:

1. What do I want to make happen?
2. What do I want to prevent from happening?

By evaluating my opponent I start solidifying my own approach to the match. As I review their game style and strokes I'm preparing my basic game plan. If they broke down my backhand last time I'll be thinking about how to prevent the same thing from happening this time. If their serve is weak I'm alerting myself and going over how to take advantage of that. I'm planning a specific approach for that specific player. All of this before I even see them at the court.

Set Your CompassYour body will try to do what your mind tells it to do. In this pre-match review you're programming your mind to give the body correct information once the match begins and things start happening quickly under fire. You're setting the course you want to take to arrive at your destination. That destination is victory.

In its most basic form your plan evolves as you answer these questions:

1. What is my opponent's best weapon?
2. Where is my opponent weak?
3. What is my best shot and how can I direct it at my opponent's weakness?
4. What can I do to keep my opponent away from my own weakness?

Your pre-match effort creates a mental compass. You know where you want to go and how you're going to get there. There may be detours along the way, your opponent may present some surprises, you may get lost, but the basic route is laid out in your head in advance and your mental compass keeps you on course. (Coming up I'll show you how following this procedure helped me beat both Boris Becker and Jimmy Connors, in totally different ways.)

Even if you tend to play the same people over and over (your tennis buddies) it is still important to zero in on the specific player for a particular day. Get your mind on that one player. If you're playing each other regularly it can be even more advantageous to review and refine your tactics because you've got a backlog of information. That's when it really starts to get interesting.

Watch the tour players. The great ones are very intent on getting off to a good start because they know that it can often set the tone for the entire match. Getting the other player under your thumb right out of the chute puts them in a "catch up" position. Sometimes they'll recover. A lot of times they won't. And that's what you want to do to your opponent. As early as possible you want to force them to be considering the idea that "maybe it's just not gonna be my day today." It can happen very early, believe me. Your pre-match preparation and visualization can make you the one somebody else is trying to catch up to.

You're thinking, "Hey, Brad. Gimme a break! I've got a life. I can't be thinking about tennis all the time." That's right. But what I'm talking about takes less than ten minutes of attention on the way to your match and then the effort of following a plan once you get there. Maybe you can squeeze that in for opponents you really want to beat. By giving yourself a good chance to start right you're giving yourself a good chance to finish right. That's worth the extra attention.

Let me take you through my own mental preparation exactly as I've used it before important matches.

Preparation on Tour: Becker and Connors (Different Strokes for Different Folks)When I started seriously using my pre-match opportunities in this way I started winning more often. Let's say my opponent in the round of 16 at the U.S. Open was Boris Becker (because it was). My own mental review before I got to the locker room at Flushing Meadow would go like this:

Becker can attack my weak second serve. He knows how to exploit it for maximum effect. This is a polite way of saying he creams it.

Therefore, I don't want to let him see many seconds. That means I want to get my first serve in more consistently, to put a premium on reducing first serve faults. Obviously, I'll have to hit with less abandon and take fewer risks on my first serve, but the reward will be that he doesn't get the opportunity to make me eat my second serve.

Also, I want to serve to his forehand, try and get him missing some forehand groundstrokes. Why? I know that Boris has a great forehand. It anchors the rest of his game. But if he starts screwing up with it, everything else can suffer. He gets frustrated when the forehand doesn't meet his expectations.

I've learned (and tell myself again in the pre-match review) that when he starts to miss on the forehand side, the rest of his game can start to wobble. That's when he'll start screaming at himself in German. So I want to be sharp serving to his forehand without getting too ambitious, get a high percentage in.

Also, I should give him no pace. Boris will win any battle over who can hit the ball hardest. Without pace he still wants to hit the ball hard and often overhits as a result. Especially on the forehand side.

Before I get to the court I go over all of that in my mental review. I also remind myself to try and open up the court on Boris by hitting intelligently to his forehand. This means that I know from past matches with him that when I hit wide to the forehand (either with my serve or a groundstroke) his tendency, or shot pattern, is to hit it

crosscourt right back to my forehand. If it's even a little short I'll look to hit a forehand approach (my best weapon) down the line to his backhand. Then I'll follow it in and camp near the alley. So, my game plan when I serve should regularly follow this pattern: Serve wide to the Becker forehand. Look for an opportunity to hit a forehand approach shot to his backhand. Then follow it in and camp near the 'alley. That's my 1-2-3 punch. Two elements come into play with that combination that I've experienced in past matches. First of all, Boris is going to have to move from his forehand grip (under the racket) to his backhand grip (somewhat over the racket) while moving from the deuce court to the ad court on the full gallop. In the past I've seen that he doesn't always do that well. It's just a little glitch that shows up from time to time. And, if he does make the grip change and take a good cut at the ball his tendency is to go down the line -- not all the time, but that's his first choice. Watch him on the tube. You'll see he favors that shot. What happens when he does? There I am camping near the alley. Bingo. Forehand volley to an open court. I've run that combination of shots successfully on Boris many, many, many times. And, on his serve I tell myself, "Boris has a huge serve. Don't try to do too much with it. Get the ball back in play. Make him play an extra ball or two each point. Keep the ball in play. That's the key for me against Boris, making him run down an extra ball over and over again. Becker can get frustrated and I want to frustrate him. Obviously, if he's swarming winners I'm in trouble, but I tell myself that in the match ahead I've got to stay in every point possible. Keep cool. Be patient. Don't try to make things happen too quickly. Busting My Butt for Boris I also think about the "personality" of the competition and the competitor ahead. Boris Becker is like a thoroughbred. His physicality, power, and movement are so pure that it can be intimidating. He's big and he plays big. I get myself ready for any Becker match by reminding myself, "Don't be impressed. Don't let his presence be overwhelming. Keep your eye on your game plan and not on his game." I have to do that or I'd take one look at what Becker brings onto the court and retire. (And that's important in your own tennis. Don't be impressed until after the match. Never before.) I want him to see me busting my buns for everything, throwing everything back. I want to show him that I'm going to compete on every single point of every single game if the match goes on for a week. I want him to believe that I will never give up. I want him to get the feeling that I'm not going away. That I'm permanent. I know that Boris can get frustrated out on the court. Against someone like Michael Chang this wouldn't matter. With Becker it can be very important. He doesn't have great patience if points, games, and the match drag on. I know that if he gets impatient he'll start missing shots because he's trying to end it quick. As I mentally program myself for Becker's game I'm getting ready to try to exploit both his physical and emotional tendencies and weaknesses. My Mental and Game Plan for Becker

1. Increase my first serve percentage. Don't try to hit aces or service winners. Don't let him see many second serves.
2. Serve to his forehand regularly. Look for short crosscourt return. Approach down the line. Camp near the alley.
3. Try to create mistakes on his forehand. Don't give him any pace. Repeat: No Pace.
4. Don't try to do too much with my service return. Get it back. Make him hit another shot.
5. Work hard on every point. Show Boris some hustle. He gets impatient.
6. Don't be impressed with anything he does. Let him pound the ball as hard as he wants. But, make him pound it over and over! Always try and make him hit one more shot.
7. Boris can get frustrated if things don't go his way. Try and make him stay around longer than he wants to. If he starts screaming at himself in German he's getting wobbly. Does it work? Yes. Does it work all the time? Yes. You won't win every time, obviously. But my procedure will improve your chance of winning every time. And that's all I'm trying to do when I play, improve my chance of winning.

U.S. Open 1987 -- Grandstand Court Becker vs. Gilbert Round of 16 I've used this plan very effectively against Becker. Most notably in the round of sixteen in the 1987 U.S. Open. At the time he was ranked number four in the world. I was still trying to crack into the Top 10. Boris had rolled over me in the first set 6-2 and then won a tiebreaker for the second set. Now he was leading 3-0 in the third. I was very close to the point of no return and Boris knew it. He could end this match very soon. Boris exudes so much confidence when he's ahead that it can break down your belief in yourself. His hair gets redder. His eyelashes get so white they almost disappear against his pale skin. He's physically bigger than me and he carries himself even bigger. A pure athletic aura surrounds him when he's rolling, and you can feel it across the net. He has tremendous presence. When he's running with a lead the confidence he displays goes beyond arrogance. He tells you with his body language that he knows he is better than the rest. Except I didn't believe it. The third set continues with me serving. I hold to stay in the match at 3-1, but I knew if Boris holds to go up 4-1 I'm history. Then he makes a serious mental mistake. Boris seems to have a lapse in concentration. He plays a very casual service game, almost lethargic. He donates a couple of points with double faults and suddenly I'm back on serve at 2-3. There's hope in my mind because of what I know (and

have reviewed) about Becker. Suddenly I can see a way to win. Here's how. Our scheduled afternoon match had been delayed because of rain. As a result we started very late and in extreme heat and humidity. The temperature that Monday in New York was pushing 90 . On the grandstand court it felt like 190 . It was like playing on a muggy day in the jungle, a jungle that had jets flying low overhead every fifteen minutes. Concentration was difficult. Even though I don't like hot weather I felt this could work in my favor. I knew that a few weeks earlier I had beaten Boris in Washington, D.C., in this same kind of weather when he fell apart in the last set. I felt that if I could somehow claw out of this third set it might have a very negative effect on Boris. It might get him thinking about our last match in hot humid weather and what had happened. I believed he had already made the assumption that he was going to win in straight sets. If I could steal this set after he was so close to winning the match (up two sets with a 3-0 lead) he might get upset with himself. If I could make him play more tennis in these conditions he might get very upset with himself. And I knew what that could mean. This became a great motivator. I honestly felt that I was nearing an opportunity to get into Becker's mind, to upset his composure in a big way. And this opportunity existed because I was way behind. Or, more to the point, it existed because Boris was so close to winning the match that he could taste it. If I could get him feeling that things were dragging on in this grandstand heat and humidity, the quality of his game would drop because the quality of his thinking would drop. I had seen it happen before. I told myself if I could win the third set I could win the match. Sound too optimistic? Here's what happened. At 2-3 I held serve to even the set at three games apiece. We're now two hours and thirty minutes into the match. I've won three games in a row and it's gotten his attention . Now, we each hold serve, but Boris is becoming increasingly unhappy and irritable. Twice he starts screaming something in German. I make a little joke and tell myself the translation is "My feet are burning up. I want to stick them in ice." Boris picks up the pace and is playing more quickly. As though he wanted to end it as soon as possible. His composure is changing. We each hold again. And again. Suddenly it's 6-all and we're in another tiebreak. Boris seems to get himself together and grabs an early mini-break. He's serving at 2-1. It's exactly where I don't want to be, down a mini-break in a tiebreaker that could send me back home. But Boris now plays two points that became crucial in the outcome of the match, both for what they did to the score and what they did to his composure. Serving at 2-1 in the tiebreak Boris double-faults. He puts me back on serve and I don't even have to swing my racket. It's a major error on his part. I believe it was brought on because he was getting impatient, rushing things just a little bit. He wanted to get the job done too quickly. Perfect. Then immediately another critical exchange at 2-2. Boris serves and attacks the net. As he moves to his right (just inches from the net), his feet slip out from under him and he crashes to the ground. I see him fall, and as he frantically struggles to get back up, I hit a backhand crosscourt lob that sends him racing toward the baseline. He doesn't get there. At the service line his feet go out from under him again. And again his body slams into the court. This time he doesn't get up. Becker is lying face down on the court screaming uncontrollably at himself in German. He's fallen so hard that his gold watch has slid down from his wrist to around his fingers. He's furious with himself and about what's happening. He raises up to one knee and lets out a terrible scream. Nobody in tennis has a scream as fearful as Becker's when he loses control. It's the sound of pure and total anguish. It is beautiful to hear. Boris is coming apart. At 3-2 in the breaker I serve again to his forehand. Boris nets it and immediately unleashes another bloodcurdling screech. This time I can't hear him. Another huge jet is directly overhead and obliterates all other sound. It's a very strange sensation. The court is actually vibrating from the jet's noise. I can see Boris screaming, but I hear nothing except the huge noise of the jet. Boris takes a vicious swipe at the court with his racket. I know he feels like he's drowning and can't swim. No matter how hard he tries, he feels things are only getting worse. It's interesting how distractions affect you when you've got some momentum and are winning points. The heat, the humidity, the incredible white noise of the jets flying overhead, none of it bothered me. But when you're struggling like Boris was struggling it is almost impossible to stay focused. The distractions become crippling. Your mind gets totally berserk. You just want to get out of there. We continue to 5-4 in the tiebreak on my serve. I remember my game plan is to go selectively to his forehand. And that's what I do. Boris nets it, 6-4. Set point now, and again I decide to go to his forehand with my serve. Again he nets it! The tactic works beautifully. I've cracked through to win the breaker and with it the set 7-6 (7-4). Boris's march to victory has been slowed. I'm still alive. More than alive. I know I can win the match. The fourth set is tough, but my game remains steady. Nothing flashy, but exactly what I had planned on doing. I got a break and gave it back. Boris was unhappy, but he still understands that he isn't far from sending me back to California. I'm hanging in there, hitting to his forehand when possible and approaching to his backhand with

success. He's seeing no pace unless he supplies it himself. I'm not letting him see many second serves. I'm patient. Then something happened I hadn't expected. Word began to spread through the tennis complex that Boris Becker was in trouble. The grandstand seats started to fill up with fans from the stadium court where John McEnroe was beating on Andres Gomez. And those fans wanted to see some more tennis. They knew for that to happen I had to win the fourth set. The crowd packing into the grandstand seats was totally on my side! Cheering for me on every shot. Yelping and hooting as I ran down everything and worked my butt off in what was a real steam bath. They loved it. And I loved it too. Becker was affected. The long wailing shrieks in German continued: "My feet are burning. I want to stick them in ice!" It was like a shot of adrenalin into my system. I knew that when he loses control I have beaten him. Boris was becoming very frustrated. He had gone from being two points away from the match (when I was serving in the third set at 4-5, 30-30) and a trip to the quarterfinals, to having a lot of work in front of him. And in conditions that a camel would hate. At 5-all Boris threatened to break my serve. Twice he tries and fails. It's not a pretty hold, but I hold. Boris will serve next at 5-6. We head to our chairs for the changeover. I decide to change shirts to give myself a little mental boost, to put on something fresh and dry. And I really start working on my thinking. I review my game plan: "Stay alert. Don't give up any stupid points. Make him play some balls and keep hitting to his forehand. Let him make some mistakes!" In the background I can hear something, some noise in the crowd. It breaks my concentration. I look up and see two teenagers running through the aisles. They're waving American flags and the crowd is picking up on it: "U.S.A.! U.S.A.! U.S.A.!" It gets louder and louder. The fans have really gotten into it. "U.S.A.! U.S.A.!" I look over at the section where my family is sitting with my coach, Tom Chivington. They're standing and cheering. The emotion running through the grandstand was electric. I actually got goose bumps in 90 heat; really pumped up and confident. We go out onto the court with Boris serving at 5-6. The crowd is buzzing. Boris serves four times. He doesn't win a point. I break him at love and win the set 7-5! It's electric. The crowd is roaring and gives me a standing ovation: "U.S.A., U.S.A." More flags are waving. Suddenly we're at two sets each. The match is all even, right? Wrong. I've won. The match isn't over, but I've won. I glance at Boris and I can see that he's finished. His energy is gone. The eyes are dead with no fight or spark in them. His body language told me he was through battling for that day. It wasn't physical either. It was mental. Boris is a super athlete in fantastic shape. What had weakened was his resolve. Boris had gotten frustrated with the match. He just wanted out of there. Just as I thought might happen. Beginning of the fifth set. My serve. And again Becker doesn't threaten. I hold easily. Boris has gotten only two points in two games. The rout is on. I break, hold, break, and hold. I'm up 5-0 and it took ten minutes. At least it felt that fast. Boris managed to get a game out of it, but lost 6-1. The match had taken four hours and seventeen minutes in oppressive heat and humidity -- a sweatbox. Even though it was scheduled to be an afternoon match it was now almost 10 P.M.. I had lost seven pounds. But I was so exhilarated I felt like I could run a marathon. Jimmy Connors "de-exhilarated" me two days later in the quarters. But it took nothing away from the pride I took in battling back from two sets down to beat him in five. Never before had Boris Becker lost after leading by two sets. Pre-Match Preparation Pays Off A lot of things went right for me that day, but I was only able to take advantage of them because I'd prepared myself before the match for the game and temperament of Boris Becker. When he had me on the ropes I still saw a way to win because I understood his game and his temperament. I had gone into the match with strong mental preparation. I knew what I wanted to make happen and what I wanted to prevent from happening. Part of it had to do with strokes and strategy. Part of it had to do with personality, both mine and my opponent's. That preparation served me well when I needed it. When things were getting desperate I had a mental compass that kept me on course and gave me a way to get back in the match. Instead of rolling over and accepting defeat I believed there was a way to win. Boris Becker is a gentleman. Later that night I was at a disco called the Heartbreak on Varick Street in Manhattan. At about midnight I feel a tap on my shoulder. It's Boris. He congratulates me and we talk about the match over a beer. He says he hates that kind of heat and humidity. I tell him I love it. He says they've got to do something about the planes flying overhead during a match. I tell him I love those planes. He kids me a little and says I won't be so lucky next time around. Five months later I beat him in the Masters at Madison Square Garden -- no planes, no heat, no humidity. Every Player Is Unique, But Connors Is the Most Unique! Against Jimmy Connors my "auto"-visualization or pre-match analysis and conclusions are completely different because his game and personality differ so much from Becker's. First and foremost I remind myself to block out the elements -- not the sun or wind, but the chaos he can create with the fans and the officials. Jimmy treats the crowd like he's a conductor and they're the band. He gets them to do what he wants. At an important point

Jimmy could suddenly get 14,000 people going crazy, cheering for him and against his opponent (namely, me) in an uproar. I'll tell myself to expect it and ignore it. It's part of his game plan. As you'll see, against Connors this is easier said than done. (If it had been Jimmy instead of Boris in the U.S. Open match I just described, Connors would have done something disruptive with the crowd when I started to make my move in the third set. And, when I pulled ahead in the tiebreak, I guarantee there would have been some "stuff" going on to shake up my momentum -- an argument about a line call, an obscenity, or something else. He would never just let you cruise to victory.) Also, with Jimmy I'll plan to hit slice shots into his forehand (I call it slicing the roast beef). Nothing hard. Just a ball that stays lower on the bounce. I know that when it hits on the service line Connors will tend to chip his forehand back. If he does, that's the one I'm waiting for. I want to be ready to step up, bust it, and move in behind it. The Connors service return also needs special pre-match consideration. He has one of the best service returns ever. His specialty is making a play off a great serve. He manages to get the racket on the ball and keep it in play. What should be a winner or an ace comes back at you and Jimmy stays in the point. He doesn't necessarily kill the ball. He makes fantastic gets and then is able to hit the ball with direction (to put it where you can't make your best shot). He immediately takes your advantage and turns it into a disadvantage. And he does it because he guesses a lot. When he guesses right even the best serve can come back. But the important thing is he doesn't kill that service return. What this allows me to do is go for a winner or one that produces a weaker return off my first serve. If he guesses right it'll come back. If he guesses wrong I win the point. And, if I fault I know he won't stick the second serve back down my throat like Becker. It changes my entire strategy in serving. By taking the pressure off my second serve Jimmy allows me more leeway with my first serve. I know going in that a serve that would ace anybody else might come back. I'm not going to let myself be surprised. That's what Connors brings to the party. If you let it bother you he'll get you letting up on that first serve or trying to hit bigger and bigger. My approach is to go for great serves and expect them back. I don't worry about having to serve up seconds if I fault on the first. In fact, the truth is that my second serve bothers him (as you'll soon see). Jimbo loves pace. He feeds on it. My second serve is a lollipop. I honestly think it bothers him a little because it has no pace. So, I don't worry about having to hit second serves because Connors (unlike Becker) doesn't make you pay the big penalty. My Game Plan for Connors

1. Expect Jimmy to manipulate the crowd at key moments. Be prepared for disruption and stay focused.
2. Serve big on the first serve. If I miss he won't come in on my second.
3. Hit slice to his forehand.
4. He doesn't like junk. Massage the ball.

The Masters 1987 -- Madison Square Garden Connors vs. Gilbert

Connors and I faced each other in the 1987 Masters several months after he had beaten me in the U.S. Open quarterfinals following my five-set comeback against Becker. Neither of us was in great shape. I had just played four tournaments on four different continents in four weeks. Jimmy had been fighting a bad cold. Nevertheless, I went into our match with great focus and motivation. Part of it came from a desire to avenge that loss at the Open. He had kept me out of the semis and given me one of my toughest losses. I felt strongly that if I stuck to my game plan and kept my concentration I could beat him. It looked like I was right. I began thumping on him immediately and went up 6-4, 4-1. I felt like I could just grind it out and win the match. And to add to my confidence it looked like Jimmy agreed. His attitude during the second set became completely different from what it usually was. He almost looked like he was clowning around. He got pulled wide on a shot and kept running until he was nearly in the stands. Then he stopped and started kidding with a couple of fans (he took somebody's napkin and blew his nose). The crowd loved it. A little later he got upset with himself and started grabbing his crotch (a move Michael Jackson stole from him). The crowd was thoroughly entertained. Also, it was apparent he was feeling the effects of the cold. He appeared winded at times. Now, at 3-5 in the second set (and down a set) Jimmy is getting ready to serve. He turns to a fan behind him and says loud enough for me to hear, "I've got Gilbert right where I want him." Jimmy's got this big grin on his face. The crowd is laughing and applauding: "Jimbo. Jimbo." And I like it, too. I figure Connors knows he's tired and out of the match and just wants to have a little fun with the audience before it's over. Big mistake. The next time I look up at the scoreboard Connors and Gilbert are tied 5-5. Just like that he had held and broken. He had worked on the crowd and gotten to me; not by creating turmoil, but by going for some laughs and changing the tenor of the match. I couldn't believe he had broken my concentration. He had gotten me watching his antics and believing that he was through for the day, that he was going to lay down. I had lost my focus. It was a shock to realize what had happened. Such a shock that I woke up. I hold and so does Jimmy. Six-all. Tiebreaker. I knew I was in trouble if we went to a third set. The crowd was beginning to be a factor, and if Jimmy took it to three they would definitely become a major asset for him. I reviewed

my game plan: "Keep some balls in play. No pace. Make him try to hit winners. Nothing fancy. Let's win it right here." And I did. Connors let it get away from him even though he led 5-3 at one point during the breaker. Then he made a couple of errors on backhand volleys to even it up at five apiece. My serve. I go for a big serve. Fault. My next serve is a lollipop and Jimmy nets it. He hates junk (remember my service strategy?). On match point we get into a long rally. He hits a deep approach shot to my backhand. I'm ready and just crush it for a winner and the match. The comeback was over, Gilbert 6-4, 7-6 (7-5). Jimbo had almost worked his magic of crowd control to take back the match. This time he failed. As you'll see later, I'm not always so fortunate. Connors is superb at turning things around when he's behind. He stops your momentum in a variety of ways and makes you come out of your game by taking you out of your concentration. He tries to make you play on his terms, not yours. He can do it by joking around with the crowd as he did here. Or, he can use intimidation and rage to take control. At the '87 Masters I recognized what had happened before it was too late. I had gotten ahead by following my pre-game plan and staying focused. When Jimmy successfully got me "unfocused" I was able to get back on course because I had a strong understanding of his tactics. They had been mentally locked in place during the pre-match mental review and planning. I realized it wasn't my strokes that were responsible for his comeback, it was my mind and the fact that it had weakened. Totally Great, Totally Different So, two great players, Becker and Connors, with totally different games, styles, and temperaments. Both require special attention, specific game plans and attitudes that I try to cement in place before I even see them on the day of a match. One capitalizes on my weak second serve. The other doesn't. One orchestrates the crowd. The other doesn't. Becker gets frustrated if the match drags on. Connors loves being out there so much he actually hates to see it end. Boris has a huge first serve and a great second serve. Jimmy has neither. Before I ever see an opponent on the day we play I've completely reviewed our match history, his game, and my plan for the match. I've mentally reviewed exactly what I want to make happen. And I know exactly what I want to prevent from happening. I know where I want to go and how I'm going to get there. Olympic swimmer Nelson Diebold said right after he had won the gold medal in 1992, "Good mental preparation is as important as good physical preparation." It's true in all sports, especially tennis. The process I go through in getting ready for Becker and Connors (or Lendl, Chang, Courier, or any other player) is exactly how you should mentally prepare for your own Beckers and Lendls. If you're smart. Don't think because you play A, B, or C tennis that the advantages don't add up. I believe they add up even more. Here's why. The guys I play are generally sizing me up just like I'm trying to figure them out. They're also masters at not letting me do what I'm trying to do. You don't have that problem. Most of your opponents are mentally lazy before and during the match. Depending on your level of play you may not meet one player a month who seriously considers your game and knows how to exploit it. Plus, their relatively modest level of tennis skill makes them vulnerable to a player who's good at exploiting opportunities. Good early mental preparation is an opportunity waiting to be exploited by you. Be Ready to Play When It's Time to Play In early visualization and planning, your sub-conscious starts to pull in information from other encounters. The brain starts throwing switches and turning dials that program you for that particular player. It's tough to do once the action begins because too much else is going on. You need that mental compass you establish before the match starts as a reliable reference point, one that can get you back on a winning course. Make it a new habit. Your match begins before the match begins, in your car or at your home when you calmly review what you know about the opponent and how you plan to use the information. It takes very little time, but get it done before you arrive. By the time that first point is under way you'll have already "played" your opponent and be into the match. The Importance of Pre-Match Preparation (And a Little Bit of a Hustle) Here's a terrific example (although an extreme one) of the tremendous advantage the average player can get with good pre-match preparation. And of what a disadvantage "just showing up" can be. This particular player at the San Francisco Tennis Club used good mental preparation, good physical preparation, and some gamesmanship against a guy who just showed up and wanted to start playing. Here's what happened. For a big match (and he liked to bet \$100 per set with certain players) this fellow (a bit of a hustler) would get to the court one hour early. He had already spent time looking over his notes (yes, he kept notes of past matches). He had given some attention to his game plan. Next would be the stretching exercises to get completely loosened up. Now would come the warm-up, before his opponent even arrived at the court. The "hustler" would hit with the club pro for thirty minutes, going through the strokes and touching up anything that was giving him trouble that day. Nothing intense. Just a real good warm-up. Then he would leave the court, go to the locker room, and change clothes. So, now that he's reviewed his game plan, checked his notes, done his stretching exercises, had a great warm-up, and

changed into dry clothes, would he head back out to the court? Of course not. It was time for the final stage of the hustle. He'd make sure he got there ten minutes late, apologize for the delay, and suggest that they cut the warm-up short. Obviously, his opponent would be a little upset by the late arrival and want to get started to save time. They'd move right into the match with only a "quickie" warm-up. The "pigeon" would be handing over the money in straight sets. He would have saved himself \$200 if he'd anticipated the behavior and prepared properly himself. He got taken instead. He had no plan, no system, no nothing. He let the other player control events because he wasn't prepared. He'd have been a lousy Boy Scout. The interesting thing about what this "hustler" did was that everything (except arriving intentionally late) was excellent preparation. It's how a conscientious player should get ready to play a match. Throwing in that last twist by arriving late was probably unnecessary (not to mention unsportsmanlike). He was way ahead by doing everything else. You can give yourself that same advantage. Having the "Want" to Win Most recreational players really don't care enough about winning to do much more than show up for the match and chase down some balls during it. Recreational players are usually long on running and short on thinking. That description probably fits many of the people you play. If it does, you're lucky because you can take advantage of their mental laziness to win more often. But only if you care about winning and are willing to push yourself mentally to do it, only if you activate your brain from the "git go." Do it and the early edge is yours, and with it often goes match point. Next: Your mind is ready. Make sure your equipment is. Copyright 1993 by Brad Gilbert and Steve Jamison. Revue de presse 'Winning Ugly explains Brad's formula for a winning tennis game. He understands the mental part of tennis better than anyone I have ever met.' Andre Agassi 'Winning Ugly is a totally new approach to getting more out of your tennis game. I wish it had been around when I was learning to play' Jim Courier