

**TAKE CONTROL:**  
Australian coach Darren Cahill has helped world No.2 Simona Halep improve her resilience under pressure.



# BUILDING Resilience

How can early experiences on court shape resilience? **RYAN HENRY** explains

**A**s a tennis academy director, I see many parents trying to overprotect and at times spoil their children. They may think they are helping, but it can prove a barrier to long-term success.

To be successful in anything in life, you need to develop mental toughness and learn how to handle adversity. Tennis can help build these qualities from an early age, providing a challenging outlet to experience adversity that also promotes opportunities to adapt, grow and become resilient. For example, the lessons from a difficult loss often far outweigh the benefits of winning an easy match. With resilience, players can return stronger after a loss.

A mistake that some parents and coaches make is not

providing enough opportunities to work hard and overcome difficulties. This is likely to lead to the child becoming helpless when they do face adversity during a match. Parents and coaches who operate on the tougher side of the spectrum help develop the ability to overcome difficult situations on the court.

Important steps to develop resilience include:

## BEING INDEPENDENT

It is important for players, especially when they are children, to feel a level of autonomy in their own development. This begins with taking tennis lessons. They should decide to play the game and excel in it because they enjoy it. Parents can encourage this love of the game, but ultimately every child should feel like they are in control of their destiny and have incredible support along the way.

## KNOWING HOW TO PROBLEM SOLVE

Problem solving is an important part of development, as well as learning to make decisions. Letting parents and coaches make all decisions or provide all the answers can promote helplessness. When under pressure in matches, every player has to know how to take responsibility to turn the situation around.

## RESPECTING DISCIPLINE

Clear limits and consequences for poor behaviour serve their purpose. When unable to meet certain standards, parents and coaches should apply appropriate consequences. This reinforces that actions are important and will guide appropriate behaviours and values.

## HAVING POSITIVE ROLE MODELS

Parents and coaches need to be mindful of their influence, as it is their values, work ethic and emotional responses to situations that can shape the way those around them also deal with adversity. Actions speak louder than words, so they should make a conscience effort to be a calm and positive role model.

## BALANCED APPROACH

Players who deal with adversity well typically have a balanced approach to competition.

They build their self-esteem on personal efforts and achievements, rather than a match results focus. Parents and coaches can shape this through communicating unconditional support regardless of a match outcome.

## SEEKING POSITIVE FEEDBACK

Consistent and positive communication towards the player helps increase self-belief, which prompts the enjoyment of facing challenges. Consistent negative and critical feedback promotes self-doubt, self-criticism and attributes that do not build resilient players.

## BEING REALISTIC

High expectations have benefits, as they can help athletes strive for more. However, it can also heighten pressure and lead to disappointment. Striking the right balance in setting realistic expectations is key. If goals are too unobtainable, it weakens mental resolve.

Resilience is an attribute that athletes continue to build throughout their career and life. Experience does shape an individual's responses, especially at an early age, but remember it is never too late to improve this quality. A strong work ethic and never give up attitude are the core elements of a resilient player. **ATM**



**Ryan Henry** is a former professional player and managing director of Voyager Tennis Academy in Sydney, which specialises in the development of elite junior players. He is also a co-author of 'Winning on and off the court - a parent's guide to creating world-class players and people', a book released earlier this year.