

# Embracing the Inner Game

*BTCA member Andy Knibbs outlines the Inner Game approach that will soon be available through the BTCA training programme*

Andy Knibbs is an LTA ICA tennis coach with over 20 years experience and an MSc in Counselling Psychology from the City University, London. He currently coaches at the Esporta club, Northwood, Sarraff Tennis Club, Herts and Townsend Tennis club, St Albans.



Andy began training with Sir John Whitmore and Caroline Harris in 2002 and has found coaching immensely more satisfying since working with the Inner Game approach. He now relishes the opportunity to help others to learn faster and perform at much higher levels.

For 20 years I used a predominantly command and control style of coaching. A typical lesson consisted of a warm up of 5 minutes or so, followed by some analysis of what I had seen and how we might work on this. From there we would go backwards and forwards trying to fix something with the result that nothing seemed to get much better.

In 2002, I attended a series of workshops to learn about the principles of the inner game. (The principles and related articles can be found at [www.innerworkcoaching.org](http://www.innerworkcoaching.org) ) Since that time I have used this skill set in my coaching.

The Inner Game Approach focuses on how we learn, which can have a dramatic

effect on how we teach. This is achieved, as demonstrated in the dialogue below, by remaining player centred and using a process of effective questioning and attentive empathic listening. Effective questions are often open questions that are crucial for finding out what is going on in a player's mind. Using questions that create choice and thus ownership of learning for a player also increases their buy-in and commitment to the task being worked on. Learning and performance can significantly be increased by the use of questions that help a player to narrow their focus of attention and raise their awareness in a non judgemental way.

Below is a typical coaching dialogue. Look out for the subtleties in the questioning process!

C = Coach

P = Player

( ) = Explanation of the intervention used

**C; What would you like to work on today?**

P: I would like to try and improve my forehand. I would like to be able to hit it with more power, topspin and control. (Sometimes when asked, players give a

number of qualities that they would like to improve or work on. However, it is more beneficial for the player to choose one quality at a time to focus on)

**C: What is most important to you at this moment, power, topspin or control?**

(Following the player's agenda and giving them choice)

P: I think topspin is.

**C: Ok, what level of topspin would you say you currently hit on your forehand out of 10, with 10 being the most and 1 being the least.**

(This is checking current reality)

P: Probably about 4-5.

**C: What level would you like to achieve?**

P: I would be happy with about 7 or 8.

**C: Is this realistic given the time we have?**

(In alignment with the SMART goal setting model)

P: Yes, I think so.

**C: Ok, would you like to hit a few topspin forehands and using a scale of 1-10, call out after you hit the ball, the level of topspin you are achieving on each shot.**

(Player then hits a number of shots without any intervention from the coach and rates the level of topspin on their scale, i.e. 4, 6, 4, 5, 8....)

**C: So what made that last shot an 8?**

(The player has rated one of his shots at

the desired level they were after and it is always useful to stop at this point and to ask the question above to help raise their awareness of what happened to achieve this result).

P: I think I used my wrist a lot more.

**C: How did you use your wrist a lot more?**

(Using open questions that directly relate to what the player has just said helps them to further increase their awareness. Open questions typically begin with what, when, where, and how much).

P: I noticed that when my wrist finished here after the shot, that I created a lot more topspin.

**C: Where did it finish?**

(Again, I am following the player's agenda and helping them to raise their awareness further)

P: When it finished here, I got a lot more topspin from the shot?

(The Player is demonstrating physically where his wrist finishes. Important information can be discovered by staying open to non verbal, as well as verbal feedback)

**C: Ok. Would you like to look at where your racquet is finishing on this shot.**

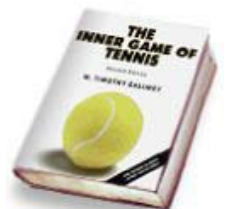
P: OK.

**C: So how about we call this position you are showing me zero. Anything short of this position you could call -1, -2 -3 and anything past this position you could call +1, +2, +3?**

P: Ok let me hit a few.

(It is very important at this stage that the player, having discovered

The book that started it all - The Inner Game of Tennis by Tim Gallwey



this desired position doesn't try to achieve it on every successive shot, but allows himself to swing freely and simply observes after each shot where he finishes. Eventually, what will happen providing he remains focussed and aware, is that he will find his optimal finish position effortlessly. He may even discover that the optimal position is actually slightly different from the one he identified first)

### **C: So, how is this going for you? Would you like to continue looking at your finish position?**

(After a few shots the coach might check in with the player to find out where his attention is. This allows him the choice to either stay with what he is working on or to place his awareness on some other aspect of the shot, or his game. Shifts in attention can also be observed by watching the player's body language)  
P: Yes, it's very interesting! Actually, I am beginning to notice that my legs are helping me to develop a bit of power in the shot now.

### **C: What exactly are you noticing?**

(Here the coach is following the player's new focus of attention, and raising their awareness of a possible change in direction to the session)  
P: Well, when I bend them and then push up during the swing I get more power.

### **C: Which one are you noticing the most, the bending down or pushing up?**

(Helping the player to become aware of where most of his attention is, can often lead to discovering a key factor in their technical improvement)  
P: I think it is more on the pushing up.

### **C: Now, would you like to refocus on the spin or change focus to the power?**

P: I'm happy with the spin at the moment - can we move on to looking at the power?

### **C: Yes of course we can!**

(In the last few interactions, the player has changed his goal from wanting more topspin to wanting more power and by following his agenda and asking awareness raising questions, he is taking ownership for his learning – not the coach! When someone feels responsible for their own learning there is a corresponding increase in self belief – so crucial to increased performance and tournament wins!)

### **C: What is it about the push up that interests you?**

P: I think I am beginning to notice when I push up.

### **C: How far away is the ball from you when you start to push up?**

(Helping the player to raise his awareness by asking him to observe something specific within the general focus)  
P: I am not sure.

### **C: Would you like to hit a few and find out? You could start by noticing how far away each ball is in metres when you start to push up.**

(Encouraging non-judgemental, objective feedback to increase the chances of a discovery)  
P: Yes, ok.

(Other awareness raising questions might be; How much bend feels right for you? – or to find the limits of the range

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of possibility within which it would be possible to experiment; What is the most/least you could bend your legs?)

This process continues with the coach following the player's agenda and discoveries, maintaining focus, raising awareness and periodically checking the direction and outcome goals of the session.

Since incorporating these principles into my coaching, I have noticed a number of significant changes in both learning and performance across all ages and genders of player.

Firstly, I have noticed an increase in motivation to learn, especially with children, which has resulted in faster learning. Secondly, I have noticed an increase in the confidence of players, who previously suffered from self-doubt,

fear and anxiety whilst learning and performing. Thirdly, as a coach I have never enjoyed my coaching as much as I do now. I look forward to and relish the challenge of each lesson. Each lesson is different and each individual is unique. In addition, I feel less stressed than I used to do, because I realise it is not necessary for me to have all the answers in order for my students to learn effectively. But instead, I feel privileged to be able to facilitate another's learning in what often feels like a more natural, fun, compassionate and at times magical process.

*The BTCA will be running Inner Game courses as part of its 2007 IST programme - further details will be released at the end of January.*

*For more articles and information on Inner Works courses please visit [www.innerworkskoaching.com](http://www.innerworkskoaching.com).*

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