

French Open: Djokovic remains Andy Murray's biggest psychological obstacle

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Tennis rivals have come to view Murray as mentally weak. EPA

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As Andy Murray gears up for the French Open, he will do so with more spring in his step than for the last couple of years. Last month he won his first clay-court titles in Munich and Madrid, and on the way defeated Rafael Nadal. Paris is on another level, however.

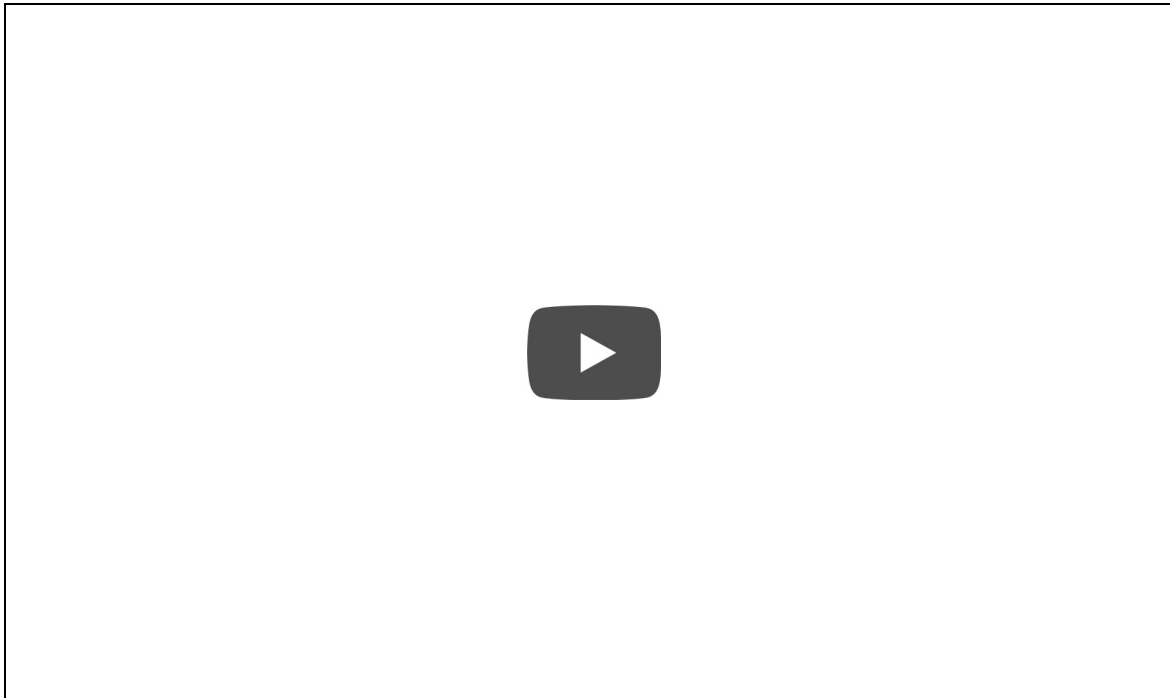
The latter event is one of the four Grand Slam tournaments on the tennis calendar, along with the Australian Open, Wimbledon and the US Open. Winning more minor tournaments is one thing, but now will come questions about whether Murray can win another Grand Slam and whether he can reach the top of the ATP world rankings.

The answers depend in large part on the answer to another question: can Murray find a response to Novak Djokovic? The Serb is the world number one, most recently winning the Italian Open a few days ago as Murray rested himself for Paris. He has beaten the Scot seven times out of seven since losing to him at Wimbledon 2013 – notably in the final of the Australian Open in January. Where once the two men seemed evenly matched, now Djokovic looks to have the upper hand. If Murray is to build on his two Grand Slam victories, breaking this cycle looks absolutely key.

Making sense of Murray

Despite his recent victories, there is widely held view that the main flaw in Murray's game is a mental one. Murray himself highlighted his mental lapses in interviews after his defeat to Djokovic in Australia in January.

One approach to examining mental weakness is to look at toughness. Mental toughness was introduced in the sport psychology literature by Jim Loehr in the late 1980s. After years of academic debate about how it could be defined, a 2002 paper provided both a working definition and a list of 12 characteristics. It argued that the fundamentals of mental toughness are around deep robust confidence, resilience, an ability to filter out distractions and strong intrinsic motivation. To get a clear picture of Murray's situation, I'm going to take each one in turn.



1. Confidence

Murray's game has a deep flaw which every other player knows about. He has the weakest second serve of all the top male players. And Murray's second service in the Melbourne final was timed as slower on average than that of Serena Williams, the women's champion.

The consequences of this slow second serve are twofold. It puts a huge pressure on the first serve, which is often resolved by being risk averse: Murray knows that his first serve must go in. The second consequence is that opponents know that his second service is attackable – in Melbourne, Djokovic won 19 more points on Murray's second serve than the other way around.

In sport psychology, we interpret confidence quite narrowly as the strength of the belief that a specific behaviour can be executed. It boils down to, "what is the strength of my belief that I can execute my

first service at 150km/h to within a few centimetres of the optimal target?" I suspect in Murray's case, this is reasonably high – especially in contrast to, "What is the strength of my belief that I can execute my second service at over 120km/h to within a few centimetres?" Considerably less, I suspect.

To compensate for the lack of threat in his service, Murray has worked on his physical conditioning. His speed and athleticism around the court is comparable to Djokovic. But unfortunately for Murray, Djokovic has another trump card: a return of service so devastating that it is seen as being one of the best ever.

We encourage players to focus on what they are doing rather than become preoccupied with their opponent. However Murray must be conscious that his weakness matches almost exactly Djokovic's strength. It is difficult to believe that he walks on to court to play Djokovic with an unshakeable belief in key parts of his game.



Djokovic celebrates winning the Italian Open in May 2015. EPA

2. Motivation

Andy Murray has shown very high levels of resilience to bounce back after short and long-term setbacks, and also of intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is the extent to which a person is motivated to achieve without the incentive of rewards. He was not content with being the best player in his own country. At an early age, Murray benchmarked himself against the best in the world.

As he became more successful, he recognised it would have been easy to establish himself among the

top players in the world and carve out a comfortable living. But he has appeared unwilling to do this. He continues to work hard on his physical and technical game.

3. Focus

In interviews after the Australian final in January, Murray spoke of being distracted by Djokovic's thigh injury during the second and third sets. Having won the second set on a tie-break, Murray went on to lose the final set 6-0. Even the most naïve spectator could see that Murray's mind was elsewhere from the beginning of the third set. He made many unforced errors and his service was inconsistent.

One would need access to Murray's mind to know exactly what he was thinking. From the visible evidence it appeared that his attention had moved away from executing his skills. My suspicion is that he was second-guessing the type and extent of Djokovic's injury to determine whether he was fit to continue. The loss of focus for just a few points handed the momentum over to his opponent. By the time Murray regained his focus, Djokovic was away.

Murray knew he had been "mugged" and this led to his final set collapse. Had his focus remained on the skills, nothing his opponent was doing would have mattered. He would simply have carried on playing.

Final report

No assessment would be complete without mentioning that after his recent Madrid victory, Murray made headlines by writing on a TV camera that "marriage works" – a reference to his wedding to Kim Sears a couple of weeks earlier. It would lovely to think that this could be making the difference, but the wider evidence is patchy to say the least. It could just as easily be a pleasant coincidence. I certainly wouldn't advise him to rely on it.

From my analysis, the problem for Murray and his support team is that they appear to have a blind spot – an unwillingness or inability to address the main flaws in his game, at the interface between the technique and psychology.

If he is to fulfil his potential as a player, starting with the French Open, his team need to systematically address and eliminate the areas of weakness in his game. These are less critical against players of lower ranking: Murray has the technique and fitness to consistently dominate, hence his position in the world's top three. Against Federer, Nadal and Djokovic the margins are so small that the smallest flaws become accentuated. And in the specific case of Djokovic the match of strengths against weaknesses make it extremely difficult for Murray to



Wedding slammer? Andrew Milligan/PA

succeed.

 **Andy Murray** **French Open** **Novak Djokovic**