

Mental strength triumphs in nail-biting finals

Heroes: Ben Stokes (left) and Novak Djokovic (right) triumphed in tense matches on Sunday.

Are mental powers in sport more exciting than physical skills? Cricketer Ben Stokes and Wimbledon champion Novak Djokovic performed under crushing pressure to seize victories on Sunday.

Sunday 14 July, 7pm.

At Lord's Cricket Ground in north London, the Cricket World Cup final is — unbelievably — tied. England and New Zealand must battle it out in the first-ever **super over** in the **sport's history**.

England batsman **Ben Stokes** has pulled his team back from the brink of defeat. He is exhausted, physically and emotionally, but the expectations of a nation rest on his shoulders.

The pressure is on. He has just six balls to score enough runs to secure England's first-ever cricket World Cup title.

Meanwhile, on the other side of London, at Wimbledon's Centre Court, the longest men's tennis final in the history of the tournament goes to a fifth set **tie-break**.

At last, Novak Djokovic has three championship points to close out this epic battle. But the crowd is cheering the name of his opponent, Roger Federer.

Both men prevail under immense psychological pressure. Later, Djokovic admits the match was the most “mentally demanding” of his career.

“For me, at least, it's a constant battle within, more than what happens outside,” he said. The Serbian player is known to practise meditation and yoga to reach a state of calm.

These mental tricks helped him play his best tennis for almost five hours, despite the majority of the 15,000 crowd backing Federer.

“When the crowd is chanting: ‘Roger’, I hear ‘Novak’,” he explained.

Anna Owen is a sports psychologist who worked closely with the England cricket team.

“It’s a team game, but it’s a sport of individuals.” Cricket, she says, is very unforgiving of individual mistakes.

It wasn’t just Stokes whose composure was tested on Sunday.

There was England bowler Jofra Archer, entrusted with bowling for the deciding super over. It was a huge occasion for a young player, and one which briefly seemed to **overwhelm** him.

Then there was Jason Roy, who fielded the last ball of the game in a mad scramble to stop New Zealand getting the two runs they needed. Any error would have cost his team the World Cup.

Cool as a cucumber

Is the psychological drama the most exciting part of sport? Or is it the sheer skills on display? Sports stars hone their craft through years of training and pushing their bodies to the limit. Surely, it’s the beautiful tennis shots and the **virtuoso** cricket that the crowds truly admire? These incredible displays of athleticism are what make sport spectacular.

But the heart of sport lies in the emotional battles — between the agony and the ecstasy — endured by both fans and players. A true sporting hero must possess the psychological strength to carry immense pressure with the fear of heartbreak, under the gaze of an audience waiting to see who will crumble, and who will rise to the challenge. It’s the life blood of sport.

YOU DECIDE

1. Is cricket or tennis the better sport?
2. Is psychology the most important part of success?

ACTIVITIES

1. Write two news headlines that sum up the drama of the Wimbledon men’s final and the Cricket World Cup Final. Use our links in Become An Expert if you aren’t sure what happened.
2. How do you remain calm when you are stressed? After doing some research, write a one-page leaflet with advice on how to beat stress.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

“Champions aren’t made in the gyms. Champions are made from something they have deep inside them — a desire, a dream, a vision.”

Muhammad Ali, US professional boxer (1942-2016)

What do you think?

Q & A

What do we know?

On Sunday, England beat New Zealand in the final of the Cricket World Cup that saw the competition’s first-ever tied game. Both teams scored 241 runs in the main match. As a result, the winner was decided through a super over. This was tied too, so England won because they scored more fours and sixes over the course of the game. In the same evening, Novak Djokovic beat Roger Federer to claim his fifth Wimbledon title. The fifth set was tied 12-12, so it went to a tie-breaker, which was won by Djokovic.

What do we not know?

If the focus on psychology in sports is linked to the wider, more open discussion about mental health. Not long ago, it was rare to find sports psychologists in the changing room. Now, though, it is accepted that psychology is key to sporting success.

WORD WATCH

Super over

When a game of cricket is tied, teams play a super over. Like a normal over, a super over comprises six balls. The team who scores the most runs from the six balls is the winner. If the super over is tied, the team who scored the most fours and sixes over the course of the game wins (in this case, England).

Sport’s history

A super over has never taken place in One Day International cricket before.

Ben Stokes

This was a moment of redemption for Stokes who, in 2017, was arrested for fighting outside a night club. It led to his suspension from the England team, but he was reinstated after he was found not guilty of affray (fighting in a public place and disturbing the peace).

Tie-break

Fifth set tie breaks were only introduced at Wimbledon this year.

Overwhelm

Archer bowled a wide (it went too far wide of the wicket) with the first ball, giving New Zealand an extra ball and a free run, which made it look likely to win after batting a six. But Archer pulled back the win with the last few bowls.

Virtuoso

A person highly skilled in a particular area, usually music.

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