

# How mindfulness became Konta's secret weapon

**Konta me out:** Britain's best female player lost to Venus Williams in a mere 73 minutes. © Getty

Johanna Konta has been knocked out of Wimbledon. But she played very well the past two weeks — a fact that many put down to her calm on the court. How important is mental training in sport?

Johanna Konta is, generally speaking, a bad sport. She gets horribly competitive and does not like losing. In one very heated childhood game of Monopoly, she made her big sister cry.

Which makes her poise on the tennis court all the more remarkable. Throughout this year's Wimbledon, people have remarked on Konta's exceptional calm during tough matches, several of which she almost lost.

Although she was defeated by **Venus Williams** in yesterday's semi-final, she still got further in the tournament than any **British female player** since 1978. Many have put her brilliant run down to her mental strength.

It was not always so. Yesterday, a retired player revealed that before playing Konta in 2009, she wrote in her pre-match notes that her opponent had a "weak mentality". Konta admits that she used to struggle with on-court anxiety. That changed in 2014, when she began to work with sports psychologist Juan Coto.

Konta says that Coto helped give her "better perspective [and] trust in my own abilities". She learned to practice **mindfulness**; one coach compared her to Buddha. Her world ranking promptly shot up from 150-odd to the top 10. Even after Coto's suicide last year, the player has continued to put his ideas into practice.

The field of **sports psychology** has grown rapidly in recent decades. Increasingly, athletes turn to experts for advice on how to stay mentally tough. Tried-and-tested techniques include breathing exercises, sticking to **routines**, focusing on factors that the player can control, and “positive self-talk” (e.g. telling yourself to “keep it up” between points).

Some athletes take these tactics to extremes. Swimmer **Michael Phelps** listens to music until minutes before he enters the pool. Before taking a run-up, high jumper Blanka Vlašić psychs herself up by clapping her hands rhythmically above her head.

She may be out of Wimbledon, but Konta is now firmly in Britons’ hearts. Her attitude could take her far. In sports, is mind more important than body?

## Never mind

Don’t get carried away, say some. Not all top athletes are mentally strong — angry outbursts are common in all sports. But they are all physically outstanding. And when their body turns on them, there is nothing they can do. Look at how Andy Murray and Novak Djokovic, two of the world’s best tennis players, limped out of Wimbledon this week.

Perhaps, reply others. But a positive state of mind is what separates the geniuses from the merely talented. It is what gives them the drive to keep playing. Roger Federer confesses that he was “a crazy maniac” as a junior. He got psychological coaching and became the best tennis player in history. All athletes can learn from his example.

## YOU DECIDE

1. Who is the greatest athlete of all time, and why?
2. Should we all be patriotic about sports?

## ACTIVITIES

1. Imagine you are interviewing Konta immediately after her defeat. Come up with five questions for her.
2. Practise one of the mental exercises mentioned in this article for a month, keeping a journal of your progress. Did it have an effect?

## SOME PEOPLE SAY...

“The best cure for the body is a quiet mind.”

What do you think?

## Q & A

What do we know?

All competitive sports are tough, but in many ways tennis is especially demanding. There is no fixed time limit to a match; a men's game can run to five hours, a women's to three. The players are alone. They have to run *a lot*. Moreover, there are frequent breaks throughout the match, which can disrupt a weaker player's concentration.

### **What do we not know?**

What the future has in store for Konta. She is 26 — relatively young for a tennis player (Williams is 37!). She is soon to be ranked in the world top five. Until this year, she had only reached the second round at Wimbledon, which suggests that she is improving rapidly. That said, Williams defeated her easily, exposing flaws in her game. "It's going to take a long time to get over this," as *BBC* presenter Sue Barker put it.

## WORD WATCH

### **Venus Williams**

At 37, the American is the oldest player to reach a Wimbledon women's singles final since Martina Navratilova in 1994. She has also designed her own fashion line, EleVen — Konta used to buy leggings from it!

### **British female player**

Born and raised in Australia to Hungarian parents, Konta moved to the UK when she was 14. She became a British citizen in 2012.

### **Mindfulness**

The process of focusing one's mind on the present moment through meditation. It is a key part of Buddhism, but has recently become very popular as a non-religious therapeutic technique in its own right.

### **Sports psychology**

Often sports psychologists also work with people in business, as Coto did. As they observe, success in business and in sport requires many of the same attributes.

### **Routines**

Many players have on-court rituals: Raphael Nadal always touches his face in the same way before a rally. Routines can also keep players grounded off-court: Konta tends to eat the same thing for breakfast every day.

### **Michael Phelps**

With a whopping 28 medals, Phelps is the most successful Olympian of all time.

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