

## MATCH POINT: DON'T PANIC, JUST HIT THE BALL

by KATHLEEN J. WU

**B**all. Hit. These two words, when accompanied by the adrenaline rush of a competitive tennis match, can help the player focus on the task at hand.

With Grand Slam tennis season under way, I'm spending a lot of time watching and thinking about tennis. I'm always in awe of a player who can shut out the chatter, the coach's reminders and the opponent's psych-out games and just focus on hitting the ball.

I know of competitive tennis players who use these two words to great effect. They can be remarkably soothing as a mantra and invaluable as a tool to get the player back to basics in the midst of an incredibly competitive environment.

I can't say whether Roger Federer's or Maria Sharapova's incredible comebacks at the French Open can be attributed to that mantra, but the two of them obviously possess awe-inspiring mental focus when it comes to connecting their racquets with those tiny, rocket-fast yellow orbs.

I try to bring that same back-to-basics mentality to my job these days. With everyone feeling anxious — about their jobs, their spouses' jobs or whether they will have to lay off employees — it's difficult to ignore the panic and just do the job.

But just as a tennis player can't control what's going on around him when he's playing, most lawyers have little or no control over whether their firms lay them off. What they can control, though, is how they hit the ball. That may be drafting a document, performing due diligence or divining the applicability of OSHA's

Multi-Employer Citation Policy, but it's all about hitting the ball, putting those years of training and late nights at the library to good use. It's the lawyer equivalent of muscle memory.

When getting back to basics, it's helpful to remember the three Ts of lawyering:

- *Take care of your clients.* In the purest sense, this means the consultation made the clients better off — hopefully much better off — by saving them money, time or both; making a problem go away; or opening avenues of opportunity.

This maxim applies to attorneys not working directly with clients. For associates, the partners they work for effectively are the clients. The same rules apply. Make their lives easier. Anticipate problems and find solutions. Be the lawyer colleagues turn to at the bottom of the ninth inning.

Associates working on a project should understand the big picture, not just their own little part of it. If it's a deal, they should know its structure well enough to pass a test on it. Also, their finished product should give the client all necessary information from all possible sources and anticipate what the client wants next.

- *Take care of your employer.* This can mean serving on firm committees, mentoring new associates, spreading optimism, being productive, getting good publicity for the firm — the options are endless.

It reminds me of Dear Abby's advice that women pondering divorce should ask themselves if they're better off with or without their husbands. In the unfortunate event that a lawyer's firm is pondering layoffs, management essentially will ask that question about all lawyers and staff. If any readers even

suspect their firms might be better off without them, now is the time to make a course correction.

It's also important to be plugged into what the firm values. That may be civic involvement, serving on boards, supporting particular charities or providing pro bono legal services. Most firms have their own unique way of giving back. Learning what that is and getting on board with it can go a long way toward securing a lawyer's place at the table.

- *Take care of yourself.* Taking care of others is the price of entry for great lawyers, but ensuring one's own success requires occasional self-promotion. One of my favorite sayings is, "There is no 'I' in team, but there is an 'M' and an 'E.'" It's important to make others look good, particularly the boss. But lawyers do themselves a disservice if nobody knows they had anything to do with writing that brilliant brief or laying the groundwork for that massive deal.

Without being a blowhard, lawyers should make sure their colleagues and supervisors know the role they have played in firm successes. How? Be visible. Speak up in meetings. Seize every opportunity to get in front of clients. Go out to lunch with co-workers.

In this economy, there are no guarantees. But since you can't control the world around you, focus on what you can control. Keep it simple.

Ball. Hit. Ball. Hit.



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