

I'm the Tight Competitor.

Why do I look free in practice but stiff in competition?

You're not suddenly a different player when the match starts.

That is the first thing to understand.

You are not one person in practice and another person in competition, though it may feel that way. In practice, you move easily. Your hands are softer. Your feet are lighter. Your dinks have touch. Your serves have rhythm. Your resets happen without a family conference in your head.

Then the match starts.

Now the same shot feels different.

The paddle feels a little less friendly.

The ball seems to arrive sooner.

The court gets smaller and bigger at the same time, which is one of pickleball's little magic tricks.

You start guiding shots you normally release. You protect the serve instead of swinging through it. You steer the dink instead of feeling it. You punch the volley instead of letting the paddle meet the ball. You become careful, and careful is often the doorway to tight.

But you have not lost your skill.

“ You are the same player with less freedom.”

What's really going on?

In practice, your body is allowed to play.

In competition, your mind starts managing.

In practice, the ball is just the ball. You see it, move to it, hit it, recover, and go again. Mistakes do not weigh as much. You miss a dink, and the world does not hold a press conference. You hit a bad return, and nobody updates your permanent record.

So the body stays freer.



It has access to rhythm, timing, balance, feel, and adjustment.

But in competition, the stakes change. Now the opponent becomes more important. The score becomes louder. Your partner's mood becomes a weather system. The point begins to mean something beyond the point itself.

Now a missed dink is not just a missed dink.

It becomes evidence.

- Maybe I'm not playing well.
- Maybe they're better than I thought.
- Maybe my partner is getting annoyed.
- Maybe we're going to lose this game.
- Maybe I'm choking again.

This is where the trouble begins.

The mind moves out of the present and into consequence. Instead of playing the ball that is actually coming, you begin playing the meaning of the ball. You are not just hitting a third-shot drop. You are trying to protect your image, your lead, your confidence, your partner's approval, and your private belief that you are a reasonably competent human being with hand-eye coordination.

"That is a lot to load onto one poor little perforated ball."

In Fluid Motion Factor terms, your prefrontal cortex jumps online. The brain's bossy CEO enters the court wearing a whistle and carrying a clipboard.

It starts managing.

- Be careful.
- Don't miss.
- Keep it low.
- Don't give them an attackable ball.
- Don't waste this serve.
- Don't lose this lead.
- Show them you can play.
- Make sure nothing bad happens.

That "extra effort" feels responsible. It feels like focus. It feels like competitiveness. It feels like you are rising to the moment.

But often, it is the thing that blocks you from rising.

The conscious mind is trying to prevent mistakes by supervising the body. But the body does not usually play better when it is being supervised shot by shot. It plays better when it

has clean access to the skills it already owns.

So the clean flow from mind to body gets interrupted.

●
Tighter paddle

●
Heavier feet

●
Guided shots

The swing gets shorter in the wrong way. The dink gets guided. The serve gets protected. The return gets pushed. The volley gets poked. The reset gets stabbed at.

You become a player trying not to lose instead of a player allowing the body to play.

That is the difference between practice freedom and competition tightness.

You do not lose your skill.

“ *You lose access to it.* ”

What am I misunderstanding?

Your misunderstanding is this:

You think your main goal is to beat the opponent.

Of course you want to win.

That is not a problem.

Competition includes winning. Nobody enters a tournament hoping to provide the other team with a moving personal-development experience. You want the point. You want the game. You want the match. That is natural.

But you do not need to keep reminding your nervous system that winning would be lovely. It already knows.

In Fluid Motion Factor language, winning is the DNA goal. It is built into the game. It is already part of why you are there. You do not have to consciously carry it into every shot like a suitcase full of bricks.

“The deeper goal, the goal that actually helps your body play well, is freedom.”

That may sound strange at first because competition seems to be about the opponent. The opponent is across the net. The opponent is trying to beat you. The opponent has patterns,



strengths, weaknesses, speed-ups, lobs, drops, drives, and that one irritating shot they hit with an expression suggesting they have discovered indoor plumbing before you.

So yes, tactically, the opponent matters.

But mentally, if you make the opponent the center of your experience, you give them too much power.

You create an invisible cord to them.

Now your attention is attached to what they might do, what they think, how good they look, whether they are attacking you, whether they respect your game, whether they can sense you are tight, whether they are about to exploit your backhand, whether they are judging your last miss.

Now you are no longer fully on your side of the net.

You are mentally living over there.

And when you mentally live over there, your own body becomes a rented room.

- You stop feeling your feet.
- You stop feeling your paddle.
- You stop seeing the ball cleanly.
- You stop playing from your own center.

That is why the opponent can become too important. Not because tactics are irrelevant, but because your nervous system begins treating the opponent as the source of the game.

They are not.

The ball is the immediate source of the game.

Your body is the instrument.

Freedom is the access point.

When you think your main goal is to beat the opponent, your mind often tries to control the outcome. It starts chasing the finish line. It starts protecting against embarrassment. It starts making the match heavier than it needs to be.

But when your deeper goal is freedom, you are trying to preserve the condition that lets you play your best.

You are not ignoring the opponent.

You are putting them in the right place.

“ They get to be in the game. They do not get to be in charge of your inner universe.

What's your one key correction?

Make the opponent disappear.

Not tactically.

Mentally.

You still notice where they are. You still notice if one player has a weaker backhand. You still notice if they are crowding the middle, hanging back, speeding up too early, or leaving space behind them. You still play smart pickleball.

But you stop making them the star of the show.

You stop letting your attention plug into them like an electrical cord.

You stop asking, point after point:

- What are they going to do?
- Are they better than me?
- Do they think I'm weak?
- Are they targeting me?
- What if I miss against them?

Instead, you return to your own side of the net.

●
Feet

●
Paddle

●
Breath

Your eyes.

This ball.

That is where freedom begins.

Before the next point, do not try to pump yourself up. Do not give yourself a motivational speech. Do not order your body to be brave, tough, gritty, fearless, or any of the other noble words that often make a nervous player even tighter.

Do something simpler.



- Soften your eyes.
- Feel your feet.
- Let your shoulders drop.
- Feel the paddle in your hand.
- Acknowledge the ball.
- Let the body play from your side of the net.

YOUR CUE



My goal is freedom.

Not panic. Not proof. Not protection.
Freedom is the access point.

That cue changes the whole assignment.

You are no longer trying to prove yourself.

You are no longer trying to defeat the person across the net before the ball is even in play.

You are no longer trying to drag the match to the correct ending.

You are simply trying to stay free enough to play the next ball.

That is not passive.

That is not weak.

That is not surrender.

It is the most practical competitive goal you can choose, because freedom is what gives you access to your timing, feel, touch, movement, and decision-making.

When you lose freedom, your game shrinks.

When you keep freedom, your game has room to appear.

So the next time competition begins and you feel yourself tightening, remember:

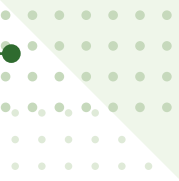
You are not trying to become a different player.

You are trying to give the player you already are enough freedom to show up.

The opponent can stand across the net.

The score can sit on the scoreboard.

The match can matter.



But inside your own little pickleball universe, the goal is freedom.

Not panic.

Not proof.

Not protection.

Freedom.

“ That is where your best game can breathe.

