



editorial

Welcome to issue 27 of the ITF Coaching & Sport Science Review – the second issue of 2002.

In continuing with our commitment to one monographic issue of ITF Coaching & Sport Science Review each year, issue 27 is dedicated to the tactics of elite level singles play. We have asked some of the world's foremost professional tennis coaches as well as renowned national coaches to contribute to this issue in an effort to provide an insight into the strategies and tactics used in the modern professional game. In piecing together this information we hope that both tennis coaches and players find it of interest and to the benefit of their coaching, training and/or playing of tennis. The contributors, to whom we would like to extend our warmest thanks, are:

- Ivo Van Aken (Belgian Fed Cup Coach and Technical Director of Flemish League of Belgian Tennis Federation).
- Darren Cahill (Former top 25 player, Coach of Andre Agassi and former Coach of Lleyton Hewitt).
- Sven Groeneveld (Coach of Greg Rusedski and former Coach of Tommy Haas, Mary Pierce, Michael Stich and Monica Seles).
- Tom Gullikson (former US Davis Cup Captain and Director of Coaching for USA Tennis Player Development of the USTA, former Coach of Pete Sampras).
- Antonio Martinez (Coach of Juan Carlos Ferrero).
- Doug MacCurdy (Former Director of USA Tennis Player Development for the USTA).
- Bernard Pestre (Director of Training and Education Department of the French Federation).
- Craig Tiley (Coach of Wayne Ferreira and former South African Davis Cup Coach).

The ITF Tennis Development Department can also confirm the dates for this year's ITF Regional coaches workshops. These workshops play an important role in the ITF's Coach Education Programme as they provide coaches in these regions with access to the latest coaching information. The dates and venues for these Workshops are as follows:

- The ITF Central American & Caribbean Workshop will be held in Fort Lauderdale, USA from 9 - 15 September.
- The Tennis Europe Coaches Symposium will be held in Val do Lobo, Portugal from 12-17 October.
- The ITF Asian Coaches Workshops - There will be two Regional Workshops in Asia. One in Dubai, UAE from 14 - 19 October and the other in Beijing, China from 20 - 25 October.
- The ITF South American Coaches Workshop will be held in Rosario, Argentina from 10 - 16 November.



- The ITF East & Southern African Coaches Workshop will be held in Pretoria, South Africa from 25 - 30 November, and the ITF West & Central African Regional Workshop will be held in Abidjan, Ivory Coast from 30 November - 5 December.

Finally, we would like to take this opportunity to report that according to our latest figures, edition 25 of the Review recorded 17,500 hits in the "Coaches News" section of the ITF website, www.itftennis.com. We hope that you continue to use this medium in the pursuit of this coaching information.

We hope you enjoy our 27th issue.

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Modern Tactics: An Introduction

By Miguel Crespo and Machar Reid (Tennis Development Department, ITF)

Coaches and players will agree that tactics play a predominant role in tennis at all levels and that the improvements made in one's strategic and tactical prowess are essential for optimal tennis player development.

At beginner and intermediate levels, new teaching methodologies (the so called games based approach or teaching for understanding) place a great emphasis on the importance of understanding the game (the strategic and tactical aspects) prior to actually hitting balls.

These new teaching methods better help the players to discover how the game is played. They focus on introducing basic tactical concepts that are used at all levels of match play and which, when learned serve to provide the foundation for a complete game style:

- **Game situations:** Serve, return of serve, playing from the baseline, approaching and playing at the net, and playing against the net player.
- **Phases of play:** Attacking, neutral, defending.

- **Tactical options:** Hitting the ball over the net and inside the court, moving the opponent, playing to the opponent's weaknesses, using your best weapon, etc.

- **Game styles:** All round player, aggressive baseliner, serve and volleyer, and counter puncher.

At the advanced level there are several aspects that differentiate the modern game, and the tactics used, from that of the past. Players are stronger, taller, fitter, and faster. Rackets, courtesy of continued technological advancement, are becoming increasingly efficient. More aggressive use of the body (and court) has led to more powerful strokes, which in turn has made the game faster and reduced the amount of time players have to make decisions and prepare for the next shot. All of these factors have had a significant impact on the way the modern game is played and the characteristics of advanced modern tactics can be best summarised as follows:

- **Power used as a tactical weapon:** Power is being increasingly referred

to as the name of the game. Cannon ball serves, attacking returns, killer forehands, winning approach shots, and drive volleys are common among today's game.

- **Faster decision making:** Players need to decide what to do with the ball in less and less time. The options available are determined by the knowledge and the skill of the player as well as the characteristics of the situation and the opponent.
- **Use of best shots:** Usually the serve and the forehand. Players generally base their game around these two strengths although the backhand is also being used very aggressively by a growing number of players.

- **Lack of specialist game styles:** Players compete on various surfaces and in various conditions year round. This obliges them to develop more of an "all round" game. Agassi, who has won all four Grand Slams, is perhaps the best and most prominent example of a player who has achieved this well. Pure specialists such as serve and volleyers are becoming less common (Sampras, Rusedski, Henman), while clay courters (Kurtzman, Corretja, Moya, Ferrero) are needing to quickly become accustomed to playing on faster courts.

In this issue of ITF Coaching & Sport Science Review we have asked some of the world's leading tennis coaches to commentate on the tactics of the modern professional game. Their views reflect how tennis is currently played and the principles they allude to should be used by coaches to best advance the development of their tennis players.



Tactics of the Baseline Player

By Darren Cabill (Australia)

What type of player do you coach?

It's the first and most important question to ask yourself not only when you take on a new role but constantly over the course of your partnership with your player. It's only when you fully understand the answer to that question that you can start to develop a plan of strategy that targets both training and match play. That answer should never be as simple or general as "well, my player's an attacker, he plays serve and volley" or "I coach a baseliner". It's about establishing the potential for and limit of future growth in your player.

- Is the player talented and utilizing all aspects of his game?
- Is the player talented but chooses for one reason or another to not tap his full potential?
- Is he talented but actually doesn't realize the capabilities that lie within his game?
- Or maybe you have a player for which nothing comes easy but who possesses an incredible work ethic.

Then you can start to push it further by determining exactly what it is the player is trying to accomplish through the way he plays, his shot selection, his presence and weight of shot against varying styles and court surfaces, his mental approach to the game, his self belief, long term goals, ability to analyze opponents and adapt in match situations, and so on.

While no two players are the same there are always similarities that float on the surface with many that play a similar style of game. Lets look at a baseliner that predominantly plays from the back of the court in the mould of Michael Chang, Lleyton Hewitt and Mats Wilander.

Some characteristics that these players have are speed, strength of mind, endurance, lack of baseline weakness, strong passing shots and a good return of serve. Utilizing their speed around the court is crucial to this type of player's success as it opens up numerous advantages. It allows the player to play a high percentage style of tennis characterized by good clearance over the net, good depth of

shot and a low unforced error count that forces his opponent into taking risks.

But speed alone is not enough in today's game to guarantee success at a high level. Players have the capabilities to hit the ball harder and finish the point quicker so it is imperative for the growth and longevity of a speedster to develop weapons of his own that can see him on the offensive during baseline rallies.

BASELINE PLAY

Does your opponent...?

- Have a strength on the forehand or backhand
- Protect his weakness by playing from the backhand court and looking for forehands
- Do you need to go to the strength to open up the weakness
- Can he be pushed back into a defensive position during baseline rallies and how
- Is he comfortable moving forward to a no pace ball
- Will he drop back when given a high and heavy ball or will he stand up and play aggressive
- Can his speed around the court be exposed
- Will he move forward to the net when given the opportunity or will he back up
- Does he have a defensive game when stretched

These are just some of the questions that need to be assessed when determining a game plan for your player.

Two players standing toe to toe trading heavy groundstrokes is always an entertaining match-up. The player that is a little slower around the court is always looking to control the rallies, being more aggressive forcing his quicker opponent to cover more court. The quicker player may be doing more running but invariably is taking fewer risks. He also is searching for that opportunity to step up take control of the point which will expose his opponent's lack of speed and force

him to execute a low percentage shot.

The great baseliners will not relinquish control of a point. Once they assert themselves in a baseline rally and fire that first penetrating shot, they step up on or inside the baseline and work their opponent until it's time for the "kill" shot.

Against a player that is searching for that opportunity to attack the net, things take on a different perspective. Your opponent is looking for that first short ball and will take his chance. Depending on the proficiency of his net game, he will either go for the big shot in an effort to hit a winner or at the very least force an error, or work the ball deep and establish a strong net position.

Keeping good depth and hitting a heavy ball is vital to pinning your opponent on the baseline. Don't air on the side of caution though. An easy trap to fall into is to play it safe when in a baseline rally expecting your less comfortable opponent to miss. Quite often, the opposite can happen! The baseline rallies that you should be dominating become hard work because your level of play and intensity has decreased. In actual fact, you've lowered the standard of your own baseline game and dragged your opponent into the points, potentially giving him more short balls to look at. Don't back off! When he's pinned on the baseline, you have him where you want him most and where he's least damaging, so dominate these rallies which will in turn send a strong message about who is the better player from the back of the court.

SERVE & RETURN

The three W's always apply here. Is it a weapon, a weakness or is it wasted?

A player who is 5'9" is potentially never going to serve as well as someone who is 6'3". So what is he trying to accomplish?

Firstly, improve your second serve! It's the most important shot in the book and opens up a world of options on your first serve if you have the knowledge that your second serve is strong and difficult to attack. It needs



a combination of variation, accuracy, consistency and pace to be effective over the long term. A great deal of baseliners will step up to the plate and simply bomb their first serve looking for a cheap point. That in itself is fine, but so often wasted. The first serve is an opportunity for you to control the point from the outset with direction and pace depending on your opponent's strengths and weaknesses while still allowing you the chance for a free point.

When playing a net rusher in the mould of Pat Rafter or Pete Sampras, the first serve percentage becomes a much more important statistic. These players are looking at second serves as a way to attack the net and don't mind giving up a few free points if their opponent continually bombs the first serve as they know that it's hard to serve this way at a high percentage. Serving with a little more spin, taking a small amount of speed off the ball will allow the player to serve at a higher percentage giving the net

rusher fewer looks at a second serve.

Do some work on your opponent's return of serve. Is he stronger off the forehand or backhand side or maybe one wing is more consistent but not as threatening as the other and presents a chance for you to control the point from the outset? Look at the player's grip when returning. Quite often the receiver will change grips as the server tosses the ball up. Is the use of an extreme grip making it difficult to return off a particular side?

Where does he stand to return both serves and is he opening up the angles by drifting too far back? Alternatively the body serve may be more effective against a player that is stepping in and taking a big swing.

The serve is the first shot played in every point. Don't waste it by just using it as a way to start off a rally.

NET PLAY

Over recent years this part of the game seems to have been increasingly neglected with very few players feeling comfortable around the net. This is in spite of the fact that life can be made much easier for most baseliners if they venture to the net occasionally to knock off the easy volley.

When an opponent is stretched and out of court, players' should take away their defensive options by moving forward and forcing them to make something happen. It doesn't have to happen much! If your opponent knows that you are willing to come into the net, this will create a greater level of uncertainty with respect to what you are doing whenever he is on the defensive. No longer can he just expect to push the ball back deep and grind his way back into the rally. Rather he may think it necessary to execute a big passing shot close to the line, which in itself will bring about a larger number of errors.

Practice and drill the volley

- Don't try and generate pace but use the pace given to you
- Small swings
- Long and quick strides when approaching to get to a strong net position
- Split step at point of impact of your opponent's passing shot so you can react in either direction
- Use the dropshot and the angles of the court
- Volley out in front and bend the knees for anything low.

In a perfect world, the players who feel more comfortable at the back of the court should always be coming in on their terms. If they find they are playing a high percentage of low volleys it could mean a few things: they are

- Coming in on the wrong ball and their opponent is set for the passing shot
- Hesitating or second guessing themselves
- Not exploding forward like a sprinter but just making a casual move
- Not taking those extra two or three steps forward to catch the ball before it drops below the height of the net
- Or, being brought forward by their opponent with the use of the dropshot or short ball

Improve the net game and all of a sudden the good two-dimensional player has added another dimension to his game and something else for his opponents to consider.

The net game may never become a weapon but it can absolutely become an option when encountering certain match-ups, and this is not even to mention the benefits that will be realized on a variety of different surfaces.

The Net Rusher and Serve Volleyer - A Dying Breed or Big Point Opportunists?

By Sven Groeneveld (The Netherlands)

INTRODUCTION

One should ask the question: "is The Net Rusher and Serve Volleyer a dying breed or simply a player that creates opportunities on the big points"? In

my opinion it is both!

"**A dying breed**" – Over the years the game has changed, yet, not one factor in particular can be blamed or highlighted as the reason for the

effective destruction of "The Net Rusher and Serve Volleyer". Factors such as the reality that three of the four Grand Slams were previously played on grass, the development of space

age technology for rackets and strings, tennis-balls that appear to be constantly altered in size and weight, large sums of money that have attracted more players to the game and advancements in science and technology that have facilitated these players in becoming better overall athletes have all played their role. More and better competition is the result and the subsequent schedule that is forced upon the players is tough. Players experience more injuries (despite improved injury prevention) and are forced into earlier retirement. Only a very select few can survive with this type of game but the question remains, for how long?

“Big point opportunist” – This is the present and future of tennis that we as coaches and players should all focus on. I believe we will continue to see more and more players develop an all round game. Yet, to best develop as a player, you will need to learn how and when to rush the net and to use the serve and volley as a change up.

Below, you will find several different on court situations that you can create as a Net Rusher and Serve Volleyer (in my eyes an opportunist) against two types of players.

CREATING THE OPPORTUNITY

The Opportunist will not be intimidated by any situation that he or she will be faced with on court. Opportunity is always around the corner. That is, **the element of surprise, taking away time** from their opponent, **reducing angles** that can be used against them, **conserving energy** after a long point, taking a player out of their **comfort zone** and **intimidating** (with their game!) are all net rushing/serve and volley strategies and tactics that create opportunities. In using opponents with two different styles of play as examples, the Counter Puncher and the Aggressive Baseline/Good Returner, you will see how you can benefit from both rushing the net and serve and volley tactics.

THE COUNTER PUNCHER

First of all what is a “counter puncher”? A counter puncher is a player that will use the angles and the speed of the ball that their opponent creates. The counter puncher is the one player that is most difficult to surprise since they have a very large comfort zone. The counter puncher wants you to give them speed and angles so they can use

the element of surprise in their favor. They are not known for their creativity but more for their reactivity. Both rushing the net and serving and volleying forces them into a situation in which they have to create instead of react.

Against the counter puncher however, rather than asking when the serve and volley tactic should be used, it is more pertinent to question what type of serve should be used in order to follow it up to the net.

Since the element of surprise and speed are not factors that trouble the counter puncher, the type of serve used becomes critically important.

What type of serve?

- **Speed** should only be used if the placement of the serve is into the body of the counter puncher.
- The body serve is the **percentage** serve. First, determine the weaker side of the player and pick which side you are going to. Yes side! Some of the very best body serves are those that curl into either the right or left hip of the player. Hereby you can decide to which side the player will move to hit the return and therefore provide him with **less angle**. Obviously, you would prefer them to move to the sideline to hit their return thereby creating an open court or allowing you to play behind them when they try to recover.
- Kick serves: to give yourself more **time** to get into the net and give them **less speed and angle** to work with.
- Slice serve: although it is a harder serve to come into the net on, it can still be effective. Especially when **time is taken away** from the counter puncher and they are forced **to create**.
- Your best serve, come in after it to save energy after a long point, first serve down the T, to give them less angle to work with.

Now, the next question is how to “rush the net”? Rushing the net can be done within the rally or with a return of serve. When, and how, is it most effective to rush the net against the counter puncher?

Within the rally

- Since the counter puncher likes speed and angles, and have larger comfort zones, we have to look to rush the net down the center of the court. The shot should not be hit

with pace but with great placement. Foot speed should bring you close into the net, before the ball reaches the baseline at the counter puncher’s side. This will give you the upper hand, however, do not forget that the counter puncher has good hands and might surprise you with a lob. At least you have forced them to create something and that is not what they like or do best.

Return of serve

- It is more than likely that the counter puncher is a percentage player and not much difference lies between their first and second serves. However, to create a higher percentage play, look to take the second serve return very early, taking away time from the counter puncher. Also place it down the center with depth to provide them less angle to work with.
- Although they have a larger comfort zone you can still force them out of it. You can create an element of surprise by dropping the second serve return short and following it up to the net. This forces them to create a different shot and while it may be a lower percentage play, it does represent a great opportunity to make the counter puncher think.

THE AGGRESSIVE BASELINER AND GOOD RETURNER

The definition of this type of player is self-explanatory. The player has a very aggressive backcourt game that forces their opponents into defensive situations and exerts added pressure as points continue. This pressure is not only evident in your return game but also applies to your service game as this type of player has a very strong return of serve. So, how do we use and benefit from rushing the net and still use the serve volley game to create opportunities?

Since this player has a very good return, the element of surprise is a factor that should be used in the game plan. In doing so, we should focus on **when** we should use serve and volley as a tactic to create opportunity. In general these players that have a good return are even better when they are given a target. This emphasizes the importance of timing when to follow your serve up to the net.

When to Serve and Volley

- As these players love to be in control of the point from the time



the first ball is hit, you have to force them out of their zone and into a defensive position. By sensibly picking your time to serve and volley you can create an element of surprise and intimidate them with your tactics. The most crucial moments are those when the game appears to be slipping out of your hand. On scores like 0-30, 15-30 and deuce, when a potential break point is on the line consider using the serve and volley as way to get out of this situation. However, when you decide to do so, make sure you are hitting your best serve and go for the easy volley. Even the best returners in the game do not like to be pressured, challenged or forced with less time to set up for their favored shot.

- On your second serve look to go wide on the deuce side and to the T on the ad side. As you are playing against a good returner and aggressive baseliner you have to take into consideration that they will be looking to hit their inside out forehand as often as possible. (In the case of a lefty, the opposite applies.)

When to Rush the Net

Obviously the Aggressive Baseliner likes to start the point with a high percentage serve and then force you into defense with their groundstrokes. Rushing the net on their serve can be most effective. This can be done on both a first and second serve. The element of surprise and tactical intimidation can force them to press more on their first service, resulting in a lower first serve percentage and maybe even some double faults. Also,

by rushing the net in this way they have less time to set up, which may in turn force them to go for a different or more risky shot.

Rushing the net from the back of the court can also be performed through counter-attacking one of their baseline power shots or taking a larger swing at (and more risk on) their second serves. This will force a shorter ball for you to come in on.

1. Rush net with the return of serve.
 - On a first serve, try to pick your time (as mentioned earlier when a breakpoint is on the line). Against a right hander on the ad side, look to rush the net when they go for the T. Try to block it short, down-the-line (their body weight will be leaning to their left) to take away time, to force them to cover a larger distance and to create your own angle. If you play against a lefty, you would do this on the first serve on the deuce side.
 - The second serve always represent a good opportunity to apply pressure on an Aggressive Baseliner. You have to take away time and apply the pressure on their service when they least expect it. In general when they go down the T with their second serve it is always a good time to approach down the line and a bit short. This will force them to move in a direction that does not come naturally as they are more than likely to be readying themselves to play their inside out forehand.
2. Rush net from the back court.
 - Take a swing at their second serve to set up a shorter ball for you to come in on. This will create more

opportunities than any other, when playing against this type of player. Make sure you go for a percentage shot either down the center or crosscourt. Both will give you the upper hand from the time the ball is put into play. Use this to get them out of their zone and put yourself in charge.

- In playing an aggressive baseliner not many opportunities will present themselves from the back of the court unless you take some chances and use some of the tactics highlighted for use against the counter puncher. For example, look to negate his angles with hard hit shots down the line. That is, provide them less time and angles to work with and force them to provide you with opportunities for you to go to the net, take control and ultimately win.

Note: Clearly there are other types of players than just the Serve and Volleyer and Net Rusher playing the game and as a result some of these strategies and tactics will be able to be employed with good effect among those players as well.

WHAT TO DO IN GETTING THERE

Having got to the net either via serving and volleying or rushing it, you are immediately faced with prospect of how to best cover it. You might want to consider these few handy tips in getting there.

1. Make sure you shorten your back swing while approaching the net and keep your head up after your serve.
2. Keep your racket head up.
3. Use a split step at the moment the opponent makes contact.
4. Lower your center of gravity (wider base).
5. To cover your angles, move in a straight line. (Following the line of the ball is not always the best solution as this can create angle).
6. Keep your shoulders square to the net.
7. Do not favor one side (forces the passer to guess).
8. Drop your volley short when it is below the net.
9. On difficult volleys, volley back to where the ball came from.

Now we arrive at the most difficult part of it all. How to improve your game of Opportunity? While there are many drills that can be applied to improve your opportunities to win, those to follow are specifically

designed to enhance one's serve and volley and net rushing skills. The most important part of this entire process however, remains that you make sure that you already possess good serves, volleys, returns and groundstrokes.

DRILLS AND GAMES FOR THE SERVE AND VOLLEYER

1. Use targets in the service box to improve your placement. Focus on the body serve and the different aspects of it discussed earlier.
2. Shadow a serve and follow it up to the net. A ball will be fed to volley. Focus on keeping your head up and split stepping. (This 'saves' your shoulder after serving lots of balls.)
3. Play a game till 11 where you have to serve and volley on both serves only using half the court.
4. Serve and volley and the first volley

has to be played behind the service line in the full court.

5. Full court game but only one serve. Serve and volley is obligatory. (Play table tennis style with each player serving 5 points). One point will be subtracted for a service error.

DRILLS FOR THE NET RUSHER

1. The classic approach drill: feed ball to either side and make the target deep in the center of the court. Draw lines on the court to represent the target.
2. Game: Feed from center of court and have the player on the other side approach down the center of the court. Play the point out with only points that are finished with a volley counting. Play to 11.
3. Play points: Both players, at opposite ends of the court, start in the doubles

alley on the baseline. One player feeds the ball to his opponent's far corner, the reply has to be played down-the-line. Play point out but neither player scores unless point is won with one player at the net.

4. Chip and charge. Second serve return; place different targets at the back court and follow it up to the net.
5. Return of first serve to T: Shorten your back swing, block the return down the line and follow it to the net.
6. Play a game to 21 with one serve. Points are worth double when won at the net either by the server or returner. Switch server every 5 serves.

Good luck in creating new **opportunities** both on and off the court!

A Winning Game Plan for All-court Players

By Craig Tiley (South Africa)

DEFINING AN ALL-COURT PLAYER

An all-court player is simply a player that is skilled in executing from all areas of the court. It is a player that is equally adept at serving and volleying, attacking short balls, playing aggressive baseline points, and neutralizing the point when on the defensive.

As an all-court player you will nonetheless need a winning game plan. Or if you are a coach, you will need to be able to teach a winning game plan. Just how simple is it? Well, by following a basic set of guidelines you can be assured some success. That is, in order to provide a clear picture of an all-court player's objectives we will firstly summarize the basic principles of singles strategy before discussing an all-court player's specific goals against varying styles of play.

WINNING SINGLES STRATEGY CONCEPTS

There are a few basic concepts that every player should adhere to in order to insure a winning tactical game plan. These concepts are determined by the dimensions of the tennis court, which do not change no matter where you are playing in the world. Just like there are scientific principles to adhere

to with regard to technique, there are some basic principles to follow with respect to strategy and tactics. Use the following 10 concepts in developing your decision-making skills in singles.

Concept 1 - Play consistent percentages

A simple plan is to reduce the amount of points lost by unforced errors and increase the number of points won by forcing your opponents into error. Unforced errors are mistakes made with no applied pressure from your opponent. Forced errors are not necessarily mistakes, but rather the loss of a point from applied pressure from your opponent. In singles, the three most important shots for consistency focus are the serve, return and approach shot.

Concept 2 - Know the zones

Use the analogy of a traffic light as follows:

- Red Zone
Baseline area
–Safe, consistent play
- Yellow Zone
Mid-court area
–Proceed through, approach
- Green Zone
Forecourt area
–Go, go for the put-away

Concept 3 - Understand the target areas

- The closer to the net the greater the potential angle.
- Height equals depth - Aim for a 3'-6' window over the net.
- Safeline - An imaginary alley inside the singles sideline (use for approach shots). Don't necessarily aim for the sideline.
- Safe spots - Are predetermined target areas, for example, when forced wide, hit high and deep down-the-middle to buy time for recovery.

Concept 4 - Limit direction changes

The difference between down-the-line and crosscourt is very small. The prospect of committing an error increases when changing direction off a deep crosscourt ball.

Concept 5 - Center the ball

The best error to make is long. When drilling, use the two-bounce concept: the second bounce has to land in between imaginary lines extended from each singles sideline. Centering the ball will reduce the opponent's hitting area and angles.

Concept 6 - Attack the short ball

Determine your short ball range, that is, the number of steps taken to reach a good volleying position



(G.V.P.) by the time your approach shot bounces. Approach to the opponent's weaker side, that is, the side they hit higher and longer. Approach up the safe line and move through the approach shot to gain proximity to the net. Effectiveness at the net should result in winning 2 out of 3 points (66%).

Concept 7 - 1-2 Sequence

Use the 1-2 sequence for the following: Approach and volley; low volley and high volley; 1st then 2nd passing shot; and serve and volley. Emphasize winning the point on the second shot, for example, when an opponent advances to the net, hit your first passing shot at them or to their weaker volley and then win the point with your second pass.

Concept 8 - D.N.O.

When on the baseline, play according to your position – either defensive, neutral, or offensive. Defensive is behind the baseline, neutral is on the baseline and offensive is just inside the baseline.

Concept 9 - Hold the line

On low volleys at the net, the percentage play is to hit down the line. Use the safeline target.

Concept 10 - Change gears

Change tactics and rhythm when needed by using the following:

- More or less topspin
- Underspin backhands
- More height over the net
- Stay on the baseline longer
- Vary speed of the ball
- Attack only on a very short ball
- Hit your 1st serve as if it was your 2nd serve
- Take more time between points

TACTICS FOR AN ALL-COURT PLAYER AGAINST VARYING GAME STYLES

Versus a Serve and Volleyer and/or Net Rusher

In order to counter the effectiveness of a very aggressive player, that is a serve and volleyer, you should adhere to the following goal priorities:

1. Serve management – It is critical when competing against a serve and volleyer to have effective management of your own serve. This includes:
 - Serving a higher percentage of first serves even if it means hitting with more spin and less speed.
 - Developing effective targets such as serving to the body to prevent the opponent from attacking your serve.
 - Playing aggressive serve games by looking to serve and volley more often.
2. Return consistency – Since it is more than likely that your opponent will be serving and coming in, you can focus on:
 - Developing predetermined targets and not overly concerning yourself with your opponent but more so on your return.
 - Returning up the middle to eliminate the opponent's potential volleying angles.
 - Executing a return with more topspin to force the opponent to hit up on the first volley.
 - Following the return, hold an offensive position inside the baseline which will reduce the time the opponent has to recover after the first volley.

3. 1-2 passing shot sequence – After the serve your goal should be to make your opponent volley before looking to pass him with your second passing shot opportunity. Use a variety of passing shots such as: a lob, dipping crosscourt passes, and up the line to the safeline target.

Versus an Aggressive Baseline

In order to counter the effectiveness of an effective baseliner you should adhere to the following goal priorities:

1. Self-focus – Repeat the phrase “focus on myself first and the opponent second”. It is important when playing an aggressive baseliner to maintain your general status as an all-court player. Do not attempt to match shot-for-shot what an aggressive baseliner can do. Deal with your own strengths first.
2. Identify the weakness – Every aggressive baseliner will have some weakness such as: does not attack short balls, moves side-to-side better than forward and back, is slow in recognizing short balls or drop shots, does not respond well to balls hit up the middle, or does not like hitting high bouncing balls. Determine the weakness and adopt a game plan that consistently exposes these weaknesses.
3. Serve management – This is always an important goal regardless of who you play, however against an aggressive baseliner it is particularly critical. Focus on the following:
 - More serving and volleying.
 - Consistently changing your serving targets and using a variety of spin and speed to prevent the opponent from “grooving” their returns.
 - Using more body serves.
4. Aggressive return games – To add pressure, do the following:
 - Attack second serves by approaching up the middle.
 - Return with heavy topspin.
 - Attempt to place the server on the defensive on the return.

Versus a Defensive Player

One of the easiest opponents to develop an effective game plan against is one that plays too defensively. Your goal priorities should be:

1. Attack – Increase the frequency with which you serve and volley as well as your aggressiveness in returning your opponent's serve. Make the defensive player utilize their defensive skills at every

- opportunity. Do not rush. Use safe targets and reduce the number of angle opportunities by attacking up the middle.
- Adjust – While you should look to attach at every opportunity, mixing-up your game plan by occasionally staying back, playing some higher balls and bringing your opponents to the net with dropshots or short balls to make them volley can also be very effective.

DRILLS AND GAMES TO REINFORCE MAKING THE RIGHT TACTICAL DECISIONS (LIVE BALL)

Serve Management

Drill 1 – Serve Pressure: Play a set where the server is only allowed two second-serve per game.

Drill 2 – 7-11: Play to eleven points however the returner starts up 7-0. This drill could also be adjusted to 5-11. The server must serve and volley.

Drill 3 – 10 points: Play a serving

game where you count the number of first serves. Play a total of 10 points each game and keep track of your serving percentage. Play the point out after each first serve.

Drill 4 – Sequence: Play points but in order for the point to count, the serve, return and first volley must be in. Play to 11 and then switch serves.

Drill 5 – Side-out: Play to 11 points, serving until you lose the point. When you lose the point serving your opponent now becomes the server and that particular point does not count – you just lose the opportunity to serve.

Return/Groundstroke Consistency

Drill 6 – Grinder’s Paradise: Play to 11 points. First 6 balls have to be in for the point to start. Every ball has to be hit with topspin and with height over the net. You can adjust to reduce the target area to behind the service line. No serving.

Drill 7 – 5-5 Challenge: Both players

start on the baseline. One player feeds the ball in and you play the point out. Both players start at 5 points and the goal is to reach 10 before 0. You lose a point for an unforced error and win a point with a winner and when you force your opponent into error.

Drill 8 – Forcing Special: Play to 21 points but you can only win a point with a winner or forced error. Unforced errors do not count. No serving.

Drill 9 – Scramble Singles: The entire singles and doubles court is considered “in.” One player feeds a ball and you play the point out. Play to 11. No winners can be hit in the first game, however in the second game to 11, winners count.

Drill 10 – Alley Rally: Both players stand facing each other in the alley. One player feeds a ball in and play the point out. Play to 11 but the ball has to land in the alley for the point to count.

Good luck and go for it!

Tactics for Advanced Clay Court Tennis

By Antonio Martínez Cascales (Spain)

INTRODUCTION

Tactics is a crucial part of the game at all levels of play. However, the more I see professional tennis matches, the more I am convinced of its absolute importance at this level.

In fact, I believe that one of the reasons why Juan Carlos has improved his game so much during the last few years has been our ability to analyse his opponents and his adeptness in applying all of the tactical concepts he has learned in matchplay. This is what I call “tactical maturity”.

Playing on clay is a tradition that many Spaniards, Continental European and South American players have experienced since childhood. In many of these nations, clay court clubs prevail, children are introduced to the game on clay and most tournaments are played on the “red stuff”. Players quickly become used to getting their socks dirty, and mothers quickly become used to soaking their red clothes! I think that the dream of all clay court players the world over is to win Roland Garros.

However, with Juan Carlos things were a little bit different as he started

playing the game primarily on hard court and we used to combine practices and tournaments on clay and hard courts to better provide for his long-term development as an all round tennis player.

For Juan Carlos and many other claycourters, growing up as a tennis player on a clay court has several advantages as players tend to develop:

- A more consistent game,
- Very strong groundstrokes,
- Patience,
- Good physical endurance.

However, it does have its disadvantages:

- Less focus is often placed on the development of their serve, return and net game.
- The longevity of the top clay courters is typically shorter than the serve and volleyers as it becomes increasingly difficult to sustain the high intensity required to compete in long matches year after year.

That said, claycourters should not be demoralized when they play on hard courts. I think it is a matter of practice, patience and understanding. Juan

Carlos likes to play on grass and fast courts. I think he needs to practice and be exposed to a little more hard court tennis to do something very special in the important hard court tournaments.

GAMESTYLES, STRATEGY AND TACTICS ON CLAY

Gamestyles
In many tennis texts you can read that there are two types of gamestyles, which best fit with clay court players: the aggressive baseliner and the counter puncher.

In my opinion, the counter puncher, a type of defensive baseline player who reacts to their opponents and allows them to dictate the play, no longer exists in the modern men’s professional game.

Professional male players are nowadays very fit and extremely strong. Almost all of them hit the ball very hard, move and cover the court very well, and are tactically very aggressive.

Obviously, there are some players who play a little bit further back from the baseline than others, and hit with more heavy topspin, greater height



and deeper ball trajectories.

I think that the modern clay court player uses, or at least tries to play with, an attacking game based around their powerful groundstrokes (the forehand is the big weapon that is used to dominate points from the back).

In general, these top clay courters tend to vary their personal gamestyle depending on the opponent and court surface. They are very effective on all types of courts but obviously more so on the slower surfaces. We are seeing however that clay court players can adapt to fast courts quickly and are developing more all round gamestyles in the mould of Agassi, Hewitt, and Safin. For instance, Juan Carlos, Moya and Corretja have all had very good results on hard indoors and outdoors and, even, on grass!

In the modern game at the top level, gamestyles tend to equalize. You will still find players who base their game around the serve and volley but they play reasonably well from the baseline. The same happens with the claycourters. They base their game around the groundstrokes but are capable of playing a good net game when necessary. For this reason the number of all round players has grown and pure serve and volleyers or defensive players are increasingly rare.

Basic strategy

What should be the basic strategy for a clay court player? According to my

experience, I think it can be summarized as:

- Attacking from the baseline,
- Moving the opponent and,
- Forcing the opponent to make mistakes.

Tactical aspects

I like to break down this strategy into different tactical aspects according to the game situations. A good claycourters has:

- A forcing serve,
- An attacking return,
- A strong and dominating baseline game comprised of consistent groundstrokes,
- A solid net game when necessary,
- A sound passing game.

Additionally, there are certain other important elements to be taken into account:

- **Movement:** Effective court positioning and movement.
- **Physical:** A good endurance base.
- **Mental:** Mental toughness.

Let's now analyze all of the aspects mentioned above.

A forcing serve

Clay court players do not usually have a dominating serve the same way all round or serve and volley players do. However, all of them try to improve the serve as much as possible in an effort to force their opponents and start the point aggressively.

In the case of Juan Carlos we are trying to improve his serve to make him more aggressive on all court surfaces, but this will obviously be of particular benefit on the faster courts.

Worth noting however is that there are clay court players who have very good serves such as El-Aynaoui or Kuerten. Their serves, in much the same way as those of serve and volley players, allow them to dictate the point from the outset.

Tactically speaking typical clay court serve patterns include the following:

- **Right service box:** Wide serve, down the line return by the opponent, inside out forehand long or short to the backhand side of the opponent (right handed).
- **Right service box:** Same as above but the inside out forehand long or short goes to the forehand side of the opponent (right handed) to wrong foot the player.

- **Right / Left service box:** T serve, any kind of return by the opponent, use the best shot to the weak side of the opponent.

- **Right / Left service box:** Serve to the body, any kind of return by the opponent, use the best shot to the weak side of the opponent.

- **Left service box:** Wide serve, any kind of return by the opponent, use the best shot to the weak side of the opponent.

Serve and volley plays (regular or drive volley) are less common but can be used in several situations to surprise the opponent (set / match balls).

Variation of the serve characteristics, direction, speed and spin are also very important.

An attacking return

The return of serve is crucial on clay and players should be quick to take more advantage of not so hard or well-placed serves. They should try to return with their best shot to the weakest shot of the server or, at least, try to play a forcing return. This forcing return is usually a deep ball, played higher, which allows the player to recover his position and keep the server well behind the baseline.

Juan Carlos, as well as other claycourters such as Kuerten or Corretja have very good return of serves.

Common clay court return patterns are, among others, the following:

- **Against a hard serve:** Block return. Deep and high if possible when the server stays back or low and short if the server approaches the net. Try to recover your position. Be ready to run and to defend the point. Look for opportunities to take an attacking position.

- **Against a weak serve (usually second serve):** Attacking return. Deep down the line or crosscourt to the weakest side of the opponent. Or short to move the server. Try to win the point if the serve provides you that opportunity or if not, assume an attacking position after the serve.

One point to remember here is that good concentration, effective reading of the cues that the server can provide, as well as previous analysis of the server's tendencies can help a lot when trying to anticipate the direction of the serve.

A strong and dominating baseline game comprised of consistent groundstrokes

Groundstrokes are of key importance in clay court tactics. We all know that clay court specialists base their strategy around their best shot, which is usually the forehand. This is the case of Juan Carlos, El-Aynaoui, Moya and others.

So, players want to use their best shot as often as possible to dominate the point from the baseline. How do they do this? They use the **inside out forehand**. That is why this is one of the most important strokes for a clay courtier. In my opinion, the secret of this shot is not the stroke itself, but the positioning and movement of the player before hitting the ball and the direction of the stroke that can be hit for a winner or as a preparatory point-winning shot.

In hitting this stroke players should be able to move around their backhand to surprise their opponent, especially when the ball is in the opponent's court. Lateral movements are crucial for its success and hitting in front while stepping into the ball is another important component. This shot should always be hit with high ball-speed. Basic directional patterns for the inside out forehand include:

- Deep towards the opponent's backhand (to wrong foot the opponent),
- Short and angled to the left of the opponent, and
- Deep and fast to the opponent's forehand ("inside in")

In wanting to hit hard and penetrating strokes, claycourters will use a **regular forehand**. This stroke has also changed in the modern clay court game. Years ago, clay courtiers hit balls with heavy topspin and high trajectories. Nowadays, the forehand is a flatter, faster stroke played with a lower trajectory. It is mostly used to win points from the baseline or from inside the court. High bouncing balls are generally played with a flat, hard forehand.

These days all claycourters need a very complete game from the baseline, and for this reason the **backhand** has become an increasingly aggressive stroke. In fact, there are some very good clay court players who possess better backhands than forehands: Gustavo Kuerten, Alex Corretja, Gastón Gaudio and Albert Costa. While these players still win many points with their forehands, it is their backhand strokes that are feared by

their opponents. The most used backhand tactical patterns are:

- The flat down the line backhand to the opponent's forehand (right handed),
- The short crosscourt backhand to the opponent's backhand to open up the court.

On clay courts in endeavoring to set up a point winning shot, players can spend considerable time **rallying** from the baseline. The basic patterns in this game situation are:

- Moving the opponent by:
 - Changing directions,
 - Playing wrong foot,
 - Playing the big X (deep crosscourt to one side and short crosscourt to the other side),
 - Forcing the opponent to come to the net,
- Attacking the weaker side of the opponent,
- Keeping the opponent behind the baseline,
- Playing winners from the baseline.

The surprise factor is also very important from the baseline. That is why we have been working a lot with Juan Carlos on his **drop shot**. I really believe that this shot is very important on clay as it can be used to disrupt the rhythm of the opponent and can in itself be the catalyst in winning many points by making the opponent run forward. Drop shots are usually played when the player is inside the court or on the baseline, never behind the baseline. An important technical tip here is that to better disguise the shot, players should use the same grip and backswing that they use for their regular forehands.

A solid net game when necessary

In general, all clay court players should try to win more points closer to the net. However, those who are very strong from the back seem not to need a net game.

One thing which is very common with some of the claycourters is that they know how to volley and hit the smash technically quite well, but they do not really know how to "play" very well close to the net or when to approach the net. Playing at the net is not only a matter of having good and soft hands, but also of moving well and finding oneself comfortable there – something that is only achieved by making a habit of volleying!

Mid court deep or drive volleys as well as close to the net put away

volleys are the most common clay court volleys. Apart from the regular and jump smash, I think that the smash played from the baseline is quite common when playing on clay and should also be practiced regularly.

A sound passing game

Part of being a good player on clay is being able to effectively pass your opponent when he is at the net. The best clay courtiers are very good at doing this when playing against serve and volleyers and net rushing players. Tospin or flat shots, deep down the line or short cross court are the most commonly used passes while two-shot combinations are also used to good effect.

Lobs, whether hit with topspin or hit flat, are also a good tool for passing the net player. Clay courtiers need to not only develop good lobbing technique but a sound understanding of when to use this shot (ie. if the net player is very close to the net or he is closing in very aggressively).

Effective court positioning and movement

Good clay court players have the following court positioning and movement characteristics:

- Play close to the baseline.
- Move to hit as many shots as possible with their big weapon.
- Move forwards to take the ball early.
- Move sideways with great economy.
- Recover their position very well after returning a forcing shot.

Technical characteristics of footwork on clay include:

- Good combination of side steps and cross over steps.
- Ability to slide when the ball is far from reach.
- Ability to move in and out the court to play short and deep balls respectively.

Good endurance base

Physical conditioning is of foremost importance in pro tennis and helps to determine the gamestyle and the tactics of the players. On clay, matches are longer, points are more difficult to win and players are required to hit many more balls and run many more meters to achieve ongoing success. Consequently, establishing a good endurance base is of paramount importance for all claycourters.

With Juan Carlos we follow special aerobic and anaerobic, lactic and

alactic, endurance programs both on and off court, with a variety of drills that help him to best develop this type of solid base.

Mental Toughness

I think mental toughness is also a component of tactics and strategy and, on clay, a very important one.

Clay court tennis teaches the player to fight for every point, even more so than on hard courts where points are

won and lost comparatively easily. On clay, free or cheap points are few and far between. When the top claycourters are on court they are ready to fight and to give 100%; their efforts are maximal and their discipline in preparing for tournament play unquestionable.

CONCLUSION

Playing on clay is beneficial for all players wanting to develop a more

complete game, improve their physical endurance and their mental toughness. In closing, I hope that I have been able to present some of the most important strategies and tactics used by the best clay court players in the game, and in doing so, have provided you with some information that will help you in your coaching pursuits.

Fast Court Tactics - Part 1

By Tom Gullikson and Doug MacCurdy (USA)



Fast courts include grass, and some hard courts and carpets. On a fast court the ball tends to skid and the bounce is relatively low. Altitude and the type of ball can also affect the speed of the game. A lighter ball or high altitude can make a medium paced court feel like a fast one.

Prior to discussing the actual tactics, let's review some of the mental, physical and technical factors that are likely to promote success on fast courts.

MENTAL FACTORS

Fast court tennis requires intense

short-term concentration. Everything is happening so quickly that the player has to be totally focussed to handle the speed of the ball. A momentary loss of concentration may cause two or three loose errors and result in a service break, as well as the loss of a set.

The basic mental approach to fast court tennis should be to dominate the opponent and dictate the tempo of the points. Just reacting to the opponent's shots does not get you very far on fast courts.

One of the most difficult challenges for a player that prefers slow courts, when competing on fast courts, is understanding and accepting that they will make many more errors than normal. There will also be a feeling that it is difficult to establish much rhythm. Learning to accept these conditions and deal with them is part of playing on fast courts. Remember that both players will get more cheap points.

Overall, the scores of sets are usually considerably closer on fast courts due to the fact that there are less service breaks. As such, the player must feel comfortable and confident late in the sets and in tie-breaks.

PHYSICAL FACTORS

Seeing the ball well, and fast reaction and response times are great assets. Combined with good anticipation skills, these elements allow the player to use the fast court to his advantage.

Explosive movement is a key and should be emphasized in the training. Since the ball tends to stay low, players generally have to get down

and stay down during the preparation, even more so than on slow courts. Dynamic balance is at a premium since all the movements must be performed quickly and efficiently.

During a stretch of fast court tournaments and practice, be sure the players maintain their level of endurance with off-court training since there will be less aerobic benefit from the tennis itself.

Warm up well before playing on fast courts. The player must be ready to make quick and often fairly jerky movements right away.

TECHNICAL FACTORS

Players win on fast courts with a variety of game styles, strengths and weaknesses. Slice serves, in particular, are very effective on fast courts.

Great serving is an obvious asset. Strong servers often win over 80% of the points on first serve on fast courts. Good placement, combined with sheer power, will reap many dividends. Slice serves are very effective on fast courts.

The second key is the return of serve. In men's tennis on grass courts, the average number of balls per point is less than two in matches involving big servers. The serve and missed returns account for a huge number of points. Returning first serves with reasonable consistency and effectiveness, and taking advantage of second serve opportunities are what set up service breaks.

The ability to load quickly and make compact strokes when necessary on service returns is invaluable. Producing neutralizing and offensive

strokes when standing close to the baseline allows the player to dictate the tempo of the points. Developing the timing to use the opponent's pace to block the ball back, often offensively, is very beneficial.

Limiting excessive topspin on service returns and groundstrokes makes the shots more penetrating on fast courts. Offensive slice backhands can be deadly, while slow defensively hit slice will have little effect and tend to sit up. Driving through the ball, sometimes with even a bit of sidespin, puts more pressure on the opponent

than heavy topspin that is so effective on slower courts.

Effective volleyers are in their element of fast courts. Consider the list of Wimbledon Champions during the past 20 years. Among the men, the vast majority of winners of multiple titles were serve and volleyers including McEnroe, Becker, Edberg and Sampras. Serve and volleyers are not common (currently almost non-existent) in the women's game. However, Navratilova, Mandlikova and Novotna account for 12 titles.

Technical skills for effectiveness at

the net include the ability to hit penetrating first volleys, punishing high volleys, good touch on low balls and very solid overheads. The ability to anticipate and position oneself properly is essential. Specialty shots such as half volleys, backhand overheads and a variety of emergency volleys are very important and often keep the net-player in the points. Emergency volleys would include situations where the player is stretching or diving for the ball; or handling a ball hit very hard at the body.

Tactics Specific to the Female Game

By Ivo Van Aken (Belgium)



INTRODUCTION

Today, the leading generation of female tennis players are considerably more aggressive than those of earlier decades, which has led to the women's game attracting increasing spectator, sponsorship and television

support. In terms of vibrancy women's tennis parallels the men's game more than ever and I am certain that we will see increasing numbers of up and coming female players adopting more attractive and aggressive game styles. This is in part due to the fact that most female juniors are already playing more aggressively than previously and also because of improved dissemination of coaching information that assists coaches develop junior players into senior players that are capable of playing with more aggressive game styles.

To best understand the tactics specific to the female game, we should analyse the female game from physical, mental and technical points of view.

THE INFLUENCE OF PHYSICAL AND TECHNICAL CAPACITIES ON FEMALE TACTICS

It is well accepted that a difference in strength of approximately 20% exists between males and females. However that female players are hitting the ball harder and heavier is clear, and a

combination of correct technical training from both methodological and biomechanical perspectives, in combination with continually improving strength training have helped this enormously.

Women need to maximise the efficiency of their strokes, establish perfect contact points, time the ball well and play it on the rise if they are to hit powerful shots, play aggressive angles with both the forehand and backhand, ...

THE INFLUENCE OF MENTAL CAPACITIES ON FEMALE TACTICS

That women are meticulous, always practice with high quality and endeavour to get the most out of each training session isn't a new statement. However, it is a very important one to consider if female players are to succeed at the top of the women's game. For irrespective of the quality of their physical factors (co-ordination, speed, ...), if these mental characteristics are not catered for, players are unlikely to develop a good tactical understanding of tennis (or their game) and their chances of success will be significantly reduced. Also, as a result of this mindset (and their reduced power as compared to the men) female players typically demand a more detailed match plan.

In this respect, the only thing we have to be wary of as coaches is that this positive attitude does not become extreme or over analytic such that the

female player is no longer able to play the game naturally. However, if we foster independence among our players and provide an appropriate amount of open situations in our training sessions, the risk of this happening should become negligible.

GAME STYLES IN MODERN WOMEN'S TENNIS

As I previously described in my article for the 12th ITF Worldwide Coaches Workshop in 2001, the game styles, in women's tennis just as in men's tennis, are approaching one another.

The baseline player has a powerful serve and will play very aggressive baseline shots. This aggressive game style is not just based on power: playing the ball increasingly on the rise, entering further into the court, combining power and placement, ... all contribute to the development of this type of game. Potentially, playing the ball on the rise not only results in more power but can also 1. place opponents under more time pressure and 2. allow players to better open up the court with sharp angles (forcing opponents wide, off balance, ...) so that a winner can be hit or an approach to the net made to finish the rally with a volley. I am convinced that a democratic coaching style that promotes the use of open situations in combination with tennis-specific physical training will result in a growing number of baseline players who will play a little more at the net. That is, I do not believe there is a future for defensive baseline players if they really want to be on top of the female game. Defensive players will only have a "second-class" role in women's tennis to be at the top of the female game.

The all court player of today also looks completely different than some years ago. Her groundstrokes are more powerful than in the past, which is in part due to the fact that the quality of her passing shot (in terms of ball velocity) has also improved. Approaching the net is only performed once the rally has been built up in such a way that the opponent is under pressure and an aggressive approach can be played. In fact, the all court player looks increasingly similar to the baseline player with the difference being in the timing and frequency of approaching the net. In situations where the baseline player will wait for a big groundstroke, the all court player will attempt to come in and finish off

the point at the net.

The serve and volley player has also changed in that she plays far more groundstrokes than before. Indeed, given that all opponents possess more powerful passing shots, it is only on very fast courts that the serve and volley player will come in like before. On all other courts, she will approach the net less and it will be the variety in her decision-making that will upset her opponent.

Having considered these three tactical styles of play, it becomes evident that irrespective of style, aggressive baseline strokes have become considerably more important in modern day women's tennis.

THE QUALITY OF THE SERVE AND RETURN DISTINGUISHES THE TOP FEMALE PLAYERS

Women know as well as men that the quality of the serve and return will determine the options available to them in each rally. The top women players play a game with more powerful serves and more aggressive returns. In particular, when serving they dominate each point from this first shot. That talented players like Martina Hingis and Anna Kournikova are having difficulty beating players who possess powerful serves is testament to the fact a serve is not only a question of placement, but both power and placement.

These days returns are also played as aggressively as possible by the game's elite. No longer do they think in terms of "keep the return in the court". Rather, players try to return with a combination of optimal power and control. They know very well that only aggressive returns can save them from being placed on the defensive from the outset.

IS SERVING POWERFULLY AND RETURNING AGGRESSIVELY DIFFICULT TO LEARN?

Although we are seeing more and more women **servicing** well, I am positive that many girls would be able to serve more effectively if they had had the right programmes in terms of co-ordination, technical and tactical training from the very beginning: in other words between the ages of 6 and 13. Likewise, a much higher volume of serve training would also provide for further improvements: during a training session most players hit considerably more forehands and backhands than serves. The ratio of

groundstrokes:serves during a match certainly implies that such a process should be reviewed.

If we believe that efficiency in decision making is learned from a very young age, it should not be difficult to teach young female players to play aggressive returns as at these ages powerful serves are not common and the returner experiences few time problems. Although the best female players are continuing to **return** serves more aggressively and with more control, time spent practicing the return in terms of volume and quality are areas that both players and coaches have to address.

On the circuit we see so many players practicing the serve significantly more than the return, and, when they do practice the return, it is largely in a closed situation. Due to this lack of practice, the specific techniques for returning serves do not become optimally automated and because of the prevalent use of closed situations in return practice, one of the most important factors in returning serves: anticipation, is not practised at all.

THE BEST PLAYERS HAVE MORE WEAPONS

I strongly believe that all players should develop powerful serves and forehands to be best positioned to compete in modern day tennis. Besides these two weapons, a player will also need to develop additional artillery if she wants to reach the top of the women's game.

These extra weapons should be consistent with and reflect the physical, technical, tactical and mental capacities of the player (for example: amount of variation in tactical play, using the slice specifically, incorporating drop shot, ...).

CONCLUSION

If we facilitate the development of female juniors in an optimal manner, the standard and appeal of women's tennis will continue to rise in the forthcoming years. As long as we bear in mind that player development is a question of respecting and adapting certain scientific principles to provide for optimal long term performance (ie. developing the tactical game before puberty starts and preparing the body in such a way that aggressive tennis can be played), one thing is sure: the women's game will become increasingly aggressive.

The Game of the Lefty

By Bernard Pestre (France)

Playing a left-handed player is less tricky than it was a few years ago. Male and female players have all improved dramatically and got rid of the weaknesses that were still noticeable 5 or 6 years ago. Today, the best male and female players possess an all-round game and it is virtually impossible to find players handicapped by a fatal flaw among the top 100 men and women.

Left-handers have also expanded their repertoire and no longer rely on one or two specific shots as they did in the past. Consequently, they play more and more like right-handers with a “big” serve, an effective return of serve, as well as powerful and aggressive groundstrokes. For this reason the strategy to employ against a left-hander is not that much different today from the one you would use against a right-hander.

However, the game of left-handed players has some distinctive features and our purpose here is to look at the shots of left-handers, their use in 2002 as well as potential solutions to neutralise or counter them.

SERVE/RETURN OF SERVE

Left-handers typically use an angled slice serve on the ad side. This serve bounces away to the right of the right-hander’s backhand forcing the player to hit a return from an off-centre position, thus leaving the court open. It is worth noting that now right-handed players also use the angled serve frequently to open the court. Therefore, the advantage that left-handers have is that they can play a lot of “key points” (30-40, 40-30, ads...) by “bombarding” the right-hander’s backhand. If the left-handed player is able to surprise his opponent once in a while with a serve to the T, like McEnroe used to do, this weapon becomes even more formidable.

Since left-handers and right-handers are in general able to impart all the different types of spin, it becomes difficult to put the opponent off guard. Left-handed players who do take their opponents by surprise are those who are able, on the deuce side, to hit wide serves either flat with a lot of speed or heavily spun with a lot of “kick”. These players are not numerous, since left-handers have in most cases exaggeratedly developed the mastery of

the slice.

The tactical answer to the “left-hander’s slice serve” is a powerful return down the middle or crosscourt which neutralises as much as possible the offensive intentions of the server. It is essential for the right-hander who returns this type of serve not to stand too far behind the baseline because in doing so, he leaves his opponent room for a sharply angled serve.

Also, when a right-hander serves against a left-hander, he must impose the same treatment as his opponent: angled slice serves alternated with well-directed serves to the forehand. On the ad side, he generally has a better kick serve than left-handers and must therefore use it extensively.

BASELINE GAME

Unlike a few years ago, it is now quite uncommon to notice a large difference between the effectiveness of the forehand and the backhand of left-handers.

However, in women’s tennis, the forehand is usually the strength of left-handed players while for right-handed players the two-handed backhand has in many cases supplanted the forehand as the main weapon.

The short crosscourt forehand of left-handed players obviously causes a lot of damage to right-handed players, preventing them from constructing the point (Arazi and Rios on the men’s side, Patty Schnyder and Clarisa Fernandez on the women’s). Because they have problems reaching the ball, right-handers are sometimes forced to retrieve it at full stretch, which limits the power of their shot and leaves room for a decisive attack from the opponent. Moreover, the left-handed player, just like the right-hander, is now able to take advantage of the opening with a forcing forehand or backhand, a drop-shot or a volley.

Tip for the right-handers: if you’re forced wide on your backhand by a left-hander’s forehand, short and angled, the best defensive reply is to play a deep cross-court shot at the lowest speed



possible so that you have enough time to recover. Make sure however that you do not hit the ball too high over the net such that your opponent can sneak in. A low-bouncing slice is therefore the best solution.

Against a left-handed player who has a big forehand, it can be useful, just like against a right-hander, to try and force him wide on his forehand before attacking him on his backhand. But this means that you need to get involved in a cross-court rally during which your backhand is in opposition to the left-hander’s forehand, which might favour him. Thus, you need to have a very solid backhand to decide to use this tactical plan. Varying the spin and height of your shots in this cross-court battle can also be rewarding.

Furthermore, in order to achieve this, you have to use your backhand right from the start of the rally, which is often more complicated. There are a few players who are very good at doing this, such as Kuerten or Mauresmo with the one-handed backhand and SAFIN with the two-handed backhand.

You can also move the left-handed player out of the court with your own inside-out forehand (Hewitt, Grosjean), but in this case the angle achieved is not as great.

In conclusion, as we mentioned earlier, the game of left-handed players is becoming increasingly similar to that of the right-handers. It is essential not to change your game patterns completely when playing against left-handers; otherwise you may no longer be able to take advantage of your own weapons. I hope that the information provided here will prove beneficial for left-handed and right-handed players, as well as to coaches.

Recommended Books and Videos

Books

Handbook of Sports Medicine and Science - Tennis. Edited by Dr. Per Renstrom. Year: 2002. Pages: 318. Language: English. Level: Advanced. This book aims to provide sports doctors, coaches, tennis players and physical therapists with an authoritative but easily understood overview of the scientific principles and practical aspects of training tennis players. Contents include chapters on Biomechanics, Nutrition, Strength Training, Injuries and Injury Rehabilitation and Psychology. Contributors include: Bruce Elliott, Per Renstrom, Ben Kibler, Kathleen Stroia, Michael Bergeron, Babette Pluim, Howard Brody, Robert Weinberg, Todd Ellenbecker and Paul Roertert. For more information contact: Blackwell Publishing. www.blackwell-science.com.

Communication in Tennis Coaching (La Comunicacion en la Ensenanza del Tenis). By Luz Maria Rodriguez Gonzalez. Year: 2000. Pages: 148. Language: Spanish. This book details the different types of communication coaches can use with players and provides suggestions on how to communicate more effectively with both players and parents of players. Contents comprise of: The Communication Process. Communication between the Coach and Student. Modifying the way you communicate. Communication in Competition. Communication with Parents. For more information contact: Tesitex, S.L., Melchor Cano, 15, 37007 Salamanca.

Tennis Technique, Coaching Course 1, Coaching Course 2. (Tennisteknik, Tranarkurs 1, Tranarkurs 2). By Svenska Tennisforbundet. Year: 2001. Language: Swedish. Level: All levels. These books provide coaches with a comprehensive description of all

tennis strokes as well as some information on the application of physiology, periodisation and psychology in tennis. For more information contact: Svenska Tennisforbundet, Utbildningsproduktion AB. Box 16 045, 200 25 Malmo. Tel. 040 93 30 60, Email: lagret@upab.se.

Videos

Killer Forehand, Bollistic Backhand and Tenacious Net Play.

By Human Kinetics. Authors: Nick Bollettieri. Year: 2000. Language: English. Level: All levels. These three videos of the Bollettieri Video Collection present information on superior technique for some of the game's essential strokes. They provide coaches with a guide to improve the technical effectiveness of their players at the baseline and net through target training and match simulation drills. For more information contact: Human Kinetics, P.O. Box 5076, Champaign, IL. www.humankinetics.com.

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