Chapter 14

Coaching Tennis "Strategies:" From Mental Tennis to Playing Strategies

Singles and doubles strategies within the Advanced Foundation as well as General Coaching "HINTS"

There are so many variables when a person takes on the responsibilities of coaching a group of players. In addition to coaching specific tennis strategies, there are other coaching strategies that are important to anticipate and know how to respond to when they occur. I probably won't be able to predict all the unique events that might occur to a particular coach within the dynamics of any give team. But, since I am sharing my insights from coaching 28 seasons of tennis, I can, with fair certainty, predict many of the variables you will probably be faced with.

Figure 1: Good coaching is more than just 'rallying the team' and giving great pep talks. (Although, this element is important too!) Great coaching includes being organize, communicating, demonstrating, leading, and being a good "student" of the game as well.

The most obvious element you will need to deal with is personalities. Any given team will have two distinct "personalities": These are "Team" personality, (the overall character the team exhibits on a daily basis), and "Individual" personalities. (Each and every player will bring a unique personality to each and every team.)

These personalities will either contribute or detract from the overall team spirit and progress. However, you, as the coach, can help channel these personalities so they indeed contribute to the team as you see fit.

Lack of Clear Directives and Communication

One of the biggest mistakes I see coaches make with teams is when they don't provide clarity and direction for all the players and their parents. I covered this in **Chapters 3 and 4** in creating good communication with both your team players as well as their parents. However, it should be stressed here that, not only do you need to communicate your goals, expectations, and all things related to behavior, attitude and effort, you must also be consistent with the applications of these items throughout the season. Too many coaches will often make exceptions for an individual which sets up the potential for a lack of respect among the players for the coach and his rules, and it often opens the door to more problems.

Great coaches can be "soft" or "hard-core" in terms of their own personality. Why both personalities can be successful is the level of expectation they provide their team. A "tough" coach who does not make—or keep—consistent rules can't expect to be taken seriously if they suddenly come down hard on a team that isn't provided clear directives and expectations. On the other hand, a soft-spoken, low-stress coach can be successful if they to remember to provide clear information of what they expect players to do while on their team even though they are not as vocal or emotionally driven as coaches who are more aggressive or demanding.

Figure 2: Coaches must be personal yet, at the same time, be careful of student's personal "space" and level of closeness the student perceives as comfortable.

Young Coaches

Young coaches must be very careful in how they work with players, especially those of the opposite sex. It is not uncommon to have young female players develop a crush on a young male coach. More coaches have lost their jobs and careers in coaching because they did not handle or 'define' a relationship correctly or with propriety. Young male coaches are often enamored with the attention female students can show for them. And today, we even hear about female teachers and coaches being caught with young male students, something that didn't happen as often years ago… or it was not publicized as much as today.

In either case, it is not worth jeopardizing your reputation nor your career by entertaining any element of impropriety with any member of your team or program. In fact, I caution every coach to not just avoid any relationship possibility with a student, but to make it clear from the very start of any season or program that there is not even the most remote possibility that a relationship could develop. This is done mainly through consistency in how you treat all players and to clearly avoid anything that could be construed as flirtation or otherwise.

Be very careful of how you praise your players. Obviously, avoid unwanted or unwarranted touching or affection. That is, while there is nothing wrong with giving a player a hug, you must understand that such an action can be construed as something other than praise or happiness for that person. I prefer to give "high fives" in place of anything else. Even a simple pat on the back can be mistaken or viewed as inappropriate by some people. In fact, many players, you will find, can be uncomfortable with coaches touching them in any way, and while

they may not say anything, they nonetheless feel discomfort when someone touches them, no matter how innocent the action.

Better to be cautious on the side of being "hands off" than to do something that a player or a parent might consider a "red flag".

Favoritism

Another area that is often misconstrued is when a coach appears to show favoritism towards one player over the others. I will say that no matter what, there will be players a coach simply likes more than the others. Such players either work harder, they listen, they help out, or they simply do what they are told. However, while such players almost always exist, a coach must be careful in being unfair or inconsistent with the rest of the players. Any action that is even perceived as unfair to the rest of the team will have a negative impact on that team. Go out of your way to be as fair and consistent as you can. You can always reward players for good effort or performance at the end of the season. Yet, I guarantee you that such players will usually earn rewards on their own merit and you won't need to show extra favoritism to them during the course of the season.

Positive Reinforcement

It is easy for coaches to become negative and critical of tennis teams and players. This is because there are so many more ways to hit a tennis ball poorly than with correct form and with successful results. Thus, a coach needs to find ways to turn every learning moment into a positive instead of a negative.

Instead of saying, "Don't…" find ways to say, "Try to…" This simple concept creates a positive mindset instead of a negative. For example, if a player is letting the ball drop too low on the serve before swinging at it, instead of saying, "Don't let the ball drop so low before you swing," say, "Try reaching higher for the ball at contact." Players are far more open to "trying" something than being told to "avoid" doing something. Also, the psyche of young kids is often so sensitive that any critical prescription can be construed as them being bad. This is a hard thing to remember, but it pays off for all.

Positive Response

Too often people of any age are critical of themselves. We hear people all the time moan about a missed shot, criticize themselves for hitting an out ball or even yell or throw their racquet, sulk or pout, or simply degrade themselves when they hit a ball in the net, long or wide. In many cases, even when an opponent hits a great shot, the other player can be seen kicking themselves as if they were at fault. I've had several partners and opponents all through high school and college, simply fault themselves every time I hit a great shot. The sign of a great player is often seen when they congratulate their opponent for a well-hit ball. The sign of a loser is when a player either can't recognize an opponent's good shots, or worse in my opinion, when they think that the opponent was simply "lucky". I've had partners embarrass themselves by saying things, like, "what a lucky shot," when their opponent hit a great shot.

As a coach, it is important to train positive reinforcement. That is, players so seldom acknowledge a good stroke or shot or point. (Although, we do have some players who overtly pump themselves up on a good shot; but more on that in a moment.) But, such players are often quick to negatively judge themselves on a bad stroke, shot or point. Thus, it is helpful to use tools to train positive responses by your players, if they so need them. A simple training tool is to

have each player identify a good shot in a drill or a non-playing rally by saying "yes" out loud. This action conditions the player to recognize a good shot with a verbal command which, in turn, creates a condition that the player becomes more conscious of such shots and gives value to them as well in a positive effect.

Figure 3: A subtle, yet firm "Positive Response" is important to reinforce good shot-making and maintaining a positive demeanor on the court.

Young kids need to learn this at home. Often a parent will praise a child only to have the child still fuming about something the parent said hours or even days earlier! The natural focus of kids and adults alike is to focus on the negative. Obviously, there are some who overdo the focus of the positives and become arrogant, over-confident, or just plain obnoxious! Yet, except for these exceptions, players tend to dwell on bad shots instead of good. I is not uncommon to see a player hit several good shots with no response, only to hit one poor shot and become unglued! Coaches need to recognize this and train the players to understand why they missed a shot, (an objective rationale), but not subjectively criticize themselves for such misses. Likewise, players need to recognize good shots objectively, understanding "why" the shot was successful. You can subjectively "celebrate" a good shot and not gain from the shot in terms of recognizing the components of that good shot. (There are times, obviously, that we will simply want to go out and "Play Tennis"…that is, play without consciously thinking too much about any shot! More on this in a moment!)

Mental Tennis: Definitions

Mental Tennis can take on many definitions in how it relates to player performance on a tennis court.

Figure 4: Team work and camaraderie are key elements of not just doubles team members, but for the entire team as a whole. Mental toughness includes creating a positive "team-feel" for all the players on your team.

Many people associate "Mental Toughness" as being the all-encompassing phrase used to define an accomplished tennis player. This broad term has, indeed, been written about in tennis texts for decades. However, Mental Toughness is just a part of the overall "Mental" picture. This is because Mental Tennis includes more. It includes both on and off-court preparation and understanding; it includes mental toughness training, and it includes something that can't be gained in practice: Competitive Experience.

Many players fail to recognize these associations. Thus, many players fail to study and, ultimately, are unaware of how they can and should train for Mental Tennis.

Mental Toughness is derived from the overall preparedness that a player understands as being a necessary part of Mental Tennis. In my opinion, Mental Toughness is a resulting factor, one that a player gains through his or her *determination* in reaching Tennis Mastery. Coaches must understand this concept; for it is the coach who generally emboldens his players through practice principles, procedures and overall personality.

Figure 5: A team that is well trained and well prepared will enter competition with confidence and a positive sense of anticipation for competitive play. Players who are not well trained or prepared will anticipate competition with anxiety and apprehension.

Reaching Mental Toughness can be achieved through the actual practice of key component parts, such as those you will learn about in this chapter. Some of the preparatory portions can only be achieved through various types of *key experiences*. Key experiences include situations that occur only in match-play competition…experiences that force a player to encounter *real* pressure, or situations where pressure is substantially increased. This is why tournament tennis is an absolute requirement for players looking to develop overall Mental Tennis as well as Mental Toughness. I will talk more about tournament tennis later in this chapter.

Confidence as it applies to Mental Tennis

Confidence is, perhaps, one of the most important ingredients to becoming a mentally sound tennis player. The true belief in oneself that you can and will succeed, (in both shot manufacturing during competitive match-play and in the overall belief you will prevail in competition), is essential to solid Mental Tennis. Thus, becoming a master of the mental side of tennis does indeed include having the sincere confidence in oneself. In fact, I can't recall a single player of the three thousand-plus I have taught who could perform well, especially under pressure, who lacked sincere confidence. Certainly, players described as reserved, tentative, or cautious, have seldom gone on to play successful competitive tennis at any competitive level. Understand too, that such "Sincere Confidence" is an EARNED mental state. That is, a player simply can't 'fake' his or her way to

confidence. A player simple will not be able to say to themselves, "I'm going to go into this match with great confidence." This is what I call forced or false confidence…it isn't earned confidence.

Figures 5 & 6: Above, Bjorn Borg and Jimmy Connors (below) exhibited two forms of confidence: Borg with silent fortitude, Connors with a "Bull-dog's" fierceness; both players were champions and used different personalities to create and maintain mental focus and confidence.

This earned or sincere confidence is bred through a combination of two distinct elements:

Knowing you are well trained

This aspect is directly related to the Advanced Foundation. By training within a pattern of strokes, techniques, and strategies, (ones that are know to be both proper and progressive in their development for the player), a player goes into competition with a true sense of confidence. Players who possess inferior strokes have to find ways to avoid or conceal such weaknesses. These players often have a false 'bravado' or confidence that quickly erodes within true competition.

Knowing you are well-prepared

The confidence you build in your players or yourself is related to both your mental toughness as well as your physical condition. Your mental condition is determined by the level of experiences you have accumulated as well as the depth of your "tennis knowledge". This 'knowledge' includes your understanding of strategies (singles and doubles playing strategies), as well as a general understanding of shot selections, potential probabilities, (based on your strengths, opponent's weaknesses, as well general understanding of percentages based on court position and geometric openings during any given rally), and understanding probable and potential outcomes.

Physical conditions include physical strength, endurance, quickness, and physical fortitude. (Fortitude relates to how well we play under the pressure of competition and within the various pressures that competition presents. This includes how we play when we are ahead, behind, or losing or gaining momentum.

Players who are indeed well-trained and well-prepared generally have a sincere confidence that comes from within their physical and emotional being. Those players who lack either quality usually attempt to display some false sense of confidence. Such false confidence is usually exposed as the pressure of competition becomes more intense.

Cocky Versus Arrogant

I have used the term "cocky" to describe this confidence in many lectures. A player who is "cocky" does not appear to mind a missed shot, as he or she KNOWS they will still hit winners when needed, make incredible shots later in the match, and, most importantly, will prevail when the match concludes. Depending on personalities, the exposition of this cocky attitude can be expressed in a variety of ways. From simple facial expressions to fist-pumping, whole body movements to vocal commands, most all competitive players have a unique way of expressing their confidence depending on each player's unique personality. The most stoic of expressions were those of Bjorn Borg, whose cockiness was expressed almost completely by a silent fortitude and eyes that exhumed defiance. In contrast, Jimmy Connors during the same era, expressed an almost "bulldog" fighting spirit that made his somewhat diminutive stature seem Goliath-like. More recently, observations of top players can include the fast-paced play of Andre Agassi who reemerged as one of the world's all-time tennis greats through the confidence of conditioning. Agassi, at the age of 30, took the knowledge of being in terrific shape and parlayed this confidence in becoming number one in the world after plunging to a career low ranking of 144. When watching Agassi play, one can't ignore his penchant for fast play, especially on changeovers. His brisk walk with head held high, eyes wide and expressive, and shoulders back with the demeanor of the proverbial conqueror—whether he is ahead in a match or behind—demonstrated his particular brand of cockiness. This is a far cry from his earlier years of rebellious and contemptuous on and off-court behavior.

Today's top player, Roger Federer, exemplifies a more Borg-like quietness in competition. His calm, outward emotional side is controlled like a powerful race car which is only racing in third gear…and winning! His emotions are almost never expressed until match point is in the bag and his work is done.

In talking about this cocky attitude, I try to distinguish it from an "arrogant" attitude. Arrogance, in my opinion, is a player who—among other things—talks trash both on and off the court. An arrogant attitude can be associated with cockiness as much as it can be associated with confidence. (Or overconfidence!) However, I sometimes associate arrogance with ignorance. A player who is an arrogant player will oftentimes fail to be a prepared player, (both mentally as well as mechanically). This is because arrogance tends not to promote readiness.

A classic example of this difference can be extolled through a match played back in 1987. That year, I had a team of mostly Asian boys at my school in Southern California. We were very good as we were ranked third in the CIF Southern Section of California. However, we were about to play a team from the wealthy community of Palm Desert, California in a first-round match of the CIF playoffs. The Palm Desert team was coached by a young man who either didn't know how high we were ranked, or thought too highly of his team to worry about the match. The Palm Desert team was composed of mostly large white guys who towered over my group of mostly Vietnamese

refugees, none of whom were ranked at that time individually. However, as a team we were extremely deep.

Figure &: Lleyton Hewitt always played with a fiery spirit, one that lifted the Australian to a top 10 player throughout the late 1990's and into the 2000's.

The Palm Desert team exited their nicely furnished team bus with laughter and snide remarks whispered amongst themselves when they noticed our team's size and lack of blond hair! It was actually embarrassing for me to witness their immediate arrogant attitudes, (which boarded on racial abhorrence), that preceded the match.

The Palm Desert team members all had the latest Fila tennis clothes and several expensive racquets, all which helped promote their arrogant appearance.

Needless to say, my team looked like the proverbial underdog at the onset of the match!

At the conclusion of the match, things looked altogether different. Our team soundly beat the Palm Desert team by the team score of 14 - 4 with most of the matches having a zero or a one recorded as the number of games our opponents won in most of the sets. The Palm Desert players now resembled whipped dogs, scampering speechlessly to their bus with their tails between their legs.

Were the Palm Desert boys arrogant at the beginning of the match? Absolutely. Were they cocky after loosing the early games of each of their matches? No. It was interesting to witness the immediate crumbling of such Goliath-like players under the weight of my team's confidence and, yes, even cocky play. My players never responded to the derogatory statements made by the Palm Desert players throughout the match. In fact, my players played almost careless in regards to their opponent's attitudes while simply hitting winners and high-fiving teammates or shouting praise to each other through the course of the match.

Figure 9: Great coaching includes knowing what to say as well as how to say it to his or her students. Here, Coach Dow Christiansen talks to his state-champion doubles team of Hunter Housley and Russ Christensen.

Mental Toughness

There are many definitions for mental toughness as it applies to tennis. Some might say it is the resistance to choking. Others might define it as solid concentration or not easily distracted. These would certainly be in the right ballpark.

However, mental toughness is much more than what those definitions might infer. Through years of coaching and observing thousands of players, young and old, I prefer the following definition:

Mental Toughness is a conditioned and positive response to adversity.

If you look at every competitive match, any set that has something riding on it; these matches all offer some level of adversity. Whether it is the match itself or the points within the match, there is potential conflict riding on every stroke. Certainly, there are variables that add or detract from the severity of pressure each match or point contains. Match variables could include whether or not an opponent is recognized as a threat, what the match means for the player, (or for their team if it is a team match). If it is a tournament, variables include the round the match is being played in, seeded players, next round opponents, and others. Pressure point variables include what the game or set score is, points that are played in tie-breakers, points played after "momentum shift" points, (more on Momentum Shifts later!), and certainly game and match points carry significant pressure. Because of these variables, Mental Toughness can be used to describe how well a player reacts and responds to such variables.

It is always interesting to watch how players play under many of the diverse scenarios mentioned above. Some players play great almost always when nothing is riding on the outcome of the match. However, give the match some extrinsic reward and these same players crumble from the moment the first serve is struck. An excellent example of this behavior can often be witnessed when players put some monetary value on the outcome of a match. I seldom encourage betting on the outcome of matches. However, when money is sometimes the reward—no matter how much or how little—the real mental character of each performer is often revealed! (Golfing is notorious for this practice! Those of you who have played golf and played perhaps a simple betting game such as skins can relate to this pressure! A three foot putt can feel short or long depending on how much is riding on a make or a miss!)

Sometime when you play a singles or doubles match put a little wager on the match to test this theory. It can be as innocuous as having the losers buying the winner a soda or sandwich at the end of the match. Note how the character of each player changes compared to playing a simple social match. It can be a noticeable difference, or it might be so subtle that little change is detected. However, this little test can reveal a great deal about players and their state of mental toughness!

The truly mentally secure players are often the ones seen as not being affected by the added pressure of a bet. Some players might actually play more focused and intense. Some might quite literally, fall apart at the seams. This kind of pressure is most revealing.

However, there are other kinds of pressure that tennis players encounter from different situations. Sometimes, the worst kind of pressure is encountered when you are about to play someone who you know you should beat. (And especially one in which the audience knows you should beat your opponent!) This time of match sets up expectations which sometimes makes players focus on the aspect of winning instead of playing each shot, independent of the expected

outcome. When this happens, players often find themselves lost in the emotional and expanded confidence that is dominant in such a match. All of the sudden, the underdog scores a few points, and self-doubt and the fear of choking can take root in the player who is expected to win. I will talk about 'fear' and how fear can control our physical and emotional state in a moment.

Part I

How to Condition the Response

"Mental Toughness is a conditioned and positive response to adversity." Dave Smith

A Conditioned, Positive Response: This means that it can be learned. And I have not seen a single player who was not capable of developing Mental Toughness.

I have witnessed players who were not *successful* at developing Mental Toughness; some of these players where members of my own teams who had developed phenomenal strokes, incredible serves, lightning fast feet and terrific agility. We have all seen this type of player…the one who can drill with the best players, hit 100 mile-per-hour serves, and hit targets with ground strokes off the ball machine…

But they can't win a match.

What is this player missing that others, players who might possess less natural ability, have and are using to beat him with?

You know the answer: Mental Toughness.

So how do you learn—or teach—Mental Toughness…now that you know it can be learned?

You start with how you practice.

Figure 10: Coaching and Listening: Players have an equal responsibility to listen carefully to their coach. Learning the game and playing it skillfully is a two-way street between coaches and players.

Let me ask you a question: Do you create adversity and overcome it in every practice shot for your students? No? Well, most coaches don't. Building on stroke foundations with consequences based on performance might be 'politically incorrect' but such practice within drills increases the exposure of pressure and gets a player learning how to handle pressure early on. How can you add this element to your practice? Many of these practice tips have been discussed in detail within each chapter on stroke production.

The practice techniques discussed in this book that help build mental toughness include counting consecutive shots and the use of targets. All the areas of practice should be thought of as "mentally conditioning" your mind. They not only help you increase your stroke production, they also will make you a more mentally tough player. But this is just part of your mental toughness training.

Learning mental toughness is not like reading a book and memorizing some deeply affecting phrase. Mental toughness is actually a "result" of the hard work and playing experiences done within the overall progression of learning the game. In fact, mental toughness is generally a "response" that is seldom planned or expected. Most players who are mentally tough seldom talk about it, seldom think about it, and seldom play specifically addressing it. However, while in practice, most champions do indeed train for it. By working mentally tough drills, by setting up competitive situations, and environments, and by improving the mind through reading and mental discoveries, a player will indeed improve his or her mental toughness as a result of these conscious efforts.

Coaches must recognize these key elements and help his or her students train for it in some way each and every day. The most successful coaches are those who create opportunities as often as they can within the practice setting for both individuals as well as for team players.

Part II

How to take the response into the match

The ability to add mental toughness aspects to your practice will undoubtedly translate into a more mentally tough match player. But there is more.

As you become better prepared for your matches, you will find it difficult to accept defeat. My favorite coaching phrase is: "The harder you work, the harder it is to fail." Certainly, any hard work you perform will make the goal of that hard work that much more valuable to you. However, don't confuse the simple concept of "hard work" as being the gist of the lesson. Otherwise, you might find yourself discovering another phrase: Lesson in futility! Working hard on faulty form will only make changing that form more difficult when you realize that the faulty form is limiting you. Tennis mechanics at every level must be clearly understood so that you will be working "hard" on the very form that will give you the best results.

Once you have put in the hard work, the next step is implementation of proper form and strategy in competition. How often do we see tennis players working on specific shots or strokes in practice only to completely abandon those things in competition! It is no wonder that one of the first books on the mind in competition was a book dealing with the mental side of tennis!

Back in 1972, Timothy Gallwey's ***The Inner Game of Tennis*** was a revolutionary revelation in dealing with sports psychology. So popular was Gallwey's book and approach that over 700,000 books were sold around the world! I highly recommend that tennis players today, pick up a copy of his book if not already in possession of it.

In Gallwey's book, he describes "Self 1" and "Self 2". Self 1 is our controlling voice, the critic. Self 2 is the self who performs. Gallwey says, "The more you trust self 2, the better you will play." When we let Self 1 dominate ourselves, (and our minds), in competition, we open ourselves to all the variables that tend to destroy our mental toughness. Those variables include:

- ***Tanking:*** This is when a player simply "gives up". This is the "excuse maker", the whiner, and the complainer. Players resort to tanking to absolve themselves of the pain that accompanies losing. Players who tank matches don't hurt as much when they lose because it protects our ego. This is because the tanker has a built-in excuse: "I didn't win because I didn't try." We can face our friends and peers with the false sense of reason. "I could have won if I really wanted to." This is a common statement made by a tanker.
- ***Anger:*** This is when a player allows his or her emotions to control them. Showing anger, like tanking, is an emotional response designed to protect the ego. Again, anger provides a player with the excuse: "I didn't win because I was so mad." Anger also projects the false image of a player who is trying. Instead of focusing their energy on the match, the angry player focuses on how he is observed and perceived by others.
- **Choking:** This is the emotion which all competitors hate. It is a physiological response to fear and doubt. When a player doubts himself, the results are painful to experience and to watch! Everything seems to move too fast, players can't think straight, and there is a feeling of anxiety. When fear consumes us, the simple seems hard; the logical becomes illogical; the present seems like the past. In one sense, however, choking is a far better response than anger or tanking. This is because at least with choking, we care and we are trying. Choking is more of an innate response to competition than a conscious choice. While anger and tanking are sometimes chosen avenues for many in a competitive match, choking is almost never an elected response!

When players gain confidence, their ability to play in "the Moment" is increased. That is, they are focused on the ball and the moment…the "here and now" as I like to call it. Highly skilled players learn through a variety of experiences to play tennis without focusing on the detrimental tendencies of anger, tanking or choking. Those experiences usually include both a practice foundation based on the principles I have introduced in this book, and the playing experiences that are gained through a variety of competitive environments, many of which I have described in **Chapter 10**. A player simply can't accelerate through lessons to obtain the necessary aspect of actual playing experience. All players will have varying degrees of success in gaining the necessary mental aspects to playing under pressure. Some players might be ahead of the mental game through having some previous sporting experiences. Others, can have a predisposition for becoming mentally tough while others simply have to work hard at it for a long period of time. I have found that the mental capacity of players, those who can play tough when the pressure is on, is more of an inbred than the athleticism necessary to simply learn proper tennis strokes. More players have overcome limited natural physical conditions faster and easier than players who have to overcome limitations related to the mental game!

There is an excellent axiom that I read in the book "Zen in the Martial Arts" by Joe Hymas, which is related to this issue of playing "in the moment:"

> ***"Seize the moment: You must learn to live in the present, not in the future or the past. Zen teaches that life must be seized at the moment. By living in the present, you are in full***

contact with yourself and your environment; your energy is not dissipated and is always available."

Tennis players who play competitive matches with any part of their mind focused on the outcome of any match will not play within their "competitive moment." Examples of situations that will take players out of their "competitive moment" include:

- Worrying about what the results of the current match may mean
- Still thinking about a great shot hit
- Still thinking about a bad shot hit
- Thinking about your next match while still playing within another match
- Worrying about what will happen if they lose this game/point/set/match
- Thinking about how great they are playing
- Thinking that they are going to win the match: Thinking that they should easily win a match before it begins
- Fuming about a bad call made
- Thinking about the lucky shot your opponent hit
- Thinking about the lucky shot YOU hit

The most common example of these listed is when a player serves an ace. I don't know what the statistics are, but it is very common for a player to double fault on the subsequent point following an ace. The reason is really quite simple: The server is conscious of the ace and believes he or she can do it again. The lingering memory of the ace is still strong in the mind of the server. Instead of focusing on what exactly the server needs to do on the next serve, the memory of the ace is still the predominant mental thought. Thus, the server following an ace does not focus on specifically what he or she wants to do on the next serve. If the first serve is thus missed, the player often focuses now on not double-faulting…especially since he just aced his opponent on the previous point. Again, instead of focusing on what serve the server wants to deliver, they are thinking on the future. (Wanting to ace again followed by thinking about not double-faulting!)

Dealing with Fear

Fear is perhaps the most powerful negative emotion that can affect us on a tennis court. Fear of losing, fear of winning, fear of looking bad, or, the fear of the unknown can all have a direct effect on our ability to play well. Most athletes know that they perform at their best when they are loose, focused, and aggressive. Fear can sabotage these three key elements and make a person play tense, distracted and apprehensive.

Jeff Greenwald expresses this concept of fear in his program, "Fearless Tennis:"

Everyone talks about self-talk; that it needs to be positive and upbeat. Sure, that can help. But, more powerful yet is the ability to come on the court truly ready to play absolute fearless tennis. I believe every one of us, somewhere in our lives, has been a fighter, has toughed it out through a difficult situation—or maybe we just want to be tough. The trick is, on the court, not to be victimized by the first and automatic thought that may come into your head: "Oh, god, he's ranked, or seeded, or misses nothing in the warm-up. I'm going to get creamed!" Go down that train track and you know where you're going to get off: at the Big 'L-Stop'…embarrassed and angry at yourself. Instead, let the second thought surface: Wait a

minute. I can do this. I belong here. I'm just going to go out and enjoy the heck out of it." Amazing how you can play when you feel that way.

Dealing with the Ego

Notice all three of the negative response variables (tanking, anger, and choking), center on the player's ego. When a player is concerned with his ego, tanking and anger are the first to show their ugly head! I have used a phrase for years as a general statement to developing better mental tennis:

"When we play and practice not to satisfy our ego but to satisfy our goals, we allow the best tennis to emerge."

Think about this phrase. If we are concerned with our egos, we are concerned with what others think about us. If, however, we are concerned with our goals, we are then focused on things related to our development as a tennis player. If we lose a match, ego-centered players will look for excuses. Goal-centered players will look for ways to learn from the loss.

The ego can sometimes be used to help reach goals. When we want to prove something because of our ego, we then almost subconsciously recognize the value of goals. Coaches can use the ego of his or her team to accomplish this. I will discuss this in detail in a moment.

Players trained in elementary stoke patterns, (those not recognized as skilled or progressive), and recognizing that they need a mental change are often victimized by their own ego. Let me give you a scenario:

Julie, who is 35 years old, is a 3.5 player. (Ten years at this level!) She has finally broken down and receives accurate tennis instruction on her serve/volley/backhand. She has worked in practice on her new stroke and knows what she should do to hit the ball correctly within the parameters of the new technique. However, when she gets into a match, she goes right back to hitting her old, inferior strokes.

Why?

Julie felt that if she tried her new strokes there would be a perception of failure: If she used her old strokes, she believed she could at least compete at the 3.5 level in which she was used to playing. So, Julie let her ego dictate what she did in the competition. Instead of forgoing the ego and making or missing with her new strokes in match play, (and, thus, improving each shot in the process!), she took the "ego-easy" way out!

Sadly, anyone in this same situation, as she continues repeating this scenario throughout her playing days, they will continue to play at their same level essentially for their lifetime.

Intention Drive versus Results Driven

For any shot in tennis, the object of the shot has little to do with the outcome of the match, yet a great deal to do with the eventual outcome of any particular point. Thus, a player who is focused on the ramifications of winning or losing is focused on the results or outcome of a match. This type of focal attention prevents a player from focusing on the more immediate and more important type of attention: INTENT.

When you hit any ball in a match or in practice, the shot should have a specific intention. That is, a mental focus of what specifically you want to do with the ball. Intentions can be as simple as getting the ball over the net for beginners. Or, intentions can involve very complex shot-making skills. Examples of these complex shots can be a sharp angle passing shot on the run that involves hitting a 'reverse forehand' finish with significant topspin but with minimal ball velocity. Skilled players through extensive experience and practice, group these complexities into a single mindset. As players advance, this grouping of more complex actions becomes a single thought or intention. Beginners using the Advanced Foundation may have to make conscious connections within any given intention. They may only be able to concentrate on the racquet path. Or, they may be ready to engage the proper footwork with the reverse forehand finish. Regardless of the level of experience, each player must have a clear intention of what shot is desired. Too many players allow the ball and their perceived lack of time to dictate the shot…namely, just trying to get the ball back!

This intention takes the mind away from the potential outcome of the shot and places it where it should be: on making the shot. When coaching, always ask your players, "what is your intention?" This is an important exercise when coaching. One of the problems when coaches or instructors focus only on stroke production, the student fails to develop critical thinking skills that are related to recognizing what shot is the best shot in any given situation. Thus, asking this question of intent forces the student to recognize where their mind was when attempting a shot.

The more a player practices the "intention focus," the more it becomes the way the player will play in competition. Highly skilled players can falter in match play because they lose this focus of intent. They become focused on other issues, (those I have mentioned earlier), issues that have nothing to do with hitting a successful shot. Thus, all coaches and instructors must remember this aspect of mental tennis when training players. When the intent is clear, fear, anger, and ego will seldom control a player's emotional condition.

Seeing your Future

Have you ever noticed that there are some players who seem to win more than their fair share of matches? You know the players; those who seem nonchalant even if they fall behind in a match only to watch their opponent eventually crumble? Among the pros, there are many whom we can associate with this seemingly fearless mindset: Pete Sampras, Roger Federer, Chris Evert, Tracy Austin, Monica Seles, Bjorn Borg, Rod Laver just to name a few.

Figure 11: Play as if you have seen your future; a future that has "success" spelled out for you. If you play like you know this outcome, you will provide yourself the opportunity to play your best tennis.

Using your own "Crystal Ball"

If you owned a magic crystal ball, one that purveyed the future with perfect accuracy, and you gazed into it before any given match, how would you play that match if the crystal ball pronounced you the winner? You KNOW you are going to win. Would you be apprehensive? Would you panic if you fell behind? Would you over-think about winning if you were ahead?

The answer I believe would be "NO" to all of these. Why? Because you already knew you were going to win! So why let any emotions control you or your game. You would actually be free to enjoy each point, enjoy the sensation of hitting the ball—not to win or lose—but to create opportunities that are the essence of "Playing Tennis." And, for anyone who has played tennis for any period of time, there is nothing better than going out and playing a great match (win or lose!) and feel like we played our best tennis ever. We call this level of performance "playing in the zone" or playing "unconscious" tennis.

Oftentimes, we play someone head and shoulders better than us. We go out and play some of the best tennis of our life while losing to this far superior player. What allowed us to play well? Most recognize correctly that "we had nothing to lose." In a real sense, we are playing in the "zone" within our current playing abilities. When we have nothing to lose, we again are not concerned with winning or losing. In a sense, we have seen our crystal ball's message again: "You're going to lose!" But, instead of hitting to avoid losing, (which we already know we are); we are hitting to succeed in individual points. No different than playing a match where we know we will win, we are anticipating each point as an opportunity to enjoy, shine, and/or have a great rally.

Obviously, we don't own a real crystal ball. But, if we could learn to play as if we did—and as if we KNEW we were going to win (or lose!), we could create this mindset of playing in the zone…even if we fell behind or are playing someone superior to us.

When you play tennis against a player you know you can beat, you seldom press; you often play at a slower, more relaxed pace; if you lose a point, or even a game, there is no panic because you know you are going to win.

We need to approach all of our matches with this same mindset. Because the alternative seldom produces our best tennis! In watching a lot of junior players, you often see them ride the roller-coaster of emotions: From fist-pumping when they win an important point to racquet-throwing outbursts or tantrums when they start losing. Even in more complacent players, you can read their emotions in their face: from disinterest to despair, from anxious to annoyed, the eyes are often the window into a player's mind.

What can we expect?

Obviously, we can't expect to win every match we play. This would be both unrealistic as well as most improbable. However, if we keep in our mind we have "already won the match", even if we are way behind, you give yourself at least an opportunity to make a comeback…one that would be nearly impossible should you fall into the more debilitating, emotionally-driven reactions that we often see in competitive tennis.

Even as you may not come back and win every match, by maintaining a calm, relaxed emotional state, you create the opportunity for success when facing a down-turn in any given match. Your opponent may start to freak out when you demonstrate this calm mindset. You simply look at your opponent and say to yourself, "I've already won!"

What if I'm winning?

This mindset helps when you are ahead as well. Too many players who get a lead start to play "not to lose" and end up changing the very game that got them the lead! When you play as if you already know you're going to win, you don't end up getting all excited about winning a particular point, game or even a first set! On the contrary, by maintaining a calm, confident attitude, you simply maintain your style and level of play even when you are ahead.

Watch Mr. Federer

Roger Federer is a modern day classic practitioner of this mindset. Ever notice that he doesn't let a lot of emotion out during his competitive matches? Does that mean he keeps it all inside? No. There is a difference between maintaining a calm, cool composure through knowing you're going to win, and trying to subdue emotional outbursts. The difference is, when you play as if you know your going to win, there is no build up of emotions. They are essentially non-existent. Yet, with that said, we all know that emotions seem to have a mind of their own. That is why you need to play as if you already know your going to win; because if you do, winning and losing individual points are meaningless to the outcome of the match. Thus, a great shot or a lousy shot won't carry as much weight as you would give such a point if you were playing to specifically win or to keep from losing.

Figure 12: Roger Federer not only does not appear to let things bother him in a match, but his on-court persona projects a perception of someone who "knows" he is going to win…even if he falls behind in a match.

Roger Federer seems to remain calm and only expresses his motion of accomplishment at the conclusion of any match. Borg would do the same. Chris Evert was called the Ice Queen because she seemed to look at you with an icy stare, never afraid to look her opponent in the eye; and her eyes spoke for her: "I am going to win."

Of course we all have different personalities and we need to recognize them and channel the id and ego into productive means. Jimmy Connors was a fiery competitor, but this was his normal level of intensity. As a champion, Jimmy also walked and reacted to adversity and conflict with the trot of a champion-expected-to-be. John McEnroe also had an air about him that seemed to transmit his confidence even though he was prone to outbursts and emotional tirades a time or two!

On-Court Tools

Scott Ford, a fellow contributing writer for TennisOne and one of today's leaders in developing tools for improving mental conditioning, has developed some of today's 'cutting edge' understandings of how to train the mind along with the physical development of a student.

In Scott's "Parallel Mode Processing" discussions, his study of how the eyes track moving object along with how to focus the mind on the ball, or more specifically, the "hitting window" has helped thousands of players understand how to play in the moment.

> ***Playing tennis "in the zone" is a remarkable experience. Billy Jean King once said that being in the zone "is what the game is all about." If you have played the game for any length of time, you have probably been in the zone a few times, maybe more. Looking back, you will remember the ease with which you played the game, the surety with which you struck the ball, the control you seemed to have not only over your own game but over your opponent as well. You will remember how every part of your game seemed to come together into a unified whole. Your concentration was total, your visual awareness heightened, your anticipation uncanny, your timing perfect. At times it even seemed like the ball was moving in slow motion, getting bigger as it moved toward you.***
>
> ***But there is one more thing you will remember if you have ever been in the zone. You will remember how difficult it was to reproduce the zone the next time you went out to play. No matter how hard you tried, no matter how hard you concentrated, you just couldn't get back into the zone.***

Without getting into the specifics of Scott's work, (which is well worth your time and effort to learn more about by going to **www.arete-sports.com),** I will try to summarize how I use his Parallel Mode Processing in helping my students.

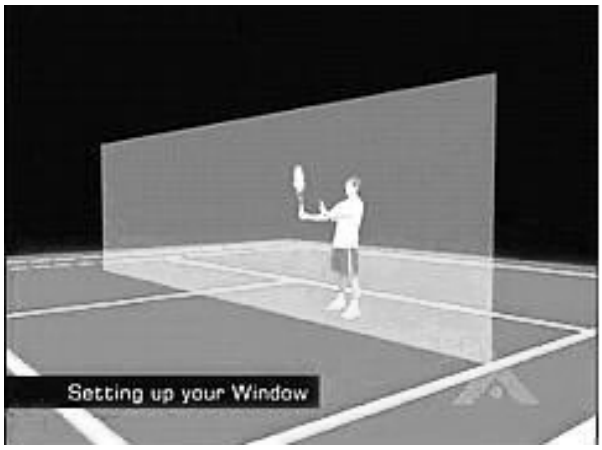

Figure 13: Your "hitting window" is the optimal point of contact for any given shot. The goal is to focus not on the incoming ball but on making contact with the ball in this hitting window.

Hitting Zone

The idea is to not focus your eyes on the moving ball but on your hitting "window"…the zone in which you will make optimal contact with the ball. Because your eyes can not keep a moving object, (that of an object moving at the typical speeds of a moving tennis ball), in focus, the eye will do a series of 'jumps' called saccades. Saccades basically when the eye looses the

focus of the moving ball, it will jump ahead of the ball and let the ball almost 'catch up' to the eye so that the focus of the ball stays longer within the center of your retina, (called the fovea).

The saccades can help identify those easy shots at the net where you swear you were watching the ball and you swing and either miss it, miss time it, miss-hit it, or bury it into the bottom of the net!

The point is to bring your primary focus to the hitting zone instead of trying to fixate your eyes upon the moving ball. You're going to watch the ball, no question. However, your mental focus will be specifically on the hitting area.

Scott's instruction to do this is to identify the hitting window into three areas: In front of ideal contact, ideal contact point, and late or behind the ideal contact point. Next, when a player is working on hitting specific balls, the student first verbally announces "Yes" if they indeed hit the ball in the optimal contact point, and "No" if they recognize they made contact either in front of or behind this ideal zone.

The next level is to verbally identify the contact points as "1" if the contact was early, "2" if the contact was perfect and "3" if the contact was late. This focuses the student on the specific hitting zone instead of subjective, outcome-based criteria.

One of the many factors that helps players when they use Scott's Parallel Mode Processing is what I call the "Challenge Factor." That is, when a player is focused on keeping every ball in the hitting window, they challenge every ball instead of evaluating any given ball as being too difficult to reach or one that is possible. Any moment of such evaluation delays the player's important first step. We see this all the time, especially when a net player is lobbed. The first response is usually looking up and judging whether it is a ball that can be hit as an overhead or one that will need to be run down. This momentary pause in looking up, instead of challenging the overhead, (by assuming ALL lobs can be hit as overheads and preparing by turning and taking the racquet back immediately), is that second of time that makes most make-able overheads impossible.

There is far more information that Scott has documented and released in his DVD, "Welcome to the Zone" a comprehensive study of all the elements of Parallel Mode Processing. I highly recommend the coach, pro and/or tennis parent study this very compelling and authoritative look at ways to improve mental tennis.

Tournament Tennis

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, playing tournament tennis is an absolute must for any player wanting to Master Tennis. The reason for this is that there is no other method that replicates the pressure and importance of playing tennis. In most tournaments, if you lose a match, you're done, (or you're thrust into consolation rounds). This kind of pressure is hard to emulate in practice. The closest I have come to matching this pressure is through team challenge matches. Challenges present a similar pressure due to the fact if a player loses their challenge; it usually costs them a position on their team ladder. Challenges that determine whether the winner will play varsity or junior varsity are especially pressure-packed!

Improvement Roller coaster

For almost every individual on this planet, improvement in anything is seldom a steady, progressive state that can be measured in equal, incremental steps. If anything, improvement in most skill-related sports occurs in consistent inconsistencies! Tennis is no exception to this statement. In fact, tennis improvement is probably indeed one of the most inconsistent sports in which players can

expect to see some essence of steady improvement. One day, a player can be playing so well, they can't believe they can possibly lose. On another day, oftentimes (and sometimes on the very next playing date!), players can experience their worst performance ever. The amount of variance between these highs and lows is usually controlled through a player's mental toughness. In other words, players who are mentally tough don't seesaw between these two playing descriptions as far. The most mentally tough also don't stay down very long. And finally, the mentally tough player does not allow bad days to affect them as long or as deeply as a mentally weak player does.

Figure 14: Improvement in tennis, like any skilled activity, is much like a rollercoaster: a player one day can play great, and the next time, nothing seems to work. However, those who learn tennis within the Advanced Foundation, discover far fewer "down days" and more of a steady progressive sense of improvement.

Cycle of Improvement

Improvement must be recognized not in a subjective acknowledgement of indication, but in qualitative and quantitative measurements. These values for improvement include:

- Hitting more consistent
- Hitting harder, more consistently
- Hitting with more angles, more consistently
- Hitting with more variety, more consistently

In a nutshell, becoming a better player means "hitting more effective shots more consistently."

It may be obvious, but this issue of continued improvement can be measured primarily by a player's ability to utilize consistent and reliable swing patterns. If there are flaws in a swing pattern, in form or in footwork, the ability for a player to hit "more consistently" in each of these areas I just mentioned, will be diminished. Thus, it will be critical for every player to work towards this quality. In tennis, this procedure is often referred to as a "roller coaster" as it quite adeptly describes the issue of how most tennis players experience improvement. The "Cycles of Improvement" that follow this pattern of tennis playing, are founded on the concept of ***considerations***.

Considerations

Consider that when a new stroke is first attempted, the body must coordinate many unfamiliar or uncomfortable patterns. Any player who has been playing tennis for any period of time will recognize that change is difficult. One of the whole objectives for this book is to eliminate, or at the very least, diminish the need for making changes. Of course, if a player has indeed been playing tennis prior to reading this book, then change is inevitable! So, assuming that change is needed, almost every single player will go through a challenging period: Trying to keep from doing what is comfortable—yet wrong—and do that which is right, however difficult and uncomfortable. Not only

are these changes difficult and uncomfortable…they will be relatively unsuccessful for some period time!

This pattern of adjustment will be an ongoing experience. The good news is that as players come nearer their Advanced Foundation, both the difficulty and the frustration will diminish.

Yet, all players must understand that improvement and perception of success will rise and fall like our proverbial roller coaster. Some days you will find tennis easy and flowing, other days it will feel forced and unfamiliar. This is common, even for advanced players. Beginners often look at advanced players as think, "wow, these guys are so good, how can THEY have a bad day playing?" Yet, even for advanced players the PERCEPTION of how they are playing—to themselves—can reach peaks and valleys similar to those experiences any other level of player might experience. Remember that as players become more proficient, the EXPECTATIONS rise for those individuals. No longer are advanced players simply satisfied in getting their serve in or hitting the ball over the net! These players now look to do more with the ball. This means greater chance of failure…unless the player has developed progressive strokes as they themselves develop. (Which is another reason why and Advanced Foundation is so very important.) As progressive strokes become mastered, the chance of failure is diminished.

General Playing Strategies: Playing SMART Tennis

As we have mentioned, hitting strategies will change as a player progresses and improves. Likewise, playing strategies—or a player's "game plan"—can change dramatically as a player's skill advances. Typically, the hierarchy of playing strategies evolves into more complex and defined methodologies, (as they apply to the targeting of each shot), as a player's hitting ability progresses. Obviously, our playing strategies will change not only when our own abilities increase, but also when our opponent's abilities improve!

Thus, in addition to the phrase that describes more skilled play, "hit more effective shots more consistently," we must also consider this phrase:

"DEFEND more effective shots more consistently and effectively."

If an opponent can't get a ball over the net to save their life, then the only strategy we should be concerned with would be to simply "get the ball in play!" However, when opponents meet or exceed certain playing abilities and strategies, we must adopt a more effective game plan based on our own abilities.

Playing Within Oneself

This is an important concept for all coaches to stress and train players within if they hope to have their students win matches as well as improve. Too often, players attempt to hit shots that are low-percentage for their skill level. Like addicted gamblers, some players, because they successfully executed ONE of these low-percentage shots once, they think they can hit it again. Unfortunately, the reality of the matter is that the few times they were successful in making such shots it was more a matter of luck than skill! Even though it is important to push oneself to try higher levels of skill-related shot-making during both practice and match play, it is important to try them within the bounds of proper form and logical speed. Players, those who often over-hit balls, sacrifice balance, form, and footwork in favor of seeking raw power.

Figure 15: Coaches often need to remind players to "play within themselves." Too many players, in the heat of competition, lose this concept and try to hit shots that are low-percentage for that individual.

As a coach, I often encourage my players to actually hope an opponent attempts—and makes—a low-percentage shot. This early success breeds additional attempts, most usually resulting in failure. Consider a player who rips a down-the-line winner early in the match; he attempts the shot four more times, missing three and making it once. The element of making the shot will encourage him to try it some more. Yet, at making it only one time out of four, he is only going to win 25% of the points based on this shot. You will win 75% of the points—and the match, if he continues. You can see that success that is not looked at logically, can make you look great…but lose a lot of matches!

Another thing as a coach or instructor you must do is create a balance of your players: they must strive to hit proper strokes as often as possible in competitive matches. However, while in actual competition, there is a recognition that players will want to play shots offering the greatest opportunity to win. (Especially true with team matches where winning a match can affect the entire team's record or score.)

Players must accept the fact that they will make errors even when they attempt correct form. If they continue to revert back to elementary or 'safe' tennis strokes, those which the player feels comfortable and confident with, then they will fail to improve within the bounds of skilled advanced play.

The answer to this enigma is to employ new techniques within speeds and balance that gives the player the best chance of success. Too often, players learn a new technique and then try to rip balls with it thinking they either have it down or because they were used to swinging with such panache with their old technique. Two things are bound to happen when a player swings too big: simple failure or old technique patterns sneaking in when the player swings at their old swing speed. Either way, the player will not gain a lot of success.

This is why I say that players must "Play within oneself." If you learn something new, use it, but use it at speeds that help you master it. It is like taking baby steps before walking, then walking before jogging, and then jogging before sprinting.

Singles and Doubles Playing Strategies

The Advanced Foundation does not just apply to strokes and footwork techniques. There is a nearly parallel condition of players learning "simple" strategies for singles and doubles, often predicated on their limited strokes. However, there is a great deal of bad information and assumptions that are being perpetuated among high school coaches and parents who work with kids. Like learning an inferior stroke initially, it can be equally difficult and frustrating to "re-

learn" strategies that players employ in singles and doubles competition. And like the Advanced Foundation understanding that players will evolve their strokes and techniques as they evolve as players, strategies will incorporate personal idiosyncrasies that will evolve as players discover personal preferences, strengths in their game and weaknesses.

However, like the Advanced Foundation, players should learn the basic "rules" of singles and doubles play so they don't make silly mistakes that come simply out of ignorance. So, I will be passing on to you the foundation for playing strategies that I consider part of the Advanced Foundation of learning skilled tennis.

Doubles Strategies

There are some very clear faults that players unwittingly do when they don't understand doubles strategies and situations. Such players have often heard some simple bit of advice and assumed it is a rule that is always employed.

For example, we often hear the advice, "Close in on the net." This advice has situations and variables that will mandate better times to attack the net and other times that you will not close in.

Fault One: *Returning partner closes in before partner has hit a good shot away from the net player.*

This is so common that I listed it first. The situation is the partner of the returning player stands at the service line and as soon as the serve lands in, they start charging the net, BEFORE their partner has even hit the ball.

There are many reasons why the returning partner stands at the service line when their partner is returning the serve. One is to be able to call the serve long if it is long. But, more importantly, the reason for this defensive position (as opposed to being close to the net) is to prepare to defend a shot to the opposing net player. Because you don't know if your partner is going to hit the ball away from the net opponent, and you certainly don't know if they are going to be poaching, you must prescribe to this rule:

"Assume the worst case scenario."

As soon as the serve lands in the box, the partner of the returning player should shift his or her attention to the net player. This is the only player who can literally 'hurt' you! If you partner goes down the line, (either by design or by accident), and you are rushing to the net, you leave a gap between you and your partner so big that the opposing net player only needs to block the volley through this enormous opening.

Likewise, should your partner hit the ball crosscourt and the opposing net player is poaching, you are likely to get a face full of fuzz if you are standing close to the net in front of this player who has poached on your partner's shot!

Once you have seen that your partner's ball has passed the net man, THEN you move in.

This same rule applies anytime a partner is back on the baseline and you are the net player. If a ball goes back to your partner, you shuffle a few steps back near the service line, assume a defensive position; assume the worse case scenario, and pay attention to your opposing net player.

Variables: There are some variables that will effect how much you move up and back in this sequence I have just described:

1. If your partner has a very strong return, your opponent has a weak serve, you can cheat a little. However, I still would never automatically go towards the net before my partner has hit the return clear of the net player…you never know if the net man may poach.
2. If the serve is really strong, or your partner has a weakness on the return, you may want to stay back behind the service line in a more defensive position.

Fault 2: *Not moving with the ball*

If your partner hits a wide return, you will want to move in and COVER YOUR ALLEY. Depending on several factors, how much alley you cover will be dependent on how quick you are, how good your opponent's potential shot is down the line, and how good you volley. Also, there is what I call a "reverse poach", a situation where you want to 'bait' your opponent to hit down your alley by specifically leaving it open. Then, as your opponent starts his or her swing, you move towards your alley in the opposite direction as a conventional poach, (which would have you moving over to your partner's side of the court).

Fault 3: *Always moving the same regardless of opponent's style of play.*

This means, if you have a team that likes to lob a lot, what is the point of closing in so close to the net that you make it easy for them to hit their best shot? Instead of closing in too tight, only close in a step or two. If you have reasonable volley skills and quickness, you should still be able to move towards a floater or a reachable poach by staying back a few steps further off the net. By recognizing this pattern, you can make your opponents have to hit a better lob to get it over your head which means more errors. And by staying back a step or two, you are able to reach far more overheads when they are reachable.

Fault 4: *Not putting the ball where you should*

The ability to hit a volley, groundstroke, lob or drop-shot well is sometimes meaningless if you don't know WHERE to hit such good strokes! There are some basic rules of doubles that can make the difference between winning and losing. I have seen many players who didn't possess as good of strokes as their opponents did, soundly defeat such players because of the knowledge of ball placement. Like court coverage, it is important to know where to hit the ball as much as it is to know where you need to be physically on the court.

The following section will discuss the optimal hitting areas for typical doubles points based on ball/player location as well as opponent's locations.

Percentage Doubles

There are two simple phrases that define general percentage doubles:

When at the net: **"Short to short"**
When at the baseline: **"Long to long"**

While these general statements have a number of exceptions, following this simple advice can help anyone stay in a doubles point.

Short to Short

This concept is when you have a put-away while at the net; if you have an easy net shot, hit this ball through the opposing net player. A common error I see beginning to intermediate players make is when they have this easy ball, they hit it to the back player instead of through the net player. The back player is the one most likely to have time to respond to your hard-hit volley and will have a better chance at returning this shot. Hitting through the net player (**Figure 16, "B"**) is not considered poor sportsmanship or bad etiquette. On the contrary, at higher levels of skilled play, it is expected to occur.

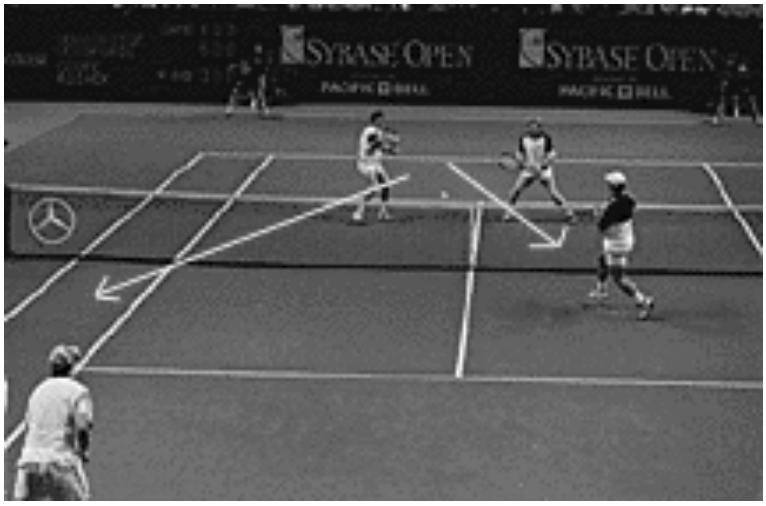

Figure 16: If net player "A" has a high volley opportunity, the optimal shot is at or near player "B". If the this same volley is too low, below the net at contact, then the second choice is to hit a sharp angle volley "C". Hitting down the middle while is a fairly safe and reasonable shot, the back player is likely to be able to cover this shot if it is not hit with good pace. And, in this shot pictured here, the likely hood of player "A" pulling the shot more towards the back player is very likely because of the volley being an "inside" volley.

An alternative to hitting through the net player is to angle a lower ball back across the court away from both the net player and the back player. (**Figure 16 "C")** Playing the ball down the middle (**Figure 16 "D"),** increases the chance that the back player could respond and retrieve this shot, thus, keeping the point alive.

Long to Long

If you are a back player in doubles, it is far better percentage to hit away from the net player whenever possible and keep the ball to the deep player, (hence the "long to long" name of this strategy). Unless you are in possession of a killer groundstroke, (or you are playing an incredibly weak net opponent), hitting to the net player is a sure way to get your own net partner killed!

Exception

Short to Long: (**Figure 17**) If you are at the net and are hit a low ball towards your feet, you will need to hit the ball up to clear the net. Because of this, you will not want to hit this ball towards the net opponent. Hitting the ball upward to clear the net will likely produce a ball that this opposing net player will be able to hit down…your throat! Any low or defensive shot should be hit to the back player.

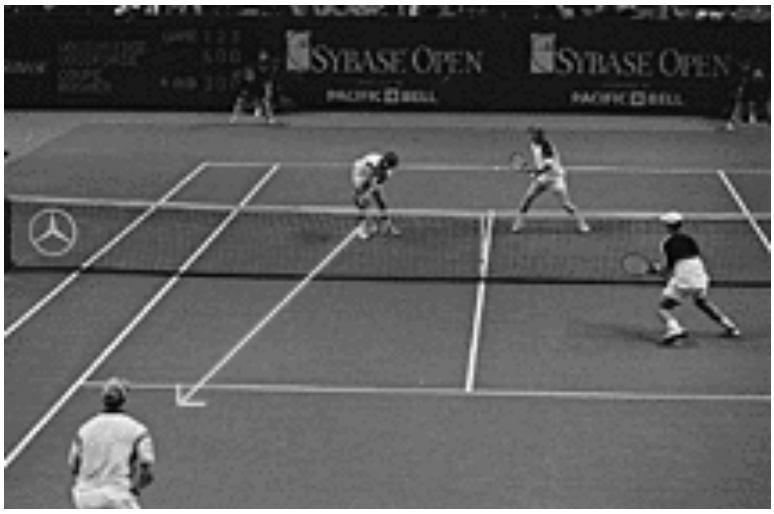

Figure 17: A low volley that can't be hit through the net player must be played conservatively. The best shot is to play the ball back to the deep player and hope for a higher ball to put away next time.

Coaching Doubles Strategies

It is important to train these exact shots so that players will automatically react quickly and, better yet, anticipate the shots before they are hit. You will want your players to be able to look for shots but also defend shots correctly. One of the biggest weaknesses in watching high school, club and league players play doubles it this constant inability to do the right thing with the right ball. Too often, players hit put-away volleys right back to the deep player who has no trouble lifting a lob or hitting a better passing shot. Or, they try to hit a put-away shot on balls they have no right to even be thinking of trying to hit a put-away on!

You will want to design drills that focus on each of these patterns and procedural shots so your players understand them and can execute them well.

Doubles Strategies Conclusion

There are books written just on doubles play. It would be impossible for me to include every doubles element and nuance, strategy and shot selection that could arise in doubles play. And based on a particular player's strength or weakness, some strategies go out the door! I have put together some very basic, but often abused, doubles strategies which should open the door to better doubles from the get-go. However, I highly recommend your looking up several books on doubles play, many of which I will be including in the Reference Guide found at the back of this book.

Singles Strategies

Basic Strategies

Generally, there are two basic singles strategies in tennis. They are:

A. Attacking Strategies **B. Retrieving Strategies**

It is probably obvious that attacking strategies are offensive in nature while retrieving strategies are defensive. While competitive tennis usually includes a bit of both, most players attempt to play within one or the other as their principle strategy. In both strategies, there are shots and placements that are more effective than others. However, even in this understanding, there are exceptions to each "rule".

Perhaps the most notable exception to every rule is this: If your opponent has a glaring weakness, exploit it. For example, if your opponent has a weak backhand, it is usually going to be in your favor to hit most of your shots to your opponent's backhand! Forget going down-the-line on approach shots or hitting crosscourt shots in rallies; hit as often as you can to your opponents weakest shot!

If all things are indeed equal regarding your opponent's strengths and weaknesses, then there are specific strategies to learn and apply while playing singles. Whether you are favoring an attacking strategy or a retrieving one, there are some basic rules of rallying that all players must understand. There will be times which an attacking player will have to stay back and hit shots that resemble a retrieving strategy until they get a shot they can attack the net on. As you can see, oftentimes an attacking player must play an "all-court" game. Likewise, many retrieving players will be forced to move towards the net and play an attacking game. This usually occurs when an opponent has hit a drop shot or even just a short ball that the retrieving player won't be in a position to retreat back to the baseline in time to defend his court after their shot.

Retrieving Strategies

When playing from the baseline, there are strategies that offer greater percentages of potential success. They are based on three basic strategic principles: 1) Strategies that will increase the percentages of hitting your own shots successfully; 2) Strategies that create lower percentages for your opponent to hit their shots successfully; and 3) If these first two strategies are essentially equal to both you and your opponent, then creating opportunities to win the point through a series of shots that lead to an outright winner is your third and most advanced strategy.

The Crosscourt Retrieving Strategy

Generally, intermediate to advanced players should keep the majority of baseline shots crosscourt. The reasons are as follows:

- Crosscourt strokes take the ball over the middle of the net, the lowest part of the net.
- Crosscourt strokes take into account the largest amount of court space. Hitting crosscourt provides for approximately 3 more feet of court length than hitting down-the-line. (The hypotenuse of a right-angle triangle is always longer than the side of the triangle.)
- For most intermediate players, hitting a ball crosscourt is easier to control with proper form than hitting down-the-line.
- Strategically, a down-the-line shot gives your opponent several options of attacking you. (More on this concept later.)
- A crosscourt shot moves the ball away from the center point of the court. This means that you can move your opponent further away from the center of the court. As a result, they will have further to go to get back to a ready position that is centered on their side of the court. (Down-the-line groundstrokes tend to move the ball parallel with the sidelines making the distance your opponent must move to get to the ball less than a similarly struck crosscourt.)

- Repeated crosscourt strokes generally produce rallies that create multiple opportunities for hitting behind your opponent. (We will talk about this strategy in a moment.)

Next time you watch a professional tennis match, count the number of crosscourt shots hit in a match. Even at the professional level, these players still hit approximately 60 to 80 percent of their groundstrokes crosscourt, depending on the surface. (Court surfaces will affect the speed of the ball after the bounce. Courts such as clay and "Har-Tru" will produce slower speeds of balls after the bounce than 'faster' courts such as grass or hard courts made of concrete or asphalt.)

Generally, retrieving strategies involve playing a baseline game that focuses on patience. Since it is difficult to hit outright winners from the baseline, seldom does hitting balls hard in attempting such a strategy produce winning points. However, players who develop proper form for consistent power will create openings and opportunities for winners and forced errors from the baseline. Certainly more power will force opponents to cover more court in less time. This will put more pressure on them to either attempt better shots themselves or they will become more out-of-position as a rally progresses. Both of these scenarios will force opponents to hit lower percentage shots… the ultimate objective of a retrieving playing strategy!

Crosscourt strategies involve a baseline player to hit crosscourt on virtually all groundstrokes. As mentioned, crosscourt shots offer several advantages. A player when given a crosscourt shot will automatically hit behind their opponent by hitting a crosscourt shot in response. Anytime you can hit behind your opponent you create a unique advantage: Your opponent, who just came from the corner you are hitting to, (to cover the open court), must change direction to return back to the corner he or she just came from! Because this requires more energy than simply moving in the same direction they are heading, (as if to cover a down-the-line by you), over the course of a point, subsequent shots of this nature tend to wear down your opponent. Sooner or later your opponent will hit a weak shot, one that you can hit to the open court for a winner or once again hit behind them with more offensive pace. Either way, they will have difficulty retrieving your shot. (As you can see, even in this "retrieving" style of play, you can create offensive opportunities through patience and shot selections.)

Attacking Strategies

Attacking strategies center around two distinct patterns of play:

a) Serve and Volley **b) Approach and Volley**

Both of these strategies are dependent on a player's ability to get to the net. Thus, these players will want to have effective serves and approach shots in which they can follow in behind and approach the net. In addition, attacking players must possess crisp, offensive volleys to finish off the point. (Here again, an advanced foundation in each stroke is imperative to successful play.)

Effective serves and approach shots are not based solely on power. In fact, certain approach shots are limited due to the physical laws of motion. For example, slice approach shots can only be hit so hard until they can't possibly land in the court. (Please review the slice groundstroke in **Chapter 9**) Thus, no matter how good you are, the slice can't be hit beyond a certain range of pace. In this case, placement and depth become paramount.

Attacking players tend to favor fast surfaced courts, such as grass and hard courts. These surfaces keep approach shots low and makes returning serve more difficult.

Players favoring net-attacking strategies include Pete Sampras, Tim Henman and Patrick Rafter. In the past, many of the men's champions chose the attacking strategy. Namely Stefan Edberg, Ken Rosewall, Rod Laver, Pancho Gonzales and Roy Emerson each were champions of the past with attacking strategies. One of the best known and effective attacking players was John McEnroe. McEnroe didn't hit as hard as many of the past or present attacking players, however, his timing, anticipation, and knowledge of court geometry was superb. He used cunning instincts to win record numbers of matches and tournaments in his career. Women did not favor an overall attacking style of play until more recently. Billy Jean King was one of the first who favored attacking the net. In addition, past champions like Martina Navratilova, Gabriela Sabatini, and Virginia Wade ventured to the net quite often. The "modern" women's game now features many players who are prone to finish points off at the net. These women tend to combine an attacking strategy with an effective and penetrating ground game, forcing opponents into hitting shots that they can attack. Venus and Serena Williams, Lindsay Davenport, Justine Henin, and others are the current generation of aggressive women players seen on tour.

Approach Shots

Even as slice strokes have limitations in terms of power and pace, there are many advantages to using a slice stroke as an attacking shot. Here are some of the advantages that hitting a slice offer:

- A slice is generally an easier stroke to hit while moving towards the net; the slice lends itself to be hit while moving forward during the shot itself.
- The slice tends make the ball stay lower after the bounce
- The slice is generally easier to hit down the line
- It is easier to disguise a drop shot while using a slice as an approach shot

When to Approach

Typically, attacking a short ball hit by your opponent is the best opportunity to hit your approach shot. Thus, your ability to play an effective retrieving game while waiting for these opportunities is important. Too often, intermediate players become impatient and attempt to approach the net on shots that are not appropriate. These players often hit a shot from behind the baseline and then try to race to the net. Several potentially negative results can come out of such an approach.

- From starting in such a defensive position, the attacking player usually will not be able to advance in as close as desired. This will usually result in the player hitting a first volley from a much deeper position.
- Your opponent will have more time to move to cover the approach shot due to it coming from a deep position on your side.
- It is harder to hit a deep, penetrating shot effectively and consistently from such a deep position.

In addition to these problems, typically a player will try to rush the net faster to make up for the distance he needs to travel. Thus, the player is not only often out of position, they are also usually out of balance when attempting to volley. Players, who tend to rush headfirst to the net

with minimal balance and a late, or non-existence split-step, are often passed with even the slowest of passing shots.

Anytime a player approaches the net, there are four possible shots that your opponent can attempt:

1) Pass you down-the-line
2) Pass you crosscourt
3) Hit it right at you
4) Lob

Your ability to limit the effectiveness or opportunity for any of these shots to be accomplished by your opponent will offer greater opportunities for you, the attacker, to finish each point off with a relatively easy winner.

Where to hit the approach shot

Geometrically, down-the-line approach shots offer the best offensive potential for the attacker and the least opportunity for the defensive player to pass. Although, with understanding, both crosscourt and down-the-middle approach shots can be effective alternatives under many circumstances too.

Down-the-Line Approach

When a player gets a short ball, hitting this shot down-the-line as an approach shot is usually the primary choice. While down-the-line involves two problematic issues, (having less court to hit into and hitting over the higher part of the net), it offers several advantages:

- Hitting down-the-line takes away some of the angle that your opponent might use against you in attempting to pass.
- Hitting down-the-line allows the attacker to stay on the same side of the court as his approach shot while covering the net.
- Down-the-line approaches tend to provide more opportunity to hit an open-court volley winner.

By making your approach shot deep, low and with a reasonable amount of pace, you limit your opponent's ability to execute any potential response with effectiveness. And, if you opponent has a weakness on groundstrokes, you certainly increase the probability that you will get an easy shot at the net to put away.

Crosscourt Approach

The greatest problem that exists if an approach shot is hit crosscourt is the opening your opponent has to hit their passing shot down the line. This is due to the attacker's general inability to cover the side of the court they approached on. The most effective passing shots are whenever the distance between the opponent's contact point on the pass is and the point on the court behind the attacker is the shortest. Thus, down the line is the shortest line of flight that the ball needs to take to get past the net player. Going crosscourt on a pass has the ball traveling in the air longer before it reaches the net, giving the net player a fraction of time longer to react and reach the volley.

As an attacking player, understand that there are also some advantages for your opponent to hitting a crosscourt passing shot. The first advantage being that the passing shot will travel near the middle point of the net…the lowest part of the net. Also, as a general rule, crosscourt shots are easier to hit under pressure than down-the-line. (Although, this can be debated as some players thrive on hitting down the line shots.) However, in order to hit an effective crosscourt passing shot, the opponent must hit with a considerable amount of topspin. This is because going crosscourt on the pass reduces the amount of depth in which the ball can land inside the court. (See **Diagram #1** below.) A down-the-line pass literally has the entire length of the court in which the ball can land in. (Of course, the down-the-line passing shot has less angular directional error room!) As an attacker, you must consider that your opponent has this option.

Down-the-middle Approach Shot

A third choice in hitting approach shots is simply hitting the ball down the middle of the court. This is not a bad strategy as it offers several advantages. First off, approaching down the middle allows the attacker to hit the approach shot over the lower, center portion of the net. These extra inches can give an attacking player a little more error room and, perhaps, allow the player to hit a more powerful approach. Hitting down the middle often is a shot hit right towards your opponent's body, as opposed to the side of the player. Many opponents will actually hit better when they are given the opportunity to move towards a ball as opposed to moving out of the way of one hit right at them. Perhaps the most important advantage to hitting down the middle is the reduction of possible angles afforded one's opponent. Take a look at these two diagrams depicting possible angles which an opponent can pass.

Approach Shots and Potential Passing Shots

Diagram 1: Approach Shot down the line: Attacker **X** hits down-the-line. Potential passes by opponent **O** are back down-the-line or crosscourt. The crosscourt response does offer error room over a lower part of the net, yet less court to land the shot in. (As depicted by the shaded boxes.) Down the line passing shots offer greater error room as it applies to depth.

Diagram 2: Approach shot down the middle: Potential passing shots are over higher parts of the net and provide smaller court areas in which to pass.

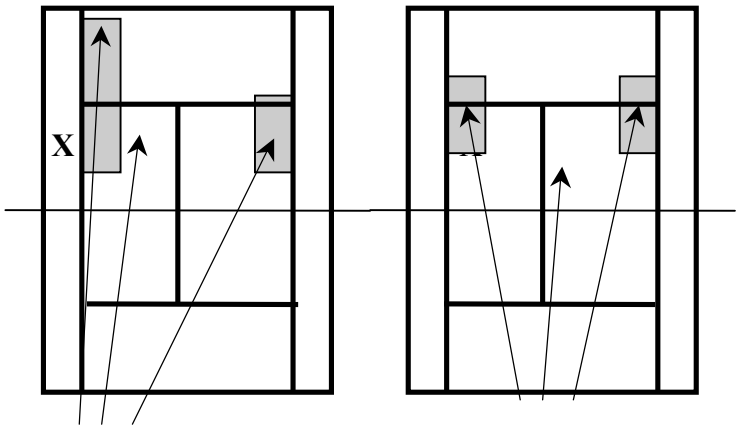

Diagram 1 **Diagram 2**

While approach shots down the middle have advantages, there are inherent disadvantages associated with the strategy as well. The two primary disadvantages are,1) that the attacking player has less open court in which to volley the potential winner to and, 2) has two equal halves of the net to cover the potential passing shot. The latter issue makes anticipation a bit more difficult. Approaching down-the-line, (and even crosscourt), moves the opponent to one side of

the court in chasing down the approach shot. This opens the court up for a potential winning volley—provided that the attacking player is able to get to and then complete the volley!

As you can tell, there are many possible scenarios for both the attacking player as well as the defensive player. As you gain experience, you will learn what shots work best for you. It is important to know what options are available to your opponent so that you won't just be guessing while at the net.

"Making" your opponent hit a specific shot

Advanced players can improve the likelihood of knowing what shots their opponent will hit after an approach shot. By favoring one side of the court slightly, your opponent will sense an opening in which they can exploit. However, if you know this, (especially because you intentionally left a little opening for your opponent), you can anticipate the shot hit and "poach" to the part of the court you left open.

You can also eliminate options your opponent might consider by certain strengths. For example, if you have demonstrated early in the match (or through reputation) that you possess a killer overhead, your opponent might not elect to ever give you this shot. Players who have great mobility and solid overheads can play closer to the net in anticipation of one of the passing shots their opponent might choose instead of lobbing. By being able to play closer to the net, the attacking player can cut off potential passes with less distance to cover.

Retrieving Strategies against Attacking Strategies

Obviously, if you review the attacking strategies just covered, you can readily see your options as a retrieving player when playing against such an attacking style. The options the attacking player has while at the net are designed to counter some of the options a retrieving player has to defend such an attack. The best advice to offer a retrieving player is to make sure you have all the shots in which to defend with. These would include:

- Being able to hit low, topspin, down-the-line shots on both the backhand and forehand sides
- Being able to hit topspin, sharp-angle crosscourt passing shots
- Being able to both offensive (topspin) and defensive (slice or block) lobs effectively
- Being able to hit hard shots right at a net player

Foot speed and anticipation are also items which defensive players need to work on to give themselves as much of an advantage when playing attacking shots. Traditionally, retrieving players have always been relatively fast players. Some of the best retrievers in the game included Michael Chang, Bjorn Borg, Arantxa Sanchez-Vicario and Chris Evert, all who possessed terrific foot speed and anticipation.

Aggressive Retriever

A style of retrieving that has become quite notable in recent years is the aggressive retriever. These players possess more aggressive groundstrokes yet don't necessarily attempt to attack the net, even when opportunities are sometimes presented. Players who distinctively play this style of game include Andre Agassi and Monica Seles. These retrievers set up points by pressuring opponents from the baseline with angles and depth, opening up the court and waiting for the opportunity to take advantage of such openings with powerful topspin groundstroke winners.

All-Court Players

Today's modern game seems to be moving towards players who favor an "all-court" strategy of play. These players have all the shots; attacking groundstrokes, effective approach shots, spectacular overheads, touch and finesse, and lightning-quick finishing volleys.

The $10,000 Shot

If there is one strategic stroke pattern that can defined the modern game, one could argue that the ability to hit more effective inside-out forehands has become the 'staple' stroke for the new millennium.

It isn't that the inside-out forehand is necessarily hit as a winner. (Certainly, from some offensive positions inside the baseline, the inside out forehand can—and often is—hit as a winner!) However, the ability to hit with significant angle from the ad court (for right-handers) to an opponent's backhand (also a right-handed assumption), opens the door for the inside-in forehand for a winner. And, because of the position of the player hitting the inside-out/inside-in forehand, as well as the shot characteristics, these two shots don't put the player in as precarious position as other shots hit from similar positions.

Definition

Because there is some confusion for many recreational players as to just what an 'inside-out' and an 'inside-in' forehand are, let me define and describe these two shots.

Inside-Out: The shot refers to a ball that is struck from the 'inside' or interior portion of the court, (relative to the player hitting the ball) and directing this shot crosscourt to the ad court of his opponent. That is, a right-handed player is going to hit a forehand from the ad side of his own court crosscourt to the ad side of his opponent with a forehand.

Inside-In: Taking this same inside ball, the player pulls the ball down the line to the deuce side of the court.

Hank Pfister, a fellow USPTA speaker and former top-ten world-ranked player, coined this term a number of years ago. I liked the concept and feel it can help many players as they develop. I hope I can do it justice and relate it at least half as well as Hank did when I heard him talk about it.

The idea is, what baseline position would you look for to set up a point or finish a point if $10,000 was riding on the rally? The area on the court is shown in **Diagram A.**

From this '$10,000' area, a player can run around the backhand and hit the forehand either crosscourt (inside-out) or down the line (inside-in) with a relative amount of safety as well as creating a very offensive shot on the player's strong side.

Technique Differences

While the discussion of the various inside-out and inside-in forehands could encompass many pages of text, there are a couple technical issues that I would like you to consider when working these shots.

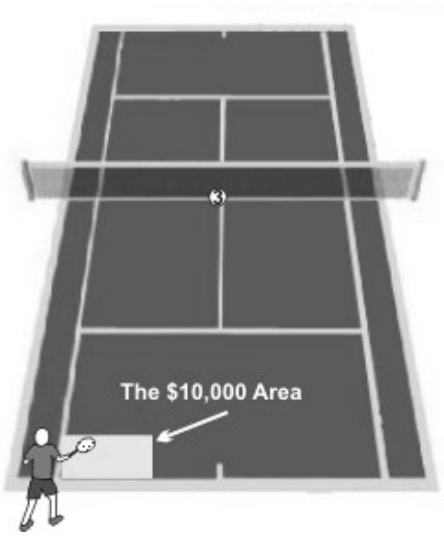

Diagram A: For a right-handed player, the $10,000 shot area is inside the singles sideline and inside or along the baseline.

Inside-out: When working the inside out forehand, using a more significant grip can prove essential. The more towards the western grip lays the racquet back significantly more than using an eastern or semi-western grip. This initial position of the racquet allows a player to drive up and through the ball with significant power while maintaining the desired racquet face for the inside out. It is important that players keep the wrist locked, especially using the double bend position. (Please see my last newsletter on the double-bend.)

Using an open stance, the player can lead heavily with the hand and hit the ball with the racquet head slightly back. This position can increase the inside-out effectiveness of the shot as well as set up for the inside-in forehand for the winner on a subsequent forehand from the same position.

Inside-in: The player will want to make contact much earlier so-as the racquet head catches up to the hitting hand without using the wrist. That is, you will want to feel the tip of the racquet getting out around the outside of the ball…but, be careful you don't try to whip the racquet around by flicking the wrist. This hitting the ball early will allow you to hit not only topspin, but a little side spin where the ball curves from right to left when hit by a right-handed player. This effect makes the shot so very effective.

Strategic Concepts

As many of you have learned in previous articles, strategically, you will want to keep most baseline groundstrokes crosscourt. Players who hit down the line at the wrong time find themselves usually running all over the court. There are several reasons for this situation to occur, however, I will save such strategy concepts for a future article.

The thing you will want to know is that if you are pressed to hit a backhand on your ad court, you will want to take your backhand crosscourt…especially if you are pulled outside the singles sideline.

However, if you can hit a ball in the '$10,000' range, you have a couple offensive options.

1. Run around your backhand and hit the inside-out forehand.
2. Run around your backhand and hit the inside-in forehand.

Because the inside-in forehand can be hit from inside the singles side line, the shot isn't as low-percentage as a player hitting a backhand down the line. This is because the forehand can be hit more towards the middle of their opponent's court; yet have the ball curve back out wide towards the singles side line. (When hit around the outside of the ball.)

Ideally, one will want to take the inside-in ball from inside the baseline. From here, the ball can be hit effectively inside-out or inside-in.

Many players center their entire singles strategy on these two shot choices. That is, they will keep most balls crosscourt until their opponent hits a short ball in the $10,000 range. Players, who have developed a powerful, aggressive forehand, can wait for this shot and parlay one of these two shots, or use one to set up the other.

In addition, you will see pros hit the drop shot from this same position, especially when they can set up the forehand more inside the baseline. Because opponents have seen the inside-out and inside-in aggressive forehands, they tend to play even further back to give them time to run down each of these shots. Thus, a drop shot can be very effective hit to either side of the court.

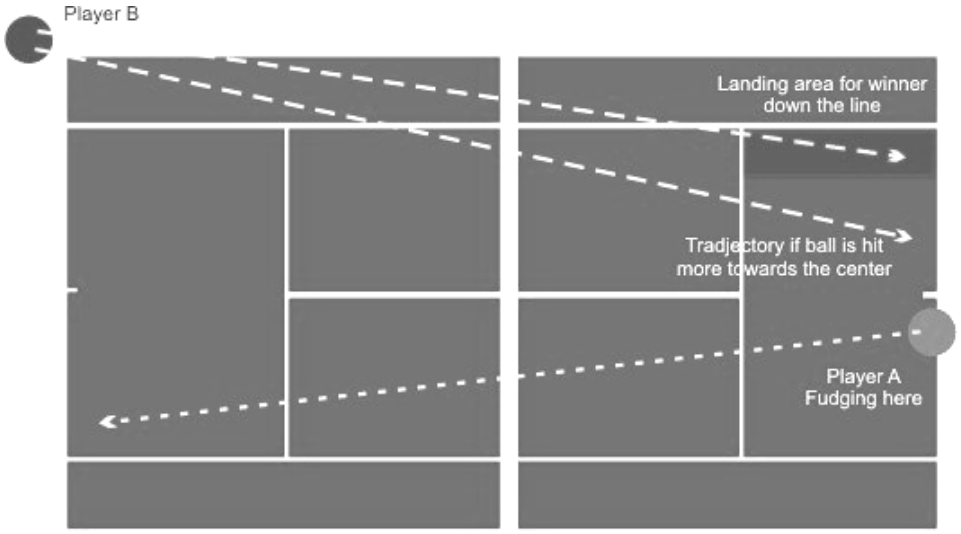

Diagram B: When Player A hits a ball from his ad court crosscourt, he can "fudge" towards his ad side. This sets up the opportunity for an inside-in forehand if the opponent, player B, attempts a shot down the line. Not only is the landing area small for a winner down the line from B, if the ball comes towards the center of the court, player A will have the inside-in winner available.

Fudging

When a professional hits an effective crosscourt, you will notice that they don't return to the center of their baseline. They 'fudge' over, staying on the side of the court they just hit from. This is because of two elements. The first point: Any opponent's shot down the line will be a low-percentage shot since the ball has to go over the highest part of the net; it will travel over mostly out of bounds area, (over the alley in most cases), and the landing area is very small for such a down the line to be a winner. **See diagram B**:

In addition to the fact that the down-the-line is a low percentage shot, the ball tends to draw toward the middle of the court. This gives player **A**, the excellent opportunity to run down the ball fairly easily. As a right-handed player, **A** will have a forehand to hit crosscourt… often times for a winner from this position.

The second advantage of fudging is that it sets up the player for the inside-out, inside-in shot opportunity using the forehand.

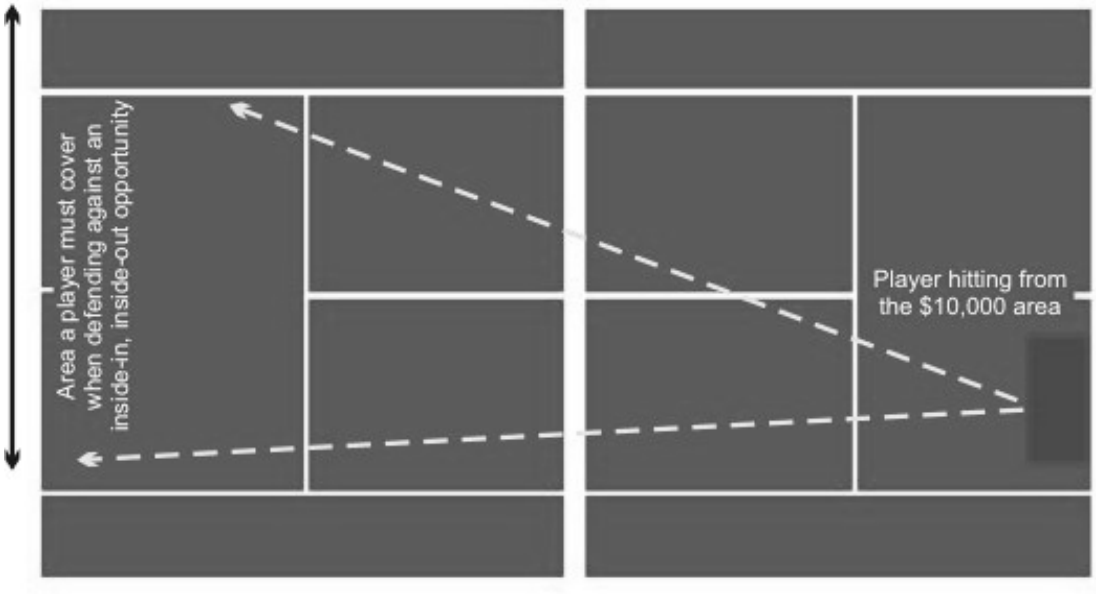

Diagram C: Here, you can see the distance the opponent must be able to cover between the two forehands that can be hit from the $10,000 shot area.

Hitting the inside-in, inside-out combination, you create two advantageous strategies: 1. you create a great distance that an opponent must cover between these two shots; and 2. these two shots are within the higher percentage of court locations and landing areas for the player to keep the ball in play without excessive risk. (See **Diagram C)**

Disadvantages

Because you are running around the backhand to hit the forehand, it is important to have your weight balanced or moving back into the shot. If you are off-balanced, you will tend to fall to your left (as a right-hander) and potentially be out of position. Hitting your inside-out ball too close to the middle of your opponent's court will require you to recover back to your middle instead of being able to fudge. Also, when trying for the inside-in forehand, you will need to recover at least to the middle if not slightly towards the deuce court. If you opponent reads the inside-in or can run it down effectively, their response will probably be crosscourt.

Other than these issues, the inside-out and inside-in forehand has a high level of effectiveness while limiting the chance of becoming out of position.

Manufacturing a Shot

One of the interesting aspects of running around the backhand to hit one of these two forehand shots is the concept that you are 'manufacturing' a shot. That is, instead of hitting the shot that your opponent's shot dictates you hit, (ie: hitting a backhand when the ball is hit to your backhand side of the court instead of running around and taking it as a forehand), you are making a shot that YOU decide. This 'pro-active' mindset means you are looking for shots rather than waiting for shots. This helps players keep their feet moving and limits a player from standing flat-footed.

I like the concept because it helps players dictate instead of being dictated by an opponent. It also sends a strong message that you are looking to take the offensive. Opponents can succumb to the pressure you exhibit by looking for these shots.

Obviously, this strategy of using the inside-out, inside-in combination is predicated on a player's ability to hit a strong forehand within the dynamics of today's modern forehand.

What is helpful for many players is that this is an extremely simple strategy to follow and favor. While having more than this one strategy as an option is important to any player looking to compete against more diverse players, it is indeed a fairly safe strategy all things being equal.

Watch the pros play singles and you will see a great number of players employ this strategy for much of their singles play. With the potency of today's forehands, the strategy is one of today's most distinct patterns of play.

Singles Strategies Conclusion

Simply put, Singles Strategies can run the gamut of possibilities. Depending on a player's personality, strengths and weaknesses, and stroke preferences, any number of strategies can be favored. Certainly, the ability to change strategies based on our opponent's strengths and weaknesses is a blessing to all players. Most current top players do indeed possess the ability to effectively change their particular game plan in relative increments to suit their game to counter their opponent's game. However, it is often advisable to stay within strategies that you are most comfortable and confident with. Work to make those strategies work against every possible opponent. Certainly, many strategies have become hallmarks for individuals and have often become the strategies which others have come to emulate. My best advice to you is to watch as much professional tennis as possible, pick players who you feel play a style and strategy which you imagine yourself playing. Then, imitate these players as best you can within a strategy that exemplifies your own personality, strengths and weaknesses.

Finally, there are numerous books written on singles strategies. These go into great detail of "what if's" and general singles theory. I could not begin to address all of the circumstantial shot selections that could occur in any given match. As one could imagine, as the quality of play increases the dynamics of circumstantial strategies will change. In this section, I have offered the two main types of singles strategies as an overview. As you play more singles, you will learn that many atypical nuances—those that are NOT covered in books, can and will occur! By following the foundation of singles play described in this book, you will have a good understanding of how to deal with most of these occurrences with effective responses.