

# Play Like the Pros

With Oscar Wegner



## Play Like The Pros



*Oscar Wegner makes tennis one of the easiest sports to learn*



*"Believe It or Not... Tennis Is Easy!"*

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## *Introduction Part 1*

My name is Oscar Wegner. I played the tennis tour in the 1960s against some of the best of that era, from Roy Emerson, Fred Stolle, John Newcombe, Tony Roche and Martin Mulligan, to Beppe Merlo, Gaetano Di Maso, Francois Jauffret, Roger Taylor, Ronnie Barnes, Cliff Richey, Istvan Gulyas, Niki Pilic and Boro Jovanovic.

I also practiced with some of the best players ever: Pancho Gonzalez (I played close to 90 practice sets with him), Rod Laver (for the picture taking of his signature book) and Pancho Segura (while being his assistant coach at the Beverly Hills Tennis Club) and coached Bjorn Borg for his second comeback in 1992, Gustavo "Guga" Kuerten from a very young age to the end of 1991 at 14, and a plethora of junior boys and junior girls, some ranked in the top ten in the world.

I learned immensely from those experiences, for some of those were the very best the game has produced. Couple that with my experience of six years as a tennis analyst/commentator for ESPN International, my background studies in engineering and later on of a new science of the nature of man and the human spirit, and I have had enough data to fill hundreds of volumes on the tennis subject.

But most importantly, I extrapolated what would make a perfect player, all aligned with the physics and mechanics of the game but from the viewpoint that man is a spiritual being, that he thrives in tennis (and sometimes in life) looking, feeling and on simple instinctual decisions, and that he uses those as a guide to succeed in reaching the highest echelons of the game.

Children are very keen to operate like that and should be encouraged to do so. Those abilities change after lets say 10 years old, when schooling and the influence of society make them accustomed to think prior to every step they take.

This book will emphasize the lessons I learned, the simplicity of the sport of tennis, the tested results, and the different world that this sport can be.

It is not about criticizing and betraying the greatest players and coaches I have met, but to applaud, admire and pass-on the best I learned from them. I love them all, their style, personality and above all, the executing quality they brought, with their best tools, to the game.

This book is a treatise on the simplicity that this sport of tennis really is, and how some tenets and simple mechanics are not only more natural, but by far more efficient not only in playing but in learning the game. Children (and all adults) deserve our best guidance. Students trust coaches to do so.

I had a huge open stance Western forehand as a kid. At 16 years old, being the 18 and under club champion and a very good starting performer in the Argentinian juniors top echelon ranks, I was counseled to change my forehand grip, to turn sideway and to hit linearly through the ball. I lost my major weapon.

I still made it into the international tour for five years. I could see top players struggle at times for lack of clear, concise, true data. I can see students of all ages suffer many times from the same. It boils down to the different messages of their feel and instinct from the misconceptions of what has been passed as "secret lore", for over a century, of what you have to do to learn the game.



*Pancho Gonzalez, and Oscar with Pancho Segura*

## *Introduction Part 2*

One of the most marking things I learned is how top players rely on "knowingness" or what could be called the recall of "feel" for their best performances, while on explanations of their success they opt instead for banal concepts that more align with what is commonly taught.

The link between the spiritual world and the physical realm in this sport has never been lucidly explained. There were various attempts to do so, including the overwhelmingly popular *The Inner Game of Tennis*. *Inner Tennis* seemed to fulfill this hunger for knowing the realities of the inner spirit, the soul, the being that never dies but continues on through lives.

It's interesting how many top players transcend this chasm to produce their best results, the barrier where most humans, at least in the occidental world, stop.

This is a book that aligns the person's nature, spiritual and physical, and the realities thereof with increasing ease.

We could call feel and instinct the computations of the spirit, and mechanics those movements of the body and computations of the mind.

Aligning those has been the real "secret" of the ages in any endeavor, in any sport.

Even further: the key to the game is what the player does with the hand in those milliseconds of contact with the ball. Top players move the ball on the strings while powering it, thus catapulting the ball with incredible spin and speed quite accurately into the opponent's court.

They are so focused on that instant of contact that they seem not-human, while the opposite is true. They are exploring the limitless realm of the human spirit, a Zone that we all aspire to achieve in more life activities and sports, a goal as old as mankind's existence on this planet and beyond, an approach to native state.

This book does that for tennis, freeing the spirit, the soul, to direct the physical to perform to the best of the human body's abilities, and creates a form, a technique that is so personal, such a discovery of self, and of one's feel while observing the result, that although conforming to the realities of the physical, they transcend the limitations of thought!

# PREFACE

## *Tennis, Past and Future*

Tennis is easy to learn, to play, to teach and to enjoy. The shocking truth is that tennis has been made difficult. So ingrained is the false data accepted as truth for more than a century that it has affected, to this day, coaches, players, commentators, sports writers, even pros.

Something fateful happened to tennis in the birth of the 1900s. The Doherty brothers, one of them a former Wimbledon champion, published a book in 1903 in which they described tennis the way they played, a game of circular motions well adapted to the body, natural moves and positions, hitting across the ball, and a game of feel. In 1904 P. A. Vaile, an attorney, wrote a "classic" book called *Modern Lawn Tennis* in which he described tennis as linear, similar to cricket, where the body is sideways and the stroking effort is forward, practically ridiculing what the Doherty brothers had published. This 1904 so-called "Modern Tennis" book became the worldwide mantra for learning tennis for the more than 100 years that followed. In America, for a century, tennis has been taught as similar to baseball, again sideways and with a forward effort when hitting the ball.

Even some of the greatest players of all time fell for these misconceptions and wrote book after book that did not reflect the way they played themselves. And this saga continues, perhaps somewhat modified, through present time.



*Rod Laver, one of the best all time      Bill Tilden, also one of the best*

What changed in the 1990's in Europe, Asia and South America, shown by a plethora of new stars thereof? Simply, my 1989 and 1992 books, widely accepted in those continents, and my 1997, 1998, 1999 ESPN International tips across more than 150 countries, with billions of impressions, shattered those misconceptions and created a new generation of coaches and youth who rose to their personal best. What happened in the USA? Tennis Magazine derided my 1989 book. Their editorial staff called it simplistic, ineffective and unrealistic, forewarning their readers without even trying the techniques. The coaches association's educational staff shunned it as well, ridiculing it, misleading

their 30,000 plus members and the public those coaches served. Why? Their educational resources and know-how would have been shown to be faulty and their reputation compromised.

This long-time misrepresentation in the USA has had a negative impact on both the business of tennis as well as competitive performance toward national excellence. It perpetuated an atmosphere of strain on coaches and their players, imposing excessive effort and force in both teaching and playing techniques, including pain and injury to elbows, shoulders, lower backs and knees. The opposite, naturality and simplicity, was shunned.

This book will help coaches and players realize that tennis is easy and will serve the public seeking guidance in being introduced to a wonderful sport by helping them improve to good levels of personal competence with minimum stress.

Play REAL Modern Tennis. Try these lessons and you'll be the judge.



*Venus Williams at US Open*



*Serena Williams at Wimbledon*

# CHAPTER 1

## *What is Timing and The Zone*

Good timing in tennis would be the coordination of the execution of a shot, a stroke, with the ideal moment in which the ball reaches the most favorable or unavoidable position to strike it back.

That would certainly have to agree with the person's perception of those components and his ideas both in respect to his stroke technique and of the ideal zone and time to do it.



*Roger Federer, one of the best of all time*

Time, unbelievably, is dependent on the way you operate. If the player is in the Zone, he sees time, and the ball, as slow. If the player is thinking, thus employing the computations of the mind, he would see the same ball as fast.

Let me go a bit further. Have you ever experienced a moment or an event in which time seemed unusually slow? It could be while practicing a sport, while running for some time, at home while relaxing, or perhaps when looking at a beautiful scenery or a rose sparkling with the morning dew.

I have experienced this Zone and I have spoken to many players about it. One of my students was so much in the Zone that she actually said that she had seen the ball stop before hitting it. Amazingly, Andre Agassi has said similarly in a media interview.



*Andre Agassi, young and older*

For the casual observer watching a professional match, tennis would seem a fast game. He would be utterly surprised if he found out that the experienced top pro could be seeing it as a slow game. Not only the pro's perception is different, but he also knows that the ball loses, in flight, a high percentage of speed.

People, in general, as a part of life, record about 30 pictures per second of what they are observing. That could be called the person's mind and usual memory, which is generally used to predict and decide. If you look at a film you enjoy a series of motions that appear as a continuous movement, as a continual stream. If you slow down the film considerably, let's say below 30 frames per second, you see the pictures individually and jumping up, one to the next.

This aspect of the "mind" could be called your internal clock. It seems to control your sense of time.

What would happen if you could shut off this "mind" and just look? In other words, no attention to the mind at all. With your internal clock shut off, what would be your perception of "time"?

In tennis you would see the ball as slower than usual, experienced in different degrees perhaps, according to how deeply you are in the Zone. It is a simple process, perhaps not easy to achieve, which I bet is experienced by almost everyone at one point or another in life. Many of my friends and students have had experiences like that.

We are so used to "thinking" that it conspires, for many, against this process of "letting go". But there is a clever way to help the "thinking" and the "mind" quiet down (initially voice it, but soon do it silently): in groundstroke practice, count 1 exactly at the bounce, then 2, 3, 4, and with a bit of a pause, count 5 when you stroke the ball. Slowly you'll find more and more time. It'll seem as if time has slowed down.

Once you are calm and seeing the ball slower you can stop counting. If suddenly rushing or nervous, you can resume the count.

I used this drill countless of times, years, decades in coaching. Carlos Rodriguez used this drill to help Justine Henin become number one in the world.

I even use this for volleys silently, 1 when your opponent hits it, 2, 3, 4, and 5 when you hit the ball. It definitely slows the ball down!

Tennis would be a beautiful sport with which to practice this state of awareness, this Zone. Drop off the many misconceptions, positions, preparations, the "thinking" to which you may be accustomed. Clear your mind, be dreamlike, loose, just look and let your feel, your instinct take over. If you are an experienced player, you already know how you want to hit the ball. For complete beginners, or players without much control, follow the simple instructions in this book as to how to find and strike the ball.

You'll feel your body moving like when you were a kid, without thinking, with grace and efficiency, with a lesser effort that is a joy.

You can increase the feel and time of the ball-racquet contact by brushing across, like a caress. And the more you feel it, the bigger effect you cause. Every day you play, the better game you play, and the harder you can safely play.

That is what this book specializes about!

# CHAPTER 2

## *Topspin, Power, and the Open Stance*

The most efficient body movements are heavily dependent on the use of the body's ideal kinetic chain, which would incorporate a certain feel of many muscles and joints. From animals to humans, the body was gradually developed, through millennia, to create the most ideal structure to flee from harm.

Bone, joint, muscle, work in unison to produce the highest speed and sudden changes of direction, plus lethal power to protect through shape and form the survival of the species and ultimately, the residing source of life.

Which would be the ideal kinetic chain? That which ensures, through efficiency, the highest form, a combination of moves that uses the body with utmost simplicity, but delicately synchronized, in its most potent response.

What would be most efficient but the use of the minimal effort possible to produce the maximal result.



*Guga Kuerten, 2000 World #1, 3 French Open titles*

Bruce Lee, a Martial Arts innovator, demonstrated that rotational movements and changes of direction are the most potent generators of destructive and defensive force. Other sports, when guided correctly or geared instinctively to discover the most ideal operating mode, rely heavily on same principles of efficient form.

Tennis is no exception, although authoritative sources insist on preserving less natural principles which impair the sport, complicating it. One of them is a linear concept that insists on stepping into the ball.

Tennis is thought to be an aggressive sport, pushing one's body and power towards the opponent or towards the intended placement to maximize the intended effect. A different mind-frame, far more native, more like Martial Arts, necessitates an initial forward attack but a timely withdrawal that increases the efficiency of the stroke.

Most tennis players rely on racquet head speed at impact, while force can be generated by acceleration alone. Uncannily for most, the more slowly, within reason, you get the racquet to the ball, the more you can accelerate the racquet head. That, due to the body's limitations, can only be generated by a direction change. You are seemingly going to strike the ball in a forward direction, when suddenly you pull from the racquet backwards and across, generating not only a forward but also upward whip effect (the notable windshield-wiper), which imparts the ball not only with vigorous velocity but also with tremendous top-spin. Some top players accelerate the racquet head to over 70 miles an hour and generate forehand ball speeds above 120 MPH and over 4,000 ball RPM.

Further, as some of the following chapters will reveal, rotational power is most efficient with the open stance, where breaking the run and lifting and turning on the outside foot both for the forehand and two-handed backhand increase not only the stroke's power and efficiency, but also help simplify the needed recovery and coverage of the court.



*Martina Hingis, very young World #1*

Topspin is a forward roll, just as if the ball was rolling forward on the ground. It is created by brushing up on the ball while stroking and pulling across. You lift the racquet much higher than the intended line of flight of the ball.

That, in addition to the force of gravity, makes for a much more pronounced downward curve. Technically, the top of the ball strikes the air much faster than the bottom of the ball, which is moving with the air, creating a downward force that seemingly adds to the weight of the ball. The ball drops

much sooner than if it had no spin at all (a "flat" ball). The faster the ball rotates forward, the more downward force it gets and the faster it drops.

Although still not widely taught at the beginner and intermediate levels, topspin is a tremendous advantage to any player. It allows you to hit the ball with great force, well above the net, knowing that it will come down in the opponent's court.

The ball is also going to take quite a jump, making it difficult for your opponent to handle it, and could alter his precision by rotating into his racquet's strings.

This happens very often at the professional level. You see many rallies between the top players in the world where the ball doesn't go deep, sometimes not clearing the service line by much, but it is still very effective in keeping the other player back.

### **High Topspin**

A ball hit high with a lot of topspin slows down as it goes forward and up. Then it accelerates as it comes down, making it difficult to judge how the ball will bounce. Such a ball usually kicks high and toward the backcourt. That makes high topspin effective, even on hard courts, in troubling your opponent when he is back. And when he comes forward, topspin allows for lower net-clearing balls that drop much faster and also for sharper angles for the pass.



*Rafa Nadal, World #1, 9 French Open titles*

### **Confidence Builder**

Topspin is a great tool and also a confidence builder. When you are afraid of missing you don't have to hit a softer shot to be safe. You know the ball is going to drop in the court if you rotate it enough. Your fear doesn't show since you don't need to slow down your shots to keep the ball in the court.

With topspin, you can also clear the net by a wider margin. With practice you get the feel that the more you hit up, the more the ball comes down. That is why I teach this technique to the beginner, the intermediate, the advanced player, and the pros who haven't mastered it yet. It encourages them to hit much harder, even under pressure.

## **When to Learn Topspin**

The techniques used in this book to teach ground-strokes develop topspin naturally, right from the beginning.

Although this learning is done at slow speeds at first, the swing developed is the same low-to-high stroke used by the pros.

I consider this a very basic part of learning to play tennis well. Topspin requires that you apply much more upward force to the ball than the intended line of flight of your shot. Taught early, it becomes a habit, something that will be difficult to shake in the future. You hit the ball with a certain direction of effort and you relate this action to the speed and height of your shot, and to where the ball lands. If I first taught you to hit flat and later tell you to lift your strokes with topspin, you'll probably panic. You'll be afraid of hitting the ball too high and too far.

If you are a differently experienced player, hitting the ball squarely, you may understand these new principles intellectually, but deep inside you may have been conditioned differently. You haven't instinctively built the feel that comes with topspin: the more you hit up on the ball and the more you roll it, the more it comes down. Players who have hit flat most of their lives and now want to hit topspin may need hundreds of hours of practice to master this new feel.

For all these reasons I like to see beginners hit up and use topspin to bring the ball down in the court, rather than forcing the ball down as soon as they develop some faster shots. With beginner players, their tennis instinct is virgin territory. They need to get the feeling from the start that lifting the stroke causes the ball to curve down.

Most notably, I use a string about three feet above the net to train students and to practice topspin myself.

The results are quite amazing. Not one of the players I taught with topspin was afraid of hitting the ball out. Whenever their shots went beyond the baseline, they rolled the next ball more.

Topspin builds up your confidence. Flat hits cause innumerable errors, lessening your confidence.

As you progress as a topspin player, you'll learn to rotate the ball more and more efficiently, whether on your forehand, backhand, or serve. The safety factor in your shots will always be in your favor. Should you decide to risk a few, you can hit some flatter shots, but you can always revert to safety when needed by going back to topspin strokes.

# CHAPTER 3

## *New Modern Basics*

A significant part of this book reinforces principles that I laid out in my first book of 1989, *"Tennis in 2 Hours"*, which caused such incredible results first for Eastern Europe and, eventually, the rest of the world.



*Novak Djokovic, a new era #1*

Though rejected for decades in the USA as violating century old principles supposedly based on a special tennis kinetic chain resembling cricket, baseball and golf, my techniques are making inroads. Coaches are now aware that modern tennis is significantly different and apply many of my techniques, whether they recognize or acknowledge the source. But one principle has not fully hit home: the premise that top tennis players thrive on extreme simplicity! The human body-mind-spirit composite performs naturally in ways that are aligned with realities much deeper than the visual ones, and shies away from unnatural considerations and tenets that make tennis a difficult sport to learn and perform.

First of those barriers is the idea that the basic tennis movements are intrinsically linear, when something very different takes place at the high level: tennis strokes and movement efficiency are deeply dependent upon rotation. Muscular contraction, rather than elongation, is the basis of a body's strengths. Stretching and elongation are part of physical health preservation and of extending the body's range, but not the basis of the modern tennis game's way of operating.

Perhaps the most pervasive idea is that by adding greater and greater components onto their mechanical basis players can get greater performance, while the opposite is true. Simplicity is the key that has guided some of the best tennis players of all time.

### Several new basics:

1) A player's timing is enhanced by keeping the racquet in front while tracking the ball, rather than taking the racquet back early. Perceptively, mentally waiting and stalking it makes the incoming ball look much slower than usual and makes the player feel as if they have more time. Calmness, rather than rushing, is a key for success.

2) Modern tennis is a rotational sport rather than linear, both for the body and the ball. The open stance, loading on the outside foot and permitting the inside foot to lift off the ground even in most extreme situations, facilitates such, including the turn to recover open ground.

3) Tennis ground-strokes are much more upward and vertical than what is conceived visually. Gravity, always present, is not viewed but felt. Not only your arm effort reflects that, but pulling up with your body will maximize this feel of pulling up. Staying down or low, on the contrary, traps your topspin strokes.



*Kim Clijsters, US Open Champion and #1 in the World*

4) Contact length and control is exponentially augmented brushing not only upwards but also across the intended direction of the shot. Those actions, for intended ball rotation and spins thereof, considerably magnify feel and ball-string contact time.

6) Dragging the racquet head behind the hand is quickly more effective. Shot direction, spin and shot height can be controlled much more easily this way. But rather than change the direction of effort while impacting the ball, which is the more effective way, the tendency is to “break” the wrist forward, compromising the modern “windshield wiper” stroke. Conventional techniques necessitates tightening up the wrist and the arm, while the modern ones I propose to hold the racquet loose and use off-center contact, closer to the frame, to magnify spin, feel and control.

7) Pulling from the racquet at contact enhances all of the above, while pushing forward decreases the efficiency of the stroke. The change of stroke direction is a major component of racquet head acceleration and impact force.

8) Extreme groundstroke grips, such as the Western forehand, magnify these basics, making them a necessity. Young students, in particular, find the most efficient grips on their own and change them only, unless influenced by others, to increase their feel and control of their strokes. Coaching the young is a delicate undertaking which when violated can limit their future in this beautiful sport.

# CHAPTER 4

## *If You Already Play, Solutions To Problems*

<b>Groundstrokes</b>	
Lacking ball control	Learn to find the ball first, then hit. Hard to fathom, but it is as if touching it first, then releasing your power (in a special way you can learn through this book)
Feel rushed and lost	Take your time and notice how the ball loses, from baseline to baseline, close to 60% of the speed. Track the ball really well AFTER the bounce. There is more time than you think
I am thinking too much	Slow things down and focus on the ball exclusively. Tennis is best played shutting off the mind and just observing and reacting accordingly. Too early a preparation and you'll be out of "present time"
Hitting the ball in the net when wanting to hit it hard	Aim the ball two to three feet over the net, with plenty of topspin, so you can still hit it hard and get the ball in
Groundstrokes land too short	Hit the ball higher, or harder, or both
Hitting well but ball seems to sail out	Hit the ball lower on the string bed, below the center, and a bit more topspin
Having trouble handling hard balls	Take a smaller backswing and use the incoming force across the racquet face
Rushing the shots	Count silently to five, one at the bounce, five when hitting
Not controlling the direction of the shot	Pay more attention to the racquet angle than to your body or to your stroke

Hitting too wildly	Find the ball slowly, then accelerate your stroke. Keeping the eye at contact, including on the serve, is a good habit to learn.
Playing better against a hard hitter than against a slow hitter	Wait longer for the ball and use more topspin, so you can hit hard without risking as much
Can't hit topspin consistently	Get your racquet well under the ball at some point in your swing
Having a hard time timing and controlling the ball	Track the ball longer, especially after the bounce

<b>Forehand</b>	
The ball comes out too flat	Use the "windshield-wiper" swing, bending the arm, and lifting the elbow for more topspin
Feeling the ball gets too close to the body	Use the open stance, keep your racquet longer in front, and hit in front. Let your body pull across
The wrist breaks forward	Practice your windshield-wiper forehand against a fence, brushing it
No power	Combine open stance with forceful bending of the arm
Wild power	Bring the arm closer to you in the follow-through, not further away
Forehand feels stiff	Lower your body and then lift it as you hit
Racquet tends to turn	Hit the topspin forehand below the center of the strings
Can't hit inside-out	Lead the forehand with your hand, dragging the racquet behind it

<b>Two-Handed Backhand</b>	
Stroke feels stiff	Let the left hand power the shot, with the right hand looser
Shot is too flat	Approach the ball from below, bend your arms and finish over the shoulder
Too many backhands into the net	Aim two to three feet over the net, using topspin to get the ball to go down
Ball sails out	Hit with more topspin to bring the ball down
No power	Use an open stance and bring your arms across the body
Racquet tends to turn	Keep racquet near the navel, separating the elbows. Hit the ball below the center of the strings
Ball tends to go too far crosscourt	Drag the racquet head behind the hands longer, but still hit across your body
Sharp-angled crosscourt shots go slightly out	Put more topspin on those shots than on your down-the-line
Hitting the ball too short	Practice with a string three feet above the net, and hit over it

<b>One-Handed Backhand</b>	
No grip control on the topspin shot	Put your thumb behind the grip
No power	Turn sideways, get your arm to your right for the hit, and add force to the ball by squeezing your shoulder blades together

Stroke feels stiff	Lift your body as you hit
You feel too close to the line of the ball	Pull upwards and backwards to accelerate your stroke
Too many shots into the net	Swing up, ending with your arm extended and your hand well above the shoulder
Cannot meet the ball in the right place	Track the ball with the butt of the racquet
Have trouble directing the ball	Extend both arms, with the hitting arm going up and the other arm going backwards and down
The racquet seems to collapse	Stay sideways and keep the racquet perpendicular to your arm
Having trouble finding the backhand grip	Change the grip as you turn to your left, pointing the butt of the racquet to the incoming ball as if squeezing a bicycle's handlebar

<b>Backhand Slice</b>	
The ball has too much spin	Open the racquet initially, but flatten it as you hit
No power	Point to the ball with the butt of the racquet, then hit your slice across to your right
Losing balance	Open both arms while hitting
Trouble timing the ball	Let the ball slide over your hand and into your racquet before powering it
Trouble with the follow-through	Stay sideways and get your shoulder blades closer together at the end of the swing

Slice approach floats	Hit down with a slightly open racquet
Slice keeps going into the net	Aim at least a foot over the net
Slice is too short	Aim two feet over the net
Slice is not consistent	Track the ball until it is near your hand. Don't rush
The racquet is wobbly	Keep the throat of the racquet in your left hand until you are ready to hit, releasing it like a sling shot

<b>The Serve</b>	
The toss is too low	Practice under a 12ft ceiling until you consistently toss the ball barely touching the ceiling
The toss is not consistent	Practice against a tall wall or fence until the ball stays close to the wall or fence surface all the way
Having no power	Go to a field and practice hitting a few balls as far as you can
Having no spin	Practice spinning the ball above a fence, from outside the court some 30 ft
No pronation on the serve	Approach the ball with the racquet's edge in a hammer like fashion, letting it turn when you hit (pronation)
Keep hitting the legs at the end of the serve	Hit across the ball and to the right, turning the racquet before coming down in front with the left edge towards the left hand
The first serve is not consistent	Put some spin into the first serve too

Coordination is off on the serve	Raise both arms together, and slow down or pause slightly before you hit
No control	Approach the ball slowly, then accelerate
Serve goes too long	Bend your wrist inwards as if looking inside the palm of your hand. That will close your racquet face above your head.
Serve goes too much into the net	Serve up more. Practice serving over a fence or a few feet over the net, with spin
Not enough spin	Let the racquet drop behind you and swing up and across to your right
Not enough power	Point at the ball with the butt of the racquet at some point before you hit it
The serve is too stiff	Bend your arm and then extend it
The body feels unbalanced while serving	Find a slightly sideways position before you start the serve and then turn into the ball as you hit
The service feels too rushed	Start your serve slow in the beginning, pause a bit and then swing at the ball
Not finding the ball well	Imagine a small triangle between the tossing hand, the ball, and the racquet hand at the hit. Watch the ball touch the strings
Toss too erratic	Practice close to the court fence, tossing the ball by the fence, and stopping it against the fence with your racquet, well above your head
Double faulting too much	You are only as good as your second serve. Practice spinning it well above the net

<b>Return of Serve</b>	
Mistiming the return	Track the ball as long as possible after the bounce, waiting longer!
Mistiming a spin serve return	Keep your racquet in front as long as possible after the bounce
Mistiming a hard serve return	Prevent yourself from taking your racquet back too soon and getting caught there. Cut your backswing to almost none
Weak return of serve	The follow-through is the key to strong returns. Hit up and across the ball
Having a hard time returning a wide serve	Intercept the ball diagonally to cut off the angle and the distance to the ball
Having a hard time switching grips to return serve	Wait with the backhand grip, if this is your weakest, or vice-versa.

<b>Volleys</b>	
Netting too many forehand volleys	Keep elbow close to your stomach so as to open the racquet face
Netting too many backhand volleys	Keep your elbow away from the body so as to open the racquet face
Mis-hitting volleys	Wait til the ball is near before you punch
Feel rushed	Count silently to five, starting when your opponent hits the ball and hitting at five
Having a hard time with low balls	Open the racquet face, and hit down and forward firmly

Volley game not strong	Practice stopping the hand firmly right at or immediately after contact
Hitting high volleys out	Point the butt of the racquet towards the ball, then move the racquet butt down and away, closing the racquet face
Not controlling the placement	Pay more attention to the racquet angle, regardless of the position of your body
Feel stiff at the net	Volley with your hands, not your body
Not knowing where to go at net	Follow the line of your shot, moving a bit to the right or left of the center as needed
Forgetting to split step	It is not necessary to split step. Just let your body be ready to move forward or laterally on a diagonal to intercept the shot
Having trouble switching grips at net	Practice a hammer grip, with minimal changes as you take your racquet to either side
Racquet too wobbly	Keep your non-playing hand on the throat of the racquet, pointing it slightly up, and use it to get your racquet to either side
Getting hit when at net	Using the racquet to protect yourself is faster than trying to move the entire body

<b>Smash</b>	
Not finding the ball well	Place yourself under the ball, as if you were going to catch it with your left hand, then hit
Mis-hitting the smash	Get your racquet up slowly, timing it with the lob, then hit firmly but not too hard
Can't place it accurately	The accuracy of the placement depends more on the racquet angle than on the swing
No power on the smash	Approach the ball with the edge of the racquet, as if going to hammer it, then turn the racquet when you hit
Losing balance on the smash when leaning back	Use the scissors kick
Hitting the legs with the racquet	As with the serve, bring the racquet down and across your front into the left hand
Having trouble timing the smash	Raise your arms slowly, holding onto the throat of the racquet with your non-playing hand while positioning yourself under the ball
Having too many variations on the smash	Practice pointing the butt of the racquet to the incoming lob until the ball is near and you are ready to hit
Not knowing whether to hit the smash forward or down	Always hit the smash down, and control the height and distance of your shot with the opening or closing of the racquet face

<b>Lobs</b>	
Lobbing too short	Get under the ball more, and follow the ball up with a full finish
Lobbing too long	Put more topspin in your lob
Not controlling a defensive lob	Find the ball slowly before accelerating under it
Opponent reads the lob too well	Disguise the lob as a passing shot, changing it to a lob as late as possible
Not knowing how high to aim a lob	The highest point of your aim should be past your opponent, not above him
Not knowing where to go after hitting a lob	Make small moves to keep your opponent guessing which side you will cover most
Not knowing whether to lob cross-court or down the line	Lobbing over your opponent's backhand side is preferable, but cross-court lobs are the safest of all
Not knowing when to lob	If your opponent is crowding the net, a lob is due. If he is farther back, a topspin passing shot will draw him closer to the net, where you can pass him above
Lobbing is weak	Increase your follow-through

# CHAPTER 5

## *An Easy Way To Start*

The drills in the following chapters can be abbreviated as much as wanted. Just make sure you have success with a drill before going on to the next. Here are some videos that simplify the learning to the bare minimum for all strokes. These videos are a great visual guide as well for the advanced player.

<http://tennisiseasy.com/MTMBeginners.aspx>

Coordination in tennis is basically getting to the ball as easily as possible and stroking it comfortably. Ideally you would get to the ball with a minimum of effort and you would exert yourself while stroking only as much as needed to make your shot safe and effective. In other words, no wasted effort.

Since you learned your basic moves at a very early stage in your life, there is no need to relearn them. On the contrary, doing things as naturally as you can will accelerate your learning process, making it easier.

The forehand stroke in tennis is quite similar to catching the ball underhand and then releasing it with an underhand throw over the net and into your opponent's court. To coordinate your catch with the flight of the ball you need to get your hand near the ball and wait until it gets to your fingers to grab it. If you rush, closing your fingers before the ball gets there, you'll miss the catch. If you don't find the ball well, you'll also miss the catch.

The same goes for your strokes in tennis. If you want good control of your shots, you need to get your racquet very close to the ball before releasing your power. This is the most important fact for you to learn.

Regardless of the many details involved, when you catch a ball you don't think about your steps or other body movements. You just run and worry about catching it. To hit your strokes in tennis you approach the ball the same way, as if you were going to catch it.

We will refer to the above as finding the ball. This is the most important and most underrated factor in tennis. Without it, nobody plays well.

To develop this and your coordination I have a few drills that you can do barehanded, by yourself or with someone else, at home, on the court, or anywhere. Even if you are good at it, do each drill a few times to become trained to the bounce and changing speeds of the ball.

If you have some difficulty, it is better to work on your coordination right here, in the beginning. Do not start learning to play until you feel a comfortable control of what you are doing with your hands and with the ball.

You may have to do some gentle running while doing these drills. Do things as slowly and as efficiently as you can, keeping your eyes and your attention focused on the ball in flight. If some balls

are uncomfortably far for your reach, just let them go and pick them up later. The emphasis is on control and coordination, rather than speed.



**DRILL #1:** Toss the ball underhand higher than your head and catch it underhand on its way down. Repeat until you can catch the ball comfortably every time.

**DRILL #2:** Toss the ball underhand higher than your head. Let it bounce up, then, on its way down, catch it underhand. Repeat, tossing the ball to different heights, until you get a smooth catch each time.

**DRILL #3:** Toss the ball underhand against a wall. Let it come back, bounce up, and start to go down again. When it comes down to a comfortable height, perhaps a bit below waist level, catch it underhand. Do this at varying distances from the wall, ten feet away, twelve feet, and fifteen feet away. Also vary the height you hit on the wall.

**ALTERNATE DRILL #3:** If you are on the court or in an open space with another person have him or her toss the ball to you, at a distance of about 8 to 10 feet from each other. The tossing person is close to the net.

The ball should bounce well in front of you so that it starts to curve down. Catch it underhand, then throw it back underhand to the other person.

**DRILL #4:** Same as Drill #3 or alternate Drill #3, except that instead of catching the ball you push it up with the palm of your hand and finish touching your opposite cheek with the back of your hand (as shown in the two pictures below) toward the other person, who catches it. If you are doing it against the wall, let the ball bounce, come up, hit the ball once as shown, and catch it the next time. Repeat until you are accurate, both at finding the ball, finishing by your cheek, and sending it over the net.



You can also use an “over the shoulder” finish, touching your shoulder with the index finger, as shown below.



Caution: For you beautiful ladies, this drill can break long fingernails if you miss the ball slightly. You can do these drills safely with a larger foam ball.

Your push should lift the ball to a height a little above your head, in the direction of the other person or the wall.

**DRILL #5:** Play the ball back and forth with another person, both with the palm of your hands. Do it over something high, like a chair, or a few feet over the net if you are on a tennis court. Use the "touching your cheek" or "over the shoulder" finish.

If you are doing these drills against a wall by yourself, play it back and forth gently and pretty high, allowing yourself plenty of time between shots, even while reinforcing the finish.

Repeat this last drill until you develop a rally (several hits back and forth). The emphasis should be on finding the ball all the time and having a controlled upward hit (or push) in the direction and height you want.

By now, rather than rushing, you need to get your hand near the ball, a little below it, and to accelerate it from the contact point on upward. Even if your feet are rushing to get to the ball, your arm and hand need to move smoothly to find the ball, with all the effort applied upwards from the contact point on.

The ball should reach an approximate height of six to eight feet in this drill, and should get to the other person comfortably after one bounce.

Again, if you don't have a partner, do these drills against a wall, keeping a comfortable distance to it, depending on the drill, and hit high enough to give yourself plenty of time between hits.

(I have done these drills with many of my students. As a very interesting observation, I have found that those who had learned tennis the classic way, with body positioning and the like, have much more difficulty doing Drill #4 and the subsequent drills than a beginner unfamiliar with tennis instruction.

The complete beginner would stroke the ball comfortably with the hand, while many accomplished players would miss the ball entirely. They would have an astonished look on their face, especially if they had seen the beginner doing it with ease. Those accomplished players had their attention drawn to how they were stroking the ball, rather than finding it. That apparently small diversion of their attention made them miss the ball.)

# CHAPTER 6

## *Grip and Racquet Position*

The way you hold your racquet in your hand for a particular shot is called your "grip."

Players usually have a "forehand grip," a "backhand grip," and some slight variations for serve and volleys.

Through the methods in this book grip changes become automatic, as part of the feel of each particular stroke.

To learn your basic grip and racquet position stick your index finger through the throat opening of the racquet, as shown in these pictures.



Put the racquet butt by your belly button, as shown below.



Look ahead--not at your racquet. "Feel" the grip. Your fingers should be comfortable, slightly spread apart. The left hand is in front of the right hand. The position of your left hand can vary, according to your liking, and it might adjust itself as you learn. The racquet is pointing forward, slightly downward, held relaxedly, and the racquet face is fairly vertical (strings perpendicular to the ground).

### **An advanced choice**

As a more advanced set of drills, or if the racquet by your belly button is not your most comfortable position, you can start now with the next set of instructions, which is more the way the top pros play today, even with the racquet quite loose, to accentuate the racquet head whip-like speed through the windshield-wiper stroke.

A) Start with your racquet face (the strings) slightly facing the ground and the butt of the racquet close to your right hip, as shown below.



B) Do a drill, starting as above, with the hand facing down as if petting a big dog, and bounce the ball down into the ground repeatedly with the strings parallel to the ground. Do it until you can comfortably control the ball for a continuous up and down rally. You may brush the ball a bit backwards (finding the ball with the hand, then bringing the strings to hit it) as if dribbling a basketball with a bit of backspin, to increase the contact time and your feel.

C) Now have a friend toss you the ball gently, point at it with the tip of your racquet while taking your hand a bit to your side, as shown in the first of the next sequence of pictures, then, applying the same feel as in drill B) come forward to meet the ball, while pulling the racquet around with a windshield-wiper rotation and backwards while lifting every part of your body to get the ball upwards with a forward roll, clearly clearing the net. The challenge here is to push the ball gently into your friend's direction, at a comfortable speed where it can be caught comfortably. Most students think forward power is necessary, while actually the lift and rotation imparted to the ball are the most important elements in the development of a pro. Remember that tennis is a game of feel and that the memory of a top athlete is the feel within the body at contact and at the finish that allows them to repeat endlessly their favorite and most efficient and powerful shots.





*Sharapova Forehand ----Rafael Nadal Forehand Finish*

The left hand is basically helping you rest your racquet in both hands while you are not hitting the ball. This is formally called "the waiting position", or more appropriately, the hands-waiting-position.

On a ball coming to your right side the left hand will release the racquet at some point after the bounce of the ball to let you swing at it. After the finish of the swing and observing where your ball landed, even if you were moving to cover the court you left open, the racquet will come back onto your left hand, again resting comfortably in both hands.

You can move your hand down bit by bit towards the end of the grip. On this basic or advanced grip and racquet position, make sure the racquet feels comfortable in your hands. I have purposely not shown closely the position of my right hand in some of the pictures because this varies from individual to individual. It is the player who chooses the exact grip, rather than the instructor doing it for the student. Choose what is most comfortable to you, not the teacher's idea of what is best for you.

Somewhere in the learning process small grip changes occur. This is okay, since the person is adjusting to a more comfortable or more efficient grip.

This is in essence your forehand grip. There is nothing complicated about it. You don't need to think about it, and you don't need to look at it. It just needs to feel comfortable and secure.

You don't need to grip your racquet tightly. Just keep it firm throughout the hit. You can vary the finger pressure accordingly, usually tightening up your fingers at impact time.

**DRILL #1:** After you learn the above, walk around the court, or your house, with the racquet in both hands as described, until you get used to this position of your arms while you move at slow and medium speeds around the court. For emergency and further reach, you may need to very briefly release the left hand from the racquet and to pump your arms like in a sprint.

Turn to your right, walk, turn to your left, walk, then get to the middle of the court and face the net. Repeat a few times.

In a short while you'll be ready to play tennis. You need to keep your racquet in both hands as long as possible while you are waiting or running, so that you aren't tempted to start your swing well before its time.

**DRILL #2:** At some point close your eyes while standing. Release your right hand from the grip and move it to the right side of your body, while keeping the racquet in position with your left hand. After a few seconds bring your right hand back onto the grip, getting the same feel as before. This way you'll learn to find your grip without looking at it.

**DRILL #3:** After you developed certainty in the last drill, with your eyes still closed, release your right hand from the grip and move the racquet toward the left side of your body with your left hand. After a few seconds bring the racquet back to your bellybutton or to the position you chose before to be comfortable, and grip it again with your right hand, always feeling the same grip.

After a few repetitions do it with your eyes open, but without looking at your grip.

Just a few minutes doing each of these drills will groove-in your grip for life.

## Backhand Grip

This two-hand resting position is also the basis for the two-handed backhand grip. In that stroke the driving hand is the left one, with the right hand accompanying the process, fairly relaxed, still keeping the forehand grip or any position comfortable. The hands are fairly close, or touching each other. You would start, as in the forehand grip, with the index of the left hand through the throat of the racquet, as shown in the picture below. Finish over the opposite shoulder.



*Serena Williams Backhand - Rafael Nadal Backhand Finish*

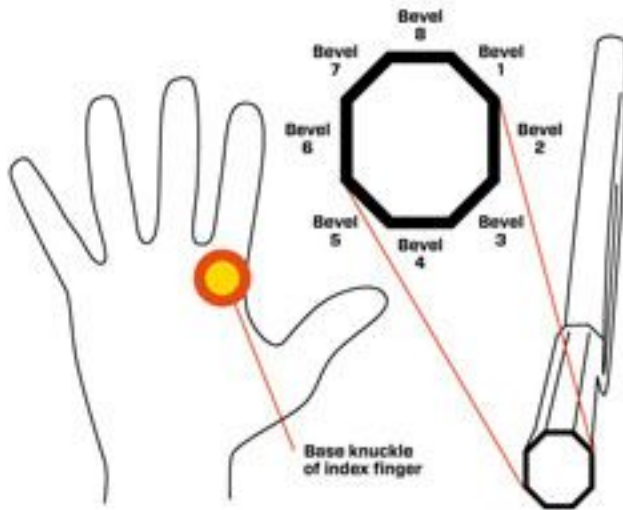
The power will be generated mostly by your left side. You could do the above drills this time alternating with your left hand alone holding the racquet first, then with the two hands on.



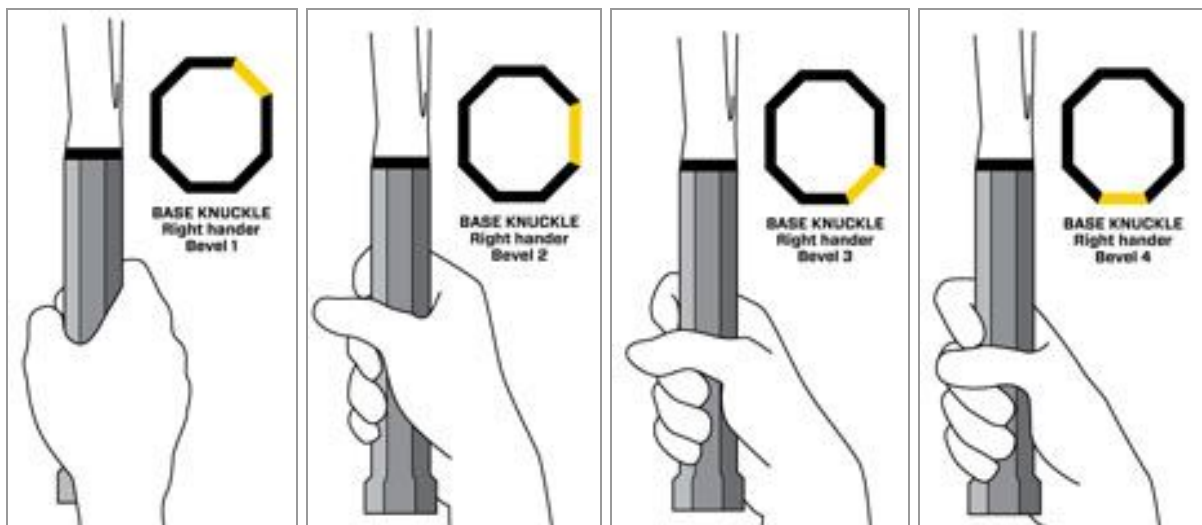
Should you choose a one-handed backhand, your grip will be different. This is explained in Chapter Nine, "The One-Handed Backhand."

## Section for coaches

Grips for modern strokes have changed quite a bit. While previously the preferred forehand grips were Continental and Eastern, now the Semi-Western and Full Western are the choice of most youngsters and of pros, as these permit them to generate topspin in a most natural and profound way.



How a grip is measured



Continental

Eastern

Semi-Western

Western

# CHAPTER 7

## *The Forehand*

Let's say you are on a tennis court for the first time in your life. You've already done the coordination drills, and you are satisfied with your control of the ball. You also went through the chapter on basic grip and racquet position and you should feel comfortable about that.

You brought a friend with you who is good at tossing the ball and you also brought a bucket of balls. A minimum of fifteen new or used balls would be good.

### **How Long to Play**

You are about to learn your first stroke, the "forehand," through the ten drills in this chapter.

With some well-coordinated teenagers and adults, I have gotten through these drills in as short a time as thirty minutes. For others, it took well over an hour. Sometimes I would fit these drills into several half-hour lessons, done on different days.

I adjusted the lessons to the students' stamina, their physical conditioning, and the weather conditions.

You also need to manage your time on the court. Overdoing your first lesson could turn you off to tennis.

My suggestion is to spend one hour on the court at most the first day. For some very young children and unprepared adults, twenty minutes to half an hour would be enough.

When you come back on the court the next time, you can check back on some of the drills you did. Then proceed with the next few drills and so on.

### **How Long Should Each Drill Be?**

Each student has a different speed of learning. You just have to do a drill until you are getting all the balls where you want and you have gotten the feel of the swing. In other words, do each drill until you are sure that you can repeat the swing at will and get the same results.

### **Warning**

This is the moment when you are building those habits that will last for life. This book will tell you which things you need to focus on. Do nothing else, no matter how good somebody else's suggestions may seem at the time.

Most people are very generous with their advice, but they are not really knowledgeable about how to teach someone, no matter how well they play themselves.

With these methods you can learn in hours what it usually takes months to learn. But if this learning process is tampered with by introducing additions, your focus may change, and it may eventually disrupt your feel for the ball.

## An Easy Way to Start

There are two ways you can start. One is with the racquet full length, with the hand in the normal grip position, as shown in the previous chapter. The other option is shortening the racquet by holding it from somewhere in the throat, as shown below, sticking your index finger through the opening in the racquet's throat.



This is also called "choking" up on the racquet, and the position of your hand may vary according to your liking, and would be dependent on your success in controlling the ball.

The shorter you hold the racquet, the easier it is to control the ball when you are totally new to this sport. There is less of a tendency this way to "swat" the ball, but as soon as you are hitting okay from one position you can slide your hand back, gradually getting to the normal grip position you learned in the previous chapter.

On the other hand, good athletes and well-coordinated people can move quickly to the normal grip position, but swinging slowly, avoiding wild hitting and slapping the wrist.

Children should start with light racquets, much shorter than those of an adult. You can get further information on shorter racquets in Chapter Eighteen.

## The Drills

First, for the sake of knowing how the ball bounces on the type of surface you are on, toss the ball back and forth with your friend, letting it bounce once each time. Then play it bare-handed over the net a few times, just like in the coordination drills in Chapter 5.

Now, having done all that, grab your racquet, centering it at your belly button or by your side as described in the last chapter. For an easy start, slide your right hand up on the racquet.

Get in the middle of the court, six to ten feet in front of the service line, facing the net. Have your friend stand in the opposite court, near the net and to your left side. He should leave the middle of the court open for you to hit balls toward. (Note: Start young children much closer to the net.)

**DRILL #1:** Your friend feeds (tosses) a ball gently toward your right side. The ball should bounce well before it gets to you, allowing you plenty of time, just like in the hand drills. Wait for the ball to come near you, adjusting your body if necessary. Find the ball slowly and to your front with the bottom of your racquet strings (more feel and more spin). Accelerate your right hand and racquet up and across your body until it touches the upper part of your left shoulder (relating this finish to the placement of your shot).



Do this with a gentle upward pull as you touch the ball, creating the momentum of your arm from the ball forward, rather than prior to the contact with the ball. It should feel like you pushed the ball up and over the net.

First, find the ball well, as if you were going to grab it. As you touch the ball, accelerate your hand and racquet mostly upward, bending your arm toward your left shoulder.

Your racquet face is slightly open when you touch the ball, but you lead the swing with the upper edge of the racquet, so that it goes up and over your left shoulder. This will propel the ball at about twenty mph, two to four feet over the net, in the direction of the open court. If the ball goes too high, tilt forward the racquet face a bit for your next shot.

**DRILL #1A:** Hit forehands while walking backwards, from near the net to further back than the service line.

**DRILL #1B:** Hit forehands while walking forward, from somewhere behind the service line towards the net.

(You can mix Drill #4 and Drill #5, all of which make your stroke independent from the body's moves)

Do these drills fifty or sixty times starting from the racquet in the bellybutton position described earlier. After a while you'll start noticing that the ball has a slight forward rolling action after leaving your racquet. This is called topspin. The more you lift your arm, the more topspin you will get on the ball. Just two or three rolls of the ball until it bounces in the other court is enough topspin for you at this stage.

Again, be gentle. Do not take a hard swing.

You can start to slide your hand toward a normal grip position, but keep the finish over the shoulder, whether you are "choking" up on the racquet or not.

## Notes

How far to "choke" up on the racquet depends on the person's strength and physical ability. Some people like to start with the hand closer to the throat of the racquet, some others midway, and others would rather play with the hand on the racquet's handle. It should be left to the student's discretion. A few tries, and you will know what feels best for you at the stage you are in.

Some people go through all the drills in this chapter gripping the racquet short. This is perfectly all right. Confidence is built by success and the person knows instinctively what his "safety needs" are to get the ball on the racquet and then into the other court.

## Guidelines

Do not "break" your wrist. It can drastically affect the direction of your shot. The wrist is slightly laid back, with the racquet's upper edge moving upward together with your arm.

Keep your focus on finding the ball and getting it over the net. Everything else will fall into place naturally as you do the drills in this chapter. You want to feel the ball on your strings as long as possible, and then to feel the finish of your stroke, as if these were the only important things to do.

Don't worry about the position of your body. Do whatever is comfortable for you. The less you do, the better. It's okay if your body faces the net, or if it's slightly turned. Just get those easy balls gently over the net, ending with your right hand over your left shoulder.

Many people make hitting the ball harder for themselves because they are also concentrating on the position of their feet, their balance, weight transfer, whether they are sideways to the net, their racquet preparation, etc.

Your focus needs to stay on finding the ball and then the same finish only, even while you are running around. You could think of all the other things and then look uncoordinated, like trying to walk using four or five crutches at the same time. You'll end up with the ball getting by you or hitting you on the head.

**DRILL #2:** When you are comfortably hitting every ball over the net and into the court, have your friend vary slightly the height and speed of his toss. By now you may move back, closer to the service line.

Have your friend toss some higher balls, too. As much as possible, let the ball slow down and come to a comfortable height by staying away from the bounce. Let the ball curve fully after the bounce, up and then down below the waist level, where it is most comfortable to hit with a lift.

If this is not possible, it is because your friend is tossing the balls too fast or too close to you. Have him adjust his toss to a gentle one, a little to your right side. At this stage your friend needs to make things easy for you, not difficult. You want to learn to find the ball and to work out how close to the ball you would start the acceleration of your hand and racquet. You want to learn control for the rest of your life, rather than going for speed and power first.

Taking the racquet back to get more power is also called the backswing. It is something developed personally, by yourself, without even thinking about it. No one should try to help you by telling you to take your racquet back or showing the backswing to you. You'll develop it gradually and naturally when you start increasing the power in your shots.

Be economical in your moves, slow and deliberate in your swing. If you do a lot of fast moving at these low speeds it may trap you later. Can you imagine how much faster you would have to move at the higher speeds? If you rush on a slow ball, you'll probably panic on a fast ball.

Practice the other way around, doing things as slowly as you can. Once you groove-in a slow motion for a slow ball, you'll do things instinctively faster for a faster ball.

The more you wait for the ball and keep your cool in these learning stages, the better you'll learn to use your time.

Work out your own timing, depending on the speed of the ball coming to you. Wait until well after the bounce before swinging. Don't let anyone rush you. Many people like to help by urging you to prepare or to swing. This will only interfere with your own computations. You need to work this out by yourself, from your own viewpoint.

You will definitely notice if you are late in your swing. You have all the data now, and the quieter the world around you, the better you can do.

The best help you can get from your friend is gentle advice, "wait for the ball," or "don't rush."

Pretty soon you'll start getting the feel that you are accelerating from the ball on. If you get your racquet close to the ball before you accelerate, you will have control. If you rush your stroke and

strike too early, the ball may come out too hard and without control. That is why I say touch the ball, or push it. When you push something, you touch it before you put your force to it.

In tennis this is done by accurately finding the ball, then accelerating from very close to the contact point on. You can develop this feel easily. Just feel that you touch the ball before you hit. Slowly you'll realize how soon you can accelerate without losing your control, and you'll develop a stronger and stronger push.

Waiting for the right moment to swing is probably the most delicate part of the game. Almost every human being tends to overreact. Over 80 percent of the mistakes made by professional tennis players are caused by starting the swing too early, rather than late.

A word of caution here. Starting to swing too early, then slowing down at mid-swing (sometimes unconsciously) to compensate, and accelerating again, feels like a late swing, when, in reality, it was too early a start.

Leave your right hand touching your left shoulder at the end of your swing, until you see where the ball has gone. After that bring it back to your bellybutton. By doing this you create a relationship between the end of your swing and your placement. This finish could be also described as the butt of the racquet pointing to the direction of your shot.

That is the only mental image of "position" that you need to keep. This will help you complete your stroke 99.9 percent of the time, no matter what is happening to your body and balance, or how difficult the situation may be. Just like the pros, you'll never forget to finish your swing.

**DRILL #3:** Slowly you'll start noticing that the height and direction of your shot depend only on the angle of your racquet. The swing feels the same all the time. It ends the same whether the ball is lower, higher, further away, or closer to you.

If you angle your racquet slightly to your right when you touch the ball, the ball will go to your right. If you angle your racquet to your left, the ball will go there, as shown in the following pictures:



Practice this in the drill. Aim some balls to the center, some to your right, and some to your left, taking care not to hit your friend.

In all three instances you would continue the swing toward your left shoulder, finishing the same.

**DRILL #4:** If you open the racquet face, the ball will go higher up. If you close the racquet face a bit, the ball will go lower over the net, as shown in the following pictures:



This closing or opening of the racquet is done with a little turn of the forearm prior to the swing and kept throughout. The grip always stays the same. Lifting your elbow will also close the racquet face.

Practice this. Hit some higher balls and some lower ones by slightly varying the opening of the racquet, without disturbing the path of your stroke.

## Note

If your friend is a well-coordinated, athletic person, and you succeed in hitting the ball gently in his direction, he can catch it and keep tossing you the same ball over and over. This is particularly good when you only have a few balls. Otherwise you must have a good supply of balls, so that there aren't too many interruptions to these drills.

**DRILL #5:** Have your friend toss slightly shorter balls, so that you have to move forward to stroke them. Touch them and touch your left shoulder again. This is your swing, whether you are on the move or stationary. You can add momentum to it when you wish by slightly increasing the acceleration during the impact. Just be careful not to disturb the racquet angle very much.

**DRILL #6:** Start from the left sideline, just in front of the service line. Turn to your right, and start to walk parallel to the net. (Young children should be much closer to the net, according to their build, age, and coordination.)

Have your friend toss the ball a little in front of you so that you'll hit it while walking forward. You don't need to stop to hit it. Walk very naturally, as if you were going down the street, all the way to the right sideline, hitting four or five balls in between. Your friend also walks across the court, a little behind you, on his side of the net, leaving an open court for you to hit to.

**DRILL #7:** When you get used to hitting balls while walking forward, hit forehands while walking backwards, from the right sideline to the left one. Your friend can toss the ball close to you so that you have to move back before hitting each ball. This will teach you to put some distance between you and the ball when it is coming too close or right at you.

You can actually combine these last two drills, hitting four or five balls while walking forward, then four or five balls while walking backwards.

You will also learn to walk slower or faster to find the ball. It will all depend on the speed and placement of your friend's toss, and the place where you want to meet the ball. It is always like catching the ball, whether you have to run to get it or not. Always find it first, and again, don't rush the stroke. This teaches you to hit the ball on the run as well. If you prefer to get to the ball and turn into the open stance to hit, then turn again to continue across the court, this is a good place to do it. It would be more of an advanced drill, but do as you please.

**DRILL #8:** Put a can of balls in the center of the court, in front of the service line. Stand right in front of the can. Your friend tosses a ball to your right side, a few feet from you. Get to it and hit it. Turn to your left and come back to the center. Round the can from the backcourt, turning to your right, while your friend tosses another ball to your right. Get to it and hit it, get back to the center, rounding the can again, and so on.

This will teach you "pivoting," that is, turning to go in one direction, then turning to go in another direction. Always walk or run forward in this drill, not sideways or backward. Do this naturally, turning and turning again.

Don't turn your back toward your friend or to the net at any time during this drill. You must always go around the can from behind. This way you can see your opponent's court at all times.

Synchronizing the body to the strokes is really an instinctive process that you develop with the drills in this book. Sometimes you'll need to hurry, just like when the pedestrian light starts blinking and the traffic begins roaring to a start. But the more naturally you walk, as if you were walking down the street or window shopping, the better you'll learn to play.

The tennis court is quite small, three or four steps to each side, a few more forward. But you can't lose time preparing your shot before you get somewhere near the ball. Many people start their swing before they run. They lose valuable time that could be used to get to the ball. The shot preparation occurs when you are getting near the ball, or the ball is getting near you.

With practice you can get to the stage where your arms feel independent of your body position or movement. You'll be able to find the ball smoothly and move through the swing whether you are on the run, falling forward or backward, or completely stationary and facing the net. Slowly, this feel of

your arm will be preponderant amongst all other feels, and will be the basis, as it is for the pros, of your "style".

Now, as you progress, move the can a little farther from the net. Have your friend toss the ball farther away, slowly increasing the difficulty of the drill.

Always be in control of what you are doing. You may have to do some running to get to the ball, but go slowly toward the middle and make sure your friend doesn't toss the next ball too soon. He shouldn't toss the ball too far from you or too fast either. At this stage of your development it would ruin your swing.

If it starts to go bad, go back to an easier part of the drill. The criterion here is that you have to find the ball well and finish the stroke properly. Otherwise the degree of difficulty is too steep and you need to go either to a slower toss or a ball closer to your reach, or both.

**DRILL #9:** After you have completed Drill #8 forty or fifty times and you feel you have gotten your stroke grooved-in, you can have your friend feed the ball with a tennis racquet. He should do this only if he can control the ball with the racquet. (By now, you may move well behind the service line.)

While doing the drill, run gently to the side where the ball is coming. The ball bounces. Slow down and wait. Find the ball gently, with little momentum in your swing. Accelerate the arm at contact, bending it farther when you touch the ball. Finish with the right hand touching your left shoulder. Leave the hand there while you turn toward the middle of the court, seeing where you placed the ball in your opponent's court. Bring the racquet down gently to both hands, and your bellybutton, while slowly going to the center of the court. Round the can, and so on, over and over.

You can alternate with your friend, and feed balls to him. Trade places with him. If you are feeding the ball with your racquet, bounce the ball a little to your front and to your right. Using the same gentle swing as in your drills, direct the ball as if you were tossing it to your friend, so that he can hit it comfortably.

**DRILL #10:** As soon as you feel in complete control of your stroke and the ball, you can get rid of the can. Stand midway between the service line and the baseline, or perhaps closer to the service line, whichever is to your liking. Now you can hit balls back and forth with someone good enough, with your forehand only (and only to your friend's forehand if your friend is also at this stage).

Hit at a slow pace, a few feet over the net. Always return, at least a few feet, toward the center after each hit. Pivot back and forth, just like in the drill around the can.

When you are able to hit ten or twenty balls back and forth, move further back. Work out the speed gradually to a medium-paced rally.

You'll find that there is plenty of time between each of your hits. At this pace the ball takes between one and a half to two seconds to go from baseline to baseline, assuming that it cleared the net by a few feet and that it bounced near the service line. Therefore, the ball can take from three to four seconds between the time you strike it until it comes back into your racquet again.

That is plenty of time for you to follow through all the way in your swing, to take a few steps toward the middle, to run again and to go back to hit another forehand.

You can do everything as you did during the drills, without rushing at all. On the contrary, emphasize waiting and moving slowly. Find the ball well and finish your stroke all the way.

Choose whatever feels best, is the least strenuous, and allows you to stay loose. Swing smoothly and firmly, without disturbing the feel of lifting the ball and completing your swing. All the small adjustments to the flight of the ball, body motion and position, distance, etc., will start to occur instinctively. They will all build automatically if you keep your focus on finding the ball and finishing your stroke.

## **Drifting to the Center**

There is usually a four-inch line at the center of the baseline to indicate the center of the court.

While playing a match, or hitting back and forth, you don't need to get to the middle of the court all the time. After striking the ball, drift slowly toward the middle. Then if you see your opponent hit the ball behind you (the place you just left), turn right back to get the ball.

As you watch a professional match, you may see that players sometimes skip sideways toward the center, usually after they hit a crosscourt shot. Moreover, professional players do it without covering too much territory. They are just staying in the vicinity of their opponent's highest percentage shot, which would be another crosscourt. If there is any kind of pressure, or they need to cover more territory or to get somewhere fast, they pivot for their run.

This pivoting is common to many sports and a very natural thing to do. You see kids of a very tender age turning in whichever direction they want to go. As a matter of fact, they do that before they learn to walk.

In order for you to learn to play naturally and efficiently, even under pressure, you need to groove-in your pivoting from the start. The drill with the can of balls is the best way to get used to it. From my experience with students, learning to sidestep at this stage just impairs coordination and timing and severely complicates the whole learning process.

## **Errors**

The most common error is to rush arm movement, which destroys your feel of the ball. Sometimes it pays to wait too long when you are learning or practicing, because this way you'll find out exactly how long you can wait. If you get used to rushing, you'll never know how long you could have waited before swinging. The compensations players create to make up for being early usually hide the perception of this error. The difference may be in the one hundredth of a second, but it will affect your play.

## **Focusing Your Attention**

Introducing additions to the techniques, like worrying about your steps, your body position, and the like, may complicate your learning process. There is a difference between focusing your attention and just being aware of something while focusing on something else.

Good concentration is focusing all your attention into one thing. The more you isolate that particular thing from the rest, the better your concentration is. Here in tennis is hand-eye-ball above all!

Human beings tend to lose their concentration easily. Top pros don't. Not all pros act the same between points, but, while the ball is in play, there is nothing else in the world to the pro but finding it and getting it back.

Of course, they are aware of other things. But, again, their focus is directed toward the feel of a very few important things that are clearly explained in this book.

Students who have their whole attention on the feel of the ball and the finish of the swing look very stylish and coordinated. On the other hand, those who pay attention to their feet usually look stiff, unnatural, and sometimes plainly uncoordinated. The reason behind that is that they focus their attention on things that need to happen naturally, taking valuable attention away from the most important thing, which is finding and feeling the ball.

## **"Racquet Back"**

A beginner should never be told, as stressed in most conventional teaching techniques, to take the racquet back. Taking your racquet back early, or hard, or fast, separates your hand from the ball. You won't find the ball well.

There is no early, separate backswing in the greatest strokes in the game. There is simply a movement back and forth where the player is generating momentum according to the power he wants in the shot, while still carefully finding the ball.

In modern forehands this momentum is generated mostly by a turn from the waist up. It is like a twisted spring that will come back with force. The right hand also goes back and forth just prior to the hit, but the player feels that the hand is still near the ball, therefore "finding it" well before exploding from the ball forward.

If you are a beginner, let it be a gentle, slow movement at first. Keep in mind that you are learning control first, before you hit as hard as a pro. You want to find the ball perfectly and smoothly and to feel the impact as long as you can.

Your backswing may be circular or straight down and up. It may be almost nonexistent at first. As long as you find the ball well and you don't disturb your racquet angle, there isn't much difference between the two. This part of the swing is peculiar to each player and shouldn't be disturbed. It is the way a player "finds" the ball.

## Hitting High

Do not fear hitting high over the net. Many people have the idea that they need to hit down to get the ball to drop in the court. From baseline to baseline the distance is 78 feet. Your slow backcourt groundstroke has a mathematical and physical impossibility of clearing your opponent's baseline, no matter how high you hit the ball, unless it is carried by the wind. The same goes for a medium-speed shot hit with plenty of topspin.

One very common error is to hit the ball very low over the net. This causes more errors than hitting safely over the net. I remember a stage in my life when I lost more matches to the net than to my opponents.

While practicing groundstrokes, put a string two or three feet above the net and hit over it. Many pros follow this rule, especially the topspin players, who get depth in their shots either by hitting very hard or hitting high over the net, or both.

## "Breaking" the Wrist

Do not snap your wrist forward as you hit. It causes you to lose control and possibly strain your arm. Bending the wrist forward is usually a compensation for hitting too early. The player is swinging and the ball isn't quite there yet. He looks for it with the tip of the racquet, and the ball often ends up crosscourt.

It is your hand that moves, not just the racquet. The racquet head is actually slightly behind the hand when you are finding the ball. For a topspin forehand, you should actually be able to see the back of your hand throughout the whole shot.

## Forearm Rotation

Forearm rotation helps to lift the ball and rotate it with topspin. The following picture sequences show this windshield-wiper rotation of Rafael Nadal and Roger Federer:



## **Dropping the racquet Head**

You can let the racquet head drop as low as you like below your hand and below the ball before you hit. This will help you to lift the ball and put topspin to it. Keeping the head of the racquet up all the time, as recommended by many tennis teachers, will not only stiffen your swing but also strain your forearm. It is one of the primary causes of "tennis elbow", a chronic pain at the outside of the elbow.

## **Lifting the Body**

Your body will usually help to lift the ball by pulling up. This is a very natural thing to do. The more topspin you hit, the more your body needs to help the lift. To stay low throughout the shot can dampen your feel of lifting and stand in the way of developing a great topspin stroke.

## **Backing Up**

To handle topspin balls coming at you, you may need to move back to get away from the bounce. This way you let the ball lose some of its sting and come to a comfortable height where you can also hit it back with topspin. The most comfortable height to hit a groundstroke with topspin is usually between knee level and waist level.

## **"Hitting on the Rise"**

Attacking a high topspin ball is delicate and risky. The best place to attack such a ball, other than to volley it before it bounces, is to hit it right after the bounce, with the ball at knee level or below. With the ball rising, you need to close fairly well the racquet face. This takes great timing and touch (perfect contact between racquet and ball) while the ball is still going fast. It is best to leave that until you are very experienced in the game. During your early tennis development stages, use the safest and most consistent option, which is to let the ball slow down by moving back. Let it come down comfortably, and hit topspin back.

## **Low Topspin**

Not all topspin shots are high. You'll see the pros hitting hard topspin shots low over the net for sharp cross-courts or forceful passing shots.

On a topspin crosscourt shot you can achieve a greater angle than with a flat stroke without having to slow down your shot.

On a topspin passing shot, your opponent has more difficulty handling your ball because it drops much more quickly after crossing the net. (A passing shot is the shot that you hit with a groundstroke to pass an opponent who has come to the net and wants to volley your next shot.)

There are so many advantages to topspin on groundstrokes that they are still being discovered by many of the top pros.



# CHAPTER 8

## *The Two-Handed Backhand*

When the ball comes to your left side, you have a choice of hitting your backhand with both hands on the grip, or with just one hand on the racquet.

Many adults choose a one-handed backhand because their right side is so strong that they prefer to do everything with that side. For children, the two-handed backhand is easier to learn. The two-handed support gives them more strength and it doesn't require a grip change.

A two-handed backhand gives more power and also works out the left side of the body, making for a more balanced physical development overall. The only disadvantage is a slight reduction in reach compared with the one-handed backhand.

Most professional players have both backhands. They hit topspin two-handed, while they slice with a one-handed shot.

This chapter will teach you the two-handed backhand. The one-handed backhand is explained in the next chapter, and the backhand slice in Chapter Fifteen, "Special Shots."

If you have already decided to hit your backhand one-handed you may skip this chapter and go directly to the next chapter.

### **The Two-Handed Backhand**

Many professionals use this shot, which is really a two-handed forehand from the left side. The palm of the left hand does the driving, with the right hand just accompanying the process, without interfering with the left hand.

A few pros play a mixture of a two-handed and a one-handed backhand, in which the left hand lets go of the racquet at the impact time or right after.

This chapter will teach you the backhand in which you keep both hands on the racquet throughout. The backhand is easier to learn at this stage because by now you have plenty of experience as to how the ball bounces and behaves. You also know how to find the ball before swinging.

In the waiting position, a player with a two-handed backhand keeps his hands closer together than the player with a one-handed backhand. The contact will also be further back than the one-hander, and also closer to the body.

Keep both hands on the grip, near your bellybutton, while waiting in between shots. Get to the ball, find it well, and follow through over your right shoulder.



It is like a mirror copy of your forehand shot, except that you don't release the other hand from the racquet. You can do a few two-handed backhands in front of a mirror. Let the right hand go sometimes. You'll see how it resembles a forehand with the left hand. I would recommend to do this one-hander drill initially on court, so as to make the left hand more dominant in the two-hander shot. Below, on drill #2, switching between two hands on the racquet to just the left hand is some top players' favorite backhand drill.



**DRILL #1:** Go on the court without a racquet and stand facing the net six to eight feet in front of the service line. Have your friend toss the ball toward your left side. Let the ball bounce, find it with the palm of your left hand, and push it over the net. Finish with the index finger of your left hand touching your right shoulder, or the back of your left hand touching your cheek. (If you have any difficulty finding the ball, do all the coordination drills of Chapter Five with your left hand.)

Do this drill until you are getting the ball over the net comfortably.

**DRILL #2:** Grab your racquet with both hands, as described earlier. Center your hands by your belly button, while standing in front of the service line facing the net. (You may "choke up" on the racquet as much as you like.) Have your friend toss the ball gently toward your left side. Wait until after the bounce, find the ball well with the center of your racquet strings, and push it up over the net, bringing both hands over your right shoulder, as shown in the pictures above.

Repeat this drill thirty or forty times, mixing sometimes with the one-hander on the backhand side. Get used to keeping your hands near your waist while waiting for the ball, then adjust to the ball as needed. Find the ball mostly with your left hand, and follow through over the right shoulder, leaving the racquet there for a split second, while looking where your shot has gone.

The following drills are similar to the ones you did while learning the forehand.

**DRILL #3:** Your friend tosses several short balls toward your backhand side. Get to the ball and hit it gently over the net.

**DRILL #4:** Hit backhands while walking backwards, from near the net to further than the service line.

**DRILL #5:** Hit backhands while walking forward, from near the service line towards the net. (You can mix Drill #4 and Drill #5, which make your stroke independent from the body's moves.)

**DRILL #6:** Put the can of balls in the center of the court. Go around the can and to your left.

Your friend tosses the ball in front of you. Let the ball bounce, find it with the racquet, and lift it over the net, following through over your right shoulder. Turn right immediately and go back to the can, rounding it from the backcourt and turning to your left.

When you begin walking toward the left side of the court, your friend tosses another ball. Get there and hit another backhand, then return to the can of balls and so on.

Never turn your back to your opponent in your turns or after the hit. Turn to your right after your shot, to your left when you round the can.

Swing slowly at first, always in control. Leave the racquet at the finish position while you turn toward the center of the court, building up the relationship between the finish of your stroke and the placement of the ball in your opponent's court.

The racquet face angle will determine the height and direction of your shot. After a while the stroke will become quite automatic, going from the ball to the shoulder, whether the ball is high or low, close to you or farther away.

It is important that you learn not to slap at the ball, suddenly changing the angle of your wrists. On the contrary, move your hands smoothly through the stroke, feeling the lift you are giving to the ball.

Preferably, the ball should have a forward roll after leaving your racquet.

When hitting comfortably from near the service line, move the can farther away from the net a few feet at a time. Have your friend toss the ball slightly farther each time.

Always step up the difficulty of the drill very slowly, so as not to lose the feel of the ball and the finish of the stroke.

**DRILL #7:** Same as Drill #6, except that your friend feeds the ball with a tennis racquet, but only if he can do it with control and without disrupting your own control.

**DRILL #8:** Get rid of the can. Now you can work out your shots to a medium pace and start brushing up on the ball, the same as you did with your forehand, to give the ball more of a forward roll (topspin).

Dropping the racquet head below the ball and lifting it up over your shoulder will increase your topspin. You'll be able to clear the net at a good height and still get the ball in the court, even when you hit hard.



**DRILL #9:** When you are satisfied with your progress and are confidently hitting your backhand without a miss, you can start a one forehand, one backhand routine.

Walk naturally, first to your right. Your friend feeds a ball to your forehand side. Hit a forehand. Turn to your left. Walk. Your friend tosses a ball to your backhand side. Hit a backhand. Turn to your right, walk, hit a forehand, and so on.

Do this until you are completely comfortable on both sides.

Now your friend can mix up forehands and backhands as he likes, but always giving you enough time in between shots to turn and start to return toward the middle.

**DRILL #10:** You are ready to hit back and forth. You need to do this with someone who has good control of the ball.

Keep the ball in play at a medium or slow pace that allows you to find the ball easily and to get it back to the other player with a full and controlled stroke.

## Control

I say a controlled stroke because that is the emphasis when learning with this method. You'll very quickly see the relationship between your swing and the ball's velocity and placement.

You can experiment, but be careful not to stray very far from the essence of this technique. Should you make wild strokes, or the other player feed or return the ball wildly, it can severely damage both your swing and confidence.

## Confidence

Confidence is built by hitting the same shot over and over a few hundred times. You get to know that you caused it with a specific movement, a specific technique.

Trial and error as a learning method doesn't work well in tennis. There are a million ways to strike the ball, but very, very few of them are really effective.

With the type of stroke I am teaching you, topspin is an easy thing to develop both for the forehand and the backhand. If you can hit topspin consistently from the backcourt, at a medium pace, three to six feet over the net, you are on the way to becoming a good player.

In following junior tennis at the world-ranking level for many years, I have seen that the great majority of top players in the last fifteen years are those who had plenty of topspin in at least one of their strokes in their developing years.

Although topspin has been widely accepted by the best players, most of the various teaching techniques seem to avoid it altogether.



On the contrary, I encourage you to use it right from the beginning. I like to provide students with the best equipment for their stroke, to teach them to play like a pro, to be as consistent as a pro.

You may be using topspin defensively to start with, but sooner or later you'll learn powerful offensive shots that will need a lot of topspin to stay in the court.

I purposely took away the power in the early learning stages with my teaching methods. You focused on feel and control. Now the power will gradually come into your game.

As you gain confidence you'll stroke harder. With a lot of topspin, you can hit as hard as you like. As long as the ball keeps clearing the net and going into the opposite court, this process shouldn't be disturbed.

# CHAPTER 9

## *The One-Handed Backhand*

This chapter will teach you both the flat and the topspin one-handed backhand.

If you have decided to hit your backhand two-handed, you don't need to go through this chapter at all. Skip it and go directly to Chapter Ten, "The Serve."

The one-handed backhand could be likened to hitting the ball with the back of the hand, as shown in the photograph below.



(CAUTION: Don't try this with the regular ball because it hurts the hand. You can practice this with a sponge ball, as shown above)

The body should definitely be sideways to the net during this stroke, turning back towards the center of the court only with the finish. This stroke is best executed by pulling the shoulder blades together in your back, rather than moving the wrist (which should be locked with the racquet perpendicular to the arm, even while rotating the forearm to achieve more topspin).

To learn this backhand quickly, put the thumb of your right hand against the strings, as shown in the photograph below.



As soon as you succeed hitting the ball this way 2 or 3 ft. over the net, you can switch your grip to the handle of the racquet, as shown below. Keep the racquet perpendicular to your arm, with the arm pointing in the direction you want the ball.



**DRILL #1:** Stand about eight to ten feet from the net. Have your friend stand on the other side of the net, tossing easy balls toward your left side. Meet the ball well in front of you and gently push it up and over the net, toward the open court. Finish with your arm fully extended and up. Eventually, you can move your grip to the end and have the thumb around the grip, as shown here.



This is an upward effort, both to lift the ball and the arm.

Don't resort to hitting the ball hard to get it over the net. Just push the ball upward more than forward, sending it a few feet above the net.

After a few shots turn slightly to your left. See if this helps your swing.

Leave the arm up at the finish for a couple of seconds to build the relationship between your finish and the placement of your shot in your opponent's court.

If you have good control of the ball, you can hit it slowly toward your friend, who will catch it and toss it to you again.



The following drills are similar to the ones you did while learning the forehand.

**DRILL #2:** Have your friend toss some shorter balls. Move up to the ball, find it, and hit it gently, up and over the net.

**DRILL #3:** Hit several backhands while walking from your right sideline to the left sideline, with your friend tossing the ball short and a bit to your front. Meet the ball toward the right side of your body, as in Picture 2 above, and extend your arm upward in the direction of your opponent's court, as in Picture 3.

**DRILL #4:** Hit backhands while walking backward, from the left sideline to your right sideline. Your friend tosses the ball in your direction so that you have to move back to hit. Keep the right arm up at the end of your swing for a short while, as in the prior drills. Your friend shouldn't rush you by feeding the next ball too soon.

You could also do a combination of these last two drills, hitting four or five backhands while walking forward, and four or five backhands while walking backward.

As you gain confidence in your shots, gradually start moving your hand toward the grip of the racquet. Your left hand will help you support the racquet prior to your swing.

You don't need to move your right hand all the way onto the racquet handle early in your development. Keep your hand wherever it feels comfortable.

If you feel confident that you are ready and are finding the ball well, you can place your right hand on the grip, but keep the angle between the racquet and your arm close to perpendicular. Otherwise you'll get used to "breaking" your wrist, following through with your racquet only, instead of fully extending the arm.

**DRILL #5:** Put the can of balls in the center of the court, near the service line. Round the can to your left, looking at your friend who is ready to toss you a ball toward your backhand side.

Turn to your left and start walking toward the left side of your court.

Your friend tosses the ball slightly in front of you, making sure it bounces well before it gets to you. Get near the ball, finding it toward the right side of your body, your right arm fully extended. As you touch the ball, accelerate your arm upward and lift the ball over the net.

You end up with your right arm fully extended toward the net, while your left arm extends backward to keep your balance.

After finishing your swing, turn to your right, with the arm still up. When you finish your turn, bring the racquet back to both hands, while walking back toward the center of the court. Round the can again and repeat the process over and over.

Don't turn your back toward your opponent's court. After you hit, turn to your right. Round the can turning to your left.

In this drill it is best to use the backhand grip all the time in order to get used to it. Small changes and adjustments will occur, both in your grip and your swing. This is okay, because you are developing a better feel and the most efficient swing possible.

As long as you are clearing the net safely and have the ball speed under control, keep lifting away.

Gradually move away from the net and toward the backcourt, continuing this drill from farther back.

You can leave your thumb against the backside of the grip, or you can drop it all the way around it. As players get very good, they usually end up with the thumb down and around the grip.

The flat and the topspin one-handed backhands are similar. Topspin will be a natural consequence of your lift.

Ideally, your ball should be rotating with topspin from an early stage in your learning.

It is easier to muscle the ball with topspin using your forehand. To develop the same strong feel in your backhand you'll need to practice until you develop your back and shoulder muscles.

Just keep pulling up your swing, brushing up on the ball. Start with the racquet head below the ball and pull it upward toward the sky.

Do it gently, slowly building up your strength. Do not use much force. Get feel and control first.

**DRILL #6:** After you have excellent control and get every ball over the net and in the court, get rid of the can of balls.

Go onto the center of the court, behind the service line. Have your friend feed a ball to your forehand side. Get to the ball and hit a forehand. Turn to your left. Change to your backhand grip. Pointing the butt of the racquet toward the ball in your friend's hand will help this process.

Your friend then feeds a ball to your backhand side, close to your reach. Get to it and hit a backhand. Leave the racquet up while you turn to your right. Then put the racquet butt near your bellybutton, changing to your forehand grip.

Your friend now feeds a ball to your forehand side. Get to it and hit a forehand, turn to your left, and so on.

Your left hand can help you get your backhand grip by pulling back from the throat of the racquet. At the same time the grip slides inside your right hand, while you set your fingers closer together.

Do not look at your grip while changing from forehand to backhand or vice versa. The grip needs to be felt, not seen.

If you are experiencing any trouble, take a few minutes and practice this grip change with your eyes closed. Face the net with your forehand grip. Turn your shoulders to your left, while pulling back from the racquet throat with your left hand and slightly loosening your right hand grip. Point the racquet butt to an imaginary ball coming to your backhand side and tighten your right hand grip again. This sequence will change your grip inside your right hand.

After that tighten your arms and shoulders as if you were preparing for a backhand stroke. Then face the net again, centering your forehand grip by your bellybutton.

Do this back and forth until the grip change becomes automatic, together with your turning to your left and to your right.

Some players, including many professionals, bring their shoulders around, right shoulder toward the ball in the backhand, left shoulder toward the ball in the forehand. This is good (it keeps the body moving), as long as you keep finding the ball with your hand, not your shoulder.

**DRILL #7:** Now your friend can mix up forehands and backhands. He can also slowly step up the difficulty of the drill. Always feel in control, otherwise cut the difficulty back.

Do this drill until you are getting every ball smoothly into your opponent's court.

## Rallying

Now you are ready to hit back and forth. You'll need someone to hit with that has good control. Start at a slow pace, keeping the ball in play as long as you can.

This is not a game yet. You are still developing your strokes and you want to keep the same feel of control and finish of your stroke.

If you lose the feel of your swing or you lose your confidence, find the ball well and exaggerate the finish of your swing. It should come right back.



## Control

(For those who skipped the previous chapter)

Keep the ball in play at a medium or slow pace that allows you to find the ball easily and to get it back to the other player with a full and controlled stroke.

I say a controlled stroke because that is the emphasis when learning with this method. You'll very quickly see the relationship between your swing and the ball's velocity and placement.

You can experiment, but be careful not to stray very far from the essence of this technique. Should you start to make wild strokes, or the other player feed or return the ball wildly, it can severely damage both your swing and your confidence.

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You may be using topspin defensively to start with, but sooner or later you'll learn powerful offensive shots that will need a lot of topspin to stay in the court.

I purposely took away the power in the early learning stages with my teaching methods. You focused on feel and control. Now the power will gradually come into your game.

As you gain confidence you'll stroke harder. With a lot of topspin, you can hit as hard as you like. As long as the ball keeps clearing the net and going into the opposite court, this process shouldn't be disturbed.

## **Advanced Topspin**

Many top players can hit tremendous one-handed topspin backhands from almost any position. Prior to the shot they point the butt of the racquet to the incoming ball, lowering the racquet below the ball. From there they hit upward, getting plenty of lift and ball rotation, while still hitting the ball very hard.

Depending on the racquet face angle, they can achieve--with the same stroke--a low passing shot, a forceful crosscourt, a high and deep looping shot, or a deceiving topspin lob.

It isn't hard to do. It is just a question of being far enough below the ball to create plenty of lift.

# CHAPTER 10

## *The Serve*

The serve is the first ball hit in every point.

The point continues until someone hits the ball into the net or outside the boundaries of his opponent's court, or is unable to get to the ball before it bounces twice. The player who makes the error loses the point. (Any ball touching the correct boundary line, no matter how slight the contact, is considered to have landed inside the court.)

In a match you must serve from behind the baseline (the back line of the court). To make learning the serve easier, you would start the drills from inside the court, closer to the net. You serve the first point from the right, hitting the ball to the diagonally-opposite service court. Serve the second point from the left, hitting the ball to the other service court, the third point from the right, and so on, alternating.

The same player serves an entire game, comprised of several points. Your opponent serves the next game, and so on. One game is part of a set, and one set is part of the entire match. The full scoring system is explained in Chapter 12.

A player can return a serve only after it has bounced in the service court.

### **The Drills**

You can learn to serve quickly through a simple procedure. Stand about six feet from the net, slightly to the right of the center line.

The service court where you will serve is the smaller area across the net and to your left.

**DRILL #1:** Without your racquet, toss the ball gently overhead over the net and into the service court. Repeat several times and observe how the ball curves down into the service court.



**DRILL #2:** From the same position as in Drill #1, pick up your racquet from near the throat with a hammer grip, as if it were a shorter racquet. Hold the ball in your left hand.

Toss the ball slightly above your racquet strings,



and push it gently with your racquet, over the net and into the service court. It is best to address the ball first with the forward edge, as if you were about to hammer it with the frame, then let the frame turn to the right as you hit. This is called pronation, and it will be a great tool to develop a serve of different spins.

This push is done by extending your arm towards the right of your target, so it gets some side and upwards spin. Play with those to get an idea how to spin the ball.

Serve balls from this position near the net until you are successful in getting the ball in the proper court. Advance your hand, rather than just the racquet head.

**DRILL #3:** Get a bucketful of balls and gently, from close to the net, hit a serve into the correct service court. Every time you get the ball in the service court, you are allowed one step back toward the baseline, staying to the right of the center. Observe how the upward spin curves it down.

Every time you miss a serve, take a step forward toward the net.

By moving away from the net only after a successful serve, you'll instinctively develop a feel for the serve. You will sense how much power you need to release to get the ball over the net and still drop it into the service court. Curve the trajectory of the ball, rather than hitting it straight.

If the ball touches the top of the net and lands in the correct service court (this is called a "let"), repeat the serve from the same position.

You can move your hand gradually toward the normal grip position, or you can keep the racquet short for a while. Do what you feel is best in order to develop your serve at your own speed.

Stretch your arm upward to get the ball to curve over the net.



The angle of the racquet will determine the direction of the ball.

As you get better, move your arm and racquet across the ball, from left to right, to give it spin. This will add to your control, and is a significant part of developing a good serve. Just be aware of the racquet angle while you move your arm. The more you want to spin the ball, the more you need to angle your racquet to the left.

Feel your arm movement, especially the upward push of the ball. As you develop a better serve, exaggerate the length of your push past the impact point. Extend your arm farther and up to get the ball to clear the net, increasing the curve and the spin, rather than going for a hard hit.

When you get to the baseline keep going back one step at a time until you are near the back fence or wall of the court. This will lengthen your swing. You may also be turning to get more power, your toss may be a little higher, your swing longer. Let all this develop as needed to get the ball over the net and into the service court.

**CAUTION:** Before you try harder serves, you need to get used to ending your swing with your right arm across your body and to your left, as shown in the picture sequence further above. Otherwise you might hit your legs with your racquet.

This is not a problem in the beginning, because your swing is smooth and slow and probably stops with your arm in the net's direction.

As you lengthen your swing and increase your arm speed, first bring your right hand up toward your right to spin the ball then, when your arm starts falling, bring your hand toward your left hip, finishing with the racquet throat in your left hand.

**DRILL #4:** As soon as you can serve consistently from the backcourt go behind the baseline and start serving from there, still positioned slightly to the right of the center line.

You are not allowed to touch the baseline or the inside of the court as you serve (this is called a "foot fault"). Your foot can land inside the court only after the ball leaves your racquet.

Serve ten to twenty balls into the correct service court.

**DRILL #5:** Come close to the net again, standing to the left of the center line. Now you'll be serving to the service court across the net and to your right. Repeat the same process that you did on the right side of your court: one step back for every ball you get in and one step forward for every ball you miss.

Continue past the baseline, then come back just behind the baseline, to the left of center, and serve ten to twenty balls into the service court from there.

**DRILL #6:** Practice a few balls from the right side, then a few from the left side. As soon as you feel good about getting the ball where you want, alternate, serving one ball from the right side, one from the left, and so on. Work until your accuracy is well over 50 percent.

**DRILL #7:** In a match you are allowed two serves, that is, two chances to get your serve in. If you miss your first serve, you then take a second serve. You better get this one in, otherwise you lose the point. Missing both the first and second serves is called a "double fault," and the point goes to your opponent.

"Let" balls (touching the net and bouncing into the service court) have to be repeated from the same position, whether it is a first or a second serve.

Now practice this way: Serve one ball from the right side. If you get it in the correct service court, count it as your point, then serve from the left side. If you missed that first serve, go for your second one. If you make it good, count it as your point. Otherwise count it as your opponent's point.

Now serve from the left side, using the same procedure: first serve, second serve if necessary, either your point or your opponent's point.

Alternate serving from the right and the left up to ten or twenty points or until you no longer serve any double faults. Double faults should be a rare thing, even at this stage.

After that, switch to your opponent's court and serve ten or twenty points from there.

This is the basic learning process for your serve. You can do all this by yourself. Many professionals go out on the court with a bucket of balls and practice dozens of serves. You can do the same, both to learn and to develop your serve, but only after you have gradually developed your arm and shoulder muscles.

If you don't have many balls to do these drills, serve gently and have a friend catch your serves on the other side. He can then send the ball back to you after each serve.

As soon as you have completed these drills successfully, turn to the next chapter, "The Rally Game," to improve upon your skills and get ready for a game.

Later in your development you can lengthen your swing by going down and then up with your arms, prior to the swing, like the pros, but to do it here in the beginning may complicate your progress.

You now have an easy and effective way of serving with which you can start the point and play with anyone. A gradual development of your skills with many hours of practice is much more efficient than learning too many things at the start. Get on the court and practice what you already know, before tackling the advanced player's full-motion serve.

## **Advanced Serves**

The professionals get momentum on the serve with a very coordinated motion similar to an overhead pitch.

The racquet starts in front, resting in both hands. The arms separate, going slightly down, then up, while the player leans forward, turns the shoulders, and arches the back. The left hand releases the ball in an upward toss, coordinated with the upward movement of the right arm. The right arm bends, looping the racquet behind the back. The player feels the accumulating momentum (power). The arm and racquet are then thrust forward and upward, while the body uncoils and stretches, leaning into the court and jumping off the ground. The racquet makes contact with the ball, moving as far up as possible, and making a circular arch that goes first to the right, then down to the left. The acceleration and stretching go way past the impact point with the ball, while the player falls forward, stepping into the court.

## **The Slice Serve**

In the slice serve (for a right-hander) the ball would spin, as seen from the server's viewpoint, clockwise on a clock in the ceiling. As a result, the ball curves toward the left of the server.

## **The American Twist Serve**

The American Twist serve is similar to hitting topspin in your groundstrokes, except that it is more difficult in the serve to get the ball to roll forward and still clear the net.

Players achieve this serve by tossing the ball slightly behind themselves or to their left, then bringing the ball up and forward with a closed racquet face. The ball gets a combination of topspin and some sideways rotation, curving down and slightly to the left during flight, but then jumps to the right and up on the bounce, curving again to the left.

This serve is very safe, because the ball drops very quickly, clearing the net by as much as three to four feet.

Top players use it for second serves, not only for its safety, but also for its effectiveness in keeping the opponent from attacking the serve due to its kick.

For the serve-and-volley player, this serve's slower flight speed gives them plenty of time to get to the net, while making it difficult for their opponent to drive through for a forceful return.



Contrary to the flat serve and the slice, the American Twist hangs in the air much longer, then accelerates on the way down to the bounce, regaining speed, and kicking way up. This particular feature makes it more difficult to judge. Returning players have to resort to moving back to return this serve with a full drive or making a slower and safer return.

Professionals use different degrees of spin according to the surface and the score situation. Most first serves have some spin.

Only on grass does the American Twist lose some of its efficiency. The ball slides and doesn't grab the surface on the bounce, losing the characteristic high kick that otherwise makes it so difficult to return.

Summing up, spinning the ball in your serve creates curves that help get the ball in the service box. It allows the player to hit the serve much harder with a smaller percentage of errors.

It isn't a difficult stroke to learn, except that you have to hit up much more than you ever imagined. The best way to learn it is to exaggerate both the upward pull and the spin.

# CHAPTER 11

## *The Rally Game*

Now that you can serve and have good control of your forehand and backhand strokes, you are ready for a game from the backcourt.

To improve your skills and enjoy yourself, play a "Rally Game". The object is to hit as many balls as possible over the net and into the court, without trying to finish the point. Just return the ball to your opponent so he or she can return it to you.

This game is played from the backcourt, with each player letting the ball bounce before hitting it. It will teach you to keep the ball in play until you can hit back and forth at a medium pace. The other player should do the same, striving for control, getting as many balls as possible back to you.

It is not unusual at this stage to see thirty or forty consecutive balls going back and forth in each rally.

Start with an easy serve, then keep the ball in play, always returning it close to your friend's reach.

The player missing a shot or hitting beyond their opponent's reach counts it as losing the point. The same applies for hard or forceful shots. The emphasis is on keeping the ball in play where the opponent can get to it comfortably.

Even professionals hit like that in many practice sessions, or when they warm up prior to the start of a match.

### **Keeping Score**

One player serves until one of the players gets to ten points. Count that as one game. Then the other player serves to ten points, and so on.

This training will help you become consistent, which is the basis of any match play.

### **The Ideal Partner**

In choosing the partner you hit with, get someone who wants to commit to playing safely.

If either you or your friend think that playing tennis is hitting all winners, change your mind for this Rally Game. Take it as playing the piano, not banging it, or like dancing without stepping on your partner's feet. Neither of you wants to embarrass yourself or each other, so enjoy playing back and forth with control.

Your body may need to build up to match your skills. Practicing as shown, with long ball exchanges, will build up your strength, your resistance, and your patience.

Be efficient. Don't exert too much effort and try to kill the ball. Efficiency is the ratio of effort to the result you get. The less effort overall and the smoother the swing, the better off you'll be when learning to play. You'll end up feeling the ball much better and having plenty of control over your shots.

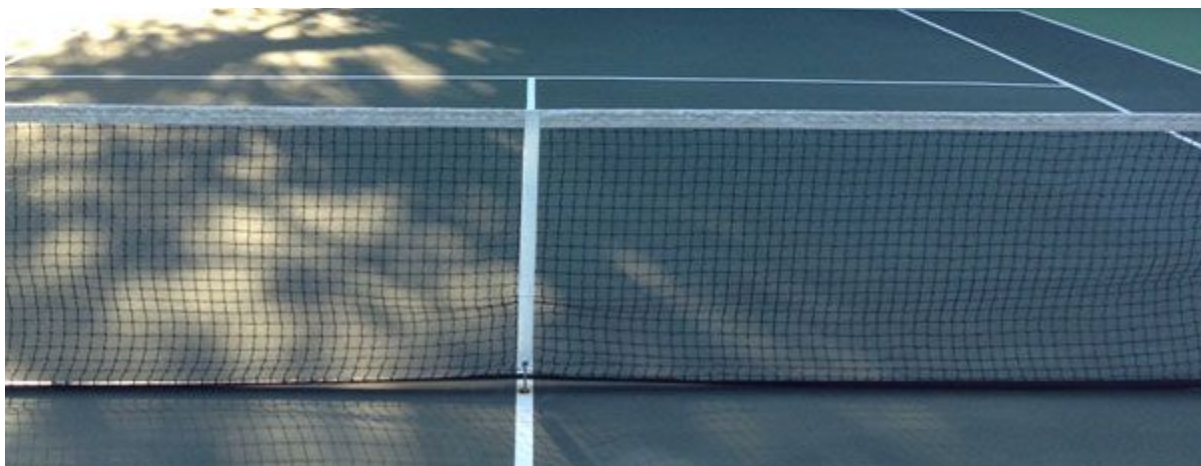
As you progress, you can speed up your shots gradually. You'll play more topspin, stronger games, stronger opponents. You have all the data now for the backcourt game and you need only to practice to improve your game.

At this stage I usually send people to play, without any theory lessons of any kind, for several months. If they want to play with me, I usually string a rope across the net, about three feet above it, and we hit back and forth, or do special drills. (See Chapter 16 on "Drills for Development.")

I recommend that you become a proficient backcourt player before you learn to play the net game. Being close to the net gives the player a totally different view of the opponent's court, as shown in the following pictures, both taken at eye level.



From the baseline, you see the other court through the net (unless you are more than six feet tall).



Near the net, you see the other court from above the net. This latter view will give you the impression that you need to hit down to get the ball in the court, which is true for the volleys and smash.

But it is very important to get used to hitting up on the groundstrokes first and controlling the height of your shot with your racquet angle, not by hitting down.

This is why small children usually learn their groundstrokes so easily and so well. They see the net as a high obstacle and they hit up. Later on, as they grow up and gain power, they keep the same stroke pattern and start closing the racquet face to keep the ball in the court, rather than hitting down on the ball.

You can do the same by staying in the backcourt and using topspin until you get very proficient in the Rally Game.

After that read Chapter 14 "The Volley and Smash."

# CHAPTER 12

## *The Scoring System*

In tennis there is a peculiar way of counting points. Adopted in the last century, tennis scoring has been kept almost unchanged because it gives matches a special flavor.

This scoring balances the game in such a way that you always have a chance at winning, even if you have lost every point, until the match is over.

The only significant change in this century has been the implementation of a tiebreaker to avoid marathons and make the game more suitable for TV broadcasting.

The match is divided into segments, called sets. Usually a maximum of three sets are played in a tournament match, while major championships require five sets for men.

Sets are divided into games.

Players alternate serving one game each until one reaches six games, which gives him one set. Sets must be won by a margin of two games. The score can be 6-0, 6-1, 6-2, 6-3, or 6-4. If the score reaches 5-5 (also called 5-all), it has to be won 7-5. If the score reaches 6-6 (6-all), then the special tiebreaker game will be played and the set will end at 7-6.

If you see a 7-6 result for a set you know the players were tied at six games each and a tiebreaker was played.

Winning a three-set match requires winning 2 sets to 1. The result is either 2 sets to 0 (zero is called "love" in tennis), or if each player wins one of the first two sets, they then play a third and deciding set, and one player will win by a score of 2 sets to 1. This last set is called the "final set."

In the best-of-five-set matches, a player must win three sets. Therefore, the score is either 3 sets to 0, 3 sets to 1, or 3 sets to 2. Some of these best-of-five-set matches are very long, lasting four or five hours. Usually a three-set match goes from one hour, for the easier matches, to two or two-and-a-half hours.

When a match is started, players first "spin" a tennis racquet or toss a coin to decide who will serve first and which side of the court they will be on for the first game. The winner of the toss has the choice of his preference on one of those decisions. If you decide to serve or return, then your opponent has the choice of side. If you choose the side, then your opponent has the choice of serving or of returning your serve.

Change of side is required after one game, three games, five games, and so on (an odd sum of games) in each set. Most courts are built approximately north-south lengthwise, and the sun angle varies according to the time of the day. The sun's position will affect players more on one side than the other. Players usually choose the better side for their own first service game.

When you win the toss you also have the right to tell your opponent to choose first. This can be advantageous when a right-hander is playing a left-hander outdoors. The sun's position will affect one player more than the other on one side, both for serving and for high balls. If you win the toss, have your opponent choose first. If he chooses to return, you choose your good side to serve. If he chooses to serve, let him serve from the side that is bad for him and good for you. By the second game the change of side will have you serving without the sun interfering with your toss. If you break your opponent's serve in the first game, you are off to a good start.

Let's say you won the toss and have decided to serve and let your opponent choose sides. Go to the other side, behind the baseline, with two balls in your left hand or one in your hand and one in your pocket.

You will be serving the first game as follows: From the right side of the court serve the first point to your opponent's service court (crosscourt, to your left, as explained in Chapter 10). If you miss the first serve you get a second one. If you miss the second one it's a double fault and the point goes to your opponent.

Whoever wins the first point gets the score of 15. The server's points are called first. Therefore, it can be either 15-0 (15-love) if you won the point, or 0-15 (love-15) if you lost the point.

Now you serve from the left side. If the score is 15-0 and you win this point, you go to 30-0 (30-love). If you lose this point then it is 15-5 (15-all). If you lost the first two points, then it is 0-30 (love-30).

Continue alternating, serving one point from the right, one from the left, going, for example, from 15-15 to 30-15, then 30-30 (30-all). The next point is called 40. Let's say you win the next point and the score is now 40-30. If you win the following point, you win the game and you are "one-love" in games.

You then change sides of the court and your opponent will serve the next game.

If you get to 40-40 (40-all) it is called "deuce," and deuce games have to be decided by a margin of two points. After 40-40, the next point is called "advantage." It will be either "advantage to the server" (also called "ad-in"), or "advantage to the receiver" ("ad-out"). If the player at advantage wins the next point, he wins the game. If he loses it, the score goes back to deuce, and again, two consecutive points by one player are necessary to win the game. There is no limit to the number of "deuces" that can occur in a game.

Each player serves one game until the set is completed, 6-0 or 6-4 for example, or 7-5. If the score gets to 6-6 (6-all), then the tiebreaker game is played.

The tiebreaker goes as follows: The player whose turn it is to serve will serve the first point from his right side, as usual. After the first point his opponent will serve the next two points, the first from his left side (not his right side as in a regular game), the next one from the right. After that, the serve goes back to the first player, who will serve two points, the first from his left side, the next one from his right.

The serve keeps switching back and forth, with each player serving two points. Those points are counted here one, two, three, four and so on (not 15, 30, 40 as in a regular game). One player has

to get to seven points to win the tiebreaker and the set, but it has to be by a margin of at least two points.

If the score in points gets tied at 6-6, then the tiebreaker has to be won 8-6. If it goes to 7-7, it has to be won 9-7, and so on. A tiebreaker final score may be 7-0, 7-1, 7-2, 7-3, 7-4, 7-5, 8-6, 9-7, 12-10, 20-18, and the like. There is no limit to the number of points that could be played in a tiebreaker if there is a succession of ties, but the chances of it going on forever are minimal.

The same rule of calling the server's points first is used during the tie breaker in tournament play. If an umpire is calling (refereeing) the match, he will usually add the name of the player serving next when calling the tiebreaker score. For example, he will say "Mr. X, 3 points to 4" (Mr. X will serve the next point).

During the tiebreaker the players change sides after each six points. Therefore, you change after 6 points, 12 points, 18 points and so on. After the tiebreaker is finished, a change of sides is mandatory.

In the first game of the following set, the next player at serve is the player who received the first point of the tiebreaker.

The score of a set that went to a tiebreaker is "7-6" with the points scored in the tiebreaker in parenthesis, for example, "7-6 (10-8)".

A final score for a match may look like this:

Mr. X 7-6 (9-7), 6-7 (10-12), 6-3.

The winner's games in each set are recorded first. Mr. X won the first set in a tiebreaker, lost the second set in another tiebreaker, then won the third set 6 games to 3.

# CHAPTER 13

## *Notes on Footwork and Timing*

Playing the Rally Game gives you a good chance to streamline your footwork and timing.

Footwork in tennis is a very natural and simple thing. You turn your body toward wherever you have to run or walk, and you move your feet as if you were walking down the street or running to catch a bus.

If your opponent hits a short ball and you are facing it, you don't need to turn your feet. Just go straight to the ball and hit it. If the ball is hit to your side, turn that way, get to the ball, and strike it. If you need to cover the court you just left open, turn and go that way.

Slow ball? Go as slowly as you please. Fast ball? Go as quickly as needed.

If you want to get to the ball quickly, lean in that direction to get a faster start.

These are very simple techniques of movement that you probably learned before you were five years old.

Pivoting into the direction you want to go is crucial and the most natural thing you can do. I see very young children turning when they want to change the direction of their walk or their run, so I see no reason why adults can't also do it.

Leaning while pivoting is the fastest way of turning and starting to move, just like the basketball pros do. Top tennis pros do it very well, especially in stress situations. They take several sidesteps only when they have a lot of time or they want to stay in the vicinity of their last shot, not when they want to race all the way across the court.

Many professionals skip up and down on their toes between shots to keep their legs alert and ready for a fast start. You can do this sometime in your development, but beware: thinking of your feet can be very harmful to your game. As a beginner, don't complicate your learning. Just turn to the right or to the left, or wherever you have to go.

You want to strike the ball as comfortably as possible. Walking backward or to the side to get out of the way of a ball coming straight at you is okay. Backing up to let a high ball drop to where it is easier to handle is also fine. But if you have to go some distance back, it is better to turn your feet in the direction you are going, while watching the ball over your shoulder. Then turn again to strike the ball as usual.

Lean, step, walk or run naturally, without paying attention to the position of your feet. Keep your attention on finding the ball.

Many people move their racquets in preparation for their shots long before they move their legs, wasting valuable time that should be used to get to the ball. Keep your arms close to your body while

you run. When you are near the ball, you may move your arms away from your body to get momentum or reach, but well after your body has moved. Of course, you can pump your arms in your run if needed, but have the racquet come back to both hands if possible before you get to the ball, in preparation for your shot.

There is a definite separation between the time you move your body, usually leaning and turning to get to the ball, and the time you swing. This sequence sometimes takes too short a time to really get the feet moving, because of the speed of play.

That is the reason why most top players split-step (a quick upward jump, with the feet landing about shoulder width apart), just as the opponent is about to strike the ball. That gives them momentum, like a coiled spring, to lean and start in any direction, anticipating the flight of the ball.

## **Anticipation**

Anticipation is reading the racquet-to-ball contact of your opponent. From his racquet angle at impact point you know where the ball will go before it actually starts its flight toward your court.

If you carefully observe your opponent's racquet at the moment it makes contact with the ball, this will become very apparent. Just leaning in the direction the ball is about to take will tilt your body and your weight that way and help you start to move.

## **Timing**

Timing is the coordination between the time the ball is nearing your reach and the release of your stroke.

Correct timing by the professionals simply comes down to waiting for the right moment to strike the ball. That is why many pros use the left hand to hold on to the racquet. It helps them wait. It makes them move their legs first, rather than overreacting with the arm alone.

The left hand also helps change the grip when necessary, simultaneous with the first shoulder turn.

As a last-minute effort to get to a difficult ball, a player will stretch the arm in a groundstroke or a volley. That occurs after the body has moved and the swing has started in a normal way.

On both the forehand and the two-handed backhand, if your arm or arms have to stretch to get to the ball, finish toward the opposite shoulder as you did on your easier shots. This will help your timing and ensure that the ball goes over the net and into the court.

Delicate touch shots, or blocking difficult returns, should be the only exceptions to this rule.

## Preparing Early

Taking the racquet back too early messes up both finding the ball and timing your hit. Most conventional teaching techniques discourage waiting and stress the earliest possible backswing. This makes it very difficult to find the ball well and to hit it with control.

Those techniques are outdated, as shown by the way the top pros play today. They may turn the shoulders, changing grip in the process, but the hands stay near the body, waiting for the right moment to swing.

In your groundstrokes, wait until after the bounce of the ball before you make a final judgment as to how you are going to swing.

Waiting longer actually seems to increase the time you have to make a perfect shot. Your mind may not grasp all the details, but at a deeper level you'll feel the difference.

Learn this from the beginning. Have your partner hit slow, looping balls. Keep both hands on your racquet as long as possible. As you get faster balls you may tend to get anxious and overreact. Keep making yourself wait until well after the bounce. Move your feet and turn your shoulders in the process, but keep your hands near your body.

Wait for the bounce, then swing as usual, finishing your swing all the way.

In the one-handed backhand, the racquet moves to a position parallel to the front of the body together with the shoulder turn. The racquet head goes back, but beware of taking the arm back too soon.

In the forehand and two-handed backhand, the butt of the racquet is kept close to the waist while turning and waiting for the bounce of the ball.

Wait and finish. No matter how horrified you may be that you might be late, keep yourself from overreacting.

Your legs may be racing all over the court, but wait until you are near the ball to move your arms to swing.

Most human beings tend to overreact. The top professionals wait-- sometimes milliseconds--but they wait. That is why some pros seem almost inhuman--they are so cool, with such great timing.

Pros are as human as anyone. They have learned to wait, no matter how fast the ball is coming, no matter how anxious they may be. They have gotten so used to waiting that it seems totally natural to them.

The body reacts while the ball is still far away, the arm reacts when the ball is near. Sometimes it seems too late, but if you keep your mind on finding the ball and on the finish of the stroke, instinct takes over and you get the ball where you want it.

## The Striking Zone

Most conventional techniques also stress hitting the ball well in front. There is quite a risk involved in that.

To explain further, the point where you meet the ball doesn't necessarily have to be exact or the same every time. There is an entire zone in which you can stroke the ball perfectly, provided that you first find it well. Attempt to almost touch it before exerting your force on the swing, making sure that you have angled the racquet correctly for that particular shot.

The direction of your shot can remain the same in any of the contact points within the correct striking zone. The height of your shot can also remain constant, provided you didn't change the racquet angle in this zone.

This correct striking zone can be, in your groundstrokes, as long as two feet. The front position is the area where it is easier to hit the ball flat, while further back zones are better for topspin shots. It is easier there to "muscle" the ball, keeping it on your strings longer, and rotating it more.

In coaching professionals and top junior players I make sure that the athlete hits many balls around the later hitting zones during practice. The tendency in tight spots in tournament play is to rush slightly. The player used to wait more will tend to hit earlier, getting less topspin than he intended, possibly hitting out by a foot or two.

The player used to hitting in front will hit a few shots too early and the ball will sail out. The difference here may be just a few inches within the striking zone. In terms of time it could be a difference of just a few hundredths of a second. But in terms of feel, the difference is more pronounced. The impact is definitely longer when you let the ball come farther back and you "muscle" it with topspin.

You may hit a few balls too late through your learning period. You'll definitely notice those. But if you are constantly early you may not know what is going wrong. Diagnosing early shots is more difficult because of the compensations you may create to make up for it.

That is another good reason to wait for the ball as long as possible. The fewer the number of compensations, the smoother and simpler your swing will be, and you'll get more "feel."

The accuracy of a pro is so high when hitting within this latter part of the striking zone that the player gets very confident and goes for better and better shots, whether they are harder, at more of an angle, or closer to the lines.

Throughout this whole striking zone your racquet angle should change as little as possible, so that your shot goes where you want even if you misjudge the contact point.

# CHAPTER 14

## *The Volley and Smash*

The volley game is a major part of developing your game to championship standards.

No game is complete unless you know how to play any shot in any part of the court. Otherwise, an accomplished player could easily exploit any weaknesses in your game.

Most tournament players scout their opponents for obvious faults or unskilled areas in their game. One particular spot is vulnerability to short balls.

With the type of strokes you are learning here, it isn't difficult to attack short balls, make forceful approaches, and set yourself up to end the point at net with easy put-aways. (Put-away: A shot hit from above net level that you can "put away" as a winner)

There are two stages to learning the volley. The first is to become familiar with shots close to the net and above it.

After mastering those, you'll move away from the net, learning more difficult volleys sometimes hitting the ball from below the level of the net.

This could be called the second level. Here you will learn the shots that will enable you to play an attack game, in which you could serve and volley or go to the net most of the time.

This requires a different type of proficiency on the volley, a different type of game. It is also a different dominion in terms of the space of the court, both your own and your opponent's, and it practically requires another state of mind. You want to rush your opponent, in order to cut his response time.

It is very different from your Rally Game, but it may be useful on faster courts or in cases where your steadiness from the baseline doesn't make a dent.

Because of all these reasons, I will introduce you to the volley slowly, building it one step at a time.

Consider it a major undertaking. Make sure you are proficient in each step before you tackle the next.

I also recommend that you master your put-aways by attacking short balls and following them to the net in your practice and matches. Get familiar with this type of volleying before you go to the sophistication of a more advanced serve-and-volley or an all-out attack game.

Then go to the section on advanced volley drills and practice those to your total satisfaction. In those drills you'll move gradually away from the net until you learn to volley from anywhere on the court.

## Basic Concepts

All volleys, including low ones, are hit with the racquet-face moving down and forward.

The most modern volleying, which is also the most effective, stops the hand and racquet at contact with the ball, except for easy put-aways, where it follows through more.

This is a dramatic change from your groundstrokes. That is the reason you have to first become very proficient in your backcourt game, where it is important to follow through all the way.

You'll volley many balls from above the net level, where it seems logical to hit down. But when the ball drops below the top of the net you can also achieve great results by going down and forward with your racquet, with the racquet face sharply open.

Then stop the hand firmly at contact, like a cutting action with an ax.

The ball will clear the net and go forward at a good pace, making this shot very effective. The backspin will make the ball slide and stay low on your opponent's court.



## Advanced Players

You may be learning tennis through this book, or perhaps you have played for many years, but are not skilled at volleying. Regardless of your level of advancement, you can learn to be a good volleyer following the same path through the drills.

While someone starting to learn to volley may do a drill thirty or forty times before having it totally under control, an advanced player may accomplish the same for one drill in eight or ten repetitions. Perhaps the next drill would take much longer to accomplish for a lower-level player, and so on.

Each drill develops a certain aspect of a shot, e.g. coordination, control, racquet angle, placement. Do each drill until you feel you've got it. Keep the sequence as laid out in this chapter to get the best results.

On the other hand, if you have a good forehand volley and a poor backhand one, you can skip the first section and go directly to the backhand volley drills. Or if you have excellent high volleys and weaker lower ones, go to the low volley drills.

## Professionals

For the very advanced player or pro, just reading this material may point to a concept previously not clearly defined or, perhaps, defined incorrectly. By analyzing this new data against your experience, you can envision the changes that need to be made.

Translate this into practice and observe the results. You can now decide whether to incorporate this new data into your game or keep the same old form.

Many times what seems tailor-made for one player may not fit another as well. Practice will tell you what is valuable for you and what is not.

## The Forehand Volley

**DRILL #1:** Stand about two feet from the net, in the center. Have your friend stand at the other side of the net, about five feet away from it, and slightly to your left. He'll toss a ball to your right side, about face high.

Barehanded, block the ball down firmly with your right hand so that it clears the net and goes down in your opponent's court, as shown in the picture below.

Your hand should stop at the contact with the ball. Repeat several times. Block some balls in different directions just slightly changing the angle of your hand. Keep doing it until you are successful on every try.



**DRILL #2:** Grab your racquet with your right hand behind the strings and the left hand midway on the throat (not shown). Block the ball the same way as in the prior drill. Your hand needs to stay against the strings to get the feel that you are blocking the ball with your hand.

Try some balls in one direction, then in another, changing the angle of your right hand.



**DRILL #3:** After successfully performing the previous drill, move your right hand to the throat of the racquet and hit your volley as shown, preferably on the side of the strings closer to you.

Block the ball down, sending the ball over the net and down into the other court.

While waiting at the net or anticipating a volley, the racquet head is held above hand level, instead of at hand level or below as in the groundstrokes.

Note that the left hand helps prepare the shot and lift the racquet if necessary. It will let go of the racquet prior to the hit, but will stay in the vicinity of the racquet and will come back to it after each hit.

When the ball is coming toward your side and you need to move your body, it is best to lean first in that direction, then let go of the racquet with the left hand just prior to the hit.

Let the ball come near your racquet before you hit. Most errors are due to rushing, instead of waiting for the ball to come close and then blocking it firmly with the center of the racquet strings. You'll actually hit in front, but striking too early will affect your consistency and control.

It is best to keep the racquet face slightly open and to hit down with the face, while still going forward, than to hit the ball plainly forward and flat. The slight backspin that you get by hitting down will add to your control.

As you progress, move your hand gradually toward the grip of the racquet, volleying ten or twenty balls in each grip position. Don't rush these changes because it is easier to learn with the racquet gripped short than with your hand all the way down to the grip.

**DRILL #4:** After mastering the last drill, with good control of the placement of your shots, move to a position about six to eight feet from the net and volley from there. Your friend needs to stay clear to one side so as not to get hit by your returns.

First, have your friend feed some higher balls, shoulder level or above.



When the ball comes high, it is a good idea to point to the incoming ball with the racquet butt. This will automatically open the racquet face, allowing you to hit down without hitting the ball into the net.

Lead the shot with your hand, rather than with the head of the racquet.

(I have used this laid-back position of the racquet to correct many advanced players who had trouble with the forehand volley.)

Next, have your friend feed some lower balls. Open your racquet face while you go down to find the ball. Lead the shot with the bottom edge of your racquet, as when you still had the racquet short.

This is done while going forward and stopping at contact with a firm hit, as if you were stopping an ax at the contact with a tree.

The ball should come up and clear the net with some pace, but not too much backward rotation. Otherwise, it will be a slow shot. Try some different racquet positions to get a clue as to what the opening of your racquet should be for each shot. There isn't a set racquet angle. It all depends on how the ball is coming to you.

After you have the height and depth of your shots under control, have your friend stand in front of you. Practice hitting some balls to his right and some to his left. You'll need only to vary the angle of your racquet, without changing your grip, to accomplish this.

Again, practice will tell you the relationship between your racquet angle and your placement.

Here is an example of how to lean towards the ball as the first move:



## The Backhand Volley

The most efficient volleyers volley all shots with just their dominant hand. There is much more reach hitting the backhand volley with one hand, than keeping both hands on the racquet throughout.

Therefore, I will teach you the one-handed volley first. Later on this chapter will describe the two-handed backhand volley.

**DRILL #1:** Stand about two feet from the net and hold the racquet from the throat with your left hand. Put the racquet in front of you, a little to your left, about shoulder height. Place the back of your right hand behind the strings.



Your friend tosses a ball toward your racquet. Block it down into your opponent's court, keeping your hand against the strings. Repeat several times. Notice how the racquet face should start slightly open towards the sky. This will give you the idea that the backhand volley is like blocking the ball with the back of your hand.

**DRILL #2:** Grab the racquet just slightly down the throat with a right hand hammer hold. Have your left hand hold the throat of the racquet, as with a sling shot. Always hit down, leading with the bottom edge of the racquet. Some sliding of the ball on your strings will occur, which will add time to the contact and more feel and control.

After each hit have the racquet come back up and onto your left hand.

Note that a shoulder turn helps you hit more comfortably, especially when the ball goes farther away to your left. Hit normal volleys, higher volleys, and lower volleys, managing the opening of your racquet as needed.



Pointing the butt of the racquet to the incoming helps to find the ball and to hit it firmly. This pointing will also help you later to rotate the racquet from a forehand volley to a backhand volley.



The racquet movement for the hit comes from extending the arm, rather than breaking the wrist .



**DRILL #3:** With your friend in front of you, but safely farther back, hit some balls to his right, then some to his left. Do this gently but firmly, varying the racquet angle but not your grip. Repeat until you have complete control of your shot direction and you meet every ball in the center of your racquet strings.

**DRILL #4:** Continue practicing, but slide your hand gradually toward the grip of the racquet, until you get to a normal grip position.

At this point it is better to move your thumb down and around the grip because the thumb against the back, if that's how you started, although good for early developing stages, will make it difficult to open the racquet face for very low volleys.

Practice volleying with this new grip, but make sure that you still can volley firmly on high balls, too. If you have trouble, keep your thumb against the backside until you strengthen your hand and your arm.

**DRILL #5:** Move away from the net another six to eight feet and volley from there until you have control. Then, have your friend feed you some higher balls. Point the butt of the racquet to the incoming ball, then block it firmly. Below is your finish, whether the ball you hit was high or not.



Lead the shot with the butt of your racquet, rather than with the racquet head and breaking the wrist. As you hit, the right arm should extend toward the net and across the line of the ball. The left arm extends toward the backcourt to help you keep your balance, but backwards as if putting your shoulder blades together.

Next, have your friend feed low balls. Open the racquet face sharply and lead the shot with the bottom edge of your racquet, like a cutting action, as shown below.



Hit down and finish across. Stop firmly at contact with the ball, to send it over the net at a good pace and yet keep the ball in the court..

You need to work out the correct angle of your racquet to give good pace and some depth to your shot. If you underspin the ball too much it will be a slow shot.

The angle of your racquet should vary, depending on the speed and height of the ball coming to you. In the beginning, get the racquet face almost parallel to the ground for very low balls. Then, start to adjust according to the results you get. This racquet angling is learned from experience and instinct, rather than being set the same all the time.

## Combining Forehand and Backhand Volleys

When you are waiting at the net for your opponent to hit the ball, you hold the racquet in front of you. Whether you'll go to your right or to your left depends on the direction of your opponent's next shot.

In chapter 13 I described how to anticipate the direction of your opponent's next shot by carefully observing his racquet angle the moment he makes contact with the ball. As soon as you see whether the ball is about to go to your right or to your left, lean in that direction.

Your upper body usually turns in that direction, too. Keep both hands on the racquet during this turn to adjust the grip and line up your shot.

**DRILL #1:** Starting with slow balls, your friend alternates the toss to your right side and to your left.

Don't rush. Wait for the ball. Lean and turn slowly and deliberately, taking as much time as you can, instead of getting ready too fast. This way you'll move naturally. You'll work out what is necessary and what is not, what to focus on and what to ignore.

Going slowly will throw overboard those unnecessary details that will trap you at higher speeds. The slower you go at these slow ball speeds, while simplifying your moves, the faster and better you'll react to the high ball speeds.

Grip changes at the net for pros are minimal. They occur mostly at the bottom of the palm of the hand, while reacting to the right or to the left. I led you into more of a grip change only to get you started (that was forehand volley Drill 3 versus backhand volley Drill 2). Later on, as you find the ball better and better, you'll achieve more firmness and certainty in your contact with the ball. By then you may need less grip change in your volleys.

This latter stage is usually called the continental grip for your volleys, halfway between your regular forehand grip and the one-handed backhand grip.

Some minor natural adjustments will occur--even with a continental grip--for both your forehand and backhand volleys to be truly efficient. Going from the right to the left, and vice versa, the racquet angle will change slightly in your hand.

Again, it is the left hand's hold of the racquet that induces these changes. The left hand will push back the racquet head for the forehand volley, together with a slight shoulder turn to the right. The

left hand will pull the racquet head back, together with a sharp shoulder turn to your left for the backhand volley, then releasing the left hand and, for the backhand volley, squeeze your shoulder blades to help power the ball from that side..



If you followed the drills and instructions detailed early in this chapter, this should now be built-in in your muscle memory and most likely, at your instinctive level reactions.

The best volleyers volley firmly but not too hard. Hitting hard interferes with finding and feeling the ball.

You don't need to grip the racquet tightly in between shots. Have the racquet rest on the fingertips of your left hand, holding the racquet head up. The right hand "feels" the grip, firm but not tight, and your body is ready to jump to find the ball. You start your move, releasing the left hand as late as you can. Then you hit, tightening up the racquet at contact with the ball, stopping it firmly as you would stop a hammer hitting a nail into a wall without breaking the wall. Then come back to the ready position, covering the court as well as you can.

## **The Two-Handed Backhand Volley**

If you truly feel that you like to hit the backhand volley with two hands, leave both hands on the racquet, without any grip change.

Your hands will either be touching each other or fairly close together.

The racquet face is held up while you wait for the ball. Then go for the ball and hit it forward, with a slight downward cut. Stop at contact, with the left hand doing most of the work.

This two-handed volley is similar to a forehand volley with your left hand, except that the right hand is kept on the racquet. You can follow the same learning sequence you did for your forehand volley, but using your left hand instead. Grip your racquet with your the left hand higher on the grip to leave room to put your right hand below it, pretty much like your regular two-handed backhand grip, but

holding the racquet pointing up. In the beginning, alternate hitting one volley with the left hand, then one volley with both hands. After a while, keep the right hand on, but without letting it interfere with the work of the left hand, which should be slightly dominant.

In the two-handed backhand volley it is the left hand that changes the angle of the racquet. The right hand accompanies it.

It is an easy stroke to develop, especially if you already have a two-handed backhand stroke. The only disadvantage is a big reduction in reach. The one-handed backhand volley allows an unequalled stretch for difficult shots, while this two-handed backhand volley does not. On the other hand, you may like the feel of the two-handed shot and its simplicity, since it doesn't require a grip change at all.

Hit down on low two-handed volleys, leading the shot with the bottom edge of the racquet and with a sharply opened racquet face. Stop firmly at contact, and the ball will clear the net safely and carry some good pace into the other side.

## The Smash

When your opponent is trying to lob the ball over your head, you "smash" the ball when it is directly overhead.

This smash requires only a short preparation, and it is similar to the serve described in the beginning of the service chapter.

**DRILL #1:** Stand close to the net. Have your friend toss balls to you a little higher than your head. Hit them down in your opponent's court with your right hand, as shown in the picture below.



**DRILL #2:** Have your friend stand safely to one side. Your friend again tosses the ball above your head and you hit it gently to get feel and control. You end the shot, after extending your arm, down and across to your left and into your left hand, which will catch the racquet by the throat.



Do this gently, with control. Find the ball well and hit away from your friend to avoid hitting him.

Smashes are hit down, rather than up like serves. They are also much more flat.

**DRILL #3:** When going up for the ball, also lift the racquet with your left hand. Find the ball well and hit it down into your opponent's court.

Unlike a fully developed serve with the long loop before going for the hit, the racquet goes straight up as in the high forehand volley. Then maneuver yourself under the ball, finding it well, and hit it downward firmly, but with control.

**DRILL #4:** Have your friend feed higher balls. The left hand will become instrumental in placing yourself under the ball and finding it well. Get yourself under the ball as well as possible, lifting the racquet with both hands toward your right shoulder. Now point to the ball with your left hand as if you were going to catch it, fine tuning your position below the ball at this time. Your racquet has dropped behind your back, as in the serve. Find the ball well, then release your power into the shot finishing toward your left hip.

This last detail is important to prevent you from hitting your legs with the racquet.

**DRILL #5:** After becoming proficient in the former drill, move your hand gradually toward the racquet grip. Hit several balls from each hand position, mastering the new racquet length before going on to the next. Follow through firmly but not hard, always ending with the throat of the racquet in your left. The most important thing in the smash is to find the ball well. The easiest place to do that is above your head, perhaps slightly in front and to the right. On most balls you will need to adjust to wherever the ball is going, whether it's to your right, to your left, or behind you. The best smashers lift the racquet with both hands, coordinated with the upward flight of the ball. Then, with the ball descending, they point to it with the left hand, as if going to catch it. Then they hit it. If the lob is clearly going back beyond their reach, instead of backpedaling, they turn their feet to run back

normally, while still raising the racquet slowly and looking at the ball over their left arm. When the ball is within their reach, they jump with a scissors-type leg action, which allows a timely power release and avoids hard lower back twisting or a harmful fall.

Smashes don't need much force to be fast. They require coordination and timing, with the force coming in when almost touching the ball. Smashes usually come out harder than intended, especially in the early learning stages.

For your friend's safety, smash gently and with control.

## **Learning the Smash by Yourself**

If you don't have a friend who can hit high balls to you, you can toss them high yourself and do the drills described before. Just toss them high enough so that they clear your head after the bounce. Find the ball well as it starts to come down for the second time and hit into your opponent's court.

Advanced players sometimes practice this way. They hit the ball up with the racquet, let it bounce, go up again, then smash it down into the other court.

Again, should you do this, learn control rather than force. The force is within you--the control has to be learned.

## **Advanced Volleying**

There are four major types of championship styles. One is the purely defensive player, who stays back as much as possible, and often just goes to the net to shake hands at the end of the match.

The next type of player is mostly a baseliner, but as soon as he gets a short ball, he hits a very forceful approach shot, almost a winner in itself, and gets to the net for a volley put-away.

The third type is the player who is skillful from the back, but who is always looking to maneuver to the net. He'll take more chances of going forward, and is usually good at placing the first volley where the opponent has difficulty making a good passing shot.

The last category is that of the serve-and-volley player who does it as a way of life, regardless of the surface. He probably isn't very skilled at matching groundstrokes from the backcourt, and usually thinks of it as a waste of time. Rather than work his way into the point, this player risks everything, from groundstrokes to storming the net on any kind of ball.

This can be very effective on given days, when things go right and the opponent collapses under the sheer pressure of the attack. But if this player is matched against a skilled all-court player, he'll have a struggle on his hands. The backcourt player will dampen the other player's attack with low angles and skilled lobs mixed with some forceful passing shots. Although backcourt players do more running, they do so with more time to get to the ball, while the attacking player depends mostly on jumping and lunging ability.

On clay courts, where matches between players of comparable skill usually go on for hours, an attacking player will have difficulty sustaining the effort for an entire match.

At championship level, serve-and-volley players get to most of their opponent's service returns near their own service line. The shot from here, should they be able to reach it before the bounce, is called the first volley. In most cases, the ball is by then below the level of the net. This first volley needs placement, pace, and depth. After hitting the first volley the player continues to advance toward the net, and is now prepared to cut off the next return, usually a forceful passing shot or a lob.

The attacking player is now in a more commanding position, but here the options for the opponent vary according to the type of surface of the court. On a slippery surface like grass, good players go for a forceful passing shot most of the time, or for a very defensive lob. The attacking player just needs to angle the next volley to the open court, and most likely it will be out of the other player's reach. On a lob, he needs to reach the ball and hit it to the open court.

But on slower surfaces, like clay courts and most modern championship hard courts, the likelihood of the defensive player hitting a good lob is much greater. The attacking player cannot risk getting very close to the net. He therefore opens himself to some angled passing shots.

Here is where an accomplished serve-and-volley player has something that the accomplished backcourt player does not: a sense of net coverage, of which angles to open and which ones to close. Serve-and-volley players know how to lure the opponent into hitting a particular shot. They can close to the net fast, while still preparing to smash even a decent lob. A little while into the match, they've learned to anticipate the passing shot by reading the racquet angle of the opponent at contact time. It is a skill that you develop by committing to a volley game. Your tactical approach changes, adjusting to different conditions that you create for yourself.

One major aspect of the successful attacking game is the pressure put on the opponent to make very good shots, which leads to many errors, especially in important points. The faster the court, the more pressure the player under attack feels.

## **The Low Volley at Championship Level**

For a low volley, you obviously have to lower the racquet from the normal height where you were holding it to the point where you'll meet the ball. You can use this downward (and at the same time forward) movement to get momentum to hit the ball. You get it to go over the net by opening the racquet face, while you stop at contact with a firm grip. This will give the ball good speed, while it will still be accurate and clear the net. The ball will also have some backspin that will keep it low after it bounces in your opponent's court.

You can use this low volley with spectacular results from anywhere in the court, including being caught behind the service line or somewhere in the backcourt. The ball may be at your feet, without a bounce, and you can still make a good shot.

To develop this volley I have some interesting drills, for which you'll need someone good across the net to feed you the ball pretty low, reaching you at a height around knee level or below. You will also need a bucket with a minimum of twenty or thirty balls.

I have included these drills in this chapter, although they belong to an advanced level of play, because I know players of many different skill levels will read this book. At some point you may desire to learn this and it is available here for you to learn whenever you want. Even some of the most advanced players need to polish their strokes, and these drills will help them.

## The Drills

The initials FR, FC, and FL indicate each position where your friend will stand to feed the ball to you. FR is your Friend to your Right, FC is your Friend in the Center, and FL your Friend to your Left. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 are the positions where you will be, 1) inside the forehand service court on your side, 2) center service line, 3) inside the backhand service court, 4) farther back than your forehand service court, 5) farther back than your center service line, 6) farther back than the backhand service court, according to each particular drill. R, L, and C are your target areas.

R and L are the deep Right (from your viewpoint) and deep Left corner areas of the court, and C is the deep Center area of the court.

Mark these three areas with ropes, cones, or empty cans. On a clay court you can mark them with your foot.

In the following drills, for example, FR to 2, low FH volley to L means your friend stands at FR, you are at 2, he hits a ball to you toward your forehand side at knee level or below, you hit a forehand volley to the left corner area. On another drill, FL to 3, low BH volley to R means your friend is at FL, you are at 3, and you hit a low backhand volley to the right.

Depending on your advancement, do each drill until you hit five, ten, or twenty balls in the area of your intended aim.

**DRILL #1:** FL to 1, low FH volley to C.

**DRILL #2:** FC to 1, low FH volley to R.

**DRILL #3:** FR to 1, low FH volley to L.

**DRILL #4:** FL to 2, low FH volley to R.

**DRILL #5:** FL to 2, low FH volley to C.

**DRILL #6:** FR to 2, low FH volley to L.

**DRILL #7:** FL to 3, low FH volley to R.

**DRILL #8:** FR to 3, low FH volley to C.

**DRILL #9:** FC to 3, low FH volley to L.

**DRILL #10:** FR to 3, low BH volley to C.

**DRILL #11:** FC to 3, low BH volley to L.

**DRILL #12:** FL to 3, low BH volley to R.

**DRILL #13:** FR to 2, low BH volley to L.

**DRILL #14:** FR to 2, low BH volley to C.

**DRILL #15:** FL to 2, low BH volley to R.

**DRILL #16:** FR to 1, low BH volley to L.

**DRILL #17:** FR to 1, low BH volley to C.

**DRILL #18:** FC to 1, low BH volley to R.

After completing these drills, repeat drills 1 through 9 hitting one forehand volley, one backhand volley, another forehand volley, and so on for each drill.

After you are successful volleying these low balls from the 1, 2, and 3 positions, switch to the backcourt.

Volleying from the 4, 5, and 6 positions, repeat drills 1 through 9 with the one forehand volley, one backhand volley routine, aiming to R, L, and C.

As soon as you feel good control hitting your low volley from anywhere in the court, your next step is to learn to hit while moving forward.

Stand on the baseline, behind 5. Hit your first volley at 5, your next one at 2, then get to the net and put the next volley away. For your next try go back to the baseline, behind 5 or 6, hit your first low backhand volley at 6, then a low volley at 2, then a put-away in front of 1 or 3. Mix positions in any way you like, forehand and backhand volleys alike, also mixing your aims to R, L, and C.

When you get good at moving around the court while volleying, add a smash to end each sequence. Some of the most advanced players continue the sequence through several hits. The player feeding the ball draws them back by hitting a deep lob. The next shot is a low one, drawing the player forward again.

I advise you not to try to learn all this in one day, unless you are a highly trained tournament player. Practice while you feel good and strong. When you get tired, save the rest of the drills for another day. Most professionals are so superbly conditioned that this type of tennis seems easy to them, but it causes a lot of physical stress to newer players.

## **McEnroe**

John McEnroe has probably been the best volley player of all time. Although he has slowed down with age, he is still outstanding on low volleys, high volleys, delicate stop volleys, put-aways, smashes, anticipating and cutting off difficult passing shots--anything that he can catch on the fly. McEnroe's body moves are very efficient, both in getting to the ball and stroking it. On the volley, he leads and leans with the upper body to wherever he has to go, getting a fast start. When he gets to the ball, he may jump or take a small hop, while his arm hits down and forward. At contact, he immediately stops the movement of his hand.

The combination of these last two features is what makes McEnroe so outstanding. What he achieves is to keep the center of the racquet strings on the line of flight of the ball for a prolonged period of time, still discharging plenty of power into the hit. He avoids costly off-center mis-hits that dramatically affect the accuracy and speed of the shot and he doesn't depend on perfect timing at all.

Many of the world's best players mis-hit some volleys under pressure or when they want to put a lot of power into the shot. They either don't always time the volley properly, or their body interferes with the shot.

Most of these errors come from missing the intersection of the line of travel of the racquet center with the ball's line of flight. The ball stays up while your racquet goes down on your hit. Hit a little off-center, and your volley doesn't go exactly where you want.

McEnroe avoids that by lifting his body, which keeps the racquet head on the line of the ball while he strokes. It is interesting to note that, even on his off days, when things seem to go wrong, his volley stays at a high level, and usually saves him from painful defeats.

Stopping the hand at contact with the ball is the other safety feature of McEnroe's technique. The stopping action will last a few tenths of a second, during which time the ball will hit the strings. On very fast passing shots, it is practically impossible to time the beginning of the stopping action at the point of impact with the ball.

At 65 mph, for example, the ball travels close to 100 feet per second. If your opponent is near his baseline and you are near the net, your distance is forty to forty-five feet. The ball will take approximately 5/10 of a second to get to your racquet. Your stopping action should commence just prior to contact with the ball, and will last throughout. The ball will be in your racquet and out while you are still stopping it.

Therefore, just like McEnroe, you won't have any difficulty timing your hit. Although it feels different, that fast ball will hit your strings, rather than you hitting the ball. The resulting shot placement will depend on your racquet face angle, which of course you control with the position of your hand.

This type of advanced volleying is easy to learn. First look for the ball, leaning toward it with your upper body or your head. If the ball is hard and stays up, pull your head upward together with your hit, or move your face away from the ball, stopping your hand firmly inches before the hit. If you are moving forward, try a little jump or a hop.

Otherwise, if the ball is a "sinker" (dropping quickly), get down as low as you can, but hop forward as you hit it. On these, as well as on the high volley or a slow passing shot, you can discharge more power. Stop your action during the hit. At least get the sensation that you are stopping your arm. By then the ball is gone from your racquet but your accuracy will improve. On an easy set-up, stop your arm right after the hit.

The results of this technique are astounding. The hits are firm and accurate. With some practice, you'll hit the ball consistently in the center of your racquet strings, allowing you to develop great racquet control and touch.

Do not stroke too early. While volleying, you should keep your playing hand in front and you should hit in front. But releasing your power too soon or stopping too early will cause mistakes.

Perfect timing results from waiting for the right moment to hit. Sometimes it seems there isn't enough time. You feel rushed. But with practice you'll be able to "feel" the difference between too early and too late. You'll time your stopping action according to the speed of the incoming ball.

# CHAPTER 15

## *Special Shots*

### **Backhand Slice**

The backhand slice, whether one-handed or two-handed, is a backhand swing hit from high to low with the racquet face sharply opened. It is similar to the backhand volley, except that you accelerate from the ball forward, continuing well past the ball, while in the volley you stop as you hit.

By hitting down and forward, and leading the stroke with the bottom edge of the racquet, you brush underneath the ball and make it spin backward.

This is the opposite of topspin, and is called underspin or slice.

This spin creates more air friction at the bottom of the ball than on the top, keeping it in the air longer. The ball tends to fly more nearly parallel to the surface than on a pronounced downward curve as in topspin shots.

To compensate, slice groundstrokes have to be aimed lower than topspin shots, with a smaller clearance over the net or they will go out of bounds.

Professionals with one-handed backhands usually return fast serves with this slice backhand because it can be shortened, blocking the return, and still get ball speed and accuracy. You can also keep the ball low and get some depth, which makes this slice return effective whether your opponent serves and comes straight to the net or stays back. Two-handed backhand players use the slice for emergencies, such as the ball being too far for their two-handed reach.

If the serve comes to your forehand it is a different story, because you can hit a forehand hard with topspin with no preparation. A very hard return will give your opponent trouble even if it doesn't go very deep.

This is also true for the two-handed backhand, which doesn't need any preparation prior to the hit. You jump at that fast serve and follow through hard, up and over the ball.

On the one-handed backhand return you need more preparation, such as a shoulder turn and a backhand grip, to drive through the ball.

A top pro may wait for a first serve favoring his one-handed backhand side, and slam a hard flat or topspin backhand return, surprising his opponent on his way to the net. But it is a risky shot that requires tremendous skill and precision. You can't muscle the ball as well as with your forehand or a two-handed backhand. If you are a beginning or intermediate one-handed player, your safest choice for a booming first serve coming to your backhand is a blocked slice return.

While rallying, a slice backhand hit low and firm can give trouble to your opponent by skidding and staying low. It all depends on your opponent's adjustment to different strokes. Some players like to hit their groundstrokes with the ball low, others higher.

You may prefer one style of backhand over the other. If you feel that you can do better with just one type of stroke, I wouldn't disturb that feeling. Your confidence depends on what you feel about your game, not what others think about it.

On the other hand, adding this slice stroke to your repertoire will make you a more complete player, helping you vary your strokes when needed, mixing up slices with topspin strokes.

Personally, I consider this backhand easy and effective. Many of my students, taught flat one-handed backhands, have drifted naturally towards a slice stroke.

Learning this stroke is easy. To start, you only have to point the butt of the racquet at the incoming ball to be ready, the racquet face as shown in the first picture below.



This will automatically change your grip to the backhand. The grip change doesn't need to be as pronounced as for the topspin one-handed backhand. Your fingers stay spread apart, as in the forehand grip. The main change occurs at the bottom of the hand, which gets slightly mounted on the top bevel of the grip.

The best way to cause this grip change is to pull from the throat of the racquet with the left hand while pointing the butt of the racquet to the ball. This brings the racquet to a position closer to perpendicular with your right forearm.

On a fast incoming ball, this is all the backswing you need, pulling the racquet with your left hand toward your left side. You'll be able to block the ball instinctively with a short stroke.

Your elbow needs to separate from your body. On the easier or slower ball, when you are preparing for a longer stroke, the arm is usually bent at the elbow, and the stroke is done by extending the arm past the contact with the ball.

In the beginning, it is a good idea to point both the butt of the racquet and your elbow to the incoming ball, while still holding the racquet with both hands. Then straighten your right arm at the elbow, putting separation between the arms. (See picture sequence above)

Your shoulder blades pull towards each other, resulting in your right hand moving forward and across in an arc. The racquet face closes intentionally and firmly from forcing the butt of the racquet to lead the effort across the arc, giving your shot some backward spin, and great power and precision.

Mastering it is a simple and easy art guided by feel and instinct, while waiting initially uncannily to let the ball get into your racquet past your hand and the butt of the racquet before powering the shot with your shoulder blades.

The left arm should stretch back to keep your balance and to prevent you from turning too early to your right, which could vary the shot direction from your intended aim. Your best finish would be holding your shoulder blades almost touching each other while turning your body around to cover the open court.

The height of your shot will depend on how much your racquet face is open. While learning, keep the racquet face angle quite open and hit down on the ball. Make it very different from your topspin stroke, so you do not get them confused.

## **Two-Handed Slice**

If you have a two-handed backhand and also want to slice the ball using both hands, simply open the racquet face, find the ball well, and hit from high to low.

Practice will tell you all the refinements as to racquet angle and spin. There are no complications or secrets. On your topspin, close the racquet face and hit up. On your slice, open the racquet face and hit down.

Many of the top pros have a two-handed topspin backhand but use very efficiently a one-handed backhand slice. They too induce this shot by pulling from the throat of the racquet with the left hand as they turn to the left, with the right hand pushing away from the body, pointing the butt of the racquet to the incoming ball. This will automatically get the backhand slice grip (fingers slightly spread) in the right hand, and will also give more firmness to the slice stroke than keeping the forehand grip.

Even if you are strictly a two-hander in your backhand, you should practice the one-handed slice. In some situations it is very difficult or even impossible to get to the ball with both hands on the racquet. If you have practiced a one-handed backhand slice, you'll instinctively reach for the ball this way and possibly keep the ball in play, saving you from a certain point loss.

To develop this stroke, do the drills shown in Chapter 9 on the one-handed backhand.

## High Backhands

Most one-handed players have trouble when the ball comes high to their backhand side. Two-handers can put a bit more force on a high-contact-point backhand than can a one-handed backhand. Both can drive the ball back hard if they catch it before it goes up high, or may back up to let it come down to a height where they can drive it.

One-handed players don't have much power when hitting a high ball to their backhand, and usually hit a weak return on that shot. But if you have a backhand slice, there is a simple technique that allows you to put power and depth into this shot.

First, with the racquet still in both hands, point the butt of the racquet to the incoming ball.

When the ball gets close to you, extend your arms and let the right arm turn, bringing the head of the racquet to meet the ball. Follow through strongly from the ball forward, until your arms are fully extended and the racquet is pointing up and perhaps a bit to the right.

The resulting shot is between a flat and a slice, and the ball carries height and speed to make it go deep.

You may use your body to add power to this shot. It actually depends on the particular situation. This shot needs to be practiced to develop the feel for it, as well as to strengthen your shoulder and back muscles.

## Lob

The lob is a ball hit high to send it above the reach of a player near the net. With the type of topspin strokes you learned earlier, you just need to lift the ball higher to get a good lob. Open the racquet face, still hitting with topspin, and lift the ball fifteen to twenty feet over the net.

Although the ball may be slower than a hard groundstroke, you still need plenty of racquet speed and a lot of topspin. This will make the ball bounce past your opponent's service line.



The topspin will help get the ball down sooner and faster and make it jump toward the back fence. It will then be difficult, if not impossible, for your opponent to get to the ball.

This shot was very unusual some twenty years ago, but today it is very common among the top pros.

Another way of achieving a lob--very useful when reaching the ball with great difficulty--is simply to open the racquet face under the ball and hit it up. It will probably be a slow ball, but if you hit it 25 feet or more in the air and deep into your opponent's court, it will give you time to get back to a more comfortable position in your court. This shot is usually called a "defensive" lob.

The deeper you hit a defensive lob into your opponent's court, and/or the more to his backhand side, the more difficulty he'll have in handling it and smashing it back.

### **Half-Volley**

The half volley is not really a volley, but a short topspin groundstroke hit immediately after the bounce of the ball.

It is a delicate shot, but necessary when you are caught near the bounce of the ball and can't volley it on the fly.

If the ball is about to bounce close to you, get your racquet behind the bounce and time your hit to start with the bounce, practically from the ball forward, with no backswing at all.



Finding the ball is done at the same time you accelerate your hand with a lift. Hit upward, letting the racquet flow naturally and over the ball, slightly covering it with the racquet face. This will keep the ball low and quick, preventing it from shooting up and giving your opponent an easy set up.

The most critical thing here is the timing and the racquet angle. Feel that you are coming off the ground together with the ball and that you brush up on it, covering the ball as if you had your hand slightly over it.

You can either finish the stroke as usual or make a much shorter motion. Either one will work as long as you find the ball perfectly with a pick-up action, your body timed to come up at the same time.

For both the forehand and the two-handed backhand half volleys, hit the ball close to your side, rather than well in front. On the one-handed backhand, hit it more in front.

## Drop Shot

The drop shot is a ball that you direct to a point near the other side of the net, to put the ball out of your opponent's reach, to force him to make an error, or to get him out of position so that you can hit a winner past him.

To keep your opponent unaware of your drop shot, fake it, as if you were about to hit a groundstroke. Just when you are about to make contact with the ball, change it to a drop shot

The drop shot is a delicate move, more like caressing the ball than like striking it. In essence, there is no backswing to the drop shot (except to the extent that you do a fake groundstroke-backswing), but a very sharp opening of the racquet face, while advancing the racquet across the bottom of the ball, gently touching its back and underside.



Follow through across, well past the ball. Make the ball underspin (backspin) and curve over the net, just enough to clear it. It will land softly on the other side, and the backspin will make it stop quickly, usually with a short bounce.

The drop shot feels the same for the forehand as well as the one-handed and two-handed backhands. Your grip on the racquet has to be softened during the impact depending on your distance from the net. The closer to the net, the softer your shot needs to be.

The ability to hit soft shots is called a player's "touch," usually developed with much practice and experience. The better you find the ball, the more touch you'll develop.

## Stop Volley

The stop volley (or drop volley or touch volley) is a volley hit softly, stopping the ball very short and close to the net in your opponent's court.

It is a great shot to hit when you have your opponent deep to one side and you are at the net. Delicately touch the ball in the other direction and he will never get to the ball.

You can disguise it as a regular volley and at the last possible moment open your racquet face sharply, as in the drop shot, and soften your grip, and, optionally, move the racket-face slightly downward and forward to impart more underspin.. The ball will not gain any momentum and will bounce softly off your racquet, curving over the net, and "dying" in your opponent's court.

Feel that you stop your hand, right at the impact, and in that minuscule instant advance the butt of the racquet across, while your racquet head drops, face opening, touching the underside of the ball. It is like the drop-shot action, with practically no follow-through. Also, skillfully making the stroke longer may add to the sidespin and underspin.

## CHAPTER 16

### *Drills for Development*

When a ball comes toward you, either to your forehand or backhand side, you have only three choices of direction in which to hit it back--down the line, crosscourt, or down the middle.

You must also choose to hit it short or long, high or low, or somewhere in between. There aren't a million choices, so you don't have to think much. Brilliance in tennis is usually the player's combination of instinct and experience.

The best professionals, whether intelligent or not, do not rely on thinking while playing but on instinct and feeling. They have drilled or executed their down-the-line or crosscourt shots so many times that it is simple for them to decide where to hit, and to send the ball there.

They instinctively know where to hit--especially if they wait to make that decision until they see how the ball is coming at them, or how it has bounced. The more they delay their final decision on exact direction and height, the better they find the ball, and then, when they have the ball within their grasp, they make their decision and hit it there.

It is almost unbelievable how long you can wait before committing yourself. For example, you can get to the point that you are preparing to hit a down-the-line passing shot, and then, when you are almost touching the ball, change your mind and hit it crosscourt. Your opponent certainly is misguided by your early actions and usually gets caught going the wrong way. This, of course, is at

a very high level of play. But you need to be aware from the beginning that waiting is far more valuable than rushing.

## **Drills**

Drills are the best way to develop the feel of one shot direction at a time so that you know where your shot is going.

It will also be easier to decide where to hit each shot, as drills let you know your margin for error. For example, you observe in a drill that your forehand down the line goes off a maximum of two feet to either side of your intended placement. In a match you'll know to aim at least two feet inside the court. The same would go for depth, taking into account that there is less control for the length of your shot than for direction.

In these drills you need another player with good control feeding you the balls. You should have a whole bucket of balls, and have them fed to you in a precise sequence, to simulate playing conditions and avoid unnecessary interruptions.

In most drills your friend will be standing to one side of the court. You have to aim your shots to the open space of the court, not back at your friend. This way you'll develop the idea of hitting to the open court instead of sending the ball back to where your opponent is standing and making his job easier.

## **Definitions**

"Down-the-line shot:" A shot hit almost parallel to the sidelines. If both players are right-handed, you hit from your forehand to your opponent's backhand, or from your backhand to your opponent's forehand.

"Crosscourt shot:" A shot that you hit across the court. If both players are right-handed, you hit your forehand to your opponent's forehand, or your backhand to your opponent's backhand.

"Down the middle shot:" A ball you hit toward the middle of your opponent's court.

## **The Drills**

Depending on your physical conditioning and your advancement, hit twenty to thirty balls in each drill. With some advanced players and professionals, I have used up to fifty balls per drill.

All these drills are not meant to be done in one day. If you get tired, stop and come back another day. The idea is to build your conditioning and stamina a little at a time while grooving-in your shots.

The same goes for the degree of difficulty that the feeder creates with a shorter or longer time lapse between shots, as well as with the placement and pace of delivery. The person feeding the balls is really "the coach" and is at the service of the student. He's helping the player develop confidence

and assurance on his shots, not trying to make him miss. Accordingly, he should adjust his delivery to see that the student has a high percentage of successful shots.

Unpredictable increases of pace or difficulty are okay while drilling a very advanced player or a professional, but only after he has mastered the easier stage of the drill.

For the first five drills, use a can of balls or another marker in the middle of the court, behind the service line if you are a new player, inside the baseline if you are an intermediate player, or behind the baseline if you are very advanced. Always round the can from the back of the court and turn facing your opponent's court.

Some of these drills are explained more extensively in the forehand and backhand chapters.

**DRILL #1:** Topspin forehands down the line, running around the can after each shot. Turn left after your forehand shot, turn right after running behind the can. The feeder stands across the net to your left.

**DRILL #2:** Topspin forehands crosscourt, running around the can after each shot. The feeder stands across the net to your right.

**DRILL #3:** Topspin backhands down the line, running around the can after each shot. The feeder stands across the net to your right.

**DRILL #4:** Topspin backhands crosscourt, running around the can after each shot. The feeder stands across the net to your left.

**DRILL #5:** Backhand slice, alternating one shot down the line and one crosscourt, running around the can after each shot. The feeder stands across the net in the middle of the court, behind his service line.

**DRILL #6:** Forehand topspin inside out (slightly from the left of your court towards the right line of the court), avoiding your backhand and then moving back to the middle after each shot. Start from the middle of the court, without the can. Your friend tosses a ball about three to four feet to your backhand side, at a slow pace. Turn left toward that side, go beyond the line of the ball (the direction from which it is coming), turn toward the net and hit a topspin forehand to your opponent's backhand court. Turn right after your shot and go back to the middle. Your friend feeds another ball to your left, and so on. The feeder stands to your left, but close to the center of the court.

This is a stressful drill, especially if you don't turn properly.

The following drills are also done without the can of balls. The feeder will feed balls one to each side, back and forth, but not too quickly.

**DRILL #7:** Forehand down the line, backhand down the line. The feeder stands across the net, in the middle of the court.

**DRILL #8:** Forehand crosscourt, backhand down the line. The feeder stands across the net to your right.

**DRILL #9:** Forehand down the line, backhand crosscourt. The feeder stands across the net to your left.

**DRILL #10:** Forehand crosscourt, backhand crosscourt. The feeder stands across the net, in the middle of the court, behind his service line.

**DRILL #11:** Volleys. Get near the net. Hit your forehand volley down the line and backhand volley crosscourt. The feeder stands in front of his baseline and to your left.

**DRILL #12:** Volleys. Forehand volley crosscourt, backhand volley down the line. The feeder stands in front of his baseline and to your right.

**DRILL #13:** Smash to the right side. You are near the net and the feeder stands to your left, close to his baseline. He hits lobs to you, and you smash to the open court.

**DRILL #14:** Smash to the left side. The feeder stands to your right, close to his baseline. He hits lobs to you, and you smash to the open court.

A good variation on the smash drill is to run up to the net after each smash, then run back to hit the next one, and so on.

Overall, keep the ball safely over the net. On the groundstroke drills it is a good idea to hang a string two or three feet above the net. Except for the sliced backhand and passing shots, all other groundstrokes should clear this string. Even hard shots will go down in your opponent's court if you hit them with enough topspin.

## Service Drills

For the next few drills divide each service court in half. Place a can of balls in each half as shown, or any other marker. On a clay court you can mark a line with your foot. This will give you four areas to serve to.

**DRILL #1:** Serve twenty balls to the deuce court, to your opponent's backhand (area 2 in the diagram). Use your American Twist or your spin second serve.

**DRILL #2:** Serve twenty balls to the ad court, to your opponent's backhand (area 4 in the diagram), using your American Twist or your spin second serve.

**DRILL #3:** Serve twenty balls to the deuce court, to your opponent's forehand (area 1 in the diagram). Here, use more of a slice serve to pull the ball and the other player off the court.

**DRILL #4:** Serve twenty balls to the ad court, to your opponent's forehand (area 3 in the diagram). Use a slice serve to pull the ball away from your opponent.

I have instructed you to first serve to your opponent's backhand because that shot is usually weaker than his forehand. It is also your primary choice for your second serve. The placement, speed and kick of your second serve is probably more important than your cannonball first serve. At many

important stages in your service games you may want to throw a safe kicker rather than risking a hard serve.

Hitting over a string two to three feet above the net is a valuable practice tool to keep your second serves safe and deep. You'll learn that serving up with spin makes the ball come down before the service line, while still kicking up high and fast.

One way to jam an opponent's return is to serve into his body. The exact placement varies with your opponent's skill. With some players you hit to the body, some to the right hip or shoulder, others to the left. Some are vulnerable to the high kicker, some to the slice.

You can try some different serves in the beginning of a match, then stick to the option that gives your opponent the most trouble. With some very skillful players none of these options to the body are very effective, and you have to resort to placing a high kicker on their backhand as your first serve in the closest scoring situations. Otherwise, should you risk your first serve and miss, your opponent may take command of the point with a very forceful return off your second serve.

Once you have practiced and mastered your second serve, practice your hard serves, mixing them up as you like, to the four areas shown in the diagram.

## **Advanced Drills**

There are many advanced drills, some of which can be done with someone feeding balls from a bucket, others by simply hitting back and forth.

With someone feeding balls from a bucket, you can do a combination such as an approach shot (to approach the net), then a couple of volleys and a smash off the feeder's lob. On these drills, have the feeder stand to one side and hit toward the open court.

Another drill is to hit "behind" your opponent, sending the ball to the place your opponent just left. You can do this with the groundstroke drills 1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 9, 11, and 12. Hit the ball to the small space between the feeder and the sideline closest to him, instead of to the open court. Your friend should stand a little more toward the center of the court than in the original drill, to leave you a slightly larger opening, depending on how advanced you are. It is best to disguise your shot by "pretending" you are about to hit the open court, then change your aim at the last possible moment and hit "behind." Disguising your shots will keep your opponent off balance, unable to read where you are really about to hit.

You can also do many drills hitting back and forth, but the effectiveness will depend on both players' levels of advancement. For example, one of the players can be at net and to his right, covering just half of the singles court, while the other player is back. The volley player hits away from the backcourt player, who has to cover the whole court and hit all balls toward the player at the net.

In the next drill the player at the net moves to the left half of the singles court and volleys from there, while the backcourt player still covers his whole court, and hits back to the player at the net.

To become proficient at the net, have your friend stand in his backhand corner, just behind the baseline, while you cover the whole net and direct your volleys toward your friend. For the next drill, your friend should stand in his forehand corner and you direct your volleys there.

These last drills can be combined with lobs and smashes to get the net player away from the net and then back in for the next volley. Keep a good supply of balls in a bucket by the center of the court. The bucket and the singles sideline will be the boundary of the half court, determining the area where the player at net has to hit all his shots.

One of the most strenuous drills, especially when done between two pros or very advanced players, is with both players back, one in a corner and the other covering the whole court. The player in the corner hits the ball from side to side, while the other player returns everything back to the same corner. It is a great conditioner for the legs and for the lungs, but should only be tried by young tournament players in great shape, and only for short periods of time. As with other stressful drills with one player stationary and the other covering the whole court, you can switch back and forth after each drill to give each other a rest.

The better the players, the more intense and more tiring these drills can be. You can devise other drills in which to practice your drop shot, your half volley, your serve and your service return.

A good way to practice your doubles game is to play points crosscourt, using only opposite halves of the court. You first serve from your right and your friend can only play to your right half of the court, all the way to the doubles line. Likewise, you have to continue the point hitting only to the half court to your opponent's right. The next point you serve from your left and you both play crosscourt to the opposite side.

Overall, do the drills you like best and that help you the most, depending on your needs and your stage of advancement. Don't overdo any particular drill.

Keep yourself interested by making your drills as interesting as a championship match.

I usually keep statistics for the drills I do, logging the percentage of successful shots. Or I design a scoring system for the drills where we hit back and forth. This keeps the player interested and trying his best.

# CHAPTER 17

## *Return of Serve and Singles Strategy*

There are two distinct returns of serve. One is the response to a forceful serve--you block the ball to get it back in your opponent's court. The second is the reply to an easier serve. You drive the ball with pace and with a definite idea of playing it down the line, crosscourt, or forcefully down the middle.

For the blocked return, get your racquet on the ball with a short and firm action, the racquet angle depending on the placement you want. Get the ball over the net without much forward movement of your arm, using the momentum of the incoming ball to get good speed on your return ball.

You need to tighten your grip prior to the impact with the ball and to be very conscious of the angle of your racquet, because it will determine both the placement of your shot and whether the ball goes over the net. On this shot the racquet face angle should be slightly open, but of course it will vary with each return. The stroke resembles a volley, except that you hit from the ball forward, getting more of a follow through.

Professional players make sure they get the return of serve in the court. If they get a chance at driving the return they will definitely do it, but their uppermost goal is to get the ball in the court.

They put a lot of pressure on the opponent that way. Balls constantly coming back to the server are a lot more work, and he starts to get the feeling that he has to force the action to finish the point.

That kind of pressure makes for more errors, although a player with a forceful serve has the upper hand. He will get some points on "aces," outright service winners in which the ball gets by his opponent before he can touch it. He will also force his opponent to mis-time and mis-hit service returns, getting more outright service winners.

Those points, added to the normal percentage of return errors, and also some weak returns of serve where it is easy to put the ball away, give the player with a very good first serve a tremendous advantage.

On grass courts, it is unusual to see a good serve-and-volley player lose his service game. The low and uneven bounce of the ball, especially when the grass is damp and slippery, makes returns and passing shots very difficult.

On hard courts there is a great variety in court speeds. It varies according to the roughness and the type of paint coating of the court, and whether it has a cement or asphalt base. If the court is hard, smooth or slick, the game is very fast and that favors the big server.

Some decades ago in the U.S. the tendency was to build very fast hard courts, especially for the major championships, favoring the big serve-and-volley players.

Today most hard courts have surfaces that slow down play to where you can play successfully from the backcourt against a net rusher, although a big serve-and-volley player still has an advantage in his service games.

On clay courts you have plenty of time to hit good returns of serve. Just stand behind the baseline to return a hard first serve, using your normal strokes. If your opponent misses the first serve, move inside the baseline to return his second serve. The second serve will most likely be slower or else there is the risk of serving a double fault.

## **Returning a Twist Serve**

Professionals rely on a twist second serve because of its accuracy and safety. They spin the ball so much that, even while clearing the net by two or three feet, the ball still curves down into the service court and then takes a jump.

To return a twist serve successfully you have two choices. The easier one is to move back to let the ball lose some of its height and spin and then drive it back with topspin. The other choice is to move forward to hit the ball before it goes up above your shoulders. This second choice is risky because the ball has not lost its sting, but a firmly blocked return should get the ball in your opponent's court.

Attacking a kick serve after the bounce is a specialty of some top players. It requires perfect timing and a closed racquet angle to keep the ball from coming out of the racquet higher than intended, or off to either side.

Other pros resort to hitting the ball harder than it came into their racquet, therefore canceling the effect of these spins. If there is any difficulty on a particular shot they switch to a firmly blocked return.

If you are facing a twist player it takes several service returns to understand what you have to do to block the ball with precision. Don't despair. Even the pros sometimes experience this at the beginning of a match, then they adjust as the match progresses.

Many players have trouble adjusting to a left-handed player's serve because the ball curves and kicks differently. If you are right-handed and a left-hander is curving the ball to your backhand side, you need to move in diagonally to make a dent with your return. Otherwise, the ball will slip farther and farther away. The best option, prior to a tournament match, is to get a player with a similar serve to practice with.

## **Return of Serve Summary**

Get your return of serve in the court, any way you can. Then you can really start the point.

"Finding" the ball is a "must". Most people think of their stroke first. Against a big serve, they are trained to react right away with the arm. On the contrary, avoid rushing your arm. Get your body as a whole to react first, with your hand and racquet finding the ball, then hit.

You need to react fast to a hard serve, but be totally aware of meeting the ball in the center of your racquet strings. You need to observe where the ball is going after the bounce in your service court, even if there seems to be no time, or you'll miss more returns than you get in.

As you find the ball, refine your racquet angle to control your shot. There isn't much time when receiving a hard serve. But instincts, honed with practice, will help you if you don't overreact.

Get the ball safely over the net first, then, as you get more accurate and experienced, you can go for better angles and harder returns.

## **Singles Strategy**

Rally game philosophy (Chapter 11) is very good even when playing a standard match at club level. Of course, you don't hit toward your opponent but slightly away from him to make him sweat it out. Hit to the open court when you have a sure shot. Keep the ball in play, without making silly errors, and you'll slowly learn to win points.

You would be surprised how many people--perhaps ninety percent of the fifty million or so who play tennis--cannot hit as many as twenty balls firmly back and forth in the court.

In club play more points are lost on mistakes or unforced errors than are won by hitting winners. If you keep the ball in play you'll end up winning much more than you lose.

Rallying is the part to learn first. In a match on any medium to slow court, the professionals get into a rally before they start going for winners. You should do the same. Hit several feet over the net with power and plenty of topspin, not only to be safe, but also to get depth and a higher bounce. This will force your opponent to return from farther back, reducing his chances of hitting a winner or a quick shot that can catch you unprepared.

## **Margin for Error**

If your opponent has a weak backhand, or his forehand is a much bigger weapon than his backhand, direct your shots to his backhand side. If your opponent's game is balanced, hit most of your returns crosscourt or down the middle, over the lower part of the net. Avoid making errors or opening up your court. Then, when you start sensing where he's vulnerable, hit the ball there, always keeping a good margin for error. For example, if you know that in the down-the-line drill you need to aim three feet inside the sideline to avoid hitting out, in a match, aim the ball at least three feet inside.

The same goes for height over the net. If aiming one foot over the net results in errors during practice, hit the ball at least two feet over the net, with plenty of topspin, during a match.

## **Depth**

If the ball is bouncing too short in your opponent's court, hit it higher. You'll get more depth and more jump on your shot. It is far less dangerous to hit the ball closer to the service line than to go for the

baseline. And it doesn't make sense to hit the ball long when you have enough topspin to make it land well inside the court and make it jump.

## **Attacking Short Balls**

After you hit a forceful shot, move a few steps into your court. Your opponent will likely respond with a shorter or easier shot. As you go forward to get to a shorter ball, hit your groundstrokes lower and with more topspin.

Closing the racquet face, and pulling up more on the stroke (whether you then finish the stroke higher or lower than you normally do), will accomplish that, while still clearing the net. Lower clearance and more topspin is needed because the ball has a shorter trajectory to go down into your opponent's court.

The same goes for passing shots, in which you want the ball to get plenty of topspin so it will dip down soon after crossing the net, making it more difficult for your opponent to volley.

## **Drifting Back to the Center**

When you hit a good crosscourt shot from the backcourt and your opponent is also back, drift slowly toward the middle. It is very likely that your opponent will hit crosscourt, the best percentage shot. You don't want to get caught running fast toward the center of the court while your opponent hits to the place you just left.

If your opponent happens to go down the line with a shot, close to the sideline, he'll be risking much more. In any case you'll be facing slightly in that direction while going slowly toward the middle, so you'll just need to accelerate to get to the ball. Otherwise, if your opponent hits behind you, pivot, and you should be pretty close to the path of the ball.

## **Hitting Crosscourt**

When you are pulled wide, which occurs mostly when receiving a crosscourt shot, hit the ball back crosscourt, so that you don't open the court much to your opponent. A weak return, of course, would be a setup for him. It will be short and allow him to attack you on either side, to come to the net, etc. But if you hit the ball past your opponent's service line, with plenty of topspin, he won't be able to do much with it.

If you don't have a strong crosscourt shot but are pulled wide, lift the ball high, down the line, but well inside. You could also hit it down the middle, again high and past your opponent's service line. Either choice will give you plenty of time to get back to the middle of your court, ready for the other player's next shot.

At a high level of play, a crosscourt shot would take precedence over any other shot as a return of a good crosscourt shot, unless the opponent has stayed too close to the side he made the shot from, therefore leaving the other side wide open for your down- the-line shot.

The second-best choice would be a high topspin shot, deep down the middle. This is especially true on clay courts. You see the top pros get into crosscourt rallies mixed with down-the-middle shots, risking nothing, waiting for a weaker shot that opens the play for something different.

To show you how dangerous down-the-line shots can be when you are pulled wide, try it practicing with someone good. You hit only down the line while the other player hits only good cross courts. You would soon be out of breath because you are running many more yards to get to each shot than your opponent is. A good crosscourt shot will pull you beyond your sideline. From there your down-the-line shot cannot be parallel to the sideline, or else it will land outside your opponent's court. You have to angle it toward his court. After the bounce the ball will continue to get closer to the middle, giving him a good chance to cross it the other way where you left a wide open court. Now you have to race all the way across your court. A few shots like that, and you'll feel that you are chasing a rabbit, while your opponent is easily strolling around the court. You may also start to hit short, allowing your opponent to come to the net.

## **Studying Your Opponent**

You need to adjust your game tactics to your opponent's play. Stay cool and see what gives him trouble, what he likes and what throws him off. Unless you know your opponent well, "feel" your opponent at the beginning of a match. Throw some "junk" at him, mixed with your good shots.

Many players don't handle a change of pace well, others thrive on your hard shots, making you feel that the better you are playing, the better they play.

Throw some high topspin shots that bounce deep and high, and see how your opponent reacts. If he has trouble, keep it up. It is part of the game. If you are playing competitively, you are not there to hand the match to your opponent, but to beat him or at least to have him sweat it out until the last point is over.

## **Practice Matches**

Practice matches or social matches are different. You try to get the best workout possible. Sometimes your friend across the net doesn't have a good backhand. If you hit mostly to his forehand, you'll get the best possible practice, only reverting to winning tactics if you need to.

In practice focus on consistency and accuracy, rather than raw power. You can hit hard, but use a lot of topspin. The tendency in tournament matches is to hit forward, flattening out the stroke. Practice the other way around, getting your muscles used to lifting the ball. It will be easier to resort to topspin in tight spots in match play.

## **Rushing the Net**

When you approach the net, whether with your forehand or your backhand, a down-the-line approach will cut the angle of your opponent's passing shot. After you hit the ball, continue to advance and stay to the side you made the approach from, perhaps two or three feet from the center

line, depending on your shot's depth and how close you get to the net. Your opponent will have only a small opening to pass you with a sharp and short crosscourt.

For the average player such a sharp angle is a low percentage shot. Unless he has plenty of topspin, he'll have to resort to hitting a slow shot to place the ball in the open space, giving you a chance to run it down.

## **Defending Against a Net Rusher**

If you are in your backcourt, and your opponent has made a good approach that doesn't give you much angle to pass him, you can "dink" the ball. You hit it so low and so slow or with so much topspin that the ball goes down to his feet or to his side. From there your opponent will have trouble volleying with pace and usually gives you a shorter ball and a better chance to pass him with your next shot.

If your opponent is very close to the net, your best choice is a good lob, making sure you get the ball well over him even if he jumps back and up. A "dink" usually drives your opponent close to the net, making it easier to lob the next shot over him.

## **Backcourt Tactics**

Let's say a right-hander is playing a right-hander. A very good tactic is to stay in the backcourt a little to the left of the center, and pound the ball into your opponent's backhand, over and over, your backhand crosscourt, your forehand inside out toward your opponent's backhand. Whenever possible, run around your backhand, forcing your opponent to hit closer and closer to your left sideline. After every strong shot, especially with your forehand, move a yard inside your court, still slightly to the left of the center, ready for a weaker return.

After a while your opponent will feel pressured. There's not much room for a crosscourt backhand, and he'll risk sending the ball down the line. If he makes a good shot, run it down and hit it with plenty of topspin, high and safely, toward the middle of his backhand side. Then move into the court again, toward the left, and keep pounding his backhand side. As soon as he makes a weaker shot, jump on it crosscourt with your forehand, with plenty of topspin and hard. It should be a safe shot if you get enough topspin, and your opponent will have a hard time reaching it and even more difficulty handling it. If by then you are at the net, you probably have a big open court for your volley, and an easy put-away, or a smash.

This type game requires a lot of patience and very good stamina. Some pros with a big forehand sometimes play two yards to the left of the center of the court, hitting patiently to their opponent's backhand side, pounding their forehands there, or hitting sharp cross courts when the ball comes to their backhand. They wait for the short ball that they can attack savagely, forcefully, and hit far from their opponent's reach.

When they get to the net the point is already almost won. Unless their opponent, risking everything, hits a miraculous winner or an incredible angle shot, fate is in the attacking player's hands. He has a wide open court to hit either his volley or his smash.

## **First Serve Percentage**

Getting your first serve in is a very good way to put more pressure on your opponent. Even a slower first serve gets treated with more respect than a second serve of the same speed.

If you miss your first serve consistently, the other player will soon be attacking your second serve and making better returns.

You can do the same if your opponent misses his first serve. Move inside the court and attack his second serve.

## **Crosscourt Returns**

The safest return to hit is usually crosscourt, over the lowest part of the net and toward the longest extension of the court.

When an opponent is coming to the net following his serve, pounding the ball crosscourt will give you good results. The ball will dip down sooner than a down-the-line shot and it might very well go by your opponent, or give him difficulty, because of the pace. You don't risk making a mistake as much as with a down-the-line return of serve, closer to the sideline and over the higher part of the net.

## **Steady Tactics**

Of course, you would vary all these tactics depending on the degree of success your opponent has in handling them. You can surprise him with a change here and there, but keep winning tactics steady. Don't change a winning game--but always change a losing one.

Don't vary winning tactics just for the sake of change. It might give your opponent a lift and change the whole match.

The same goes for your basic game. You know your best weapons. If you have the fundamentals of this book down well, your consistency will be very high.

Stick to your topspin and the "finish" of your groundstrokes. They will get the ball in the court, and you won't have to resort to frightful halfway strokes.

Stay in the match as long as possible. Don't rush. Keep the ball in play one time more than your opponent and you'll beat players that look much flashier than you.

Overall, respect your opponent and his shots. Never underestimate anyone. If you can beat someone easily, do so without snubbing them. They'll appreciate your game and your behavior. They

will also know that the points or games they won they did on their own, without you handing them anything they didn't earn.

And if one player keeps beating you no matter how well you play or how hard you try, recognize that he or she is better than you are. Keep playing your best and learn from the experience. It is possible to improve every day, to learn something good every day. And we learn something every day, whether we recognize it or not.

A positive experience depends only on you.

# CHAPTER 18

## *Racquets and balls*

Tennis racquets come in a great variety of shapes, materials, and prices. The latest advancements are the larger sizes and the space-age materials used for their construction. That same variety sometimes makes it difficult to choose a racquet to learn the game. In this chapter I will give you some help in this respect, and also an idea of what to expect from the racquets available on the market.

Tennis is a game of "feel," and the best way to play it is with a racquet that gives you feel. When you start you are striving to learn control. The power of your shots is secondary. You need to spend some time hitting the ball at slower speeds and into the court before you start going for harder shots.

Also, your arm is not yet built up to the strain of hitting hundreds of balls. Therefore, your racquet should have some special characteristics that will help you build up both your stroke and your arm.

First, the racquet should be light. For an adult, that would be around a 10- to 12 1/2-ounce weight. Second, it is preferable that it have a large size head because the area of lively response, called the sweet spot, is much larger, and you would have no apparent difference on off-center hits, saving your arm from further strain. For the same reason your racquet should be very flexible.

The racquet should also have a small grip, fitting comfortably in your hand, perhaps a 4 1/4- or 4 3/8-inch circumference for an adult. This may be contrary to common sales practice and "expert" advice, but smaller grips make the racquet feel lighter and easier to handle. Cumbersome grips make racquets harder to handle and strain the arm. The choice should be left to the player, who knows what feels most comfortable and manageable in his hand.



The larger racquet heads, up to 110 square inches of string area, make play easier. They tend to vibrate slightly, but if you put a rubber grommet on the strings, as shown in the picture below, or some other vibration dampener, it stops the vibration.

On the more expensive side there are many kinds of wide-body racquets made of materials such as graphite, kevlar, ceramic, etc. Some of these new racquets are flexible, light, and very responsive, especially with the larger head. They are a pleasure to play with. There are now so many kinds of racquets on the market that you need to get some good advice. If help is not available, just avoid stiff models, heavy racquets, large grips, and small racquet heads.

## Strings

The more flexible and responsive the racquet, the less you'll need to overpower the ball and the more feel you'll get. String thickness and tension will greatly affect the racquet's response. In general, thinner strings are more responsive (added power, longer string contact and thus more feel), and for those playing flatter, tighter string tension will diminish feel but give you more control.

The most popular strings on the market are synthetic strings. They are not as elastic as natural gut, but they are more durable.

It wasn't until the late 1970s that the larger racquet head was developed. These racquets give a good response with nylon strings, while with the previous smaller wooden racquet models the only high response was obtained when strung with natural gut. Those strings didn't last long but they were the only choice for a world class player.

Today there are many types of synthetic strings available, some of them with incredible response. The best ones require custom stringing and may cost as much as a complete racquet at the lower end of the price scale. But they are the choice of the top pros. They may break several sets of strings per match, but they get them free. And they also get paid to advertise them!

You can get the best combination of racquet response and control by stringing the racquet medium tight with tournament-gauge synthetic gut or fiber. These strings are very thin, seventeen gauge and above, while the normal strings on racquets sold prestrung are usually the thicker 16 gauge.

Top quality strings make the mid-size racquet very responsive. Most professionals use racquets between ninety to one hundred square inches of string area. They feel that the mid-size is the best combination for both power and control. Only the younger crop of professionals are geared toward the larger size. The reason may be that most of the experienced pros in the game today started in their childhood with the smaller racquet. The younger professionals, on the other hand, started when the large-size was most popular, possibly prior to the development of the mid-size.

## Choosing a racquet

Different combinations of materials such as graphite, fiberglass, boron, and ceramic make the selection of a composite racquet very difficult for the beginner or the accomplished player who wants to change to a different racquet. Many stores have resorted to lending out "demonstrator" racquets. You can borrow a racquet, usually with a sizeable deposit, and try it for a few days.

This is a great service to the player, but the final decision is still not easy. Is this the best racquet you can buy? Will the racquet respond better with top quality strings? Will it play better at another string tension?

The choice is easier for the beginner. You can start with an inexpensive racquet. If you enjoy playing, you may look for a better racquet and pass the older one on to someone else.

People who get "hooked" on tennis usually like to get their friends started. Now you know what to do with your older racquets.

You don't need to be a pro to start someone on the right track. This book offers the opportunity for any two beginners or more experienced players to learn the game.

## Changing racquets

Most people aren't too choosy when they select their first racquet. But when they already play, they feel that a racquet choice may be crucial to their tennis future. And it is, for more reasons than the obvious goal of hitting better shots.

For one, the health and durability of your arm depends on several factors related to your tennis racquet: stiffness or flexibility, weight, grip size, and overall size.

At this stage the arm has already developed itself around the racquet's characteristics. It has gotten used to the string tension, the racquet weight, the grip size, as well as the racquet's flexibility and response.

The player's technique and detailed muscle work has been conditioned instinctively from experience with his first racquet. Going to another racquet may be a traumatic experience. Mis-hits with a stiffer racquet, or one with a smaller sweet spot, go right down the arm.

It is a delicate proposition, to say the least. You either build up your muscles and your technique gradually for the greater demands of a stiffer, heavier racquet, or you end up on the long list of players with "tennis elbow," or some other physical problem.

On the brighter side, if your technique is very good and you have the patience to start slowly and deliberately, drilling one shot at a time, your muscles may respond well.

Here is my advice:

- 1) To start learning, choose a very flexible light racquet or get one with very responsive strings.
- 2) Be very selective when you change racquet brands or models. Of course, you can upgrade your equipment, like the top stars. But keep in mind that they get customized equipment, a contract, and usually so much practice time that the new racquet gets to feel like a part of their body, just like the old one did.
- 3) Make the stress factor on your arm your most important consideration. You'll have to try the new racquet and trust your feel, watching for signs of pain or stress. One of the most dangerous signals is pain appearing in any joint, such as your wrist, elbow, or shoulder. The tendons attach the musculature to these joints, and they are harder to repair than the muscles themselves. The rest period necessary to fully repair a tendon can feel "infinitely" long.

## Shorter racquets

Shorter racquets, much lighter and with a large head, are excellent for children. There are plenty of these on the market. The best type is very flexible, light, with a large head, a short throat and a small handle that fits comfortably in a child's hand. With these I have been able to teach children as young as four and five years old.

When those were not available I cut two to six inches off old adult racquets and used them not only for children but to teach adults as well. Shorter racquets are a very successful teaching tool.

The tennis industry would do well to develop shorter learning racquets for adults, similar to the Graduated Length Method used in teaching snow skiing.

For the beginner, the shorter racquet makes finding, feeling and controlling the ball much easier. Students go for control rather than power and they enjoy hitting back and forth at the slower ball speed. With the techniques shown in this book, it makes tennis a very easy sport to learn.

Students learn quicker with a shorter racquet. Next I have them use a normal size racquet, while "choking" up on the handle, as explained in Chapter Seven. From there, they move the hand gradually to a normal grip position. But these adjustments are different from individual to individual, depending on their feel and confidence.

## Tennis Balls

In the U.S. tennis balls are very lively, while in some other countries the balls have some characteristics that make them slower or harder to propel.

Some European balls, for example, come in boxes, while in the U.S. they are packed in pressurized cans. Professional players resort to lowering the string tension while playing with the slower European ball to get more ball speed and feel.

There are two distinct types of balls: one is for clay courts, the other for hard courts. The advertised difference is that the hard court balls last much longer on hard courts, which is basically true. The same can't be said for the player's arm. The hard court balls are somewhat stiffer, less flexible, less lively.

The regular balls, or clay court balls, are softer, have a much better feel and cause a lot less stress on the arm, to the point that many professional tournaments played on hard courts have chosen the regular ball over the hard court ball.

Personally, I coach adults and top juniors with the regular ball, use special balls for kids, or larger sponge balls for beginning adults, whether on hard courts or clay courts, saving my students' arms and my own. The only exception would be in preparing someone to play a tournament in which other balls were used. In this case it is best to choose the exact brand and type so that the player adjusts to the conditions he'll have to face later on.



A beginning tennis player doesn't hit consistently in the center of the string area. When the less-responsive area of the strings comes into play, the stress of the impact is greater on the arm. This situation is compounded with a faster ball. Hard court surfaces don't slow the ball much. A fast ball will continue traveling with quite some speed. If you mis-hit it, you'll feel it on your arm.

Avoid stressing your arm until you have built it up to the task. As a beginner, have your partner play or toss the ball deliberately slow.

Good technique will help your arm immensely, as will finding the ball really well. Most notably, off-center hits on the appropriate racquet string-bed location create a torque that contributes to good ball-handling and to an easier effort on your arm.

# CHAPTER 19

## *Tennis Courts*

There are four major types of court:

- 1) Clay courts, either American green Har-Tru or Fast-Dry, or European-type red clay. Clay courts are soft, gentle on your feet and legs, and absorb part of the impact of the ball on the ground, slowing it down.
- 2) Hard courts, made of a cement or asphalt base and an acrylic surface coating. Hard courts are quite fast. To slow down the court the surface is usually roughed up by mixing the coating with sand or rubber granules. The more granules in the mix, the slower the court will play.
- 3) Grass courts, made of special grass, cut very short, similar to golf greens.
- 4) Carpets of many kinds and materials, usually used indoors.

Lines on clay courts are usually plastic tapes nailed down to the ground. Lines on hard courts are painted on the surface, and lines on grass courts are laid down with chalk or special paint.

Hard courts can stress your arm, your back and your legs. If you have the chance to learn on clay, do so. The soft surface is easier on your legs. Your feet don't stick as they do on hard courts. Turns and pivots on clay courts are harmless and natural. Another advantage is that the bounce of the ball on the softer surface slows it down considerably, giving you extra time before the swing. Practicing on clay for a considerable amount of time reinforces the habit of reading the second curve of the ball, the one after the bounce, and adjusting to it.

On hard court surfaces, players usually do not learn at very slow speeds. From rushing and hitting hard, they get the feeling that there is no time, that they have to start swinging prior to the bounce of the ball. It is a faulty mental computation that may stay with the player for the rest of his life and interfere with the improvement of his groundstrokes.

If you always play on fast courts, you may not know the difference. But if you get to a tournament level and play on all surfaces, you'll know.

I recall many U.S. junior champions, particularly from California, where most courts are of cement or asphalt base, playing on clay courts at the Orange Bowl, the largest international junior tournament in the world. They didn't make it past the early rounds in singles. Players dominant in their age categories were utter failures on clay. They had extraordinary serve-and-volley games, but their hard-court-developed groundstrokes were not up to the task.

## **A Bit of History**

Back through the '60s and '70s many top American players avoided the early part of the European tournament season, played on red clay, and went directly to England just prior to Wimbledon to play on grass. From there they came back to America to play several grass court tournaments in preparation for the grass courts of Forest Hills (now the U.S. Open). After that it was California and hard courts, then to Australia for the grass court tour.

Except for some great champions who were good on any surface, like Chuck McKinley, Jimmy Connors, John McEnroe, Vitas Gerulaitas, and some clay court specialists, like Cliff Richey from Texas, and Florida's Frank Froehling, Harold Solomon, and Eddie Dibbs, most Americans had weaknesses on the slower clay. From Tony Trabert in 1955, to Michael Chang in 1989, it took 34 years for an American male to win again on the red clay of the French Open.

The American viewpoint of the Davis Cup was almost the same story. The clay courts were to be avoided. The "Challenge Round" rule was in effect--the champion nation sat comfortably at home, waiting for the elimination rounds to determine their final challenger. The sole survivor had to play, of course, on the Cup Holder's grounds, which were usually the grass courts of Australia and the U.S. To compound this situation, the interzone finals were played in the Cup Holder's country and usually on grass.

From the end of World War II in 1945, when the Davis Cup was resumed, until 1960, the U.S. and Australia played every single Challenge Round.

Wresting the Davis Cup from those two giants was nearly impossible. They had legions of players over the years who were masters of the serve-and-volley game, and the Davis Cup was safely tucked away.

## **A Different Viewpoint**

Two interesting developments occurred in the 1960s, increasing the challenges to Australia and the U.S. The interzone final went to the home-and-away rule for the first time. The U.S. lost on red clay to Italy in Rome in 1961, to Mexico in Mexico City (Zone match) in 1962, and regained the Cup in 1963 in Australia on grass. At home in 1964 for the Challenge Round, the U.S. chose to play on clay and lost to Australia, then again lost on clay to Spain in Barcelona in 1965.

To simplify matters for America in the American Zone, up to that time there was a simple rule that said that the finals between the North American Zone and the South American Zone had to be played "within the confines of the North American Zone." In the International Lawn Tennis Federation meeting in London in 1965 yours truly made the motion that this rule should be changed and replaced with the home-and-away concept. The U.S. had to go to the slow courts of South America, with some painful losses. But the presence of the U.S. team in those countries, coupled with the intense competition and the sellout crowds, spearheaded an incredible development of tennis in South America, which had been precisely the argument I put forward favoring the rule change.

The abolition of the Challenge Round system in 1972 was another blow to Australia and the U.S. Now the Cup Holder had to go through the elimination rounds the same as anyone else. The Davis Cup was finally equally open to any country, and the best teams visited many countries around the world. This made tennis grow worldwide with great intensity, a phenomenon that hasn't stopped since.

I know that American players must sometimes feel like guinea pigs when confronted with difficult conditions and unfavorable crowds in other countries, but these players' participation is perhaps their greatest contribution to keeping the game truly international.

## **Hard Courts Versus Clay Courts**

Aided by clay as their main surface, countries like Spain, Romania, Sweden, Czechoslovakia, Germany, Italy, Argentina, Serbia, Croatia, and many others developed legions of youngsters with superb groundstrokes. Many of them made it to the top ranks.

Chris Evert of Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and John McEnroe at the Port Washington Tennis Academy in Long Island, New York, were no exceptions to this rule, practicing and playing many junior tournaments on clay.

The U.S. made an excursion into using clay courts for their top tournament at Forest Hills. The stadium grass courts could not stand the wear and tear of the two-week U.S. Open Championships. Many players criticized the courts. Finally, in 1975, the grass court surface was replaced with Har-Tru, an American clay with superb characteristics including reduced physical stress on the legs, excellent drainage that allows play even in light rain, and faster speed of play than European clay courts.

European clay courts can be exhausting for a player because they are very slow and points are so hard fought that it is not unusual to see a ball going back and forth fifty times or more in just one point. The Har-Tru surface, on the other hand, can be made faster or slower by merely changing the amount of rolling done to the court, adding or scraping off loose material, as well as regulating the watering of the court.

The Har-Tru clay court surface was kept for three years. Chris Evert was invincible, winning all three championships played on clay. She actually had a clay court winning streak of 125 matches, all the way from 1973 to 1979.

On the men's side there were many interesting matches, and Jimmy Connors made it to all three finals, winning in 1976, in perhaps his finest victory, over Bjorn Borg.

But the U.S. Open, in the wake of a huge tennis boom, needed a larger, better site, and, unlike the West Side Tennis Club at Forest Hills, one totally under the control of the United States Tennis Association.

Perhaps because of the threat of domination of the softer surfaces by the foreign clay court specialists--such as Bjorn Borg, Guillermo Vilas, Manuel Orantes, and many young overseas

players--U.S. officials went to their hard court formula. They built the new home for the U.S. Open at the Flushing Meadows site of the old Louis Armstrong stadium, near La Guardia airport, in 1978.

The hard courts of that time were quite fast, and many times were painted lengthwise to make them smoother and even faster. West Coast tournaments and Davis Cup matches had shown practically no rallies, and the spectacle there and at the then new U.S. Open hardcourts was as good as an Old West shoot-out. It was a far cry from the beautiful artistry we had seen on clay at Forest Hills and in the European events, including Wimbledon's center court, where the grass was very short (grabbing the ball more rather than enabling the skidding ball of old), slowing down play which allowed some success from the backcourt, too.

Over the years, under pressure from players and the media, hard courts at the U.S. Open and other major tournaments have been slowed down. Players can now play successfully from the backcourt. But in order to slow down hard courts the surface is made either coarser or softer, mixing sand with the coating or using rubber-like components. The resistance to turning your feet is greater than in any other court, with much higher stress on ankles, knees, and hips.

For top flight tennis players, who fight each point and each match no matter how long, this type of hard court is the most taxing in the world. Careers have been cut short due to leg and lower back injuries, while players who played mostly on clay and grass have generally had much longer careers.

A partial solution to cut down on knee injury on slow hard courts is to use smooth sole tennis shoes, except when the surface is slippery. The smooth shoe sole makes it easier to turn, diminishing the stress factor on the legs.

## **The Hard Court Boom**

From 1975 to 1977, when the U.S. Open was played on clay courts, the major tournaments leading to Forest Hills were now on clay to foster top players' participation. The most important part of the American tour was on clay. This started a boom of Har-Tru and Fast-Dry clay court construction in the U.S., except on the West Coast. More than 5,000 of those courts were built.

But in 1978 the U.S. Open changed to hard courts and many other American tournaments also switched. Practically all the major professional tournaments in the U.S. were either on indoor carpets or hard courts.

Following this, still in the midst of the incredible tennis boom of the '70s, tens of thousands of hard courts were built in schools, clubs, and private homes. The U.S. Open had set the trend.

Today, the main surface for a youngster in America is fast hard courts.

And America is paying the price. Hard courts, together with the conventional teaching techniques prevalent in the U.S., have made flat hitting from the backcourt the rule. Heavy topspin is the exception of a privileged few, like Courier, Krickstein, Agassi and Chang.

U.S. players do very well around U.S. Open time, when the competition is on hard courts. But overall, with over twenty million tennis players, the U.S. is not in the commanding international

position it could be. Countries with a fraction of that number of players are head and shoulders above America. From 1985 to 1991, U.S.-born male and female players captured five Grand Slam titles, vs. Czechoslovakia's seventeen, West Germany's fifteen and Sweden's nine. After its 1984 final round Davis Cup loss to Sweden, the U.S. did not again reach the finals until 1990, when the aforementioned young topspin players came to the rescue and won it in the U.S.--on red clay.

It is not by accident that most of the world's best tennis pros in the last fifteen years are players with plenty of experience and practice on clay courts in their younger years.

The most successful and famous tennis academies and training centers in the world have clay courts. Clay is a surface that helps develop key features of the backcourt strokes and the backcourt game. Hard courts, on the other hand, help develop volleys and court sense at the net.

Ideally, a player should first develop groundstrokes, then the net game. Again, if you start on hard courts and want to be good, begin at slow speeds and develop your topspin groundstrokes. Next work on the backhand slice and on your serve. Then concentrate on your net game until you volley like a pro.

Tennis associations, clubs, cities, schools and colleges must make slow courts available to developing youth. If they are clay courts, better still.

California, almost 100 percent hard courts, would do well in changing the trend.

# CHAPTER 20

## *General Rules and Competition*

Tennis is governed by an international set of rules laid down by the International Tennis Federation and adopted by the United States Tennis Association.

Called Rules of Tennis and Cases and Decisions, these rules, together with The Code, cover every aspect of the game of tennis, from size and make of courts, tennis balls and racquets, to scoring, competition, and correct behavior.

The Rules of Tennis and Cases and Decisions have been extended with U.S.T.A. comments that clarify them to a far-reaching extent. These Rules and the Code can be seen for free at the U.S.T.A.'s website.

Some of these rules have been covered in earlier chapters in a simplified manner. This chapter deals with additional general aspects of the rules.

The server shall not serve until the receiver is ready, whether it is a first or a second serve. If the receiver attempts to return the serve, he shall be deemed ready. Otherwise, should he indicate that he wasn't ready, a "let" will be played, repeating the same serve.

A "let" can be called for a hindrance in making a shot, outside the player's control, but not the result of a permanent fixture of the court. For example, if a ball from an adjacent court comes into your court while the ball is in play, a "let" is called and the whole point is replayed, with the server getting a first serve.

A player may toss the ball up to serve, then decide to catch the ball instead, directly or after hitting the ground. Unless he attempted to strike it, he can replay the serve.

Any ball touched by a player before it lands outside his court is deemed to have landed in. Many players catch the ball outside the court during friendly competition, calling it out, but in any argument, remember that the rule states that if it touches you before landing, it is good.

A ball touching a line is deemed to have landed in the court of which that line is boundary. Any ball that you cannot call out with certainty should be regarded as good.

The Code determines further rulings on decisions not covered by the Rules of Tennis and Cases and Decisions.

In the event a match is played without officials, each player calls the balls on his side, but should be scrupulously honest and fair to his opponent. If he can't call it out, there is no maybe. It is good.

The calls should also be instantaneous.

If you missed seeing the ball's landing well, and the ball you called out was actually good, you should immediately correct your call.

The server should announce the score in points prior to serving each point. (This is a tradition kept by good players since the beginning of time.)

Obscenities and bad language are considered "unsportsmanlike" conduct, as are abusing the ball or tennis equipment. In officiated matches such infractions are penalized.

Making loud noises, although allowed by the Women's Tennis Association ("WTA"), can be the basis for a "let" or a hindrance, and should be avoided.

If you become a serious player, ready to compete, realize that there are innumerable situations not covered here that you may need to resolve quickly. Knowing the answer in advance is the best solution to avoiding problems in your matches that can result in an impaired performance.

## **Competition**

The U.S.T.A. is an exceedingly well-managed organization, dedicated to controlling, promoting, and developing all aspects of the game in the U.S.

The U.S.T.A. has members distributed over seventeen Sectional Tennis Associations, some of which comprise several states. Each section is a separate tennis organization, divided into districts, each with its own representatives and affiliated tennis facilities.

As an example, one of the U.S.T.A. sections, the Florida Tennis Association (F.T.A.), has close to 500 affiliated tennis facilities in its sixteen districts. The F.T.A. has a year-long calendar of tournaments in all age categories, plus major tournaments involving top professionals as well, including the Miami Open, which brings almost every pro in the game to Florida. Altogether, over 600 sanctioned tournaments are played in Florida each year.

Age categories in tournaments are 10 and under, 12, 14, 16, and 18 for boys and girls. For adults, the age categories are 25 and over, 30, 35, 40, 45, 50, 55, 60, 65, 70, 75, 80, and 85. There are also some special doubles divisions, like husband and wife, father and daughter, father and son, mother and daughter, mother and son, brother and brother, brother and sister, and sister and sister.

Senior tennis is extremely popular, not only at the local, state and national level, but around the world as well. There are international tournaments in age categories above 35, 45, 50, and older. The U.S.T.A. is increasingly associating some of this competition with the most serious tournaments. Where years ago pro players were washed up, competitively speaking, in their early thirties, today you see former world champions in their forties and fifties playing for prize money in front of enthusiastic crowds.

Each section publishes its own yearbook, in which every affiliated tennis facility is listed, with address and phone number if available, a complete schedule of tournaments, leagues, rankings, offices, and officials to contact, and a host of services such as recreational tennis programs, U.S.T.A. school programs, teacher training workshops, programs for the disabled, video and film libraries, and many more.

Another publication you might want is the U.S.T.A Tennis Yearbook. This is a marvelous documentation of the incredibly complex but organized role of the U.S.T.A. in the tennis game, as well as a historical record of major championships and events. It also lists all its offices, officers, committees, representatives, rankings, champions, the season's results (both professional and amateur), awards, prize money, sketches of the top U.S. players, official rules of tennis, constitution and bylaws of the U.S.T.A., tournament regulations, and much more.

The U.S.T.A. has several player development programs. A typical "roots" program is the U.S.T.A./National Junior Tennis League, designed to bring tennis to those eight to eighteen years old. It has 280 chapters spread throughout the U.S., with an enrollment above 100,000, from novice to intermediate levels.

The U.S.T.A. Tennis Yearbook can be ordered from the U.S.T.A. The U.S.T.A. phone number is (914) 696 7000.

# EPILOGUE

## *A Game for Life*

Tennis is a sport for the being, rather than the mind. The being (spirit) thrives on feeling, on aesthetics, on beautiful coordinated moves, while the mind thrives on pictures, perfect poses, right - wrong computations. The best tennis pros are artists who operate at the higher harmonics of aesthetic flows, with little thought involved, just like concert pianists at their best.

Life seems full of pressures. But we can all be artists, provided we deal with those pressures which we ourselves created.

Some players misbehave. In tennis, as in life, there is no reason for bad manners. Having good manners, good attitude, grace in winning, and coolness in defeat, doesn't hurt anyone.

Be a master of control. Show it with your emotions and your behavior.

If your opponent acts up you can show dignity, cool disapproval if you like, or you can stay uninvolved. Today's championship rules penalize unsportsmanlike conduct and those rules should always be enforced. Someday everybody will realize that sportsmanship is the best way to survive.

More and more the best players today act like the supreme artists they are. Regardless of the pressure of the media for sensational stories, these pros respect the rules, other players and officials, and don't lose their control.

It wasn't always like that. Credit is due to those who are regulating the sport. Tennis couldn't exist without rules and the contributions from the many officials who regulate and promote the game.

Tennis wouldn't have grown, either, without the legions of "aficionados", the media, tennis teachers, club managers, volunteer committee members, aspiring youngsters, and helpful parents.

To all of you, everyone involved in tennis, my greatest admiration and thanks. Your actions are appreciated in this sport that is moving forward, stellarly, into a brilliant future among all sports.

