

Chapter 7

Starting the Progression: The Volley

In this Chapter, I will outline the patterns I use to develop all players, not just juniors, in learning the first component of tennis: The Volley. The volley is not only effective in terms of total player development, but it is one of the two shots that are usually the weakest among players who stagnate at levels below their potential. The volley and the serve, (which I will discuss in Chapter 8) tend to be the two shots that often—and sometimes clearly—differentiate players who are stuck at lower levels and those who go on to reach progressively higher levels of skilled play.

In addition, the volley is the most effective and efficient introductory stroke which I use to introduce all players to tennis...which is why we are starting with it here!

Part I: Starting with volleys



Figure 1: One way to find the continental grip is to hold the racquet flat or horizontal to the ground and look at the back, flat part of your hand. (Arrow pointing at this part of your hand.) I should be pointing towards the top of

As mentioned in the previous chapter, there are many advantages to starting all tennis players with the volley. I can't express the importance of this concept enough; below are a few of these advantages.



Figure 2: Work on drills that develop the familiarity of the continental grip. Here a group of juniors are doing “down bounces holding the continental grip.”

- Because the continental grip is usually unfamiliar, starting with the volley is an excellent way to develop the affinity of this grip for all students. (Instead of avoiding this grip and moving on to topspin grips at first.)
- The volley, requiring little swing and overall strength, is a great starting point for players in developing the hand-eye coordination of meeting a moving ball with the strings of the racquet.
- It is much harder to introduce the volley after groundstrokes. This is because the student will become comfortable with the topspin grips initially and the student will be more familiar with not just the full swing associated with groundstrokes, but the low to high pattern that is usually first taught with topspin strokes. This makes learning the volley very difficult to learn with the associated continental grip, short stroke and slight under-spin ‘high to low’ swing pattern associated with skilled volleys.
- It is much easier and efficient to teach large groups with the volley as many drills can be done with many students in a smaller space.
- In addition to the volley, the serve, the overhead, the two-handed backhand and the slice forehand and backhand are all hit best with a continental grip. Thus, with the exception of the topspin forehand groundstroke, essentially all other shots are based on a continental grip.

How to Find the Continental Grip

The continental grip aligns the racquet with the forearm. That is, if you are holding a relaxed continental grip out in front of you, the point of the racquet tip should be directly in line with the forearm’s extension.



Figure 3: Up-bounces. Keeping the elbow straight also helps in developing the proper arm position for the backhand volley.

Also known as the ‘hammer grip,’ the continental grip will resemble holding a hammer with the bottom edge of the racquet being the part you would hammer with.

Another way to find the continental grip is to hold your arm out in front of you while you hold the racquet flat, parallel with the ground. Use the flat, back of your hand as a guide and have that surface point towards the top of your head. (Please see **Figure 1**.)

Note: “Grip Strength”: Because the continental grip is not usually a familiar or comfortable grip, there is a tendency to feel weak hitting balls with it. Players often migrate to the eastern grips (eastern forehand and eastern backhand), because these grips put more of the hand behind the racquet. However, as mentioned earlier, the eastern grips usually limit or

prohibit continued improvement in developing more effective volleys as well as being limiting the ability to defend more effective shots by better opponents.

Thus, it is important to remain diligent using the continental grip until it does indeed feel more comfortable. This issue of hitting a good volley with pace and depth is not a strength issue...but a technique issue. I have often demonstrated forehand and backhand volleys hit from various places on the court holding the racquet only with my thumb and index fingers to show that a player barely holding the racquet with nearly no strength can hit such volleys firm and deep. When combined with the proper stroke mechanics described below and developed within the teaching tools also mentioned in the following paragraphs, players will quickly develop the feel for the volley using the continental grip and understand that lack of real strength necessary for successful volleys.

Introducing the Volley

Introduce the volley by first teaching the continental grip. Gaining comfort and familiarity with the continental grip is achievable by everyone. However, with most students, it must be trained. Here are the ways we use to first get players comfortable with the continental grip:

1. **Up-bounces:** This is where a player will hold a continental grip, with their arm held straight at the elbow, in front of their chest. **(Figure 3)** Keep the racquet head as near to your chest as you can without bending the elbow. Bounce the ball up as many times as possible. With kids and adults, 5 to 10 up bounces is all they can do before they lose control. Work on this daily and you will see their ability to hit 50 to 100 in a row in just a few weeks.



Figure 4: Down-bounces. Kneeling down will help the player maintain the continental grip while doing these bounces.

2. **Down-bounces:** Kneel on your right knee if you are right handed. **(Figures 2 & 4)** Holding the continental grip, bounce the ball down holding the racquet face as flat to the ground as possible without teter-totering the racquet at the wrist. Kids have more trouble with this and it sometimes is helpful to help them by holding their hand and getting them to feel the rhythm of the bounce. Try for 100 in a row.
3. **Catches:** Work on tossing the ball up in the air and then catching it softly on the strings as the ball falls to your waist. Keep the continental grip and catch the ball on the palm-up side of the string bed. This is a fun, but challenging drill, that not only helps a player develop the continental grip, but also how to develop soft hands and become more familiar with the racquet in general. The secret to this is to get the racquet falling at the same speed as the ball is falling without trying to touch or catch the ball too soon. (This will only make the ball bounce off the strings.) Put your racquet up high as the ball starts

to fall; begin to descend your racquet as the ball reaches the top of your racquet. Don't try and cup or scoop the ball too early; wait to catch the ball until it is below your waist.

- a. **Advanced Catches:** Catch the ball on the backhand side of the frame, the palm-down side as well as the palm up side. Eventually, the player can toss the ball up from the stings over and over, catching it each time it comes down on either side of the racquet face.
Also, work to the point of catching the ball on both sides with the ball barely leaving the strings.
4. **Catches with Bean Bag:** This drill is great because it emphasizes the blocking aspect of the beginning volley using the continental grip.
 - a. **Bean Bag up-Tosses and Catch:** If a player has difficulty catching tennis balls (as in the catches drill above), have them toss a bean bag up and catch it on the strings. The bean bag doesn't bounce or roll off the racquet like a tennis ball will, but the concept of timing the racquet falling with the bean bag and using the continental grip is still being practiced.
 - b. **Bean Bag toss to forehand and backhand:** Toss a bean bag to the student as they turn to a forehand or backhand volley. Have them catch the bean bag on their strings holding the correct grip and using correct form. For the backhand volley, work on keeping the elbow straight and the wrist firm. For the forehand volley, make sure they keep their elbow in at their side and catch the bean bag off their front knee, not behind them or off the center point of their body.
5. **Alternation forehand/backhand up bounces:** This common drill is where the student holds the continental grip and rotates the face of the racquet so they alternately bounce a ball up on the palm-up (forehand) side of the strings and the palm-down (backhand) side of the string bed. This drill further emphasizes the familiarity of the continental grip and works the player's ability to control the racquet face on each side as well.
6. **Edge on Bounces:** This challenging drill has the player bounce the ball on the strings (either palm up forehand side or palm down backhand side of the strings), and alternately bounces the ball up from the top edge of their frame. Players can have a challenge to see how many bounces on the edge of their racquet they can do in a row. Advanced players will not have too much trouble with this drill as they will have much better fine motor control of their racquet. Beginners will find this drill difficult but most enjoy the challenge of it. It is a great drill to get players more comfortable with the continental grip as well as develop better hand-eye coordination with their racquet.

A variation of this is down bounces on the edge of the frame. A little easier than up bounces on the edge, players simply tap the ball with the bottom edge of their racquet frame as they hold the continental grip standing up.

Volley Technique

While I have covered the volley in depth in my first book, *TENNIS MASTERY*, I will provide a complete summary of the key points in learning and teaching the proper volley within my *Advanced Foundation*. It is important to understand the proper volley technique so that the drills you employ and the patterns your students practice will be consistent and provide the most effective means to master these shots.



Figure 5 & 6: The forehand volley (Left) and the backhand volley (Right) are similar to each other on many levels

Forehand and Backhand Volleys

The volley is mechanically simple. A volley, when hit correctly, has a very short back swing and an abbreviated follow-through. The body is kept relatively still at the point of impact. With but a few exceptions, the forehand and backhand volleys are “mirrored” images of each other. (See **Figures 5 and 6**) That is, they should look essentially the same in terms of racquet position contact point, racquet orientation and other similarities. In this sense, I will be teaching both the forehand and backhand volleys simultaneously with defining differences expressed as needed. Let me break down the basic volley foundation in these sequential steps:

Step 1: Grip

Use the Continental grip for both the forehand and the backhand volley. (**Figures 7 and 8**) This grip is the choice of most every pro on tour, most all top college players, and most proficient club players... and it should be yours as well! There are several reasons that the continental grip is best suited for all players to learn from the start:



Figure 7: Continental grip in hitting a backhand volley.



Figure 8: The backhand volley grip (figure 7) and the forehand volley grip, (above) is essentially the same when using the continental grip.

- The Continental grip is the perfect grip as it allows for the same action on both the forehand and backhand volleys. It is far better suited for low volleys than any other grip. The Continental grip might initially feel weak for most beginners, as it does not put as much of the hand behind the racquet during the shot, (as the Eastern forehand and backhand grips do.) However, since most volleys are hit with a slight cut or slicing action, the neutral racquet face of the Continental is perfect for volleying the ball on both sides. For advanced players, when playing higher-level players, low volleys are common due to the advanced abilities of your opponents. This helps explain why virtually every pro and top players in general, use the continental grip for net play.

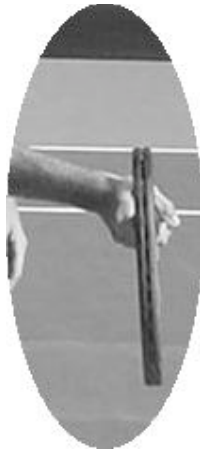


Figure 10: The eastern forehand grip on the volley sets the racquet at a right-angle to the forearm and ends up causing players to “push” their volley.

- As the name implies, the Continental grip is used for both the backhand and forehand volleys. Therefore, a great advantage to using this grip is the fact that players will not need a grip change between the two volleys. As players develop and play more challenging and competitive players, the advantage of not needing to make major grip adjustments during rallies is obvious. Quick exchanges at the net and rapid-fire passing shots require almost instantaneous reactions. The accuracy of obtaining a proper grip by having to make a grip change during such instances is certainly

hindered. This is another reason we see most all top players, especially those who play regularly at the net, utilizing the Continental grip.



Figure 9: The Eastern forehand volley grip as seen from the side at the contact. This grip places more hand behind the racquet. However, the racquet must be held at a 90-degree angle in relation to the forearm.

Compare this position with Figure 3.

- Players who try to utilize the Eastern grips for the volley usually need to overcome the distinct urge to hit their volley like a groundstroke. Typically, when using the same grips for groundstrokes as volleys, players tend to hit their volley with both a swing, (like a groundstroke), as well as topspin. Topspin volleys are sometimes hit by pros and top players but only in certain circumstances. It is not advisable for beginners and intermediates to attempt the topspin volley until the fundamental volley with a continental grip is mastered. Even when players who have worked hard in not hitting topspin on their volley with these grips, tend to revert back to this undesired swing pattern when the ball is hit at them with speed. Players almost always will repeat what is most ingrained in their swing pattern when they have little or no time to think or react.

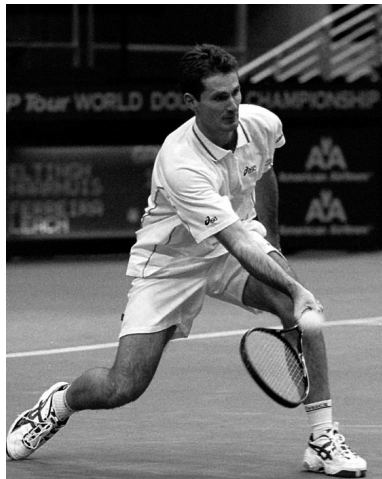


Figure 11: Compare the forehand volley technique above of a skilled player to that of the player in Figure 10.

- As most books recognize, the Continental grip is clearly the choice of advanced players. As we have stated many times in this book, it is incredibly difficult for players to make necessary changes in their strokes or grips as their play or skill develops. Thus, by learning the Eastern grips for the volley, players are sabotaging their ability in becoming advanced players.

NOTE: Most all proficient players make subtle grip changes based on the Continental foundation. These changes are in response to recognized specific shots such as higher drives or balls that are slow moving. However, almost all top players utilize the Continental grip as described in this chapter.



Figure 12: Note the relationship of the racquet to the forearm of this topspin forehand to the similar arm & racquet position in Figure 10 of the player using an eastern grip on the volley. The eastern grip, (like the semi-western above) lays the racquet head back behind the wrist.

Author's Note: Years ago (and even today, among some teaching pros) the Eastern Forehand and Backhand grips were the grips taught for the forehand and backhand volley. While it is true these two grips offer greater strength on the volley, (due to the majority of the hand is behind the racquet, see **Figure 10**), the ability for players to advance their volleying abilities with these two grips is greatly handicapped. Because of the ability for a beginner to hit “successful” volleys early in their lessons with the Eastern grips, pros sometimes favor the “instant gratification” that players get when using the grip. However, in choosing the Eastern grips for the volley, the player will become most frustrated when they discover the problems associated with their volley and want to change! In addition, the use of the Eastern grips creates a different stroke pattern than the stroke pattern used with the Continental grip. This additional problem compounds the difficulty in making the necessary change.

Additional Notes on the Volley Grip:

The basic Eastern Forehand and Backhand grips are generally recognized as “Topspin Grips”. Due to the anatomical design of our hand and wrist, these grips tend to tilt the racquet face forward as the arm moves towards the ball. As a result, players in a quick exchange at the net, or when a ball is hit fairly hard to them, they tend to close the racquet face and end up hitting the ball downward and into the net. A player using either Eastern grip will have to consciously lay the wrist back to employ a flat or slice volley. (See **Figure 10**) With low volleys, a player using Eastern Grips will have to twist the wrist at an almost impossible angle to get enough of the racquet face tilted open to get the ball over the net. (See **Figure 12**)



Figure 13: A comfortable, relaxed position at the net will allow for greater mobility and reaction speed to a volley.



Figure 14: Note how the forehand volley above is nearly a “mirror image” of the backhand.



Figure 15: Use of the off-hand helps prevent the racquet from being taken too far back. Also, note the straight right arm during the unit turn.

Another reason some pros teach the Eastern Grips is the belief that players won't have the strength to volley correctly with the Continental Grip. Yet, volleying the ball, when done with minimal back swing and follow-through requires only a small amount of strength. To emphasize this point, I oftentimes in demonstrations will employ only my thumb and index finger in holding the Continental grip to volley. With minimal effort, (and proper form), you can volley the ball with a crisp, firm shot to the baseline utilizing only two fingers!

I have taught the Continental Grip to kids as young as 5 years old with 100% success! For those of you who teach tennis and think kids this young can't handle the Continental Grip, you are greatly mistaken! When you walk them through the progression of the stroke, (as I will describe in this chapter), and employ the basic drills I will be prescribing, you will find that virtually every kid and adult can and will be hitting excellent volleys in no time at all! In fact, I have found in

comparing notes with other pros who indeed teach the Eastern grips to beginners, the actual learning time for my players to hit with accuracy and consistency was essentially the same as those who learn with the Eastern grips. This discovery rules out the premise that the Eastern grips are faster for players to learn the volley. And by learning the Continental grip from the start, players will forego the need for change later as they progress!

Step 2: Ready Position

The ready position for the volley places the player's racket in the center of the body with the head of the racquet held up. (**Figure 13**) This position allows for easy access to either the forehand or backhand volley. By keeping the racquet head up, you minimize the chance of the racquet head dropping prior to or during the volley. Players who drop the racquet head at the ready position will tend to be late in getting the racquet up to the volley contact point. Cradle the racquet at the throat with the off hand. This will help the player turn the upper body as a unit on the backhand instead of taking the racquet back with the arm.



Figure 16: On the forehand turn, the left arm follows the right arm helping the shoulders make the turn. Some players leave out the non-dominant arm and end up only taking their racquet back instead of only turning the shoulders.

Step 3: Turn

From a ready position: when you recognize that the ball coming to you is a forehand or a backhand, first turn your shoulders sideways to the net. For right-handers turn your shoulders to the right for a forehand, (**Figure 14**), and to your left for a backhand, (**Figure 15**). Note that your left shoulder should be pointing to the net on forehand volleys and your right shoulder points to the net on backhands. Don't take the racquet back with your arm! By doing so, the racquet will be taken back too far.

- Notice that when you turn your shoulders, if you're holding your racquet in the ready position, the face (or plane) of the racquet naturally opens squarely to meet the ball. (Figure 13 & 14) By taking your arm back beyond this position will cause you to over-swing as well as impede your ability to make consistent contact with the correct racquet angle.
- Keep the racquet face open slightly. That is, tilt the racquet so the hitting surface of the racquet is pointed slightly up, over the net. (Don't over-open the face! This will cause you to float or pop up your volley.)

- On the backhand volley, keep the dominant arm straight through the course of the volley. (Figure 15.) Avoid the natural tendency to bend the elbow of the dominant arm on the backhand volley.



Figure 17: Note the racquet position near contact for Pete Sampras



Figure 18: The contact point is just in front of your front knee.

Explanation: By keeping the arm straight on the backhand volley, the arm acts as a lever; the longer the lever, the stronger the force that can be applied by that lever. Also, by bending the elbow, the player now has an extra joint to control in the course of the volley: the shoulder, the wrist and now the elbow. If a player conscientiously keeps the arm straight and firm, it won't take long for this move to become natural. This is one of the most important points for beginners and intermediates to keep conscious of in developing an advanced backhand volley.



Figure 19: At contact, the racquet head is held high, just as in the ready position. The shoulders remain sideways as well as the hips. This prevents the body from turning out of the volley and pulling the ball to the player's left.

- With forehands, the elbow does not need to be kept straight. This is because the elbow can only bend in, not out, from a straight position. Thus, the bending of the elbow usually only adversely affects the backhand. In fact, with the forehand, the elbow should be bent in slightly, bringing the racquet closer to the body. If indeed the elbow were to remain straight during a forehand, the racquet would be a considerable distance from the body, making for difficult contact with the ball.

- Use the off-hand in helping make the turn of your shoulders during the forehand and backhand volley. (See Figure 16 & 14)



Figure 20: This is the open face of the forehand volley at contact.

Step 4: Contact

As the ball approaches, attempt to meet the ball just slightly in front of your hip or front knee with the racket moving in a downward and forward motion. (See **Figure 18 & 20**) I call this a “driving cut” since the racquet moves down and through the ball in a very short stroke through the line of trajectory.



Figure 22: Similar to the forehand volley, the backhand volley is hit just in front of the front hip.

Explanation: The idea of moving the racquet down through the ball with the racquet face slightly open serves to accomplish several things:



Figure 21: The proper contact point for the backhand volley

- a. The cutting action takes some pace off the ball, (due to the backspin), allowing the player to keep low shots hit up and over the net in the court. A flat racquet face at the point of contact is very difficult to control. This is further discussed below.
- b. The act of cutting or slicing the ball helps the player prevent the racket from “flipping” over the ball. For many players, it is hard to keep from using the wrist, and subsequently the racquet moves at the ball in a “wristy” motion. We see this especially when a player is out of position making a desperation shot! The reality is when a player is in trouble, the worst thing they can do is flick the racquet at the ball using the wrist. The chance of hitting the ball cleanly and in the desired direction is drastically reduced when this is attempted!
- c. Ideally, cut down the BACK of the ball as you are driving through it. Don’t try to cut “under” the ball, as this will cause the ball to float up. (Unless you are attempting a “drop-volley” where slicing under the ball with finesse and touch will make the ball die on the other side of the net.)



Figure 23: Note Tim Henmen’s hitting arm is nearly straight up and down after hitting this low backhand volley. He is not reaching too far in front to make contact.

Additional notes on hitting a slice volley verses a flat volley:

A ball hit with a perfectly flat racket-face will tend to rebound off the racket at an angle towards the ground, dropping deceptively lower off the racket face than players think. (See **Diagram 1 Below**) To prove this point for yourself, hit a ball at a medium speed at a wall with the ball arching slightly downward as it hits the wall. (In most cases, this is usually what your opponent’s shot will be doing if you are going to volley. If your opponent’s ball was on the rise when you hit the volley, (and depending on the speed of the ball), you are probably hitting an “out” ball!) Watch as the ball comes off the wall. Its rebound angles down towards the ground quite quickly. A medium paced shot at a wall anywhere from 4 to 8 feet high, will hit the ground off the rebound landing anywhere from 3 to 10 feet from the wall, (depending how hard and how high you aim at the wall.) Now imagine standing at the net where you feel comfortable volleying. (Usually about 5 to 10 feet back.) If you hit the ball with the strings perfectly flat, with the racquet blocking the ball using a minimal

blocking stroke, the ball will land anywhere from the middle of the net to the bottom of the net. (Remember the net is 3 feet high at the center. If you are 10 feet behind it and hit the ball with this flat volley about waist-high, the ball will hit the ground approximately two feet BEFORE the net!) Obviously, with increased volley speed, we can get a ball to go higher and further. However, the harder you hit the ball, the more likely the chance of an error in either racquet angle or contact point...both resulting in a lower percentage of successful shots.

Spin of your opponent's shot will also affect the reflected angle of the ball off your strings. An incoming shot with backspin will deflect downward off a flat racquet face at a GREATER angle than a topspin ball. These principles often explain how a player standing literally right on top of the net will still find themselves hitting volleys into the net!



Figure 24: The Eastern backhand grip creates a flat racquet face at contact. Notice the forearm at a 90-degree angle to the racquet, similar to the Easter forehand volley. (See also Figures 9 & 10)

Diagram 1

The angle of reflection of a ball off a flat surface is generally equal to the angle of incidence. (Angle the ball arrives towards contact.) Gravity, as well as spin and speed of the ball can increase the affect the angle of reflection has on the ball.

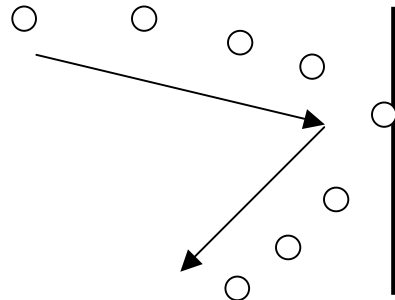


Figure 25: Here, the racket face on the turn for the backhand volley is set at the same angle it needs to be at contact. (See Figure 26 below)

On low volleys, it is doubly important to apply a slice to the ball. A hard hit ball hit flat off your racket and angled up enough to clear the net, will usually land long due to the angle up that you had to hit the ball to clear the net. Players who don't have a slice on their

volley tend to become “dinkers” at the net for this reason...they can’t take the pace of the ball except by dinking the ball, usually with a floppy wrist and arm!



Figure 26: Close up of the racquet at contact on the backhand volley.

Another point made by some instructors is their claim that hitting a ball flat is easier to control and less complex than slicing the volley. I strongly disagree. A volley that is attempted to be hit with a perfectly flat racket face is dependent completely on the accuracy of that angle within two fields: a) is the racquet angle correct in relation to the target; b) does the player have control of the correct angle at contact. If the angle is off by even a minimal amount, the control of the shot will be no more accurate than using a slice volley technique. Certainly any volley method will be dependent on the accuracy of the player’s racquet head control. However, hitting a ball flat, even in the context of the problems discussed above, is certainly no more advantageous to a player than hitting with slice. The complexity of the slice volley, when executed within the methods described here, is no more complex than hitting the ball flat. In both cases, players will have to learn how to aim and control the racquet.



Figure 27: The cross-over step at contact

KEEP THE PLANE THE SAME!

- From start
- From before contact to finish, the slightly open racket face stays in this position. (Figures 23 and 24.)

- The racquet starts slightly above the path of the incoming ball and moves down, cutting the back of the ball in a blocking or punching motion. (I use both terms here as many people have different interpretations of both in how they apply to hitting a tennis ball.) I actually prefer the term “Glide”, as the short volley motion is smooth with minimal effort.



Figure 28: Notice the back leg stays back after contact. The racquet at the contact point is even with the front leg and the body sideways to the net.

- After contact, your racquet should be slightly more in front of you from where you made contact and the racquet should still be the same position, (in relation to the arm and wrist), as when you turned your shoulders initially. That is, the racquet head should not drop during the course of the stroke, and likewise, it should not rise up. The strings should still be facing the target.



Figure 29: Compare how the eyes perceive the contact point here (left) with an Eastern grip to that of the Continental in **Figure 30 (Left below)**. Here the eyes are set behind the hitting surface. In addition, note how the eastern forehand grip forces the player to lay the wrist back.

Step 5: Stepping into the ball

As you make contact, step with the right foot on backhands (**Figure 26**), the left foot on forehands (**Figure 27**). Step forward and slightly across your body. This will vary depending on whether the ball approaching you is coming into your body or well away from you where you will have to really reach as well as step. Often times, you may have to step back with the opposite foot to create this proper sideways body position when a ball is hit right at you. Obviously, we don't want to step into a ball that is too close to us! By stepping back with the back foot, it creates the exact same body position as stepping across our bodies with the front foot.

- This step is timed differently for differently paced shots coming at you. In fact, in many cases, if the ball is moving fast, you will only have time to turn your shoulders and block the ball. You won't have time to step into the shot. However, when time permits, by stepping in, your body's forward motion provides an added force to the ball resulting in more "punch" with no more added swing on your arm's part.
- Keep your back foot back. As with many other strokes, don't let the back leg "swing" around as you make contact. Likewise, don't pull your front foot away as you hit. (As in leaning backwards.) This improper move is very common among beginners and intermediate players.



Figure 30: With the Continental grip, the eyes are set in front of the hitting surface.

Explanation: By swinging your back leg around as you are making contact, (or, likewise, moving your front leg away), your hips will rotate towards the net. When the hips rotate, your body tends to over-rotate during the course of the volley. Usually, the shoulders will follow the hips, forcing your racket to "pull" the ball away from the target line. What results is the player will automatically lay the wrist back to "push" the ball attempting to maintain the desired direction. Thus, by over-rotating, the player changes the shot from a drive to a push.



Figure 31: Note the contact point of the backhand volley by Patrick Rafter is NOT out in front of his body towards the net-- but parallel with his side.

- Ideally, you want to keep yourself as sideways as possible through the course of the volley. This will increase your ability to hit the same shot with accurate repetition.

- Your follow-through should be extremely short and compact.



Figure 32: Note the racket lies almost parallel with the hitting arm on the backhand volley.

- Your racket face should still be in an “open-face” position after contact. The racquet should not turn over the ball or hit down on top of the ball. You can check yourself by holding the racquet still just after the point of contact. By looking at your racquet after contact, you can see if you have the racquet still open or if you have used your wrist and turned the racquet over the top of the ball. (Which, if you do, the racquet face will be now pointed down at the ground...a good way to hit an easy volley into the bottom of the net!)

Author’s Point: Many pros tell their students to hit the ball “well out in front of them.” In theory and in practice, this can be misleading. When players try to make contact too far out in front of their body, several problems occur:

1. The wrist must cock back to get the racket face to tilt in proper position to hit the ball square to the target. This wrist-cock causes the player to “push” the racquet forward, away from the body instead of driving it with the arm across the body. (Compare **Figures 29 and 30.**)



Figure 33: Note the key points of Justine Henin’s backhand volley: Racquet head up, arm straight, racquet parallel with arm, sideways upper body position.

2. With the racquet way out in front, the player has literally nothing left to hit the ball with. Notice in **Figure 29**, the arm is already forward so it can't move anymore forward to apply force to the ball. This results in the player resorting to "flicking" the wrist to make the forward movement. (Or they attempt to swing by rotating the shoulders or entire upper body...just as bad!)
3. With the racquet so far in front of the body, the player can't see the hitting surface of his racquet! (**Figure 29**) In fact, the frame of the racquet usually hides the back of the strings as well. Even though the human eye can't pick up the actual contact of the ball with the strings, (it is too fast for the eye to see), the eye does track the ball to the racquet. When the object for which we are tracking the ball to, (the string surface), is out of view, it is very difficult, especially for beginners, to meet the moving ball cleanly and consistently.)
4. In the course of a volley, the player usually has very little time to track the ball. (Compared especially to how much time we have to see and prepare for groundstrokes.) By attempting to meet the ball far forward in front of the body, the player has even less time to track the ball, especially within the last two feet or so, the area which is critical to hand-eye coordination.
5. Hitting the ball too far in front also limits the ability of the player to intentionally hit angle volleys. (Please see "Advanced Situation Volleys" later in this section.)

*In directing a celebrity tennis event in 1999, I was teaching the volley to a small group of participants when one of the men complained to me that he couldn't get any power on his volley. Upon observation of his volley, I saw that the man was attempting to meet the ball with his arm already fully extended in front of him. (Similar to **Figure 29**.) Short of flicking his wrist he could not generate any substantial power on his volley.*

His reason for this hitting position came, "My pro told me to hit the ball out in front of my body." Other players in the group voiced a similar directive that had come from their pros as well. After I described the limitations and problems related to this misconception, the gentleman attempted to hit the ball just to his side and slightly in front of his hip using the continental grip as I instructed. Within a half dozen hits he was hitting his volleys with far more pace and control.

"I'm cured," he exclaimed after hitting volley after volley with desired aim and speed.

Some players may not hit as far out in front of their body as this man did. However, in working with players who haven't been taught the differences in where the contact point should be made, (and those using Eastern grips), inevitably, many of these players attempt to make contact too far in front of them. In varying degrees, many of these players faced similar problems as the man I just described had. (See **Figure 29**)

I want to emphasize however we still make contact in front of us! It just does not need to be to the point where the racquet is exhibiting the traits that I described above. This is one of those "classic" phrases that some pros use to help players NOT hit the ball late. However, be careful how *you* interpret it yourself.

Additional tips on the volley

- Bend your knees on low volleys. Don't drop your racquet head and don't bend over at the waist to hit your low volleys. A good tip is to keep your eyes as level with the ball as possible.
- Keep your racquet head up as your arm moves the racket down and through the volley. Don't use your wrist or elbow to chop down on the ball. (See **Figure 33**)
- Try to get your eyes close to the ball on contact. Many players extend their arm too far away from their body and their eyes to control the shot. (Of course, you don't want to get too close to the ball either!)
- As a general rule of thumb, keep the racquet parallel with the forearm. This principle will prevent the wrist from bending and produces a "picture perfect" volley! (See **Figure 32 & 33**)

Volley Summary:
Forehand Volley Review



Figure A



Figure B



Figure C



Figure D

Side View
shots of
above
volleys



Figure E

Forehand Volley Review

Figure A: **Ready Position.** The player is able to turn to the right or left, depending on what shot has been hit by the opponent.

Figure B & D: **The Turn.** The upper body turns, taking the racquet to the side. Notice the racquet does not go back past the front knee.

Figure C & E: **Contact Point.** The body remains sideways and the racquet makes contact almost even with the front knee. Notice the step has occurred and it is across the body. From this point after contact, the player can hold this position to check balance and racket face.

Backhand Volley Review



Figure A



Figure B



Figure C



Figure D

Side
view
shots of
above
volleys



Figure E



Note how parallel the arm and the racquet plane are in each of these two pictures. Also note that the racquet face is slightly open, beveled to meet the ball in a slice-like motion.



Advanced Volley Situations and Shots

Advanced volleys would include volleys hit while moving forward towards the net or sideways as in poaching, or a combination of both movements. Also, deep volleys from behind the service-line are more difficult due to the distance the player has to track the ball and the fact most players tend to feel they need to swing harder at the ball when volleying from further back, (which generally is not necessary!). Angle volleys are also considered advanced in that they require touch, timing and specifically, the Continental grip as described above is critical.



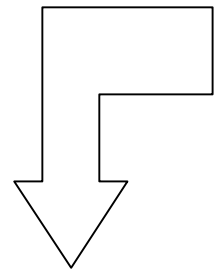
Figure 34: Note Michael Chang's upper body is sideways to the on coming ball. Note also the correct step, straight right arm, Continental grip, and open racquet face...all similar the techniques used if he wasn't moving to the ball.

Moving Volleys

When you're moving towards a ball that you wish to volley, if possible, try to pause your body's movement at the point of contact. Under some circumstances, you may not have the opportunity to slow your forward momentum down enough in order to pause while making contact. In either case, it is important to keep your upper body, (shoulders and torso) sideways through the point of contact. (See Figure 32) Keeping the back foot back on either the forehand or backhand volley usually will accomplish this. By pausing the feet at this moment, the arm can drive the ball more through the target line increasing the likelihood of the ball being directed at the intended target even if hit slightly early or late. If the foot steps through during this point of contact, the hips and shoulders tend to rotate towards the net causing the arm to be pulled across the body, (as described in the basic volley form). The player in doing this will try to correct the swing by dropping the racquet head back and pushing the racket towards the target. This produces a very weak and inefficient volley.



Figure 35: If a player stops moving forward holding an eastern forehand grip, their upper body will continue forward over the waist making the face of the racquet point down.



This idea of pausing is equally valuable when you are moving diagonal or sideways to the ball as in poaching. Keep in mind that the racquet is attached to your arm, which in turn is

attached to your body. If your body is moving sideways to intercept a ball, then your racquet is moving sideways as well! If you are still moving sideways as you are making contact, then the volley will become far more difficult due to the fact that your racquet is also moving sideways! Advanced players have learned to judge and adjust to balls, as they are moving sideways. As a result, they don't appear to pause at the point of contact. In reality, they generally do have a relative pause in their motion, usually seen as a very subtle hesitation with their upper body as they make contact while their legs continue to move through the shot.

Some instructors claim that when we pause, the ball will go downward into the net due to the feet stopping but the upper body tending to lean forward due to momentum. I tend to agree with this to a point. If the player pausing at the volley stands upright and is holding an eastern forehand grip, he or she will indeed, tend to bend forward at the waist (**Figure 35**). However, for most players, it is far easier to learn to hit volleys initially by maintaining body control through this pause than to allow the body to continue moving forward unchecked while attempting the volley. Thus, it is important for all players to maintain balance through proper footwork so the pause will be accomplished with minimal forward lean at contact. Also, for all beginners, the pausing action teaches the proper footwork of not "walking through" the volley. Players who don't slow down at the volley usually over rotate and don't remain sideways through the contact point.

The Carioca Step (Figures 36 & 37)

When players are forced to accelerate to the ball with little or no time to pause, the player must incorporate what is called a "carioca" step. This move is accomplished with the back leg actually moving slightly behind the front leg on volleys. This carioca step serves a similar purpose as the off-arm: it helps the player remain sideways. If the player allowed the back leg to swing around as in another running step, the hips would rotate around defeating the goal of remaining sideways.



Figure 36



Figure 37

Figure 36 & 37

As players aggressively move forward to attack a backhand volley, the body must remain sideways. This is difficult to do while running forward. The back leg (left leg for right-handers) wants to swing around for another forward step. If this were to occur, the hips and body would rotate around during the stroke. As we have mentioned, it is imperative for the player to remain sideways for the volley so the racquet can continue towards the target as long as possible. Here, Patrick Rafter and Layton Hewitt have completed their volleys yet are still moving forward. Notice how they both remain sideways here, long after the ball has left the racquet.

The carioca step allows the player to actually continue stepping forward. As the left leg moves in behind the right leg, weight is put on the left leg momentarily while so the body can continue forward without rotating around. This is a critical part of hitting a successful volley while moving forward.



Figure 38: The forehand angle volley. Notice the body turns away from the target. From the ready position, only a slight turn is necessary.

You will want to first learn to volley the ball correctly using the techniques discussed above. Once the volley foundation is built, it is far easier to move to more advanced levels of shot making including using body momentum to move through the shot. You will be rewarded by a greater rate of improvement if you do.

Angle Volleys

Angle volleys are, in my opinion, one of the most enjoyable shots to hit in tennis. When hit during a match, they can be psychologically damaging to your opponents, perhaps more so than a killer overhead or put-away volley. The reason for this is that with an easy overhead or volley, your opponents are expecting the ball to be driven for a winner. Opponents tend to expect to lose the point on these shots. However, when you reach out and hit a low ball for an angle winner, it almost seems to stun your opponent. You can see their jaw drop and shoulders sag when surprised by this shot. It really can take the wind out of the sails of your opponent when done at the right time.



Figure 39: The backhand angle volley. Similar to the forehand, the player turns away from the target and uses the racquet face as a mirror to “reflect” the ball. Absolutely no backswing is used in the angle volley!

The angle volley has some very important component parts to consider. However, perhaps more than any shot, players tend to convolute the angle volley when only the simplest moves are necessary. The first part is for the player to face slightly AWAY from the target. That is, you must turn your shoulders away from the angle in which you are hitting. (See **Figures 38 and 39**) The reason for this is that if you face your target, you will have to take your racquet back further than you need. This larger racquet swing causes a loss in control, both in touch needed and in getting the racket back to the correct angle for the shot. In fact, if you take the basic fundamental volley, you will notice if you just turn your shoulders to the side only a slight amount, the racquet face is angled sharply to the side of your opponent’s court. Making this simple move is all that is necessary in making an angled volley. I like to use the analogy of a beam of light and a mirror when talking about angle volleys. The idea is that the ball in flight towards your racket is the beam of light; your racquet face (plane) is the mirror. (**Figure 40**) Use your racquet strings as a mirror to reflect the beam of light, (the ball) to a desired point on the court. If you were going to reflect a beam of light with a mirror to a given point, you wouldn’t move the mirror once the proper angle had been achieved. This

same principle is how an angle volley in tennis should be approached. Once the racquet is in position to meet the ball, the angle of the racquet not only remains the same prior to contact; it doesn't change during or after contact either. Also, angle volleys should be hit with touch. Some players like to swing at their angle volleys thinking this is more effective. In reality, this is the farthest thing from what you want to do! Hitting angle volleys hard increases the likelihood of hitting the ball too far, causing the ball to go wide. Also, if you hit the ball from a higher angle, such as hitting from a couple feet above the net tape, the harder you hit it will make the ball bounce higher, sometimes giving your opponent more time to run down the volley.



Figure 40: Here, Andre Agassi sets his racquet for an angle volley. No backswing is necessary... "Set and Hold"! Compare this to our model form in **Figure 39**.

As a general rule, angle volleys should not be hit when the ball is hit from a point higher than your shoulders...especially balls that are coming soft from a high trajectory. There are a couple obvious reasons why this is not advantageous. First, balls hit from a higher point on your side of the net will logically bounce higher when they land on your opponent's side of the court. Second, if you get to a high ball near the net, you really should go for the "kill" put-away since it is a relatively sure winner. (Nothing worse than having a sure put-away, only to miss it by trying to hit a "fancy" drop angle shot!)

Another reason you should not hit an angle volley from a slow, high ball that is dropping from a high possible contact point: It is extremely difficult to hit a ball that is falling almost vertically with a racquet that is angled nearly vertical. The timing is very difficult. It is much easier to let the ball drop, (one of those exceptions to the rule!), and hit it from a much lower position allowing the racket to hit more under the ball as you're angling it off to the side of your opponent's court. Generally, if I feel I need to hit an angle shot from this position, I try to make contact with the ball and my racket about level with the top of the net. Here are some reasons I *might* recommend the attempt of letting a ball drop from a high position to this lower point:

- I didn't feel I could move up to the ball with enough time to have a good opportunity for a hard-hit winner
- Opponent(s) are standing way back near the baseline anticipating the smash
- I am intentionally trying to wear my opponent out by having them try to run down a short drop or angled shot.

When to hit the angle volley

Many players don't know when it is a good opportunity to attempt the angle volley. Let me say that it should be used much more in doubles than in singles. The reason for this is that:

- a) You have more court out wide to work with, (doubles alleys);

- b) you have more opportunity to hit from the side of your own court, opening up the possibility of hitting the angle volley with a greater degree of angle;
- c) If the angle volley isn't hit well, in doubles you have a partner to cover the open part of your court.

In singles, you leave yourself vulnerable if your angle shot isn't a winner. In singles, the drop-volley down-the-line is the better shot. It cuts down the amount of open court your drop-shot might leave you if it isn't perfect. I will discuss drop shots later when we talk about strategy.



Figure 41: Notice the relatively similar racquet orientation to the arm and body on both the higher volley and the low ones, seen here in **Figures 41 & 42.**

Drop Volley

The Drop Volley, a volley that is hit to intentionally die close to the net on your opponent's side of the net, is one of the hardest volleys to hit with accuracy and control. The drop volley works on the same principle as a drop shot hit from a ball that has bounced first. The difficulty in hitting the drop volley is creating the right amount of softness and backspin on the shot to get the ball over the net, yet die on your opponent's side of the court. Technically, the drop volley is hit the same way as we have described hitting the volley in this chapter. The only difference is that the ball is hit with a more open racket face and the arm actually gives with the shot, minimizing the force applied to the ball. Practice the shot by opening up the racquet face and hitting the bottom side of the ball at the contact point. Your first few shots undoubtedly will go too high. But as you develop your volley skills, your ability to hit the drop volley will also improve.



Figure 42: Note the racquet head held above the wrist.

Topspin Volley

Decades ago, the topspin volley was seldom, if ever, seen among the pros. What was once considered a low-percentage shot is now used and taught to advanced players of all ages. One of the reasons, I feel, that the topspin volley has evolved over the past 15 or 20 years is the insistence of

players to play and practice only a baseline game. This trend of top players to bang out groundstrokes created, out of necessity, the topspin volley. These players did not spend the time to fashion effective volleys or volley strategies in their game. Hence, when a baseliner was forced to the net, their response was to hit the ball the only way they were comfortable...with topspin! Recently, even players with solid volleys utilize the swinging topspin volley in certain situations.

In reality, the topspin volley is simply a topspin groundstroke taken out of the air before the ball can bounce. The difficulty in producing the shot with reliability is the issue of racquet head control when swinging through a ball that is not necessarily slowing down as much as a ball that has bounced first. This truly is an advanced shot in the sense that the timing of hitting the ball with a full swinging motion is critical. Players who have developed solid topspin groundstrokes can begin to experiment with hitting and practicing this shot. However, those whose groundstrokes are suspect to begin with, will fare much better by hitting the fundamentally sound block or cut volley from anywhere on the court a volley is encountered. I highly recommend all players first develop sound volley skills as described in this chapter, before deciding to experiment with the topspin volley.



Figure 43: Here Patrick Rafter is stuck hitting off the wrong foot. However, notice his shoulders have turned sideways.

The best time to hit the topspin volley is when the ball is higher in the air and somewhat of a floater. This gives a player the needed time to calibrate the swing rhythm and set up for the shot. Certainly, a hard hit ball will create difficulty in timing the swing and contact point to keep the topspin volley in the court. Most players utilize the swinging volley from behind the service line. Usually when players have a high volley inside the service line, the most efficient and effective shot is a normal drive volley to the open court. But, behind the service line, in order to create an offensive volley, a player will want to have more pace than can be generated by a normal block or punch volley. Thus the topspin volley can provide this added power.

Low Volleys

One of the most intimidating volleys, especially for beginners and intermediate players is hitting a low volley out of the air. A combination of factors contributes to this fear. Eastern forehand and backhand grips are notoriously poorly suited for low volleys. The wrist must be cocked at such a difficult angle that most players simply can't negotiate the racquet head open enough to get the ball up over the net. Also, beginners tend to drop their racquet head on low volleys instead of bending the knees. This lazy move creates difficulty in hitting a consistent volley.

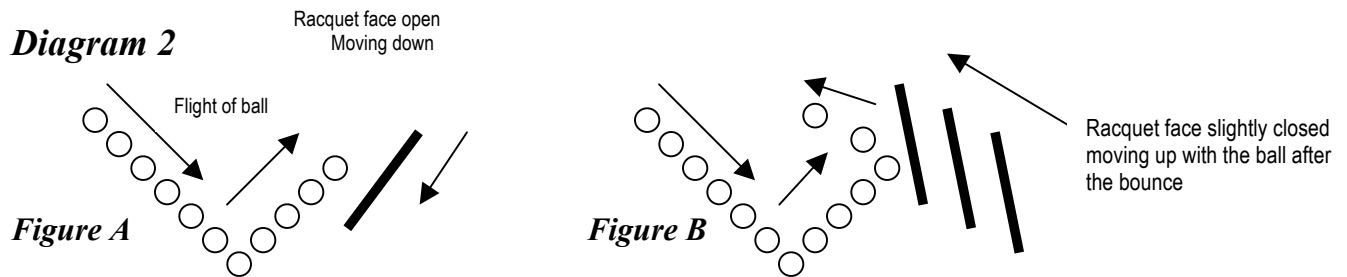
The low volley must be attempted while keeping the racquet head up and the hitting arm straight. This position allows for the leverage of the arm to be utilized while slicing the low volley. If the racquet head drops, the player tends to flick the racquet at the ball in an attempt to get the racquet to lift the ball.

In an effort to maintain this racket formation, the player must bend the knees. There is no substitution for getting low. Players who don't bend their knees tend to bend down at the waist. This will put the player out of balance in addition to putting strain on their back.

Half-Volley

The half-volley is, in my opinion, a misnomer. The actual method of hitting a half-volley correctly more resembles a short, groundstroke-like motion than a correct volley motion. In this light, the half-volley could be named the "half-groundstroke" instead. Regardless of what the shot is named, players must understand the principles of how a correct half-volley should be hit.

The half-volley is a ball that is hit immediately after it bounces, usually near the feet. Because contact is made while the ball is rising quickly from the court, the motion of hitting the ball differs from both the volley and the groundstroke. However, the half-volley takes from both strokes in correct form.



Unless you are able to create more time in hitting the half-volley, (usually by quickly backing up before striking the ball), it is not recommended that the slicing or cutting action of the volley as described in this chapter be used. Because the ball rebounds off the court at an angle almost parallel to the angle of an open racquet face, as used in hitting a normal volley, cutting the ball will usually result in a miss-hit or a pop-up half-volley. (See **Diagram 2**)

As you can see by this diagram, an open racquet face (Figure A) moving downward, moves almost parallel with the path of the ball after it bounces. The racquet held at this angle could produce miss-hit shots. Usually the ball catches either the bottom outer edge or the inside top edge of the racquet depending on the timing. In figure B, the racquet face is closed slightly and moves up as the ball bounces from the court. You can see how the ball will meet the racquet face more square in this pattern of movement. The key to directing the ball with control is to move the racquet up and through the ball with minimal changes in the plane of the racquet. This requires the shot to be hit with a firm wrist and a very short motion. Through practice, players get a feel for the half-volley in terms of how much motion and racquet face angle is needed.

As you can see, the half-volley mimics the volley in the short motion of the stroke. It also mimics the topspin groundstroke in the low-to-high motion of the racket. It is this action of the slightly closed racket face moving up through the half-volley that imparts clean topspin on the ball.

This helps the ball drop quickly on your opponent's side of the court which, in turn, helps keep your opponents from driving the ball down your throat!

High Volleys

The high volley is one of the most difficult volleys to execute cleanly and with consistency. One of the problems most players find is that the higher the volley is in relation to your body, the more the arm tends to swing in an arch. This arch causes the racquet to swing more down on the ball when the ball is hit slightly early or when hit late, the racquet tends to hit the ball too high. This same principle also makes the player hit the ball long when striking the ball late. Because the arm is connected to the shoulder, the arm, along with the racquet acts as an upside down pendulum. Please see **Diagram 3** below.

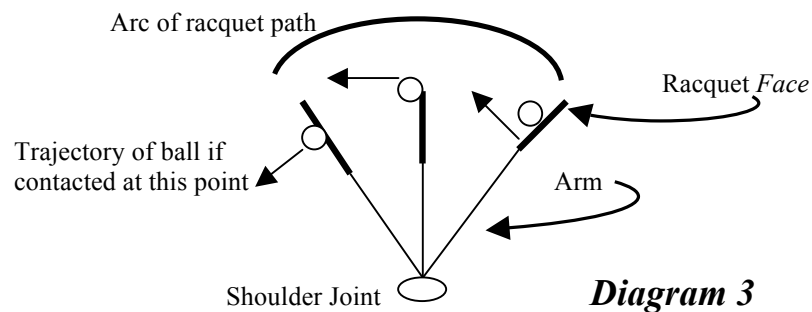
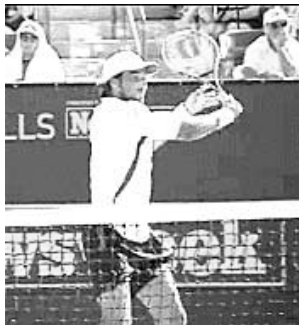


Figure 44: Note Pete Sampras sets his racquet before the ball is hit.

As you can see from Diagram 3, if the arm and racquet move parallel with each other, the contact point and trajectory of the ball changes constantly. We often refer to this movement as a “windmill” swing due to the arm arching around the shoulder like the blades of a windmill. In order to hit your high volleys correctly and accurately, you will need to avoid this common stroke problem.

There are two ways to hit a high volley within the bounds of our Advanced Foundation. You will want to learn both techniques, as there will be times each is applicable in match situations.



Figures: 45, 46, & 47: On this shoulder-high volley, Patrick Rafter starts his racquet back high with a short backswing. Contact point is parallel with the front shoulder with a slight open racquet face. On the follow-through Rafter remains sideways as his racquet clearly slices downward and through the target line.

High Volley Method 1: High Volley hit as a Volley

When presented with a high volley, a conservative approach to hitting the volley is to keep the plane of the racquet the same as long as possible through the contact zone. This requires the racquet to drive through the ball in more of a pushing motion as opposed to a rotational swinging motion as shown in **Diagram 3**.



Figure 48: With a high volley, you will want to resist the temptation to lay the racquet back on the backswing. Instead, set the racquet angle and drive with a firm wrist and arm.

Many advanced players will change their grip to the Eastern forehand or Eastern backhand grips as this does put more hand behind the racquet. Because the pushing motion does require more strength than lower balls due to the higher position of the racquet to the shoulder, these Eastern grips do help provide greater power on higher balls. However, it is imperative that the player makes sure that the racquet still stays slightly open through the volley. Because of the tendency to hit down on higher balls, players inevitably hit more of these shots into the net than they might on lower balls. Also, generally, higher balls that are indeed hit as volleys are usually arching more downward than waist-high or low volleys. (Obviously, if the high volley is not dropping, instead going straight or upward with some velocity, it probably is going out!) Players, who try to hit the ball flat instead of the slight cutting action described in this chapter, will find their shots rebounding off their flat racquet faces at a greater angle down than they usually expect. (Refer to **Diagram 1**) This is why tennis great Arthur Ashe said in his book, *Arthur Ashe on Tennis*, that ALL VOLLEYS, NO MATTER HOW HIGH OR LOW THE BALL IS, SHOULD BE HIT WITH UNDER SPIN. I will add an addendum to this phrase: Unless you intend to intentionally hit a volley with topspin, all volleys should be hit with under spin.



Figure 49: By bending the knees, you can turn a high volley into an overhead.

High Volley Method 2: High Volley hit as an Overhead

If the incoming ball is high enough to be hit at head high or higher, the same technique used to hit an overhead can be incorporated with a more offensive result. **(Figure 49)** If a player intends to hit this shot, there are two very important points to address in addition to the basic overhead technique:

- a. Make sure to bend the knees to make the high volley essentially become an overhead. Players often will swing standing upright, with contact much lower than a traditional overhead's contact. This will result in the player having to lay the racquet face way back to prevent hitting the ball literally down into the ground. Typically, these players will end up hitting the ball way long due to the result of the racquet face being laid back and not being able to release the racquet head through the course of the swing.
- b. Shorten the overhead swing. Due to the fact that high volleys present less time for preparation, players will quickly discover a loss of control when attempting to hit the high volley as a full-speed overhead. It is highly recommended that the player turn sideways just as they would for their regular overhead from a higher lob-type shot. However, during the turn, players should not only get their racquet back quick, it should be taken back in a shorter radius than when hitting the full overhead. The contact of the ball and the follow-through should also be abbreviated to help prevent the player from over rotating and over swinging. Overall, the arm swings very little. The racquet and forearm simply pronate at the ball while keeping the elbow high. Like the serve and overhead, if the elbow drops before contact, the player will have a hard time getting the racquet head ahead of the hand in time to still hit the ball from a high enough point, and still angle the ball down in to the opponent's court.

Hitting the high volley as an overhead requires much greater timing of the stroke and a sense of discipline in not letting the ball drop too far and over swinging. However, the overhead from this position, when hit correctly, is a far more effective shot than simply taking the shot as a volley.

Dead-Ball and Live-Ball Drills

Dead ball drills, also known as 'pro-fed' drills, are drills in which a player or teaching pro hits balls (feeds) to a student, specifically to a position or shot so that the player can work on a specific stroke or shot. The opposite of **dead ball drills** are **'live-ball' drills** that are basically rally-type drills where two or more players rally back and forth. The main difference between the two types of drills is that dead ball drills are controlled shots that are generally 'ideal' shots for the student to return, where live ball drills are only as reliable as the two or more players keeping the ball in play.

The advantage of dead ball drill is that the student is not pressed to react to the more random shots that are usually associated with live ball rallies. The downside to dead ball drills is that they are not 'realistic' in terms of what a player will usually see in real tennis match situations. However, in terms of developing desirable strokes, footwork patterns, grips, and swing patterns, dead ball drills encourage optimal responses. When players have mastered such techniques and skills, the implementation of live ball drills becomes more valuable. If a student has not mastered strokes, the likelihood of the student to change methods (using unproductive—but comfortable methods) to accommodate the shot is very common. Thus, players who try to 'play' tennis too early will usually develop habits that, while productive as a beginner—in terms of getting the ball to go over the net, will result in potentially bad habits...habits that will be difficult to break later on.

In this next section, I will be presenting dead-ball drills that should be fed by a teaching pro or other person.

Angle Volley Drills: Advantages

When starting beginners out with on-court drills, I have found that starting them off by working on angle volleys instead of ‘straight-ahead’ volleys, several productive things occur: First off, the player holding the racquet in the ‘ready position’ only needs to make a small ‘unit turn’ to have the racquet already in position for the angle volley. Hitting down the middle requires either a larger turn or taking the racquet back with the arm to have the racquet angle set to a down the middle shot. Also, learning angle volleys helps players develop an awareness of not only knowing or feeling what angle volleys are, but they learn how this shot is hit as a more effective strategy in many situations. We often see intermediate players with a volley—especially those using the eastern grips—have an opponent way back on the baseline hit their volley right back to these deep players! Angle volleys are especially useful in doubles when you are often faced with one opponent up at the net and the other back behind the baseline. A player with a low volley knows they shouldn’t hit to the net man (unless they want to get killed!), and a deep volley only sets up the back person with a relatively easy shot. Yet, a good angle volley is a winner in most situations. Yet, a player who can only hit deep (or don’t know they can hit angle volleys) is not usually capable of hitting a good angle volley response. Thus, training players from the start with the angle volley helps develop this shot in the process of developing their overall volley technique.



Figure 50: Remember that the angle volley is all about setting the angle of the racquet early, locating the ball, and then simply “reflecting” the ball as if your racquet were a mirror and the ball were a beam of light.

One other advantage to learning the angle volley first is that players don’t feel a need to hit hard since they are only hitting angles. They are less likely to swing and try to add additional force when hitting angle volleys.

“SET and HOLD” Principle

This saying is a terrific key position phrase that helps a player learn to volley well in addition to helping them aim better and better. The concept is that when they make the ‘unit turn’ they will want to SET the racquet faced to the desired target. When they ‘find’ the ball, they only need to block or punch the ball with just a small amount of energy leaving the racquet in the same position as they did when they SET the racquet. After contact, they will want to HOLD this position so they can see if, indeed, the racquet face is still in line with the target. If a player takes the racquet back too far, they will have to ‘swing’ the racquet to attain the desired angle. This usually creates too much racquet-head speed to be able to have the finesse and touch to hit the angle volley with much success. And even when aiming deep, setting the racquet early will allow a player to hit with more force but still with accuracy. HOLDING after contact will tell if your strings are still on line with the target or if you have swung too far past than is necessary. Certainly, if you make contact at the precise moment, a big follow-through isn’t going to have a negative effect on your aim. However, if just past contact your racquet face is tilted or facing a different direction, than a miss-timed hit will not land where you want. If you hit a little early, your shot will land where your racquet is facing at that point in time!

Aiming improves greatly when you employ this SET and HOLD principle as it gives a player a reference point for them to adjust successive shots. If you aim too high, too low, too far left or right, you can SET with an appropriate adjustment and HOLD appropriately and your aim will be better. If your racquet face is changing, especially within the critical contact phase, aiming will be nearly impossible and totally dependent on the timing of all hits; too early, you’re going to pull the ball, and too late you’re going to push the ball. If you swing early and aim appropriately—and in your next stroke the racquet is in a different position, it won’t matter where you aimed! The ball will NOT go where you aimed.

Angle Volley: Backhand

Have a player set up near their alley so you can feed balls that they can hit their backhand volley across the net towards a target near the opposite alley. Start by having the player stand with their racquet in the backhand position, continental grip, and have them identify the angle of their racquet face that will be needed to ‘reflect’ the ball towards that target. The racquet should be held slightly open with the hitting arm’s elbow straight and wrist firm. Have them support the racquet with their opposite hand at the throat of the racquet. For right handed players, they should step across their body with their right foot. They will almost be facing away from their target 180 degrees. (Make sure your student understands the necessary angle of the racquet face to reflect a ball to the sharp angled target. Many kids and adults alike don’t understand this principle and end up swinging the racquet to gain the angle.)

“Reach with your FEET, not with your hands”

This saying is helpful to remember when working any drill, especially volleys. Too many players like to reach out for balls when they are hit out of their ideal hitting location. This footwork—or lack of footwork—sets up several detrimental dynamics: First off, the player will be off balance as their ‘reaching’ for the ball moves their center of gravity outside of their center point of their body. Second, reaching for a ball usually forces improper footwork as it relates to the stance of the stroke. And third, reaching for the ball encourages a player to use a different stroke pattern, usually involving some wrist or other adverse arm movements.

Remind them to SET and HOLD and they will quickly see and feel the angle volley. If they are hitting from one alley to the other, they are hitting a ball that is traveling about 25 feet or so. What is interesting about this is that while they don’t feel like they are hitting the ball hard at all to hit this angle, they are hitting a ball that would land well past the service line if they were hitting balls straight ahead. So, even as you are not emphasizing depth, they are very quickly learning to hit balls with very little effort plenty of length for depth when they decide to change the direction of the volley from the angle to the straight ahead direction!

Angle Volley: Forehand

The forehand angle volley is done in nearly the exact same way as the backhand. The main differences include stepping across the body with the opposite foot. (Left foot for right-handed players), keeping the hitting elbow closer to the body (not necessarily straight like the backhand volley), and not as much body turn needed for the forehand angle volley.

Players will want to instill the SET and HOLD principle as mentioned in the backhand angle volley above, and they will want to learn to keep the racquet head held high and not let the head drop. Turning slightly away from the target from a ready position will set the racquet to the angle volley. No backswing with the arm is needed.

Inside-out Angle Volleys

Hitting an angle forehand volley from the side where you hit the angle backhand volley is an ‘inside-out’ volley. With this ball, the player needs to turn more sideways and set the angle early for this shot. However, because of the relationship to the target, the player has more time to wait for the ball and aim. The inside out volley drill is a great drill to train players to create more time by waiting for the ball to come to their racquet as opposed to reaching out for the ball as so many beginners like to do.

Live Ball Drills

As mentioned, live ball drills emphasis specific shots between two players in a rally situation. The angle volleys drills can and should be practiced in a live ball setting as soon as the player(s) can implement the proper volley technique on command. The goal of live ball drills is to maintain the form you are working on yet move your feet so that the prospect of the volley is hit within the bounds of such form. Too often, we see players get in a rally and due to the position of the balls being hit the desired form is abandoned to accommodate the poor position the player has to the ball. If progressive improvement is to be achieved, players should look to

MISS shots using proper form rather than MAKING shots using undesirable or easier form. It might not be obvious, but players will seldom miss shots completely and this last sentence is not meant to encourage players to intentionally miss. However, it is important to understand that human nature makes players abandon form that is unfamiliar in live ball settings—especially on balls that are not right to the player—and use something that ‘feels’ more comfortable. It is not uncommon to see players swing wildly on shots that are out of reach. There is a ‘human axiom’ that I have seen: The more difficult the shot, the harder a player swats at the ball! It is true! When players are pressed into running or reaching for a difficult shot, they make the shot exponentially more difficult by adding a significant swing to the shot that is proportional to the difficulty of the shot.

It is through training that players learn to resist this urge to swing at the ball. Live ball drills are not the best drills to train players to shorten their swing proportionately to a given shot. Dead ball drills are better at teaching this to students. However, for it the proper response to be mastered, players must apply the right swing size for the right shot in live ball drills.

You don’t have to have a gazillion drills to produce great players. Having a number of drills that provide diversity and challenging aspects for players is the goal. Most drills can be manipulated and varied to provide for many different footwork patterns, shot selections, and feel.

Improvement Concepts

Counting (Cooperative Drilling)

For all levels of players, counting consecutive shots is one of the best tools in developing mental toughness as well as conditioning players. Counting is the actual vocalization of counting consecutive shots players hit when working on a particular drill. For example, when two layers working on a backhand-to-backhand volley crosscourt drill, they count how many in a row they can make without the ball bouncing or being hit in the net or out of reach of the other player.

By counting, players will reach a particular number of consecutive shots. This number becomes the ‘target number.’ By establishing a target number, each subsequent attempt to surpass it establishes a higher level of importance and even a ‘game-like’ intensity for each shot for each player. By counting out loud, both practice partners know exactly how far they are (or how close they are) to reaching the target number. In addition, the ‘word-association’ that develops by counting out loud increases the mind’s ability to stay focused. Such counting increases each player’s ‘mental toughness’ and the ability to stay focused longer.

Here are some of the ways counting helps players create more effectiveness in practice drills:

1. It makes both players focus more acutely on hitting the ball cleanly
2. Aiming is increased as both players work in cooperation to control each shot in keeping the rally going longer
3. When a rally approaches the target number, concentration automatically increases as both players work to surpass their previous best
4. Once the target number is reached, both players often will work harder at seeing just how high they can get their new target number

5. Muscle strength, conditioning, and endurance are all increased, especially for advanced players who can get rallies to last from 50 to 200 or more consecutive hits. The players are 'willed' to continue rallies even when they feel muscle fatigue
6. Mental toughness is dramatically increased as you increase the target numbers.

The results of using counting to increase this aspect of mental toughness can definitely be seen in match play. Players who use this practice tool begin to expect longer rallies and are mentally prepared to hit many more shots. I've had students who have used counting in practice tell me after matches that they were actually disappointed that their opponent couldn't hit more balls in play!

Counting is an excellent practice tool for literally every level of player. Beginners will find it fun and personally rewarding when they can beat their previous best. It doesn't take long for beginners to build up to 15, 20 and 30 shots in a row or more. For advanced players, counting will be quite the test to reach a 'projected' target number. In my college days, my doubles partner and I had to hit 250 in a row on both the forehand to forehand and backhand to backhand volley drill before we went on to work on other parts of our game. A great way to warm up, and a great way to build up those forearms!

Work Weakest Shots First

This is a discipline that players must force themselves to perform: Warm up by hitting your weakest shots first. Many players start warming up with their best shots and they tend to work longer on their first set of drills. By starting on your weakest shots first, you will get the much-needed time required to make those shots not just better, but, perhaps your best shots!

Warm Up with Different Volley Drills

When players step onto the court, I always start every practice session with volleys. Why? Several reasons: First off, volleys are much easier on the arm when a player is cold than hitting full-swinging ground strokes. Second, players hitting volleys can hit many more balls in the same period of time than players warming up with groundstrokes from the baseline. Third, you can vary the volley drill warm-up to include many different elements.

Another aspect to warming up with volleys first is that you can get up to 6 players on each side of the net hitting most of these volley drills. So, on each court you can have twelve players warming up. That equates to a lot of hitting by a lot of players on very few courts!

Group Volley Drills

In addition to "Toss and Block" drills, there are a number of volley drills that can be done with as many as twelve players on one court. While having a crowd of players at the net doing live ball drills can involve some getting in the way of each other, I have found that having such numbers also helps players focus on directional control better than if they were the only ones on the court hitting to a particular target. The reason for this is that it is much more embarrassing to hit balls that get in the way of others on the court than it is to simply miss a target. Players are far more conscientious about controlling their shots as well as using more compact and controlled stroke patterns. Nonetheless, you will want to keep an eye on players who are hitting without this control as well as remind all players to stay within a controlled framework of hitting.

While I have seen a large number of drills out there, these are what I have found to be the most productive, fun, and improvement-specific drills I have used. You will find other drills, I'm

sure, that you will like as well. But, these drills are well proven and really are plenty for you to mix up your volley practice and yet get the most improvement out of your players.

The following are my favorite live ball drills that usually can be done by productively by beginners (once they have mastered the stroke techniques) as well as advanced players.

1. **Alternation Volley Drill:** This is where each player is hitting to the opposite side of their partner on each hit. That is, if I'm volleying with a partner and I volley to their forehand first, I will try to hit to their backhand on the next shot, and so on. This is a great drill that teaches control. Make sure that the players alternate the sequence because in this drill one player is hitting more straight ahead, where the other player is hitting the ball on a crosscourt-type angle.

The following are various drills to use with the alternation principle:

- a. **Close in Volley Drill:** This alternation drill has the partners very close to the net and hitting the ball so it almost 'crawls' over the net as the players are right in front of each other.
- b. **Deeper, crisper Alternation Drill:** Moving several steps back, players work on hitting crisp volleys net level, alternating forehand and backhands. Again, this drill has the players facing head-to-head hitting within an area right in front of them. (As opposed to a crosscourt drill which I will cover next.)
- c. **Crosscourt Alternation Drill:** This is the same alternating aim but focused on hitting crosscourt instead of right in front of each other. Both the above mentioned drills can be done as a crosscourt.

Note: The crosscourt drill can be done in half-courts, that is, you can have four players on each side of the net hitting crosscourt to partners on the opposite side of the net diagonal across one service box. You can always have just two players on each side using the full court in hitting crosscourt too...but, if you have a lot of players, you can accomplish the same drill with twice as many players on a court.

2. **Let It Drop Drill:** This drill is where you have players very close to the net and have them hit a volley straight up and over the net and each player actually lets the ball drop nearly touching the ground (but NOT letting the ball bounce), and learn to get very low to hit the ball back up and over in this same straight up manner.

This drill helps players learn to get low for low volleys, helps them develop touch and feel, and gets them to get their hitting hand down level with the racquet head. (If they don't do this, they won't be able to get the ball up and over the net standing this close.) This is also an excellent conditioning drill as after only a couple minutes, players really feel it in their quads and calf muscles.

3. **Drop, Drop, Clear, Clear:** This is an old badminton drill I used when I coached the sport in Arizona. (As a former nationally competitive badminton player when I was very young, I learned very early on the value of badminton in developing touch, angles, finesse, and racquet head control. When I first started playing tennis, my volleys, overheads, and drop shots were already very far advanced due to my badminton experiences.

This drill, *Drop, Drop, Clear, Clear*, develops great touch, footwork and feel of the racquet. The drill is done without letting the ball bounce. The drill is exactly as the name suggests: the first person hits a drop shot (standing close to the net), the other player hits a drop shot (without bouncing the ball), back; the next shot is just a short lob, (“clear” in badminton terminology), and the partner hits a lob off this first lob too. Then the sequence repeats with the person hitting a drop shot off this second lob and then the other person hits a drop shot, and so on.

NOTE: When hitting a drop shot off a short lob, it is best to let the ball drop down to waist level. Too many players will try to volley this high ball from a high position, which not only is not the best place to hit a volley from (since hitting a volley from a high position will only produce a ball that bounces higher), but it is also very difficult to hit a ball at head or shoulder level down lower over the net for the drop shot. The drill can create tremendous movement in players who do the drill correctly.

4. **Hit, Catch, toss and Hit:** This drill is a more advanced drill for players who can ‘catch’ a ball on the strings of their racquet. The idea is to hit a soft volley to a partner who ‘catches’ it on their strings. Then, this player hits it up softly to himself before hitting it over to his partner. His partner catches it, hits it up to himself, and returns the soft volley. Players can try and see who can hit and catch the most balls before dropping or missing the volley.

Note: A fun game is to have each player step back one step after hitting the ball back to their partner...so that each pair of players gets further apart. The point of this is that it teaches players to hit the right distance—yet soft enough to help their partner still be able to catch the ball on their strings.

5. **Mini-Me:** Great drill for developing soft hands and finesse along with great racquet head control. The idea is that a player hits a soft volley to his partner who volleys the ball up to himself before hitting it over the net back to his hitting partner who also hits it up to himself before volleying the ball back. This is continued between the two players. (This game was first taught to me by Greg Patton, the incredible tennis coach at Boise State University.)

Note: You can have players hit the ball to the same shot that came to them. (For example, if the ball comes to my forehand, I bunt it up to my forehand and hit it back with that forehand.) Or, you can do ‘**alternate Mini-Me**,’ where you bunt the ball to your opposite side before you hit it back. (That is, if the ball comes to your forehand side, you bunt it over to your backhand side then hit it over.) This alternate Mini-Me is a bit tougher but players get it fairly quickly.

6. **Closing-In Volleys:** Have players start on the service line and hit volleys as they continue to move towards the net. A fun element of this is to try to get the players to get so close that they can trap the ball between their racquets! You can do this down the line or crosscourt as described in the earlier drills.
7. **Backing-up Volleys:** Even as we stress moving forward, this drill can help players learn to control balls along with balanced footwork. Here, players volley the ball moving back step by step, after each hit. (The opposite of the previous “Closing-in” drill above.)
8. **Movement Cooperative Drills:** Start players at one net post facing each other. The goal is to volley the ball back and forth while moving across the net towards the other net post. You can vary this drill by making it either a ‘forehand to forehand only’ drill, ‘backhand to backhand only,’ or ‘alternation’ drill. I like to have players move all the way across two or more courts if your courts are lined up. Then have them sprint back to the start. I also like to have players mix up partners when applicable, depending on the depth of your groups of players.
9. **Volley-Overhead-Volley Drill:** This is a more advanced drill where a player will feed a very short lob and the partner hits a soft overhead to his partner who is still at the net. This player tries to block the overhead back with a controlled volley. The person who just hit the overhead then feeds this blocked ball with a short lob to his partner who proceeds to hit the soft overhead at him. As players advance, the overheads can become a little more firm...but, with the caution that you don’t want to have players over-hit any overhead with no control. (Also, I would not have more than three players on each side of the net doing this drill simply because it is harder to control these balls and you won’t want a player being hit by another player who is not their partner!)
10. **Team Volley Drills:** With a group of players, especially a large group, this drill keeps a large group active with movement when working with volleys. Team up to four or five players on one side of the net in a single file line. Opposite them is an equal number of players of near-equal ability in another single file line on the other side of the net. The drill is to volley one ball to the opposite group and then quickly get out of the way and go to the back of your own line. The goal between the two groups is to keep one ball going back and forth a specific number of times. You can have three groups on each side of the net doing straight-ahead volleys. Or, you can have two groups on each side hitting crosscourt rallies.

Depending on the ability of each group, you can set goals of 10, 25, 50 or even 100 consecutive volleys between two groups. You can also have each group do severe angle volleys and two groups in the middle do straight ahead volleys and each person rotate to the back of not their own line but to the back of the line next to them with the last line rotating around to the first line on the other side of the net. This is a great way to keep everyone moving and still concentrating on keeping the ball(s) in play.

Conclusion

As you can see, there are many variations and methods in which you can teach and practice proper volley mechanics within the Advanced Foundation. One thing to remember: while players will be tempted to change their grip on the volley (consciously or otherwise!), you will want to keep a close eye on all your student's practice habits. It doesn't take long to master the proper volley technique...and it doesn't take much to sabotage this goal. A player who unwittingly let's their grip migrate to a more comfortable grip for any give volley basically gives themselves an unconscious "OK" to do so, making the Mastery of the proper grip that much more difficult.

When you educate your students in the reasoning for proper grip and stroke patterns, in addition to their understanding that they will become skilled volley players in time with proper patterns, they will be much more diligent and mindful of the very patterns you are teaching.

