

Tennis lessons

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Return of serve

I would like to focus this lesson on return of serve for doubles. The three areas I will cover are:

1. Returning serve when your opponent stays back
2. Returning serve when your opponent charges the net
3. The mind-set you should adopt when returning serve

Since the mind-set is so important let's begin there. Whether your opponent serves and stays back or serves and runs to the net the mindset is the same. In both cases do not try to play in what I call the hit winners mindset (you know everything you hit has to win the point). Instead, adopt a consistent mindset. **Think in terms of getting the ball back and neutralizing your opponents serve.** Most players do too much with the ball and make entirely too many unforced errors. This is due to faulty thinking. They're putting too much pressure on themselves to win the point off the return of serve. Do not fall prey to this temptation.

Okay, here's what you can do to make it more difficult on the server. If your opponent serves and stays back you must master **a deep cross court return of serve.** The key here is depth. **You must keep your opponent from coming up to the net by hitting a deep cross court return of serve.** Depth makes your opponent stay back and at the same time gives you more time to react to the next shot. Hitting deep tilts the percentages in your favor. You're attempting to create pressure, not win the point outright.

Now, if your opponent is serving and **running to the net you must also hit the ball cross court** but, this time you should keep **the ball low at their feet.** This will make your opponent hit up at the ball and possibly give you a pop up, which you then can put away. Remember, you are trying to create pressure, not hit a winner!

To summarize, **when your opponent serves and stays back, you should return cross court and deep. When your opponent serves and runs to the net, you should return cross court and low at their feet.** And finally in both cases make sure you stay in the consistent mindset and not the hit-winners mindset.

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Direction Reaction

There are three techniques that can increase your speed in tennis. The Vision Straddle, the Split Step, and the Direction Reaction. I would like to tackle the Direction Reaction one more time. The Direction Reaction is exactly what it sounds like. **You react according to the direction of the ball off of your opponents racket.** Remember the ball has a direction before it has a destination. **Your mind should be thinking about the direction first and the destination second.** Unfortunately, most players think of the destination first. This causes a slight hesitation before they move to the ball. This is the reason why when I'm working on this drill and I tell players to go after the ball they look over at me and say, why should I, that ball was going out. I quickly point out, if you know the ball is going out you waited way too long to react to the ball.

Let's see if I can illustrate this better. Will you agree when the ball is a foot or so off of your opponents strings a certain set of conditions exist that are different than when the ball is 5 or 10 feet off of your opponents strings? I hope your answer is yes.

When the ball is a foot or so off your opponents strings no one knows for sure if the ball is going to be in or out. When the ball is 5 or 10 feet off the strings players can begin to tell if a ball is going in or not. When it gets 15 to 20 feet off the strings your chances of figuring whether a ball is in or out increases dramatically. The conditions change the farther the ball is off your opponents strings. When you tell me you knew that ball was going out, you've waited 15 or 20 feet off your opponents strings before you began reacting to the ball!

The art of the Direction Reaction is to react when the ball is a foot or so off your opponents strings and begin moving immediately. No one knows, including the Pros, exactly where the ball is going. **You react first, then analyze if the ball is going in or out.** The next time you're practicing give it a try! Move according to

the direction of the ball off your opponents strings. Do not wait until you know for sure if the ball is in or out.

If you would like to get a jump on the ball the Direction Reaction Technique will do wonders for your game. The Direction Reaction Technique is your ability to react to the direction of the ball from your opponents racket. Keep in mind you do not know exactly where the ball is going you just see a direction and go! The ball could be going upward, to the left, to the right, etc. Here are two things that may come as a shock to you.

1. Even the pros do not know the exact destination of the ball.
2. However, **most people can quickly read the direction of the ball from their opponents racket.**

That's right the pros do not know the exact destination of the ball, they only have a general idea of the direction and they are off running. **They analyze the exact destination of the ball while on the run. From practice this is all done quickly and instinctively.**

Unfortunately most players have conditioned themselves to stand still and analyze exactly where the ball is going first, then decide to run. They have unknowingly reversed the process! You must practice reading and reacting to the direction of the ball from your opponents racket immediately. Not sure you can do this? I disagree! As stated above most people can quickly read the direction of the ball from their opponents racket. The problem is, you read the ball fast, but you have not conditioned the body to react to that information. You have the DIRECTION part of the Direction Reaction Technique, but there is a breakdown in the REACTION part of the Direction Reaction Technique.

How do I know you read the direction fast? Simple, every time your opponent hits the ball watch what your eyes and head do. Your eyes and head will immediately follow the path of the ball. I have seen this phenomenon over and over again when watching my students cover a lob. I will usually yell, go, go after the ball! They look at me and say, "I never knew that it was going to be a lob!" I look at them and say, "then why did your head immediately follow the ball upward right over your head? Think about that, **they are looking up at a ball saying, " I don't know where the ball is going."**

Yes, you definitely **read the ball from your opponents racket much faster than you think.** The key to improving your speed is to practice following your head like the pros. If the ball is hit to the right and your head moves that way, make sure your body is moving with your head. If the ball is hit to the left and your head moves that way, make sure your body is moving with your head. Whatever way your head moves **make sure your body moves with your head.** If while moving after the ball, you see the ball going out, then you can stop. **The Direction Reaction is designed to make you react to the direction of the ball exactly the way your head and eyes do.** Test yourself the next time you play to see if your head is moving, but your body is staying in one spot.

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Run up to the net

In this lesson I will cover a scenario that occurs often. **In doubles when you lob over someone's head and they're running it down you should advance to the net.** Why? Well, remember they're running down a lob. Your opponents are in trouble! You should run up to the net and create extra pressure on them to make a good shot. Most players are so mesmerized by the good lob they hit they just stand there and watch it...never closing in on the net!

Most players will not run up after a good lob because they're afraid their opponent will lob over their head. Do not be guilty of either one of these infractions. First, learn to move into the correct position after hitting the lob over your opponents head. Stop standing there watching the magnificence of your last shot. Besides, **you can still watch where your ball is going as you're advancing to the net. You can move and see at the same time!** You do this all the time when you're driving a car....It may take a little practice, but it will pay huge dividends in the long run. Practice moving into position as you're watching your shot go over your opponents head.

Second, Do not think because you advance to the net behind a good lob that your opponent will lob back

over your head. Instead, **think they're going to hit a short lob. Thinking this way is offensive and positive minded.** Although some of the return lobs may go over your head, if you stick with it, you will get your share of high short lobs to put away. With this mind-set you are making your opponent hit good shots in order to beat you. Always challenge your opponent to make those difficult shots under pressure.

Now, if you are going to attempt to run to the net once you lob over your opponents head, here's one piece of advice you should remember. **Make sure the lob you hit first bounces behind your opponent before you begin running to the net.** Too many players begin running up when they think they've hit the ball over their opponents head only to find out they were wrong and **ended up running into a powerful overhead hit right at them.** Remember, you have plenty of time, so make sure the ball bounces behind your opponent before you run forward.

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Think about aiming

How would you like to be able to aim your shots and have the ball go where you're aiming! We'll, I have the solution! It's not a quick fix solution, but a solution that can probably cut your learning time in half. It's the missing link! O.K. here it is, this may shock you so you may want to sit down. **If you want to aim your shot better you're going to have to think about aiming it!** You may be thinking...that's it! Yep, that's it! Do you know how many players do not think about aiming their shot, but just hit the ball with the hope that it will go somewhere over the net. As one of my players once retorted when I questioned her if she was aiming the ball or not. She said "I am aiming it. I want the ball to go...that way!" As she pointed somewhere over the net.

Now, if you're a C player this is not a bad idea, but if you're a B3 player or higher you need to begin practicing thinking about aiming your shot. Notice I said practice thinking. The key here is thinking. During practice you must begin practicing the correct thought process of aiming the ball. **Each time you're about to hit a ball think about where you want to aim it.** At first this will feel awkward because you're not used to it, **but with repetition thinking where you want to aim the ball will become very natural.** In fact, eventually **if you do enough repetition the correct thought will pop into your mind automatically.** This brings me to the pop principle.

The pop principle is something I use extensively in my teaching methods. It goes like this. If you repeat a thought (like aiming a ball) enough times over and over again for weeks and months, eventually that thought will automatically pop into your mind at the right time. To learn a physical skill you must repeat that skill over and over again. Well, the same is true for the thinking. You must repeat a thought over and over again until you learn it.

The next time you're practicing try some repetition of thought. Begin by thinking about where you're going to aim your shot. Do this enough times and presto someday it will amaze you by popping into your mind all by itself. The pop principle works...use it!

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Take the net

In doubles there are three ways you can take the net. Number one, you can serve and run to the net. This is called serve and volley and is definitely the most difficult of the three. **Number two, you can return serve and run to the net.** This is the one I try to teach my students to do the most. **And third, you can serve or return serve, rally for a while, wait for a short ball than hit what's called an approach shot and come up to the net.**

Now, let's show you what each method has in common. The serve and volley is the most difficult, but one of the keys is to hit the first volley without going for a winner. After you have served and you're running up to the net the first volley you hit should be used as a vehicle to get you to the net, not as an opportunity to win the point outright. The second way to take the net, return serve and run in, should eventually be used on all slow second serves. Why not, it's a perfect ball to come in on. Again, **do not try to hit a winner, instead go for a medium pace, deep approach shot keeping your opponent back as you advance forward.**

The third way, serve or return serve, rally, wait for a short ball then come in, should also be with the same mind-set. Hit the short ball deep and come into the net. Again, you're not trying to hit a winner.

Here's the point. Notice the similarities with all three. **You are not going for winners, but setting yourself up for the win.** Most people are in **a hit winners mind-set all the time and take most of these shots and hit the back fence.** Take for instance the slow second serve. I know if you're the person returning serve you think, this is it, I'm going to wallop this slow ball home for a winner. And you do, about four miles down the road where you live. Mission accomplished! You knocked it home!

The next time you're playing take one of these shots, let's say the return of second serve. **Hit it without going for a winner and advance to the net.** Stay ready for a return and you'll be surprised how many times you'll have an opportunity to then win the point! This is a simple strategy, but you'll be surprised how this strategy eludes most people.

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Winners do not mean power

On this lesson let's go over a major misconception in tennis and what the solution is to that misconception. **Most players incorrectly pair winners with power!** This is a misconception that gets a lot of players into trouble...winners do not mean power! **It simply means hitting a shot that is not returnable!** You could hit 10 miles an hour or 100 miles an hour, **if the ball is hit for an angle and no one returns it, it's a winner!**

Why is this important to understand? Because **most players overplay their winners!** That's one of the main reasons players lose control of their put-a-ways! For some reason when they finally have the right opportunity to win the point they abandon control and go with power! This is a key, so let me repeat it again. **They abandon control and go with power!** This makes them tighten up their muscles, lose their visual focus, and yes, sometimes even hold their breath!!! Somehow from holding their breath they think they're going to gain control of the situation! They don't, and the ball usually goes anywhere, but where they're aiming! By the way, **power is achieved by timing and rhythm, not by tightening up your muscles and trying to hit hard!** Every player has done this and probably does not know the main reason why. The main reason is you're confusing winners with power!

Now, it's all right to hit a winner with power, but you must maintain control when you do. When most players hit with power they inevitably go out side of their control range! Therefore, the solution to this problem is to tone it down a notch. **The next opportunity you have to hit a winner, take your time and slow it down a little! Think about placing it for a winner, not pulverizing it for a winner!!!** The interesting thing is when you think like this, you relax your body and as a result wind up hitting the ball pretty hard anyway! But, the power will come correctly from timing and rhythm!

In this situation, just like many other situations in life..... less is more!!! The next time you're playing, give it a try. It may take you a while to acquire a feel for this technique, but you'll be one up on your competition! Remember, they'll still be thinking winners means power!

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Improved concentration

Repetition oriented thinking vs. Technically oriented thinking, we are not through yet! Last lesson I gave you one reason why Repetition oriented thinking is superior to Technically oriented thinking. When you are Repetition oriented the emphasis is on YOU doing something not relying on the technical to do it for you. It's subtle, but the difference in thinking exists big time in match play. Remember, the Repetition oriented thinker relies on himself for the win rather than relying on the technical to be right to win!

Can you not be technically sound according to the "so called" traditional way illustrated in hundreds of books and still win? Yes, of course, the pro's do it all the time. It's called mental toughness. The big advantage of Repetition oriented thinking is that it has mental toughness built right into it!!! Besides being oriented toward YOU taking the responsibility for your play, there are four other dynamic benefits that Repetition offers. Let me briefly cover them here.

Number one would be improved concentration. Obviously, if you can withstand a lot of Repetition your concentration will improve. And how about this, do you know what the key to concentration is? The key is self-discipline! One more time we are back to YOU! Your concentration improves because YOU keep concentrating even when it gets boring. It's up to YOU!

Number two is learning to deal with the good and bad cycles that exist when you do a lot of Repetition. For a while you are doing well, than five minutes later you're doing poorly. This is true also in match play, therefore, **Repetition can teach you how to deal with the ups and downs of a match.** I don't care if you are number one in the world, the good and bad cycles always exist. It's important to understand ahead of time that these cycles will occur and not be frustrated by them.

Number three is learning to deal properly with the bad times that Repetition produces. All matches have times when you are playing poorly. **Repetition teaches you how to deal with these times by not making many changes, but instead staying with what you are doing and concentrating on improving your timing and rhythm.** I have seen this over and over again in sports (even on a professional level). The athlete has trouble and starts changing everything under the sun. For weeks they try to come out of their slump by correcting every technical thing possible. Eventually, out of frustration they give up and just start going for their shots. To their amazement they come out of their slump! What occurred was simple, they stopped over-thinking and their timing and rhythm clicked back in. Do not over-think during your bad times!!! It's more about timing and rhythm than anything else.

And finally number four - from Repetition you learn not to tense up and "make it happen," but to relax and "let it happen," a key element in high level match play! When you do a lot of repetition you quickly learn that tensing up only makes it worse. You must learn in your matches to "let it happen" not "make it happen." Repetition can teach you this principle! Let's summarize and list the five dynamics of repetition.

- 1) Repetition Orientation relies on YOU not the technical.
- 2) Teaches you improved concentration through self-discipline.
- 3) Teaches you to understand there will always be good and bad cycles in a match.
- 4) Teaches you to handle your bad times without making major changes.
- 5) Teaches you to not "make it happen" in matches, but master the art of "letting it happen."

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An approach shot

What is an approach shot, and what should you know about it? **An approach shot is the shot you hit that will bring you to the net.** An illustration of this would be playing singles and rallying from the baseline waiting for a short ball. When you get a short ball you hit an approach shot and move up to the net. The same thing is true for doubles if you play back on the baseline. When you receive a short ball, and at least one opponent is on the baseline, you can hit an approach shot and come up to the net.

There are three major mistakes that most players make when hitting approach shots. **First, they go for too much. Most players see a short ball (especially if it is slow) and think this is it, I'm going for it. Usually they knock it out or into the net.** Their mindset is one of trying to win the point (there's that hit winners mindset again!) instead of hitting an approach shot and looking for a volley or overhead to win the point. **When hitting an approach shot your mindset should be to set yourself up for the win, not win the point outright.** What you're thinking when hitting the approach shot is crucial for long term match play. The key is, stop trying to go for too much!

The second major mistake is trying to stand still when hitting approach shots. Forget it! This is not the way to make a fluent transition from the baseline to the net, and in reality **if you put on the brakes to hit an approach shot, you will affect your timing and rhythm.** The pros do not do it this way and neither should you. On the surface it seems to make sense, because if you're still, you're balanced, but tennis is a moving game and you should learn to be balanced while on the move. Just like learning to ride a bicycle or learning to walk, you practice until your balance improves. Standing still and hitting any tennis shot is a myth and is not based on true application. The next time you're playing, **give yourself the**

freedom to hit your approach shot on the move and enjoy the ride!

The third major mistake is not hitting deep enough. If you hit the approach shot deep the ball will stay in the air longer and give you more time to reach your net position. Also, if your ball stays in the air longer to reach your opponent, this means it will stay in the air longer to get back to you, and as a result give you more time to react to the ball. Obviously, this means you will not be rushed when hitting your shots. **Short approach shots, less reaction time - deep approach shots, more reaction time....it's a no brainer!**

In summary, the three major problems players have when hitting approach shots are:

1. Going for too much.
2. Trying to stand still when hitting.
3. Not hitting their approach shot deep.

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Let go

Give yourself the freedom to go for your shots and if you miss...accept it! Easy enough to say, but to accomplish this sometimes can be mind boggling!!! I have a challenge for everyone. A challenge that helped me reach the next level in my tennis game. Here it is.

In your next three matches give yourself the freedom to go for your shots, whether you win, lose, or draw. By going for your shots, I do not mean blasting the ball all over the court. You can be hitting a slow drop shot and still be going for your shot. It's more a matter of what you think. Going for your shots is merely the absence of being tentative. You mentally let go. To mentally "let go" you must be willing to accept the mistakes and failures that come with this mental attitude. **When you "let go" a percentage of your shots will go in and a percentage will miss. You must accept this as your level of play.** This is one of the keys to accomplishing this challenge. You can not think to yourself, I could have played better if I would have played my old way.

I have told many players to do this in some of their fun matches, but they always come back and say "I did let go, but only for half of the time." I have often said it's easier to play on a higher level, than on a lower level. Why? Simple, pros only know one way to play...they go for it! If they did not go for it, they would lose. As a result, there is no indecisiveness when they play. When there is no indecisiveness there is less mental confusion. They make one decision (even if they miss) and that one decision is to "give themselves the freedom to go for their shots and if they miss, accept it." Nike had it right "just do it!"

What I remember the most about finally "letting go" was the sense of freedom that came with it. I stopped worrying about winning or losing and just played. I was just on "go," win, lose or draw. The amazing thing to me was how well I eventually started playing. To me it was a secret that catapulted my game up a notch or two. It was fun! You can do the same. Start by just "letting go" for three matches. You will experience something you never have before. One word of caution though. Do not go on the court thinking to yourself, yes I'm going for it! Then, the first shot you miss you say, well I tried that, back to my comfort zone! See if this year you can step out of your comfort zone and into the Mental Toughness Zone by "giving yourself the freedom to go for your shots and if you miss, accept it!"

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Keep your eye on the ball!

In this lesson I would like to give you two simple myths of tennis. **First, keeping your eye on the ball does not make you to hit the sweet spot of your racket.** Many times when players miss hit you hear them say, "keep your eye on the ball." Sounds logical, but **it is not true! It is your JUDGMENT that helps you hit the sweet spot of your racket, not keeping your eye on the ball.** When your judgment improves you do not even have to follow the ball right into the strings. How do you think a pro hits the ball from behind his back. He never sees the ball hit the strings, but he hits the sweet spot anyway. It's

judgment! Stop thinking that keeping your eye on the ball will make you hit the sweet spot of your racket. It will not! At best keeping your eye on the ball gives your brain information about the flight of the ball and eventually, with time, your judgment will improve. Over time (repetition) when your judgment improves you will be able to follow the ball with your eyes automatically. The better your judgment is the easier it will be to keep your eye on the ball!

Second, when the grip turns in your hand you think you did not hold on tight enough. As a result, the next time the ball comes to you, you squeeze tighter to make sure this does not happen again. **Squeezing tighter is not the answer.** The true answer is you did not hit the sweet spot of your racket! **You hit off center which causes tremendous pressure and makes the racket turn in your hand.** I have always felt that this was **one of the reasons players develop tennis elbow.** They simply are squeezing the racket too tightly! Holding tighter is not necessary. When you hit the sweet spot there is no pressure for the racket to turn. How do you hit the sweet spot of your racket? Simple, keep your eye on the ball....only kidding! Again, the answer is improve your judgment by learning from the greatest teacher of all - **REPETITION! If your judgment improves you will hit the sweet spot more often. Hitting the center of the strings is a natural result of improved judgment.**

The interesting thing about hitting the sweet spot of your racket is that no one can tell you anything that will speed up the learning process. The only answer is seeing a lot of tennis balls go over the net. This is very similar to the way we learned how to walk. **Repetition was the great teacher.** If you really would like to learn how to hit the center of your strings and improve your ability to watch the ball **simply play more tennis or practice on a ball machine.** The more times you see the ball go over the net the faster your judgment will improve. Remember, the key here is judgment.

In summary, stop thinking every time you miss hit that you have not kept your eye on the ball and every time your grip turns in your hand that you did not hold on tight enough. The solution to both of these problems is improving your judgment. I challenge you to not say or think a thing the next time you miss hit or your grip turns in your hand. Test yourself when you are on the court and see what automatically pops into your mind when you miss hit or lose your grip. Then remind yourself of this tennis lesson, forget whatever you were thinking and move on!

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Mental toughness

Mental toughness is the accumulation of valuable information to be utilized at the proper time. Most people think mental toughness is perseverance, self-determination, self-confidence, etc. Although all of these are part of mental toughness the true veteran realizes it is the information he accumulates and uses at the proper time that is true mental toughness. This knowledge, in turn, helps him to be confident, stay determined, and persevere. One situation that requires mental toughness, oddly enough, is when you are on the verge of winning. **Often players come to me confused and baffled after being up 5-1 in a set, then losing!** Here is some information that will help.

First, you are not alone, this also happens to pros. Second, a certain percentage of the time it is not because you did anything wrong, **but because your opponent started doing something right.** Third, the rest of the time here's what usually happens. You advance to 5-1 playing and thinking a certain way, then unknowingly you change your thinking. Instead of mentally playing to win, you start playing not to lose. In other words, you protect your lead. **You should have continued playing the way that advanced you to 5-1 in the first place.** Your game changes because your thinking changes! **You must continue to mentally play to win instead of playing not to lose.**

As far as your opponents are concerned they are loose as a goose. There is no pressure! They figure they are going to lose anyway so what is the difference. Couple these two scenarios together and the team that is winning 5-1 has a prescription for possible disaster. The next time you are in this situation remind yourself to mentally keep playing to win. **Do not try to protect your lead.** You may want to mentally try and play more aggressive. In short...go for the Gold!

One last thing. You should never forget this principle. On the verge of victory players are vulnerable to defeat. Use this when the tables are turned and your opponents have you down 1-5. They also will try to

protect their lead by playing not to lose. This makes them a little vulnerable, which may give you an opportunity to get back in the match! **Instead of thinking you are down 1-5, I will never win. Use it as an opportunity to not only get back in the match, but if you pull off a comeback you could demoralize your opponents.** What you think could be the difference between victory or defeat. Remember, mental toughness is the accumulation of valuable information to be utilized at the proper time. When you are up 5-1 you think one way and when you are down 1-5 you think another.

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Consistency

The key to tennis without a doubt is consistency. Whether you are hitting the ball right to your opponent or going for a winner, you must be consistent. **Physical consistency requires mental consistency.** What is the key to mental consistency? **It's concentration!** The ability to stay focused on what you are doing for long periods of time. Whether it is playing a match or practicing, the more you are capable of staying focused, the more consistent you will become. You may be thinking, "Okay, I will buy that, concentration is the key to consistency. So, where do I get this concentration thing from? Can I purchase a pill some place?" No, but if you ever find one let me know.

The truth is **the key to concentration is self-discipline.** Wow! This is really beginning to hit home. You are responsible through self-discipline to improve your concentration, which in turn improves your consistency. This means you should not only concentrate when things are going well, but also when you are losing, having trouble, or even when you are tired. Many times during practice I have heard players say. "I'm tired, I can't concentrate anymore, it's time to stop." In other words, what they are really saying is, it was the tiredness that made them stop concentrating. It is not their fault! This is where self-discipline comes into play. **You discipline yourself to keep concentrating even though you are a little tired and playing poorly.** By doing this you are challenging yourself to reach a new level of concentration. When your concentration improves so will your consistency.

Too many times players look for something external, like an exciting situation, or playing well to help them concentrate, instead of relying on their own internal decision making process. If you would like to increase your consistency in tennis you must be self-disciplined and concentrate regardless of the situation.

To summarize, **the key to tennis is consistency - the key to consistency is concentration - the key to concentration is self-discipline - the key to self-discipline is YOU** - and the key to YOU is...I haven't the faintest idea!!!

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Plan "A"

Over the years I have seen many players complicate the game of doubles. As a result, I have designed a basic doubles plan and labeled it Plan "A". It is amazing how many good players violate the simple principles in Plan "A". Mainly because players do not keep track of where the ball they hit is going. Most players just hit the most comfortable and best shot they have in their repertoire, regardless of whether it was the correct shot or not. Let's see if Plan "A" can help you become more aware of where your ball is being hit.

Use Plan "A" when you are up at the net by yourself or preferably with your partner. **Plan "A" dictates that you hit all low balls and all high short balls** (a high short ball is a high ball in front of the service line) **to a specific spot on the court.** When you are up at the net your opponents can be positioned in three different formations.

Formation 1. One up, one back

Formation 2. Both back

Formation 3. Both up

In this lesson we will only discuss the formation that occurs the most, **formation 1**. **When your opponents are in a one up, one back formation you should hit high short balls to the net persons feet or somewhere on their side**. You could also angle or hit to the middle, but at first you should keep it simple and hit to the net persons feet. It still amazes me to see how many players hit the high short ball to the player on the baseline. They finally get the opportunity to win the point and they choose to hit the ball to the person on the baseline. Who in turn lobs over their head! Never give your opponent more chances than necessary to lob over your head. When you are hit a high short ball, go for it! If you miss, it does not matter, you were hitting the right shot at the right time. All high short balls should be hit to the net persons feet - it is that simple!

All low balls should be hit to the player on the baseline. Again, it is amazing to watch players consistently hit the low ball to the player at the net. When you have one opponent on the baseline and one up at the net, do not hit the low ball to the player at the net! This simple does not make sense. The low ball you are hitting will be rising upward nice and high for the net person to blast it at you or your partner. To hit a low ball back to the net person and keep it low at their feet is very difficult. Especially in the heat of battle. Besides why even attempt to do this when you can hit the ball to the opponent on the baseline. I call the opponent on the baseline the safety valve. When you are in trouble play it safe and hit to the player on the baseline. A low ball is just such a situation. Play it safe and look for something better to hit for a winner.

Plan "A" is actually simple, but players unknowingly violate the principles all the time. **High balls should be hit to the net persons feet, and low balls to the player on the baseline**. Test yourself when you play and see if you are guilty of any of these simple infractions.

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Recovering from a mistake

A phrase I use often is - recovering from a mistake is more important than the mistake itself. Forgetting mistakes and moving on is one of the keys to playing more relaxed, automatic, and instinctive tennis. You must constantly practice forgetting your mistakes and moving on. The reason you must practice constantly is because human nature has trouble moving on from their failures. It is universal! Yet, everyone knows to succeed you must make mistakes. Odd, isn't it? We all know this, but have a difficult time applying it when we are failing.

The next time you make a mistake do not attempt to make any correction or analyze what you have done wrong. Just forget your mistake and move on to the next point. If you begin thinking, "if I had done this or that I would have made that shot," ignore it and move on to the next point. Do you think you can do that? What did you say? How are you going to make corrections and improve if you do not analyze your failures? Good question!

Recovering from the mistake is more important than the mistake itself. Since recovering from the mistake is more important than the mistake itself you should spend a lot of time practicing recovering without analyzing. Many times players analyze to come up with a reason why they failed, which makes them feel better about their failure. This makes it easier for them to now move on. **How about trying to move on from your failures without a reason why you failed**. Just accept it as part of the game and move on to the next point.

After you have mastered the art of forgetting your mistakes and moving on, then you can analyze. At this point you will begin to analyze without over thinking every failure. I believe they call it paralysis by analysis! Most players over think their failures instead of accepting them as part of the journey toward success. Now, please do not misunderstand me. I am not saying you should never analyze. What I am saying is most players analyze too much and recover much too slowly. They want reasons for every failure. How about this reason - you just missed!!! This is my challenge to you for the new year. For one month, do not, and I repeat, do not analyze any of your mistakes - just move on to the next point. Play like most pros play. Most pros quickly move on from their failures and are ready for the next point. They realize this is crucial for their long term success. I challenge you for one month to do what most pros do automatically and you too will think like a pro!

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Racket face

Here is a SIMPLE principle of tennis you probably will not believe either. Yet, what it can do to your game is extremely powerful and can also solve a host of different tennis problems.

The principle is, whichever way you **point the racket face is the way the ball will go**. Too SIMPLE for you? Tennis pros are going to be angry with me for this next phrase. Even if you do everything technically wrong, but have the racket face correct the ball will go toward your desired target. Now, I am not telling you to go out and play sloppy tennis. I am trying to teach you a principle. The racket face determines the direction of the ball, not technique. Technique can help you acquire more power. **Technique can help you hit topspin or slice**. But **control of the racket face determines where the ball goes**. And practice, trial and error, and repetition determine your 'feel' of the racket face.

- * If you would like to hit the ball down the middle of the court you place the racket face on the back of the ball.
- * If you would like the ball to go cross court you place the racket face on the outside of the ball.
- * If you would like to hit an inside out forehand or backhand you place the racket face on the inside of the ball.
- * If you would like the ball to go up in the air (a lob) you place the racket face on the bottom of the ball.
- * If you would like to hit the ball down toward the ground (a lousy shot) you place the racket face on the top of the ball.

WHICHEVER WAY YOU POINT THE RACKET FACE IS THE DIRECTION THE BALL WILL GO.

Note where your ball goes and the next time attempt to change the racket face to compensate. It's SIMPLE! Your ball may still not go exactly where you want, but you're learning a feel for the racket face. And like most players, you won't have to over think all of your misses. I know you think you missed because you didn't do all this intricate technical jargon correctly, but this is not true. Again, technique may help you with extra power, topspin or slice but it's the racket face that will determine the direction of the ball.

Still don't believe me? How about this? Have you ever seen a pro hit a ball from behind his back for a perfect shot in the court?

- * Why did he not bend his knees?
- * Why did he not prepare his racket early?
- * Why did he not move his weight into the ball?
- * Why did he not stay still and balanced?
- * Why did he not have his racket head above his wrist?
- * Why did his ball land in the court?

Answer. Racket face. Case closed!!!

Despite all the sophisticated technical information and all the complicated theories on how to hit that elusive little yellow ball over the net, the ball always goes in the DIRECTION THAT YOU AIM THE RACKET FACE. If you want to hit the ball down the line, you must point the racket face in that direction. If you want to hit the ball crosscourt, you must face the racket in that direction. If you want to hit an angle, you must face the racket in the direction of the angle. It does not matter if you are standing on your head, if you can get the racket face to point in the direction you want the ball to go and hit the sweet spot, the ball will go in that direction!

When you angle, you must place the racket face on the correct part of the ball to get the ball to go in the direction you desire. In the last email lesson I talked about hitting the outside of the ball when executing an angled volley. The outside of the ball is the side of the ball that is away from you.

To help you understand more about this concept, pretend you are playing doubles and you are at the net on the deuce side of the court. The ball comes to your forehand (you're right-handed) and you would like to angle it to the left. You can do this by placing the racket face on the outside of the ball. The outside of the ball is that side which is closest to the alley. One of my readers emailed me and said, "I got it, it's the side of the ball that's closest to the alley!" Now, does that make sense?

You must place the racket face on the alley side of the ball to hit an angle to the left from the deuce side and you must do the same when you are angling a ball with a backhand volley on the ad side. To angle on both the deuce side and the ad side you must hit the outside of the ball or the side of the ball that's closer to the alley.

Whether you hit the inside, the outside, the top, the bottom, or the back of the ball, each racket placement on the ball will make your shot go in a different direction. For a nice crisp angle you must hit the extreme outside of the ball.

To illustrate this concept I have a picture of Marat Safin hitting a backhand with the racket face squarely placed on the back of the ball. Study the picture and the explanation to further grasp the dynamics of racket placement on the ball.

Marat Safin hitting the back of the ball



There are five basic positions you can place the racket face on the ball.

1. As pictured above you can hit the back of the ball.
2. If Marat would place the racket face on the printing on the ball that is partially showing he would be hitting the outside of the ball. This would produce an angled volley to his right.
3. The opposite side of the ball, the side that is closest to Marat would be the inside of the ball. If he were to place the racket on that side of the ball it would come in our direction!
4. The top of the ball is the part that is facing the sky.

5. And the bottom of the ball is facing the tennis court.

When you hear players talking about hitting with an open racket face or a closed racket face this is referring to hitting toward the bottom or the top of the ball. Open racket face is the bottom of the ball and closed racket face is the top of the ball.

A BIG PROBLEM

If you have not yet figured out how difficult it is to control the racket face to make the ball go where you want it to, you are on a fine line when attempting to hit a tennis ball into any part of the court. That's why it takes so much repetition. There is no way you can consciously discern between the minute changes in the racket face to control every shot. A slight turn of the racket face placed on a different part of the ball will drastically change the direction the ball will travel. For instance, you could hit a ball ten feet out and the racket face could be placed on the ball only one degree off course!

In fact, when I'm teaching depth there is no significance difference in the racket face between a ball that lands one foot out of bounds and a ball that lands one foot inbounds. The only answer is to keep hitting and hitting and hitting until one day the same ball that was one foot out of bounds now begins to land about a foot inbounds. The difference is oh so subtle!

With this in mind, you must understand what you are up against when learning to hit an angled volley. A tough, tough shot! There is not much court to hit to when attempting to hit an angle. As a result, you must be extremely patient with yourself and hit many, many balls out of bounds before you acquire a feel for this delicate angled volley. **Any slight turn of the racket face one way or the other and the ball is GONE!**

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Move fast and hit slow

To help players learn to play in different gears I teach a doubles clinic where everyone has **to play their volleys at a slower pace**. I do not want them to slow down their body, just slow down the speed of their shots a little. It's an essential drill. I usually get yelled at a couple of times because players have trouble moving fast when they know they have to hit slower. This of course does not make sense. **Moving and hitting are two different skills**. I explain briefly that they must learn to move fast and hit at different paces to become a better player. Then they see the light and we move on. A few minutes later I get yelled at again (tough drill for me :) when they miss an easy shot. They exclaim, "when I slow down, my timing goes off and I miss. I could have made that shot at my normal volley speed." I often think to myself, can you imagine a pro saying I slowed down my stroke and it made me miss. Pros learn to play at all different speeds and so will you!

After a while I pull them all up to the net for a powwow. I have many such discussions in my day! I begin by quizzing them, "do you know why you are having trouble with this drill?" They usual are not one hundred percent sure why they are having so much trouble. My answer is, "because you are not good enough." Well, you can imagine that comment is not a big hit, but I usually do not get my self in trouble without a means of escape, so I quickly explain to slow down a shot and play at a different speed is an extremely high level of play. Have you ever seen a pro run full speed on the court then hit a slow touch angle? Do you think you can do that? To move fast and hit slow is tough!!! But, this is a level of play you must strive to reach. With this explanation I barely escape unharmed and we go back to the task at hand.

NOTE TO TEACHING PROS - try this at your own risk.

Another problem I run into is players think the ball they hit is moving too slowly. The truth is when they slow their shot down they are not really slowing the speed of the ball down all that much. What's happening is when they slow down their shot they have to slow down their mind at the same time, creating the illusion the ball is traveling super slow. Most players hit with their mind racing and think everything is happening faster. Do you? This is one of the main reasons I do this drill. To teach them to move fast but slow down their mind. If they can accomplish this slowing of the mind they will play more relaxed, aim their shots with more accuracy, and improve their feel of the point.

The reason their timing goes off is because they have their timing connected to this frantic state of mind when hitting. When they attempt to slow down their mind their timing goes completely out of whack!

The challenge is for you to learn to play with this relaxed slow mindset and not blame your misses on slowing down. Your top pros play with this mindset, so why shouldn't you. That's right the pros move FAST, but maintain a slow controlled mindset. Even when they are hitting hard they are mentally relaxed and controlled. You can do the same. But, first **you must learn the art of moving fast and hitting slow.**

Below is a list of benefits you can expect if you can master this mindset.

- * Improved accuracy
- * Play more relaxed
- * Save energy
- * See the ball better
- * Improved feel of point play
- * Move more fluidly
- * Not over play as much
- * Create a sense of mental control

This is only a partial list. You will even improve your confidence. This is one of those magical moments of doing less to get more. The art of moving fast but slowing down your mind is a mental challenge that is well worth the effort. To accomplish this mental technique, practice slowing down your shots just a little during some of your fun matches and experience the slowing of your mind. At first this can be frustrating. You will have to work yourself through some of the pitfalls explained in this lesson, but if you stay with it long enough you will experience an inner tranquility that you never knew existed on a tennis court. And without Valium! :)

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Game of percentages

Tennis is about percentages not individual excellence. An interesting concept. What exactly does this mean? It means **you do not consistently win by constantly making outstanding shots.** You do not think in terms of great shots to win. Instead, to win you think in terms of percentages (those shots you can make a high percentage of the time). This is a difficult lesson to learn for all players (pros included), but a necessary one if you wish to play at a higher level. As you improve and are capable of hitting better shots the more you will confuse individual excellence with playing great tennis.

Why? Because you can do more with the ball! To reel yourself in becomes tougher when you play your percentages, and wait for the correct situation to go for the final winner. You'll need a mental arsenal that includes self-discipline to play within yourself, as well as tennis savvy to understand why.

Whatever the level of your play you must learn to think in terms of percentages, not individual excellence. Here is an example. You are up at the net in doubles and one of your opponents is on the baseline. The player on the baseline hits a hard low ball at your feet. With laser precision you skillfully go for a winner, hit a dynamic angle, and win the point. Everyone applauds you for your EXCELLENT volley. Yes, indeed it was a great shot, but it is not the way to win consistently. You may even be thinking, "what a great shot, I'll have to hit more of them to win this match." Voila! You're in trouble and thinking in terms of individual excellence not percentages. The percentage shot would have been to hit this tough low ball back to the player on the baseline and look for something better to go for a winner.

Although junior players are guilty of this big time (they think hitting speedy winners is cool) adults do the same thing relative to their level of play. Although many adults have developed some patience they still think in terms of excellent shots to win which results in too many unforced errors. If you have to make great shots all the time to win, the question arises - why are you always in so much trouble that you have to make great shots to win points? Hmmm, that's something to think about.

Are you always in trouble on the court? Do you always have to make great shots to win? Maybe it's time to examine your over all thinking. Are you going for too much too soon? Most players do. Tennis is a game of

percentages not individual excellence. **The majority of your shots should be easy shots, positioning yourself for the winner. Keep it simple is the phrase!** Okay so it's the K.I.S.S. principle - keep it simple stupid. No offense. And that's the point, you will have no offense without keeping it simple continuously playing the percentages.

Don't take years to understand this principle. Watch the top pros with an informed eye and see it for yourself. The foundation for their great play is always rooted in percentage play not individual excellent shots. Sure they have a flare here and there where they make exceptional shots, and that's fine. The key is NOT, and I repeat NOT to build a game plan around those exceptions.

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Hitting the volley slowly

"I started asking myself questions about teaching and playing styles. Why were the strokes of the top players in the world so completely different? Why were some players baseline players, and why were others net rushers? Why did almost all the players use different grips to hit the ball? I thought of all the coaches who were teaching structured styles and forcing their pupils to play in certain ways. Then I would watch Hopman. I saw how he could coax the inner part of a player to produce the results that he wanted, but always in a unique way, suiting each player's personality."

"I realize that although certain fundamental skills are important to deliver a ball with the right force, spin and direction, a player's strokes are developed pretty much according to his individual temperament and his own style."

I love it! With all this in mind I had a question from one of my readers about how they could stop swinging on the volleys. Here is the way I approach this problem for most players.

In the first lesson I immediately begin working on their thinking. **I ask my student to slow down and hit the ball easier. I explain that most players hit the volley fast (an anxious swing) and then recover slowly for the next shot, instead of hitting the volley slowly (less swing) and then recovering fast for the next shot.** Players actually reverse the process! They hit fast and recover slowly. After the explanation and a demonstration the student begins to volley with a slightly reduced swing. Since I have a hitter that hits for me while I teach I can stay on the sideline encouraging my student to volley easy and then recover fast. Hit easy, recover fast, hit easy, recover fast, hit easy, recover fast is the concept I try to instill in them through repetition.

Notice I'm not trying to force the block volley, or giving them excessive technical information. However, I am laying the foundation for them to think better about how they hit the volley and eventually mold the volley according to their own style. Every once in a while I remind them to relax. This too, helps to reduce the swing.

Next, either in this lesson or the next lesson as they begin improving and automatically reducing the swing, I begin to teach them the concept of working the racket face, not the swing. Again, I'm working on their thinking in regard to volleys. I explain you **do not make a ball go where you want by swinging, but by how you gently adjust the face of the racket.** I demonstrate by holding the racket and moving the racket face so it points in different directions. **Slight movements of the racket face determines the direction of the ball, not the swing.** Work the racket face, not the swing to develop a good controlled volley. I harp on this concept for a number of lessons until I eventually mold them into a block volley. In time the correct volley begins to happen naturally and they still have their own style and personality involved in the process.

Rarely do I even say block the volley. Although sometimes a few words about blocking the ball or just letting it rebound off their strings works like a charm

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CHAMPIONS MENTALITY

This lesson could be a little tough on you so you better sit down. First, stop being a tennis wimp! Not a great way to begin a lesson is it? Let me explain. This is a way of thinking, a subtle mindset that most players do not even know exists. **Too many players allow other people or circumstances to incorrectly affect their attitude, their game and even how they learn to play tennis.** Certainly a teacher and some advice from others can help, but most players relinquish too much control to overt and external situations and people. They are dependent on a coach, player, some technical information, certain conditions, etc to play well, to feel confident and to develop their game.

When teaching I have seen many subtle versions of this mindset over the years. I call it the tennis victim mentality! For example, I may say to a student, "relax and hit the ball slow when volleying at the net." Their response, "but my opponent is hitting the ball hard and fast." In other words, what their thinking is, "it's not my fault, they're hitting it to fast! Tell them to slow down so I can hit it easier." Can you imagine a pro saying that to his opponent! I can hear Pete Sampras now telling Lleyton Hewitt, "Hey Lleyton could you please slow down your shots so I can hit a well placed touch drop shot and win. If you are going to hit that hard I'm going to take my tennis balls and go home."

No, instead Pete adjusts the best he can for the situation. HE TAKES CONTROL OF HIS TENNIS. Because a player hits the ball hard does not mean you have to clobber the ball back at them! You learn to control your racket face and speed. When I teach players to **relax at the net, to slow down and to use their opponents speed**, they seem to snap out of it and take back control of their game.

One of your greatest mental skills for all avenues of tennis is to learn to be self-reliant. The dictionary defines self-reliant as 'having the confidence in and exercising one's own powers or judgement.' It's up to YOU!

Let me illustrate the dynamics of learning to think from the inside out and learning to take control of your tennis.

You are in a match and your opponent hits you a short ball. You correctly hit an approach shot and come up to the net. Your opponent nails a beautiful passing shot and wins the point. Now what? Below are two opposing mindsets that could occur. The 'victim mentality' vs the 'champions mentality.'

VICTIM MENTALITY (Relinquishing too much control to the external) - "I hit an approach shot and came up to the net like I was suppose to, but I lost the point anyway. A lot of good coming to the net did for me. Now what do I do?"

CHAMPIONS MENTALITY (taking control from the inside) - "My opponent hit a good passing shot, but my approach shot was short. The next time let's see if I can deepen it up and create a little more pressure."

If the approach shot was deep and he still lost the point the champion would think, "maybe I'll add a little more speed to the deep approach shot to create pressure." If his opponent still passes him he would think, "let's see if my opponent can keep it up over the long haul. I'm going to keep the pressure on consistently with deep approach shots."

NOTE - The mentally tough competitor takes mental control and always thinks there is a way to solve the problem. As a result of this inside out thinking he keeps trying different options and solutions rather than concluding that the situation is out of his hands.

The bottom line is STOP relinquishing too much control to overt situations, conditions and people. Take control of your tennis by leaning to think differently. When you notice yourself thinking incorrectly and being controlled by an external situation, STOP and THINK AGAIN. Only this time think from the inside out and take control of your tennis. DARE TO BE DIFFERENT ...BREAK THE MOLD!

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A RELAXED MINDSET

How do you read your opponent's shot when playing the net? You have desperately tried to read the racket face and observe your opponent's body position for clues to determine the direction of their passing shot, but nothing seems to work! In your mind you'll never be able to read your opponent's shot. Why? Because

everything seems to happen too fast.

Guess what? I agree, everything does happen too fast to read the situation, make a snap decision and go off in the direction of the ball. But you say, net players are supposed to be able to read physical clues and quickly move in the direction of the ball. Guess what? I agree with that too!

Okay let's sort out this conundrum and clarify the different aspects of net play so you too can begin making those snap decisions, and have brilliant success at the net. First and foremost you must rightly divide and analyze these three areas.

1. Levels of play
2. Principles of learning
3. Principles of net play

LEVELS OF PLAY

If you are a 4.5 or higher player reading the racket face and body position of your opponent becomes a natural result of experience.

If you are a 1.0 to 4.0 player then to attempt to read your opponents passing shot by looking for particular signs is often a frustrating exercise in futility. Unless of course you learn to follow the correct principles. The point is, your level of play has much to do with how you learn, and what method you use to learn.

PRINCIPLES OF LEARNING

Much of the confusion and frustration when learning any aspect of tennis can be avoided by understanding what I call the "professional model syndrome." The syndrome works in this fashion: Using scientific studies on the top players to determine what they are doing mentally and physically to make them great players. In the case of reading an opponent's shot, pros are masters at picking up on certain clues to quickly determine where an opponent will hit a shot. Science breaks down the key elements of this feat and then this information becomes a model for teaching. Not a bad idea, used correctly this can be extremely beneficial. Unfortunately there is a down side to this learning model that causes much confusion.

Professional tennis players do not learn by coaches teaching them to watch the racket face and body position. They have learned to read their opponent's shot through a process that took them many, many, many months and years of practice and experience. What science is breaking down is the RESULT of all those months and years of experience and placing it in a 'technique' category. Somehow you are now supposed to take this technique WITHOUT THE PROCESS OF EXPERIENCE and begin reading your opponents passing shots. Sorry, but this is just not going to happen. Not unless you have gone through a process (of experience and repetition) which will prepare you correctly to assimilate and apply that information.

As a result you become frustrated and think to yourself, "I guess I'm just not quick enough, smart enough, or skilled enough to read my opponent's shots. But, this is not true! You can learn to read your opponent's shots by first working on the same core principles that the pros practiced when they were learning. In other words you MUST understand the process.

PRINCIPLES OF NET PLAY

Below is a list of many different clues a pro sees or senses when reading an opponent's shot. A pro does not always move according to what he sees, but what he senses. Thus the reason why there is not a mechanic or a technique that will allow you to read your opponent's passing shots. You must develop your senses. These different clues are:

1. Racket face
2. Body position
3. Ball position
4. The score
5. The opponent's patterns

Keep in mind this analysis happens quickly and instinctively to send a signal to the pros mind so that he can

calculate where he thinks the ball will go. Often it is a combination of several different clues.

Now, where do you begin to create the correct mental environment necessary to develop your ability for reading these different clues. You begin by first developing three simple mental skills at the net.

1. A relaxed mindset
2. Impact awareness
3. Shot priority

A RELAXED MINDSET

First, you must **learn to relax at the net and alleviate any unwanted anxiety** that produces a racing mind. When the mind is galloping you are playing with a more conscious, rigid mindset not allowing the instinctive and spontaneous nature of the subconscious to function properly. To begin the process of reading your opponent's shot and improving your senses you must learn to control mental anxiety. I teach my students to practice shutting their mind off, similar to turning off a radio. Simply stop the internal racing by clicking the mind off and thinking about nothing! With practice this mental technique will teach you to tap into the automatic and instinctive subconscious.

IMPACT AWARENESS

Second, with this relaxed concentration you must next learn to focus on the exact moment your opponent will impact the ball with the racket. At that moment you are in a heightened state of awareness. You are relaxed, but alert! Not an easy combination, but one that is necessary to begin the journey toward anticipation at the net. With this heightened state of awareness your subconscious will go to work and **begin taking note of your opponent's position, racket face**, etc. In time reading the ball WILL become easier and more automatic. You are beginning the repetition process that will give you the experience to anticipate your opponent's shots.

SHOT PRIORITY

Third, when you are at the net your mental priority should be that your opponent will drive the ball at you, not hit a lob. Most players have lob in their mind the moment they arrive at the net. As a result they are constantly playing back on their heels and never ready for a volley. There is not much of an opportunity to anticipate where your opponent's driving shots will be hit if your mind is obsessed with a lob! Also your opponent's driving groundstrokes will arrive much faster than a high lob over your head, therefore **driving groundstrokes should be the FIRST PRIORITY in your mind** if you wish to improve your anticipation at the net.

If you practice these three mental skills consistently, a relaxed mindset, impact awareness, and shot priority I guarantee you will create the correct mental environment that will influence your senses and teach you to read those crucial clues at the net. It may take some time, but to develop a more automatic, instinctive and spontaneous net game will be well worth the wait!

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Take risks

One of the most important mental challenges I teach my students is to take risks. Most players will not challenge themselves by venturing outside of their comfort zone. In a practice match if they have a particular shot they are comfortable hitting, that's the one they hit. Even if it's the wrong shot!

Remember the practice match oxymoron? It goes like this. You may be having a practice match, but there is very little practice...everyone is trying to win! As a result players continue to hit the wrong shots and never change an incorrect pattern of play. **During practice matches you must PRACTICE moving out of your comfort zone and taking some risks**. If you do not, you become predictable.

Let me show you an example where players have become to predictable. When teaching a doubles clinic I

would often play with my students. When my opponents were up at the net volleying they would be amazed how I could, with very little speed, figure out where they would hit the ball. I would explain that the reason why I could read their shots quickly was because they were hitting the most comfortable shot and not attempting to hit the correct shots. Usually the shots that are the most comfortable to a player are the easiest ones to hit, but not necessarily the correct shot. All I had to do was stay mentally ready to cover that side.

Because my students had not challenged themselves to hit the more difficult correct shots during their practice they had unknowingly become predictable.

Here is what I noticed that made my opponents so predictable. You should PRACTICE changing this pattern of play in your fun matches or in your practice sessions. The explanation will be for a right handed player. For lefties it will be the opposite.

THE EASIEST SHOT TO HIT WHEN EXECUTING A FOREHAND VOLLEY FOR A RIGHT HANDED PLAYER IS TOWARD THE LEFT. THE EASIEST SHOT TO HIT WHEN EXECUTING A BACKHAND VOLLEY FOR A RIGHT HANDED PLAYER IS TOWARD THE RIGHT.

Why? Because moving the arm across the body to hit a crosscourt shot is more natural and easier than moving the arm across the body than outward to hit to the opposite direction. And if that's the easiest shot, that's the shot players practice. Whether it's the right or wrong shot is irrelevant!

This simple fact enables me to anticipate many of their volleys without using my speed. Now, let's take this fact and show you a doubles scenario that occurs constantly. The players are in a one-up, one-back formation. The right handed net player on the deuce side receives an extremely low forehand volley. Where does he hit the ball? Answer, crosscourt. Why? It's the easiest shot. You may be thinking, what's wrong with that? Well, for starters there is a net person that's catercorner to them. The chance of taking a low ball and hitting it back low at the opposing net player is not very probable. More than likely he will pop it up and set up his opponent to smash the ball down at his feet.

Usually the player who popped up the low ball to the net person feels like there are no other probabilities. They have been so conditioned to hit the easiest shot and not the correct shot, they think it was the only option they had! By the way the correct shot would have been to hit the low ball away from the netman back toward the person who was on the baseline and wait for a better opportunity to hit at the netman's feet. A better opportunity would be a ball that is high and short.

The next time you are practicing attempt to hit a number of forehand volleys toward the right and a number of backhand volleys to the left. Even if you do not make the volleys, at least you will begin changing the incorrect pattern of play. Stepping out of your comfort zone will increase the options you will have in match play and make you less predictable.

Remember, the easiest shot to hit when executing a forehand volley for a right handed player is toward the left. The easiest shot to hit when executing a backhand volley for a right handed player is toward the right. If you would like to break this predictable pattern you must make a conscious effort to PRACTICE. Here is where a ball machine or a friend feeding balls to you can make a huge difference in your game. Get out there and **hit forehand volley after forehand volley to the right side and backhand volley after backhand volley to the left side.**

To direct the ball correctly with your volleys **simply aim the racket face toward the direction you would like the ball to go.** We have been over this before - the racket face determines the direction of the ball. Point the racket face toward the left and that's where the ball will go. Point the racket face toward the right and that's the direction the ball will also go. The concept is simple, but the application of that concept requires many hours of repetition to acquire a feel for the racket face.

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Opponent's return after serving

Are you having trouble getting ready for your opponent's return after serving? If you do get ready, are you having trouble deciding what shot to hit? Should it be a slice, topspin, or flat stroke? In this lesson I will

answer both of these questions in two parts.

PART ONE - GETTING READY!

The first plan of action would be to practice hitting your serve and not to stand there watching to see if it has gone in! Instead you should prepare for the return. This sounds simple but there are two inherent problems that plague most players when recovering after the serve.

One, they wait to see if their serve is in before getting ready for the return. It does not matter whether your serve is in or out you should prepare for a return either way. And two, most players do not practice the balance to recover properly after a serve.

1. WATCHING YOUR SERVE

This problem is the downfall of many players in their match points. They are so busy watching their last shot, they do not get ready and prepare for the return. As a result they are slow to react to the opponent's ball coming back at them. It does not take a genius to figure out that if you prepare quickly after your shot, you will have more time to hit your opponent's return. I think the phrase "**he who hesitates is lost**" sums it up quite well! You must practice hitting your serve and not waiting to see if it lands in or not. Instead, begin your preparation for a possible return. Notice I said "possible return," whether there is a return or not is irrelevant...you prepare anyway! Doing this will keep you alert and ready to move faster in whichever direction the return comes.

* Many, many points are lost because players are NOT PREPARED to make quick adjustments (mentally or physically) to retrieve shots after they have served. **They have fallen into the trap of watching the magnificence of their own glorious shot and not thinking about the possible return.**

2. PRACTICING A BALANCED RECOVERY

Next you must practice your balance over and over and over again by serving and bouncing back to ready position about a foot behind the baseline (unless of course you are serving and volleying).

A word of caution!

Just because you can execute this move does not mean you're totally balanced yet. There is a smooth rhythmic feel to the movement that takes practice. In addition, this move has to be subconscious enough so that you can concentrate on your opponent's return while you are recovering.

Tying both techniques together **you would serve and IMMEDIATELY (not waiting to see if your serve is in or not) BOUNCE BACK on balance to prepare for the return.** This is all done automatically and instinctively without hesitation! A little practice in these two areas and you will be surprised how focused you become on your opponent's return of serve and how quickly you begin reacting to that return.

As I have said before learning tennis is doing simple things over and over and over again until it is committed to the subconscious. Then the magic begins!

PART TWO - WHAT SHOT SHOULD YOU HIT?

You own a slice, a flat, or a topspin shot off both the forehand and backhand groundstrokes. Now, which shot should you select after your opponent returns your serve? The answer to this question is not black or white, but depends on many factors:

1. Are you in trouble?
2. Are you tired?
3. Does your opponent have difficulty with topspin or slice shots?
4. Are you trying to pass your opponent at the net?
5. Do you want to rush your opponent by hitting the ball with speed?
6. Do you want to dip the ball at their feet?

There are many different situations that dictate which shot you hit. In some of my matches I have even hit shots without knowing why I did it that way...it just felt right at the moment! I told you this game must be

learned on a subconscious level!

Here are a couple of general guidelines that can help you make your decisions.

If you are on the defensive after your opponent returns your serve, a slice can keep you in the point. Why? The slice offers a slower more controlled shot and can be hit easier if you are in trouble and the ball gets behind you.

If you are not on the defensive and can get a good crack at the ball, use your drive or topspin. In fact, if you have good flat or topspin shots you must use them more often than a slice in a match. **Your drive and topspin are weapons you must use in any opportunity to keep your opponent on the defensive.** The slice has backspin which is naturally a slower shot that exerts less effort. So reserve the slice for the defensive, for taking a rest, for approach shots, or for slowing down the game.

If you only possess a slice shot, obviously you are stuck slicing the ball. But if you wish to use the slice as an offensive weapon you can move the ball away from your opponent, keeping them on the run.

Be flexible and adjust your game with the shots you possess at the moment. Champions do this all the time...why shouldn't you!

SUMMARY

After you serve, stay balanced and IMMEDIATELY recover for the return, then pick a shot that the SITUATION dictates and play ball!

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Everybody's Talking About Topspin; I'm Not Sure If I'm Getting Any Topspin

Cause #1

Everybody's talking about topspin because it allows you to clear the net by a safe margin and still pull the ball back down in the court. You don't need to be a nuclear physicist to figure out what imparts topspin to a tennis ball. A clear understanding is all you need.

Solution A: First of all, what is topspin? Basically it's a ball that spins forward after the strings strike it. What's so great about a ball spinning forward? Once a ball starts to spin forward, it creates air pressure on top of the ball pushing it down. This is the main reason everyone likes topspin. They don't have to be a Las Vegas type player who hits net skimmers, always flirting with danger. They can safely get the ball four to six feet over the net, with power and the ball is still pulled back down before sailing long. To make a tennis ball spin forward, the racquet must be moving from low to high at contact. The racquet should drop at least one foot below the contact point before swinging forward to meet the ball. This ensures a low to high swing. It's this low to high motion that will cause a brushing up at contact that makes the ball spin forward. The racquet must be in a vertical position (straight up and down) when contact is made. If the racquet is tilted or laid back at contact you do not get this brushing effect. The strings should make contact at the equator of the ball, that imaginary line around the center of the ball. If you try to come up and over the top and hit above the equator, you'll simply drive the ball into the net. This over the top theory is actually a common myth that will really hurt your ability to hit topspin consistently in the court.

HOW TO HIT WITH TOPSPIN AND CONTROL

Two Key Points To Concentrate On During Your Swing:

- 1. Swing low to high**
- 2. Keep the racquet vertical through the contact area**



Fig. 23 The racquet face is closed, the palm is down, the racquet is now set to be vertical at contact.

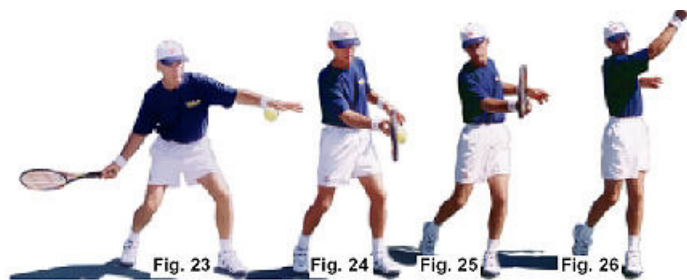


Fig. 24 The racquet is vertical at contact, striking the "equator" of the ball because the swing was from the shoulder without wrist and forearm rolling.

Fig. 25 This is a key photo, notice that the ball is gone and the racquet is still continuing on a low-to-high plane, remaining vertical. There has been no rolling over. But topspin has been imparted.

Fig. 26 The racquet continues on the low-to-high plane, finishing high, the shoulder has been used as the hinge throughout the swing.

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The Backswing

Next to the grip, the most important thing to consider for consistency is the backswing. Sometimes the backswing is misunderstood, it gets confused with the backhand. The backswing is what you do from the ready position to the racquet back position whether you're hitting a forehand or a backhand. Typically, in the ready position we're taught to stand with the racquet out in front in the vertical position (straight up and down). However, if you bring the racquet back vertically and the racquet remains vertical at the low point of the backswing, as you swing forward, the racquet will naturally be open or laid back at the contact point. The only way to get the racquet vertical at contact is by making adjustments with the forearm and wrist. This is very difficult to do on a consistent basis. Remember, this is a millisecond happening. It's risky business to rely on the wrist and forearm to consistently flick at the right millisecond to be vertical at contact.

Your forward swing is made easier by having a good backswing. Strive to get from the ready position with a closed face racquet to the low point of the backswing with a closed face racquet. From that point your swing is a piece of cake provided you don't get too wristy.

In Fig. 4 notice that the racquet is up about eye level and the racquet face is closed. The racquet is now set to be vertical at contact.



In Fig. 5 I've started my backswing. The racquet is coming straight back at eye level. Notice that the racquet face is still closed. Keeping it closed on the backswing will prevent your forehand from going long.

In Fig. 6 the racquet is back pointing to the rear fence and the left hand is out in front for balance.



From this point the racquet will drop down one foot below the contact point before swinging forward to ensure net clearance.



In Fig. 7 Lets say the racquet is now at the low point of the backswing (or one foot below the contact point). That being the case, in this photo, the contact point would be around waist high, which would be about one foot higher than where the racquet is now. Remember how low the racquet drops all depends on your contact point, you only need to get the racquet one foot below. If the contact point was chest high or shoulder high, the racquet could be up around waist high at this point, which would still be safely one foot lower than the contact point before swinging forward. Notice that the racquet face is closed. You have now completed the backswing from this point you'll swing forward and up to meet the ball. The only time during the backswing that the racquet would possibly pause is shown in Fig. 6 everything else is a continual motion.

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Beefing Up Your Second Serve

Is your second serve a friend or an enemy to your game? Having a weak second serve can be a big disadvantage. It not only puts the pressure on you to get your first serve in, but it allows your opponent the opportunity to take control of the point early when you hit a second serve. Avoid thinking of the second serve as the shot that you need to get in the box just to get the point started. The second serve can be a weapon, or at minimum, a way to fight off your opponent from attacking and putting the pressure on early. There are 3 ways to beef up your second serve to make it more of a weapon. **The 3 ways to improve a second serve are spin, placement and speed.** If you can incorporate just 2 out of 3 of these you are well on your way to having a great second serve!

Spin:

There are 3 types of spin you can use on your second serve. Slice, topspin or the kick serve. Being able to use these spins helps to keep your opponent guessing and always having to adjust. Slice serves are effective, but unless you can really pull someone off of the court with a slice second serve, I recommend developing a topspin serve or a kick serve (AKA, American Twist Serve). The advantages of these two serves is the bounce. **Both of these serves bounce very high making them hard serves to attack.** The topspin serve acts just like it's name, it bounces high because of topspin. The kick serve bounces high but also takes a slight change in direction when it hits the court, which makes the ball harder to judge. Many players stand further back when you hit the high bouncing serves as opposed to returning the slice serve. If you can get them to stand further back you will have more time to react to their return and it will also be harder for them to hit a clean winner.

Placement:

Placement is where many players fall short on the second serve. Many players have the goal of just making sure their second serve goes in the box, and they don't really care where as long as it lands in. **Being able to place your second serve** gives you an advantage. If you can put the ball where you want in the box than you can start to hit to your opponent's weaker side. If you mix that with spin than you can start to pick on their weaker side. Being able to pull your opponent out wide on a second serve may be to your advantage if your opponent is a slower player. Placement is key, and if you are not placing your second serve than start to. It takes practice and a certain level of comfort. Grab a bucket of balls and go out to the court alone and practice aiming your second serve. You will thank yourself when you are able to **hit to your opponent's weak backhand** as opposed to their rocket forehand!

Speed:

I am mentioning speed last because I think it is the least important. Speed can help, there is no doubt about it. But unless you are Pete Sampras or Andy Roddick, most people don't have fast second serves. Speeding up your second serve will force your opponent to have to react quicker and may earn you some free points. However, of all the options, speed is the one that can get you in the most trouble. Going for too much on a second serve can cause errors. **As you develop spins and placement speed naturally follows.** As you become more confident with the serve you can try swinging a little faster and see where that takes you.

My former tennis pro used to tell me this: "Swing as hard at the second serve as you do at the first, just use all spin". I took his advice, or 90% of it. I swing about 90% as hard at the second serve as I do the first serve, but I use all spin. Spin is a safe bet, it gives you the biggest margin of error over the net and also brings the ball back down once it crosses the net. Once you have the spin down, try placing the ball. **Once you can place the ball with spin, try speeding up the serve.**

As one of your "internet" tennis pro's let me tell you this. Developing a decent second serve will improve your game immensely! **You will be able to force your opponent to hit on their weaker side,** you can move your opponent around, force them to stand further back, open up the court and force more errors. Try to practice your second serve outside of a match when there is no pressure. Set up targets if you have to or set goals for yourself. Working on your second serve can make your life on the tennis court will be better!

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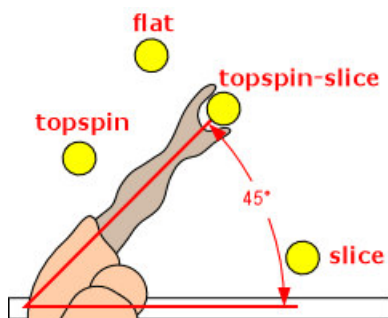
Serving with spin

Operation Doubles

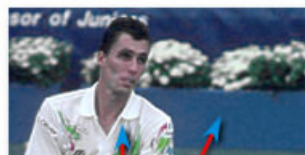
Placement of the Service Toss

Serving with Spin

The ticket to serving with spin is the toss. Mastering spin is just a matter of increasing your natural spin, controlling it, and being able to vary it at will. If you have a fairly good service motion, slice and topspin serves are not hard to learn. The diagram at right is an opening summary of this lesson. Take a heading by giving it the once-over before we start.



How to Slice a Serve As the arrow in the animation at right shows, the sidespin on a sliced serve is imparted by the racket face tracking slightly toward the right as it strikes the back of the ball. You get this to happen by tossing out to the side — off the front foot, but to your right instead of out in front. For this kind of toss, you raise your tossing arm parallel to the baseline. Swing as if to "slice" off the right side of the ball. That is, think of hitting its right side a glancing blow at two or three o'clock (though that's not actually what you're doing). As a result, your racket goes up tracking toward the right and comes down tracking toward the left — a bit of a roundhouse swing. So your follow-through should end on the left side of your body.



Ivan Lendl's Sliced Serve

These two photos show the mighty Czeck, Ivan Lendl, tossing for a sliced





How to "Top" a Serve As the arrow in the animation at right indicates, for topspin (kick) you want your racket head tracking straight upward as it strikes the ball. To get this angle on it, you must toss over your head and arch your back, leaning a little off to your left, to get directly under it. Think of hitting up the back of the ball, from six o'clock to twelve o'clock. Your follow-through would hit you in the shin if you didn't automatically divert it a bit to your left.



TOPSPIN



John McEnroe's Topspin Serve

These photos show the inimitable lefty, John McEnroe, tossing for a topspin serve. Again, though his tossing arm lifts the ball straight up, it doesn't go straight up. That's because he steps forward and arches his back as he tosses. These additional components of motion bring the ball out over the baseline and back over his head for him.



Variations on a Theme For an equal blend of topspin and slice, you want your racket head tracking upward and toward the right at a 45-degree angle as it strikes the ball. To get that angle on the ball, raise your tossing arm at a 45-degree angle to the baseline.



TOPSPIN-SLICE

You can vary the relative amounts of topspin and slice. For a little more slice, toss more out to the side; for a little more topspin, toss more overhead. On a first serve I usually go for more slice, and on a second serve I go for more topspin (to make sure I get it in). The twist serve (the American-twist serve) is mostly topspin with a little sidespin (usually slice). Toss overhead or a little to your left — yes, I said "left" — and arch your back a lot to get under the ball. The object is to get mostly topspin but with enough sidespin so that the combination of spins makes the ball curve a little one way in flight but break a little the other way on the bounce. Don't expect to see

much of a break from your perspective. But it can give receivers fits. For a flat serve, raise your tossing arm right out over your front foot.

I believe perfect service is about forty per cent placement, forty per cent speed, and twenty per cent twist.

— Bill Tilden

I suggest first learning the topspin-slice serve. You're already using it, so just learn to increase the spin you're getting on it. Then learn to vary that spin from mostly slice to mostly topspin. Doing this sets you up with three spin serves: the slice, the topspin-slice, and the topspin. Not only will you then have a variety of serving options on every point, you will have a dependable second serve that you can hit almost as hard as your first. Recreational players can get along very well without a breaking twist serve. Nevertheless, serious competitors usually want this weapon in their arsenal. As mentioned above, the primary use of the topspin serve is as a second serve. But, aimed at the body or to the backhand, a topspin serve is often a good net-rushing serve, because it gives you time to pass no man's land before the return is back. Besides, though many receivers punish high-bouncing forehands, they have trouble with high-bouncing backhands. Sliced serves have several uses. For example, I like to slice serves wide to the deuce court for aces against receivers who guard their backhands. I also like to slice serves wide to the ad court against receivers with two-handed backhands. The heavy sidespin curves into them, often getting them to overrun the ball or hit a crowded backhand off a serve they should have taken forehand. Nasty, eh?

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Adapted by Henri Rochette from internet's sources.