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CHAPTER



SERVE AND RETURN DRILLS



The serve and return are the two most important parts of the tennis game. How a player starts points says a great deal about that player's overall game style and projected level of success. The ability to start a point in an advantageous position gives the player confidence and helps the player grow and develop. An effective serve or return makes an immediate statement about the player's strength, accuracy, variety, and consistency.

A successful serve and return allow players to start a point on offense, allowing them to focus on what shots they should use to keep an opponent on defense. As a result, players are likely to develop a variety of groundstrokes to use to their advantage. Conversely, when players start points in a defensive position, their initial reaction is to play defense first. As a result, their opponents dictate their shots, and the players have to work hard in each point to get back into an offensive position. A successful serve and return gives players the freedom to explore offensive strategies, making the game more interesting and fun.

SERVE DRILLS

The drills in this section will ultimately provide an advantage when the player begins to play points. This section presents the following types of drills, which are designed to help players improve their game. The drills are presented in a progressive fashion, thus maximizing a player's serving effectiveness.

1. Grooving drills to work on fundamental techniques and warm up the player's service motion
2. Power technique drills to add power to the player's fundamental techniques and overall service game
3. Specific serve and location drills to work on variety, disguise, and location for the player's service game.

Grooving Drills

The goal of these grooving drills is to help the player practice the techniques and rhythm of the serve and to prepare the player for more complex and intense practice or match play. All serves are made up of a series of precise movements that combine rhythmically to produce a successful service motion. Performing grooving drills is one way to really focus on development and consistent execution of these phases of movement.

Overall, these drills are designed to help the player simplify the service motion. They focus on the specific phases and on using specific cues when practicing the serve. Effective for the flat serve, the slice serve, and the topspin or kick serve, these drills progress from noncontact drills to contact drills on the baseline. The player can perform the noncontact drills anywhere on the court or even away from the court for extra grooving practice. All of these grooving drills should be a daily part of the warm-up routine before doing the power drills or practicing specific serves and locations.

TOSS CONSISTENCY

Purpose: To establish the optimum extension and location for the toss and develop consistency.

Procedure: Standing on the service line, the player goes through the service motion without hitting the ball. The player tosses the ball and freezes at the top of the release. The ball should come back down and land back in the outstretched hand. The player should focus dually on the toss arm extension and the end location of the toss—the two main factors that lead to a consistent toss. Players do 2 sets of 10 repetitions. A high number of catches for every 10 repetitions would be 7 or 8 out of 10.

Coaching points: A toss that doesn't land back in the player's hand may indicate a lack of arm extension or too much wrist usage. The toss arm should always feel as though it is carrying the ball upward toward the release point, ensuring good extension of the arm. When the toss arm isn't extended properly, the wrist has a tendency to flick the ball up into the air, causing an inconsistent toss. The player's goal is to open all the fingers at once at the top of the toss arm extension so that the toss has little or no spin.

CRITICAL CUE:

This drill can be used as a diagnostic in practice on a day when a player's serving is erratic. The drill quickly determines whether the player's toss is the culprit.

RELEASE AND FREEZE

Purpose: To check the rhythm and positioning of all moving parts during the toss and takeback and to be sure the leg work, takeback, and toss all work together to set up the serve. Seeing the relationship of the arm, the legs, and the ball being tossed can quickly clean up rhythm issues and hitches (stops and starts in technique) that develop in the swing.

Procedure: The player stands on the service line, executes the service motion, and freezes at the moment the toss is released. The player looks back to see where the elbow and feet are positioned. The shoulders should have a forward and upward tilt, the elbow is at a 90-degree angle upward and outward from the body, and the palm is facing downward. The feet are together, and the legs are loaded in the pinpoint stance or balanced comfortably and loaded in the platform stance. The player should focus on the trophy position so that the upper body loads backward and the front hip points outward toward the net. The player should be looking up at the toss arm. The player repeats this drill 5 to 10 times to establish consistency in the position of all moving parts at the time when the ball is tossed.

Coaching points: Characteristics of good motion include the elbow being close to the set position, upright, and not dipping toward the body when the ball is tossed. If the arm and racket head are in a low position at the toss, a late contact point results. If the arm is not set at the toss, the player needs to speed up the arm movement. If the feet are not in a location that allows the body to explode upward, the player needs to work to coordinate the foot movement with the toss.

THROWING

Purpose: To work on the position and movement of the serving shoulder and arm throughout the service motion. The takeback directly affects the acceleration and resulting power generated on the serve. Throwing for distance mimics the techniques of the service motion.

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Throwing (continued)

Procedure: The player and a partner or coach stand about 10 feet (3 m) apart and warm up by throwing a tennis ball back and forth. The two players gradually increase the distance between them and add more loft to the throws. After warming up, they proceed to the baseline. The player goes through the serve motion and throws 10 balls to the deuce side and then 10 balls to the ad side and then repeats. On the first 10 balls to each side, the player should verify a full takeback so that when serving, the player achieves maximum acceleration toward the ball and a full extension of the serve arm. On the second set of 10 balls to each side, the player should assess the extension of the arm before and after release. The arm should extend toward the target, and the hips should rotate forward. The player should see the arm extend and finish in front of the body. The entire rhythm of the server should be one fluid motion from the takeback to the release.

Coaching points: A quick release or an upward or downward release signify poor extension and can be fixed by throwing more balls and making this drill part of the daily serving routine.

EXTEND AND TRAP

Purpose: To work on coordinating toss height and achieving full arm extension for optimal contact on the serve.

Procedure: The player stands with the front foot against a tall wall or fence and assumes the service stance. The player takes an abbreviated swing and tosses the ball up so that it travels up the wall or fence, aiming for a height equivalent to the fully extended hitting arm. When the ball reaches its peak and optimum contact point, the player reaches up with the racket and traps the ball against the wall or fence and holds the position. While maintaining good balance, the player then checks for maximum extension of the hitting arm. Holding and pressing the ball against the fence also practices applying the push or power needed to finish the stroke. The player should repeat this action until contact consistently occurs with a full extension. Then, the player takes this feeling to the service line and practices serving with a focus on this new extension and contact point.

Coaching points: When the focus on extension at the contact point learned in this drill is transferred to actual serving at the baseline, the player is likely to hit the first few balls way past the service box. This means the drill worked. The player then needs to use more wrist snap and greater leg power to get the ball in the court.

WRIST SNAP EXECUTION

Purpose: To develop a concise contact and to learn the feeling of properly snapping the wrist to get the ball in the court for different types of serves.

Procedure: The player stands on the service line and hits 5 to 10 serves into the deuce or ad box using normal service motion. The focus is on extending the racket up and snapping the wrist down to get the ball in the court. The player practices the wrist snaps needed for the different serves and then practices serving to different locations for each type of serve. After hitting the first 5 to 10 serves, the player moves back to a position halfway between the service line and the baseline and serves again. After another 5 to 10 serves from this spot, the player moves back again.

Coaching points: For each location, the player must adjust the wrist snap and arm extension to successfully get the ball in the service box.

WRIST SNAP DISGUISE

Purpose: To practice proper wrist snap with disguise by delaying the adjustment for a particular serve.

Procedure: The player stands at the baseline and practices serving. As the player releases each toss, a coach or partner shouts out a location, such as wide, body, or T. The player adjusts accordingly to perform the indicated serve. The player should attempt 5 to 10 serves to each service box. This drill should be repeated in training until the player can consistently execute the proper wrist snap for each particular serve. Initially, servers may find this drill difficult because they are not used to adjusting for a type of serve while the ball is in air. Realistically, the ability to execute the serves in this drill consistently may take a few practices.

Power Technique Drills

To hit with power, a player needs a technically sound serve, which players can accomplish using the preceding grooving drills. To add power, players must focus primarily on leg work and the wrist snap. The strength and explosiveness of the back leg is the main contributing factor to maximizing power. The next five drills combine to work on adding leg strength, maximizing upper and lower body rhythm, placing the toss in the power zone, and adding power to the wrist snap.

BACK LEG STRENGTH

Purpose: To develop back leg strength and establish good use of the legs to explode up to hit the ball. This drill teaches body position: loaded back and ready to thrust upward and forward.

Procedure: The player stands on the baseline with a racket but no ball. The player takes a ready position as if to serve and then transfer the body weight onto the back leg. The player holds this position for 1 or 2 seconds and then explodes upward, going through the service motion. The explosion upward should be slightly exaggerated and slightly higher than usual. The player focuses on driving the back leg up and rotating the front hip forward. After making one imaginary swing, the player resumes the serve stance and repeats the movement. The server performs the drill up to five more times, moving toward the net on each serve. The player should focus on feeling the weight distribution from the back leg to the front while maintaining the good body position needed for a strong serve. This is a great shadow exercise that can be done with or without a tennis court.

Variation: The player can use a tennis ball and incorporate the toss into this exercise. With the toss, the player checks to see if the racket arm position is in a good location. If the arm or the racket head is not ready to swing when the ball leaves the hand, it could highlight a need for a quicker takeback.

CRITICAL CUE:

As weight shifts from the back foot to both feet, the player pushes off as if jumping off a diving board. Both feet should come off the ground 1 to 4 inches (about 2.5 to 10 cm).

NO LEGS

Purpose: To practice optimal coordination of the upper and lower body, which will help get maximal results from using the legs for power.

Procedure: The player practices 8 to 10 serves without using the legs at all but otherwise using a normal service motion. Doing so demonstrates how restricted a player's power is on the serve when not using the legs. The player hits 8 to 10 more

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No Legs (continued)

serves, this time adding the lower body movement. The player notes the difference in power when using the legs versus not using the legs. If the player does not notice much difference or if the serve is actually better without the lower body movement, the player should experiment with the stance or rhythm of the serve. This drill can help identify disconnections between lower body and upper body rhythm.

CRITICAL CUE:

The player should think about the body staying behind the baseline and using a contact point slightly in front of the baseline. The general location for the power zone toss is twelve o'clock, above and forward from the body. This cue develops the feeling of going up higher for the contact and hitting up past the point of contact.

POWER ZONE TOSS

Purpose: To identify the power zone for toss placement and to highlight the feeling of keeping the weight back, which is necessary on all power serves.

Procedure: The player stands on the baseline with a ball but no racket. The player goes through the motion of serving but lets the toss drop to the ground. The player, coach, or partner marks this spot with a cone. If the toss lands close to a foot in front of the baseline, it is too far forward. Another cone is then added to highlight a goal location closer to the baseline. The toss and drop is repeated until the toss is consistently landing near the goal cone, which is in the power zone. The player then picks up the racket and incorporates the full serve to determine whether the new toss works with the full service motion. The goal cone may need to be adjusted, based on the feel of the serve and power generated, but the key is to have the toss in a position that doesn't cause a collapse in body position or result in reaching too far forward.

Coaching points: Most servers like the toss slightly in front of the baseline because it helps them move forward through the serve and hit with more power. However, this can lead to servers developing a toss location that is too far in front of the body, hindering their ability to create power on the serve. If the server continually tosses the ball too far forward (approximately 1 foot, or 0.3 m, in front of the baseline), then the server may be losing power on the motion.

WRIST SNAP POWER

Purpose: To isolate the wrist snap at contact and help develop wrist strength.

Procedure: The player practices serves using a full motion but with just a platform stance and no leg movement forward. The serve is accomplished through upper body action, while focusing just on the wrist snap to generate power. If the serve goes into the net, a slight upward movement of the legs can be added to the motion, but just enough to get the needed height to clear the net. The player repeats this procedure 10 times. Then, the player practices another 10 or more serves while including the normal leg movement, but this time with a focus on movement that is straight up and not out, relying on the wrist snap for power and placement.

SERVING FIVES

Purpose: To practice power techniques from the previous four drills using repetition while progressively increasing power on the serve. When players are warmed up and hitting balls as hard as possible, they can identify the actual level of power they are capable of, enhancing their ability to tap into this power when needed.

Procedure: The server hits serves to both service boxes in sets of five and follows a progression of power, starting at 75 percent of maximum power for the first set of five, then 85 percent for the next set, and 95 percent for the next set. Then, the player hits two sets at 100 percent. Finally, the player hits a set of five of each serve type to each of the three basic locations, focusing on 90 to 100 percent power. The total number of serves practiced in this drill should not exceed 60. When repeating the drill at subsequent practices, the server should start at a lower power zone for any serve and location for which technique was inconsistent. The server should work to maintain technique and gain consistency and then advance to the next power zone.

Coaching points: Serving too many balls in practice, serving too hard for long periods of time, or serving with poor or worn equipment can be harmful to players' arms.

Specific Serve and Location Drills

When addressing the different types of serves (flat, slice, and topspin or kick) and the different locations (out wide, body, and T), players need to follow a progression. Players first need to drill the technique of hitting a particular serve to a general location, such as the service box.

When players are comfortable with their technique, they can introduce cone targets to drills to further pinpoint specific location and enhance accuracy. The cone for the T serve should be placed in the T corner of the service box (1 foot, or 0.3 m, from the midline and service line). The cone for the body serve should be placed approximately midway from the midline dissecting the service box in two and 2 to 3 feet (0.6 to 0.9 m) inside the service line. The out wide cone should be placed approximately 2 feet (0.6 m) from the singles sideline and 2 feet (0.6 m) inside the service line.

Players can make target practice more enjoyable by trying different variations of games, such as trying to hit a certain number of serves (5, 10, or 15) to a certain location. Players should practice their first serve and second serve, varying the locations. Players can work for accuracy, consistency, variety, or whatever helps them focus and keeps practice interesting and fun.

FLAT SERVE (POWER)

Purpose: To develop the flat, power serve.

Technique practice: Refer to page 89 for a review of serving technique. For most power serves, the visual cue for the toss is twelve o'clock, but this may vary slightly from player to player. At the end position of the service motion, players need to check that the wrist snaps down and the fingers point directly downward in front. The player practices serve technique until the motion feels fluid and the serve arm is sufficiently warmed up. Then, the player continues the drill by progressing to target practice.

Target practice: The server starts on the service line and attempts to serve the ball in the box and have it hit the back fence. With each successful attempt, the server takes one step back until reaching the baseline. Once on the baseline the server attempts to hit a powerful flat serve that lands in the box and bounces once before hitting the back fence as high as possible.

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Flat Serve (Power) (continued)

Coaching points: Some players lean their bodies toward or away from the serve location. Neither is ideal. Leaning in either direction can alter the swing path, which makes hitting the location more difficult. Players should focus on maintaining a straight posture, contacting the ball in the same location each time, and they should use the wrist to direct the serve to the desired location. Players' height can affect their ability to hit out wide. Taller players may need to use less outward wrist snap, needing only to change the body angle. Shorter players must contact the ball higher, and they must have strong upward body movement.

SLICE SERVE

Purpose: To develop the slice serve.

Technique practice: Refer to page 90 for a review of the technique. The player's wrist snap should bring the palm down with the fingers pointing in the direction of the body. The player practices the serve technique until it feels fluid and rhythmic and the player has properly warmed up the arm. Then the player moves on to target practice.

Target practice: The player, coach, or partner sets a cone in the deuce and ad service boxes (2 feet [0.6 m] from the service line and 6 inches [15.2 cm] from the singles line). Practice hitting 10 serves wide toward the cones so that the ball lands in the box and goes over the singles and doubles sidelines. Try to hit the ball so that it bounces into the side fence or netting.

TOPSPIN OR KICK SERVE

Purpose: To develop a high-bouncing serve similar to a high-bouncing topspin groundstroke.

Technique practice: Refer to page 90 to review the serve technique. The player should pay attention to the outward wrist snap; it should look and feel like throwing a dart to the side. As the wrist snaps outward, the fingers settle outward in the general direction of the shot. The player practices the serve technique until the motion is fluid and the player has properly warmed up the arm. Then, the player continues the drill by progressing to target practice.

Target practice: The player, coach, or partner sets 2 cones on the backhand corner of the service boxes. On the deuce side the cone is placed 6 inches (15.2 cm) from the service line and center line. On the ad side, the cone is set 3 feet (0.9 m) from the service line and 6 inches (15.2 cm) from the singles line. The server practices hitting topspin or kick serves to a partner that bounce higher than the partner's shoulder. Instead of hitting a return, the partner should catch the ball to show the server how effective the serve is.

SERVE LOCATION SCORING

Purpose: To develop the ability to hit serves to different spots through a progression of targets. This drill can be performed using any of the serves.

Procedure: The player aims at three locations (out wide, middle, and service T) in each service box. The locations may be marked in the service box by using

additional tennis balls or targets. The player starts serving to one location on the deuce side and plays an entire standard scoring game serving to that target. If the player misses the first serve to the desired target, the player must use a second serve to the same location. If either serve makes it in the target area, the player goes up 15-love in the game. If the player double-faults or doesn't hit the target area, then the player goes down love-15. The player should follow this pattern of trying to hit in the same location for a game, then move to the next target on the deuce side and then the next, until the player is ready to serve on the ad side.

Variation: The player can add realism and pressure to this drill by playing against an opponent. Servers alternate for every point. If the server hits the target area, the server gets the point and goes up 15-0. If the server misses both serves, the other player gets the point, and the server is down 0-15. After one player goes up or down in the game, the second server repeats the same process; if they make one of their serves, they will either go up 30-0 if the first player missed their serves or 15-all if the first server was successful. When one player wins this game, the players play the next game to the next target area. Players can play a set in this fashion. This drill is useful for coaches needing to drill a group of players because it can accommodate four players (two on one side and two on the other) and be part of a rotation.

SERVING A GAME OF PIG

Purpose: To practice serves under pressure. This drill works on all types of serves and placement.

Procedure: Two players use cones or balls to divide each service box into three quadrants. The players spin a racket to determine who serves first. The server calls out the type of serve and its location in the service box (such as wide slice serve). If the server hits the spot called with the type of serve called, then the second player must duplicate the serve. If the server does not serve the designated serve or does not serve to the designated spot, the serve goes to the other player. On the first miss, servers earn the letter P. On the next miss, they get an I and on another miss they get a G. The first player to spell P-I-G is out.

RETURN DRILLS

The following progression of drills works through the characteristics identified for a great return. These drills start from basic and progress to advanced drills. First the drills work on vision or tracking the ball, then answering with power, and finally progressing into drills to learn and fine tune the different returns. For players to be their best, they must learn and practice all of the following return techniques and scenarios through drilling:

1. Vision drills to tune into tracking cues and preparatory techniques
2. Power drills to work on movement and acceleration for setting up and hitting through the zone for increased power and depth
3. Specific return drills to work on consistency, accuracy, and variety
4. Live ball drills to develop and test players' return skills in pressure situations

Vision Drills

A returner's vision drives the body and hand out to the ball. A player's ability to see the oncoming ball and ability to read the server's motion both contribute to good, strong contact with the ball. If the player can get an early read on the server's serve or target, then the player can begin to take the advantage away from the server. The following drills are designed to help the player develop and improve vision and ball tracking skills. If a player can track a serve early enough, then the player has a greater ability to be aggressive. Before performing these drills, the player should review the tracking technique information in chapter 5.

BILLY BALL

Purpose: To develop tracking skills and movement to the ball.

Procedure: The player and a coach or partner set up in any location on the court that allows enough space for the coach or partner to be about 3 feet (0.9 m) away from the player in a diagonal location. The positioning should simulate the position of a server and a returner set up in the normal return position. The coach or partner holds out a ball at various angles in the direction of the returner, simulating the starting path of different serves. Zeroing in on the ball's movement, the player split steps and moves to the ball, focusing on quick and precise movement. After each ball, the player moves back to the starting position and prepares for the next move.

Variation: The coach or partner can toss the ball in different directions instead of holding it. The player can catch the ball or make easy contact with a racket.

SHORT COURT TO BACKCOURT

Purpose: To work on tracking skills over increasing distances. This drill also aids the tracking of overheads because the shots also come from the service line.

Procedure: A coach or partner serves balls lightly crosscourt from the service line to the opposite service box. The player stands on the service line and returns the balls crosscourt. The player should focus on tracking the ball and moving to the ball's path as quickly as possible, then soundly execute the shot. After returning 8 to 10 balls, the player moves back 3 to 5 (0.9 to 1.5 m) feet and takes another 8 to 10 balls. This pattern continues until the player reaches the baseline. With each new location, longer focus is needed to track the ball and attune to the differences in trajectories and spins on deeper balls. The drill is repeated with the player returning down the line.

Variation: The coach or partner can hit harder serves to simulate the pace of a real serve. The returner can then focus on the tracking and technical skills needed for increasing amounts of acceleration on the ball.

Power Drills

The ability to create a power return depends on three factors: movement to the ball, stroke preparation, and acceleration at contact. A strong move with the outside leg is the primary step in a successful return. The number of steps needed after the primary step depends on a player's movement skills as a returner and the speed of the serve. The goal of any movement on any return is for the returner to maintain balance and prepare for the serve with the eyes and the body. The loading step drills in chapter 3 and the drills that follow are essential for developing the desired movement and loading for the return.

COMPACT MOVEMENT

Purpose: To practice the forward movement or flow needed when returning for power.

Procedure: The player takes position for completing returns from the baseline and then sets up three cones in a triangle: one cone 3 feet (0.9 m) directly in front of the player and two cones slightly to either side and 2 feet (0.6 m) in front of the player. The front cone marks the player's movement forward to execute the return shot, and the side cones mark the player's outside leg movement to either the forehand or the backhand side. The player assumes the ready position. A coach or partner serves different serves (flat, slice, and topspin or kick) in sets of 5 to 10 from the service line on the opposite side of the court. Within each set, the coach or partner serves to each of the three locations (out wide, body, and T). The player returns the serves to the target location specified by the coach or partner. The player focuses on the cones for a visual target of the direction for desired forward flow and the compact feel of the movement. The types of serves and the return locations should be specified before the drill begins. When the player has mastered this version, additional sets should randomize the serves and return locations to give the returner more realistic practice.

Coaching points: Compact movement keeps the body loaded and balanced, creating more power on the return. The compact feel comes from maintaining a good athletic stance.

TAKEBACK AND LOOK

Purpose: To coordinate preparation and body movement with the bouncing of the ball off the serve so the returner is positioned for an aggressive and powerful return.

Procedure: The player gets in the ready position to return serves from the baseline. A coach or partner serves balls in sets of 10 from the baseline. As soon as the server hits the ball, the player takes the racket back and prepares the body to contact the oncoming ball. When the ball bounces, the player stops all movement (as best as possible) and quickly checks body and racket positioning. The returner specifically checks that the racket preparation is set and the body is in balance and poised for a return. The server varies the location of the serves and uses different types of serves, allowing the returner to recover between serves to get ready for the next serve. After practicing this drill for 3 to 5 minutes, the returner can then begin to execute returns for an additional 3 to 5 minutes.

Variation: To increase the difficulty, the server can move to the service line. The server needs to slow down the pace of the serve initially to allow the returner to adjust. Then, then the pace can gradually increase. In this version, the faster pace makes the player prepare earlier and more quickly.

RETURN AND RELEASE TECHNIQUE

Purpose: To develop the arm extension used on the return.

Procedure: The player gets in the ready position to return serves from the baseline. A coach or partner stands at the service line and serves different types of serves (flat, slice, and topspin or kick) to the three different locations (out wide,

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Return and Release Technique (*continued*)

body, T). On each return, after making contact with the ball, the player practices the follow-through by releasing the racket immediately into the other hand at the end of the extension. (Refer to the Release Technique drill on page 59.) On the forehand side, the nondominant arm catches the racket in front of the body with the butt cap facing toward the net and the coach. The racket head should be flat. For the two-handed backhand return, the player should extend through contact and then hold the extension position at the follow-through. The racket position should point toward the server. Although the normal follow-through is out and across the opposite shoulder, holding the extension position emphasizes the use of the arms.

Coaching points: The position of the server on the service line tests the returner's ability to use a quicker or abbreviated takeback and release from a ball hit with more pace. The arm extension greatly enhances depth on returns and provides a platform where acceleration and wrist snap can be added for an aggressive strike on the ball that results in a powerful return.

RETURN ACCELERATION AND WRIST SNAP

Purpose: To develop the acceleration of the wrist snap that adds speed and topspin so that return shots bounce irregularly or out of an opponent's strike zone.

Procedure: The player stands on the service line and receives serves from a coach or partner who is positioned on the opposite service line. The coach or partner serves balls to the returner at a medium pace. The player hits 10 returns to a predetermined location. Then, the player moves back 3 steps and returns another 10 serves. Finally, the player moves back to the baseline and returns another 10 serves.

Coaching points: The returns from the service line require a quicker takeback and greater acceleration through the ball with extra emphasis on the wrist snap to finish the shot. The deeper location returns need the same quickness of preparation, but they require normal depth on the takeback to generate more power. While moving back, the player should continue to focus on maintaining the acceleration that was needed to return balls at the service line.

Specific Return Drills

The strength of the aggressive flat or topspin return, the slice, and block returns from the three return locations (inside baseline, on baseline, and behind the baseline) determines whether the return is considered offensive, neutralizing, or defensive. Specific return drills give the player the opportunity to zero in and improve on a particular return. The ability to execute a variety of returns is vital to the player's overall game. If used properly, it can make the player a tough opponent.

Because the technique for the return can be similar to that for a groundstroke, especially on a slow-paced serve, players should master the techniques and targets with their groundstrokes (using the drills in chapter 3) to create a foundation for adapting these shots for the return. For faster-paced serves, players should use an abbreviated preparation. Returning serves requires a change in timing and some tweaks to technique and positioning to deal with the increased pace and different trajectories and angles of a serve (coming from full extension above the server's head).

Where the player hits the return determines what ball the player faces next. To keep a server from getting into a rhythm, it's important to have a variety of returns to keep the server guessing as to what shot is coming back. Players should aim to hit their returns so that they can hit their weapon next or so that they are able to use a tactic they like to gain strength in the point. Each type of return has a specific location that works best, but the realistic goal is to hit a return that pushes the opponent back or off the court and allows the player to start the point off on a positive note. Crosscourt returns are mainly hit flat or with topspin; topspin, flat, and slice returns are mainly hit through the middle; and drives and slices are mainly hit down the line.

1. **Offensive returns.** The two popular offensive returns used in today's game are the aggressive flat return and the aggressive topspin return. The goal of both returns is the same: to push an opponent back in the court or pull a player off the court. These returns should be hit for depth and with power, and they are most effective when played from in front of the baseline. They can be hit crosscourt, down the line, or down the middle, but the optimal ending location is crosscourt because of the larger area to execute the shot.
2. **Neutralizing returns.** These returns are not quite offensive but not quite defensive. A player hits a neutralizing return to stay even off the return or to not give a server an easy next ball. This return is usually played as a slice shot, but can also be played with topspin from the baseline or slightly behind it. The player focuses on forward movement, but doesn't have the same go-for-it mentality used on the offensive returns. The optimum location for the neutralizing return is down the middle to make it hard for the opponent to create any sort of angle with pace off the shot.
3. **Defensive returns.** These returns are used to get the ball back in the court to a location that will not give the server an easy put away. The shots a player can hit are the block return, which has little or no spin, and the slice for when a player is slightly out of position and reaching. This return should be used primarily to hit down the middle and down the line to create less angle and options for the server's next shot. The returner can maximize this return if able to hit it to the server's weakness. This return is usually hit from just behind the baseline or even farther back behind the baseline.

The following drills can help players work on each of the different return options. These are working drills, or *no-frills* drills, because the player works on a part of the game. If any of the players struggle with poor execution, they should continue working on that return until they feel comfortable and before the coach or partner moves on to another serve. Players should drill all of the returns using the forehand and backhand.

AGGRESSIVE FLAT OR TOPSPIN RETURN

Purpose: To develop a penetrating aggressive return to any location.

Technique practice: The returner stands on the baseline in the normal return position, and the coach or partner stands on the service line on the opposite side of the court. The coach hits a few warm-up serves to the returner, and then the pace increases as the drill progresses. The coach or partner starts with flat serves hit toward the returner's forehand and backhand. After the returner has established

(continued)

CRITICAL CUE:

The player should first focus on hitting aggressive returns that would push an opponent back. Then, the player should focus on being more precise with the return location.

Aggressive Flat or Topspin Return (*continued*)

a rhythm, the server serves slice and kick serves to their locations (out wide and T). For the aggressive flat return, the returner focuses on forward movement to meet the ball and on hitting it flat or with a little topspin, low over the net, and deep toward the baseline. The server serves 5 to 10 repetitions for each serve and location, altering slightly if the returner has trouble with a particular serve or location.

Coaching points: The amount of power a player can generate on the return is key to hitting successful aggressive flat or topspin returns. As a result, a player's preparation is vital. In this drill with the server at the service line, the player develops a faster preparation because the serve arrives quickly. When moving back to the baseline, the returner should maintain the faster preparation, allowing for focus on adding more power. The power on this return is generated in part by the pace on the serve, so the returner must time the return to maintain the pace of the shot. To help with timing, players should master this shot (flat or topspin) in their groundstrokes before trying to establish it on the return.

Target practice: Players place the target cones and have the coach or partner serve from the baseline. For each location, the wrist snap and arm extension needs to accelerate and finish toward the target. For crosscourt, the player should focus on making contact early (before the front foot) and hitting around or over the outside of the ball. For down the middle, the player should hit with a slightly later contact point that is closer to the front foot. For down the line, the player should hit with a later contact point and with a more open racket to create a higher trajectory to clear the higher net down the line.

NEUTRALIZING RETURN DRILL

Purpose: To develop a consistent return that neutralizes the opponent by depth or placement.

Technique practice: The player stands on the baseline positioned for a return. A coach or partner serves balls from the service line. The pace of the serves starts out moderate and increases as the drill progresses. The server should vary the type of serve and location. The player practices moving up to the baseline to make the return, focusing on a longer takeback for a weaker serve and a shorter take back for a faster serve. The player should work on greater extension of the arm and a more pronounced wrist snap. For the neutralizing topspin return, the returner focuses on forward movement, aiming to hit a little higher over the net, and hitting deep in the court. For the neutralizing slice return, the returner should focus on keeping the ball low over the net and deep in the court.

Coaching points: The power that is generated from this return is a combination of the speed of the serve and good technical movement from the returner. For the topspin return, the key characteristic is the deep landing location (near the baseline). The key characteristic for the slice return is its low trajectory over the net and through the court that results in a low bounce (without a lot of pace) that forces the opponent to hit up.

Target practice: The player places the target cones and has the coach or partner serve from the baseline. For each location, the wrist snap and arm extension need to accelerate and finish toward the target. For crosscourt returns, the player should focus on making contact early (before the front foot) and hitting around or over the outside of the ball. For down the middle returns, the player should hit

with a slightly later contact point (closer to the front foot). For the neutralizing topspin return, the player should focus on depth and height, and for the slice, the player should focus on depth to keep the server behind the baseline. For down the line returns, the player should hit with a later contact point and with a more open racket to create a higher trajectory to clear the higher net down the line.

BLOCK RETURN

Purpose: To develop a defensive return to use when an aggressive serve, due to the pace, placement, or angle and height of the bounce, cannot be returned neutrally or aggressively.

Technique practice: The returner is positioned behind the baseline to provide more time and space to react to a fast-paced serve. The coach or partner starts serving hard from the baseline and moves up a few feet at a time toward the service line to force faster and faster reactions to the serve. The partner should vary the serve types and serve locations, serving 5 to 10 times before moving up in the court. The returner prepares for the shot by getting the racket head behind the level of the oncoming ball and moving forward if possible. The shot is blocked back, and the arm extends similar to a volley. The trajectory is 4 to 5 feet (1.3 to 1.5 m) over the net, and the returner should try to place the ball deep in the court. The player should practice making the return from the baseline (optimal location), focusing on a shorter takeback, greater extension of the arm, and a firmer wrist.

Coaching points: Some players prefer to hit aggressively on every return, but this type of return should be used when a player did not get a good read on the serve or when the serve is effective. Placing a conservative return back in the court is better than executing an aggressive shot from a defensive position that results in an error. Returning from behind the baseline, the player has space for a great deal of movement, enough sometimes to run around a shot, take a longer backswing and swing (normal groundstroke swing), and use maximum wrist snap. The pace on this return is generated mostly by movement and the normal groundstroke swing (rather than the pace of the ball).

Target practice: The player places the target cones on the court. The angle and lack of pace of the crosscourt location gives the opponent many options, so unless the crosscourt location is the server's weakness, it is not used. For down the line, the player hits with a later contact point (more over the front foot) and with a more open racket face to create a higher trajectory to clear the higher net down the line. The follow-through is similar to an extended volley technique.

Coaching points: As the server moves up, placing the return becomes difficult and the blocking aspect of the drill becomes more prevalent. However, players should strive to continue the goal of trying to place the block because doing so provides a better chance to stay in the point.

RETURN LOCATION

Purpose: To learn to recognize when to hit each type of return based on serve-receive location.

Procedure: The coach or partner hits serves from the normal serving position on the baseline to the player standing in the normal return position. The server hits a variety of serves (flat, slice, and topspin or kick serves). After 5 to 10 returns

(continued)

Return Location (*continued*)

at the normal position, the player moves behind the baseline, on the baseline, or inside the baseline as dictated by the player's success rate on each type of serve. The server serves 5 balls each to the T, the body, and the out wide locations. The returner focuses on hitting returns from the different locations near the baseline: offensive from in front of the baseline, neutralizing from on the baseline, and defensive from behind the baseline. The player receives 1 point for each ball returned from the correct court position. The server can help judge the position of the return to determine each point. Players practice to 10 points.

Coaching points: This drill helps returners understand the potential benefits of each return location. For example, a kick serve may be easier to return from a defensive position to avoid the high bounce. Plus, a player may have greater success returning inside the baseline and may want to adopt a more offensive return.

CRICKET

Purpose: To develop consistency in returning to a specific location, regardless of whether the return is defensive, neutralizing, or offensive.

Procedure: The coach or partner hits serves from the normal serving position on the baseline to the returner, who stands in the normal return position. The server hits serves using a variety of serves (flat, slice, and topspin or kick serves). The returner must make a return to each location (crosscourt, down the middle, and down the line) from each possible return position (in front of the baseline, on the baseline, and behind the baseline).

LIVE BALL DRILLING

The next progression in drilling is to pit server versus returner. This live ball setup will further develop players' skills by testing them in different pressure situations. In a match setting, the server wants to be confident in the effectiveness of the serve and ability to hold serve. On the other hand, the returner wants to be aggressive or at least neutralizing in the location and type of return with a goal of breaking serve. The following drills help the player continue to practice the techniques and targets from the different serves and returns with the added advantage of an opponent, who acts as a barometer for the player's progress in these areas.

TARGET

Purpose: The server develops a serve that disrupts a returner's game plan. The returner practices executing the return to the desired location, regardless of the type of serve.

Procedure: The returner and server designate one or more locations for the returner to hit regardless of the serve. The returner sets up cones in the target area or areas. The server and returner then play games in which the server hits a variety of serves to different locations. If the returner makes the return to the target area, the returner receives a score of 15-0; if the server forces the returner to miss the intended location, the server gets a score of 15-0. Only the serve and return are played in this game; the point is not played out. Players can play a set in this fashion or play points to 11 or 15.

VARIETY

Purpose: The server improves accuracy while determining the possible return options. The returner adds variety to the return game.

Procedure: Two players play points, consisting of only a serve and return, in which the server hits to only one location: out wide, into the body, or down the T. The players determine the most likely return location or percentage play (see page 188 in chapter 10 for help) and then agree on acceptable alternative returns or locations. Off the serve, the returner tries to hit an agreed upon return to a predetermined location. The server gets a point if the returner produces an error (hits the return out wide or into the net). The returner gets a point if an alternative return is played. No point is earned if the returner produces a shot to the expected location. The first player to 7 wins.

Coaching points: The server's goal is to maintain accuracy, consistency, and effective technique while mentally cataloguing the types of returns coming back off that serve. The returner's goal is to maintain consistency while mixing up the return game just enough to score points and keep the server from winning.

SECOND SERVE GAME

Purpose: The server practices the second-serve situation and learns to win points without the big first serve. The returner practices focusing on aggressively attacking a second serve.

Procedure: Two players play a game to 11; the server can only use one serve. When playing this game the server can use any serve desired, but it is better to focus on a particular location each time. The returner practices hitting aggressive attacking returns off a variety of different types of second serves.

Coaching points: The main point of emphasis here is the fact that the server has one serve. The server's tendency will be to hit the one serve to a comfortable location. However, to learn to rely on different serves in crucial situations, the server should try to develop different serves and hit them to different locations.

FIRST- AND SECOND-SERVE PLUS-MINUS GAME

Purpose: The server practices making effective first and second serves. The returner practices hitting effective returns off both the first and second servers.

Procedure: The server hits a first serve and a second serve to the same box (deuce, ad). Each serve is considered a point. If the server wins both the first and second serve to the same side, then the server receives a plus 1 score. If the returner wins 1 of the 2 points, the score does not change. If the server loses both points, the server receives a score of minus 1. The server tries to get plus 5, and the returner tries to get the server to minus 5. When the returner plays this game, the goal is to neutralize the first serve without overhitting and put as much pressure as possible on the server's second serve.

Coaching points: With two evenly matched players, this drill can be challenging. While performing this drill, the returner will quickly highlight a couple of key points for the server: The server can't win this game without a high first-serve percentage or with a weak second serve.

BREAK, NO BREAK GAME

Purpose: To focus the server's ability to hold serve and the returner's ability to break serve in pressure situations.

Procedure: One player serves, and the other returns. Players flip a coin or spin a racket to see which player serves first. Using normal scoring, up to three full games are played. The goal of the server is to hold serve, in order to focus on breaking the next game. The goal of the returner is to break serve. A win is awarded when a player holds serve after breaking an opponent. If both players continue to win their service games or there is no hold after a break, then the competition can keep going as is or it can switch to a tiebreaker format, in which a break, no break format is used for points instead of games.

Coaching points: This drill highlights the mental ebbs and flows of the server and returner. The mental shift needed from trying to break an opponent to holding serve can be challenging. The tendency for many players is to relax after breaking their opponent's serve and then not pay proper attention to their own serve. Also, good tennis players adjust when they are down; the idea that a player may go down a break is threatening.

GOALIE GAME

Purpose: To learn to return serves from every part of the court.

Procedure: The returner starts deep behind the baseline. The coach or partner serves from the service line on the other side of the net. The game is played to 5 points. The server is trying to score with an ace or service winner. The goalie, or the service returner, is trying to make five saves, or returns. For every return made, the returner steps forward and attempts to make a save from the new spot.

Coaching points: The returner should work to measure the returns with shorter and shorter backswings when stepping closer toward the net.