

8

CHAPTER



SPECIALTY SKILLS



Everyone involved with tennis has at some point watched or played in a match in which someone runs as fast as possible and hits an improbable shot; everyone is stunned and surprised that the player ran for the shot at all, not to mention hit a winner. When players are put into a poor defensive position, it is important to know how to get out of trouble. It takes an awareness of the opponent's position on the court, the right shot to hit, and the balance and movement needed to hit that ball correctly. Whether it is an unbelievable lob, drop shot, or shot hit from the outside of the alley, the specialty shots are nice additions to a player's game. These scenarios don't happen that often, but it is good for players to be ready when the time calls for them.

Specialty shots can boost momentum and mentally wear down an opponent. They can be used to establish a player as someone who can make great shots when in trouble. These shots can also give the player an edge in the third set, by making the opponent try too hard out of worry that the player will come up with a tremendous shot and steal the match away. The following scenarios provide examples of how specialty shots can effectively serve as game changers and swing the momentum in a match:

- A player hits an unbelievable approach shot to the opponent's backhand. The opponent backs up and looks to be in trouble. The player no doubt hopes for an easy ball to volley into the open court. But suddenly, the opponent hits a lob. The player leaps in the air to get it but the shot goes just over the tip of the player's racket and lands inside the baseline.
- A player, who has been trading groundstrokes, out of nowhere executes a perfect drop shot, giving the opponent little or no time to react effectively.
- A player on a dead run executes a miracle shot from outside the alley, showing the opponent he cannot be easily defeated.
- A player runs full speed and hits a winner into the open court off what appears to be an unreturnable shot.

This chapter covers the lob, the drop shot, the passing shot, and desperation shots. The technique to hit these shots and the impact they have on the opponent are also covered. These shots are not usually practiced. Chapter 9 provides the drills to help players practice them.

DEVELOPING SPECIALTY SHOTS

Specialty shots such as the lob, the drop shot, and the passing shot can be used quite a bit during play depending on the opponent's game style. Hit correctly and effectively, the lob and passing shots create doubt in an opponent who is a net player and may force this player to make more errors and go for too much. Therefore, the opponent may think twice about transitioning to the net and may end up playing to the player's style. The ability to hit a drop shot technically correctly also keeps opponents from establishing any rhythm against the player; it keeps them on their toes. Desperation shots are tough to develop in the same way that a player can work on the other specialty shots because of the lack of practice with them. The need for a desperation shot is variable and unpredictable in match play. Still, a player with athletic skills can learn how to use desperation shots as game changers.

The drop shot is used to help a player take control of the point, so it can be considered offensive. The defensive lob, the passing shot, and desperation shots are technically considered defensive because the player is reacting to a shot. If a player has a good top-spin lob, passing shot, or desperation shot, it can feel more offensive and may even be

considered a weapon. When executing one of these shots, the player's goal is to go for a winner or execute a shot that leads to the player getting back in the point. If a player has particular weaknesses in these strokes, they may always be considered defensive.

SPECIALTY SHOTS AND STYLES OF PLAY

Just as there are different styles of play, there are also variations of specialty shots for each style. As the player continues to develop a style, incorporating certain specialty shots can enhance that player's effectiveness. For example, the aggressive baseline player could improve by learning to hit a drop shot. Players who are effective at specialty shots within their style take their game to a higher level.

- **Aggressive baseline play.** The aggressive baseline player loves to use overpowering groundstrokes to move an opponent around the court and dictate play. The aggressive nature of this style makes for an interesting use of the drop shot. In many ways, this shot takes the player's game to another level. The combination of power groundstrokes and a finesse shot such as the drop shot is lethal and becomes a part of this style's variety. Since the inside-out groundstroke is prevalent in today's game, the inside-out drop shot is becoming a widely used shot to disrupt the rhythm of the opponent. The lob and passing shots used by this style of player are usually aggressive and offensive.
- **All-court play.** Because the all-court player uses variety as a weapon, this player would use specialty shots offensively and defensively, depending on the situation. The all-court player should be adept at hitting penetrating groundstrokes, but this player also has a finesse component to the game. The all-court player is skilled at specialty shots and has the variety of shots to win. The all-court player can execute an inside-out drop shot or a drop shot that lands in front of the player. The all-court player can hit lobs offensively or defensively. This is one of the differences between the all-court player and the aggressive baseline player; the aggressive baseline style is designed for power, not finesse shots. The passing shots are hit offensively, but not necessarily for outright winners—the passing shots are hit to look for the next ball. Finally, the all-court player's desperation shots display a depth of athleticism and an ability to control the ball.
- **Serve-and-volley style.** Specialty shots are an integral part of the game of a serve-and-volley style player because the goal of this player is to get to the net as often as possible and end the point quickly. The serve-and-volley player is adept at specialty shots such as the forehand and backhand drop volleys, lob volleys, and a wide variety of overheads, including the backhand overhead, bounce smash, bicycle smash, hook overhead, between-the-legs shot, and scoop shot. Specialty shots can help distinguish the serve-and-volley style player.
- **Rallying baseline play.** The rallying baseline player would use these shots but as part of defensive play or in keeping the rally going. Specialty shots are just another part of this player's repertoire, which include angles, drop shots, defensive lobs, and differing blends of heights and speeds on the ball. The rallying baseline player uses the drop shot when the opponent appears to be in a defensive position. The lob is hit mainly defensively but is strategically placed, so the net player is not able to hit as offensive an overhead as is desired. Being that rallying baseline players do not have big weapons to accelerate the ball with, they must rely on their foot speed and varying the height of their shots combined with taking pace off their rally balls.

- **Defensive play.** Defensive players like specialty shots such as slice forehands (especially the squash shot and backhands), defensive lobs, and drop shots. They excel at hitting short and deep in the court because it happens frequently to them as a result of their opponents attacking their short balls. Defensive players hit forehand slices including the squash shot and backhand slices because they are stretched out and retrieving the ball. They use the drop shot as a means to end the point quickly because they don't think they can rally well enough or counter an opponent's game. The drop shot becomes a desperation shot for this style. Defensive players often use the lob because they are almost always in a defensive position in the court or in a rally where they are reacting to an opponent's offense. Defensive players are very good at taking pace off shots and making opponents hit additional shots to win a point.

TECHNIQUE FOR SPECIALTY SHOTS

When they learn how to properly execute specialty shots, tennis players can add variety that takes their game to the next level. They can learn to hit a passing shot or lob to defend against a player who comes to the net or learn how to hit a drop shot that throws off an opponent. The best way to learn these shots is to initially think of them as defensive shots. In other words, learn how to hit them in order to combat any style that comes up. Then, for further development, the player can learn how to use the more aggressive versions of these shots to add the element of surprise for the opponent.

Movement on these shots is critical to being able to play them offensively as well as defensively, giving the player more options when the situation presents itself. The techniques of the shots are variations of other shots. For example, the topspin lob is a form of the high, heavy shot. The passing shot is a groundstroke that is hit more on the run or with the added pressure of a player at the net, and the drop shot is a shorter version of the blocked shot approach meant to wrong-foot an opponent. (For a review of the techniques of these strokes, see chapters 1 and 2.)

Lob

The lob can be performed on either the forehand or backhand side and has two purposes: One is to stay in the point by playing defense, and the other is to offensively give the net opponent a shot that is hard to return or will produce a weak or defensive reply.

A defensive lob is usually played when the opponent has hit an offensive shot that has the player on the run and out of position. A player can play a slice lob or a lob hit high in the air with no spin, that allows the player to regroup and get back in the point; if it is played well enough, it may give the opponent a tough shot to put away, so the player can run over and hit a passing shot or another lob. A player who lobs well is very frustrating to play against. When coming to the net, this player creates doubt in an opponent because the opponent must cover not only a possible passing shot but a lob as well.

Players want to be able to hit defensive lobs well enough to break up the opponent's rhythm and also as a way to go on offense. When an opponent isn't consistent at putting away overheads or is inept at transitioning to the net, a player can use short shots to bring the opponent to the net and then lob strategically to have the upper hand when the opponent is at the net or away from a strong position. Note: This strategy is likely to backfire at higher levels of play because the players are too strong.

The topspin lob is considered an offensive lob. It is hit when the opponent approaches the net and the player is in a relatively good position on the court. The offensive lob is hit when the player has time to run over and hit the shot with offensive technique. This is usually accomplished near the singles line on either side and near the baseline. This lob can also be hit closer to the middle of the court and landing deep (near the baseline). The player can play the offensive lob like a normal groundstroke when the ball bounces a little higher, or even if the player is pushed back in the court and is on the back foot.

Another type of offensive lob is the bunt lob, which is hit when the opponent is approaching but hasn't gotten set yet; the player hits a flat ball that catches the opponent moving forward and not expecting the lob. This shot is usually hit as a backhand slice. However, some players perfect the on-the-run forehand slice to the point that they can hit an offensive forehand slice lob, but this is rare.

Bunt Lob

Defensively, the bunt lob is often used when the opponent has hit a deep volley and the player is not in good enough position to hit a topspin lob or passing shot; the only option is to block it or push it back in the court. Offensively, this type of lob is used to catch a player off guard at the net and to hit over the net player's head. It is used when a player doesn't have time to set up for a topspin lob or doesn't want to be defensive. Serve-and-volley style players or all-court players who have good hands (feel for the ball or control of the ball) and instincts usually hit this shot because this shot has similarities in preparation to the volley. This type of lob is also very effective as a return in doubles (see chapter 11).

Preparation and Backswing For the bunt lob, the player uses a Continental or Eastern forehand grip. The stance can vary from closed if in a more offensive position to more open if on defense. This shot is hit from on or near the baseline. The preparation for this shot is similar to that for the block shot approach but without the forward momentum. The racket is brought back with the racket face open and straight back to a position where the player can then move the arm forward from slightly low to high. For the defensive bunt lob, the backswing is shorter (see figure 8.1), and the technique is similar to a high volley taken from deeper in the court (just inside the baseline to midway between the baseline and service line). The racket goes back, and the ball should have no spin so that it is pushed or blocked outward and upward through contact, and the face of the racket is open.



Figure 8.1 Shortened preparation for the forehand bunt lob.



Figure 8.2 Forward swing for the bunt lob.



Figure 8.3 Follow-through for the bunt lob.

Forward Swing and Contact The racket face is open and moves from a low to a high position. The player swings straight through the shot upward with a flat hit that is firm but controlled (see figure 8.2). The body stays in control and balanced with weight transferring forward when possible. The player is contacting the ball in the rally or attack points of contact and in the lower- or midlevel strike zones.

Follow-Through The racket movement follows the ball's trajectory in a low-to-high fashion or slightly straight through the ball (see figure 8.3). The racket ends up around the shoulders on the opposite side.

Backhand Slice Lob

The slice lob is mainly hit with the backhand. This shot is not hit often, but it can be effective because it gives the player time to recover. The player can use this lob when the opponent is up at the net and hit a volley that has the player way off the court on the backhand side. Any player who has learned to hit a slice can hit this shot.

Preparation and Backswing The player usually stands on the baseline or slightly behind it. The grip for the slice lob is the Continental or Eastern backhand grip, and the stance is more closed. On the backswing, the racket is higher with the racket face in line with the oncoming shot. The player can hit this shot from all stances. Players who are out of position may have difficulty executing this shot. It works best with good balance. Although balance on this shot is ideal, if a player is scrambling to get in position, the preparation could be a slide into the shot or preparing the legs with whatever balance is possible.

Forward Swing and Contact In the forward movement, the player pushes upward from the back leg, the body moves forward, and the racket head moves upward. At contact, the racket face is open, and the wrist is firm. The contact point is the rally or defensive point of contact, and the strike zone is in the lower- and midlevel strike zones.

Follow-Through The follow-through continues upward and finishes above the opposite shoulder. The back arm extends backward to maintain balance.

Offensive Topspin Lob

The offensive topspin lob is another form of a very effective passing shot. When executed well, it is a valuable weapon. Andy Murray is the consummate counterpuncher and has a great topspin lob to keep an opponent guessing as to what his next shot will be. Because he is so effective at counterpunching shots from an opponent, this shot is not seen until it is too late for the net player to react.

Preparation and Backswing The player should be near the baseline or slightly behind it in a location that is near the alleys or slightly farther back from the middle hash mark. The grip and the preparation are the same as those used for the topspin groundstrokes. The backswing is the same as for the groundstroke, but in some cases it might be a little quicker or shorter, depending on whether or not the player is in place for the shot. This shot is hit from the mid- to lower-level strike zones. To hit this shot effectively, the racket needs to drop under the ball and then accelerate quickly upward. The racket face is turned downward or slightly closed prior to progressing upward. The knees are bent, and the body weight goes backward to maximize the use of spin (see figure 8.4).

Forward Swing and Contact In the forward movement (see figure 8.5), the player uses the same technique as for a high, heavy topspin shot. This shot has a lot of spin. The contact point can be defensive if the player wants to incorporate more legs on the shot, or rally if the player wants to drive the ball upward and use a stroke with a higher trajectory than the high and heavy topspin shot. The strike zone should be lower-level or midlevel.

Follow-Through The legs unload on the follow-through, and the racket face continues upward and forward with great acceleration. The finish is higher than normal, and it is above the shoulders (see figure 8.6).



Figure 8.4 Preparation for the topspin lob.



Figure 8.5 Contact on the topspin lob.



Figure 8.6 Offensive topspin lob follow-through.

Drop Shot

The value of the drop shot is its element of surprise. This shot is hit well by players such as Novak Djokovic, who has an aggressive baseline game that mixes power with finesse. Djokovic can use this shot as a way of enhancing his power game. Strategically, the drop shot can be used to bring an opponent to the net who doesn't like to volley or is uncomfortable at the net. The drop shot is used most effectively when the opponent is recovering after a shot and is stuck deep in the court. It is usually hit delicately. The success of the shot depends on the player's execution, the opponent's court position, and speed around the court.

The player can hit this shot in front of the body just over the net, at an angle, and inside out. The inside-out drop shot is derived from players using the inside-out forehand. It can be disguised if the player lines up as if about to hit an inside-out forehand, takes the normal backswing, and instead of hitting it normally, cuts the swing and places a ball inside out just over the net.

Preparation and Backswing The forehand or backhand drop shot requires either the Eastern or Continental grip. The player should be in front of the baseline when playing this shot. To surprise the opponent, the player's stance should be the same as for the regular groundstroke (figure 8.7). The player takes the racket quickly back, slightly higher than the level of the oncoming ball, with a quarter turn and a shorter backswing, in a manner similar to that for the block shot.

Forward Swing and Contact The racket face is open and travels down (see figure 8.8) and across the ball for underspin, from low to high for backspin, or from right to left for a right-handed player and left to right for a left-handed player for side spin. Which spin to use depends on what type of drop shot the player is trying to hit. A great drop shot can be played three ways. With underspin, it goes over the net and softly bounces three to five times on the service box. With backspin, it goes over the net, stops or rolls back to the net, or in some cases, bounces on the opponent's side and comes back over the net. With sidespin, it bounces on the opponent's side of the court and goes off the court after that bounce. The contact point needs to be in a position that is comfortable for the player. The drop shot can be hit from all three contact points and strike zones but is best hit from the low- to midlevel strike zone.



Figure 8.7 Preparation for the drop shot.



Figure 8.8 Contact for the drop shot.

Follow-Through The follow-through is short and ends slightly in front of the body. The face of the racket is open at the end of the movement (see figure 8.9). The body is balanced.

Passing Shots

A passing shot is meant to catch the net player out of position or give the net player a shot that is impossible to put away. The technique for a passing shot is the same as for regular groundstrokes. The difference is that the player is facing an opponent in an aggressive position at the net, limiting the space to get a shot by the opponent. Passing shots are usually hit on the run. They require balance and knowing just how much space is available to hit the shot successfully.

A variety of passing shots exist. Three commonly used types include the ripper (which is aggressive), the dipper (which is part one of a two shot pass), and the open-court passing shot. The ripper is usually attempted when the player is pulled off the court, and the goal is to hit a winner because it's the only option for winning the point. The ripper may also be hit directly at the opponent with the intention of getting a short ball to attack or forcing an error with the pace. The dipper should be the goal when the player is trying to set up an easier ball on the next shot. The short dipper is usually hit when the player is not in a good enough position to hit an aggressive shot but may be able to hit it at the opponent's feet in hopes of getting another more aggressive passing shot on the second ball. The player uses the open-court passing shot when seeing an opening while the opponent is at the net.

Justine Henin has a great passing shot. Her variety of shots and her quickness to the ball make it difficult for opponents to get in the proper court position in time. Both her backhand and forehand are hit confidently and can be hit as short dippers, rippers, or into the open court.

Preparation and Backswing The open stance is mainly used when hitting passing shots, but it is possible to be in good enough position to hit in a closed stance. The grip and backswing technique depends on the type of stroke (forehand or backhand) and possible spin on the shot (slice or topspin). A flatter drive passing shot is a good choice on the aggressive passing shots. Topspin is better for short dipping shots because the player can dip the ball at the opponent's feet, which makes it difficult to get to the ball. Players usually hit the passing shot and the short dipper from near the baseline or slightly behind it and toward the alleys. The short dipper can be used inside the baseline and at an angle that allows the dip to just drop over the middle of the net and sink down.

If ample time exists, the aggressive and dipper passing shots can be prepared the same way. If the player has less time, the shoulders make more of a quarter turn, and the backswing is shorter. The player should try to prepare early to adapt the length of the backswing to the oncoming ball. The player uses a longer backswing if going for a normal passing shot and a shorter one if planning to use a shorter, more accelerated groundstroke, which requires less backswing and a smaller loop to produce the dipping shot.



Figure 8.9 Drop shot follow-through.



Figure 8.10 Contact for a passing shot.

Forward Swing and Contact The forward swing and contact depends on the speed and spin of the oncoming ball and on the direction of the shot (down the line or crosscourt). The ripper is hit with power and with a blend of topspin and a lower trajectory (see figure 8.10). The forward swing for the short dipper is shorter and is accelerated more upward in a shorter arc going low to high. The swing path of the racket is similar to those of the groundstrokes for the aggressive passing shot but shorter and less extended for the dipper.

When hitting aggressively crosscourt, the contact is in between the attack point of contact for the crosscourt ball and the rally point of contact for hitting down the line. When hitting the short dipper, the player uses the hands more to feel the shot. The dipper is meant to catch a player before getting in a great position.

Follow-Through The follow-through on passing shots is similar to that for a normal groundstroke, and the follow-through for a short dipper is abbreviated with greater acceleration used. The swing path of the racket during the follow-through is extended on the aggressive passing shot and closer to the body on the short dipper. For the aggressive passing shot, the finish is similar to that for a normal groundstroke; for the short dipper, it is across the body.

Desperation Shots

Desperation shots are notable because they can get a player out of a bad situation. Usually, the opponent has hit a ball that is over the player's head, has the player on a dead run moving backward or forward, and forces the player to come up with a miraculous shot to win the point. A desperation shot that is hit running forward is hit with an incredible angle, as a down-the-line shot out of the opponent's reach, or occasionally as a lob.

The desperation shots hit moving backward are the desperation lob shot, the tweener, and the slap shot. The tweener is hit between the legs, facing away from the net. This shot was made popular first by Yannick Noah, and today is a specialty shot used by many of the top professionals, including Roger Federer. The slap shot is a difficult specialty shot that is played over the back of the head, waist high, and to the side of the body. It is hit with great balance, feel, and can catch the opponent off guard. Following are some key points for players who need to play one of these shots.

On-the-Run Forward

When in this desperate situation, the player should get the racket in front of the body while running. In most cases the player barely gets to the ball, so the shot the player is able to hit depends on the perceived opening. This shot is usually made in the lower- to midlevel strike zones and uses the attack point of contact, just before the ball touches the ground.

The player can hit the desperation shot at an angle, through an opening to the side, or as a lob. This shot should be hit at an angle when the player is on a dead run and feels able to just barely get it up and over the net. This is usually executed with a flick of the wrist. Then the player hopes the shot is executed well enough or that the opponent gets caught out of position enough for the player to win the point. If time allows, the player may want to consider hitting the desperation shot forward or in front. This is the highest-

percentage play in this situation, because if and when the player gets it back in the court, it gives the player the best court positioning at the net.

A desperation lob forward must be hit with ample time for some adjustment of the body and the hand. The desperation lob is usually hit when the opponent is already at the net, so preparation and movement are critical. The trajectory of the ball must clear the opponent and still land before the baseline, so it requires great feel.

Desperation Lob

Players must sometimes use the desperation lob because of poor court positioning or because the opponent hit a great shot. The appropriate time for a player to use a desperation lob is on a dead run and with only the time to try to get the ball back up in the air. Desperation lobs are primarily hit in the lower- and midlevel strike zones and in the rally or defensive points of contact.

Tweener

This shot is hit when a ball goes over the player's head at the net. Both players could be at the net already, or this could be a blocked lob that goes over the player's head. The topspin lob, however, is difficult to hit as a tweener because it travels too far away from the player once it lands. As the player turns and runs for the shot and is getting close to the ball, the player decides whether it is possible to get in a good enough position to hit a ball backward between and through the outstretched legs.

To execute this shot, slight adjustment steps are made just before contact to make sure the body position allows the shot. This shot is executed on the baseline or behind the baseline. In the preparation the racket is above the head with an Eastern backhand grip, then it goes downward through the legs. The body is slightly forward to allow a little room for the racket to travel. The player swings downward and flicks the wrist back and through the legs. This ball is contacted close to the ground (about 1 foot, or 0.3 m) in the lower strike zone and between the legs. The follow-through is upward between the legs. The player usually jumps upward and forward at the moment of impact.

Slap Shot

This shot is hit on both the forehand and backhand sides, and it is played when a lob is hit diagonally over the player's head and the tweener is not an option. The player runs back as fast as possible, but this time adjusts the body enough to contact the ball at the side of the body behind the head. The player runs with the racket out and basically slaps or flicks the wrists backward, hoping to get enough of the racket head on the ball. The shot is made in the upper-level strike zone and in the rally point of contact or as close to the body as possible.

For mid- to lower-level balls the racket is prepared in front and at the same level of the head or slightly above, and then it goes downward to the contact point. The player can also hit this shot from the side at knee level or slightly higher for a higher shot. This type of shot is used at the net and requires great feel. When the player is in an outstretched position, this shot is usually used when a lob volley is hit over the player's head but not that deep in the court and subsequently at a lower trajectory. The wrist is flicked backward, but from the side of the body.

USING SPECIALTY SHOTS

How and when to use specialty shots is important to the overall success of the shots. The player can use the drop shot as a tool to get an opponent on the defensive. The inside-out drop shot is used when a player has hit an inside-out forehand, the opponent hits a shorter crosscourt reply, and while the opponent is recovering, the player scoots into the

court and hits a drop shot that will wrong-foot the opponent. The drop shot hit behind the opponent is also effective when the player wants to test an opponent's movement forward on the run. Because this shot is hit down the line, the opponent is hitting over the higher part of the net. If the opponent is quick, more options will be available, such as a drop shot back to the player, an angled drop shot, or an easier groundstroke. The one thing to recognize is that the player is using the greater height of the net on this shot, so it is necessary to play it with a little more loft; the player's goal is to get the opponent unbalanced and forced to hit a weak crosscourt shot that the player can put into the open court.

On lob shots, the player can trick the opponent into thinking the next shot is a groundstroke and then push a shot over the opponent's head. Placement and ability to disguise are key to the success of this shot. If the player develops a strong topspin lob, it is possible to disguise the lob so that it looks similar to a groundstroke. In this fashion, the opponent at the net doesn't know if the player is hitting a groundstroke passing shot or a topspin lob until the last second, when it may be too late to adjust.

Passing shots also have a way of making an opponent unsure of how to attack. Finesse type passing shots such as the dipper are meant to be disguised and keep a net player from getting a good strike at the volley or out of position and off balance. If the player's movement is efficient, the player has more options as the opponent approaches. If effective, the more aggressive passing shot can make a net rusher alter the game. Knowing when to go down the line or crosscourt takes on a chesslike game in which two players are trying to figure out each other's next move.

MINDSET FOR SPECIALTY SHOTS

The mindset for the specialty shot game is predicated on ultimate defense and the flare for the fantastic. The thought process for defense is to get one more ball back in the court, to play scrappy defense, and to do anything to win. The more offensive and fantastic side of these shots is being a shot maker, a crowd pleaser, and someone who can come up with great shots. On the practical side it is nice for a player to know that they can come up with the right shot at the right time in addition to hitting an unbelievable shot.

In match play, a player is constantly looking for an edge and a way to get an opponent to give up or get frustrated. Hitting one of these types of shots is a way to effectively get in the mind of the opponent and make the opponent work harder to win a point. In the third set, when a player is looking for whatever edge will lead to a win, the player's effort on these shots may make the difference.

10

CHAPTER



SINGLES STRATEGY AND DRILLS



Playing singles tennis is a great test of a player's endurance, movement, court sense, weapons, instincts, and discipline in shot selection. Singles strategy and tactics help the player create a game plan in order to focus on the task at hand. A good singles player has been well coached or has figured out through trial and error what helps to win points. Reading this book can help players determine their favorite shots, how to hit the shots correctly, and the style they have confidence in. If that knowledge is clear, players' practices are more efficient, are more focused, and lead to better results.

Good, sound singles strategy and the intangibles discussed in this chapter can help players become who they want to be on the court. This chapter covers percentage tennis, foundational tactics, strategies, commonly executed shot patterns and opponent responses, and strategies for playing styles. It also guides the player and coach in how to formulate a personal game plan.

PERCENTAGE TENNIS

Before formulating strategies and tactics, it is important to understand the dimensions of the court and how they apply to high percentage tennis. A high percentage shot is one that clears the lowest part of the net and is hit toward the longest part of the court. Essentially a high percentage shot is one that has the best chance of allowing a player to make a shot or win a point. Singles tennis courts are 78 feet (23.7 m) long from baseline to baseline and 82.5 feet (25.14 m) long diagonally (see figure 10.1). When hitting a tennis ball crosscourt the player effectively has 4.5 feet (1.37 m; exactly the width of a doubles alley) of additional court to hit into which makes the crosscourt shot a high percentage shot.

The net on a tennis court is 3 feet (0.9 m) in the center and 3.5 feet (1.06 m) at the sides of the court. When hitting the ball crosscourt the player hits over the lowest part of the net. Crosscourt shots are the highest-percentage shots. Balls hit straight up the middle of the court are the second best percentage plays, and balls hit down the singles lines are the lowest-percentage plays. The net is the first opponent that the player has to beat. If the player misses shots in the net, then the opponent does not get the opportunity to hit the ball. For this reason the best misses are wide or long, but never in the net.

In tennis the player has two serves. Making the first serve is critical. Making a high percentage of first serves keeps pressure on the opponent by requiring a consistent return on a ball over which the player has total control. On the return of serve the player has one or sometimes two looks at the opponent's serve. The player makes the opponent continue play by returning the opponent's serve into the court. In terms of percentage play, the best way to direct returns is crosscourt or up the middle of the court. When leading in the score of a game and receiving a second serve, the player should try to put time pressure on the opponent by hitting the return quickly or taking the return up the line.

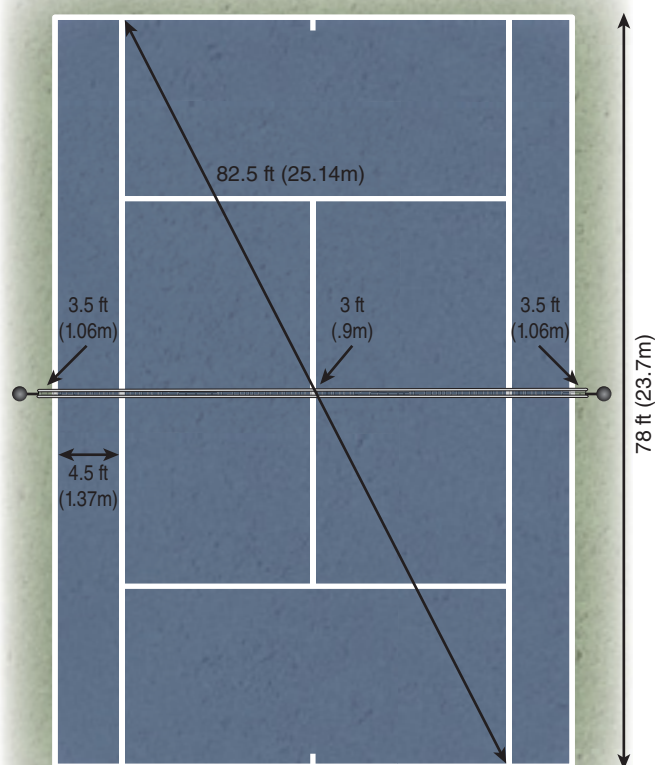


Figure 10.1 Court measurements.

Approaching the net can put pressure on the opponent in two ways: forcing the opponent to move in a direction that encourages an error, and lessening the opponent's available response time. The rules of percentage play still apply, but if choosing to hit crosscourt in the transition from the baseline to the net, the player had better hit a winner or a highly effective shot. Upon reaching the crosscourt ball, the opponent may choose to hit down the line, giving the player less response time. When a player hits crosscourt to create angle, the opponent has an easier time passing or lobbing over the player. A neutralizing transition shot hit up the middle is not a bad play; it makes it harder for the opponent to create an angled passing shot.

Although it is a lower-percentage shot, the up-the-line transition actually helps the player set up to hit a volley or overhead on the next ball. If the opponent now chooses to pass the player up the line, the player is there; if the opponent goes crosscourt, the player has time because of the longer flight path of the crosscourt pass to move and put the volley away.

SIX FOUNDATIONAL PILLARS FOR STRATEGY AND TACTICS

Players should be able to perform the following six foundational pillars (also called *ball controls*) at the level appropriate to them. Once they have accomplished this step, players are ready to learn tactics and formulate strategies. They can also perform a style of play and improve as competitive players.

Pillar 1: Consistency

Consistency can lead to getting the ball over the net once more than the opponent. Being consistent can lead to feelings of confidence, too. Each time players elevate to a higher level of play, they should try to establish consistency at that level. The following guideposts help players develop that consistency.

- **Basic.** Try to get the ball over the net as often as possible.
- **Intermediate.** Work to be able to hit 50 balls up the middle of the court.
- **Advanced intermediate.** Be able to rally 75 to 100 balls up the middle of the court with varying degrees of spin, including moderate topspin or underspin.
- **Advanced.** Be able to hit, with personal choice of spins, 100 or more balls up the middle or to whichever part of the court is desirable.

Pillar 2: Depth

Players should target three spots along the baseline: deep to the forehand corner, middle of the court, and deep to the backhand corner. Players can use the following guideposts to develop their ability to hit for depth.

- **Basic.** Play the ball deep by being able to hit the ball past the opponent's service line while hitting from behind the baseline.
- **Intermediate.** Be able to do the same as the beginner level but use moderate topspin or underspin shots.
- **Advanced intermediate.** Be able to hit 10 deep balls total to any of the 3 depth spots.
- **Advanced.** Be able to hit 10 deep balls in a row to any of the 3 spots and then alternate hitting 10 balls in a row to all 3 spots.

Pillar 3: Direction

Hitting the ball in the intended direction and being able to place the ball on the court where the player wants it to go, signifies a degree of confidence. The player is now starting to focus on *where*, not *how*, to hit the ball. Players can use the following guideposts to develop their ability to hit in specific directions.

- **Basic.** Be able to direct the ball up the middle of the court.
- **Intermediate.** Be able to alternate hitting 50 balls from one half of the court to the other.
- **Advanced intermediate.** Be able to hit 75 to 100 balls to one half of the court and then the other.
- **Advanced.** This level can consistently rally hitting 100 or more balls to the forehand and backhand corners.

Pillar 4: Height

The ball height over the net is often misunderstood by beginner and lower intermediate players who, because of the camera angle on television from behind the court, incorrectly assume that the professional players are ripping every ball an inch or two (a few cm) over the net. Good players know that clearing the net is very important both for consistency and for creating higher-bouncing balls. The closer a player is to the net, the lower the ball is over the net. The appropriate height for these shots is roughly one to two racket face widths above the net. The farther away a player is from the net, the higher the ball needs to be hit to keep it deep into the opponent's court. For this type of shot, the ball should be anywhere from three to five racket face widths over the net. Players can use the following guideposts to develop their ability to hit for height.

- **Basic.** Depending on level of control, be able to hit on average anywhere from 1 to 10 racket widths over the net. The aim is to be able to get the ball over the net and sustain a rally, so a higher net clearance is needed.
- **Intermediate to advanced intermediate.** Be able to vary heights hitting into the *four square*—each one of the four squares on the opponent's side of the net—at will.
- **Advanced.** Be able to have the full range from 10 or more racket face widths for a topspin lob to 1 or 2 racket face widths over the net on a passing shot. Advanced players are able to control height and are more skilled to handle an opponent's shots.

Pillar 5: Spin

Players hit with these types of spin: topspin, underspin, backspin, sidespin, and flat (even balls hit flat have moderate forward spin on them). Each type of spin has varying levels. Players can use the following guideposts to develop spin in their shots.

- **Basic.** Be able to hit with little or no spin.
- **Intermediate to advanced intermediate.** Learn about and practice topspin, underspin, and backspin. These players should be able to demonstrate ten of each type of spin while being fed from a basket.
- **Advanced.** This level of player can blend spins creating difficulty for their opponents. Advanced players should be able to play the Simon Does game. In this game, they match the spin that their opponent is hitting to them.

Pillar 6: Pace or Speed

When players go out to rally with a friend they use a rally speed with each other, designed to keep the ball to each other and maintain a rally. Once they get good at playing at a rally speed, they can vary the speed of play in various ways. The first is taking speed off the incoming ball (*deflating*), such as by adding height and spin or by softening the grip on the racket. The second is increasing speed (*inflating*), such as by hitting the ball harder or flatter, or by gripping the racket slightly tighter. Players can use the following guideposts to develop changes in pace or speed in play.

- **Basic.** Develop a rally speed by learning how to rally consecutive shots in a row, starting at the service boxes and backing up to the baseline. About 10 to 25 shots from inside the service boxes, midcourt, and baseline are achievable goals at this level.
- **Intermediate to advanced intermediate.** Be able to start differentiating between slow (30 to 50 percent of maximum possible speed), moderate (50 to 70 percent), and fast (70 percent and up) swing speeds. These levels of players should practice swing speeds by playing the Red, Yellow, and Green Light game. In this game, players call out the color representing the speed they are swinging. Green is fast, yellow is moderate, and red is slow. Players must remember that the slower they hit the ball, the higher they need to aim over the net.
- **Advanced.** Be able to inflate or deflate incoming balls. Players can practice in pairs; one player deflates each shot while the other inflates each shot.

COURT POSITIONING GUIDELINES

When rallying, transitioning, or volleying, the player should always try to position the body by taking more adjusting steps than appear necessary to meet the ball in the ideal strike zone and point of contact for that particular shot. Doing so keeps the player continually trying to get into an improved position when hitting the ball. Knowing where to stand helps the player to anticipate the most likely return of shot from the opponent and cut down on the number of steps needed to meet the ball. The following sections highlight various shots and how court positioning affects them.

Groundstroke Balls Hit to the Middle of the Court If the player and opponent are hitting the ball deep up the middle of the court to one another, then the player should be positioned in the middle of the court and behind the baseline. A groundstroke played through the middle can be played to get a rest in a rally, to reset the point, or to create less of an angle for the opponent's following shot. A player who hits a groundstroke to the middle of the court can also take that opportunity to get in a better court position to set up an attack with the forehand.

Groundstroke Balls Hit Crosscourt When hitting crosscourt from the baseline, the player should remember that the highest-percentage play for the opponent is for the opponent to hit back to where the ball came from. If the player hits a forehand crosscourt with good pace and depth to the opponent, then the player can be positioned about 1 foot (0.3 m) off the center hash mark crosscourt on the forehand side. If the player plays a backhand crosscourt, then the player anticipates the ball to come back to the backhand side and should be positioned just off the center hash mark crosscourt on the forehand side. If looking for a forehand, the player may want to be positioned midway between the center and the alley.

Groundstroke Balls Hit Down the Line When hitting down the line the player is hoping to hit a winner, hit an aggressive shot, or just change the direction of the shot. If the player does not hit the winner or if the opponent is quick and gets to the shot in time, then the player should immediately start getting into position on the opposite side of the court and be ready for a potential crosscourt reply. Court positioning may also dictate that the player transition to the net following a groundstroke hit down the line, especially when the opponent is late getting to the ball.

Transition Shots Transition shots are best used when the player expects or gets a good read on a potential opportunity and when a player is used to closing out a point. The player should be positioned inside the baseline for the following situations.

- The opponent is hitting softly.
- The player is trying to lessen the opponent's response time.
- The opponent is in a long rally with the player and is getting tired or nervous, and the player expects the opponent to hit the ball short.
- The player is playing an opponent who likes to hit the ball short on purpose by using drop shots and soft slices.
- The player has just hit a great shot and sees a defensive reply coming back over the net.

As a rule, unless the player is hitting a winner during the transition crosscourt, the player should keep the ball up the singles line. The correct positioning after the transition is to take two or three steps in the direction the shot was hit and adjust using the split step, waiting for the opponent's response.

First Volley and Second Volley In singles tennis, the first volley can be hit up the line to keep the ball in front of the player, then the second volley is hit into the open court. The player's volley location can vary, so when the player does not have an effective enough crosscourt shot, hitting down the line or keeping the ball in front of the body gives the player time to get positioned. Regardless of whether the player hits crosscourt or down the line on the first volley, the player should move 1 or 2 feet (0.3 to 0.6 m) from the middle of service box toward the location of the volley. Based on the effectiveness of the first volley, the player may want to move toward the net to anticipate and cut off an angle, or to stay in the current position if anticipating a lob or a down-the-line shot.

Overheads If the player notices that the opponent throws up lobs well, the player should not close all the way into the net but stay near the service line toward the side, about 1 or 2 feet (0.3 to 0.6 m) from the middle. The player will be in a better position to put the overhead away.

Retrieving an Overhead and Backhand Smash When a right-handed opponent is hitting an overhead, the player should anticipate that the natural sidespin on the overhead will go to the player's right if the opponent is right-handed and to the left if the opponent is left-handed. If the opponent hits it to the non dominant side, the opponent has hit the harder overhead. If the player successfully hits a lob over the opponent's backhand side, the player should move in a couple of steps to force the opponent to angle the ball sharply crosscourt or retrieve the ball from the direction that it came down the line. Most aggressive overheads will be hit off the court at an angle crosscourt, inside out, or straight down the middle. When an opponent moves back while hitting an overhead, the player should look to retrieve the smash down the line from that overhead. Most retrieval positions are nearer to the baseline for a better lob and farther back behind the baseline for a poor lob.

Return of Serve A right-handed server's natural spin takes the ball to the returner's forehand side, and a left-handed server's spin goes naturally to the returner's backhand side. So, the returner should be positioned in the direction that the serve naturally travels. In other words, the returner should move more to the right when playing a right-handed player and more to the left when playing a left-handed player.

For more powerful, flatter serves coming through the court, the returner should move back. This move should not occur too soon or the returner will be open for an ace out wide. Just as the server tosses the ball up in the air, the returner should back up. The same move is necessary against a really strong kick serve. If the server is aces the returner to one side, the player should get ready to return in the location where most of the aces have occurred in order to take that spot away from the server. Thus, the returner can force the server to go to a different location to break up the server's rhythm.

Serve When left-handed players play against right-handed players, they position themselves wide on the ad side to create a more severe angle to the opponent's backhand. Right-handed players can do the same thing on the deuce side: By standing a bit wider and serving out wide, they can hit a challenging serve to return for left-handed opponents. Varying the position on the serve can keep opponents guessing where players will serve next.

FOUR PHASES OF PLAY

Anytime a rally ensues, the player is jockeying for position. Presumably, the player wants to play more offensive tennis and put the opponent on defense. However, this is often determined by the strength of the opponent's shots, the player's and opponent's movement in the court, and the effectiveness of their shots. The notion that the player can play offensive shots all the time is wishful thinking; in reality, the player needs to be smart regarding shot selection and must be able to blend offensive shots with neutral shots, counterattacking shots, and defensive shots to properly construct a point.

A simple way to learn the four phases of play is to attach colors to the coordinating phase of play. Knowing the types of shots to hit in each phase of play and the responses to those shots can greatly enhance a player's intelligence and anticipation skills on the court. A green phase of play represents the attacking phase, or a *Go* situation, during which the player can play offensively. The red phase of play is defensive, during which the player can buy time to attempt to reestablish the point, such as by using a defensive lob. A yellow phase of play is the rally phase, during which the player can hit a shot to set up another shot or the player can take a red ball and, with good preparation, make it a yellow one. Counterattacking phases of play are orange because the player effectively turns around a defensive situation and makes it an offensive one, such as with a reflex volley that gets the opponent off balance.

Attack Phase of Play

In this phase, the player is on offense. The player sees that the opponent is in trouble from the last shot that forced the opponent to be out of position or on defense. This situation gives the player confidence to either place or attack the ball for a winner. An opponent's shot that gives the player a green phase is usually a ball that lands inside or near the service line or is hit more slowly, which gives the player a better chance to be offensive. The choices on a green phase shot are a winner or a shot hit with power, an approach shot, or a shot with which the player can improve court position and keep the

opponent on the defensive. The attack phase of play is usually played with flat drives and aggressively played topspin shots that have a lower trajectory over the net. The shots are hit for depth or angles.

Even though an opponent's shot can signify an attack phase for the player, ultimately the player's racket preparation and movement to the ball determines the execution and success of the shot. An attacking shot for which the player is not properly prepared or to which a player moves poorly, turns into a yellow ball. This situation is equal to a missed opportunity in a rally. The player should always focus on when an opponent makes a mistake in a rally. A mistake at any level is a poorly hit ball or a ball that lands short, where the player could take advantage of the opponent. A player who focuses on this aspect and is able to effectively execute the desired shot shows signs of being intelligent and opportunistic with an attacking mentality.

Rally Phase of Play

In this phase, the player is comfortably and consistently hitting spots on the tennis court. For example, the player can win matches by maintaining a consistent ball speed and running the opponent all over the court. An opponent's shot that allows the player to rally is hit with medium speed and usually lands between the baseline and the service line. A rally shot is played offensively when the player is in good position for the shot and can use a weapon and defensively when the player's preparation was late or the player got a late read on the ball. A rally shot, usually a neutral type shot, can also be played more offensively if the player has good movement or has an attacking style of play. For example, an offensive player can use rally shots as an opportunity to be more offensive by running the opponent with this type of shot.

Another time to play a rally ball is when the player prefers to be more patient or does not feel as though the court position is strong enough to be more offensive. The best way to improve a rally ball situation is to hit with power or depth and location. In addition, the player can take standard rally balls on the rise, giving the opponent less time. The player can also use a high, heavy ball or a ball hit with more angle to be more offensive. A player can use a rally shot to set up a point by hitting a shot that has the chance of leading to a more favorable and offensive shot on the next ball. In other words, the rally shot can be the shot before the offensive shot; it makes the offensive shot possible. Players who give their rally shots a purpose in this way have an effective strategy for building points.

When a player misses an opportunity to be more aggressive with a yellow ball, the player turns the reply into a red (defensive) shot. A common mistake tennis players make is feeling they have to or want to go for too much on their shots even when they are in a bad position in the court. Striking a delicate balance between going for too much or too little takes a great deal of patience. One could call it *controlled aggressiveness*; it is a good mentality to adopt when playing points.

Defensive Phase of Play

A red ball is an opponent's shot that forces the player to play a defensive shot. This ball usually lands near the baseline. It could be a ball hit with great spin that bounces out of the player's strike zone, or it could be a shot hit when the player's movement was poor. With defensive shots, the player tries to stay in the point to establish or reestablish more favorable court positioning or an advantage. To keep the opponent from going on offense, the player should look to clear the net with some extra height and spin.

Hitting a defensive shot doesn't mean the player can't hit a shot that leads to getting back on offense; as a matter of fact, that is the player's goal. The player's goal should

be to hit offensive high, heavy replies crosscourt, or up the middle if a defensive shot is preferred. If the player is on the run or out of position, then using a shot with greater loft or trajectory, giving the player ample time to recover, is sufficient. Often recovering back in the court after a deep shot from an opponent can help the player gain an advantage for subsequent shots.

Court positioning in a defensive position is usually behind the baseline or off the court. The player should pay attention to where the recovery is made after hitting a defensive ball. The player should focus on recovering closer to the baseline in order to be better prepared in the event of a short ball, a weak reply, or the possibility for an attacking shot. If the opponent is continually putting the player on the defensive, or if the player's game style is more patient, then hitting balls with greater depth or with spin and power can sustain the player in the point until the player gains an advantage. Defensive shots in which the player is in a bad position or does not properly execute a more offensive shot can keep the player on the defensive and give the opponent an advantage.

Counterattacking Phase of Play

This phase of play is when the player attacks from a defensive position. For example, a player is being run by an opponent and is on defense. The player goes for broke, hitting a shot with added pace, spin, and placement designed to go on offense. An example of an counterattack would be when a player's opponent hits a drop shot. Upon reaching the ball, the player is on the defensive and tries to get the ball over the net. The opponent approaches the net and sees that the player is in trouble. The opponent expects an easy put-away volley, but instead the player lobs the ball up over the opponent's head for a winner.

Another great counterattacking position is deep behind the baseline. Usually a player tries to give the ball some height and depth, attempting to keep the ball deep in the opponent's court. Sometimes if a player sees an opponent approaching the net, the player can aim lower over the net and dip the ball at the opponent's feet with additional spin, forcing the opponent to volley or half volley the ball up and over the net; here, the player can move in and go on offense.

The effectiveness of the counterattacking phase of play is based on the player's reflexes, reactions, and ability to counter an opponent's strengths. The counterattacking phase is also based on hitting a riskier, more aggressive shot off an opponent's aggressive shot, so the player's counterattacking skill needs to be advanced. The real goal is to surprise the opponent with aggressive play and possibly force an error. The counterattacking phase of play hits any type of shot that shortens the opponent's available reaction time and uses all different heights, spins, and locations. The art of the counterattack is about what shots the player develops to counter and how they fit into the player's style, such as a serve-and-volley style player who learns how to counterattack aggressively and is constantly looking for different ways to get to the net.

COMMON PATTERNS OF PLAY AND OPPONENT RESPONSES

Tennis is a game of strategy. Players must be aware of where they are on the court, where the opponent is positioned, and where the ball is. One move in tennis can set up another move; one shot can set up another great shot.

Service Patterns

When playing points, the service patterns are used to set up the player's best strategy. When players know that serving to a particular location will likely produce a particular reply, they can then begin to anticipate and be more offensive as players. The out-wide serve, the body serve, and the T serve are all effective, especially when the server mixes up the serve or uses opportune moments to hit a particular serve, such as hitting out-wide serves in the beginning of a game and then going to the T on a big point.

Out-Wide Serves

Ideally when serving wide the player wants the serve to land as close as possible up the singles line near the net and move off the court to pull the opponent wide and outside the court.

Opponent's response: An opponent who catches a great out-wide serve late is forced to hit down the line. If the opponent is early and can get the racket head on the outside of the ball, the opponent is in a position to go big crosscourt or up the middle of the court.

Jam or Body Serves

A serve hit at the opponent's body may create problems for the opponent. The body serve can handcuff an opponent and may keep the returner from achieving a full swing. A well-executed jam serve can make the ball unreturnable because it is placed intentionally into the left hip of a right-handed player and the right hip of a left-handed player.

Opponent's response: If the opponent is quick to move around the ball, the return can be a forehand. It is also possible that the returner likes body serves and can direct them to any location. Most of the time the player feels handcuffed by the serve, in which case the server should anticipate a potential mishit or short ball.

T Serves

Serves hit up the T line (where the centerline connects to the service line) give your opponent little time to react and generally results in a ball coming back through the middle of the court.

Opponent's response: If the player has hit a serve up the T that has stretched the opponent, then the ball will come back up the middle of the court, setting up the player to attack on the next shot. If the opponent is early taking the ball, then the ball is hit up the line.

Return Patterns

Return patterns are used to give the player the best possible position to start the point, neutralize an opponent's serve, and minimize the server's next shot. Returning crosscourt or down the middle are the most used return patterns (mainly offensive or neutralizing), and the down-the-line return is mainly used in either an offensive or defensive position. Most players prefer a particular return pattern, but it is important that players use variety on return patterns.

Deep Return Crosscourt, Down the Middle, or Down the Line

Players use deep returns crosscourt because the net is lower in the middle, there is more court to use, and it is the best return for starting a rally. The main consideration on the deep crosscourt return is whether the player is able to hit it with power and depth.

Opponent's response to the crosscourt return: If the player returns deep crosscourt, the opponent will generally hit the next ball back crosscourt. If the player returns a sharp angle crosscourt, depending on the opponent's strengths, the opponent will hit an angle back crosscourt or hit down the line to make the player run. A poorly hit crosscourt return can lead to an easier transition ball for the opponent.

Opponent's response to the down-the-middle return: After a down-the-middle return, the next shot generally comes back down the middle of the court. If the return is short, the opponent will be in a strong court position to win the point.

Opponent's response to the down-the-line return: The most common response off a down-the-line return is hitting the ball crosscourt, so it is vital that the return has power and depth and keeps the opponent from hitting aggressively crosscourt and putting the player on the run. If the return is strong, the player can look to sneak in on a floating shot. If a right-handed server is serving to the deuce side, a well-hit return down the line forces the server to rotate the body completely to reach the ball that is moving behind the body. The response may be a floating shot that is directed back toward the center of the court. The returner can take advantage of this floating shot by taking it out of the air and directing it into the open court. On the ad side a return hit down the line to a right-handed server will be going to that server's forehand. Since a later point of contact is possible on the forehand side, the server often can direct this shot more sharply crosscourt. Again, if the returner hits a great return down the line, then the returner moves forward for what will be a defensive reply.

Short Return Down the Line, Middle, or Crosscourt

The player is now taking advantage of the opponent's second serve, or maybe the player is up in the score, or perhaps the player is just feeling creative on a particular play. Either way, if used wisely, the short return can be very effective. This return is effective also if the server doesn't move forward well.

Opponent's response: If the opponent has anticipated a short return to any location, the opponent will be there quickly and hit the ball wherever is desired. However, if the opponent does not get off to a good start, the player can look for the next shot to be a low-angled crosscourt shot hit over the lowest part of the net. On a ball down the middle the player will have to guess whether the ball will sit up above the net. If the ball is low, the opponent is going to hit the ball shorter into the court and to the player's perceived weaker side. Anytime a player hits a really short ball by accident, such as a net roller, or intentionally, such as a drop shot, the player should move in a couple of steps because the opponent will be forced to lift the ball up over the net, causing the ball to land short in the court.

Groundstroke and Net Play Patterns

When a player faces a competitor of similar ability, the clock is running to see who can figure out the correct combination of patterns to win the match. Figuring out what is working with an opponent increases the player's focus and confidence when competing. Each of the following patterns may also be increased incrementally. For example, instead of a 12 pattern, the player can make it a 13, hitting 3 balls to the backhand first before hitting to the forehand.

One-to-One Pattern

A one-to-one pattern is alternating one shot to one half of the court and the next shot to the other half of the court (see figure 10.2 on page 198). This pattern can be used to open the court to hit a winner or to transition and play at the net (attacking phase), to repeatedly run the opponent on the baseline (rally phase), or to counter an opponent's aggression by shortening reaction time or changing the pattern of attack (counterattacking phase). It may also be used with increased height and spin to buy more time when the player is put on the run (defensive phase). The following are some pattern examples:

- Alternating crosscourt and down-the-line groundstrokes (all phases)
- An inside-out forehand followed by an inside-in groundstroke (attacking or counterattacking)

- An inside-out forehand followed by a backhand down-the-line (attacking or counterattacking)
- Transitioning to the net with a crosscourt groundstroke followed by an approach shot to the other side of the court or down the line (attacking)
- Executing a deep volley that produces an overhead (attacking)
- Serving out wide and then hitting a groundstroke or approach shot to the open court for either a winner (attack phase) or with the goal of getting the opponent out of position and keeping the opponent running (rally phase)

Opponent's response: If the player is running the opponent left and right, the opponent will try to step it up and go for something big to stop the prolonged agony of being run into the ground. The player should be on the alert for a counterattack: sudden increase of speed or direction as the opponent tries to put the player on defense.

Two-to-One Pattern

The Two-to-One pattern is two shots hit to one side of the court followed by one shot hit to the other side (see figure 10.3). This pattern is generally used when the player is attacking with a goal of wrong-footing an opponent to create an opening, or rallying to use shots to expose a weakness. A great way to use this pattern is two shots hit to the opponent's weaker side followed by a surprise shot hit to the opponent's strong side. For example, against a right-handed player with a powerful forehand, this pattern would go

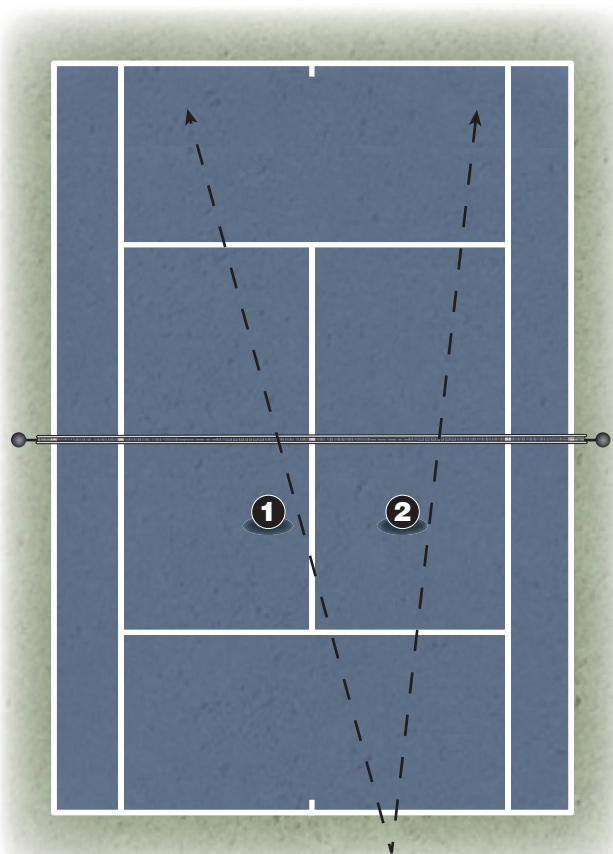


Figure 10.2 One-to-one pattern.

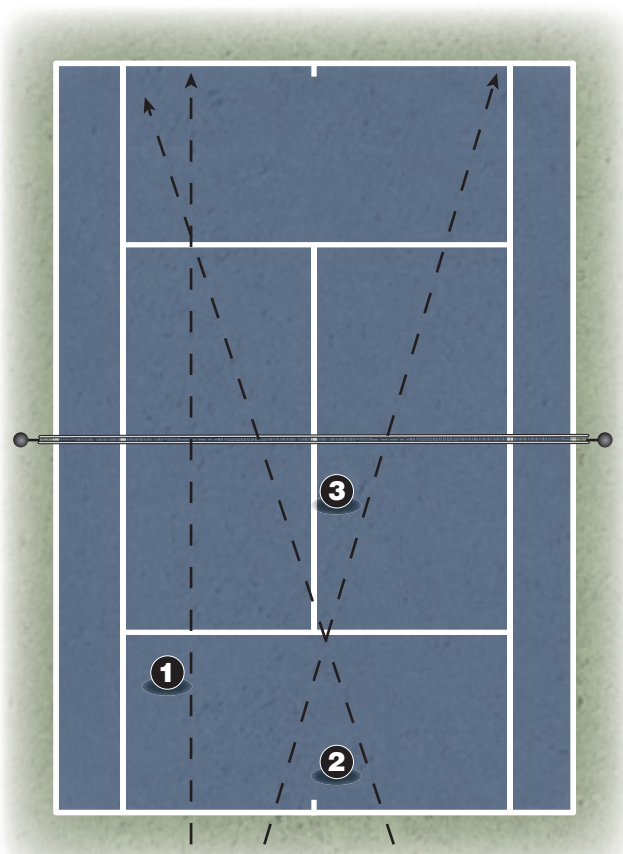


Figure 10.3 Two-to-one pattern.

crosscourt to the backhand twice, followed by a shot to the forehand. If challenging an opponent's strength, the player may choose to hit two balls to the opponent's strength and then attack the opponent's weakness. Here are some additional examples of the two-to-one pattern:

- The player hits two groundstrokes crosscourt (to a groundstroke weakness in the opponent) and then one out to the opponent's strength in the hopes of opening up the court and further exposing the weakness.
- When transitioning, the player uses two groundstroke shots to pull the opponent in a certain direction and then uses the transition shot to potentially put the opponent on the run.
- When in net play, the player hits two volleys to pull the opponent back or off the court and uses another shot as a put-away.
- The player serves out wide and then hits a groundstroke to the same area (potentially going behind the opponent, who will be running to get back in the court) and then follows with a shot to the opposite corner of the open court.

Opponent's response: A smart opponent will try to make it more difficult for the player to get two shots to the opponent's weakness by staying as long as possible on the weaker corner in hopes of running around the weakness. Hitting to the side of the court that is opposite to the opponent's strength can then open the weakness up for attack.

One-to-Two Pattern

The one-to-two pattern is one shot to one half of the court and two shots to the other half (see figure 10.4). As with the two-to-one pattern, this pattern is used for attacking and rallying. The player starts by opening up the court with the first shot, followed by a shot to the opposite side, forcing the opponent to run. The third shot is hit to the same location and behind the opponent as the player is moving back to the center of the court in anticipation of a one-to-one pattern. A player can implement this pattern in several ways:

- The player can hit one groundstroke crosscourt (to open up the court or expose a weakness), followed by two groundstrokes down the line.
- When transitioning, the player can use the first groundstroke to go down the line (to open up the court), followed by a crosscourt volley into the open court and either a second volley or an overhead to the same location; for example, back behind the player as the opponent moves to cover the other side of the court.
- The player can serve out wide and then hit two groundstrokes to the opposite corner.

Opponent's response: The opponent should focus more on the first shot (return) and try to take away the server's court position and ability to attack effectively.

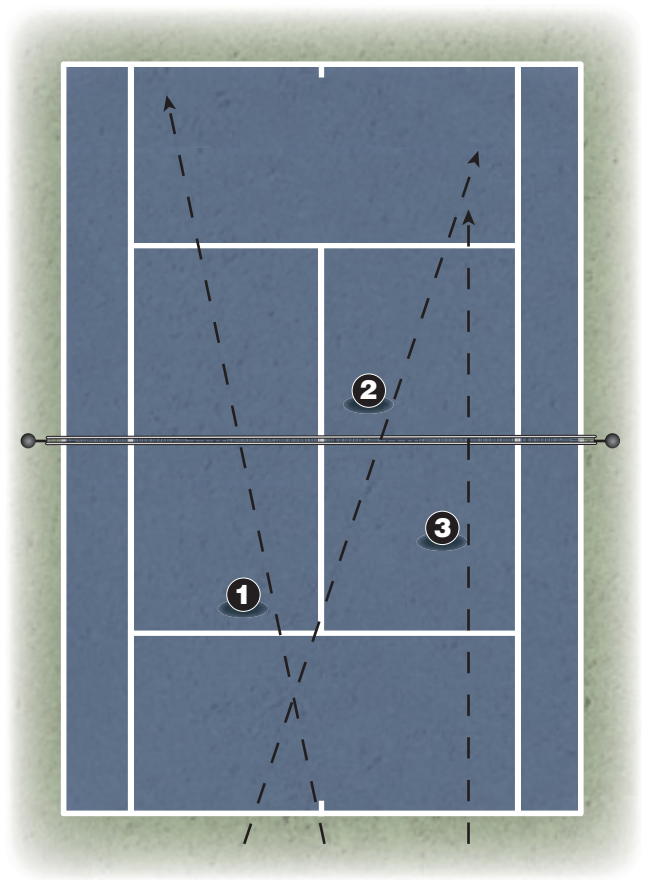


Figure 10.4 One-to-two pattern.

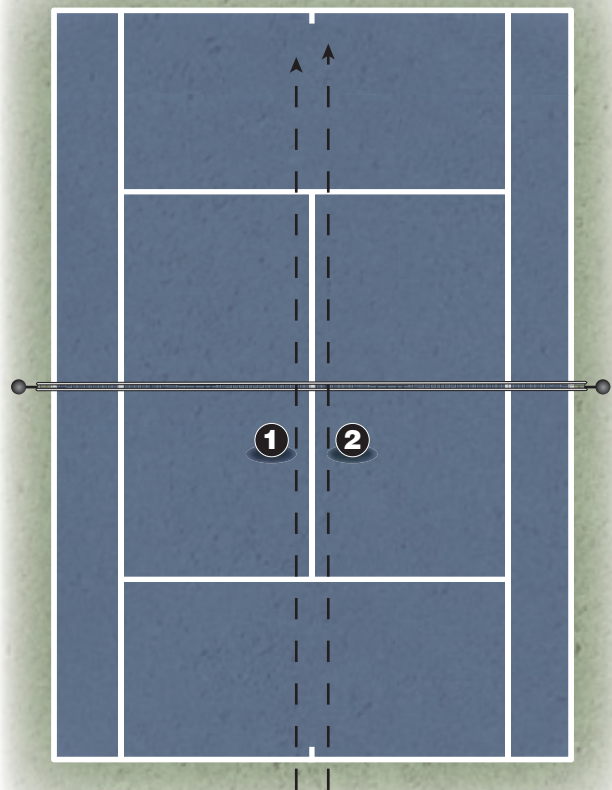


Figure 10.5 Neutralizing pattern.

Neutralizing Pattern

The neutralizing pattern is generally two or more balls through the middle of the court or mildly crosscourt (see figure 10.5), countering an opponent's pace or pattern by hitting deep up the middle to keep the player in the point and aid in recovery. When in the defensive and counterattacking phases of play, this pattern gives a player the most time to gain balance and focus to mount an attack or counterattack. This pattern can also be used in the rally phase to keep the opponent from being more offensive. The following are possible implementations of the neutralizing pattern:

- The player can hit groundstrokes through the middle that bounce higher, stay lower, or are just powerful enough to make it harder for the opponent to hit a more aggressive shot.
- A neutralizing volley can be hit from a defensive position (stretched out) to deep in the court and in a great location that allows the player to recover and hit an easier next volley or overhead.
- Neutralizing transition shots can be hit as a chip return (counterattacking phase) or as a slice transition shot (rally or attacking phase) to approach the net.

Opponent's response: If a player moves around a ball well, this player will try to get on offense (attack phase) by hitting a deep ball to one of the corners. The opponent may also play a rally shot to attack on the next ball.

STRATEGIES

Strategies are plans that give a player a sense of purpose when on the tennis court and that build on the common patterns of play. Simply put, the player executes shots in combinations that the player feels confident with and that help the player dictate play and win points.

The player's level of skill and specific shots (weapons) determine which of the following strategies to focus on and tailor to the player's individual style. For example, players who want to employ the strategy of pulling an opponent off the court should have a good inside-out forehand, have wide serves, and be able to use angles. Players can always add shots to enhance their game and add variety, but the strategy they should use most is the one that matches the shots they can hit consistently and with confidence.

All advanced strategy is based on fundamental strategy; advanced players are advanced because they didn't skip over the fundamentals. Understanding the true meaning of the shots and how they fit into the individual overall game plan gives the player a foundation of knowledge to build on. The following strategies build from fundamental to advanced.

Basic Strategy #1: Hitting to the Open Court

In this strategy, the player hits the ball to where the opponent is not standing. This strategy begins a player's development of soft focus, which is seeing where the opponent is while focusing on the player's own court positioning and the incoming ball. The player will start using ball control in an attempt to get the ball to the open court.

Common patterns of play: One-to-one pattern, hitting the ball deep, short, high, low (defensive, rally or attack phase).

Basic Strategy #2: Covering a Weakness

When the goal is to hit a weapon in a rally, the player can use the tactic of running around the weakness. Doing so takes great speed and athleticism. Consistently running around a weakness does not improve the weakness, so this tactic relegates a player to this style of play; all subsequent shots have to be developed to help that strategy.

The most popular weakness initially is the backhand, so the inside-out forehand is the answer. To effectively run around a weakness, the player must look for a short, midcourt ball with slower pace and more height. (The Three-Quarter Court drill in the upcoming strategy can help players practice covering for a weakness.) Alternatively, to set up the opponent to hit to a strength, the player can recover to the weaker side, leaving more room to hit the stronger stroke. Recovering to the weaker side also shrinks the court for the opponent, making it harder to hit it to the weakness. This is the goal of proper court positioning.

Common patterns of play: One-to-one, one-to two, and two-to-one patterns keeping the ball crosscourt as often as possible.

Basic Strategy #3: Weapon to Weakness

For most players, the serve and the forehand are the main weapons in their games. However, it doesn't mean a backhand, speed, or net play can't also be developed and used as weapons. Whatever the player's strengths may be, the goal when playing winning tennis is getting in position to hit a weapon to the opponent's weakness. The best way to do this is to use the three-quarter court strategy. This strategy says the player will try to be positioned midway between the middle hash mark and the alley on the baseline or near the baseline on the side of the player's weaker shot. The player will recover to this location on rallies, after a serve, and after a return. Because the opponent is hitting his or her strength, the opponent's net play could improve as a result of hitting a more effective approach shot, too.

Common patterns of play: One-to-one, two-to-two, two-to-one, and neutralizing (by keeping the ball up the middle of the court).

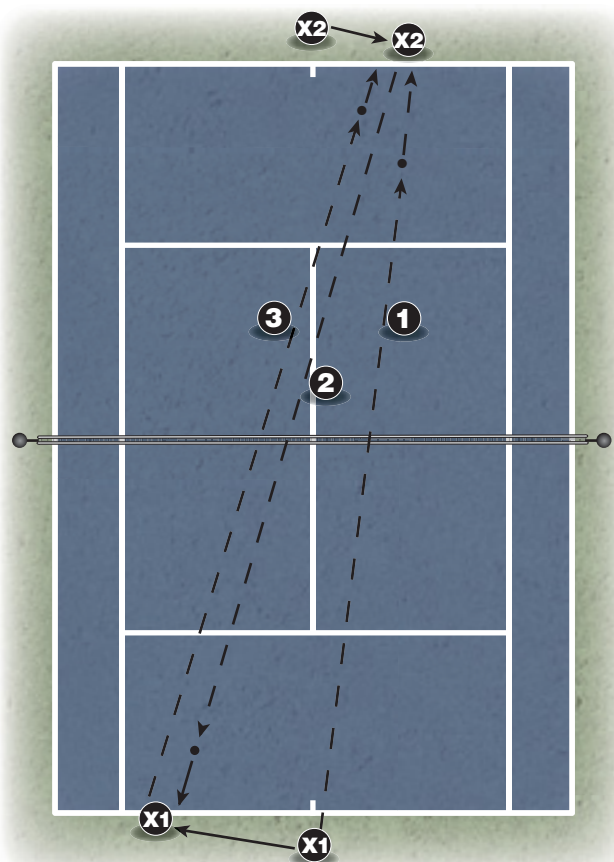


Figure 10.6 Hitting forehands from three quarters of the court.

THREE-QUARTER COURT DRILL

Purpose: To teach how to cover a weakness and use a weapon.

Procedure: Both players start in the middle of the baseline on opposite sides of the court (see figure 10.6). Player 1 feeds a ball to land midway between the middle of the baseline and the alley near the baseline. Player 2 runs around the backhand and hits a forehand inside out to midway between the middle of the baseline and alley near the baseline. Player 1 responds by running around the backhand and also hitting an inside-out forehand. After two inside-out forehands have been hit, the players play the point out whole court. The first person to 7 points wins the round; players play to the best of 5 rounds.

Coaching points: This strategy is usually used when the forehand is the weapon and the player wants to be in a position to hit more forehands in a match. For drilling to strengthen one's backhand, the player can also practice running around the forehand, but this is not recommended for match play.

Intermediate Strategy #1: Pulling an Opponent off the Court

This strategy is used to test an opponent's ability to move and also is a great way to open up the court. There are a variety of ways to pull your opponent off the court, including a deeper crosscourt ball or a shorter-angled crosscourt shot. A serve and return can also be played to pull the player off the court as well as a volley. How powerful and well placed this shot is hit, dictates the player's next shot. A weaker shot that misses its mark can give the opponent an easier next shot. A powerful and well-hit crosscourt shot can force an error or a short ball.

The goal of pulling a player off the court is to hit the next shot into the open court or behind the opponent to wrong-foot the opponent. Two very common plays are to hit a forehand or backhand crosscourt and then hit the next ball down the line. The player can use this strategy with the rush-and-crush strategy (Intermediate Strategy #2) to put additional pressure on the opponent.

Common patterns of play: One-to-one, one-to-two, and two-to-one patterns.

ALLEY DRILL

Purpose: To emphasize hitting the outside of the ball and opening the court to pull the opponent off the court.

Procedure: Each player stands on the deuce side of the court and behind the doubles alley on each side of the court. Player 1 feeds the ball into play and aims for player 2's doubles alley (see figure 10.7). Player 2 responds by also hitting to player 1's alley. After two alley shots are executed, the point is played in the singles lines only. Each player should hit on the outside of the ball with the intent of opening the court. The feed does not count as a point but every forehand crosscourt hit into the alley does count as a point. The game is played to 7 points and then switched to the backhand side. Players should also alternate between being player 1 and player 2.

Coaching points: Spin and height are essential for winning this game. The player should relax and continue to accelerate on the ball.

Variation: Players can play this game from around the service line to develop angles, midway between the service line and baseline to develop a heavy rally ball, and deep behind the baseline to practice hitting from a defensive phase.

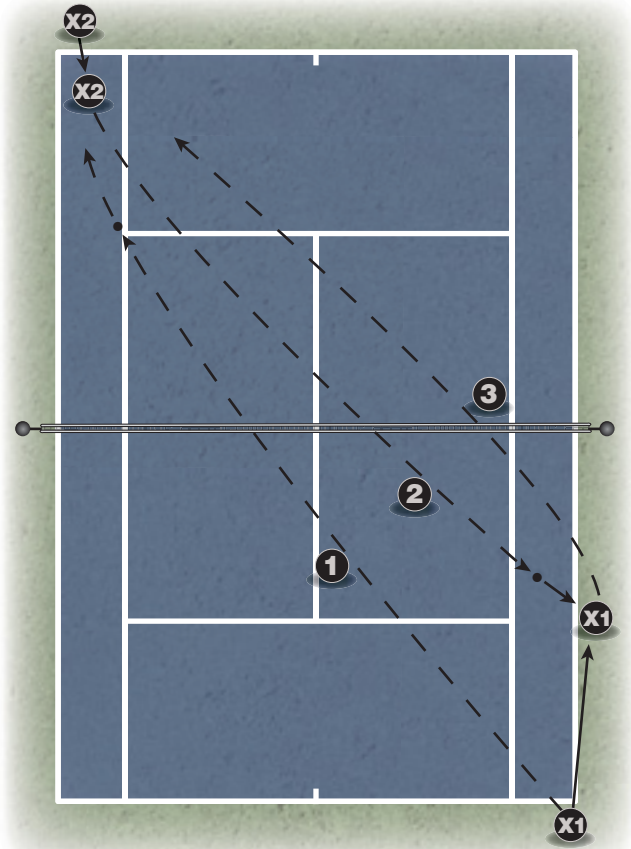


Figure 10.7 Hitting into the alleys.

Intermediate Strategy #2: Rush and Crush

With rush and crush, the player is looking for ways to get to the net. Several plays can be used to execute this strategy, starting with the serve-and-volley or return-and-volley. Or, the player can get an opponent on defense with a weapon and move in to hit a swinging volley or block volley. Another option is to throw up a high, heavy ball to the opponent's weakness and sneak in behind it. Or, the player can hit a drop shot, bring the opponent forward, and then lob over the opponent, approaching the net as the opponent runs back to recover the shot.

Common patterns of play: Serving and volleying, chipping the return or hitting and coming in, or transitioning shots of any kind are used to rush and crush. With the strategy of rushing and crushing, the player is taking every opportunity to get to the net, including one-to-one, two-to-two, and two-to-one neutralizing patterns of play. Players can also use short to deep shots to transition to the net.

CRITICAL CUE:

The player should split step just before volleying. When volleying, the player should open the racket face up. When hitting a swinging volley, the player should continue to swing from low to high.

WALK-IN DRILL

Purpose: To develop players' ability to volley from all parts of the court and on their way to net. This is a great decision-making drill for the *walking volleyer*, who must decide to block or swing at the incoming ball.

Procedure: Two players play out points crosscourt only. Player 1 serves crosscourt, and player 2 returns crosscourt. After the serve, player 1 walks two steps forward and then takes a transition volley out of the air followed by two more steps forward (see figure 10.8). If the reply from player 2 is within the recommended volley range, then player 1 volleys. If the reply from player 2 lands shorter than the two steps, player 1 can work on the half volley or block approach and keep advancing. The goal for player 1 is to practice volleying all the way from the baseline to the net. Player 2 continues to play crosscourt, reacting to player 1's volleys. If either player misses a shot crosscourt, they lose the point. Points are played to 11; one player is the volleyer for the entire game or alternates feeds every 5 points.

Variation: The player should not walk to the net but accelerate to the net, taking every ball out of the air. A scorekeeping variation is for player 1 to lose a point when missing a volley.

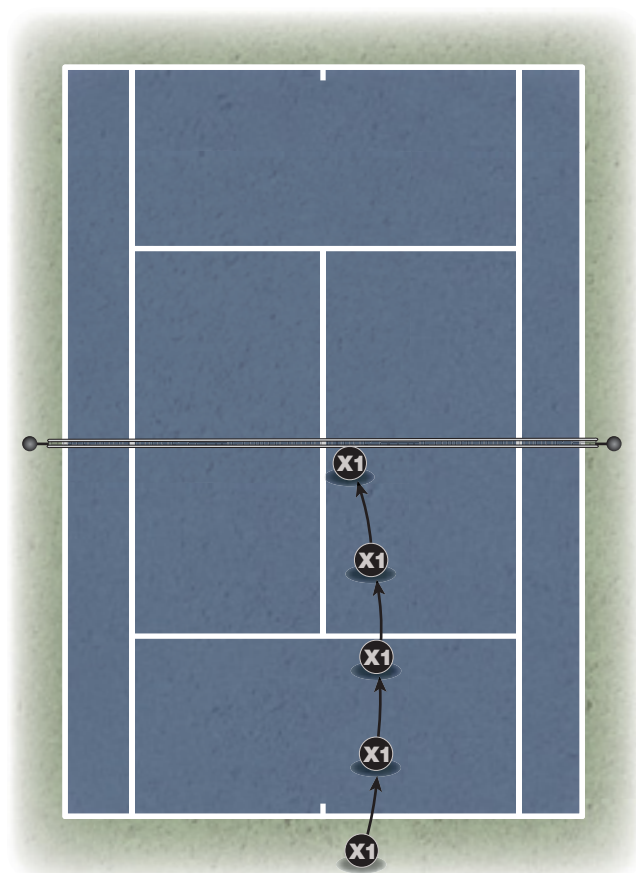


Figure 10.8 Player 1's movement to the net.

Intermediate Strategy #3: Running the Opponent Into the Court

Movement strategy is based on the fact that most tennis players either move better laterally, toward the ball, or around the ball. The most unusual movement for everyone is backward. While playing, the player should use shots that explore the opponent's movement strengths and weaknesses. The player should use the drop shot to check reaction time and speed to the ball forward. A high, heavy shot is a good test to see whether the player can effectively move back in the court. The player can use the one-to-one pattern to test lateral movement. The one-to-one pattern can also be used short and deep to test the ability to transition between forward and backward movement. Finally, the player can test the opponent's movement around the ball by hitting it right at them. Once the player knows the opponent's weaknesses, the player can execute patterns of play that have the opponent running in uncomfortable movement patterns.

Common patterns of play: One-to-one, one-to-two, two-to-one, and neutralizing patterns.

RUNNING THE OPPONENT

Purpose: To practice extended rallies and the patterns that create them.

Procedure: Two players set a rally goal of 4 shots each. The drill starts with one player serving followed by the rally phase. Once the rally goal has been reached, player 1 hits one of the test shots, such as a drop shot or slice, and the point is played out. For more of a challenge during the rally phase, player 1 hits all crosscourt shots while player 2 hits all replies down the line (see figure 10.9). Players play games to 7 points and then switch roles.

Coaching points: This is a cooperative style drill in which both players have a common purpose of reaching a goal and then battling one another. Maintaining the rally speed together is crucial or the common goal cannot be reached.

Variation: Players practice doing two-to-one and one-to-two patterns.

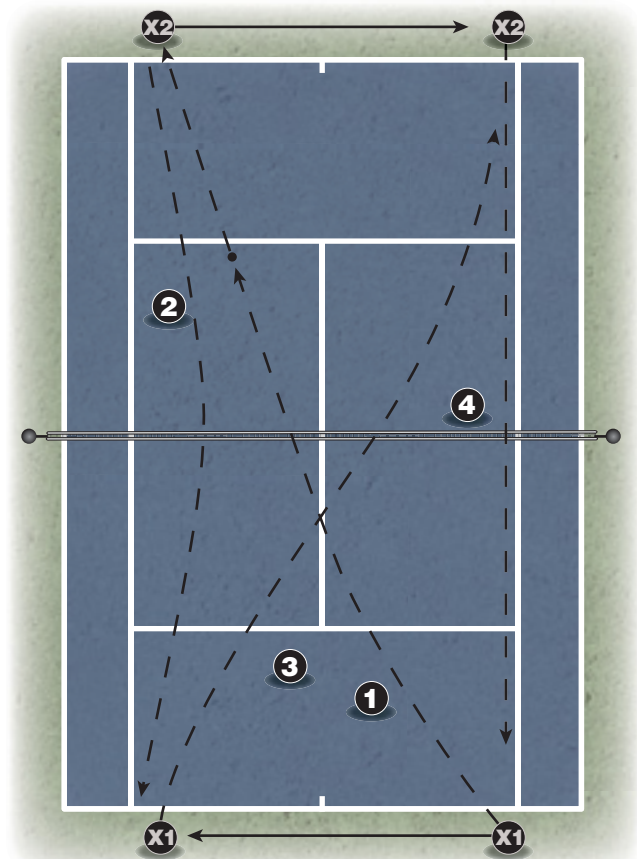


Figure 10.9 Rally phase pattern.

Intermediate Strategy #4: First Strike

First strike is using a weapon to put the opponent on defense early in the point so that the player can dictate from the start (as opposed to working one's way into the point). This strategy emphasizes a quicker point that doesn't allow for the opponent to get into a rhythm. First strike can be accomplished from the start by placing the serve in a location that puts the player in the best possible position to hit a weapon. Or, the player can return to a location that allows for using a weapon. Most players back up to allow themselves additional time to attack the return or to cover up their returning weakness. When into the point, hitting a shot behind the opponent can get the opponent off balance and set the player up for the winning shot.

Common patterns of play: Two-to-one and one-to-two.

FIRST STRIKE

Purpose: To practice playing quicker points to prevent an opponent from establishing a rhythm.

Procedure: The drill starts with one player serving to the other followed by a rally. The goal of the server is to end the point within four touches of the ball for either the server or the returner. The goal of the returner is to force an error from the server or survive the server's first four shots. The server earns a point for winning the point within four shots. The returner earns a point if the server errs or if the rally goes on for longer than the server's first four touches. The game should be played to 11 points. Players can alternate serving after every 5 serves.

Variation: Players can increase point totals for more aggressive first strikes, such as a serve and overhead winner or an ace on the serve.

Advanced Strategy #1: Hitting Shots to Set Up Strengths

Advanced strategies require players to do more. They require that the player start anticipating the responses expected off the shot that the player sent. If the player can anticipate the opponent's response, the player can use that information to place shots in the best possible position and reply with weapons. Here are some common ways to set up strengths:

- The player can hit a weaker shot down the line to have an opponent answer cross-court to a strength.
- The player can serve out wide on the ad side and look for a ball down the middle of the court.
- The player can hit a heavy ball to gain more time to run around a weakness and use a weapon.
- The player can hit a dipping ball or short ball on the opponent's feet to get a pop-up, which the player can move in and put away.
- If a player has great speed and passing shots, the player can hit a short ball and anticipate the next ball to pass the opponent, who has moved forward.
- The player can hit great lobs to make the opponent nervous about coming to the net.
- The player can hit a ball directly at an opponent at the net and look for the short ball to pass.

Common patterns of play: One-to-one, one-to-two, two-to-one, and neutralizing patterns.

HITTING SHOTS TO SET UP STRENGTHS

Purpose: To learn how to build a point and hit to a location that gives the best chance to use a weapon.

Procedure: Player 1 and player 2 rally crosscourt, working deep shots to the back corner. After an agreed upon number of crosscourt shots (usually two), the designated player says *Go*, signifying they are hitting down the line (see figure 10.10). After the player says *Go*, the point is played on a full court. Players play a game to 7 or 11 points, counting any misses as a point. Players should alternate feeds every 5 points. The same players repeat the process again for one full game, and then they reverse roles for the next game.

Coaching points: Most tennis players are programmed to hit crosscourt. A high, heavy ball hit down the line on the *Go* signal will give the player more time to recover. This drill also teaches patience and endurance. The receiving player has to read the opponent's intentions very carefully and try to anticipate the down-the-line shot.

Variation: Players play the initial rally hitting down the line and then hit crosscourt to start the point.

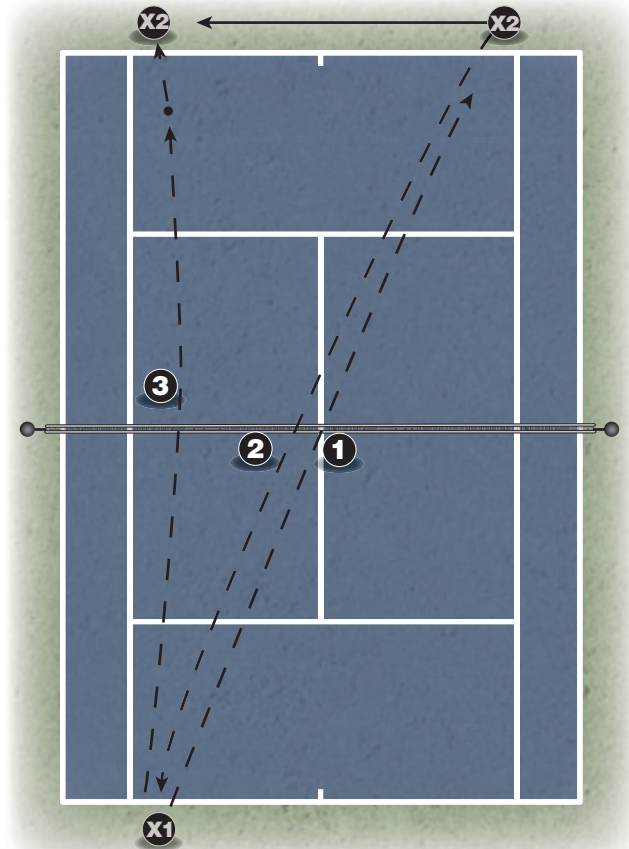


Figure 10.10 Two crosscourt shots and the *Go* ball.

Advanced Strategy #2: Deflating and Inflating or Inflating and Deflating

This strategy is a more advanced version of Intermediate Strategy #3 but uses different techniques to move the opponent up and back in the court. Deflating balls can be done by aiming shorter in the court, adding spin, taking pace off the ball, or decreasing height of the ball. Increasing pace or depth, increasing height, or reducing spin can inflate balls.

The deflating and inflating pattern tests the opponent's ability to move forward, the ability to handle shorter shots including shorter angles, and the ability to move backward for a high and heavy ball. It is also used to potentially catch the opponent out of position. The following shot combinations are useful for deflating and then inflating:

- Drop shot and lob
- Drop shot and pass deep
- Short, soft slice and flat, deep ball
- Short, soft slice and heavy ball
- Crosscourt angle and drive up the line

The inflate and deflate pattern tests the opponent's ability to move backward first or handle increased height, spin, depth and pace. Common ways to inflate and deflate include the following:

- The player can hit heavy and deep, followed by a short angle.
- The player can drive the ball through the court, followed by a short ball with touch, such as the drop shot.

Common patterns of play for both patterns: One-to-one, one-to-two, two-to-one, and neutralizing patterns.

CRITICAL CUE:

The player should watch the opponent's racket face closely to see what types of shots the opponent is trying to use against the player.

DEFLATE AND INFLATE OR INFLATE AND DEFLATE

Purpose: To work on blending differing tactics of direction, speed, spins, height, and depth.

Procedure: Players divide the court into four squares on both sides of the court. The players establish the rules regarding each box on the court. For example, *all balls hit to the service boxes must be deflated with backspin or underspin. All balls hit past the service line must be hit flat or with topspin.* (See figure 10.11.) Both players are positioned on the middle hash mark opposite one another on the baseline. Players should feed the ball to the four possible locations on the court based on the type of shot they are working on. The possibilities are short to short, short to deep down the line, short to deep crosscourt, plus the all the deep to short combinations. After two shots have been successfully executed, players should play out the point on the full court. A point is awarded after a player misses a shot after 2 shots have been executed successfully. Games should be played to 11 points. Players alternate feeds after every 5 points.

Variation: Players can change the rules by saying that they have to inflate (hit with topspin) to the service boxes and deflate (hit with underspin) past the service line. This game can also be played randomly—players don't have designated areas to hit.

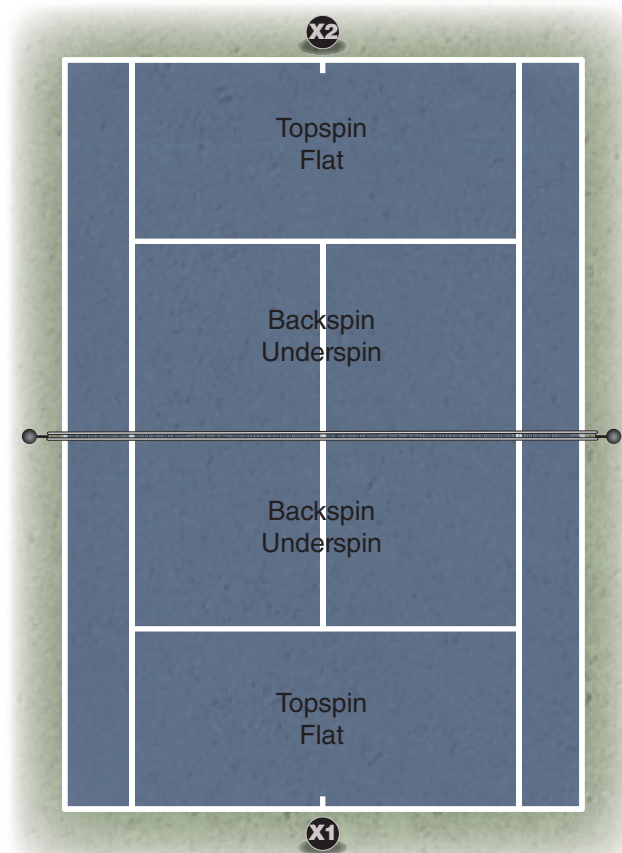


Figure 10.11 Rules for court boxes.

Advanced Strategy #3: Deflating and Deflating or Inflating and Inflating

A player using the deflating and deflating strategy constantly takes pace off the opponent's shot, forcing the opponent to finish the shot by always adding pace. One option is to use underspin and backspin, which force the opponent to move up to the ball. Or, the player can soften the grip on the racket and use topspin to take pace off the incoming ball.

A player who is using the inflating and inflating strategy, or going for broke, should be sure to play the percentages by aiming crosscourt and well inside the lines, hitting hard and flat to the corners or hitting heavy and deep to the corners.

Common patterns of play: One-to-one, one-to-two, two-to-one, and neutralizing patterns.

OFFENSIVE INFLATION VERSUS DEFENSIVE DEFLATION

Purpose: To practice inflation and deflation tactics and techniques against an opponent.

Procedure: Players can play this game in two different ways, either with a feed or a serve. Players can determine who will be on offense and defense, but the offensive player will always serve. The player on offense is going for broke and will inflate all shots, trying to hit bigger and more aggressively. The player on defense uses the deflation strategy and takes pace off and reduces the height of the offensive player's ball. Players play games to 7 points and then switch roles.

Coaching points: The offensive player should practice high-percentage aggressive plays such as runaround forehands hit crosscourt. The defensive player should work on each point to get as many balls back to the opponent to wear down the opponent and force an error.

Variation: Players play again, but the returner is on offense, and the server is on defense hitting second serves only.

CRITICAL CUE:

Players inflate balls by increasing height, depth, spin, pace, or by sharpening the direction change. They deflate balls by reducing height, depth, spin, pace, or lessening the direction change.

STRATEGIES AND TACTICS FOR STYLES OF PLAY

As previously explained in the book, the style players choose depends on their favorite shots, weapons, strengths and weaknesses, on-court personality, and passion when playing a style. A vision of how the player ultimately sees the game helps the player choose a style and keeps the player's focus on improving the specific skills used to play that style. The player's dedication and hard work dictate the eventual success of the style of play.

Although players' strengths and on-court personalities help determine playing style, the ultimate test is being able to use and execute the best strategies for their style of play. The upcoming examinations of each style and the game style form in figure 10.12 on page 210 can help players determine their two best playing styles.

FIGURE 10.12 DEFINING YOUR GAME STYLE

Check the descriptions that best describe your game.

- ☐ Your play is patient, and you like to work a point. (A)
- ☐ When reading passing shots, you pick the right side often. (D)
- ☐ You like to dictate play from the baseline and go for your shots. (B)
- ☐ Having a balanced attack of aggressive groundstroke play and net play is your goal. (C)
- ☐ You understand that this game style has a high risk factor and takes time to develop. (D)
- ☐ You are as comfortable at the net as you are on the baseline. (C)
- ☐ The longer the rally, the better. (A)
- ☐ You have an effective slice to mix up your opponent and change the rhythm of the rally. (C)
- ☐ You enjoy the role of the intimidator or aggressor. (D)
- ☐ Mentally you are the aggressor. (B)
- ☐ Changing speeds is something that you enjoy doing to throw off your opponent. (C)
- ☐ Your mind is your weapon. (A)
- ☐ Power and accuracy are how you like to win points. (B)
- ☐ You have a weakness that doesn't allow for great improvement (e.g., a great forehand and a weak backhand). (A)
- ☐ People describe your game as being very athletic. (D)
- ☐ You choose to attack with multiple options. (C)
- ☐ You will hit an approach shot and transition to the net when given a good opportunity. (A)
- ☐ You enjoy following your serve into the net and putting bodily pressure on the opponent. (D)
- ☐ Physically you are in better shape than your opponent is. (A)
- ☐ You have more than one weapon in your arsenal. (B)
- ☐ You enjoy outrallying your opponent. (A)
- ☐ Mentally you are willing to adapt and play whatever style is necessary to win on that day. (C)
- ☐ People describe you as having great movement on the court, and you use speed to maintain offense. (B)
- ☐ You prefer running forward and backward instead of side to side. (D)
- ☐ When you are on, you're on, but when you are off, you spray your shots. (B)
- ☐ People comment on your eloquence when you play. (C)
- ☐ You enjoy finishing points at the net and look for every opportunity to transition to the net. (D)
- ☐ Mentally you know that you can outlast your opponent. (A)
- ☐ You don't mind the errors that come with going for more on your shots. (B)
- ☐ You use a variety of shots to transition to the net. (C)
- ☐ You are committed to this style of play, choosing to live by the sword or die by the sword. (B)
- ☐ You have quick reflexes. (D)
- ☐ You have one stroke that is superior to all the others (a weapon). (A)
- ☐ You like to be in control of your destiny. (B)

- ☐ You enjoy staying back on the baseline and using groundstrokes to control points. (A)
- ☐ You love winning with variety. (C)
- ☐ You come into the match to put your opponent on defense. (B)
- ☐ Being passed at the net is something you get over quickly. (D)
- ☐ Keeping your opponent guessing is something that you enjoy doing while on the court. (C)
- ☐ Your favorite transitions to the net are outright winners (e.g., block transition volleys, swinging volleys). (B)
- ☐ Mentally you like taking risks. (D)

___ Total number of As

___ Total number of Bs

___ Total number of Cs

___ Total number of Ds

The letter with the largest number of responses indicates the style that is likely the most comfortable. A = rallying or defensive baseline player, B = aggressive baseline player, C = all-court style player, and D = serve-and-volley style player.

Rallying or Defensive Baseline Player

A rallying or defensive baseline player has a foundation to one day be an aggressive player, but doesn't quite have the tools of the aggressive baseline player yet. Maybe this player's weapons aren't big enough, or the player has a weakness that an opponent can exploit. Maybe the player's personality is more neutral (passive), or the player lacks the confidence to take the game to another level. The movement of the player can also keep the rallying baseline player from being more aggressive. Either way, the rallying baseline player should try to improve speed around the court to become more of a counter-puncher, or increase the power to become an aggressive baseline player.

The mindset and personality of the rallying baseline player is one of patience and endurance. The rallying baseline player likes to win points two ways: by outlasting someone or by working the point to an extent where the opponent gets out of position or off balance enough for the player to finish with a killer shot. This doesn't mean the rallying baseline player can't volley or doesn't like to volley, but this player prefers to win points by baseline strategy and has a good use of basic strategies such as hitting behind an opponent, hitting into the open court, and knowing when to hit back through the middle of the court.

The rallying baseline player possesses the following strengths:

- **Groundstroke weapon.** The rallying baseline player has a weapon to be able to keep the opponent on the defensive. A weapon has different facets, such as being able to hit a weapon from anywhere on the court or good defensive skills (speed).
- **Consistency.** The rallying baseline player consistently makes good decisions and is steady in technique, avoiding errors. An extreme version of being consistent is what one would call a *grinder* or a *pusher*. This type of player thrives on getting a lot of balls back (think, human backboard). This type of player also wants to give the opponent the feeling that the player will not miss and will outlast the opponent.
- **Ability to use depth on shots effectively.** The rallying baseline player keeps the opponent from gaining an advantage by keeping shots deep. Doing so gives the baseline player the opportunity to receive more short balls, gives extra time to run around weaker shots, and keeps the opponent from attacking.
- **Good anticipation and tracking skills.** The rallying baseline player reads opponents' tendencies and employs smart movement for maximum court positioning.

- **Ability to play good defense.** Lacking a big weapon, the rallying baseline player must know when to attack and when to be scrappy and get a ball back for another chance at an attackable ball. Good defense is also used to mix up shots effectively, including the slice or high, heavy ball to make opponents feel uncomfortable during the point.
- **Mental and physical toughness for enduring long rallies.** A successful rallying baseline player has the conditioning to go the distance and the mental focus to not fatigue during the long rallies (and matches) associated with this style of play. This mental and physical toughness can further wear down an opponent who is less solid in these areas.

From the strategies presented earlier in this chapter, the ones best suited to a rallying baseline player are hitting to the open court, covering a weakness, and using a weapon to the opponent's weakness. Besides these overall strategies, there are two other strategies specific to successful rallying baseline players:

- **Playing high and heavy balls deep to keep opponents pinned back in the court.** Some rallying baseline players adopt a style of hitting only flat balls. It can be very effective, but invariably, opportunities always come where the player must play a more defensive style of offense. This strategy is used to play a shot with a higher trajectory, allowing the player more time to recover back into the court and set up more offensive shots.
- **Minimizing direction changes in shots.** This strategy empowers players to play the percentages when in a rally situation. The thought process should be to keep shots going predominately crosscourt or more to the middle when the opponent has hit an offensive shot and only change the direction of the shot when in a more favorable position.

Aggressive Baseline player

The aggressive baseline player has most of the components of the rallying baseline player, but this style is based more on hitting with power, hitting more aggressive shots, and causing errors. The mindset and personality of the aggressive baseline player is very different from that of the rallying baseline player. The player who likes this style prefers to be in control of the point and needs weapons to be successful. This style has the mentality of a serve-and-volley player but from the baseline, preferring to hit a winner rather than come to the net to end the point.

This style centers on using power strokes, dictating play, taking time away from an opponent, and going for more on shots. The ability to run around balls that are hit to the backhand and create angles inside out are hallmarks of the aggressive baseline player. This style goes for shorter points than the rallying baseline player.

The aggressive baseline player possesses the following strengths:

- **Lethal serve and forehand combination.** The player using this style usually tries to anchor the game with one shot. It is usually a forehand, and the player uses three quarters of the court positioning to hit the forehand. A big serve combined with a big forehand can prove to be lethal.
- **Go-for-it mindset.** This is a great style for a player who has the mindset to hit hard and hit winners. This style works on first-strike capabilities including a good serve, a big forehand, a good swinging volley, and putaways.
- **Ability to control the baseline.** Players using this style constantly look for opportunities presented by the opponent.

- **Aggressiveness.** Successful aggressive baseline players have great movement to keep the opponent on the defensive.

Just like the rallying baseline player, the aggressive baseline player uses depth, accuracy, court positioning, and movement to be able to hit favorite shots, which are probably weapons. However, because this player is more aggressive, the strategy and tactics are more closely related to the all-court player. The strategies best suited to an aggressive baseline player are weapon to weakness, running the opponent into the court, first strike, and deflating and inflating.

Besides these overall strategies, two other strategies are specific to successful aggressive baseline players. Stepping up in the court, the player takes balls on the rise and hits winners from deeper in the court. While sticking with the strategy of hitting mainly the forehand, the player is also able to hit an aggressive backhand down the line.

All-Court Player

Adept at both offense and defense, the all-court player is considered a jack of all trades and enjoys all the different components of a point. Equally comfortable coming to the net as staying back on the baseline, an all-court player's mind and personality is whatever it needs to be in the given situation. An all-court player can be patient and wear an opponent down, or can attack. This player feels comfortable playing any type of opponent. Part of the psyche of an all-court player is built around the knowledge that the player can handle playing and beating any style of play. The balanced game allows this player to combat any type of play, whether it is the faster pace of an attacker or the more patient style of the baseline player.

Commonly referred to as ballet on the tennis court, all-court players typically make playing tennis look easy. What is deceiving is the amount of hard work that an all-round player has put in to be able to perform all the playing styles well.

The all-court player possesses the following strengths:

- **Wide variety of shots to use in a rally.** This is very intimidating to opponents, plus it creates more opportunities to stay in a point and go on the offensive.
- **Versatility and flexibility.** This player explores different ways to exploit an opponent. Because of this player's versatility, the all-court player possesses a built-in plan A and plan B. The player's wide variety of shots allows the ability to try different strategies when things aren't going well against an opponent.
- **Great movement in both areas of the court.** This player has a quick first step to the ball and is just as adept at moving forward and backward as side to side.
- **Ability to use the court to personal advantage.** To play an all-court style of play, the player must understand an opponent's tendencies and anticipate the next move. This knowledge takes time to master and a great deal of trial and error, but ultimately the player is rewarded.

The all-court player uses shot variety as the strategic foundation. This player has the ability to come to the net and put away a volley, or can stay on the baseline and out rally an opponent. This player can also mix up shots, which becomes very unnerving to an opponent and is very effective in keeping an opponent on the defensive and creating opportunities.

The all-court player also uses the speed of the court to an advantage. The faster the surfaces or lower the bounce of the ball, the shorter the player's backswings need to be. Because all-courtiers have a wide range of abilities, they have an easier time adapting to different surfaces. They can adapt with their swings and footwork to the slower clay

surface as well as a faster indoor, carpet, or grass court. Their strength is that their strategy is not tied into a particular surface, such as a baseline player playing on a faster surface, or a fast-paced player playing on a slower surface.

The strategies best suited to the all-court player are pulling an opponent off the court, rush and crush, first strike, hitting shots to set up strengths, deflating and inflating, deflating and deflating, and inflating and inflating. Besides these overall strategies, all-court players often use a few other strategies successfully:

- **Taking time away from the opponent.** All-court players try to take time away by hitting the ball early (as it is rising off the court), moving toward the ball to cut off angles, and being in a good location for the return of the opponent's shot. All-court players strategically place themselves so that they can hit more favored shots, keeping the opponent on the defensive, thus taking reaction time away from the opponent.
- **Breaking up rhythm.** This strategy comes with the variety and shot selection the all-court player possesses. If the all-court player is creative enough and uses different strategies and patterns of play, then this player will effectively break up any rhythm a baseline player or serve-and-volley style player is trying to develop.
- **Using the slice.** The all-court player uses the slice effectively to mix up shots and neutralize the opponent's strengths.

Serve-and-Volley Style Player

The serve-and-volley style is the most attacking style of play. This player emphasizes fast-paced action by following the serve to the net or looking for the first instance to approach the net. This player is not only going to put pressure on the opponent with good serves, returns, approach shots, volleys, and overheads, but is going to give the opponent less time to respond. This player's goal is to apply body pressure on the opponent so that the opponent feels rushed and makes mistakes. In terms of the points they enjoy playing, the serve-and-volley style player is a sprinter as opposed to a marathoner.

Because this style takes so much focus to develop, players who choose this style may initially develop insecurities with their ability to be effective from the baseline. The net rusher's goal is to get to the net. This player will take time to develop the art of rallying. The net rusher's goal is to learn how to rally effectively from the baseline using depth, angles, or changes in pace and spin to complement the game and be strong enough on groundstrokes to effectively get to the net. Serve-and-volley style players should not spend extended periods of time on the baseline if it is not their strength.

Serve-and-volley style players possess the following strengths:

- **Good serve.** As previously discussed, a good serve has power and good placement. The quality of the serve affects how tough the volley will be when the player approaches the net; in other words, it affects the player's ability to get aggressive shots to the opponent's weaker side.
- **Variety of volleys.** Good volleys are mandatory for employing this style of play. Not only must they be reliable, they should be hit to the correct location. Good volleys allow players to put a ball away, or set themselves up for a better opportunity to put away the next volley.
- **Strong overhead.** A good overhead is an opportunity to end the point, and it can intimidate an opponent. An overhead can be precisely placed to improve court positioning in a manner similar to a volley, or it can be hit hard with power.
- **Quick footwork.** Playing the net takes good footwork. Being balanced, in good position, and closing off volleys are all skills that require athleticism, strength, and

good instincts. It is imperative the serve and volley player has a great first move to the net after the serve, a great split step, and a first step to the volley.

- **Ability to make shots.** Serve-and-volley style players, or *attackers*, favor themselves as shot makers. They bring the action to the opponent and therefore feel confident in their ability to make tough shots in every situation.

The strategies best suited to a serve and volley player are rush and crush, first strike, covering a weakness, hitting to the open court, and inflating and inflating. Besides these overall strategies, successful serve-and-volley style players often use several other strategies:

- **Using a variety of serves to attack the opponent.** This player uses the serve effectively by placing it in locations that have the returner hit the ball out of reach, out of the strike zone, or directly at the server to get a weak reply for the first volley.
- **Placing volleys strategically.** Usually this player approaches the net looking to put the ball away, but often that opportunity doesn't present itself until the second, third, or fourth shot, so the player must use a strategy to successfully stay in the point to hit a volley winner. Volleys down the line on stretched-out balls, balls slightly out of reach, shots for which the opponent is slightly out of position, and crosscourt on putaways are examples of great volley strategy.
- **Coming in on the next ball.** Serve-and-volley style players should follow their serves to the net but sometimes a returner is hitting great returns (hitting the balls to the server's feet or ripping them to the corners) and the server is not winning as many points as necessary. Coming in on the next shot is an effective way to break up the returner's rhythm. If played correctly by mixing up the times coming to the net, this strategy can create an opportunity to receive a short ball that is easier to hit as an approach shot.

ESTABLISHING A GAME PLAN

A game plan is vitally important to the player's overall success in match play because it provides an initial direction from the start of a match. At the beginnings of matches, usually players focus on being competitive and getting off to a good start. A game plan can add more purpose. Players must be careful when establishing a game plan because its success is contingent on the execution of shots, and sometimes what the player thinks will work may not work as well as was hoped.

When it comes to creating a distinct game plan for each opponent, each player is different. Some may prefer specifics that include a strategy for each phase of the game. For example, a player might choose to use mostly kick serves, hit high and heavy balls to the backhand side on returns, go back behind the player on transition shots, or explore the opponent's speed moving forward. Other players prefer to just focus on what they do best, and may use their own game style as the basis for the game plan. When a player uses the preferred game style, it is important to know the opponent's tendencies. Regardless of how specific the game plan is, the ultimate goal is to remain flexible, stay with what the player does best, and be prepared to explore different ways of executing the game plan.

Game Planning Process

The game planning process is exactly that—a process—and it should be used to help the player formulate the best possible scenario to help the player's competitive level. The following steps can help players and coaches design a basic game plan:

1. **Prioritizing game styles.** The player can list the game styles in order from favorite to least favorite based on what has been established through the questionnaire in figure 10.12 on page 210, but mainly focus on the distinct style the player feels comfortable with and a style that helps to win points. Players must have their best game plan in mind, followed by their second, third, and fourth best plan of action.
2. **Assessing strengths and weakness for first and second favorite styles.** Players assess their strengths and weaknesses in their number one and two playing styles. For example, if a player's top style is serve-and-volley style, the player's strengths might be the serve and the first volley, and a weakness could be rallying from the baseline. If the player's number two style is the aggressive baseline style, a strength might be the attacking forehand inside out, and a weakness might be the backhand up the line.
3. **Prioritizing patterns of play within the style.** These patterns of play are options within a style. Players should prioritize options for both serving and receiving games. For example, if a player's game style is a serve-and-volley and attacking baseline play hybrid, this player might use the following options for the service game:
 - Option 1:** Slice serve out wide on the deuce side, approach the net, and volley into the open court. Kick serve on the ad side, approach the net, and volley into the open court.
 - Option 2:** Serve up the T, look to move around the next ball, and attack with a forehand.
 - Option 3:** Jam serve into the opponent's body and volley into the open court.
 The player might use the following options for return games:
 - Option 1:** Neutralize the return up the middle of the court, try to apply pressure with the forehand to the opponent's backhand, and come to the net.
 - Option 2:** Take the opponent's second serve and hit it up the line coming to the net behind it.
4. **Practicing the options.** Players should practice each option two or three times a week by playing games with a friend to 7 points. If the option the player is working on is to return up the line and the player mistakenly hits crosscourt, then the point must be replayed. The player should practice each option slowly and deliberately.
5. **Playing practice sets and recording results.** The player should play three to five practice sets a week and keep a journal on performance with different options within the playing style. The player can use practice sets to record emotions, focus, intensity, and any positive or negative strategic adjustments made during the practice sets. Players should rate these categories from 1 to 10. These ratings can be referred to later, and players can analyze their practice sets and how they connect to improved match play.
6. **Playing under pressure.** The player should enter a tournament or league competition and be diligent playing the options under pressure. Competition will be the test of the player's perseverance and discipline.
7. **Evaluating matches.** After each match, the player must consider whether any action or lack of action might have helped the player play better. The player should do this for a month after each practice set, practice match, or real match. Doing

this helps all players learn about themselves and their game. They effectively create a blueprint for reproducible top performances.

Although having a good, sound strategy against an opponent is important, the game plan should be simple. A few simple points can go a long way toward helping a player in times of need, but more important, it can keep the player from being too bogged down with details. Some tennis players like to obtain a lot of information on their next opponents and some like to know less. Regardless of preference, the player should keep the information simple and remember to focus more on things that can be controlled, such as the player's own skills, attitude, and confidence. The following section includes additional tips that can help make the game plan more effective.

Game Plan in Action

The following tips for assessing game plans in action are based on a player maintaining flexibility for what is working on a particular day, staying with what is working, and evaluating and making any needed adjustments. Oftentimes during a match, a player's technique can break down, so self-correcting techniques such as triggers can help the player refocus. However, at the end of the day, players need to learn how to compete regardless of how well they are playing or how good they feel. Following are some tips for implementing a game plan:

- **Being flexible.** One of the best forms of a good game plan is acquired while playing an opponent. Perhaps something the player thought would be effective is not working because the player is not hitting a particular shot well on that day, or maybe it is a bad game style matchup. Regardless of the situation, a game plan is subject to change, and a player must be flexible when change occurs. As a matter of fact, rarely do competitors play a match in which every attempt works perfectly. When playing a match the player should try seeing oneself as an accountant who constantly tries things, notes the reply, and then stores the information for a later use.
- **Assessing the game plan.** Evaluating how well the player can counter an opponent's shots is the beginning of the process of assessing how well the game plan is doing in any given situation. The player should keep in mind the following strategies for countering an opponent's shots to get an idea of how the competitors' game plans match up.
 - Going toe to toe—Part of a good defensive strategy is to be able to go toe to toe with an opponent. The player must assess this immediately and quickly decide whether to keep doing it or whether to change the game with a variety of shots. Going toe to toe with an opponent either makes the opponent change the game or causes the opponent to make more errors. In this situation, the player is effectively doing what the opponent likes to do and reacting to the opponent's shots. This strategy can be very intimidating and forces the player to reevaluate his or her own methods of winning points.
 - Defense to offense—The ability to take an opponent's better shots and create an offense off them is very effective. This can and should be done because it gives players the best chance to win points. When players shift from defense to offense, they take the ball earlier or they reply to a shot with a better shot. Each point vacillates between offense and defense and vice versa, so consciously thinking of it improves footwork and shot selection.
- **Making tactical changes when needed.** If the player is winning with a game plan, the player should not change it. If the player is losing with a particular plan, then it may be that the chosen game plan is playing into the opponent's strengths. For

example, a player has chosen to play like an aggressive baseline player but now switches to counterattacking. The player's shot pace is feeding into what the opponent likes. It is then imperative that the player make tactical changes in the game style. For example, a player can try to apply more time pressure by taking the ball earlier as opposed to using stroke pressure by hitting the ball harder. If that does not work, the player should try switching to a predetermined alternative plan or strategy within his or her chosen game style.

- **Being aware of breakdowns in technique.** It is important to note that a game plan can fail as a result of a breakdown in technique. Having good technique allows the player to counter an opponent's shots more effectively. When the player has poor technique, a weakness can hinder the player from hitting an effective enough shot to recover offensively.
- **Not getting caught up on feel.** Some players show excessive emotion and frustration at missing shots, including banging their rackets, checking the tension, wondering why it doesn't feel right, and shouting that they don't feel it. When everything a player does on a particular day works and every shot feels good, the player is in the zone and can do no wrong. However, achieving this zone can be elusive, so a better approach is to compete and work hard during every point. Players who allow frustration about their lack of feel on a particular day to overwhelm them have no chance of achieving the zone.