

4

CHAPTER



SERVE SKILLS



The serve is one of the most important shots in tennis. The main goal in serving is to use power, swing, and placement to create a tennis weapon. This weapon can help the player take control of the point by intimidating the opponent and keeping the opponent on the defensive. The player has more control of the serve than any other shot, so it makes sense to learn how to execute powerful and perfectly placed serves at opportune moments.

Although a good serve requires good technique, this shot is also a mental challenge. A mentally strong person can block out distractions and focus on delivering a strong serve to dominate a set or a match. This puts a lot of pressure on the opponent, making service games of greater importance. The opponent knows that holding serve can mean the difference between staying in the match and losing it. It is valuable for the player to gain confidence from standing on the baseline, looking over at the opponent, picking the correct location, and executing a successful serve.

Some of the best servers of the game are Andy Roddick, Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal, Maria Sharapova, Justine Henin, Serena Williams, Venus Williams, Pete Sampras, Stefan Edberg, Boris Becker, Martina Navratilova, and John McEnroe. All these players have or had great serves, but for different reasons. Players are usually characterized as having serves with power, accuracy, spin, consistency, and variety. However, a player who can hit a big serve in a hotly contested match situation is set apart from the rest.

No matter the player's level, the serve is the first and best indicator of whether the player is making an impact on an opponent. This chapter addresses the different types of serves and serve styles and how to maximize their effectiveness. It also addresses the technique needed to hit a great serve. Finally, the chapter covers the intangible and necessary ingredients needed to take the serve to the highest level.

DEVELOPING THE SERVE

The four types of tennis serves are the flat serve, the slice serve, the topspin serve, and the kick serve. Each serve has a different technique and performs a different function. It is important for every player to know how to hit and use all of these serves to add variety to the service game. The player should develop a serve that can lead to free points or to a return that allows the player to continue to dictate play.

All four types of serves can be used on first or second serves and for every serving style. Usually, a flat first serve is followed by a topspin or a slice second serve. The slice serve can be used on both first and second serves. However, sometimes variations in the pattern can be very effective, such as when a player attempts to fool, confuse, and surprise an opponent.

The best serve style for the player depends on the individual's overall game style. Whatever serve style the player chooses, the following list of thoughts demonstrates the proper mindset for any good server.

- I will get my opponent playing from behind in the game.
- I will mix up the different locations I serve to and use my variety of serves to keep my opponent on the defensive.
- I will find ways to win free points.
- I will serve mainly to my opponent's weakness.
- I will keep a running mental chart of where my opponent returns and what types of returns are used so that when I get into a crucial situation I can make an effective choice.

The three main styles of serves are defined here:

- **Big serve.** With this serve, the player mainly uses power to win free points.
- **Serve-and-volley serve.** With this serve, the player attacks the net and uses finesse and athleticism to win points.
- **Serve-and-stay-back serve.** For this serve, the player uses spin, location, and a variety of serves to keep opponents on their heels.

The following is a breakdown of the attitude and thought process of players who use each style of serve.

Big Serve Style

The clutch power servers—such as Pete Sampras, Boris Becker, Roger Federer, Andy Roddick, Serena Williams, and Venus Williams—hit the big power serve to turn the momentum their way. The goal of using the big serve is to overpower the opponent with serves that are hit to the body or hit hard past the opponent. It is preferable for a big server to be tall in order to more easily hit down on the serve, but plenty of smaller players have big serves, too. The big server needs good strength and motion to maximize power. More often than not, this server also has very good technique. Big servers have good location and a proper mix of serves. This type of server likes to use body serves as well as balls hit to the corners. The big server has a variety of serves, such as the slice or topspin serve, that are equally as effective as the flat serve.

The following list presents the mental attitude and thought process of a player who chooses the big serve.

- I have a big serve, and I am going to blow this serve by my opponent.
- My opponent will not break my serve.
- If my opponent breaks my serve, I will make this game the toughest he has ever won.
- Even if I am down, I will dig myself out of the hole.
- I will get a great start in every game to keep my opponent frustrated and feeling as if she cannot come back.

Serve-and-Volley Style Serve

The serve-and-volley style serve is meant to keep the pressure on the returner just enough to hit a good volley or overhead. Serve-and-volley servers such as Martina Navratilova, Stefan Edberg, Patrick Rafter, John McEnroe, and Taylor Dent, are considered great servers because of their ability to combine all the traits of a good server—consistency, power, accuracy, spin, variety, and location—to transition to the net effectively and often.

The serve-and-volley style server is very accurate. The player using this serve uses power and spin to hit precise spots at crucial times during a match. The successful serve-and-volley server understands the angles of the court, moves effectively, and has great vision. This server likes to be at the net, has good reach, has good technique, and knows what volley to hit in what situation in order to keep the opponent on the defensive. A player who chooses the serve-and-volley approach should be a good athlete who likes to bring the action to the opponent.

The following list presents the mental attitude and thought process of a player who chooses the serve-and-volley style serve.

- I will attack my opponent, and my opponent will get tired of passing me.
- My net game will beat my opponent's groundstroke game.
- My style is different from my opponent's; that difference is my strength.

- My serving and volleying force my opponent to deal with passing shots and shorter points instead of long, drawn-out rallies.
- I don't mind if my opponent passes me. In fact, from every pass, I learn where to move in a crucial situation.

Serve-and-Stay-Back Style Serve

Justine Henin, Rafael Nadal, and Andre Agassi have used location and spin to start a rally with a shot that is strategically beneficial to them. The location of Nadal's serves gives him the best opportunity to hit his forehand weapon on every first ball. Players who use the serve-and-stay-back style serve can use placement and disguise to keep their opponents guessing. These servers confuse their opponents by mixing up their serves and frequently changing location, speed, and spin.

The following list presents the thought processes of the player who chooses the serve-and-stay-back style serve.

- I will hit serves to locations that return balls to my strengths from the beginning.
- I have to focus on and execute the right strategies so I can take control of this point.
- I have to maximize my first-serve percentage.

SERVE AND STYLES OF PLAY

The serve is a vital part of the player's game style. Because the player's favorite shots dictate game style, on-court demeanor, and weapons, the serve becomes an integral part of how those traits are displayed. Consistently delivering a big serve in a tight match allows the player some mental breathing room, which could be the difference between winning and losing the match.

Specific serves correlate to each style of play, and they enhance the effectiveness of that style. In service games, a player can be effective in different ways. The player can use power, spin (both slice and topspin), variety (placement in different spots and use of different types of serves), consistency (ability to hit in crucial situations), and accuracy (precise location and timing) to get the preferred game style off to a good start. The following section examines how the serve plays into each of the styles of play.

- **Aggressive baseline play.** For this style, the main goal for the server is to hit a serve that gives the player free points and allows opportunities to hit an aggressive shot. The aggressive baseline style is the offensive version of the serve-and-stay back style serve.
- **Serve-and-volley style.** The main goal for this player is to hit precise serves that allow effective transitions to the net. The serve-and-volley style dictates an aggressive nature and a desire to constantly attack the net against an opponent.
- **All-court play.** This player's main goal is to combine the goals of aggressive baseline and serve-and-volley style into a blended style that uses variety when serving.
- **Rallying baseline play.** This player's serve is effective, but not as effective as the other, more aggressive game styles. This player starts rallies to get the point started in a more neutral fashion (at times offensive and at times defensive).
- **Defensive baseline play.** This server's main goal is to start a rally by serving to the opponent's weaker side to start the point. Usually, the serve of the defensive player breaks down in crucial situations, or the player gives an opponent an aggressive return. This style is the defensive version of the serve-and-stay-back style.

GRIPS

Regardless of serve or play style, technique is the cornerstone to a great service motion, and technique begins with the grip. Most professional tennis players choose to hit their serves using the Continental grip. This grip allows players to hit all the serves—flat, slice, and topspin.

The Eastern backhand grip also works to hit all the serves, especially a topspin serve. This grip closes the racket face slightly more than the Continental does, so it makes a topspin serve easier to hit. The Eastern backhand grip makes hitting a slice serve slightly more difficult. Less advanced players tend to use the Eastern grip and eventually move their grip toward the Continental grip as their technique improves.

FOOT PLACEMENT

The player's goal for foot placement is to establish a stance that allows good serve technique in order to optimize control of the ball. When setting the feet for a serve, the player must think about what style of serve and play to use and how to maximize the stance to allow for the intended movement on the serve.

The most common stance for linear movement is closed (one foot in front of the other). Linear movement (see figure 4.1) keeps the body's momentum more in a straight or slightly diagonal line and does not incorporate a great deal of trunk rotation and angular momentum. Angular movement (see figure 4.2) incorporates more use of shoulder and trunk rotation and requires that the feet be more closed. The different types of movement are related to the type of serve the player hits. The power serve, which includes the flat and strong slice serves, is a blend of linear and angular movements. Topspin serves rely more on the angular movement of rotation with the forearm, shoulders, and hips.

Even before the player serves, the foot placement sends a message as to what kind of server the player is. How close or how far away the player stands to the center hash mark says a lot about how the player will serve. A player who stands close to the hash mark shows a sense of control of the court and an ability to serve to all locations in the serving box without the angle created by standing farther away from the center. Also, this player



Figure 4.1 Feet position for linear movement.



Figure 4.2 Feet position for angular movement.

may be planning to quickly run around a particular shot, such as the backhand, and standing closer to the center better allows this opportunity. A player who stands farther away from the center uses the greater angle to pull an opponent off the court and may prefer the location of the return from the opponent. For example, on the ad side if a right-handed server hits a strong flat or slice serve wide and the opponent catches it late, the return will be down the line and right into the server's forehand, which is the server's weapon.

TOSS

Although tennis players may have a variety of motions, knee bends, takebacks, and contact points, the toss is essential for making a serve work. The toss on the service motion can determine whether a player's serve is a great success or a source of frustration. A player needs a toss that is reliable, perfectly timed, and in the right location. The toss should be rhythmically timed with the serve arm moving backward to start the motion. For toss technique for specific serves, see *Technique for Specific Serves* on page 89.

The first move of the toss arm is important to the service motion. The direction to which the toss arm travels upward dictates the type of serve to be hit. One of the best ways to extend the arm upward is called the V (also known as J) toss. When the arm hits the low point on the downward move and then heads out toward the direction of the inside of the thigh, it creates a big V (or possibly a J) shape. The exact shape doesn't

matter, but it is essential to determine the location along that V path that will give the server the best trunk rotation and contact point. The V can be made smaller to suit a service motion or it can be eliminated.

For any toss, the player's goal is to move the arm upward, slowly and deliberately, while providing balance for the ball so that the ball has little or no rotation. The smooth motion of the toss arm going upward (see figure 4.3), called the *carry*, is important because it allows the hand to release the ball in a fluid motion. It also allows the player to feel a stretch in the toss arm and upper back muscles to create the optimal reach for the serve. The V toss stretches the upper back muscles as the arm reaches up. This toss is the perfect way for servers to create and use proper angular momentum and rotation in their motion.

The toss itself should be high enough for the racket head to reach up and contact the ball with the arm fully extended. Problems can arise if the toss is too high or too low in relation to the body. If a toss is too high, the server must wait and time the contact point correctly. While the server waits for the ball to come down, the elbow and the body succumb to gravity and often start to shrink down, creating a less effective serve because the player's technique does not



Figure 4.3 The toss.

COACHING POINTS

A server who uses linear movement (pointing more toward the court) would probably use a straighter toss or a slightly abbreviated V toss. That type of toss would drop in front and then extend back up in the same direction and would be extended more in front of the body. The player should use the linear toss only with a quicker motion because the toss reduces the amount of time available to execute the serve.



hold up. Sometimes the player ends up hitting a lower contact point, which causes the head to come down too quickly or the player's shoulders to rotate too soon, driving the ball to go down into the net.

A lower toss is fine if the motion is quick and fluid and the technique is efficient, but a breakdown in the technique can cause the server to reach more forward to compensate for the low toss. A low toss that is farther out in front is not recommended but can be effective enough for some servers to get the serve in. Over time, this player will create a new contact point that is potentially too low to be a power serve.

A toss that is too far from or too close to the body can also cause problems. A toss that is too close to the body causes the server to lean back awkwardly before going through the motion. This movement can lead to improper balance throughout the motion and a subsequent lack of power. A toss that is too far away causes the server to alter the motion such that the power zone is lost. The *power zone* is the feeling the server has when proper technique has provided a contact point designed for maximum power.

Although toss location depends on the type of serve, it should be consistent. An inconsistent ball toss can contribute to bad serving habits and create problems for servers. Some coaches like to see a tossed ball in the 12 o'clock location for all serves; other coaches prefer a 1 o'clock toss for a slice serve, a 12 o'clock toss for the flat serve, and an 11 o'clock serve for the topspin serve. (These examples are for a right-handed player; just the opposite is true for a left-handed player.) As long as the location is consistent, the server can maximize the disguise of the serve.

KINETIC CHAIN

When building a world-class serve, the kinetic chain and its effect on the service motion are an important area of focus. The components of the kinetic chain follow, and the components are discussed in detail in the upcoming sections.

1. Stance
2. Knee bend
3. Hip rotation
4. Trunk rotation
5. Arm rotation
6. Elbow extension and forearm pronation
7. Wrist movement
8. Follow-through and landing

1. Stance

Good balance and a comfortable stance provide a solid foundation that allows the player to reach up properly for the ball. Choosing the right stance is important to maintaining good balance and rhythm throughout the motion. The two main stances used to hit a serve are the platform stance and the pinpoint stance. The technique the player uses should not be affected by these two stances.

The platform stance positions the legs in the same location throughout the entire serve. Foot placement should be about shoulder width apart for a comfortable, balanced feel (see figure 4.4). This stance favors a server who uses more angular movement, has great timing, and can go straight up to hit the serve without bringing the back foot up to meet the front foot.

The pinpoint stance starts out as a platform stance, but during the motion the player brings the back foot up to meet the front foot (see figure 4.5). This stance can result in a little more momentum moving forward and upward and may help the player more easily reach up for the serve.

Both stances are effective and should be tested to check the player's power on the serve. To test the pinpoint stance, the player stands on the baseline and simply tries to hit a ball into either the deuce or ad service box without using the legs. Then, the player uses the pinpoint stance and looks for any drastic change in power. A lack of power may signify that the player is losing power when moving the legs up, that the player needs to alter the position of the feet in the stance, or that the swing itself is technically incorrect. Players often bring up the back leg incorrectly. Usually they do not step all the way up to the other foot, which can cause instability in the motion. In such cases, players should make technical adjustments and try again. A lack of power may also be a signal to try the platform stance.

To test the platform stance, the player simply goes up and hits the serve without going across the baseline. Next, the player incorporates a little more angular momentum through trunk rotation to see if it improves.



Figure 4.4 Platform stance.



Figure 4.5 Pinpoint stance.

In the platform stance the weight starts on both feet and then transfers upward and into the court as the player reaches up to hit the serve. The pinpoint stance has a more distinct weight transfer. Some players like to start on the front foot and then rock back onto the back foot before moving back forward and upward to the serve. Other players like to start on the back foot and transfer the weight forward and upward. Experimenting with both stances helps players determine the best stance for the serve.

2. Knee Bend

The position and motion of the knees are essential to a good serve. The knees can help provide flexion in the beginning of the serve motion, but mainly they are used to extend and lift the body up to hit the ball. As the player reaches back and is about to get the elbow in its set position, the knees flex forward to start the loading process of the legs (see figure 4.6). The knee bend should be comfortable and allow for enough power as the knees extend and move upward. A proper knee bend dictates how high the player can reach up for a good contact point, which depends on the player's size and the type of serve. The optimum contact point is the position at which the serving arm is fully extended and the knees have provided an upward and slightly forward reach.

3. Hip Rotation

The next part of the chain is the motion of the hips. From a position where the racket head is either stationary or, in some cases, slightly swaying, the hips make a slight rocking motion forward and gain momentum before rotating backward to put weight on the back leg. As the ball is tossed for a topspin, flat, or slice serve, the player rotates forward and tries to position the hip closest to the net over the baseline (see figure 4.7). For a beginner to intermediate level player, the uncoiling motion of the hips occurs with a pivot of the front foot; for more advanced players, it occurs in the air. On the topspin serve, the body angles into the court similar to the slice or flat serve but the racquet



Figure 4.6 Knee bend with hip angulation on the serve.



Figure 4.7 Hip position for a flat serve.



Figure 4.8 Hip position for the kick serve.

brushes upward on the ball to give it topspin so that it bounce into the opponent. The toss is at 12 or 1 o'clock. The hip action for the kick serve is different. For this serve, both hips push forward and to the side fence, allowing the server to reach back and brush up on the toss at 11 o'clock (for a right-handed player) to impart the kicking topspin, which causes the serve to move away from the opponent (see figure 4.8).

Just before the beginning of the upward reach for the ball, each player has a distinct motion. For a smoother swing, the player should get the racket hand to rock slightly forward in conjunction with the hip. This rocking forward drives the shoulder up and starts the process of getting the racket in the power zone prior to contact.

4. Trunk Rotation

As the hips rotate backward and the toss arm makes the V to begin the carry, the trunk naturally begins to rotate backward, causing the shoulders to make a half turn. Because the toss arm is carrying the ball up, the front shoulder is higher than the back shoulder and elbow. The elbow rotates backward so that it is in a position past the center of the back at about the same height as the rib cage on that side.

5. Arm Rotation

The traditional takeback starts with a downward movement of both arms at the same time (see figure 4.9). The toss arm moves toward the thigh of the front leg, and the serve arm moves down and backward, reaching back with the palm down to a comfortable position. How far the serve arm moves backward depends on the speed of the motion. The serve arm finishes with the setting of the elbow and arm in a *power zone*, meaning that the shoulders are balanced but tilting upward toward the toss arm.

After reaching back the arm lifts to set the shoulders. This movement should be fluid, not jerky. As it lifts the racket head up, the serve arm should keep a little bend in it. The image of keeping the palm down throughout is useful because it prohibits a bad flaw that can develop in the wrist set just before contact. An open palm can limit the server's power. At the same time the serve arm moves backward, the toss arm carries the ball up to release.

COACHING POINTS

Poor foot stance can have a negative effect on trunk rotation. For example, if the stance is too closed (the back leg too far behind and to the back), the hips could be hampered from adequately rotating forward, causing their position to be too closed to produce power on the serve. Overrotation of the trunk and shoulders can have a negative effect on the serve as well. If the trunk and elbow rotate too far back, they need a split second longer to rotate forward. Because the serve is a precision stroke, this extra time could cause the toss to travel too far down, thus creating a low contact point.



The racket head then reaches up and back toward the shoulders, creating a set position of the elbow (see figure 4.10). The serve arm bends to make an L shape (90-degree angle), but the front shoulder is tilted upward. This position is also known as the trophy pose. Where the elbow sets depends on the service motion, but it should be slightly below shoulder level and slightly rotated backward. The player must be careful not to overrotate, which could result in loss of power. From this power position, the serve arm reaches up to strike the ball. When the arm is at the bottom of the backswing behind the back, it is externally rotated at the shoulder.



Figure 4.9 For the arm rotation, the arms move sequentially.



Figure 4.10 As the arms move up, the serve arm reaches the set position, or trophy pose.

COACHING POINTS

The abbreviated (or sequential) serve is becoming popular today because of players such as Andy Roddick who use it effectively and with power. The abbreviated takeback is perfect for someone who prefers to get set faster and use less arm movement. It also works for players who lose power in the arms or legs or who struggle to produce a fluid motion with the full takeback swing.

In the abbreviated motion, the toss arm starts as the player angles the hip into the court. The toss is delivered a little faster, and it is usually done with the player loading the legs followed by the serve arm coming up quickly. The serve arm starts the movement after the toss arm. Instead of using the simultaneous motion of down together up together to set the elbow, the player takes the serve arm straight back and in a higher path than the usual motion. The path should be in line with the shoulders or, in some cases, slightly lower and downward. The goal is to move the serve arm into position more quickly than for a standard serve.



6. Elbow Extension and Forearm Pronation

The goal of elbow extension is for the player to be able to hit the ball as high as possible and near the height of the tossed ball. This is the power contact point. As previously noted, the elbow sets slightly lower than shoulder level and at a 90-degree angle. The elbow is comfortably to the side and, once set, it should not dip downward. Then, the player extends the elbow upward and slightly outward to create a power loop and gets ready to strike the ball (see figure 4.11). On the upward swing, the serve arm internally rotates at a very high speed and creates the acceleration needed to hit the serve forcefully.

As the serve arm starts moving forward and the elbow extends outward, the forearm pronates (rotates inward; see figure 4.12) and provides the wrist a good angle for striking the ball. It is similar to giving the ball a high five with the racquet face. The goal for the toss arm is to keep it extended as long as possible until the serve arm rotates forward. As the serve arm moves, the toss arm should naturally fall down and across the body.

On a slice serve, the pronation of the serve arm is a glancing movement on the outside of the ball. On a topspin serve, it is a little more exaggerated as the racket face heads away from the body and toward the sideline. At this point in the kinetic chain, the kick serve also adds arching of the back (see Topspin and Kick Serve on page 90) to load underneath the ball in order to go up.

7. Wrist Movement

On the takeback of the arm, the wrist is slightly hyperextended as the hand bends back at the wrist. As the wrist accelerates toward striking the ball, the wrist straightens and then continues to flex as part of the follow-through. This action is called *snapping of the wrist*. Many coaches look for this action when they help students create a flat serve. A key area of focus is to make sure to keep the palm down in preparing to strike the ball. Opening the palm limits the player's ability to hit a great serve. Opening the palm limits the player's ability to hit a great serve.



Figure 4.11 The elbow extends.



Figure 4.12 The forearm pronates.

8. Follow-Through and Landing

The completion of the serve begins with the weight transfer from one leg to the other and then the racket moving through the contact point. After the ball has been struck, the arm begins to decelerate and the body begins to recover and prepare for the return (see figure 4.13). Which foot lands first depends on the server's preference.

TECHNIQUE FOR SPECIFIC SERVES

A player has three areas of focus for developing the serve: power, spin, and placement. For the flat serve the player must focus on power, while slice and topspin serves require a focus on using a variety of spins to wreak havoc on the opponent. All four types of serves require developing the quality of placement. The following are some scenarios for the different serves and the specific techniques for executing them. Combining the technique for the flat serve, the slice serve, the topspin serve, and the kick serve with variations in location, spins, and tactics, can give the player many options for constructing and winning the point.



Figure 4.13 Follow-through and landing.

Flat Serve

The flat serve is the most powerful serve of the four types. The ball hit off this serve has little or no spin. The player should hit it to the lines or corners when trying to get a ball by the opponent, hit it at the body to stop an opponent, or move the opponent out of the way. When hit correctly and at the right time, pace, and location, this serve is very effective.

Preparation

This phase of the flat serve is explained in the Kinetic Chain section. The body prepares for a smooth and fluid service motion that includes effective use of the legs. On a flat serve, the toss should go up in the air approximately 2 feet (0.6 m) from the proper extension of the arm (arm fully extended, fingers pointing up with the palm open) in front and about 1 foot (0.3 m) to the right for a right-handed player or to the left for a left-handed player.

Forward Swing and Contact

The elbow rotates backward to a position where the server can look backward and see the elbow bent and slightly rotated past a straight-back position. As the arm extends from the elbow position, the toss goes up, and the body gains momentum upward toward the ball; the shoulders turn forward. The serve arm then starts to come up, and the forearm pronates as the elbow extends upward and slightly outward; the inside of the forearm faces slightly outward, similar to the position for throwing a baseball or football. As the server reaches to hit the ball, the legs extend at the point of contact, and then the wrist snaps down on the ball.

Follow-Through

After contact, the racket head continues downward and eventually follows through on the opposite side of the player's body.



Figure 4.14 Slice serve preparation.



Figure 4.15 Slice serve contact.

Slice Serve

The slice serve is very effective because of its sidespin. The optimal locations include a serve that slices away from the opponent and a serve that slices into the opponent. One of the server's goals is to keep the opponent from getting a good read on the ball and increase the likelihood of a weak return. The slice is a great serve for variety, which helps keep opponents guessing, and it is very effective if used in combination with the flat and the topspin serves.

Preparation

The preparation is similar to that for the flat serve, but on a slice serve the upper body turns more sideways while leaning slightly farther back in the load position. Overrotation is apparent when the body moves uncomfortably backward. The rotation should tilt slightly backward, but not too exaggerated to avoid coming from farther back to get in the proper position. On a slice serve, the toss arm goes out about one ball length farther toward the left of the left-handed player or to the right of a right handed player, making a bigger V shape and allowing for more trunk rotation through contact (see figure 4.14).

Forward Swing and Contact

The arm continues upward, the elbow extends, and the forearm pronates so that the inside of the forearm moves outward and the wrist snaps toward the outside of the ball. This creates a glancing blow that imparts sidespin on the ball. If the arm does not pronate when extending, then the arm travels too closely to the body, creating a cramped motion that hampers fluidity.

The front shoulder and toss arm are more rotated in order to create the extra angular momentum needed for the slice. The angle of the body and front shoulder stay slightly more closed as the body uncoils. The position of the front shoulder creates the angle that the racket must travel to make the contact that produces the slice. Because the toss for the slice serve should be more to the outside, the contact point (see figure 4.15) for the slice serve is about one ball farther out (to the right for right-handed players, left for left-handed players) than the flat serve.

Follow-Through

The follow-through takes a little longer because the wrist was heading around the ball. The racket head eventually settles at around waist level.

Topspin and Kick Serves

The topspin serve is very effective on clay courts or hard courts because of the bounce that is created by the service motion and the safety of its height when it goes over the net. This serve can really cause problems for returners who don't like to or can't handle higher-bouncing balls or balls that bounce out of their strike zone. A good topspin serve usually bounces into an opponent and a good kick serve usually bounces away from an oppo-

ment, depending on the location of the serve and spin. A topspin serve that bounces directly into an opponent should land about a foot (0.3 m) in front of the opponent and bounce into the body. A kick serve with the goal of bouncing away from the opponent is hit out wide.

Preparation

For the topspin or kick serve the back arches as it rotates back so that the hips push forward, parallel to the baseline, and the shoulders angle backward. The racket head and shoulders tilt backward while the body settles and holds the arched-back position (see figure 4.16). The back needs to be strong enough to hold the position for a split second before the abdominal muscles contract. The shoulders stay turned until the serve is hit and then rotate forward to the direction of the serve. Because of the arch in the back, the knees load slightly more than in other types of serves.

On the toss, the arm goes back from the V shape to the side. It is thrown back in a straight line, in conjunction with the arching of the back, and heads comfortably back. Then the body moves forward and the ball is struck. The kick serve is usually tossed above or slightly behind the head of the server; it goes over the left shoulder for a right-handed player and the right shoulder for a left-handed player. The toss for the topspin serve is lower and more in front than the toss for the kick serve.

Forward Swing and Contact

For the kick serve the body remains facing the side fence until the ball is off the racket. The racket trajectory is upward and across the ball or left to right from 7 o'clock to 2 o'clock. During this phase, the player should focus on the hips moving upward to facilitate moving up and then out. Once the arched back extends, the forearm and racket naturally pronate, so the inside of the forearm faces slightly outward and upward. As the legs drive upward, the racket head is at an angle that, if the player drives upward with the legs properly, can cause the racket head to brush up on the ball producing the kick serve. Topspin is created from the extension of the knees upward and toward the target combined with the racket head driving up and out toward the sideline (see figure 4.17).

The difference between the wrist snap for the kick serve and the topspin serve is that the serve arm hits the ball at different angles. For the topspin serve, the ball is tossed lower and in front of the player and brushed from six to twelve o'clock, or bottom to top of the ball, creating a forward topspin serve. On the kick serve the ball is struck from 7 to 2 o'clock (5 to 11 o'clock for left-handed servers), or diagonally upward, which imparts an oblique spin, causing the ball to jump or kick.



Figure 4.16 Hip position for the topspin serve.



Figure 4.17 Topspin serve contact.

Follow-Through

On a kick serve, the wrist snaps out farther away from the body and therefore takes a route of snapping out first and then bringing the racket head around, heading toward slightly above the waist on the opposite side of the body. The topspin serve has a less pronounced swing path outward but more up and over motion.

MAXIMIZING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE SERVE

The player can maximize the effectiveness of the serve in four ways: hitting with power, adding a variety of serves, using disguise, and serving for location. Hitting with power is obviously something all players want; combined with the other three options, it can create an air of invincibility.

- **Hitting with power.** Hitting with power is an effective strategy for intimidating an opponent. It is used to get a free point or to get a weak reply from the opponent. The player uses power mainly on the flat serve, and hits to the corners or through an opponent. Hitting with power on every serve has its drawbacks: The opponent can get used to expecting a certain serve or pace, and the player can experience greater fatigue from hitting hard all the time.
- **Adding variety.** It is important that all players use variety in their serves. A proper mix of serves does not mean always serving hard to different locations; it means adding variations such as sometimes using a second serve as a first serve, or perhaps hitting different types of serves. A good server keeps track of what serves are effective against the opponent and when best to use them. At the start of a match, the player should hit serves to the opponent's strengths as well as weakness. This helps the player gauge just how strong the opponent's strength is. This information helps the player know what to expect on the return and devise strategies for winning the point.
- **Using disguise.** A good disguise starts with a ball toss that is in the same location regardless of whether it is a first serve or a second serve and whether the serve is a slice, flat, or topspin serve. (The toss behind the head on the kick serve does not allow for disguise.) The returner should not be able to guess what type of serve will be hit. Most good returners can read the hips and motion of the servers to know what serve is coming. They also may focus on the ball when the server is bouncing it or preparing to start the motion. So, the more consistent the server's early movements are, the greater chance of a successful disguise. To prevent the returner from getting a good read on the ball, the server can try to hide the ball in the hand as long as possible. Rotating the trunk may hide the ball from the returner's view. Another way to disguise the serve is with a quick toss or a toss that is hidden by a longer reach of the arm. The returner doesn't usually see these types of disguises, so they can be surprising as well.
- **Serving for location.** It is vital to serve to a variety of locations. Players should use variations of the out-wide, body, and T serve hit to specific locations, for example, the body forehand, body backhand, a serve that starts to the body and kicks out wide or vice versa, or a slice serve that starts to one location and moves to another. Many times players get stuck going for big serves to the lines and neglect the body serve. The server should use the butterfly method when serving—mixing up the

location from the corners to the body and from the body to the corners. To visualize the butterfly method, imagine the shape of a butterfly on the court. The wings go out for a serve hit wide, and then they come back in for a serve hit to the body. Some players are very good at returning when they are stretched out, so the body serve is necessary.

CREATING AN AURA

Once a player begins to maximize the effectiveness of the serve, holding serve becomes easier. Great servers have an aura surrounding their serve, which means their opponents fear their serve or at least think it is hard to break. Following are some tips and thoughts for players to create an aura surrounding their serve.

- **Establishing a routine.** Routines in general are very important in tennis, but for a serve, routine is essential. All great servers have a routine before they serve. For example, Maria Sharapova's routine includes pulling back her hair and taking a little hop, signifying her preparation for the serve. A consistent routine can calm a player in match play situations. The pre-serve routine should include how the player steps up to the line, the way the player gets in a balanced position for the stance, the number of times the player bounces the ball, and how the player begins the motion. How to perform this pre-serve routine is up to the player, but the goal is to be consistent.
- **Taking command of the court.** A strong look to the other side, an energy hop, or pumping up can help a player take command. The player should stand up tall and develop a plan for the point before stepping up to the line, keeping in mind that the serve can control the flow of play.

COACHING POINTS

The serve is the one shot over which players have the most control, and yet amazingly players frequently lose their service game. Although the return game has improved, the problem of holding serve derives mostly from the psychological battle players face as well as the effectiveness of their serves. Holding serve, especially for a player who has just broken serve or who is in a pressure situation, is a real test.

For many players, the pressure leads to shorter breathing, the legs feeling shaky and weak, and the mind becoming unclear about the best location for the serve. Other players may start to think about winning instead of about executing a good serve.

The best way to approach serving in these situations is for a player to focus on the serve location based on strategy or on the opponent's strengths and weaknesses. Another option that can help a player hold serve is to focus on a component of the serve. For example, after retrieving a ball from the back or side fence, the player should stand behind the baseline and practice the toss or maybe a flex of the knees to trigger the mind to focus on that component of the serve. It helps to step up to the line after using this trigger, go through the routine, and deliver the intended serve. The player can think of this trigger as a way to get the point started in the way the player wants to. This trigger is helpful when the player feels nervous or is struggling to get in a first serve.



- **Using a consistent ball bounce.** The ball bounce varies for each individual. Whatever the player chooses, it is important to stay consistent and make it part of the pre-serve preparation.
- **Being mindful.** Good servers usually look as though they are always thinking—and they are. They give themselves constant reminders of what they need to do to hit a good serve; they are plotting their strategy.
- **Embracing the challenge.** Good servers like the challenge of getting out of trouble with a big serve, fooling an opponent, or, if they do lose their serve, making it the hardest game that returner has ever played. Embracing the challenge means delivering in big situations and delighting in an escape from a near break.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

The serve can be the difference in the tennis player's ultimate level. A simple progression to develop a player's serve is as follows: First, the player must analyze the type of role the serve will have in the game style. Then, the player can learn and perfect the proper technique needed to hit all the serves and maximize effectiveness; develop the ability to hit for power, variety, location, and disguise; and create an aura surrounding the serve to show that the serve is reliable and doesn't break down under pressure.

Improving the serve takes attention to detail and a lot of practice. The best way to understand and practice the serve is with a bucket of balls on a tennis court. This is where the player can experiment with different ways of serving, work on skills, establish a good rhythm, and develop the serve into a shot that matches playing style. Chapter 6 provides drills to work on learning the different serves, practicing rhythm, and maximizing the effectiveness of the serve.