



2

CHAPTER

BACKHAND SKILLS



Whether it's a one-handed shot hit crosscourt, a two-handed shot ripped up the line, a flat or high and heavy shot that lands on the baseline, or a low slice that barely makes it over the net, the backhand is a beautiful shot. Players can use the backhand to hit for a winner, defend, add variety to shots, and raise the game to another level. For some, the backhand is a weapon and a stroke to build the game around; for others, it complements the forehand or provides balance.

Players can use two types of backhands: the one-handed and the two-handed backhand. Until the 1970s, the backhand was played almost exclusively with one hand. The classic one-handed backhand was among the most beautiful, delicate, and overpowering moves ever. Legends of the game such as Ken Rosewall, Stefan Edberg, and Justine Henin are all noted for their beautiful backhands and have built their games around the backhand weapon. With the success of Jimmy Connors, Tracy Austin, Chris Evert, and Björn Borg (all two-handed backhand specialists), the number of two-handed players exploded. Coaches liked the added power and greater control of using two hands instead of one. Now players are taught both styles, and the choice is theirs: the compact feel and built-in power of the two-handed backhand, or the added reach and flexibility of the one-handed backhand.

Each backhand has a distinct style, yet they both can have the same goal: to attack, to set up the player's better side, to defend. Depending on how well the player develops it, the backhand can be a great strength or major weakness. Often players learn the forehand first and neglect properly learning the nuances of the backhand. The player should focus on developing the backhand just as seriously as the forehand—playing an individual style, executing the shots within that style, and hitting them technically correctly. Players should try to develop a backhand weapon, but if that is not possible, the backhand should at least be used to complement the forehand and overall game.

This chapter discusses backhand styles, possible shots, and the grips and technique to hit them properly. Chapter 3 presents drills to bring out the best in any player's backhand.

DEVELOPING THE BACKHAND

Both the one-handed and two-handed backhands are popular and effective, yet both have their unique advantages. As discussed in chapter 1, the offensive and defensive characteristics of a player's shots determine the player's style and the shots that player masters. This same approach can be applied to the backhand.

Advantages of the one-handed backhand include the following:

- It is easier to hit with greater power.
- It is easier to reach for more shots, including out-of-reach shots and low balls.
- It is easier to hit good angles created by the topspin.
- It is easier to switch to a one-handed slice. (The one-handed slice is preferable to the two-handed version.)

Advantages of the two-handed backhand include the following:

- It is easier to use the grips because the player uses two hands.
- It is easier because two arms can more easily manage the strength needed to hit a shot.
- It is easier to hit a higher-bouncing ball and take it in on the rise.
- It is easier to disguise.

Players decide which backhand to use based on body build, foot speed, natural feel with two hands instead of one (or vice versa), and potential game style. If the player's style is more comfortable at the net, then using a one-hander may be a good option. If the player prefers to hit from the baseline, a two-handed backhand might be appropriate.

- **Build.** A player's build can make a big difference on the quality of the backhand. If the player has broad shoulders or a large frame, a one-handed backhand could be a better option because of the needed fluidity of the two-handed backhand. The movements of players with broader frames may not be as fluid as smaller players. The most important consideration, though, is the mobility (or foot speed) of the player.
- **Foot speed.** This characteristic is essential to the two-handed backhand because the player has limited reach with this shot. If either movement or speed around the court is a weakness, the one-handed backhand may be the best choice because of the extra reach the one-handed backhand provides.
- **Natural feel.** Most coaches start out teaching the two-handed backhand. If that shot is not progressing and doesn't feel natural, trying a one-handed backhand may be an option. Players should try to hit some one-handed backhands to get a sense of whether it can develop into a reliable shot. If it doesn't work, the worst-case scenario is that hitting a one-handed backhand can help the two-handed backhand either by developing a slice or getting stronger with the dominant arm on the two-handed backhand. Initially when a player tries the one-handed backhand, arm strength can be a challenge. The player may feel that the arm is not strong enough, but may like the freedom of the shot. Through repetition, the arm eventually becomes stronger.
- **Potential game style.** The player should look at the backhand with an eye toward potential. If all signs indicate that the style of play will be aggressive shots (such as serve and volley or hitting lots of slices), the player may want to consider the one-handed backhand.

BACKHAND AND STYLES OF PLAY

It is important to recognize the differences between the one-handed backhand and the two-handed backhand and how each fits into the player's style of play. Table 2.1 on page 32 summarizes this information.

- **Aggressive baseline play.** Because of the heavy groundstrokes hit in this style, most players who use this style of play would use a two-handed backhand because of the combination of control, power, and solidness of the two-handed backhand. Although the two-handed backhand fits this style best, an aggressive baseline player still needs to develop a one-handed backhanded slice and, in some cases, it is possible for a player with a powerful one-handed backhand to play with an aggressive baseline style.
- **All-court play.** The all-court player can be proficient with either the two-handed backhand or the one-handed backhand. While a few professionals in the world do have a two-handed backhand slice, most hit a one-handed backhand slice for reasons of increased range of motion and comfort.
- **Serve-and-volley style.** This style definitely leads the player to a one-handed backhand. The quickness needed to play this style would be hard to develop for a two-handed backhand player. It would be difficult to try and incorporate an extra

Table 2.1 Techniques for Styles of Play

Type of technique	Style of play				
	Aggressive baseline	All-court	Serve-and-volley	Rallying baseline	Defensive baseline
Eastern-Eastern	X	X	Rare but possible	X	X
Continental-Eastern	X	X	X	X	X
One-handed Eastern	X	X	X	X	X
One-handed wrist-behind-the-grip	X	X	Not recommended	X	X
One-handed Continental	Not recommended	Not recommended	X	Not recommended	Not recommended
One-handed backhand slice	X	X	X	X	X

arm into the swing when the player's reach is of the essence. The extra range of movement of the one-handed backhand is maximized with all the quicker movements around the net.

- **Rallying baseline play.** The rallying baseline player would lean toward a two-handed backhand because this style is based mainly on hitting groundstrokes. This player should also learn the one-handed backhand slice. This player probably hasn't developed a strong enough two-handed backhand to upgrade the game to the aggressive baseliner status.
- **Defensive play.** The defensive player probably uses both the one-handed and two-handed backhands. The main reason this player is defensive is because of court positioning, so the likely scenario is that the defensive player hits one-handed backhand slices or not very effective two-handed backhands from too far back in the court.

FOOTWORK AND BODY POSITION

Most players try hard to hit big forehands. Often that means their movements are big and therefore the backhand may be exposed. Adding power and variety to the backhand helps the player make it an effective weapon. Proper footwork and positioning are essential for doing this.

Movement

Proper movement allows the player to get into position for more balls and to be balanced while striking them. The backhand requires essentially the same movement as the forehand. The primary focus is on the outside leg and four basic moves: a step out with the outside leg for a ball landing on the baseline, a step back with the back leg for a deeper ball, a step forward with the outside leg or back leg for a short ball, and a step behind diagonally with the back leg to get out of the way of a shot or if the player has a backhand inside out (this shot is not common).

It is not advisable to run around a forehand to hit a backhand. It increases a player's court movement and makes recovering more difficult. Today's tennis is so dominated by the forehand that most players' forehands are better than their backhands. Therefore, this type of movement may not be worth the problems it could cause. It is fine for a player to take balls hit through the middle with the backhand if doing so is preferable, but crossing too far over that line means that the player better be able to hit a lot of winners with the backhand or have a tremendous inside-out backhand.

Following are key movements that are specific to the two backhand types:

- **Two-handed backhand.** A common problem for two-handed backhand movement is that at times the back leg can become underused. If a player makes a habit of properly stepping out with the outside leg to line up behind the ball, that player will always be in balance while striking the ball.
- **One-handed backhand.** Movement for the one-handed backhand is similar the two-handed backhand up until the outside leg slides out for balance. For the one-handed backhand, once the back leg has been set for loading and balance, the player steps toward the incoming ball with the front leg and swings. The step forward toward the ball provides ample power and control. A one-handed player can also hit an open-stance backhand in an effort to improve movement and recovery, but it will not create as much power as stepping forward.

For a slice using the one-handed backhand, the movement is similar. However, the front leg may cross over or beyond the back leg a little more, especially if the player is on the run. The reach on the two-handed backhand is limited because the other arm is being used, but if a player uses a one-handed slice effectively, it can make for a very effective style of play that incorporates variety and versatility into the game.

Stances

For the backhand, players mainly use the closed stance (see figure 2.1) and the open stance (see figure 2.2 on page 34). The use of the back leg and position of the front leg dictate the stance. For a closed stance, the front leg crosses over an imaginary line drawn



Figure 2.1 Closed stance for the (a) one-handed and (b) two-handed backhand.



Figure 2.2 Open stance for the (a) one-handed and (b) two-handed backhand.

from the back leg to the front leg. For an open stance, used on wider shots, the body faces more toward the net and the back leg reaches out to the side, away from the front leg. The closed stance is predominantly used when a player has time to step into the shot. When the player is stretched or has less time, the open stance is necessary.

GRIPS

As with the forehand, backhand technique hinges on the player's grip. Two grip options exist for both the two-handed and one-handed backhands. Options for the slice backhand are also covered here. All players, no matter what type of primary backhand they use, can employ the slice backhand.

Two-Handed Backhand

For the two-handed backhand, players should pay careful attention to the use of the arms while executing a shot. The playing arm is dominant and the other arm is nondominant. So, for a right-handed player, the left arm is nondominant and for a left-handed player, the right arm is nondominant. On the two-handed backhand, a player needs to coordinate the use of both arms by developing the use of the nondominant arm.

For most players, the main source of strength for a backhand shot is the nondominant arm. The bottom hand on the racket (the dominant arm) provides stability and extension while the top hand on the racket (nondominant arm) provides the majority of the acceleration. For these reasons, players often develop and rely on the nondominant arm more than the dominant arm. However, for a powerful shot, players must have some strength in the bottom (dominant) arm. To create more balance between the two arms on the backhand, players should hit one-handed backhands with each hand placed as it would be in the two-handed version. Hitting with each arm individually allows players to see how much power each arm contributes to their regular two-handed shot.

The two main grips used when hitting the two-handed backhand are the both-hands Eastern (or Eastern-Eastern) grip and the bottom-hand Continental and top-hand Eastern forehand (Continental-Eastern) grip. These grips allow varying degrees of power and topspin. Figures 2.3 and 2.4 show the placement of the index knuckles for right- and left-handed players. (Refer to figure 1.6 on page 5 for bevel numbers.)

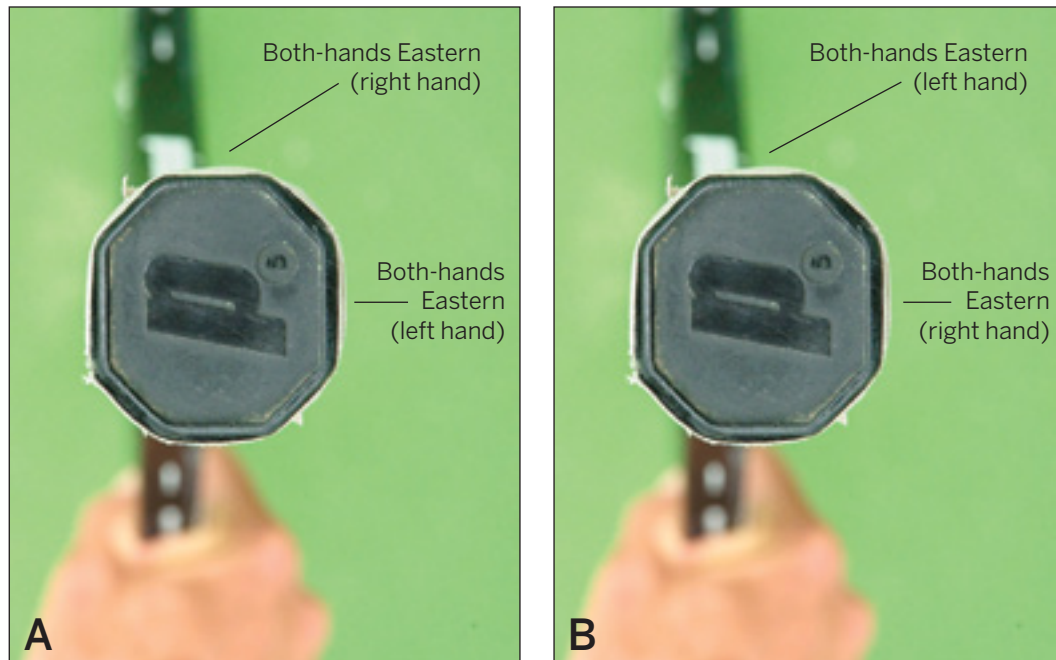


Figure 2.3 Location of the index knuckles on the racket for (a) right-handed players and (b) left-handed players using the both-hands Eastern grip.

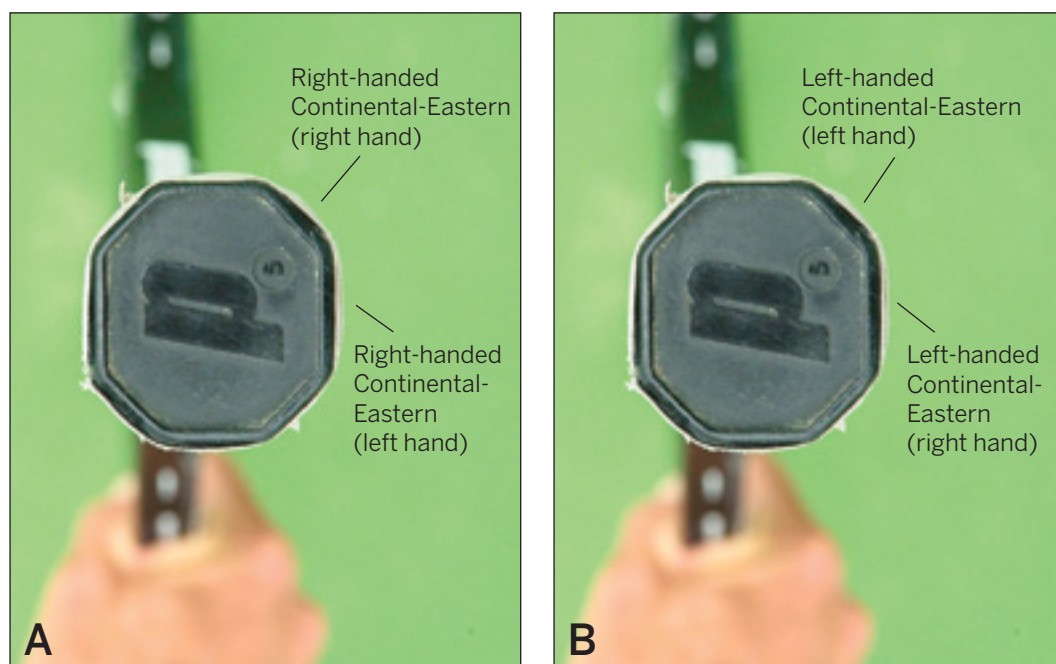


Figure 2.4 Location of the index knuckles on the racket for (a) right-handed players and (b) left-handed players using the bottom-hand Continental and top-hand Eastern forehand grip.

Both-Hands Eastern Grip

The both-hands Eastern grip is a common two-handed backhand grip. It allows the player to hit with topspin, power, or both. In this grip, the dominant hand uses the Eastern backhand grip and the nondominant hand uses the Eastern forehand grip. Right-handed players place the index knuckles of the right and left hands on bevels 1 and 7 respectively (see figure 1.6 on page 5). Left-handed players place the left hand on bevel 1 and the right hand on bevel 3 (see figure 2.5). The top hand presses against the bottom hand without the fingers intertwining.

The amount of topspin depends on the size of the loop when preparing for the shot and how well the player uses the wrists before and during the ball strike. (For more information, see Stroke Technique on page 38.) The only drawback to this grip is that it is built for topspin and thus requires wrist flexibility to square the racket head for a flatter, more powerful shot.

Any player who likes to incorporate topspin into the game can use this grip. The aggressive baseline player would definitely consider this grip. So might the all-court player with good use of the slice as well as the rallying baseline player and the defensive player.

Bottom-Hand Continental and Top-Hand Eastern Forehand Grip

For the Continental-Eastern grip, the right-handed player places the bottom (right) hand in the Continental grip and the top (left) hand in the Eastern forehand grip. The left-handed player uses Continental for the left and Eastern for the right (see figure 2.6). The hands press together without the fingers intertwining. The racket face is slightly closed.

When using this grip, the player can hit the two-handed backhand flat or with topspin. This grip does not have the added benefit of a grip already in a topspin position, so topspin must be generated with strong wrists that can hit a shot with acceleration and a strong upward thrust of the shot itself. The player can use this grip for all styles of play. It can provide the perfect balance of power and topspin needed when staying on the baseline or transitioning to the net.



Figure 2.5 Left-handed two-handed backhand grip using the Eastern-Eastern grip.

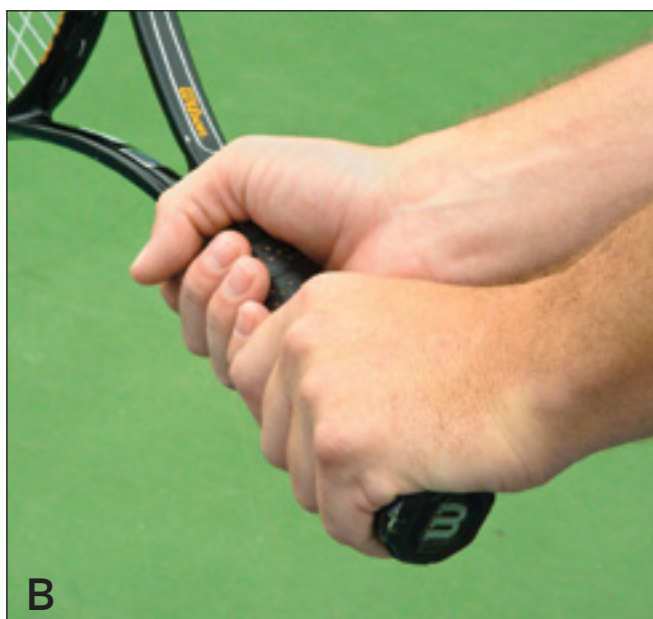


Figure 2.6 Left-handed two-handed backhand grip using the Continental-Eastern grip.

One-Handed Backhand

The two main grips for the one-handed backhand are the Eastern backhand grip and the wrist-behind-the-grip backhand grip. The Eastern backhand grip is the most popular grip used for the one-handed backhand. Roger Federer uses the Eastern backhand grip to great success. The wrist-behind-the-grip or the semi-Western backhand grip is also widely used. A player might also choose the Continental grip for the backhand, but it is rarely used today, except with the backhand slice. Figures 2.7a and 2.7b show the placement of the index knuckle for right- and left-handed players. (Refer to figure 1.6 on page 5 for bevel numbers.)

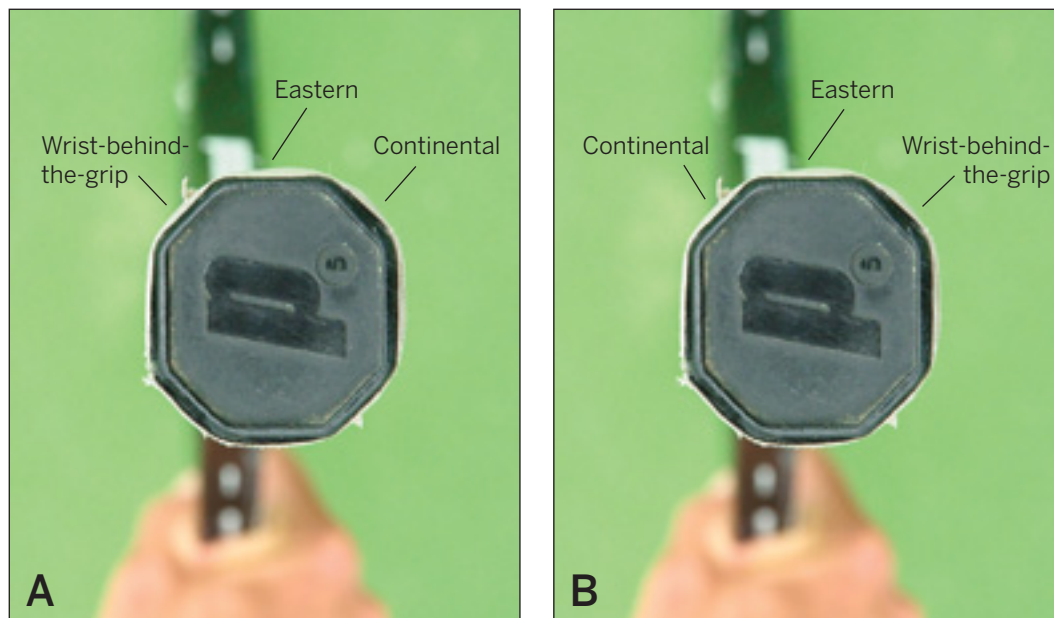


Figure 2.7 The location of the index knuckle on the racket for (a) right-handed players and (b) left-handed players using the one-handed backhand grips.

Eastern Backhand Grip

For the Eastern backhand grip (see figure 2.8), both right- and left-handed players place the index knuckle on bevel 1 of the racket handle (refer to figure 2.7a–b). If a player uses the wrist effectively and accelerates the racket head up through the ball, this grip can generate a great deal of topspin and power. The player uses the wrist to make adjustments in the spin or to flatten out the shot. When hitting a flatter shot with this grip, the player hits the shot through the ball, but with minimal wrist snap upward. Also, changing from this grip to the slice grip is relatively easy.

This type of grip is fine for all styles of play, especially an offensive style such as the aggressive baseline style. The all-court and serve-and-volley player may also use this type of grip. The rallying baseline and defensive player would most likely use the two-handed, not one-handed, backhand. A player can use this grip to hit topspin and flat shots effectively.



Figure 2.8 Left-handed eastern backhand grip for one-handed backhand.



Figure 2.9 Wrist-behind-the-grip backhand grip for the one-handed backhand.

Wrist-Behind-the-Grip Backhand Grip

The wrist-behind-the-grip backhand grip (see figure 2.9) is also known as the far-Eastern backhand grip and sometimes the semi-Western backhand grip. The right-handed player places the index knuckle on bevel 8 (the bevel just to the side of the Eastern grip but rotating the forearm to the opposite side as for the forehand; see figure 2.7a). The left-handed player places the index knuckle on bevel 2 (see figure 2.7b). This grip position squares up the racket head and builds in topspin with a straight extension of the arm. This grip is good for balls hit at normal chest height and above and taking a ball on the rise. Because the hand is turned farther on the racket, switching to the Eastern or semi-Western forehand grip is slightly more difficult.

Players can use this grip for all styles, but this backhand is a get-up-and-go grip because it uses the attack point of contact. This grip is perfect for taking balls early because of the more straight forward extension of the arm, so it makes sense that an all-court, a serve-and-volley, and to a lesser degree an aggressive baseline style player would use this grip. The rallying baseline and defensive player may want to use this grip as a good form of built-in defense, because they can use the early contact point as a means to take time away from an attacking opponent.

Slice Backhand

The slice backhand is a beautiful shot and a useful tool. Topspin shots are prevalent in the game, so possessing an effective slice sets a player apart from the rest. The slice backhand is meant to be kept low with a flat trajectory, barely go over the net, and dip down after crossing the net. Used offensively, the shot can provide variety. It can also be used as an excellent defensive shot. A player who does not move well or does not prepare adequately might overuse this shot.

The slice backhand is hit with either the Eastern forehand grip or the Continental grip. The grip players choose depends on whether they want to build in more slice to the stroke or use more wrist to produce the slice. The Continental grip requires more cut, or wrist snap, downward and requires flexible wrists. The Eastern forehand grip has more built-in underspin.

The advantage of the Eastern grip is that the player does not have to change grips when hitting an Eastern forehand followed by a backhand slice. The Eastern grip allows the player to get more slice on the ball as long as the wrist is pronated slightly downward. The Continental grip produces a flatter, more penetrating shot, and it requires less wrist pronation. The disadvantages become apparent when the player is in poor position for the shot. An Eastern forehand grip may produce too much underspin, thus causing the ball to land short, and the Continental grip may not provide the desired loft needed on the shot to get the ball over the net.

STROKE TECHNIQUE

After choosing the one-handed or two-handed backhand grip to suit preferred game style and goals, the player is ready to take a closer look at the technique needed throughout the stroke pattern. The following text breaks down the technique needed to execute

each type of backhand. Each of these strokes consists of a particular preparation and backswing, forward swing and contact, and follow-through.

Two-Handed Backhand

As noted previously, the two-handed backhand combines power and topspin. To execute it successfully, players need to coordinate the movements of the arms and the body.

Preparation and Backswing

The shoulders make a half turn, or unit turn, as the racket is taken back (see figure 2.10). The elbows, arms, and racket head should be set comfortably behind the player—not too steep and not too low. The racket is about 1.5 feet (0.5 m) away from the side of the body and the wrists are slightly firm. The grip dictates how far under the shot the player will have to loop and brush up on the ball. The trunk and hips rotate backward to load properly with the legs. Just as in all shots, the back leg should load primarily to provide a platform for the swing and to provide adequate balance (see figure 2.11).

Eastern-Eastern Grip

- More brush is required for the Eastern-Eastern grip. The trunk and hips rotate backward a little more.

Continental-Eastern Grip

- This grip requires that the player square the racket head.

Forward Swing and Contact

The weight transfers forward while the racket makes a loop; the racket head dips lower for more topspin and waist high or slightly higher for a flat ball. The loop and swing pattern is also dictated by the choice of grip. As the loop takes place, the hips will rotate backward. As the hips begin to rotate forward, the wrists pronate downward to sweep under the ball, and the arms extend outward for contact and the desired brush on the ball (see figure 2.12).



Figure 2.10 Two-handed backhand unit turn.



Figure 2.11 Two-handed backhand preparation and backswing.



Figure 2.12 Two-handed backhand forward swing and contact.

The ball is hit in the mid- to lower-level strike zones. The higher-level strike zone would also require a loop and sweep under the ball for a better extension of the arms. It is preferable that the player hit the two-handed backhand in front of the front foot to allow the player to be able to eventually handle tougher balls, more easily transition to the net, and maintain an aggressive position on the court. For the swing, the player should focus on hitting through the contact zone and accelerating the racket head to create topspin or to hit a more effective ball. Shots hit later in the rally zone are hit down the line as a disguise or as a desired effective shot, or they are hit with a defensive point of contact as a disguise or as a means to produce more topspin and brush on the ball.

Eastern-Eastern Grip

- The pathway of the swing sweeps upward for topspin but more outward for drive.
- The wrists in this phase snap up during contact with equal pressure. The wrist on the nondominant arm is laid back and must snap up and on the outside of the ball to create topspin. The player should have the feeling of brushing up on the ball while hitting the shot and extending the arms out through contact in a smooth fashion under the ball.
- To achieve topspin, the player should get into a more loaded position with the knees bent before transferring the weight forward.

Continental-Eastern Grip

- The pathway for this grip is pretty flat; it has little sweep under for flatter balls and slightly more sweep under for topspin. The racket head on this grip squares up as the player hits it, so in order to create topspin, the wrists must sweep under and drive upward.
- Both wrists apply snap and pressure. The nondominant arm is slightly laid back so it can snap up more to create topspin or slightly less for a flat ball.
- No extra load is required for this shot.

Follow-Through

During this phase, the racket head continues outward as the wrists turn over. The hands finish over the other shoulder or at shoulder level (see figure 2.13). The player can hold the body position or bring the back leg forward to assist in recovery. One recent technique for making the two-handed backhand more effective is for the player to feel as though the back leg is flowing through the shot and settles in line with the front foot. From this position, the player can use that outside leg to push back toward the middle of the court for recovery.

Eastern-Eastern Grip

- On the follow-through, the arms extend outward and upward a little more to square up the racket head for the shot.
- The arms should extend out to the opposite shoulder.
- To help square up the racket head, the weight transfer is usually a little more exaggerated upward.

Continental-Eastern Grip

- The arms extend outward and, based on the shot, they are flatter if driving the ball and more upward if imparting topspin.
- To aid in acceleration, the nondominant arm accelerates upward as well.



Figure 2.13 Two-handed backhand follow-through.

One-Handed Backhand

The one-handed backhand combines power and topspin with an expanded reach for the player. Because the player uses one hand instead of two, it is likely that strength is a concern. On the other hand, the player's reach and flexibility for hitting more difficult one-handed shots can increase.

Preparation and Backswing

The player makes a unit turn (see figure 2.14), making a half turn with the shoulders. The racket is taken back comfortably behind the body (not too steep, between waist and shoulder height). The other arm aids in the takeback and holds the position. The racket head is above the wrist, and the wrist is firm. The weight transfers backward, and both legs establish preferred stance (either closed or slightly open), while loading on back leg. Today's coaches try to establish an initial back leg load to get behind the ball. This back leg load helps the player maintain some balance through the shot, especially when fewer steps are required.

The racket face is squared on the takeback (see figure 2.15). The arm is comfortably bent at the elbow, the palm is positioned down, and the hand is set level with the back leg. The strike zone for normal shots is at midlevel. For shots hit with depth and pace that require a quicker takeback area, it is toward the lower-level strike zone.

Eastern Backhand Grip

- This grip requires a preparation to loop the racket upward before going down, but it prepares the player for a slightly steeper takeback if hitting with topspin.

Wrist-Behind-the-Grip Backhand Grip

- This grip has built-in topspin, and the arm sets in the normal midlevel strike zone position as it does for the Eastern backhand. The load toward the back leg is similar.
- The main difference in the preparation is that the racket face position is squared with the use of this grip, so the preparation to sweep under the ball for added topspin is eliminated. The player may still like to load toward the back leg and thrust upward, but in that case most of the topspin is incorporated with a steeper loop and a greater snap of the wrist.



Figure 2.14 One-handed backhand unit turn.



Figure 2.15 One-handed backhand preparation and backswing.

Forward Swing and Contact

The knees bend, and the load is set with the back leg. The hips begin to rotate backward before rotating forward and starting the loop. The wrists stay firm during the loop, and the racket face should stay squared or slightly closed downward. The arm and racket face extend outward to meet the ball at the attack point of contact, in front of the front foot, and at the midlevel strike zone (see figure 2.16). To hit a ball in the lower-level strike zone requires a deeper knee bend as well as a little more loop and sweep upward. The hips rotate forward as part of the swing. The player should feel as though the hips are holding the body's balance. The hand begins to pull backward. The head stays still on impact.

Eastern Backhand Grip

- The wrist accelerates slightly upward and forward for a flat ball and more severely upward for a topspin shot.

Wrist-Behind-the-Grip Backhand Grip

- Contact is made with the racket head already square so wrist needs to slightly accelerate upward.
- The loop is not as steep as is required for the Eastern backhand grip.

Follow-Through

As the racket extends upward using acceleration, the front arm goes toward the ball, and the back arm pulls farther backward. The wrist naturally begins to turn; the backhand will hold as far back as is comfortable. A more extended back arm gives greater balance. Near the end of the follow-through the player flicks the wrists up and out toward the opposite shoulder; the thumb essentially turns over and flows through the follow-through. The follow-through is out in front, and the racket head finishes above the wrist. The finish is over the opposite shoulder (see figure 2.17).



Figure 2.16 One-handed backhand forward swing and contact.



Figure 2.17 One-handed backhand follow-through.

Eastern Backhand Grip

- The wrist snaps upward on the follow-through, and the focus is on the arm and thumb flipping over and the racket head finishing up. The player should think, thumb up.

Wrist-Behind-the-Grip Backhand Grip

- The wrist in this grip snaps more outward and the palm of the hand stays slightly down. The thumb can still turn over, but not as much.

Backhand Slice

The backhand slice is a very effective tool for staying in a rally, especially when in a vulnerable position on the court and as an important use of variety. The lower trajectory of the ball allows for greater recovery time and a tough ball for an opponent to hit.

Preparation and Backswing

The shoulders make a unit turn as the body and racket head load backward (see figure 2.18). The weight should be transferred to the back leg for balance before using the stance. The player should focus on preparing the racket slightly above the level of the oncoming ball or directly behind it. The player should use a higher racket head preparation for more slice imparted on the ball and directly move it behind for a flatter, more powerful slice. The nondominant arm provides balance by assisting in the takeback (see figure 2.19). The fingers of the nondominant hand can hold the throat of the racket on the takeback.

The hip moves backward and the proper loading occurs depending on the stance and the movement. If the player puts the front foot across the line of the back leg, the stance is closed; if the player positions the front leg in front and toward the opposite shoulder, the stance is open. The racket face is open and up over the wrist.

Eastern Forehand Grip

- This grip has built-in underspin. The outside edge of the racket head is slanted toward the player. For this grip to work, the player needs to swing straight through the shot or slightly from high to low.



Figure 2.18 Backhand slice unit turn.



Figure 2.19 Backhand slice preparation and backswing.

- To hit a more powerful flat slice, the player drives through a little more with the legs. For a slice that floats or lands short in the court, the player may load up a little more with the legs.

Forward Swing and Contact

As the body moves forward the shoulder is kept in place. The front arm begins to move in a high-to-low fashion without going too steep. The player should imagine hitting on a plate of glass: dipping down too much would break the glass. As the front arm moves forward, the back arm releases and begins to move backward (see figure 2.20). Contact is possible in all three points of contact.



Figure 2.20 Backhand slice forward swing and contact.

Using a carioca step can help a player's execution of the backhand slice because it keeps the body balanced and the shoulders turned just before and directly after contact. To perform a carioca step, the player loads on the back leg. Immediately before contact, the back leg comes around the back of the body and sets in front of the front leg (see figure 2.21). As the shot is hit, the player must either take another carioca step behind and in front of the front foot again or pull out of the shot and recover for the next shot.

Eastern Forehand Grip

- This grip pronates or cocks backward and accelerates downward more at contact.

Continental Grip

- This grip pronates slightly less and accelerates outward more at contact.

Follow-Through

The player should try to keep the shoulder closed as long as possible, but as it does so the arm pulls to the other side of the body, and the back arm gets into a similar extended position as with the one-handed backhand (see figure 2.22).



Figure 2.21 Backhand slice carioca step.



Figure 2.22 Backhand slice follow-through.

Eastern Forehand Grip

- The follow-through on the Eastern grip travels in a more high-to-low fashion, and the wrist pronates downward.

Continental Grip

- The Continental grip extends more outward in a slight high-to-low fashion.

PLAYING THE BACKHAND

So far this chapter has covered the core techniques of the two- and one-handed backhands and analyzed the natural tendencies of each one. Next, the chapter discusses the backhand shots that all players need to learn and feel comfortable hitting. All of these shots can be hit with the two- or one-handed backhand, with slight differences. Regardless of which backhand the player chooses, it is important to have confidence in the backhand and be able to hit a variety of shots with it. Weaknesses in a player's backhand shots can hinder the player's progress. The shots presented here use a variety of spins and locations on the court. (See pages 16–19 for a review of spins and placements.) Table 2.2 shows which shots can be hit with each of the backhand techniques.

Table 2.2 Technique for Backhand Shots

Backhand shots	Type of technique			
	Two-handed backhand		One-handed backhand	
	Eastern-Eastern	Continental-Eastern	Eastern	Wrist-behind-the-grip
Backhand crosscourt drive	X	X	X	X
High, heavy crosscourt shot	X	X	X	X
High, heavy backhand down the line	X	X	X	X
Down-the-line backhand drive	X	X	X	X
Short-angled backhand crosscourt	X	X	X	X
Offensive backhand slice	rare	rare	With a change to the Continental grip	With a change to the Continental grip
Defensive backhand slice			With a change to the Continental grip	With a change to the Continental grip
Moonball backhand	X	X	With a change to the Continental grip	With a change to the Continental grip

Offensive Backhand Shots

An offensive backhand is a great weapon. This shot could be a winner, a ball to use to keep the opponent running, or a shot that takes time away from the opponent. Another offensive tool using the backhand is a shot that a player hits to a specific location, hoping for a certain reply from the opponent. For example, a player might hit a backhand down the line hoping for a crosscourt reply so the player can use the forehand on the next shot. The slice can also be considered an offensive backhand, especially if it is hit with power, spin, a low trajectory, and aggressive intent. The most offensive backhand is the backhand down the line. Most players start a match assuming their opponent has a better forehand than backhand and that the opponent will use the backhand defensively. Thus, a player with a powerful and well-placed down-the-line backhand can open the court and have more options.

Offensive backhands make a big difference in a player's game. Most people try to perfect their forehands, so when a backhand is effective and becomes a strength, it can take a player to a new level. The sections that follow discuss when to hit the different options for offensive shots, where to hit them, and how to hit them. Any necessary modifications needed for the one-handed or two-handed techniques are provided.

Backhand Crosscourt Drive

Justine Henin is considered to have one of the best one-handed backhands of all time. Her ability to hit penetrating backhands deep in the court, as well as her use of angles, gives her the perfect combination to help her overall game. Maria Sharapova has one of the best two-handed flat drives on the tour. Her forehand flat crosscourt drive is also excellent, so her main groundstroking style is offensive and flat from the ground, designed to overpower an opponent.

How The method for creating the crosscourt drive varies between the two-handed and one-handed versions.

Two-Handed Shot The player uses the preferred stance or stance dictated by the movement to the ball. In a good position, the player can use a closed stance. When out of position, the player should use an open stance. However, a player should avoid hitting a flat crosscourt shot from a wide-open stance because, unless the player's skill is perfect, the result is a flat ball that lands short in the court, prohibiting proper recovery time and giving the opponent an easier shot.

Using one's preferred grip, the contact point of the shot is usually in the attack point of contact and the midlevel strike zone. The player is trying to drive the ball with power and depth, so it can be considered a control shot. The loop on this shot is full and the player accelerates the arms and wrists first outward and then upward for the follow-through. To produce a flat ball and maximum momentum, the angle of the racket head should be square.

One-Handed Shot For the one-handed version, a player should use a slightly closed stance. The player should be in very good position for the shot, otherwise controlling the shot could be a problem. This shot is executed with either the Eastern backhand or wrist-behind-the-grip backhand grip. The contact point is in the attack point of contact and the midlevel strike zone. This shot can be hit flat or with more spin to give some shape to the ball, making it go up and down quickly and get off the court. Acceleration of the racket head and the arm still goes from low to high but extends outward immediately before contact.

Where A player hitting a crosscourt drive should be between the alleys. Getting near the alleys or outside the alleys requires a high, heavy ball (see the next shot) to try to get back in the point. The optimal landing location for a crosscourt drive is between the

service line and baseline, generally closer to the baseline, approximately 2 to 3 feet (0.6 to 0.9 m) from the baseline and alley. In general, the player should place the ball in any location deep in the court that pushes an opponent back in the court.

When The appropriate time to use the backhand crosscourt drive differs for the two- and one-handed versions.

Two-Handed Shot This shot is hit flat and deep. The goal is to get the opponent moving backward in the court, allowing the player to hit either an aggressive forehand or backhand on the next ball. The player can accomplish this with power or a flat, deep ball.

One-Handed Shot The one-handed backhand player uses the crosscourt backhand for two reasons. The shot can be hit when an opponent has hit a weak shot down the line and wants to use the backhand to be aggressive with the crosscourt shot. It can also be used to set up the forehand by hitting a deep backhand that gives the player enough time to get around the next backhand.

High, Heavy Backhand Crosscourt

A high, heavy backhand is a topspin shot that bounces high and is difficult for the opponent to retrieve. Rafael Nadal uses the high, heavy backhand to push an opponent back in the court, allowing more time for him to recover and hit his forehand. The high, heavy backhand crosscourt is one of his most effective shots.

How The two- and one-handed versions are hit the same way. A player executes the high, heavy backhand crosscourt by trying to get under the ball with as much power as possible to hit up on the ball. The ball feels heavy (the reason for the name) as the opponent receives it. The contact point for this shot is in the rally point of contact and in either the mid- to upper-level strike zone.

The high, heavy backhand crosscourt can be hit from an offensive position or a defensive position on the court.

Where This shot can be used strategically when the player isn't comfortable hitting a flat crosscourt drive and is in an offensive position on the court (midway between the center hash mark and the alley) or in a defensive position on the court (behind the baseline or in the alleys). This shot is hit deep in the court (midway between the service line and the baseline or near the baseline) and to mainly the outer thirds of the court or possibly to the middle. This shot is hit strategically to push an opponent back in the court or to give a player more time for recovery.

When This shot usually has an opponent reaching up to strike the ball, which is effective if that opponent is short or doesn't like hitting balls with a higher strike zone. This shot also allows the player more time to run around the backhand to hit a forehand, if that is the player's preferred style. This shot is hit when a player is on the run and trying to play a safer shot or when a player wants to push an opponent backward and gain time to recover or to create an angle for the forehand.

High, Heavy Backhand Down the Line

Justine Henin uses a one-handed backhand to hit this shot. It is extremely valuable to her game because it keeps her opponent on the defensive long enough for her to hit a more angled backhand or an aggressive forehand.

How This shot requires a preparation with more load in the legs, and it is hit with a lot of topspin and a high trajectory. This ball is meant to bounce high and out of the opponent's strike zone. It is a great setup shot to hit before transitioning to the net. The contact point for this shot is normally in the rally point of contact and the mid- to upper-level strike zone.

Two-Handed Shot Both the Eastern-Eastern grip and the Continental-Eastern grip can execute this shot. A player using the Eastern-Eastern grip will have to extend slightly more outward to provide power and depth. The Continental-Eastern grip requires a little more wrist snap upward to create more topspin on this shot. This shot is played with a closed stance if the player is in good position or slightly open if not in a good position or if this is the player's preferred stance.

One-Handed Shot Both the Eastern backhand and wrist-behind-the-grip backhand grip can execute this shot. The Eastern backhand grip requires more wrist snap and loading of the legs to hit this shot high and heavy. The wrist-behind-the-grip backhand grip requires more loft and extension outward. This shot is hit with a slightly closed stance and hit with loft and power generated from substantial leg loading and upward swing.

Where This ball should land deep in the court behind the service line and before the baseline, but it has the added benefit of possibly landing short and jumping up on a player to accomplish the same objective as the flat drive.

When The goal of this shot is twofold: get the opponent to hit crosscourt to the player's better, more aggressive shot (a backhand hit down the line high and heavy may make an opponent go crosscourt where the player can establish control of the point) and hit a ball that allows the player to recover or get in a better position for the next shot.

Two-Handed Shot The player hits this shot when on the run in the backcourt, near the baseline, and trying to play a safer shot or push an opponent backward to gain ample time to recover. It is used strategically to an opponent's weakness or to have the opponent hit back to the player's strength. It may also be used if the player has a weak crosscourt shot.

One-Handed Shot The shot is hit when the player is in a favorable position in the court (midway between the center hash mark and alley). If on the run, the player may want to use the slice backhand. Either way, the goal is the same: push the opponent back in order to recover and hit a more aggressive shot.

Down-the-Line-Backhand Drive

The down-the-line backhand drive is one of the most beautiful displays of power and finesse in the game. Serena Williams has a powerful down-the-line backhand drive. Opponents constantly look for this shot to come, and they are fearful of hitting a shorter ball that she can get behind and unload on the shot.

How The player can use a preferred backhand grip for this shot. To hit this shot successfully, the player needs to be inside the baseline, thus in a more offensive position. This grip is used with a closed stance or a slightly open stance if out of position. A player makes contact at the rally point of contact and the midlevel strike zone, but this shot's contact point is one ball later than the crosscourt shot and is driven for power.

Two-Handed Shot This shot requires good body preparation because the shot changes the direction of the oncoming shot, the player has a smaller area to work with when hitting up the line, and the wrist snap is out toward the outside of the shot. The big toe on the lead foot points toward the target.

One-Handed Shot This version is effective, but the one-handed player must be very skilled to accomplish the same result as the two-handed player. For the two-handed player, the extra arm provides more control, allowing time to turn or close the shoulders more, and the wrist must snap toward the outside of the shot. The one-handed player needs greater control and must extend the arm outward upon contact. The big toe on the lead foot points toward the target.

Where This shot is hit deep in the court to anywhere between the service line and baseline. The player should aim to place the shot 2 feet (0.6 m) from the alley for a winner and 2 to 4 feet (0.6 to 1.3 m) from the alley when changing the pattern. This shot should be from a position either midway between the center hash mark and the alley to almost in the alley. The down-the-line-backhand hit from the alley would have to be exceptional to recover in time for the next ball.

When This power shot should be hit when the player is in great position and trying to hit a winner or keep the opponent running. It is also an effective way to change the direction of the oncoming ball or to break up or change the rhythm of the point; in other words, the player hits down the line to have the opponent hit crosscourt to the player's better side. The success of this shot relates directly to the player's positioning and the timing of the contact point (slightly later than with the crosscourt drive), so it is important to be in good position for it.

Short-Angled Backhand Crosscourt

Jo Wilfried Tsonga effectively uses the one-handed version of this shot. His goal is to pull the player out of position on the backhand side so he can do more with his forehand, his weapon. Andy Murray uses the two-handed version effectively; he uses his speed around the court to look for opportunities given to him off this shot.

How The main grip for this shot is the player's usual backhand grip. This shot is usually hit with an open stance. The player can hit this shot earlier if trying to roll it crosscourt or slightly later to get into a more loaded position to hit with more topspin.

Two-Handed Shot The two-handed, short-angled backhand crosscourt shot is hit with a rally contact point in either the low- or midlevel strike zones. The angle of the racket head is slightly toward the outside of the shot and is dictated by the wrist snap. The player extends the arms outward—but not as far out as the crosscourt drive—and rolls over the wrists in a more accelerated fashion to get the ball to cross the net and then dip downward.

One-Handed Shot The execution of the one-handed version is similar to that of the two-handed version, but the player needs a strong and flexible wrist to perform this shot. The shot uses any of the contact points, and it is hit at the midlevel to lower-level strike zone. Though it is possible for a player to hit the two-handed version of this shot successfully from a bad position, the one-handed version must be hit in an optimal position and with great skill. The player extends outward, and the wrist snap dictates the dip after crossing the net.

Where The player should aim for the service line crosscourt toward the alley. The goal is for the ball to bounce away from the opponent or through the alley and off the court, making the opponent run or hit a defensive shot. This goal is accomplished with a lot of topspin and great acceleration of the racket head. In order to hit this angle shot, the position of the player on the court should be midway between the center hash mark and the alley or farther out toward the alley.

When This shot is used to pull an opponent off the court and as a lead-in to other shots. It challenges an opponent's ability to run and to hit while off balance. It also challenges the opponent's perspective because the ball must be hit either close in the alley or outside the alley. The player's best opportunity to hit a short-angled backhand crosscourt is as a reply to an opponent's short-angled shot. Another short-angled backhand shot is created off a short or weaker ball. The player moves up aggressively and takes the ball more in the attack point of contact and creates another angled shot.

The shorter angle with a rally or defensive contact point is used to counter and create a greater angle from the opponent. The shorter angle hit from an attack contact point is used strategically to wrong-foot or put an opponent on the defensive. Both shots are effective and, if used properly, can cause real headaches for the opponent, giving the player an easy next ball.

Offensive Backhand Slice

Samantha Stosur uses this shot effectively. She uses her backhand slice to complement her good kick serve. Combining variety with a shot (kick serve) that pushes her opponent back in the court, she can use a backhand slice (low ball). This tactic is a great way to confuse an opponent.

How This shot is hit with one hand. The arm extends out from a slightly high-to-low position. The best grip for the offensive backhand slice is the Continental or slightly Eastern forehand grip. This shot should be hit with a closed stance or a slightly open stance. A player can also slide into this shot with balance. An offensive backhand slice is designed to stay low and needs a lot of power. The player should use the attack point of contact and move through the ball more aggressively with a carioca step. The strike zone is mainly in the midlevel strike zone and the path of the racket is straighter and more directly through the ball. The offensive slice has a little less underspin than the defensive version.

Where This shot is hit from anywhere in the court from the center hash mark to the alley. A player can hit this shot crosscourt to keep the opponent from getting in good position on the shot (a form of defense) or hit it down the line to keep the opponent running or change the pattern to better suit the player. The player can try to have the ball land deep in the court to push an opponent back in the court, or slightly lower and shorter crosscourt if the player doesn't move forward very well. The player should hit the down-the-line version low, but with a little carry so that the player can recover for a more aggressive shot. This offensive shot can be hit toward the line; the defensive version can be hit farther toward the middle of the court (midway between the alley and center).

When The offensive backhand slice is a very effective shot. It results in a low ball that can change the opponents' rhythm, put the opponent on the defensive, or induce fatigue or errors. A shot that stays low is valuable because an opponent may not like hitting low balls. This could be because the opponent just doesn't move that well, is big in stature and has trouble getting low enough, or has a severe grip that doesn't allow effectively playing that shot. Most offensive shots are hit with topspin, so an offensive slice can frustrate an opponent. It can lead the opponent to try to change the variety of shots. These unexpected changes can sometimes make the difference in gaining offense.

Defensive Backhand Shots

Players are forced to use the defensive backhand when their contact point is late or when they don't properly recover after a shot. Defensive backhands are also designed to mix up an opponent's rhythm or to get a player out of trouble and recover for the next shot. The proper execution of these shots dictates whether the player stays on defense or can shift to a more offensive position. Strategically, the player can hit the defensive backhand in a location that gets the opponent to answer with a shot to the player's strength, such as the player's forehand.

Defensive Backhand Slice

Fernando Verdasco uses the defensive backhand slice to get out of trouble and keep the ball low, allowing him more time to recover and set up for the forehand.

How This one-handed shot uses a closed stance, but if the player gets to it late or if it is the player's preferred style, a more open stance can work successfully. Using a Continental or slightly Eastern forehand grip, the player takes the ball behind the back leg in the defensive contact point; the player usually is on the run or moving backward. The ball is met in the mid- to lower-level strike zones. The angle of the racket face is similar to the angle for the offensive backhand slice, but greater emphasis is on keeping the body balanced through the shot. To keep the ball low, the player must extend through the ball with a slicing motion in a high-to-low fashion. The player can visualize the slice being executed on a horizontal sheet of glass: cut too low and the glass breaks, extend through and the glass stays intact.

The technique differs from the offensive backhand slice because the latter shot is usually hit while the player moves forward for an attack. When hitting the defensive slice the player is just trying to keep it low and get out of trouble. The carioca step may not be used on the defensive backhand slice. Usually, the player is on the run and is not able to bring the back leg around through contact.

Where This shot is hit anywhere in the court, but preferably to the opponent's weaker side or angled away from the opponent.

When This shot is hit when the player is on a dead run, the player is getting pulled out of position, or the player's aggressive backhand is not that strong. When a player gets on a dead run, sometimes the only chance to stay in the point is to hit a defensive slice. The player tries to surprise an opponent into an error with speed, tenacity, or an unbelievable shot. This shot can also be used to mix things up and make the opponent work just a little harder by keeping the shot low.

Moonball Backhand

This shot is not used often in the professional game unless the player is totally out of position and just trying to get enough time to recover for the overhead that is surely coming on the next ball. This shot is much more effective in league play where the execution of the shot is erratic or not as powerful. Played against poor overheads, the moonball backhand can be used offensively.

How This shot is usually hit with one hand because the player is on defense and doesn't have the reach with the other arm. For this reason, players should learn the one-handed version. For the two-handed version, a player extends the arms out as far as possible and uses a push stroke.

The grip for this shot depends on court positioning. On the run, a player may be able to hit this shot with only a Continental grip. Otherwise, the player's usual grip can be used. The stance is usually open and on the run. The goal is to hit this shot high in order to recover quickly. The racket face must be open. The contact point for this shot is defensive, and the ball is hit in the lower-level strike zone.

Where The player can hit this shot from anywhere in the court to keep the rally going. Your best possible location is in the middle so that no angle is created.

When This is a defensive shot, but it can cause problems for some opponents. The shot is hit high in the air when the player is on a dead run and totally out of position on the court. The goal is for the player to get back in the court and try to stay in the point. This shot can cause problems for an opponent who is impatient and may get frustrated having to hit one more ball, an opponent who is not adept at taking a ball out of the air and attacking, or an opponent who does not like high balls and has to move back in the court to hit the shot. The difference between this shot and a lob is that this shot is played higher and less offensively.