IS IT TIME FOR A 'UNIVERSAL' RATING SYSTEM?

TennisLife MAGAZINE

2011 US Open: Who Will Hold the Top Prize?

ONLINE EDITION:
EXTRA US OPEN COVERAGE STARTS ON PAGE 20

UNIVERSAL TENNIS RATING SYSTEM
Is It Time for a Change?
SEE PAGE 30

SEPTEMBER 2011
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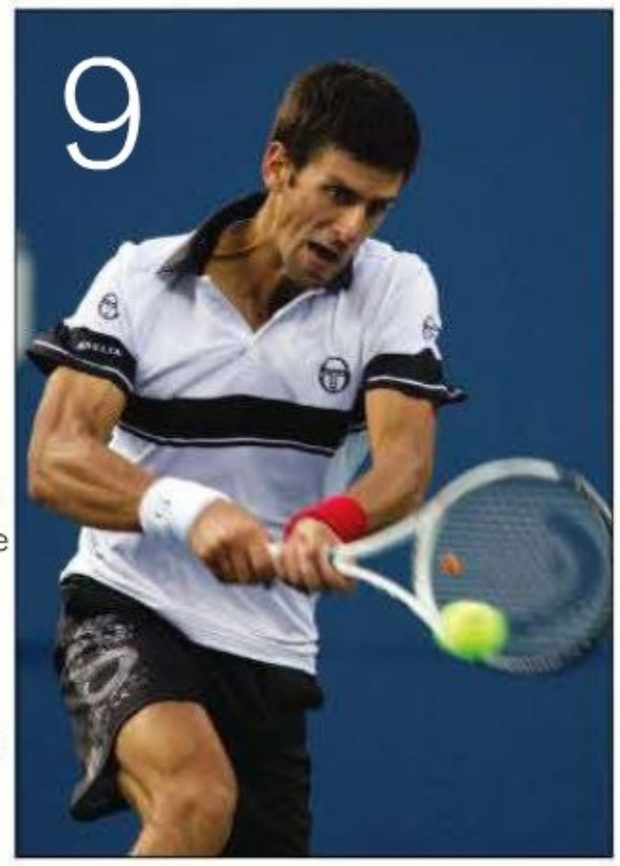

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mypoint by todd goldman

Improving Competition

For as long as I can remember, junior tennis competition has been organized by age group. Now, you can "play up" into other age groups to get different competition, but the goal is for players to play in their own age group. Jimmy Connors said, "The pressure is in your own age group." While this may be true about pressure, the competition may not be in your own age group.

How often do we see players get double-bageled in local and national events? A complaint I hear often, and not without some merit, is that players would play a designated or sectional and in the first round the top seeds would end up trouncing their opponents 0 and 0. Which is only a waste of time and money for both players and families, and in the end could deter the player that lost from continuing in tennis.

But what if players could play in their own, true level of competitive play? We all know junior players that have quit tennis after a thorough thrashing. I know some people feel that if a player loses, it could give them more incentive to work or practice harder. And while this may be true for some, I would bet that it is not true for the majority of kids.

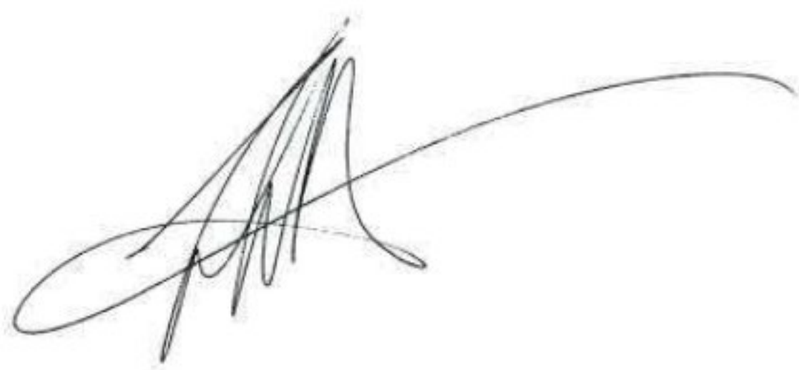
Let's take wrestling for an example. Just because two wrestlers are both 10th-graders, it does not mean they will wrestle each other. Wrestlers are put into weight classes and not age groups. Could you imagine a 200-pound kid wrestling a 120-pound kid? It would be preposterous.

And so is it in some tennis matches. Why pit two 15-year-olds against each other when one has 10 years of play and the other has two. The outcome is predictable and only has the potential to make the newer player give up the game sooner. Now imagine a 12-year-old playing up into the 16s and because he is a solid player, he would still beat some 15- and 16-year-olds that might be new to the game. Talk about demoralizing.

And if we are trying to improve American tennis, wouldn't it make more sense to have the best continuing to play the best? And are we hampering the development of our players with the most potential by bogging them down in low-level matches?

I am not saying that there is no reason to have age groups. But wouldn't it make sense that those age groups apply to our most prestigious national junior events and then let players play at the appropriate level throughout the year? Certain sports are perfect for this type of system. Tennis or golf are perfect for this since you have to have all or most of the requisite elements to play the game at the highest level.

The investment to make a college tennis player has spiraled out of control, and the competition that so many of these players seek has not always improved. If we want to make tennis a more accessible sport, we might want to take a look at the Universal Tennis Rating System (see page 38) and see if something can be done to improve the enjoyment and lives of our current and future junior competitors.



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it's your call

Hope for Young Net Players?

After reading Todd Goldman's August "My Point," I finally found someone else who agrees with me on pro players not being all-court strategists ("Options—Do You Have Any?").

I think it is an excuse that modern racquets (thus hitting harder) keep players from being frequent net players. I think our eyes will adjust with training. Also, the two-handed backhand has caused some delay in learning the net with our juniors, and it has filtered into the pro game with the "stay back and hope they miss" mentality.

Perhaps the new 10 and Under Tennis push will teach our young players to hit with the correct mechanics and be fearless at the net.

Kudos for being a brave journalist.

Sheryl Behne, USPTA Master Professional
Austin, Texas

I was impressed with the editorial on the lack of aggressive play and variety of shots. I was a net player myself, and that is the game that I taught and enjoyed most.

With the various tennis tournament age groups—8, 10, 12 and 14—most of the kids are too short to play the net, as they can easily be lobbed. When teaching my granddaughter to play in these tourneys, to encourage net play, I paid her $1 every time she got lobbed.

Maybe with 10 and Under Tennis, and its use of shorter courts, it will encourage a more aggressive net game for kids learning tennis. I had my granddaughter stand inside the baseline to learn to take balls on the rise and get to the net quicker.

I taught her to come to the net on her serve and on her opponent's second serve. She turned into an outstanding junior player in Tennessee, often playing with Carly Gullickson. She played for Belmont University and was the No. 1 doubles player all four years. She now teaches tennis.

In addition to 10 and Under Tennis, I believe the USTA needs to get top pros to do more teaching of aggressive tennis.

Roy Bradley
Crystal River, Fla.

Local Pro Tourneys & Sweaty Towels...

I enjoy reading Todd Goldman's thoughtful editorials, always with a point. In a recent issue you discussed the bad habit some pro players have of not competing in local tournaments. I agree, and was at one tournament in northern New Jersey a few years ago when a female player chose not to play the final because she wanted to save herself for the US Open.

Even more disappointing was the ill grace displayed by the tournament director, who announced, "You all would agree that Ms. X wants to save herself for the Open." Well, you can imagine the shock and the comments by the spectators, who paid good money to this pro to play in the final of the local tournament.

On another matter, I find it offensive that young ball boys and girls are now obliged to act as towel handlers. These young people can easily contract illness from having to provide and catch perspiration-soaked towels from players. It's not right, in my view, to see them running after players after every point with "the towel," then to have the player just toss the sweat-soaked towel back to them.

Here's a suggestion: Why not set up a position of Tennis Caddy, much in the same way that the sport of golf does. Golf caddies administer to golfers' needs. A Tennis Caddy would be employed to stand at the back court with towels to aid whichever player is playing, since going to "the towel" seems to now be such an integral part of the pro game.

I'm an old fellow who grew up when the "play shall be continuous" rule actually meant something. In any event, I enjoy your magazine. The articles have substance and are enjoyable to read.

Alex Bobotis

HAVE AN OPINION? E-mail: todd@tennislife.com.

JTCC Salutes the Class of 2011...Are You Next?

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Christina Harrington **Delaware**
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Undefeated Kastles Win WTT Title

The Washington Kastles completed the first perfect season in the 36-year history of World TeamTennis, overcoming three rain delays and over eight hours of on-and-off tennis to defeat the St. Louis Aces 23-19 in the WTT Finals in late July in Charleston, S.C. In only their fourth season as a franchise, it was the Kastles' second WTT title in the last three years.

All four Kastles players—Arina Rodionova, Rennae Stubbs, Bobby Reynolds and Leander Paes—had a hand in the historic championship victory, with Reynolds sealing the win at 1:03 a.m. The Kastles are coached by Murphy Jensen.

... BUT I'M *IN* CARLSBAD!

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Consider the life of a touring pro, running from tournament to tournament, city to city, airport to airport. It all got a bit too hectic for world No. 53 Bojana Jovanovski in July, when instead of landing in Carlsbad, Calif., for the Mercury Insurance Open, she found herself at the airport in Carlsbad, N.M., waiting in vain for tournament transportation to find her.

After waiting for hours, the 19-year-old Serbian called the tournament again, and was told the driver was looking for her. "I am the only person here," she said. "How can you not see me?" By the time the mix-up was figured out, Jovanovski was forced to spend the night in the airport. The next day, she found her way to the right Carlsbad and arrived 30 minutes before her first-round match … which she lost in three sets.

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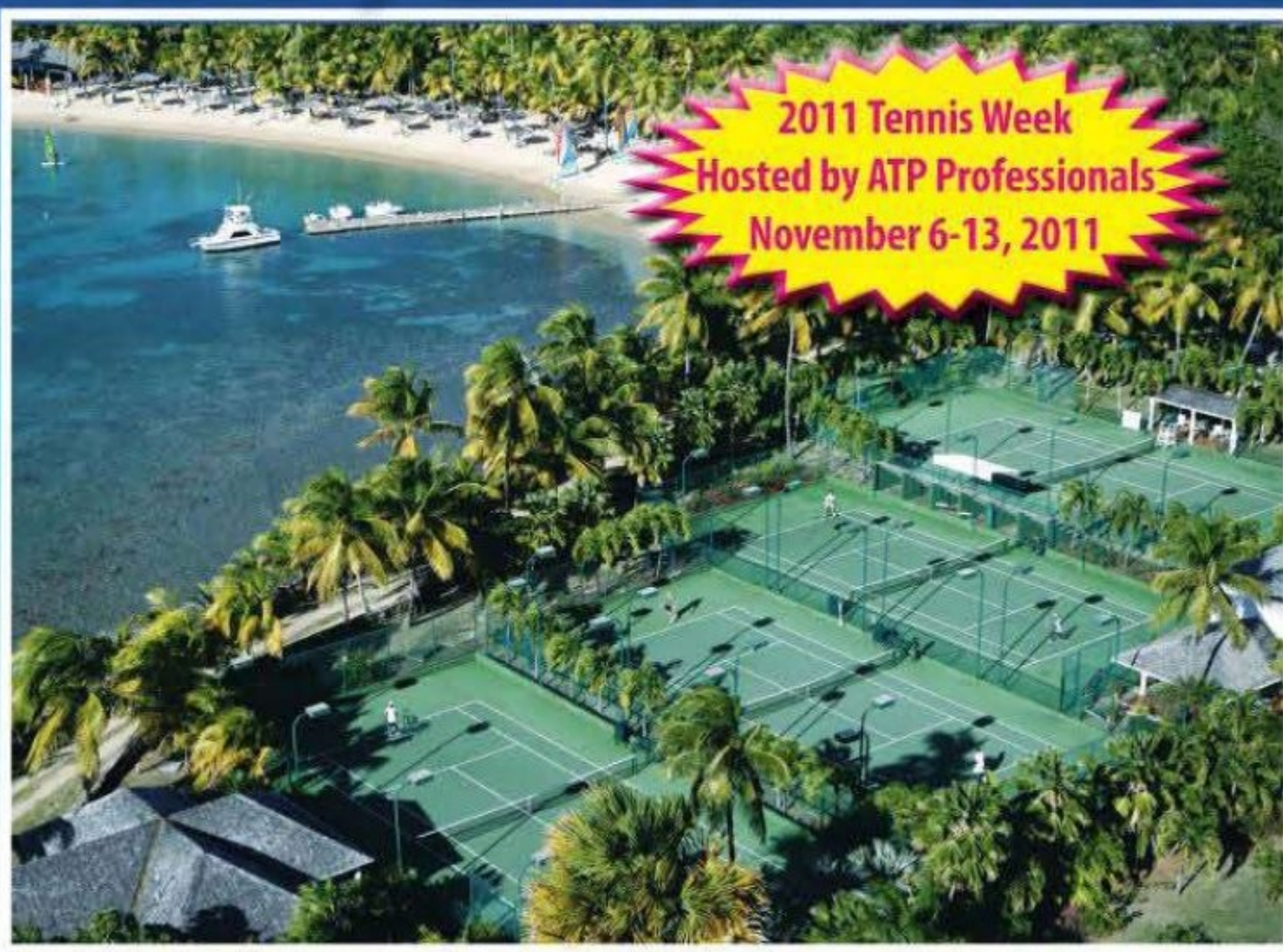

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*bottles from the 25,000 bottle wine cellar are not included.

Each day looking out on the ocean was spectacular, there are few resorts in the world like Curtain Bluff. But what impressed us the most was that most of the people we met were there on their 2nd, 7th or 12th time. This resort and Antigua are a cut above anything we have experienced. And the Tennis Week was nothing short of a blast.

Todd Goldman
Publisher, TennisLife Magazine

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SHARAPOVA, WOZNIACKI TOP FORBES LIST

Maria Sharapova, who hasn't won a Grand Slam title since 2008, remains the world's highest paid woman in professional sports for the seventh straight year. The annual list, from Forbes magazine, shows the Russian's earnings, mostly from off-court endorsements, at an estimated $25 million, twice as much as her nearest rival, Denmark's Caroline Wozniacki, currently the world No. 1. Race car driver Danica Patrick was third with $12 million.

Seven of the top 10 female earners were tennis players: 1) Sharapova, $25 million; 2) Wozniacki, $12.5 million; 3) Patrick, $12 million (racing); 4) Venus Williams, $11.5 million; 5) Kim Clijsters, $11 million; 6) Serena Williams, $10.5 million; 7) Kim Yuna, $10 million (figure skating); 8) Li Na, $8 million; 9) Ana Ivanovic, $6 million; 10) Paula Creamer, $5.5 million (golf).

KENDRICK TO APPEAL DOPING SUSPENSION

©SUSAN MULLANE

American pro Robert Kendrick says he'll appeal his suspension for doping violations and was hoping to get a hearing in New York before the US Open. The International Tennis Federation suspended the 31-year-old Kendrick for a year after he tested positive for the banned substance known as methylhexanamine (MHA) at the French Open.

Kendrick does not deny taking a capsule called Zija XM3 in an attempt to combat the effects of jetlag. But he says he was unaware the capsule contained a substance on the banned list. An independent tribunal appointed by the ITF wrote in its summary that it did not believe Kendrick took the substance as a performance enhancer.

TennisLife ALL ACCESS

☛ Canadian tennis star and current world No. 29 Milos Raonic unveiled the Lacoste "Tribute" shoe collection in downtown Toronto in July, which honors tennis legend and company founder Rene Lacoste. Raonic, who has reached as high as No. 25 on the ATP Tour, is Canada's highest ever ranked player. ☛ Lindsay Davenport, expecting her third child, was forced to withdraw from the World TeamTennis Pro League season after her doctor put her on travel and activity restrictions. In July, Davenport tweeted that "things are better and looks like another girl." She and her husband, Jonathan Leach, have a boy, 4, and girl, 2. ☛ The U.S. will host Belarus in the first round of the 2012 Fed Cup, Feb. 4-5. The site is still to be determined. ☛ Defending US Open champs Rafael Nadal and Kim Clijsters, world No. 1 Novak Djokovic, former US Open champion Andy Roddick and 2010 US Open Wheelchair champ David Wagner will team up with actor Bradley Cooper, New York Knicks All-Star Carmelo Anthony, and pop star Cody Simpson at the 16th Annual Arthur Ashe Kids' Day on Aug. 27 at the USTA Billie Jean King National Tennis Center in Flushing, N.Y. ☛ The USTA it will invest a total of $1.3 million to introduce 10 and Under Tennis in 26 communities across the country. The USTA's goal over the next five years is to bring 10 and Under Tennis to kids in more than 100 local markets nationwide. Each of the 26 communities will receive $50,000 in matching grants from the USTA to be used to build new courts and adapt current tennis courts to accommodate 10 and Under Tennis. ☛ Three players from the WTT championship team Washington Kastles were singled out for season honors: Leander Paes won male MVP, Arina Rodionova won female rookie of the year and Murphy Jensen won coach of the year. Liezel Huber of the WTT championship runner-up team St. Louis Aces won female MVP honors. ☛ The Southlake Tennis Center in Texas won the 2011 USTA Facility of the Year Award, which will be presented during the US Open in New York. The award recognizes outstanding efforts in tennis facility, tennis programming and contribution to the game of tennis. ☛ The 2011 US Open prize money purse hit a record $23.7 million. Both the men's and women's US Open singles champions will earn a record $1.8 million. ☛ Through July, the USTA added 15,000 new 10 and under members, through its "First Year Free Membership" offer for kids, which will run through the end of the year.

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PERFORMANCE ART

By Steve Flink

Novak Djokovic's inspired play has ruled men's tennis so far this year, while Serena Williams appears to be finding her old form. Can they paint the town in New York?

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Just before embarking on his summertime 2011 Olympus US Open Series hard-court campaign, Roger Federer was asked to describe his outlook about America's Grand Slam championship. Said Federer, "It's a great feeling coming back to New York. Honestly, I liked the Open from day one. It was one of those tournaments I right away fell in love with. Just the buzz and energy over there [is incredible]. It's difficult with the wind, humidity, the city behind it, the whole deal. Every time the Open rolls around I'm very, very excited."

More than a few players share Federer's effusiveness for and about the US Open (Aug. 29-Sept. 11). It is the final opportunity in 2011 for the leading competitors to claim a preeminent prize, to survive a tumultuous fortnight in ever-changing conditions, to succeed in perhaps the most rigorous test known to the tennis universe. For anyone and everyone who walks through the grounds of the USTA Billie Jean King Tennis Center, there is no more exhilarating fortnight all year long.

The best players in the business have had time to decompress after Wimbledon, and they should approach the festivities in New York revitalized and inspired to perform with the kind of panache and brio they seldom summon anywhere else. Barring injuries, illnesses or bizarre developments, many pro tennis cognoscenti project a first championship run for Novak Djokovic, the dominant world No. 1 who captured no fewer than 48 of 49 matches he played from January into August, winning two majors and seven tournaments in the process. And many are looking for a resurgent Serena Williams to step forth and claim her country's championship for the fourth time.

A CONSUMMATE PROFESSIONAL

The charismatic Djokovic is always in the thick of the battle at the Open. He was runner-up to Federer in 2007, and lost to the Swiss stylist in the semifinals in both 2008 and 2009. A year ago, Djokovic made it to his second final, saving two match points in a five-set semifinal triumph over Federer before falling to Rafael Nadal. Djokovic is a consummate professional, the best backcourt player in tennis, and a commanding hard-court competitor. No one can control the climate of matches from the baseline better than this 24-year-old dynamo. It will take an outstanding performance from any rival to overcome the formidable Djokovic.

Nadal, meanwhile, has his mind set on defending the title he won so convincingly a year ago, when he became only the seventh man ever to secure all four majors in singles. The Spaniard added considerable velocity to his first serve at the 2010 Open, altering his grip to increase his power on that delivery, earning a good many more free points than was his custom in the past. Nadal played the finest hard-court tennis of his life last year, but he was living in another world at the time as the game's standout player. His psyche was deeply bruised this year by losing five consecutive times on three different surfaces to Djokovic from Indian Wells through Wimbledon. Nadal probably needs someone else to account for Djokovic if he is going to hold onto his hard-earned crown.

For Federer, the 2011 US Open could be among the most consequential tournaments of his illustrious career. He has not won a major since the 2010 Australian Open, when he captured a 16th Grand Slam championship. In his last six majors, Federer has been to only one final in that span, losing to five different players, thrice getting knocked

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Will anyone be able to contain Serena Williams?

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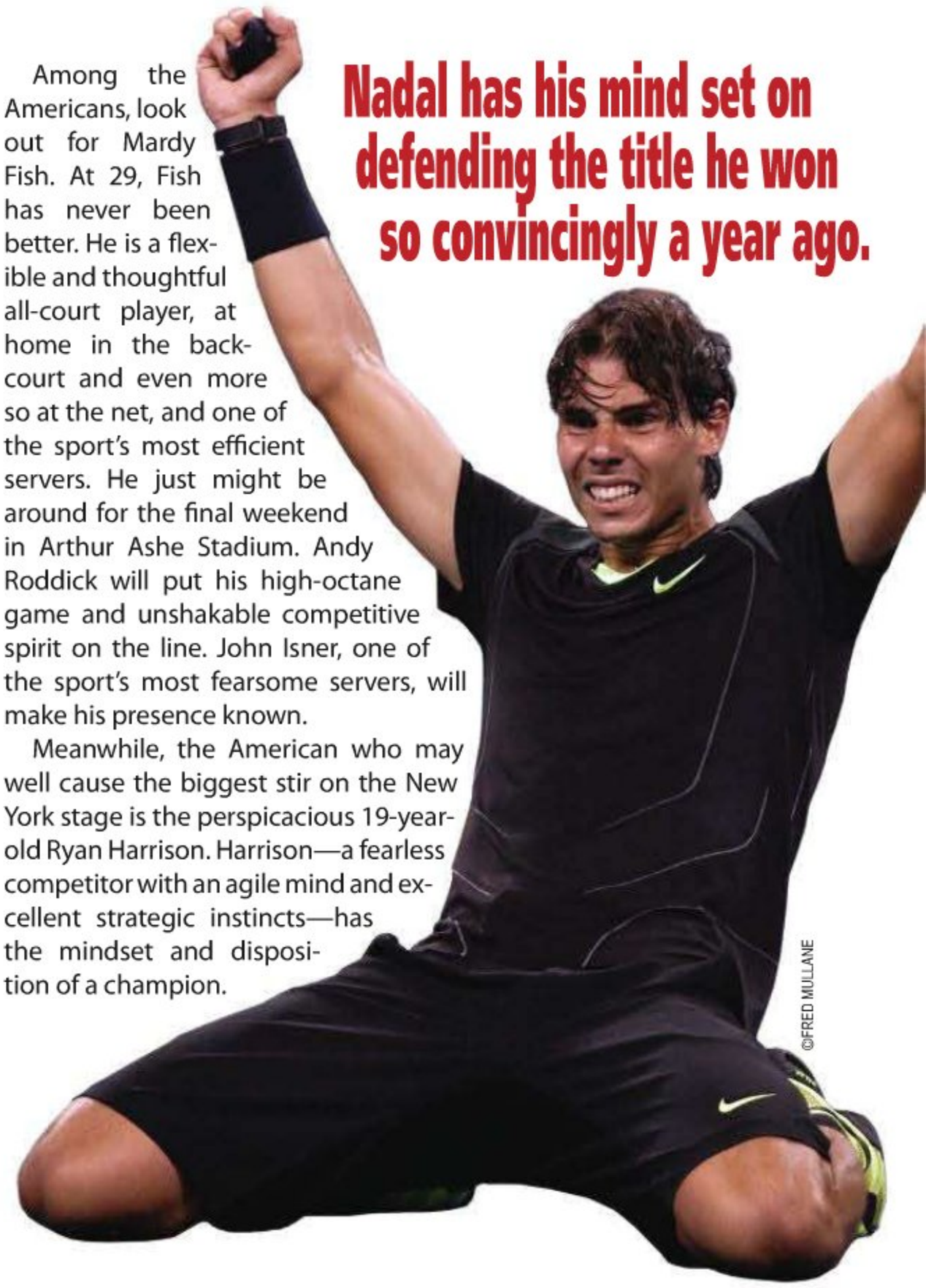
out in the quarterfinals, including his most recent setback against a highly charged Jo-Wilfried Tsonga at Wimbledon, when Federer failed to convert a two sets to love lead for the first time in 179 career contests at the majors. The 30-year-old wants to break a men's record he shares with Bjorn Borg and Pete Sampras, the only other players to take at least one Grand Slam title for eight consecutive years. The five-time Open titlist is fully capable of a revival in New York, but it will take a stirring display of craftsmanship and gumption—and a rekindled spirit and conviction—for Federer to be the last man standing in New York.

MURRAY'S MOMENT?

It was at the Open in 2008 that the gifted Andy Murray reached his first major final. Murray has had his most consistent year yet at the premier events, reaching the Australian Open final and the semifinals at Roland Garros and Wimbledon. He is a walking contradiction in many ways, boosted often by his agile mind and versatile playing style, held back often by his unbridled intensity and periodic bouts of insecurity and volatility. Yet the feeling grows that one of these days Murray—at his very best on hard courts—will come through when it counts, and maybe, just maybe, September at Flushing Meadows will be his moment.

Clearly, the game's "Big Four" of Djokovic, Nadal, Federer and Murray are the leading candidates to prevail at Flushing Meadows. But don't be surprised in the least if 2009 Open champion Juan Martin Del Potro steps to the forefront again this year. Del Potro has come back with gusto from wrist surgery in 2010 and has recovered much of his old form and explosive brilliance. He can blast anyone in the world off the court when he is in full command, and his quiet ferocity could carry the towering Argentine to another title. Meanwhile, two-time French Open finalist Robin Soderling of Sweden is overdue to elevate his big-hitting game on another big occasion, and Tsonga's aggressive game could make him a factor as well.



Nadal has his mind set on defending the title he won so convincingly a year ago.

Among the Americans, look out for Mardy Fish. At 29, Fish has never been better. He is a flexible and thoughtful all-court player, at home in the backcourt and even more so at the net, and one of the sport's most efficient servers. He just might be around for the final weekend in Arthur Ashe Stadium. Andy Roddick will put his high-octane game and unshakable competitive spirit on the line. John Isner, one of the sport's most fearsome servers, will make his presence known.

Meanwhile, the American who may well cause the biggest stir on the New York stage is the perspicacious 19-year-old Ryan Harrison. Harrison—a fearless competitor with an agile mind and excellent strategic instincts—has the mindset and disposition of a champion.

GATHERING STEAM

The women's draw will be fascinating. Three different players have won majors in 2011, starting with Kim Clijsters in Australia, followed by China's Li Na at the French Open, and the dazzling left-hander Petra Kvitova at Wimbledon. But will anyone be able to contain Serena Williams?

In only her third tournament back after nearly a year away from the game, Williams was victorious in July at Stanford on the hard courts. She defeated both old rival Maria Sharapova and her Wimbledon conqueror Marion Bartoli to win that leadoff US Open Series tournament, giving herself an enormous confidence boost in the process. Williams in full flow is simply not going to lose at the Open, and there is no better big-match player in the women's game. If she survives an early-round upset, she will be almost unstoppable, gathering steam with every match.

And yet, three other women will undoubtedly be awfully difficult

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to beat. Clijsters has not lost a match at Flushing Meadows since 2003; since then, she has captured no fewer than three titles on that stage, including impressive championship runs the last two years. She is a terrific hard-court player who succeeds with outstanding footwork, fine anticipation, and first-rate court sense. Sharapova has enjoyed one of her most consistent seasons in 2011, reaching the semifinals at Roland Garros, going to the final of Wimbledon, returning to the top five. But if the New York winds are blowing as fiercely as they did in 2010, Sharapova's serve could be irreparably damaged by her high ball toss, causing too many double faults.

Caroline Wozniacki has established herself unequivocally as the top-ranked woman player in the world. She is immensely efficient and unerring from the baseline, a staunch competitor, a clean ball-striker with extraordinary ball control. But her nagging inability to seize the initiative and step up the pace of her shots remains a fundamental problem for the 21-year-old Dane and is the chief reason why she has not yet secured a major. But she did reach the final of the US Open in 2009 and the semifinals a year ago. Perhaps the much bolder shot-making of Kvitova will propel the 21-year-old from the Czech Republic to a second straight Grand Slam title. She is an outstanding shot-maker.

Clijsters has not lost a match at Flushing Meadows since 2003.

Meanwhile, Bartoli's penetrating two-fisted strokes make her a threat against all of the leading players. Wimbledon semifinalist Sabine Lisicki is one of the biggest servers in women's tennis, and the crackling ground strokes of Victoria Azarenka have carried her into the top five in the world with good reason. Last, but not least, two-time former champion Venus Williams always loves competing in New York. If the 31-year-old is healthy, she could replicate her semifinal showing of a year ago.

Still, in the end, the evidence points to a 14th major singles title for the redoubtable Serena Williams, and a third Grand Slam championship of 2011 for Djokovic, the man who largely rules men's tennis today with newfound discipline, a growing command of his craft, and the self assurance that comes from knowing precisely how good he is as he moves comfortably through the heart of his prime.

Steve Flink *has been reporting on tennis since 1974. A columnist and editor at World Tennis Magazine from 1974 to 1991, he was senior correspondent for Tennis Week Magazine from 1992 to 2007. Since 2007 he has written a weekly column for www.tennischannel.com. Flink is the author of "The Greatest Tennis Matches of the Twentieth Century" and is in the USTA Eastern Section Hall of Fame.*

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2011 US Open

Caroline Wozniacki has established herself unequivocally as the top-ranked woman player in the world.

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Sharapova has enjoyed one of her most consistent seasons in 2011.

For Federer, the 2011 US Open could be among the most consequential tournaments of his illustrious career.

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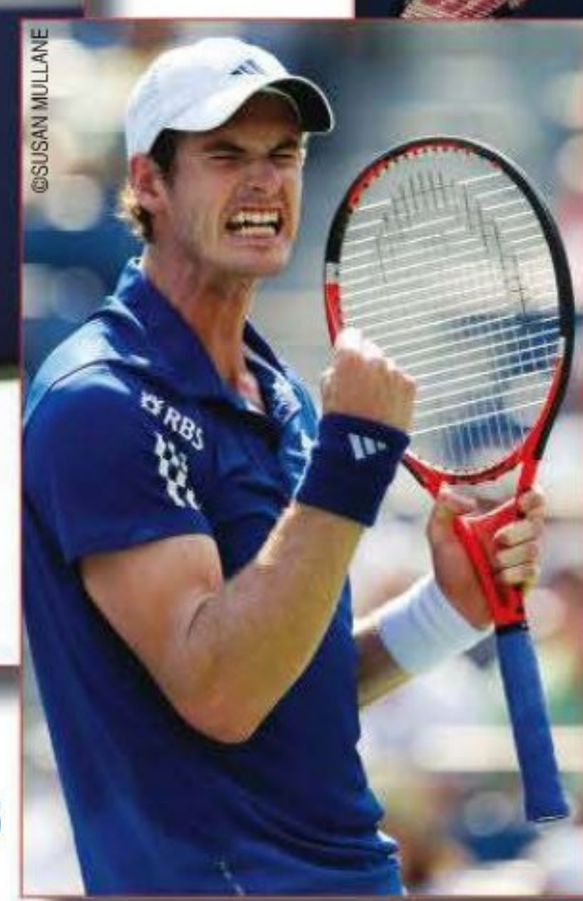
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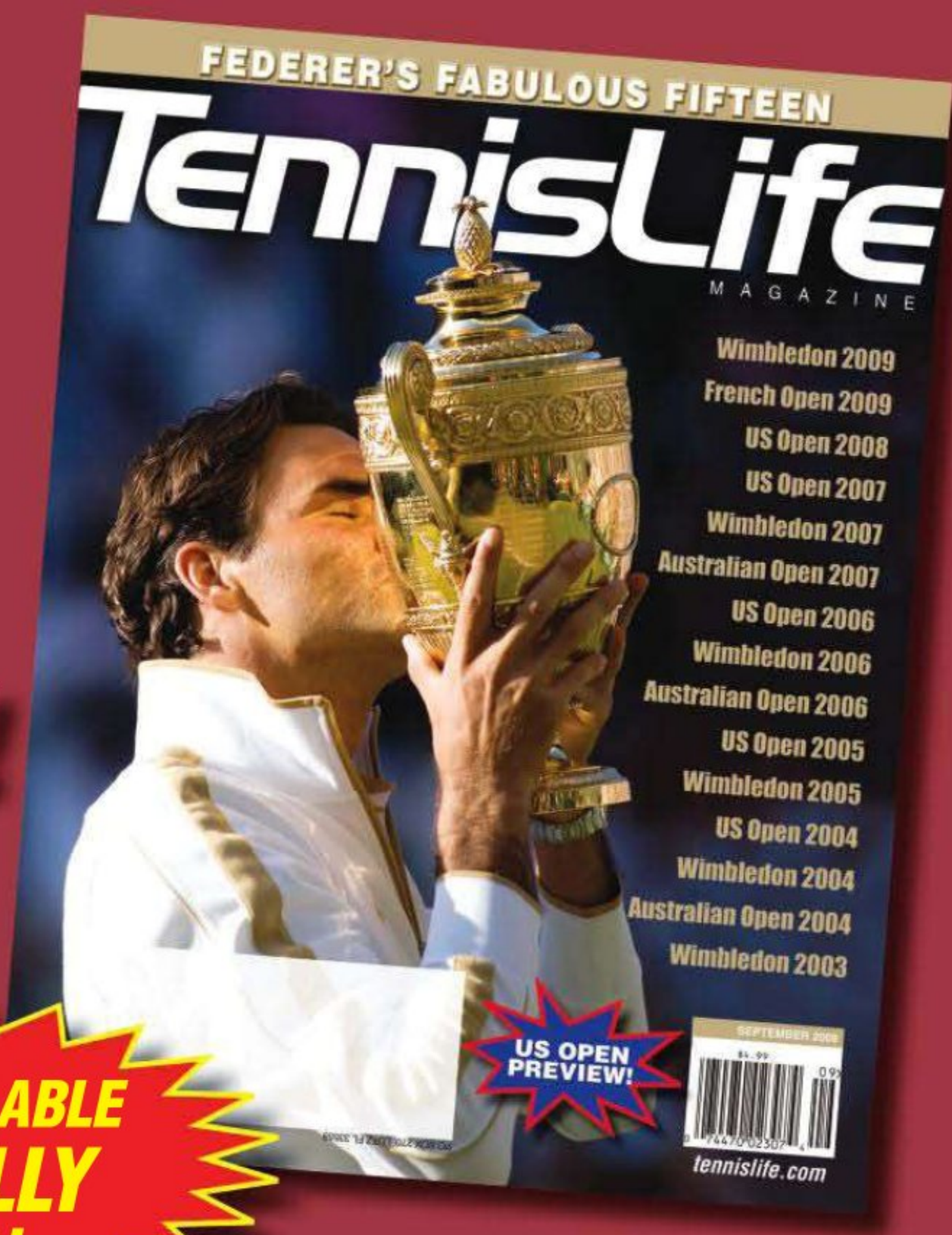

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A Tribute to a Lifelong Friend

By Ray Collins

I used to watch my father play tennis through the net. That was my vantage point as self-appointed ball boy. I'd scramble around picking up the balls—until he finally asked me to sit down, or until I saw something shiny that diverted my attention.

Each summer morning, I rode my banana-seat bike to the public courts with my metal Wilson T-2000 racquet in hand and dirty white tennis balls jammed in the spokes. The Town of Amherst, N.Y., recreation program in suburban Buffalo included daily free tennis lessons for kids of all ages and abilities.

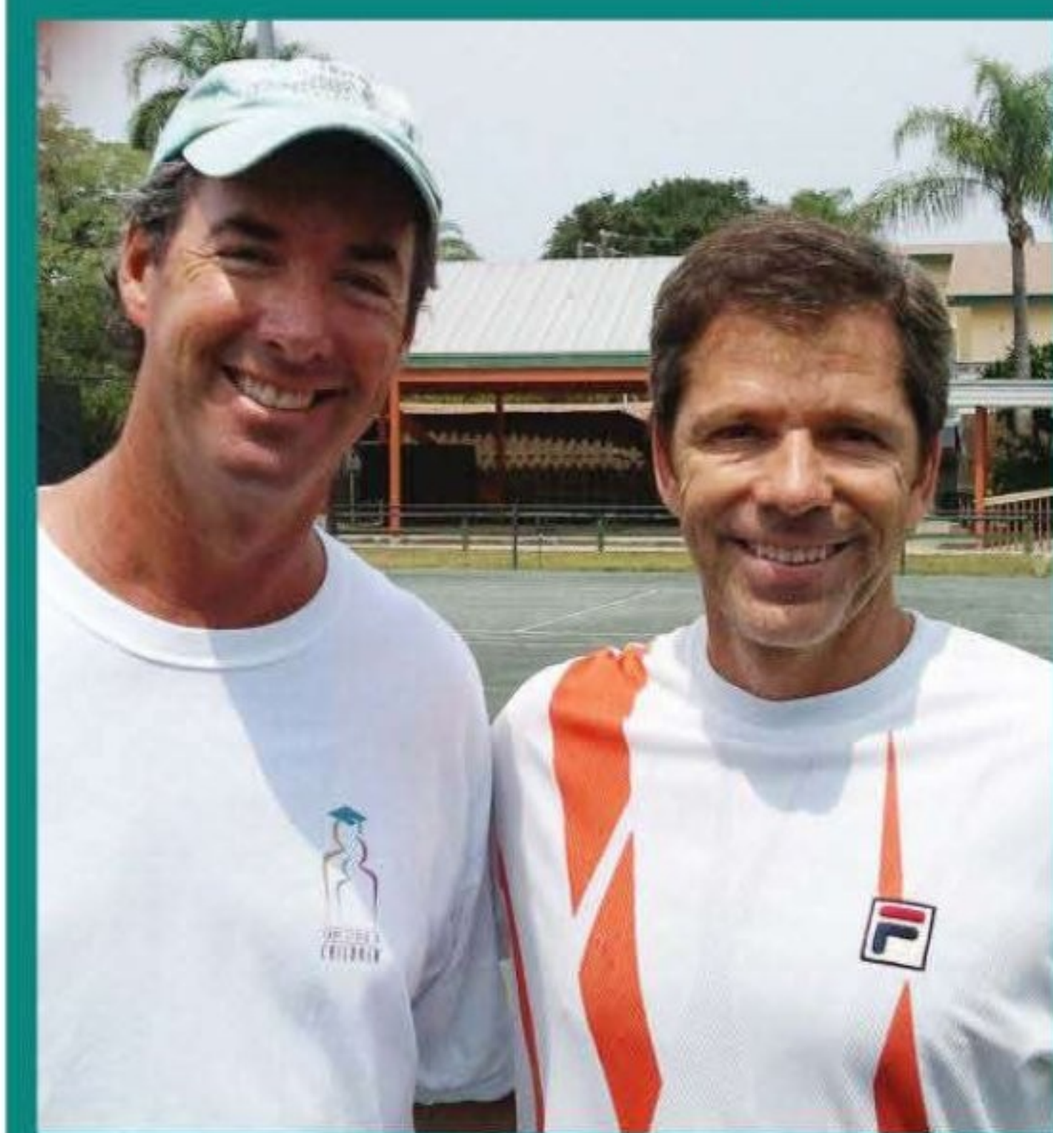
After dinner—if I didn't have a Little League baseball game—I'd play tennis some more or hit tennis balls against the wall at the junior high. An accoustically satisfying "three-sided wall" made the sweet-spot of my $12 nylon strings thud like a marching band bass drum. I probably hit a hundred balls up on the roof over the years—but by the time I was practicing lobs, it was usually time for bed anyway.

During the bitter cold winters, I'd take a city bus—or even hitchhike—to the indoor Buffalo Tennis Center. It was a long rectangular former warehouse turned into a tennis oasis, safe from the slush and snow outside. It always seemed counter-intuitive to put on a tennis outfit under my layers of winter clothes and head out in the cold.

But once I got out on those slick rubbery courts and felt the ball on the strings, all the effort to get to the other end of the rainbow made perfect sense. (There was usually a dark-haired kid around the same age on the next court who would draw a crowd each time he hit a ball. The racquet went up to his waist, but boy, he could pound the ball. More on him later.)

All this playing began paying off when I became No. 1 singles player and captain of my high school tennis team. The back fence on our home courts was up against an expressway; we didn't finish many matches with all three tennis balls. I did well in the Catholic league—but I didn't have a prayer against the non-conference schools. I vividly recall my undefeated record disappearing in less than 30 minutes to the top player from a private school that joined our division for a year. Our warm-up lasted longer than the match itself. A local TV station came to shoot the highlights of our match, but there were none.

'Since childhood, tennis has always been there for me—even during my brief but torrid affair with golf.'



Ray with Jimmy Arias

I got a partial athletic scholarship to play tennis for St. Bonaventure University—but "partial" may be overstating it: $350 a year. I don't even think I ever received it—and was too embarrassed to ask. The highlight of each season was traveling to the annual NCAA Atlantic 10 Championships and staying in hotels. Our small school never did well against mega-campuses like Penn State, UMass or Rutgers. Calling it a David and Goliath situation would be an insult to David. We felt more like the Washington Federals up against the Harlem Globetrotters.

Taking It On The Road

I went away my junior year of college to intern for a TV news network in its Capitol Hill bureau. One day in the Senate Press Gallery, I overheard legendary network correspondent Brit Hume lamenting the fact that his regular tennis opponent for the next morning had canceled and he needed to find a game. I heard myself say, "I'll play."

"You any good?" Hume asked.

I must have convinced him—because the next morning, he was picking me up outside my dormitory to take me to his private club. I won, something like 6-3, 6-1. I might have done even better if I didn't keep hearing in my mind each time he was about to serve, "Brit Hume, ABC News, the White House." I remember him talking in the car on the way back to campus about recently getting the assign-

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ment to cover the Walter Mondale Presidential campaign. I felt like a big shot that day.

I wanted to do something different my last summer before college graduation—and naturally wound up falling back on my old familiar friend—tennis. I saw a classified ad in the *Washington Post* for seasonal tennis instructors. I auditioned with dozens of other players one Saturday morning for a company that placed tennis teachers around the country at private clubs, resorts and hotels. I was lucky enough to be chosen—and given the option of spending the summer teaching tennis in Minnesota, Delaware or New Jersey. They then added, "New Jersey has free housing in a 'clubhouse' on the grounds of a country club." Sold.

I became the summer tennis pro at a rural country club in northwest New Jersey. The grounds were beautiful—but it turns out the "clubhouse" was not. It was the former clubhouse that had deteriorated into a haunted mansion. Water and plumbing had long-since been turned off. The assistant golf pro and I each had a small room at the top of the creaking stairs. Walking through the darkened cob-webbed one-time restaurant each night to get to my room was like a scene from "The Shining." Making matters worse, the members didn't want tennis lessons but did want a lot of ice and towels by the courts. I wound up getting a part-time job after-hours that summer at a local radio station.

After graduation, I returned to that station near the club to begin my career as a radio DJ. I made a few extra dollars by teaching tennis in my spare time—including to the local Congressman's young kids. The chance to make $40 an hour for telling people to turn sideways and swing was hard to resist.

A few years later, when I wanted to get into TV news—without any on-camera experience—I once again resorted to my "old friend" tennis. I had a colleague videotape me giving a peppy "Sixty Second Tennis Tip." It led to my first anchor job in Southwest Florida.

Going Pro

I saw a tennis show on one of the national sports networks. I waited until the closing credits to copy down the contact information—and called the show's producers in New York City. They offered to pay several hundred dollars per story if I could produce a human interest story they liked enough to "buy" from me. I convinced local resident—and two-time Australian Open champ—Johan Kriek to allow me to do a profile of him. We put a cordless microphone on Johan—and I casually interviewed him while we rallied back and forth on a court near his house in Naples. The producers loved it—and began assigning me to bigger tennis stories around Florida.

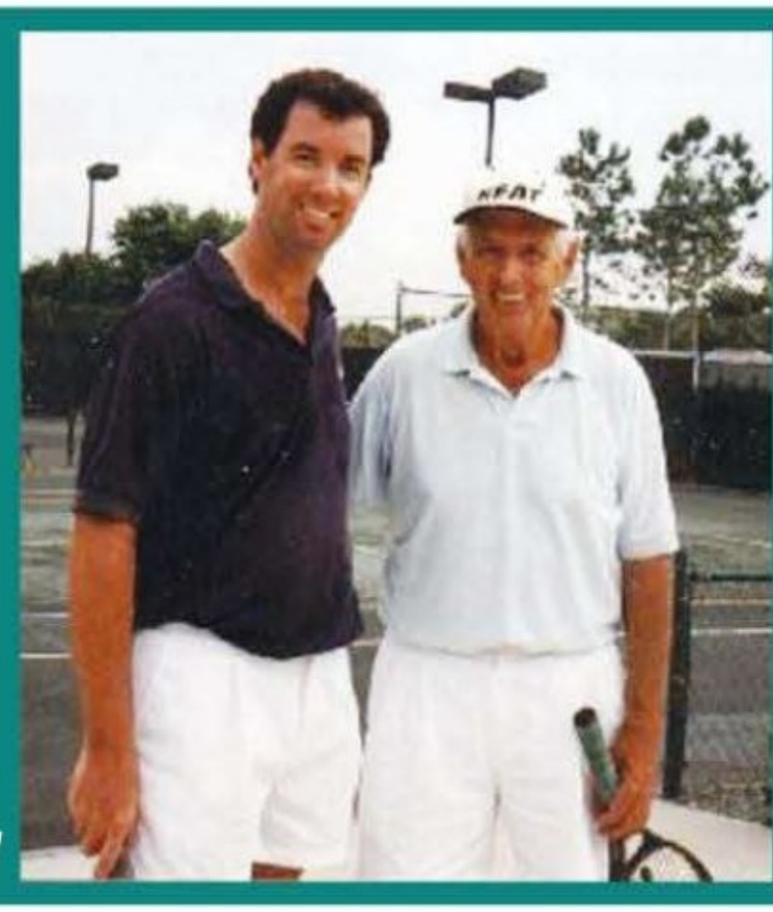
They sent me to Key Biscayne to cover the then-Lipton Championships. I stood in the photographers' "pit" courtside during matches—and afterward interviewed all the big names of pro tennis at the time, from Pete Sampras, to Andre Agassi, to Steffi Graf and Lindsay Davenport.

Later, I was sent to Miami to cover the best junior players in the country in the Easter Bowl. I initiated a story about 12-year-old twin brothers who were polite, respectful and well-mannered. I never imagined little Bob and Mike Bryan would later become the best doubles team in the history of the sport.

I had a chance to interview legendary commentator Andy Rooney who was in town for a lecture. He was just as much of a curmudgeon as you'd expect—that is, until I asked him about his tennis game. His demeanor changed instantly and the interview sailed from there. Afterward, I told him I'd be in New York City soon and asked if he wanted to play—which he said he would. But when I called to confirm weeks later, Rooney said "I don't want to play, I don't know how good you are." I assured him I had played before. He said, "That's the thing—Harry Reasoner brought around a guy a few years ago, I didn't get a game off him. It was no fun for either of us. How are things in Florida?"

Ray reporting for FOX news

'I wanted to do something different my last summer before college graduation—and naturally wound up falling back on my old familiar friend—tennis.'



Ray and his Dad

Lifelong Gift

Hop-scotching the country for my career over the past quarter-century, having to assimilate into new communities has been that much easier thanks to tennis. In each new town I'd unpack my racquet, find the nearest club and make some new friends who shared a love of tennis.

Since childhood, tennis has always been there for me—even during my brief but torrid affair with golf. Tennis waited for me patiently and still took me back, no questions asked. Competitive or social, for exercise or relaxation—tennis has it all.

(By the way, that little kid at the indoor tennis center in Buffalo who always drew a crowd went on to become No. 5 in the world. Coincidentally, Jimmy Arias is a friend and ironically is a fellow-member of my tennis club in Sarasota.)

I was back in my hometown last week and made a point to go over to the junior high to hit against the wall. This time I was getting out of a car—not putting down a kick-stand. The balls were new and no longer had my initials scrawled on them with magic marker. My reflection in the adjacent classroom window revealed the passing of the years, but the sound of the ball on the strings hadn't changed a bit.

My father has since passed away, but I'll always appreciate the lifelong gift he gave me of tennis.

Ray Collins *is a Sarasota, Florida-based freelance writer. More information at www.RayCollinsMedia.com.*

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Are You Stuck in Your Comfort Zone?

By Bobbye DePaul

To improve your game and get to the next level, you need to play outside your comfort zone.

The word "comfort" may bring to mind all things warm and fuzzy—your grandma's chicken and dumplings, a warm and snuggly fleece pullover, or the easy chair you like to unwind in. It may also remind you of the situations where you feel most confident and at ease on the tennis court—perhaps side-by-side with your favorite doubles partner or powering ground strokes at the baseline.

Yet, while comfort is generally a good thing, when it comes to tennis, a little too much time in the comfort zone can seriously hamper your game by keeping you stuck at your current level. So how do you get *out* of your comfort zone?

It helps to understand how you got there in the first place. According to Dr. Patrick Cohn of Orlando-based Sports Psychology for Tennis, the comfort zone is actually an image we have formed of ourselves based upon labels we have given ourselves or adopted from others. Somewhere along the line, we started telling ourselves that we were strong at the net, for instance, better on the ad side of the court and competent returners. At the same time, we also give ourselves negative labels such as "weak server" or "slow moving."

These labels often are formed in our infancy as tennis players, yet stick with us over time. Or they develop in match situations where the pressure of the moment may exaggerate a strength or weakness. In other cases, a teaching pro or coach may have given us repetitive feedback that led us to label an aspect of our game.

"Labels lead to expectations," says Dr. Cohn. "If I label myself as a baseline player, I'll stick to that part of the court and avoid the 'discomfort zone' that might be an approach shot or getting to the net."

The discomfort comes from the fear of mistakes and the failure we

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'When it comes to tennis, a little too much time in the comfort zone can seriously hamper your game.'

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may encounter when we try something new. For doubles players, that can be coupled with a fear of disappointing their partners. Additionally, the discomfort of being in an unfamiliar situation can lead a player who often loses to blow a big lead and lose one more time. Sadly, winning isn't always a comfortable expectation!

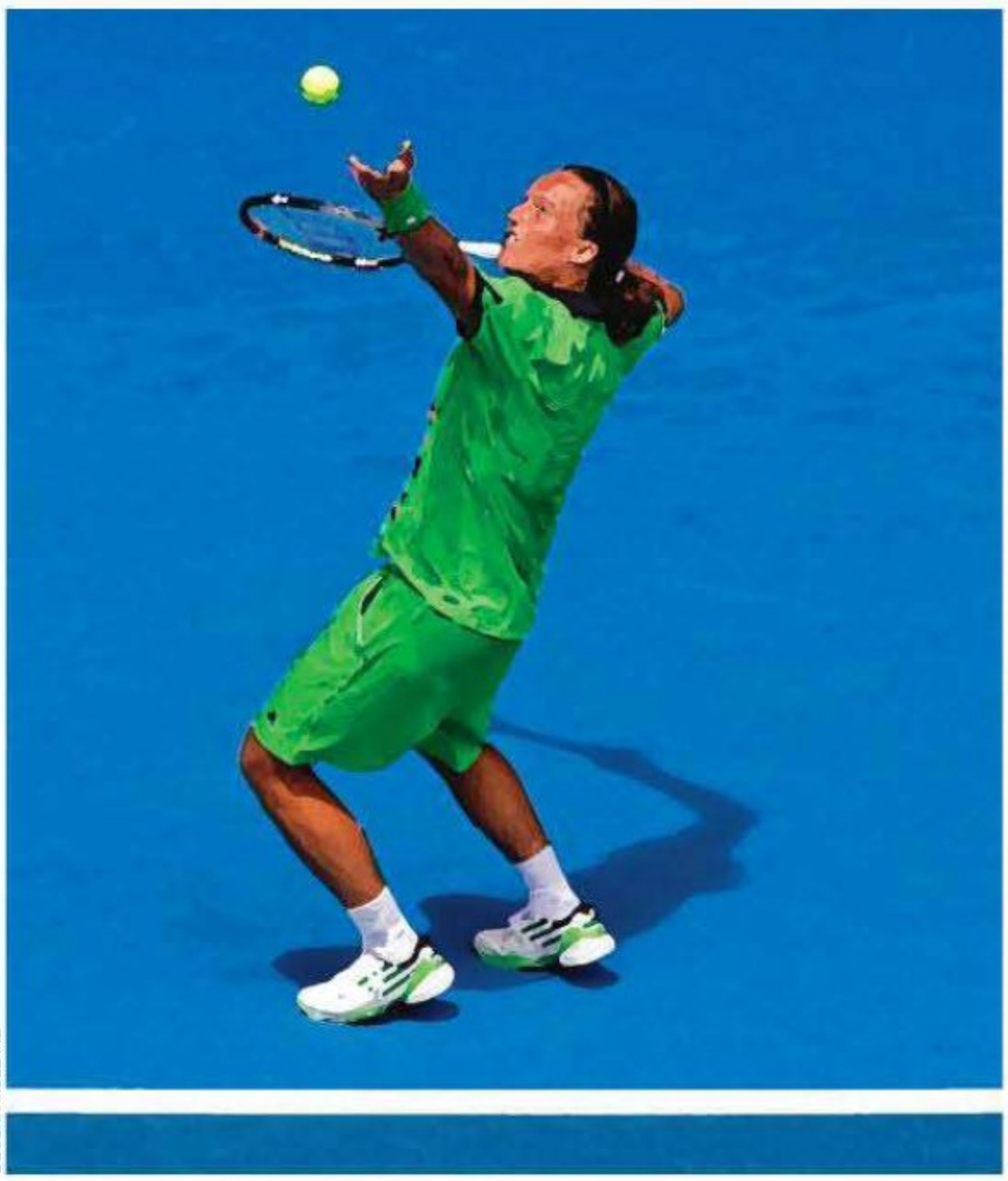
But you can break free of the comfort zone by trying these steps:

Try out new skills and strategies in practice scenarios:

Develop competencies and confidence on the practice court, with a pro or practice partner. This is the place to push yourself to try a new follow-through on your forehand, a different service toss or get up close and personal with the net. Put together a doubles game and play the other side of the court. You'll soon find that some of the labels you have stuck to yourself have come un-glued.

Let go of the fear of mistakes:

In order to learn something new, mistakes will be part of the game. Let your practice opponent know that your priority is to practice a new skill and then stop berating yourself or apologizing for errors. Tell your doubles partner that you are going to play outside of your comfort zone and then let go and have fun. Soon, you will learn to accept the inevitable mistakes in competitive matches, as well, without scurrying back to your comfort zone.



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Set positive goals:

Dr. Cohn recommends setting small, positive goals that can be measurable, such as getting to the net once in each game or trying a down-the-line shot two or three times each set. The formation of these goals will force you from your comfort zone and toward being a more well-rounded player. Coupling these goals with a small reward works well for some players. You might treat yourself to a stop at the coffee shop on the way home or give in to that "need" for a new racquet when you are able to meet your goals on a consistent basis.

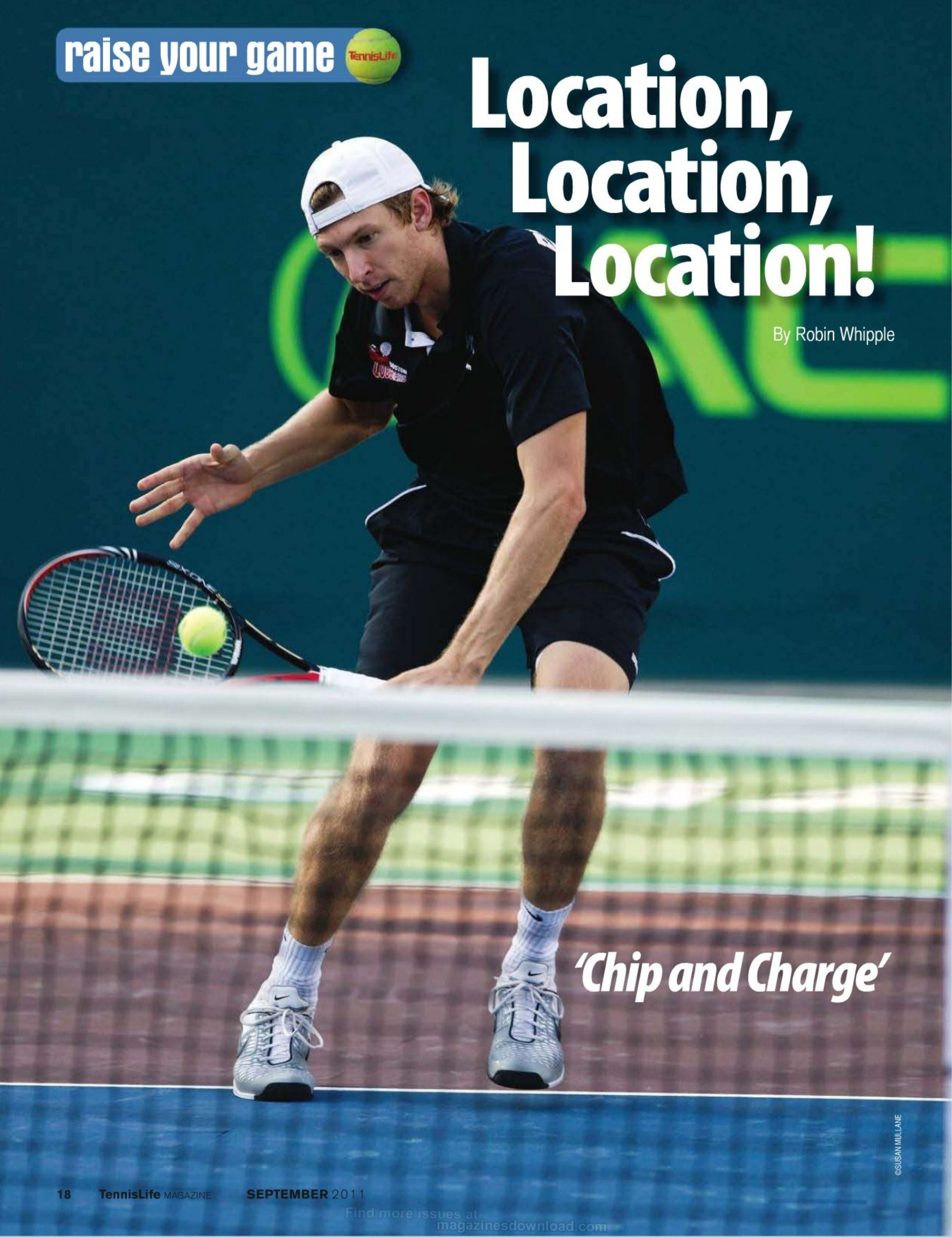
You may have heard the saying that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over, yet expecting different results. That's the trap of the "comfort zone"—where we play the same way each game, yet expect to become better players, where the labels we have given ourselves keep us from developing our games. So book a practice court and start trying something new. Soon, you may be expecting to be the winner you really are!

Bobbye DePaul *is a club player, novelist and advertising copywriter from Paradise Valley, Ariz. She can be reached at bobbyedepaul@cox.net or on the web at depaulcreative.com.*

'Discomfort comes from the fear of mistakes and the failure we may encounter when we try something new.'

Location, Location, Location!

By Robin Whipple



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Own the court by moving to the right spot, hitting the ball in the proper place on the racquet, and placing the shot where your opponent can't get to it.

The pros you watch on TV and read about know the mantra "location, location, location" is as important in tennis as it is in real estate. To hit a winner you have to put the ball in a location from which your opponent can make no return; better yet, a location your opponent cannot get to at all—a clean winner, which sends the message that you own the real estate. "Welcome to *my* tennis court!"

Putting the ball where you want it, the right *location*, is your goal. It closes the sale. To achieve this, two prerequisite locations are required. First, you must get to your opponent's shot, a "location" on your side of the net, and position yourself for maximum power and accuracy in your stroke. You must then "locate" the ball on your racquet in the right place, the contact point.

Understand these three locations and you are well on your way to thinking like the pros, putting yourself on the path to hitting more winners and winning more matches! Now, let's break it down further:

Location of Your Body to Strike the Ball

Getting the right distance from the ball and being well-balanced is the foundation of hitting a winner. Count the number of steps the pros take to set up for hitting the ball and compare that to what recreational player take. On most any shot, the pros take five or more steps; recreational and club players take far fewer. Emulate the pros. Take more adjustment steps and you will be in a better "location" to hit the ball with more power, more accuracy and less errors. Here's how:

After turning your shoulders and running to the ball, you must use what I call "squeaky steps" to regain your balance and get your body the right distance from the ball. Tune in to a professional match this hardcourt season and you will hear what I mean by "squeaky steps." The pros literally burn rubber from their shoes while they take small adjustment steps on the balls of their feet, getting their bodies set to hit the ball.

Most recreational players think of playing shots as a two-step process: Run to the ball, then hit it. The pros think and put into practice a three-step process: run to the ball, set up by taking small steps (adjusting distance from the ball and achieving balance), and then hit the ball. Focus on taking as many "squeaky steps" as possible. This is the missing link in the three-step process for many amateurs. Get yourself in the right location to strike the ball and you will have more accuracy and power.

'Keep your opponent guessing'

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Location of the Ball on Your Racquet

Though you've heard this a thousand times, it's worth repeating: Watch the ball! Better said, watch the ball right onto your racquet. Watch it hit the "sweetspot," a "location." Keep watching it. Watch the ball leave your racquet. Keep your head down, eyes on the ball. Then, and only then, follow it with your eyes.

This is perhaps the most common mistake rec players make: lifting their eyes from the racquet head too quickly in order to follow the shot. Look at pictures of the pros hitting the ball. You'll see what I mean. Practice this discipline and you'll increasingly find the "sweetspot," the optimum "location" on your racquet for the ball.

Find the "sweetspot"

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Location of Your Shot

If you properly achieve the first two locations, it will allow for varied and effective shot selection. Becoming aware of being in position to strike the ball and where you strike the ball opens the door to adjusting your strategy according to your readiness, your contact point—and also, your opponent's readiness. These adjustments can both increase winners and decrease errors.

Too often players decide where they want to hit the ball and then, no matter how early or late they are in positioning themselves and no matter where they contact the ball, aim for that spot. A better idea is to let your contact point guide your shot selection. If you hit the ball early, go for cross-court shots and angles. When hitting late, go for down-the-line or inside-out shots. As you become more aware of your contact points, try to hit the ball early when your opponent is out of position with less recovery time.

Chipping and charging and taking the ball on the rise or out of the air are great tactics that rob your opponent of time. At other times, wait to the last second and hit the ball later to keep your opponent guessing which direction to run, sometimes causing your opponent to pick the wrong direction and become wrong-footed. Running around your forehand, "locating" yourself for a forehand in what would normally be a backhand return, is a great time to wait, hit later, and keep your opponent guessing whether you are going to hit crosscourt or inside out.

Location, location, location! If you take more adjustment steps and improve the "location" of your body, "locate" the ball optimally on your racquet, and then adjust your shot selection depending on the "location" of contact, you will be thinking and playing like the pros and develop the ability to put the ball in a "location" your opponent won't like!

Robin Whipple, *currently a teaching pro in the Washington, D.C. area, was a member of the 1998 Flagler College tennis team, which finished second in the nation. As a junior he competed nationally, including play on a National Zonal team and in Junior Davis Cup. He's trained with a number of top teachers, including Nick Bollettieri, Dennis Van der Meer and Bud Cox.*

Shining Stars

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SPAIN

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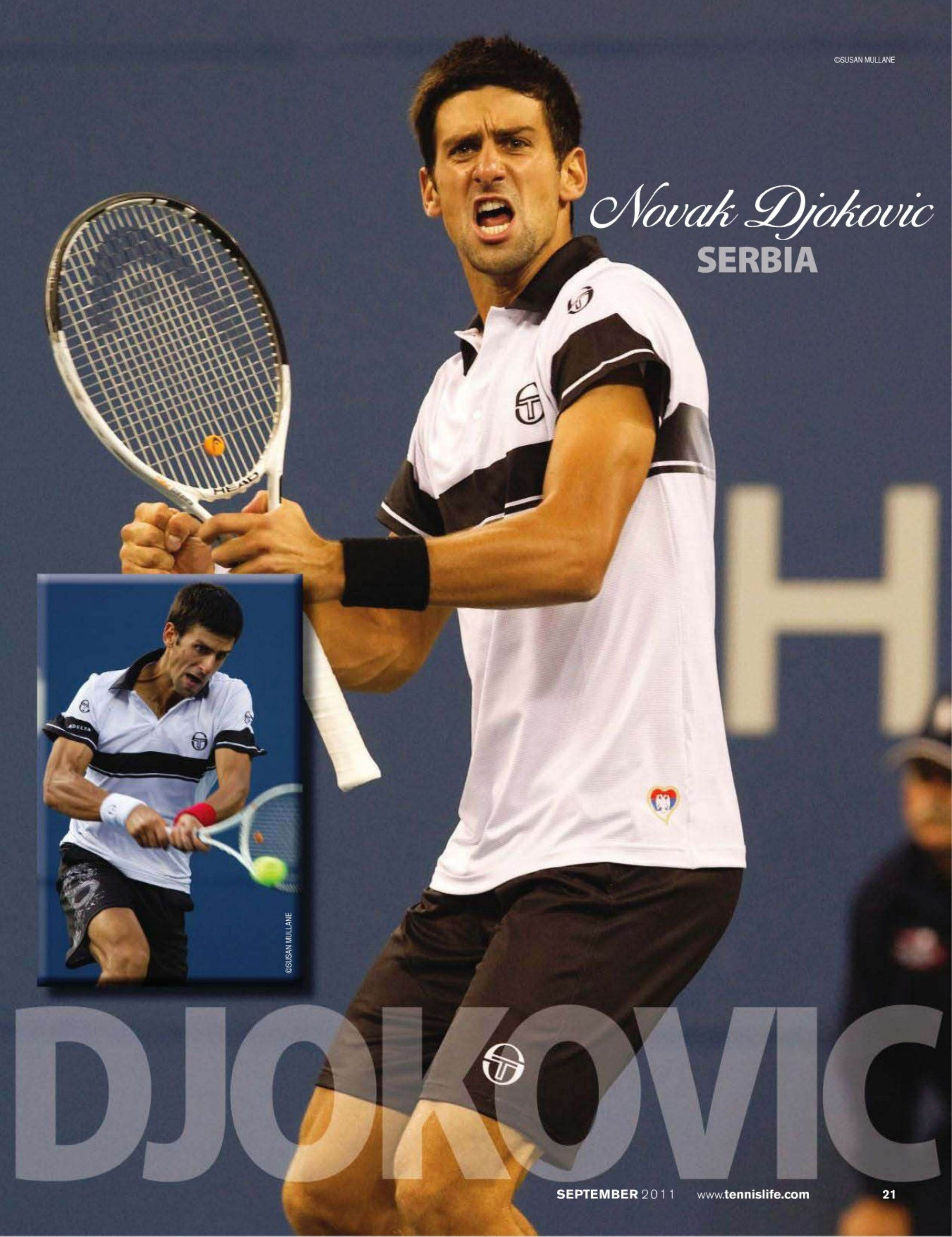
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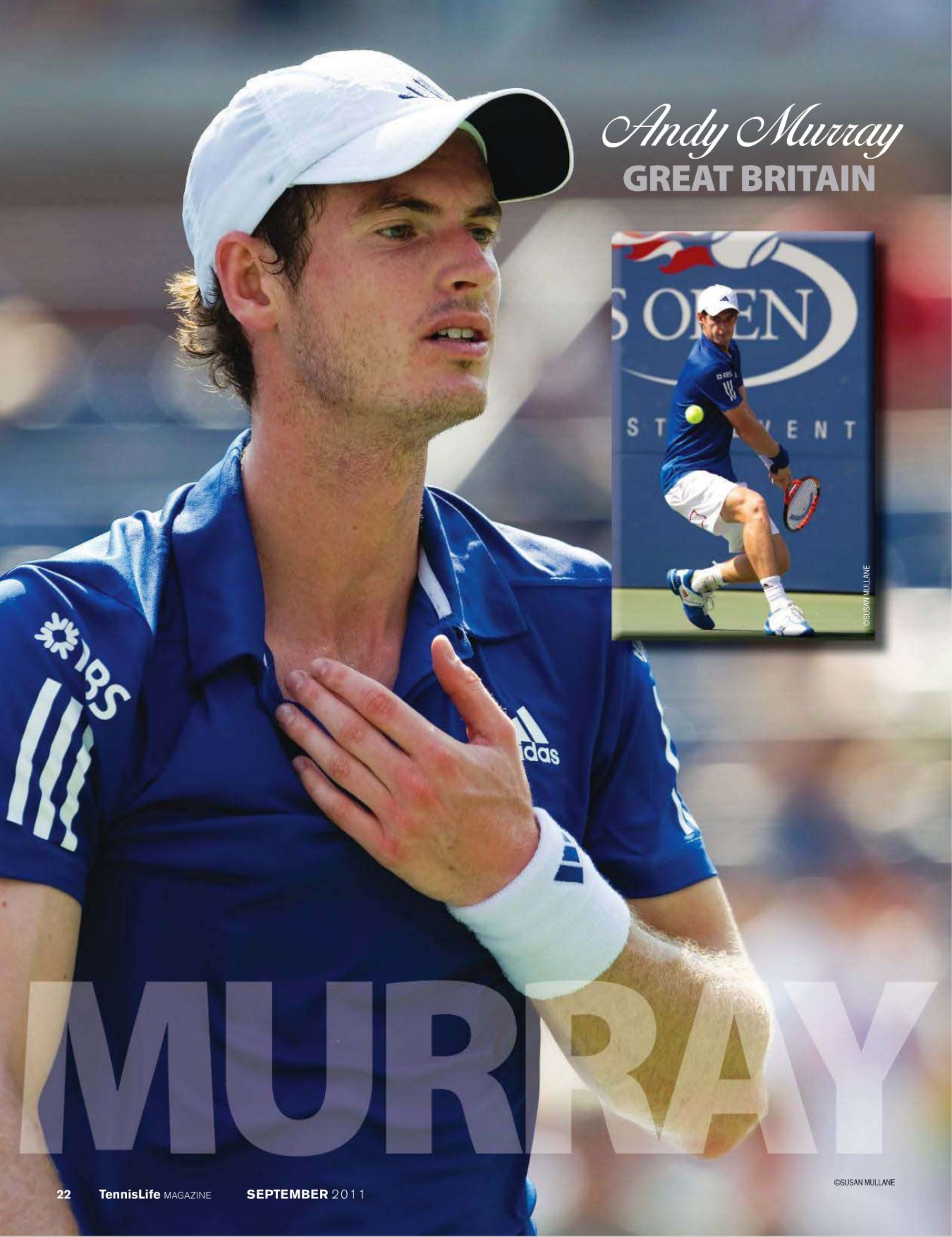

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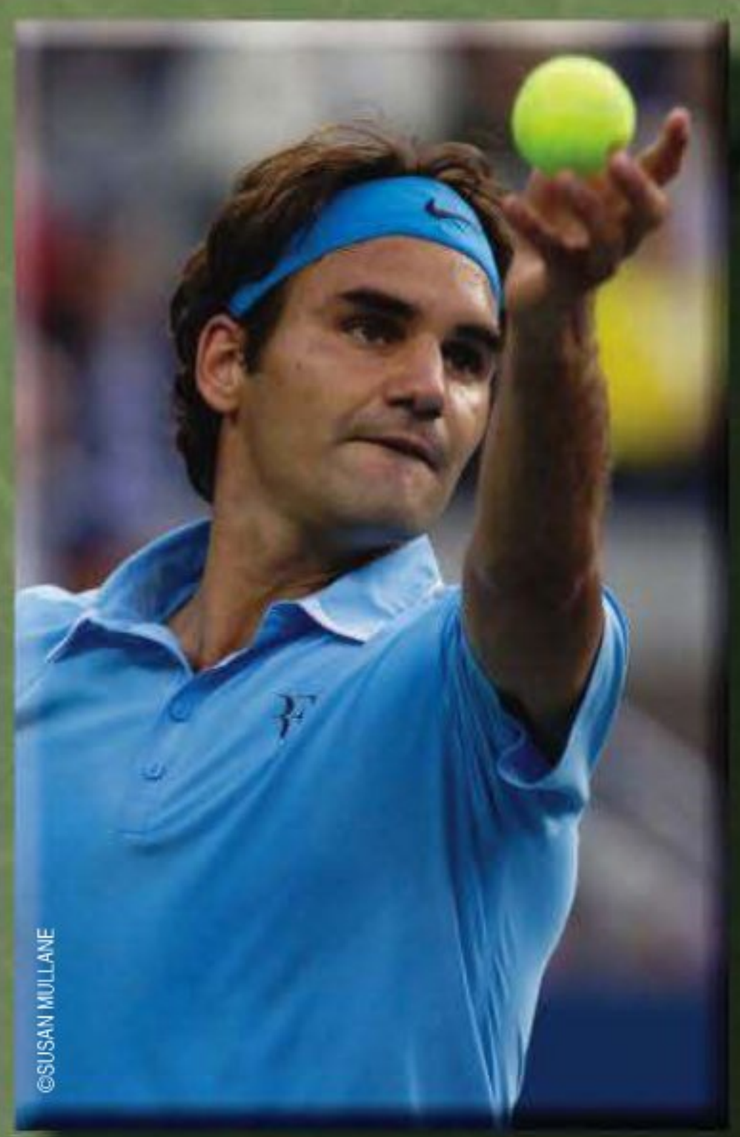

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'Economize' Your Game

By Peter Marrack

To reach the next level, simplify your tennis by limiting the amount of thinking you do on-court.

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I think we can agree that everyone would benefit from a little simplification in their lives, not to mention in their tennis games. Tennis is an incredibly difficult sport to pick up from scratch, and I'm continually reiterating to my beginners, "It's OK, you know, tennis *is* very hard, after all."

But once you make it past that initial hump, and you can go out with your friends and play, it does become more enjoyable. Simplification is the key.

What do I mean by simplification? Well, the fewer things we have to think about on the court, the better. For example, not to be mean or anything, but it's no coincidence that Andy Roddick comes across as, ugh, rather simple, and that he is one of the best players in the world. His thinking appears pretty straightforward: serve big, hit heavy from the baseline, and mix in the occasional slice, for good or ill.

However, for those of us who take great pride in our outstanding IQs, we must consciously limit the amount of thinking we do on-court, and try to channel our mental energies into one sharp line of focus. That said, I can't say this is the easiest task to accomplish, especially for beginners, or those of us with smart phones. So what I'll do here is propose three different thought-processes, one for each level of tennis player, that ought to make the game that much easier, and your life a little simpler.

'It's no coincidence that Andy Roddick comes across as, ugh, rather simple, and that he is one of the best players in the world.'

BEGINNERS

There are two things I always tell my beginner players to focus on, if all else fails: 1) Turn your body and racquet (to set up) as soon as the ball leaves your opponent's racquet, and 2) recover back to the center of the baseline after each shot.

If you can narrow your focus to just these two movements—turning sideways depending on where the ball lands (either on your forehand or backhand side), and getting back in time for the next ball—then your racquet should be able to take care of itself.

Footwork is typically the screwy domino that topples the whole rest of your tennis game, not to mention your confidence. There's nothing more demoralizing than chasing after a new ball after each and every swing. So I suggest you turn, run, hit, and then run back to where you started, and things should pick up.

INTERMEDIATE

For the intermediate player, who has more or less mastered their swings, I tell them to concentrate more on court positioning, as well as basic tactics. One, recognize when you have hit an offensive shot and make the appropriate adjustment with your feet (that is, move up), and two, don't change the direction of the ball unless you receive a shorter, weaker ball from your opponent.

These are two basic tactics that many intermediate players diverge from, rather quickly, as soon as they gain the smallest amount of confidence in their strokes. However, there's no faster way to lose this very confidence than to change directions too often, or fail to recognize when you are on offense or on defense. Both of these tips are intrinsically linked.

ADVANCED

Finally, the advanced player should look to simplify their games even further, almost to the point of exaggeration. I could sum it up in one sentence: Don't miss and don't get caught.

Advanced players don't make errors, they force them. And do not, under any circumstance, get beaten by a crummy flub shot when your opponent is at the net, and you hit a dipping passing shot. Expect the short ball, or dropper, and get there.

'We must consciously limit the amount of thinking we do on-court, and try to channel our mental energies into one sharp line of focus.'

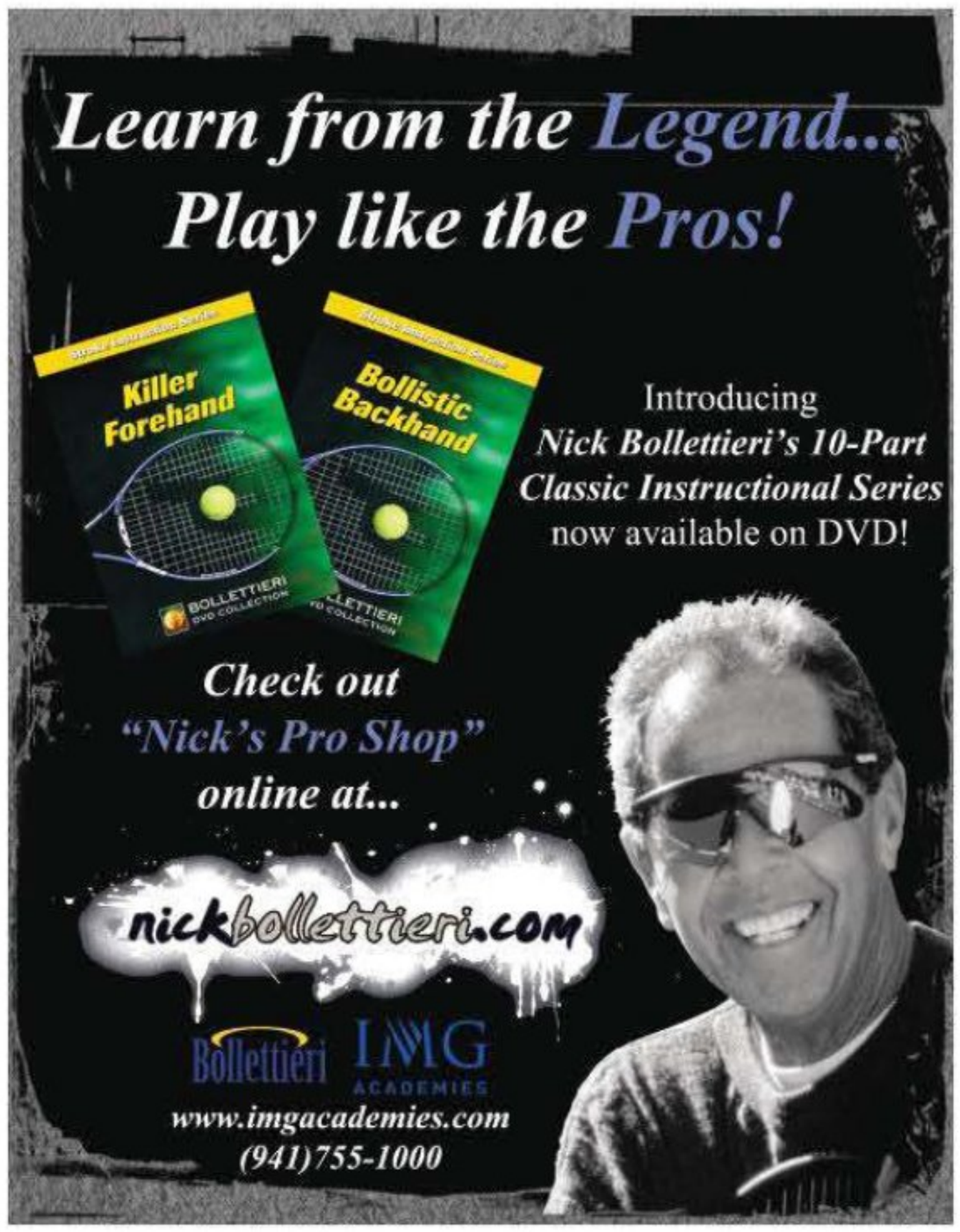
My college coach, ex-touring pro Greg Van Emburgh, used to threaten me with bodily harm when I got beaten by one of these flub volleys. According to Greg, it's what makes or breaks the advanced player, and heck, I believe him.

So now that you have that, there's no reason why you shouldn't be able to progress to the advanced stage in a matter of weeks. Right? Wrong...

The second most common thing I find myself reiterating to beginners goes something like, "*Much* better. And the ones you missed, they only come with practice, more repetition." You have to be willing to put in those 10,000 hours... to master anything really, and that number seems a little low. I know it took me at least 13 years to truly perfect my tennis game, to be the best that I can be. So either prepare for the long haul, and work on controlling/simplifying your mindset (as your knowledge grows), or schedule the first opening down in Tijuana for a black-market lobotomy.

You might just need it to win that Wimbledon title in 2012.

Peter Marrack *is a writer from Toronto, Canada. He coaches tennis at Rosedale Tennis Club, as well as playing with some of the best juniors in Canada at Ontario Racquet Club. He is also co-owner of Yo! Raps Magazine.*



THE 3 D'S OF *SLICE*

By Curly Davis

Slice, a.k.a. underspin, has made a resurgence in the pro game. I say resurgence because the slice shot took a backseat to topspin in the 1980s and '90s. Now we see touring pros such as Roger Federer employing a slice backhand tactic, and Kim Clijsters with her famous out-stretched wide forehand, or Andy Roddick, with his side-slice backhand approach shot, very effectively used by his former coach Jimmy Connors when he was on the tour.

There are three varieties of slice: Drive, Draw and Drop—I call them the 3 D's. While the 3 D's have some similarities when hitting them, they are different, and they all have different purposes. You need to know the similarities, differences and the proper time to hit each one.

PHOTOS COURTESY CURLY DAVIS INTERNATIONAL TENNIS CAMP

Drive *SLICE*

For the drive slice, the racquet head starts slightly above the intended contact point, approximately shoulder height. The racquet moves down and through the contact of the ball. The arm action resembles that of a baseball umpire signaling "safe!"

A vital component is maintaining the wrist angle, as shown in photo 1. Retaining the wrist angle is vital because it keeps the racquet face angle behind the ball longer, resulting in a lower trajectory and lower bouncing ball.

The drive slice is commonly used as an approach shot, since it will take longer to get to the opponent's court, giving you more time to get to an advantageous net position. The bounce will stay low and force your opponent to hit up to clear the net, running the risk of hitting the ball too high and giving you an easy putaway. Furthermore, if your opponent uses a semi-Western or Western grip, the drive slice will make their shot particularly difficult to return because those types of grips close the racquet face, so the opponent can't get the racquet under the ball.

'The Drive *SLICE* is commonly used as an approach shot, since it will take longer to get to the opponent's court.'

Draw *SLICE*

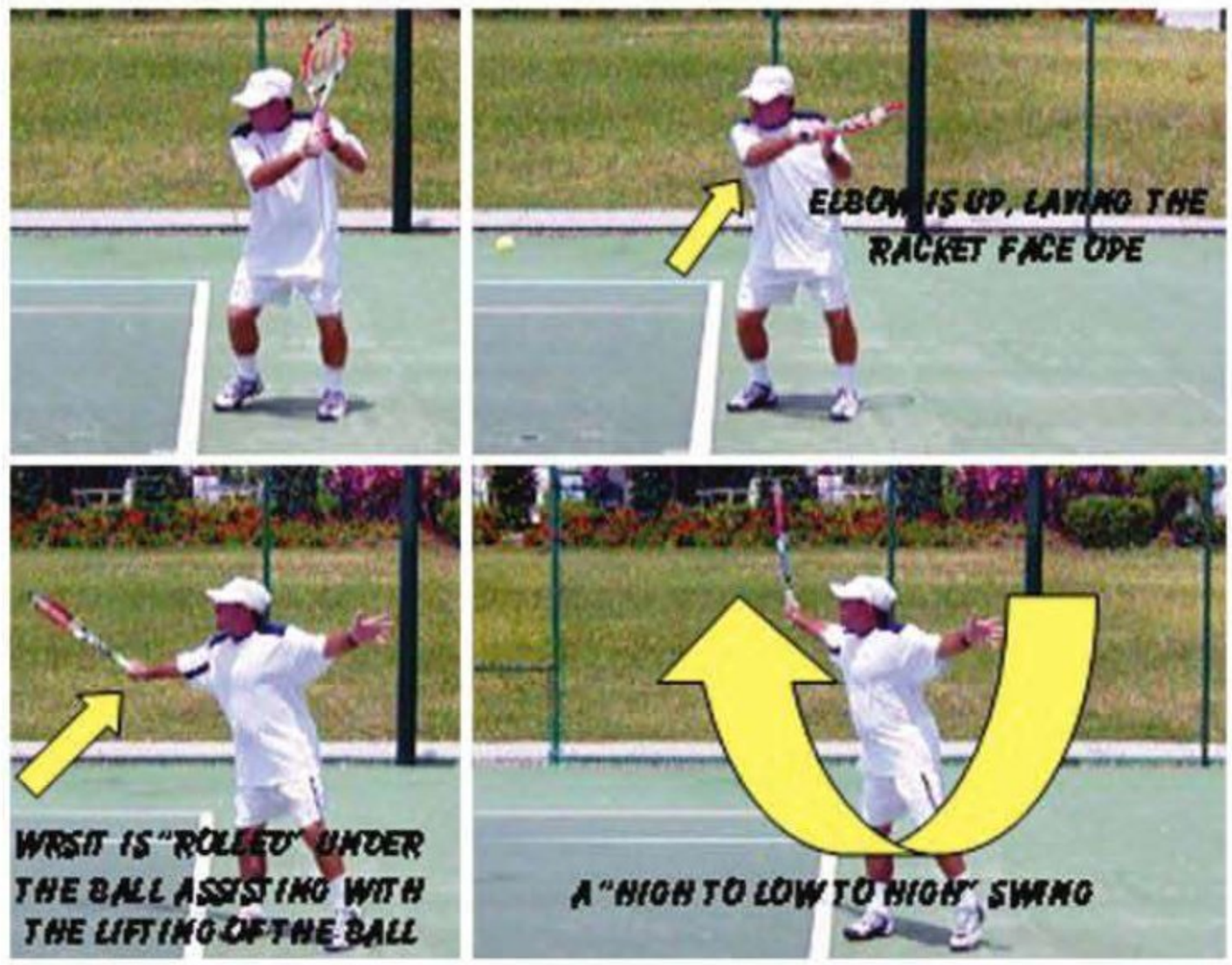
The draw slice is designed to draw (float) up or draw (bounce) away from your opponent. To draw the ball so it will float, start with the racquet up above the contact point, then let the racquet face move down, under and forward.

Next, allow the elbow to drop into the swing, followed by the wrist dropping slightly, as shown. The wrist rolls under the ball, which helps to lift the ball. With the elbow away from the body, it will help open the racquet face. The swing for the draw slice will look like the letter "U."

When should you hit this floating shot? When you are trying to give yourself more time to get back into proper position because this shot takes longer to get to the opponent's side.

The draw slice that bounces and moves toward the side of the court, away from your opponent, is most typically hit as an approach shot. To hit this shot, start with the racquet above the ball, just like the other slices, then pull the racquet across the back side of the ball to create a sideways rotation. This slice allows you to play with less risk by playing the ball farther away from the sidelines. Once it bounces, it will move away from your opponent and toward the sidelines, making it more difficult for your opponent to hit an effective passing shot.

Finally, understand that slice kills power—and the draw slice is effective at killing your opponent's power. If your adversary hits the ball harder than you feel confident in returning, use the draw slice to kill their power.



'If your adversary hits the ball harder than you feel confident in returning, use the Draw *SLICE* to kill their power.'

'Never use a Drop *SLICE* to get you out of trouble—it will only get you into more trouble if used at an inopportune time.'

Drop *SLICE*

Hitting with slice is required for a drop shot for two reasons: 1) slice will kill the power from the oncoming ball, and 2) once the ball bounces on the opponent's side, it will "back up" or move away from your opponent, making the shot difficult to retrieve.

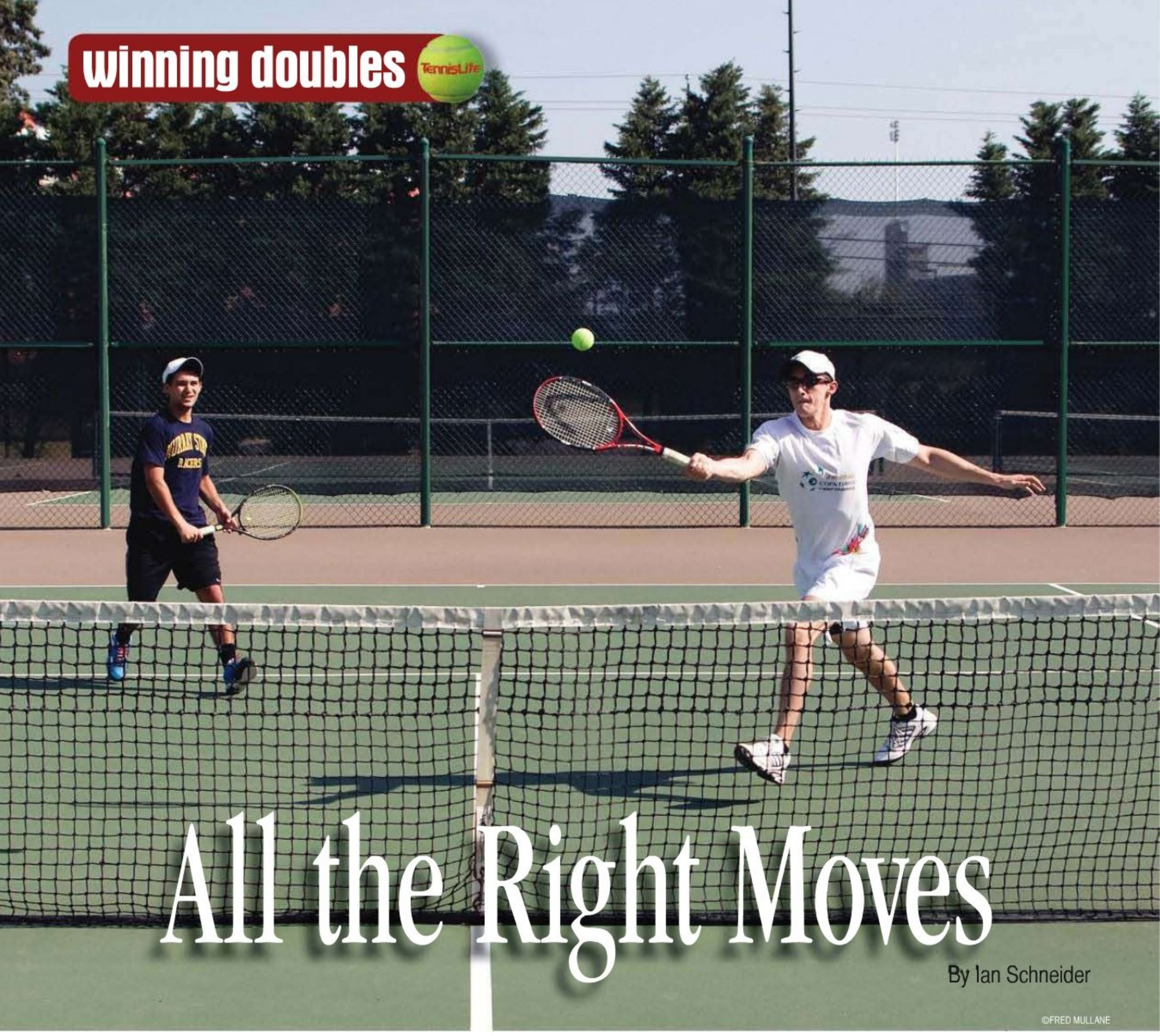
To execute the drop shot, prepare the racquet slightly above the intended contact point (the same motion as the drive slice in order to disguise the shot selection), then with a relaxed grip on the handle, "brush" the racquet face down and under the back side of the ball.

The ball should leave your strings traveling in a low trajectory, or down, but *not* up. If it is traveling up, your opponent will see that it is a drop shot and have time to respond.

The proper moment in a point and a match are two big considerations for using a drop shot. It should be used as a surprise tactic. The drop shot can also be used to pressure your opponent by pulling them to the net, where they are uncomfortable. Never use a drop shot to get you out of trouble—it will only get you into more trouble if used at an inopportune time.

Finally, if any of these slices are hit with too high of a trajectory, greater than 45 degrees, the ball will sit up, giving your opponent time to step around the shot to hit their weapon.

Longtime tennis teaching pro and academy director ***Curly Davis*** *is the owner and director of the Curly Davis International Tennis Camp in Naples, Fla. For more information, visit www.curlydavis-tennis.com.*



All the Right Moves

By Ian Schneider

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These 20 tips can help you and your partner knock your opponents out of the game.

Doubles is a unique game—it's like chess with a tennis racquet. I work with many club-level and senior players, and I created this list of tips to help them improve their doubles and play a winning game. Share this list with your partner and your team will come up with the right moves to vanquish your opponents.

1. Doubles is a team sport. It is not a spectator sport where one partner plays while the other watches.

2. Play no-fault tennis. The *team* loses points, not the individual. Lost points happen too frequently to place blame. Never criticize, only compliment your partner.

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3. Analyze your opponent's game. Watch for weaknesses and then, take advantage of them. Do not allow your opponent to be comfortable.

4. Constant movement and a variety of strokes will confuse and frustrate your opponent. Move, move, move. Fake, fake, fake. Pressure, pressure, pressure.

5. Follow the flight of the ball at all times.

6. In doubles, placement is better than power.

7. The opponent's side of the court can be divided into four quadrants, of which two are always occupied, and two are always open. Hit to the open quadrants to win points.

8. Play the odds. Don't be cute; be boringly effective.

9. Expect to lose points, but if you win only slightly more, you will likely win the match. In a match, the difference between points won and lost is always amazingly small.

10. The most important point is the next one.

11. When you lose a point, always examine the preceding shot, that is the one that caused the loss, not the shot that won it.

12. Take your time. Think before you serve or receive.

13. Serve to your opponent's weakness 85 percent of the time. Generally, that means the backhand side.

14. Attempt to receive the serve on your strong side 100 percent of the time. Move in as close as possible when receiving serve. This allows you to return the serve quickly and with a short angle, or lob over the net player's head into the corner of the court farthest from the server. Do not hit back to the server.

15. Only poach the moment the ball is on the face of the opponent's racquet. Fake a poach before that moment to distract the opponent.

16. Lob to the open court, and follow it to the net immediately, as it is likely the return shot will be short, at which point, you should volley a short angle shot or hit an overhead to your opponent's weak side.

17. Volleys should be blocked/punched to the open court. Do not take a full backswing for a volley. It raises your error factor dramatically.

18. 90 percent of all non-lob shots are hit to the middle of the court. Therefore, when at the net, constantly try to cut off your opponent's shots down the middle by stepping diagonally toward the center of the net. This movement allows you to intercept your opponent's shots and the movement interferes with their grooved, comfortable strokes.

19. During the course of play, work together as a unit. When your partner must move out of position, you must move with your partner to cover any of the court left open by that move.

20. You and your partner should constantly advise each other verbally with commands such as: "Yours," "Switch," "Bounce it," "Watch the bounce," "They're both back," etc.

And just as important, have fun together!

Ian Schneider *is the Vizcaya Community Tennis Director in Delray Beach, Fla. Because most of his students are seniors or club-level players, he created this list of tips as a handout to help them improve during match play.*

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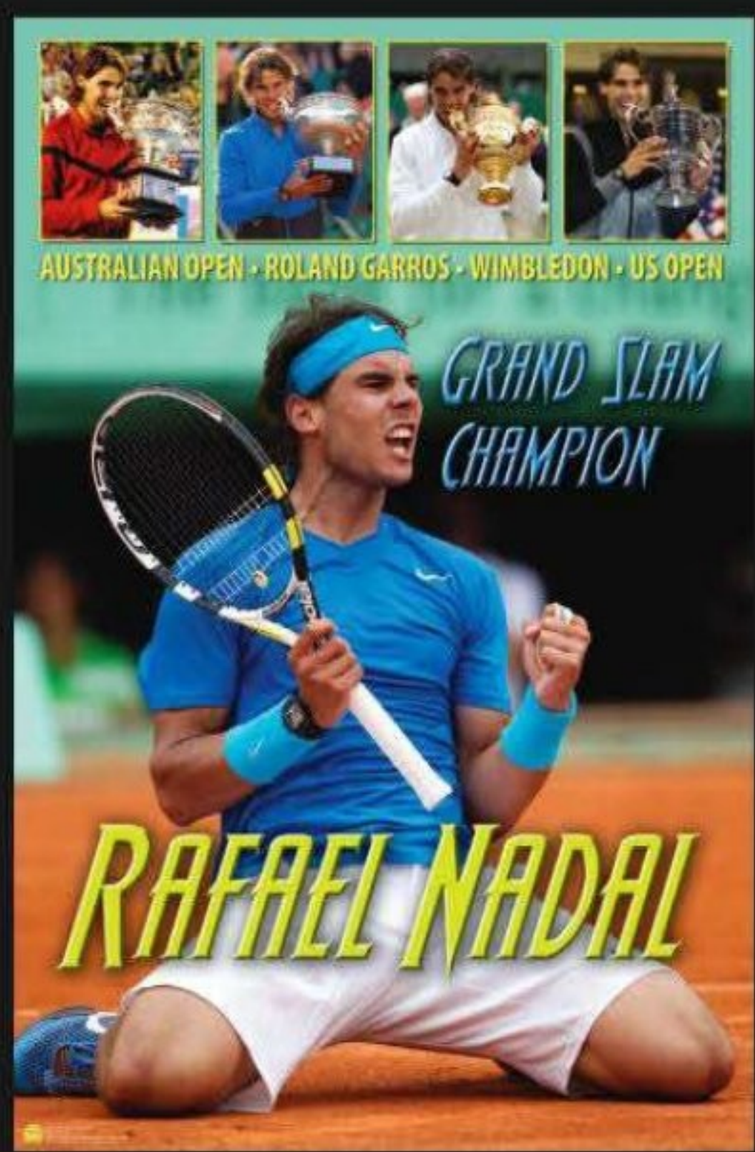

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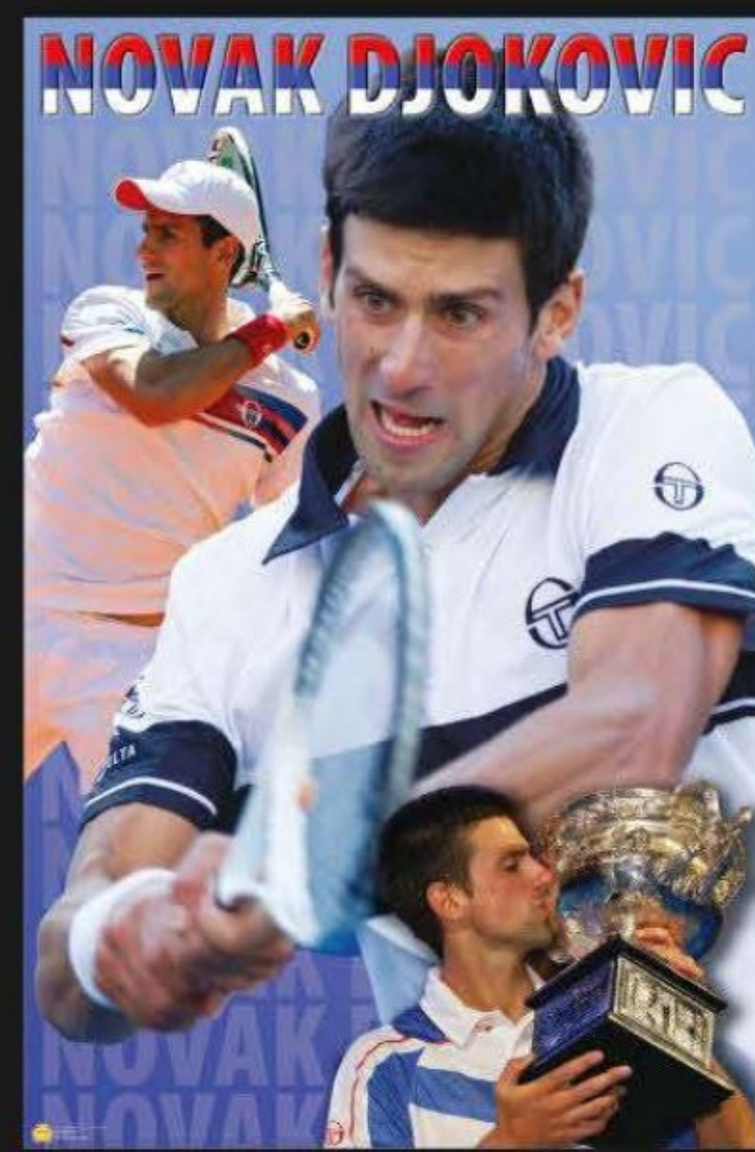

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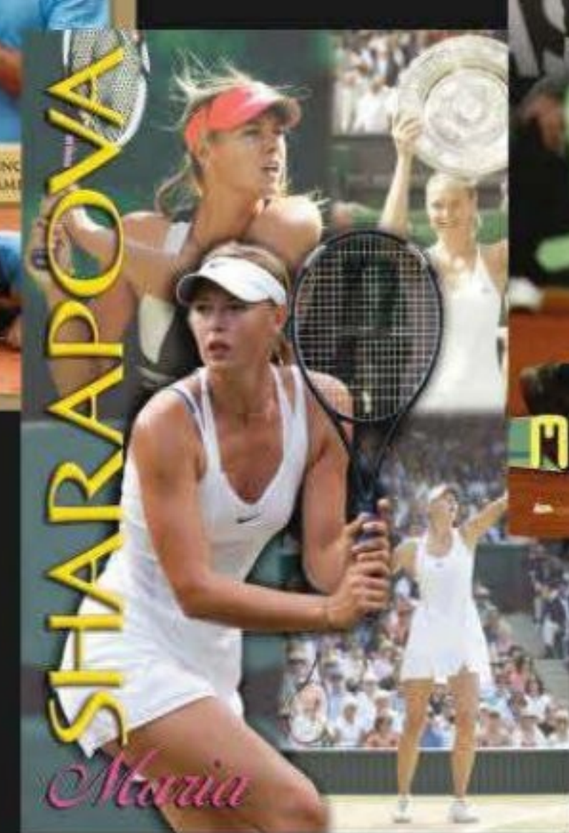

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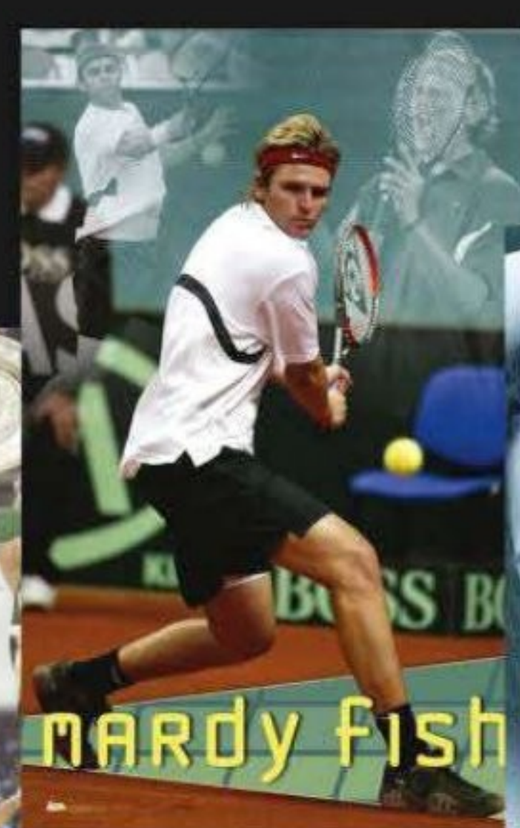

MARDY FISH

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Drop Shot: How to Hit It

By Nick Bollettieri

'It is imperative that you capture the key element of the drop shot: Disguise, disguise, disguise!'

In my last column I explained what a perfect drop shot is and when and why to use the drop shot. After watching many hours of the 2011 Australian Open (I only slept about three hours a night), it became even more apparent to me how important the drop shot is. Each and every match the players would have killer groundstrokes, sonic serves, and great movement. Where was the drop shot? Some used it effectively and some struggled with it.

Here are a few simple tips on how to hit the perfect drop shot.

Grip for the Dropper

The grip can differ per individual. Some players will use the same grip they use for their forehands and backhands and some will change. A former student of mine, Jim Courier, used the same grip (semi-Western) for his forehand that he used for his famous drop shot and his swing pattern was also the same. The majority of players probably will use the Continental or Eastern backhand grip for their drop shot.

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Preparation & Swing

To disguise the drop shot, you should use the very same backswing for both the drop shot and the slice. When hitting a drop shot, use less follow-through and more spin. Not only do you want the swing motion to be the same, but also the footwork. Once again, repeat the same footwork you use in hitting aggressive shots.

Balance

A strong foundation to ensure better balance will add more control to your drop shot. Relax your front knee so you can hit your shot. Stay relaxed and get down to the height of the ball when hitting the shot.

'A drop shot hit directly at your opponent will make it more difficult for them to read the distance and speed than a drop shot hit away from your opponent.'

Nick's Note: It is imperative that you capture the key element of the drop shot: Disguise, disguise, disguise! You will be successful with the drop shot when your opponent is thinking you will hit deep groundstrokes, high rollers, angles, or try to go for winners.

Tommy Haas once asked me when he should come to the net. My answer was very simple: Come in all the time and through trial and error you will learn when to hit the drop shot.

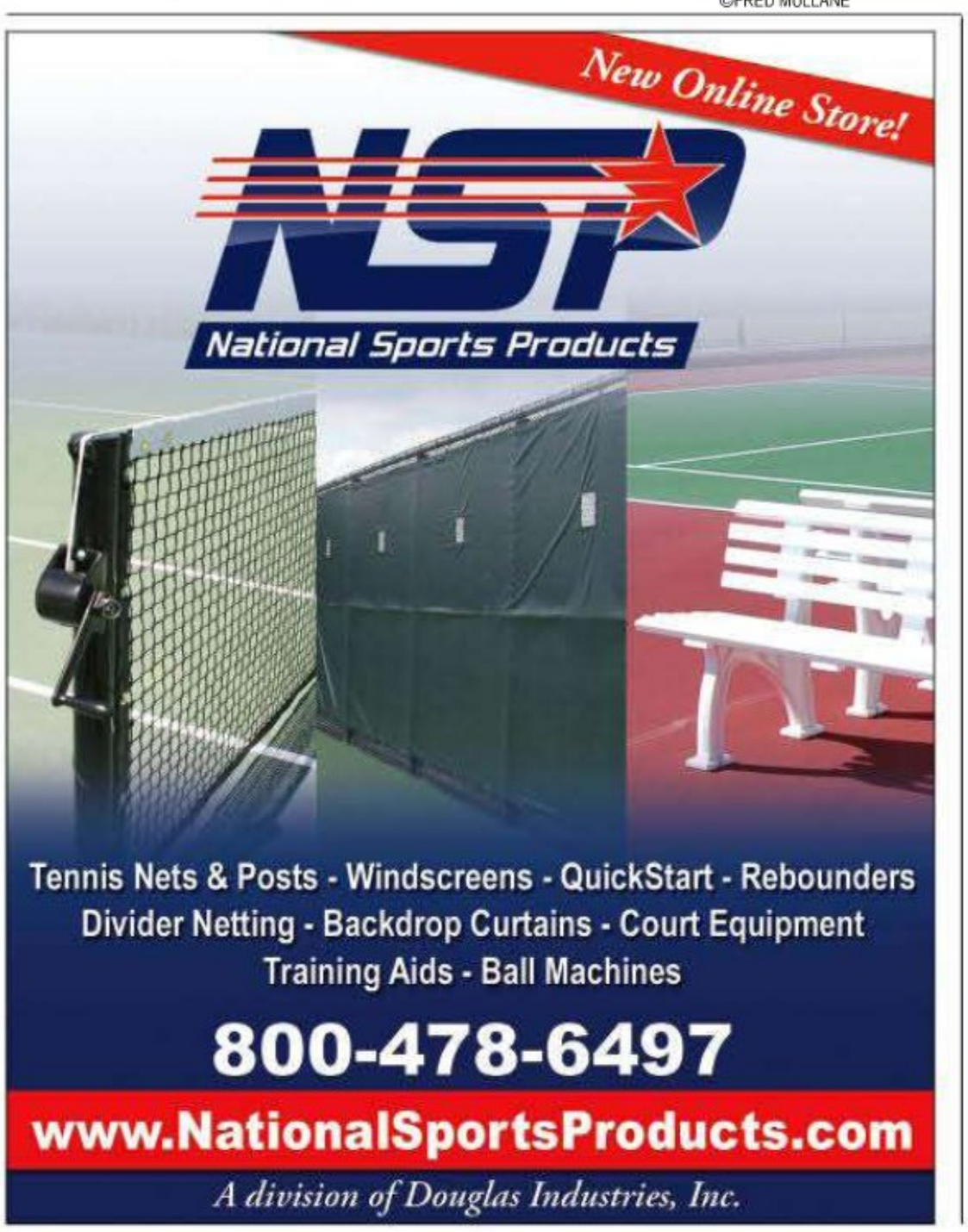
Do not be discouraged in the beginning if your opponent runs down all your drop shots. In time, you will get the feeling of the drop shot by repetition and it will become a more natural shot for you.

Experts say you can accurately judge depth perception only up to 15 or 20 feet. Therefore, you can use the direction you hit the ball to further the disguise. For example, suppose a car is some distance away and traveling toward you in a straight line. How close must it get to you before you can estimate its speed?

In the same situation, if you were to change your position to the side of the road, could you better judge the speed of the car? This situation provides the best perspective for your depth perception and for determining the speed of the car.

Now, how can we apply this to disguising a drop shot? Let's say you have your opponent on the run and pushed back behind the baseline… a perfect time to hit the drop shot. Now, where do you hit it? A drop shot hit directly at your opponent will make it more difficult for them to read the distance and speed than a drop shot hit away from your opponent. Next time you are on the court try this out, and I guarantee you will have success!

__Nick Bollettieri__ is the founder and president of Nick Bollettieri Tennis Academy, part of the IMG Academies in Bradenton, Fla. He has coached nine No. 1 tennis players, has worked with a number of professional players, and has published numerous tennis books, videos and audio CDs.



Keeping Players Grounded

By Steve Smith

A longtime coach says the 'Universal Tennis Rating System' may be what's needed to bring about a system-wide change in the culture of tennis in the U.S.

The USTA's 10 and Under Tennis initiative is a major step forward for tennis. While there are still challenges and questions about how to implement this initiative, it's not too early to start thinking ahead.

If 10U does yield more kids who are primed and eager to keep playing, will they find a clear, affordable and effective pathway? The current pathway is none of that. The USTA's junior tournament structure has led us to "Get Out Your Checkbook" player development. The ranking system awards points based on the round reached, so parents want their kid in tournaments where the kid has a chance to win the most rounds to be able to secure the most points.

It's a not-so-uncommon scenario: A kid in Boston signs up for four Level III Open tourneys and the weakest is in Honolulu. Two days before the event, he moves up on the wait list and his parents purchase two expensive airline tickets to Hawaii, rent a car, and check into a hotel. The kid plays three singles matches and two pro sets of doubles. What did each match cost? Some U.S. parents are paying roughly $1,000 per national match.

But think about this: It doesn't cost $1,000 a match to have a hotshot 14-year-old with no shots play a "B" match against a middle-age dinker with only one shot at a local event around the corner. This is a classic matchup, the blaster against the pusher. In France, this happens all the time, because juniors have many opportunities to compete against adults. If this happened more in the U.S., parents would hesitate to pay for their "not as good as they thought" kid to participate in an event thousands of miles away.

USTA President Jon Vegosen has fortunately recognized the problem. In January, he challenged the USTA to turn tennis back into "The Sport of Opportunity"—accessible for all!

College coaches have known for years that the French have a "rating" system that lets them put together players of similar ability through "block-seeding" more effectively than our age-based system. Block-seeding is a tournament format in which players who reach a predetermined round from one draw are fed into a second draw with players of a higher rating level. There are usually multiple feed-in draws in one tournament. Block-seeding based on player ratings allow all players to be more accurately placed.

At major national junior tournaments with feed-in consolation draws, many players play their tournament "backwards": First they meet a better player, then after having been beaten soundly, they begin their "real" tournament. As such, coaches trust the French ratings more than they do the USTA's points-per-round ranking system.

One American, Dave Howell, is actually doing something about these problems. A PTR and USPTA teaching pro with 40-plus years of experience, Howell has been working on a solution for more than a decade and has developed a compelling vision for changing the current culture. With the help of Alex Cancado, a software engineer who developed the algorithm Howell now relies upon, Howell created the "Universal Tennis Rating System." In a nutshell, it's a pathway that could take American tennis where it needs to go—upwards instead of in circles. (Go to **universaltennis.com** to find out more, and to sign up.)

Howell studied the ins and outs of various systems worldwide, including in France, and experimented in tweaking his own system in the Virginia Beach area. He solved the problems of having too many levels within one tournament with block-seeding and raised the percentage of competitive matches, increasing participation at the same time. He then created a simple formula to measure the percentage of matches played. He calculates the "threshold of competition" with the goal of ensuring more tough matches. He also designed his entry levels to be understandable for parents and kids.

By connecting the results of *all* competitive players—juniors, college players, adults, seniors, pros, members of the USTA or not—everyone will be able to know where they stand against the field. Federer and Nadal, for instance, are 16.5's. A "middle of the roader" in Division 1 college tennis is a 12.5. It can help save parents thousands of dollars by reducing expensive travel. It can serve as a map to show players how to advance their games.

The U.S is too large geographically to depend on age-based play—requiring travel for kids to play other kids of the same age is just too expensive here. The Universal Tennis Rating computes one's rating based on play across all ages and genders. A competitive structure that allows all ages and all genders to play makes it easier and a lot less expensive for players to find more quality matches on a regular basis when players are not confined to age "bands."

Once juniors know where they are on the ladder, it will change their focus from where they are ranked now in the 12's to where their level needs to be when they're 18 trying to compete successfully against older college players. But please note, in American junior tennis today players on their own accord register to play up in an older age group or two having not even won within their own age group. This major problem would be regulated by a system such as Universal Tennis.

Howell's approach is gaining more and more supporters. Vegosen, before he became USTA president, headed up the USTA Collegiate Committee and helped relations between the Intercollegiate Tennis Association and the USTA. Hats off to Vegosen for taking the time to listen to college coaches and declare it's time to build something better.

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Building Opportunities

Let's keep it simple and smart! The Universal Tennis rating scale offers 10 and Under Tennis kids a clear pathway, gives juniors more perspective, and college kids more incentive to keep trying. It will give college coaches a great tool for evaluating talent and will do the same for juniors trying to evaluate whether they could play at their "dream" school. It tells kids if they are ready to turn pro. And, if tournaments began to offer modest prize money, our best adult players would have an incentive to keep competing and mentoring younger players.

In a perfect world, the USTA, along with the ITA, would start feeding its results to Universal Tennis so the database can be as comprehensive as possible. We know that tons of international kids want to play tennis at U.S. colleges. But our juniors rarely get the benefit of playing against them before they face off in college. The Universal Tennis Rating System with a new tournament structure will solve this problem.

As Howell is quick to point out, it's the idea, not the algorithm, that we should be paying the most attention to. During the school year, kids need to play as many matches as possible within driving distance of home. Building these opportunities is the real challenge.

No one knows more about junior tournaments than Bobby Curtis, a Florida tennis legend, who will tell you that basically, parents think their kids are better than they are. But who can blame the kid or their parents for developing an inflated sense of how good they are under the current tournament structure? The Universal Tennis Rating System will keep kids grounded and humble.

Remember, John Isner didn't get to No. 18 by competing only against other American college players. Has anyone stopped to think why so many college players who were not picked for greatness before college suddenly take off in college?

Intriguing Possibilities

The possibilities that come to mind when you think about having everyone on the same scale are intriguing. For instance: Limit national junior tournaments to the summer, when most kids can travel more easily. During the rest of the year, make it possible for junior players to get better competition on a regular basis closer to home.

Over winter breaks, create multi-level, block-seeded tournaments in metropolitan areas. Open them up to juniors in the early rounds, college players in later rounds; including international players. Offer prize money to attract the best adults. Have the tournaments on college campuses when these facilities are available. Parents could stay home and work, the kids could stay in dorms for longer time periods. The new format would be cheaper and more competitive matches would be played.

Or how about dropping the expensive Level II and III tournaments, and instead give kids opportunities to play in summer circuit events, where they could compete against international players, former pros, and former college players. Most older teens are not ready for the $10,000 Futures, but they could benefit from playing people who know a lot more about tennis than they or their peers do.

How about the USTA helping U.S. college coaches put together a new circuit of tournaments and events? American parents want college coaches to recruit U.S. kids, but right now, for the most part, they are dealing with nice, privileged kids whose parents think they are better than they are. Coaches want to deal with serious athletes who have come up the hard way. A new circuit should be less costly and suited to modern schedules. It would be a powerful step to help increase the depth of American tennis.

The beauty of this change is that while some national tournaments will no longer be necessary, many more players will be interested in playing in a local, level-based system of tournaments that could offer even better competition at a fraction of the cost. Everybody, not just the elite, would benefit if they can find the right level of competition easily and locally. The new rating system would inform high school players of a target rating to achieve to play beyond high school. And let's make sure boys and girls, at least until the age of 14, are part of the same ladder.

COMPETITIVE THRESHOLD PERCENTAGES
ATP Grand Slams 70%
WTA Grand Slams 55%
ITA D1 Men Championships 70%
ITA D1 Women Championships 55%
USTA National Junior Championships 45%
USTA Sectional Championships 35%
USTA District Tournaments 27%

The fewer the levels of play in a tournament, the higher the number of competitive matches

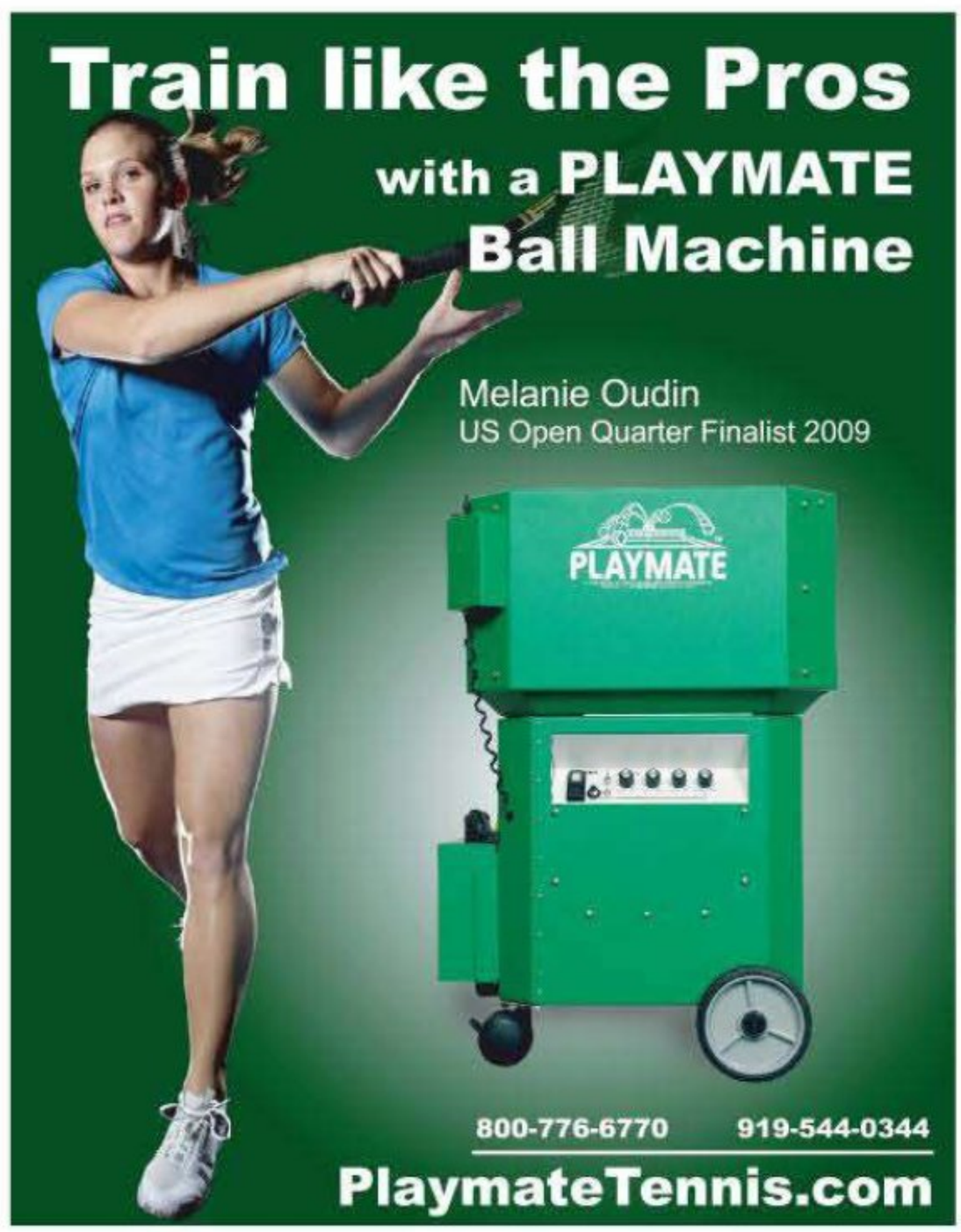
By following the vision of Howell and others, the USTA could lead the way to major change that can boost American tennis. If it did, it could help to build a healthier and more robust competitive system for everyone. Let's put something in motion now. U.S. tennis is bigger than just the USTA; it will need the goodwill of all the other competitive tennis groups to make changes.

The USTA does not need to change the US Open, just the culture and the pathway of competitive play for American kids who we hope will one day play the US Open. Dave Howell's efforts could make tennis better and, once again, affordable in America. The Universal Tennis Rating System needs an army to fight the good fight.

Fighting to change the current junior structure of tournaments in the U.S. is a must—a must now!

__Steve Smith__ has 35 years of diversified experience. Academically, he designed and developed the first accredited comprehensive degree program for tennis teachers. Seven of his former students, ones developed in their formative years, have won NCAA National titles. Clinically, he's studied under and worked for tennis teaching legends.

For a special offer on the Universal Tennis Rating System, see coupon on page 37



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Cardio Tennis: The 'Fun' Way to a Healthy Heart

By Dr. Robert Heller

I recently attended a teacher-training program on Cardio Tennis and participated in many of the experiences found in an actual class. Cardio Tennis, which was developed and is managed by the Tennis Industry Association, is a group-based, on-court aerobic exercise class that uses tennis movement activities accompanied by music to build stamina and burn calories. Recent surveys by the Physical Activities Council indicate that more than 1.5 million people participated in Cardio Tennis in 2010. In fact, last fall former tour pro Anna Kournikova agreed to become the Cardio Tennis spokesperson.

Cardio Tennis spokesperson *Anna Kournikova*

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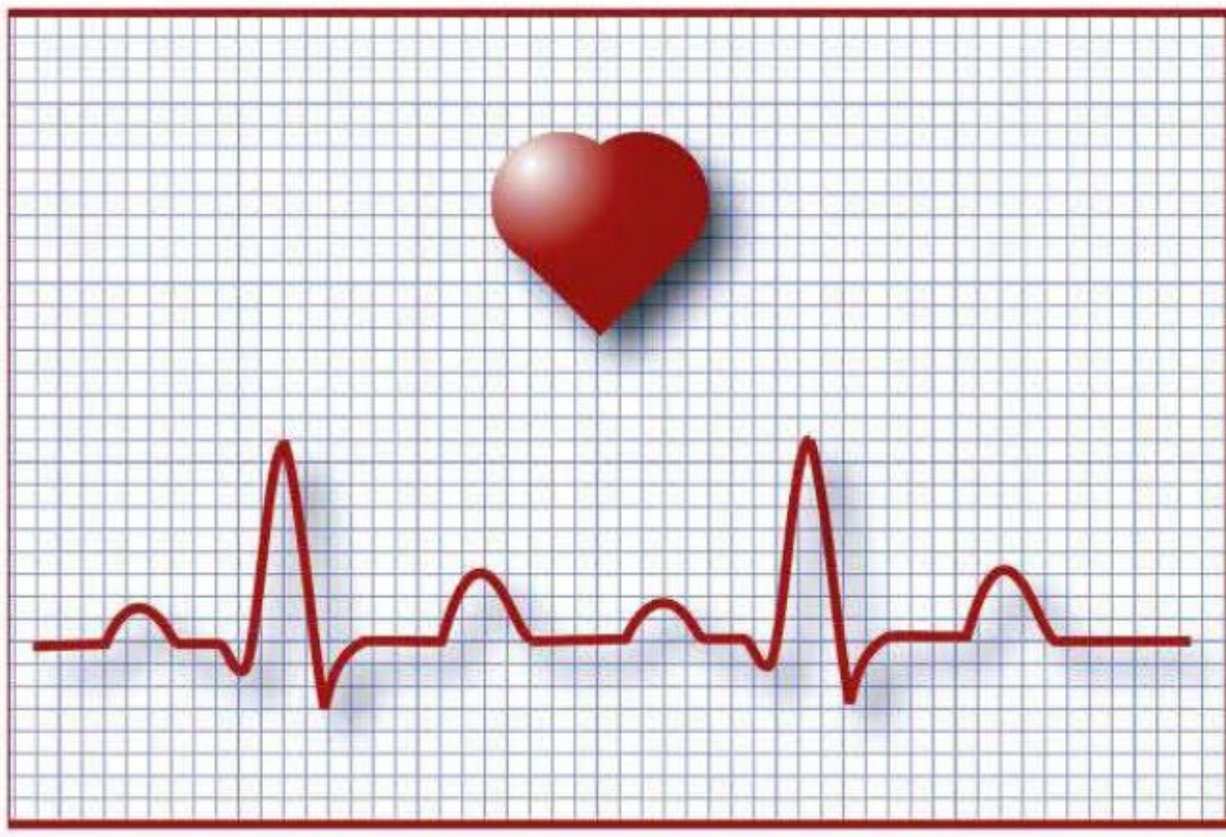
Cardio Tennis is held on one or more tennis courts with six to eight participants per court and a tennis teaching professional. The class meets for 60 to 90 minutes and consists of a warm-up, tennis-related games and drills, and a cool-down period. Participants can be of different ages and skills levels and still get a good workout within the same class.

A key component of the program is monitoring participants' heart rates, to make sure they remain safely in their target zone. Ideally, you want to use a heart-rate monitor to ensure each person is working safely and at maximum efficiency based on their age, weight, height and gender. In the program I attended, the instructor provided a watch and chest strap and guided us through setting up the watch so that you can increase or decrease your effort during the class to remain in your target zone for the longest period of time. At the end of the class, you hit a button and the monitor shows you how much time you spent in your target zone and the number of calories you burned. With clear instructions from our teacher, we were up and running within minutes.

A second component of the Cardio Tennis program is the use of music. Like a regular aerobics class, music is designed to make the class more fun and lively. According to the Cardio



Cardio Tennis is held on one or more tennis courts with six to eight participants per court and a tennis teaching professional.

Tennis material, music during the program will increase a participant's effort by 30 percent, which means it also increases a participants' benefit. And, because of the music and the activity, you simply don't notice this increased effort.

The third component of the program is the use of rope ladders and other "sideline" activities placed on the ground outside the court. The goal is to keep participants constantly in motion, so when they're not on the court running for shots, they're stepping through the rope ladder or around cones on their way to go back on the court. The continuous movement keeps the heart rate up and also improves footwork.

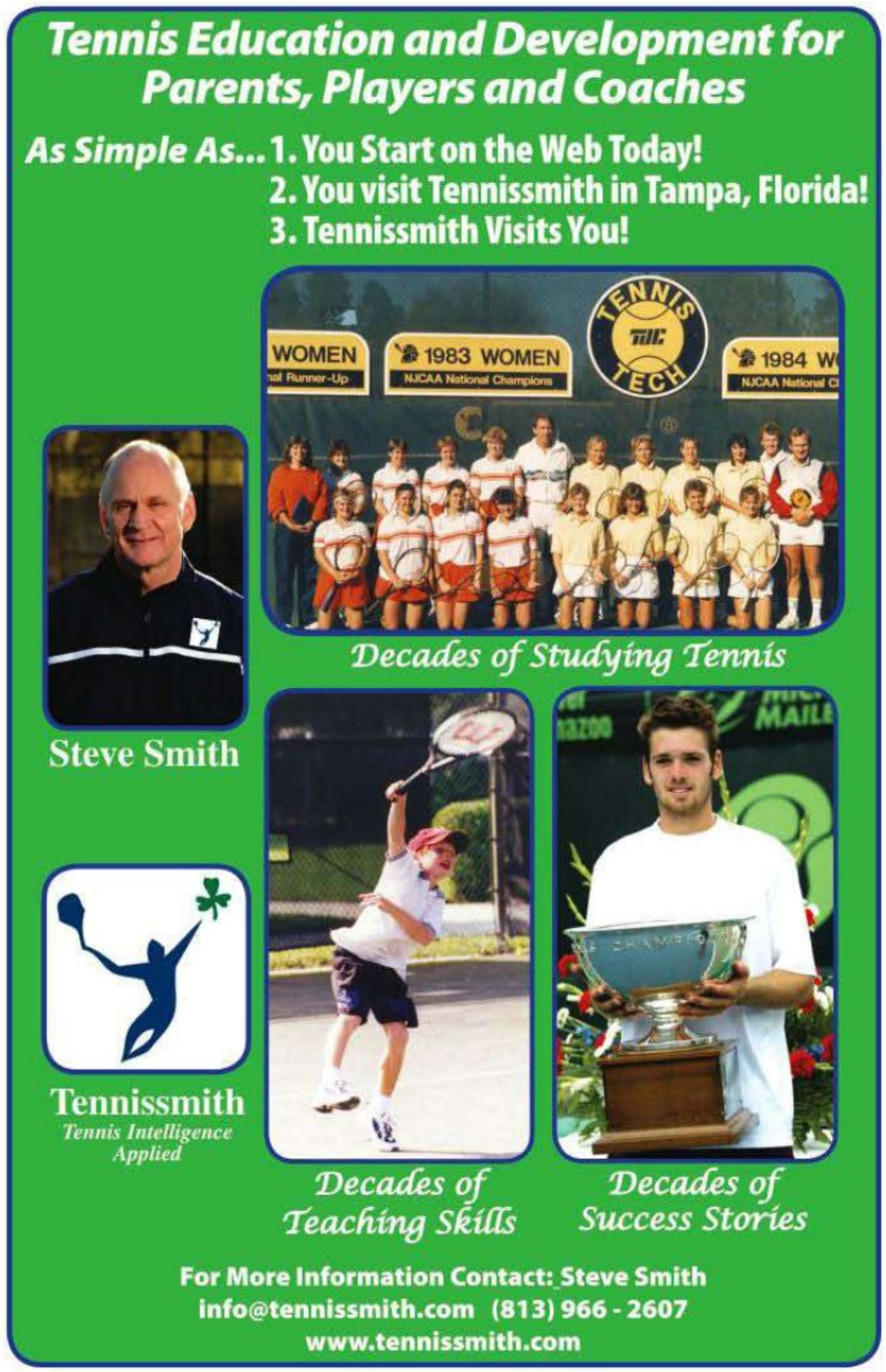
A fourth component of Cardio Tennis is the use of low-pressure balls, which allow for easier control of the ball during hitting so rallies are easier and longer, especially for participants with little tennis experience or skill.

Generally, of the portion of the Cardio Tennis session that is aerobic, 70 percent is devoted to fast-paced tennis-related games and 30 percent devoted to tennis drills. Forehands, backhands and volleys receive a lot of the attention. A game or drill moves quickly, lasting maybe 7 to 15 minutes, so there is no time to get bored. There is typically no serving as part of the class.

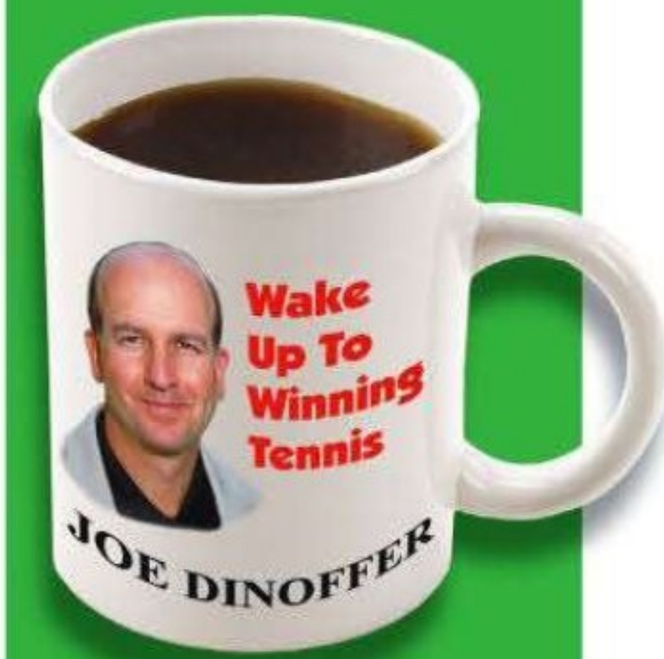
Also, there is little or no technical instruction given on strokes, strategy or mental skills. The instructor mainly explains the game or exercise, encourages and motivates the students and reminds us to check our heart rates frequently to ensure we are training in our target zones.

If you like the idea of moving to music and hitting lots of tennis balls, and you want to get out of the gym and onto the tennis court, give Cardio Tennis a try.

Dr. Robert Heller *is a psychologist, tennis psychology consultant and certified tennis instructor based in Boca Raton, Fla. He is the author the mental conditioning program, TennisMind, a frequent speaker to organizations, teams and clubs, and can be reached at www.mentalskillstennis.com, info@robertheller.net or 561 451-2731.*



CUP OF JOE



In "Cup of Joe," we want to evaluate accepted methods of how tennis should be played and coached in the context of the modern game. Some readers may conclude that many of the accepted ways of thinking are now obsolete; other readers may feel their importance is reinforced. Either way, we want to hear from you—about this current topic and on other topics you'd like us to address. Email me at joe@oncourtoffcourt.com and we will try to publish your comments in future columns.

Waking up to the facts and myths of winning tennis.

Can You Actually Hit 'Through' the Ball?

By Joe Dinoffer
USPTA and PTR Master Professional

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The notion that we should hit "through" the ball has been around for decades, but what does it really mean? Can we really hit through the ball? How long is contact? With lighter racquets and faster racquet-head speeds, is this instruction still relevant? If you're curious to see if this instruction should be sent to your recycle bin, read on.

Q: ***I've heard that the length of time the ball is in contact with the strings is very short. How long does it last?***

A: Through the use of high-speed video, we know that the ball and racquet are usually in contact for 2 to 3 milliseconds, or about 1/250th of a second. Considering that the human eye cannot even see an event this fast take place, that's not much time. (Note: The human eye can only see as fast as 1/60th of a second.)

Q: ***What kind of racquet-head swing speed do different playing levels create?***

A: It's not so much about different levels since some beginners swing quite fast. The ball may not go in the court, but the swing may be quick! Think of it this way: On average a 50 mph racquet-head swing speed will create a 65 mph ball speed. Likewise, at higher levels, a 100 mph swing speed on the serve will create a ball speed of approximately 130 mph.

Q: ***OK, take a 50 mph swing speed on a groundstroke as an example. Over what distance is the ball in contact with the strings?***

A: Very good question. It's also interesting that you mention the swing speed on a groundstroke in relation to hitting through the ball. We never hear anyone speak about hitting through

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the ball on the serve, do we? The reason is that timing is much easier on the serve since the ball is more or less stationary in the air when we hit it. The answer to your question is that a 50 mph swing speed results in a racquet head that is traveling at 73 feet per second. This is incredibly fast when you think about it. Do the math with ball in contact with the strings for 2 to 3 milliseconds, and you end up with ball and racquet contact spanning just 1.75 to 2.63 inches. Of course, it's a little more complex than that since incoming ball speed and other factors will also affect the equation.

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Q: ***That's quite short. So, why would it be important for the racquet to travel forward after contact, if the ball is already off the strings?***

A: The reason is timing. Think of it this way, the faster the swing, the more challenging it is to precisely time contact. If the ball is contacted an inch behind or an inch in front of the desired point of contact relative to your body, you risk losing control over ball direction and trajectory if the racquet is not traveling forward just before and just after contact. This is why coaches correctly speak about hitting "through" the ball.

Q: ***So, what does hitting "through" the ball actually mean?***

A: Hitting through the ball has long been an instruction to encourage players to keep the swing path on a relatively straight path as long as possible before contact and also after contact. To understand it visually, picture a racquet with no strings that has a type of invisible force field that passes through the ball.

Summary

Tennis is an open sport. This means that incoming ball speed varies from shot to shot (not to mention placement, height, spin, etc.). This is where the instruction of hitting "through" the ball or lengthening "through" your shots comes into play. It is very easy to contact the ball slightly early or slightly late. We do it all the time. So, if players keep their swing more linear by thinking of lengthening "through" their shots, it will be easier to control the ball. Think of it like an insurance policy. If you swing a little late or a little early, hitting through your shots will help you hit more of your shots into the court!

'If players keep their swing more linear by thinking of lengthening "through" their shots, it will be easier to control the ball.'

Joe Dinoffer *is a Master Professional in both the PTR and USPTA, a distinction awarded to only a handful in the tennis industry. He has published numerous books and videotapes, and is a frequent speaker at tennis conferences around the world. For more information, visit www.oncourtoffcourt.com.*

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Are You a Tennis Warrior or a Tennis Wimp?

By Tom Veneziano

WARRIOR

'Most players are nervous when going to play a tournament or an important match. This is perfectly normal.'

WIMP

Your mental attitude during practice and in your matches says a lot about your tennis game. Is there a champion in your tennis philosophy, or does a weakling sneak through every now and then? In these questions and answers, find out whether you're a tennis warrior or tennis wimp.

Q: You are on your way to a tennis tournament and you are nervous and a little anxious. Are you a Tennis Warrior or a Tennis Wimp?

A: Tennis Warrior

Most players are nervous when going to play a tournament or an important match. This is perfectly normal, healthy and, in fact, can stimulate adrenaline to keep you alert for the battle ahead! Do not overanalyze your nervousness.

Q: You arrive at the match and begin warming up with your opponent. You proceed to blast balls all over the place without allowing your opponent or yourself to warm up correctly. Are you a Tennis Warrior or a Tennis Wimp?

A: Sorry, but you're a Tennis Wimp!

Apparently many players either are oblivious to the proper warm-up procedures or they believe practicing winners is the correct way to warm up. They feel like they have to practice winners because that's how to win a match. I'm not sure where they got this notion, but it was not from a Tennis Warrior.

Tennis Warriors realize that consistency and control win matches, not winners! And even when hitting winners, Tennis Warriors are smart enough to know that hitting winners without control is meaningless. Warm up correctly by working on your timing, rhythm and control. Stay relaxed and allow your opponent to do the same.

Q: The match begins and within the first game you are missing some easy shots. Immediately you feel threatened and believe you are not playing well. Are you a Tennis Warrior or a Tennis Wimp?

A: Tennis Wimp!

Do not allow the importance of the moment to take over your emotions and make you forget the Warrior mantra: "The next shot is more important than the last mistake."

In the first game you are still nervous, so allow yourself the convenience of missing without panicking. Repeat: Allow yourself the convenience of missing without panicking. Staying positive during this time will serve you well as the match progresses. Think long-term, not short-term.

Q: You attack the net and you are passed three times by your opponent. You are losing, but you continue to attack! Are you a Tennis Warrior or a Tennis Wimp?

A: Tennis Warrior

Most players immediately change their strategy when just a few failures occur. This is especially true at the net in doubles. One lob over the net player's head and the net player is never to be seen again in the vicinity of the net!

Do not change your strategy just because of a few passing shots, lobs or well-placed winners from your opponent. Stick with your plan. The long-term commitment—to keep coming at your opponent regardless of his great shots—can wear down an opponent. Tennis Warriors do not make changes until they are sure their strategy is not working.

Q: You have not practiced any overheads in years, but you are upset and frustrated when you blow an easy overhead in match play. Are you a Tennis Warrior or Tennis Wimp?

A: Tennis Wimp!

No one, and I mean no one, practices overheads with any consistency. Because of the height of the ball and the timing involved, the overhead is one of the toughest shots in tennis. You would think players would want to practice this difficult shot. I rarely see players practice even five minutes of overheads a week! Separate yourself from the rest of the pack by adding some simple overhead practice each week ... just five to 15 minutes a week.

Q: You lost the first set 6-2, you are down 5-1 in the second, and you believe that you can still win! Are you a Tennis Warrior or Tennis Wimp?

A: You're a Master Tennis Warrior!

One of the principles that a Tennis Warrior has mastered is "on the verge of victory a player is vulnerable to defeat." When any player, in this case your opponent, is way ahead and believes he has the match won, he tends to become overconfident and subconsciously complacent.

As a Tennis Warrior you attempt to exploit this weakness in your opponent by staying positive and fighting hard for that last game. If you succeed, the momentum could possibly shift in your direction. A match is not over 'til it's over!

Tennis Warriors always keep the opportunity of winning alive ... despite the score!

Tom Veneziano, *a tennis coach for over 30 years, teaches at the Westheimer Indoor Tennis Club in Houston, Texas. As the developer of the Tennis Warrior System, Veneziano has produced books and audio CDs that are available at www.tenniswarrior.com.*

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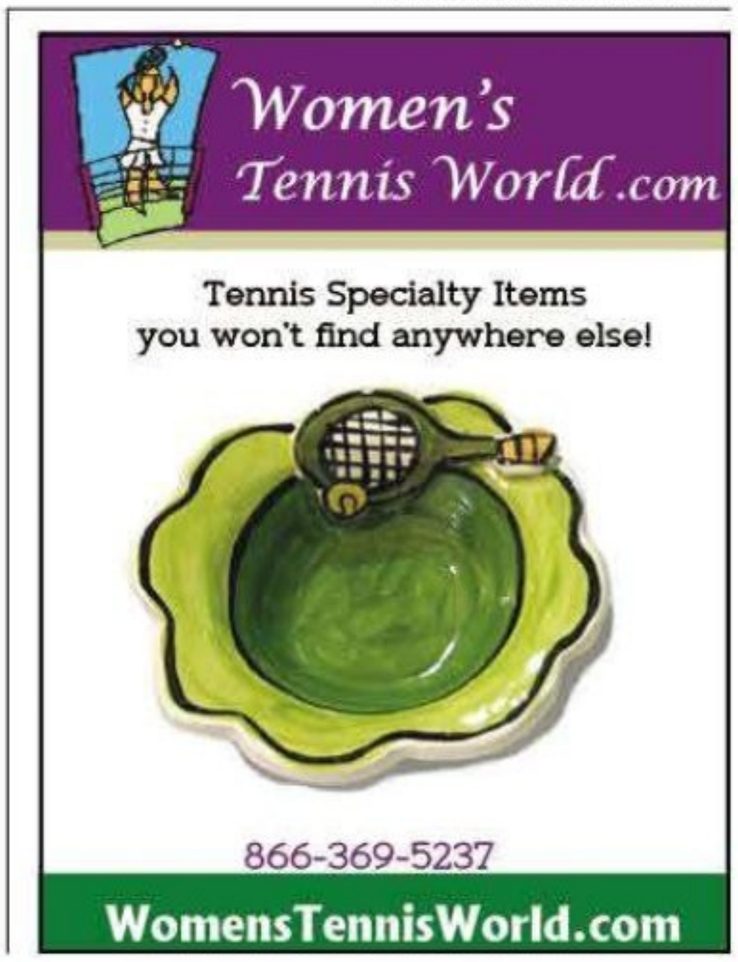

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