

OPEN MINDS TO OPEN SKILLS

Some considerations that model the philosophy of our tennis program



While it is likely that two tennis coaches will have different opinions regarding how players should hit the ball (the right way versus the wrong way) or even agree about it, in reality we must accept that at the end there are **not two players that hit the ball exactly in the same way**. Therefore, we must help students find their own unique way to strike the ball.

Game of constantly changing situations

Most motor skills are defined within a wide spectrum of open skills to close skills. **In closed skills** sports (swimming, most track and fields athletics) there is a minimal need for improvisation. The situations repeat themselves constantly, and require mostly precise machine like repetition.

Tennis is a game of open skills, which requires adaptations and improvisation while dealing with constantly changing situations since every player's action influences on the opponent's reaction. Therefore, teaching biomechanical skills by trying to duplicate strokes techniques and ignoring the “open skills” nature of this game would be useless. Teaching too much “mechanics” can result in tension, lack of ability to adapt to a game situations and frustration.

The majority of the learning processes, especially for beginners and players with lower coordination skills, should deal with all the not less technical elements - like intentions, placing and timing - that occur before the actual strike of the ball versus the shape of the stroke itself.

Beginners start working on improving coordination and court awareness in a changing situations environment on the physical level, while changing perceptions making tactical shot selections on the mental level.

Working on coordination means developing one's ability to connect the ball to the middle of the racquet. Beginners suffer to do so facing the ball complicated flight; therefore we ease to them the task through progressive familiarization exercises.

Working on movement and court coverage means working on moving to the ball before the moment of contact, which depends on situational perception and tactical intentions (reasonable meaning for the stroke). Smaller courts and soft balls provide friendly conditions to reach the ball with sufficient time to achieve it successfully. **After coordination and movement are reasonably developed, it is possible to start refining carefully the stroke's technique.**

The tactical aspects are relatively simple but important. The goal for lower levels is to aim the ball accurately and consistently. The students must learn to control the ball within certain boundaries. They first learn to control the ball in the service box and, sometimes, even closer, without using the net. Since most of the teaching is done in a game mode, or at least during a live rally, we must enforce ball control within the boundaries at any time. Coordinative aspects like muscular intensity and timing are essential motor skills to learn.

The tactical phase is about making decisions. Beginners mostly focus on their ability to control the ball. After some ball control is achieved and becomes more or less beyond thinking, players must shift thoughts to decision making. Obviously, at this stage, the strokes are not perfect and technical work on the strokes might be helpful. However, we slowly ease up and shift the focus from how the stroke is performed to **how the ball is controlled in order to affect the opponent**. We expect them to learn how to win points and matches and to avoid losing them. And loving...

It is important to mention that it is almost impossible to focus on technique and tactics at the same time. Since every action starts with a thought (a meaning to it), therefore, in order to change ineffective actions we must alter ineffective thoughts. For example: many beginners think that in order to hit the ball over the net they need to take a big hard swing or in order to win the point they need to take risks. As a result, they totally miss the ball. Teaching them how to hold the racquet and how to swing may not be as effective as helping them understand that it is not necessary to hit so hard. Expecting them to swing successfully before, instead of controlling the ball, could be even less effective.

About teaching and learning

Let us remember for a moment that, based on principles, we first teach coordination while delaying the refined stroke technique for later stages.

Many pros tend to confuse this order by assuming that when the player cannot make solid contact with the ball, it is because of lack of proper stroke technique. They give instructions related to the movement of the racquet and where the motion should end. As a result, they sacrifice player's coordination and ability to make contact with the ball. I have seen many students who know all the "proper strokes technique" but the percentage in which they make a solid contact is very low. Since tennis' nature is of constantly changing situations, player must constantly improvise, especially when their court sense and positioning relative to the ball is yet to be developed. The conditions seem to be ideal to **practice reacting** to unexpected stimulus, **create solutions** to each different problem, increase the experience and **develop anticipation (decisions taking according in a determined game situation)**.

Only well-mannered, experienced and highly coordinated players can perform with perfect technical stroke technique while leaving room for improvisation for any situation. "Jazz players".

When we invest in something for a long period, we create a sense of importance. Working too long on strokes technique without balancing the tactical aspects, often create a twisted or imbalanced perception of importance. For example: if players are taught strokes technique repeatedly for a long period, they start creating a belief that all their problems and solutions are in correcting their technique. In reality, every error can contain elements of all aspects, physical, tactical and mental. When a player missed the ball, it could be because he tried to take too big of a chance, was not clear about tactics, or made a technical error. Maybe he was apathetic. Sometimes all aspects are involved and we need to figure out which is the most effective angle to approach the teaching.

Creating a belief that it is all from one aspect means creating false perception, which reduces learning ability and performance.

Hundreds of researches were conducted regarding the science of playing but much less regarding the science of teaching. Recently, the roll of the coach became more complex and shifted from "showing how to do it right" towards being a guidance, an educator and a **learning process manager**.

We shifted from science of playing towards science of learning and we must keep continuing to farther do so. **Good teaching values "how to learn" not less then "what we learn."**

There are two basic approaches to learning motor skills. The first one is teaching **details to create the whole**, while the second approach teaches the **whole** and slowly moving **to perfect the details**.

Since tennis is a game of open skills, teaching from the whole to the details is necessary.

In other words, players must learn basic ball control to be able to play the game while over time strokes become more refined and efficient.

The goal is to help students feel like players that are constantly improving rather than feel like students that will become players sometime in the future.

Practice mode for most coaches is when they feed balls from the basket while the students hit them back and there is no rally. We call this method "dead ball drill". This type of practice is effective when we want to focus on a very specific shot in order to improve a very specific habit. It may look attractive, the students are somehow activated, they work hard and the coach is completely involved. **Game mode** is when the ball is moving back and we count points at times. It is called "live ball drill". This type of practice is more open and works on the effect of consistency while dealing with changing situations. **Game mode** is less effective for changing more specific technical habits. Therefore, many times is not considered as a learning method but an opportunity for the kids to have fun since they are playing less responsibly; or a possible moment when players should apply and prove what they learned technically during the **practice mode**. Few face it as an opportunity (and know how) to teach the tactical and mental aspects of the game. Some may say that playing is not practicing.

The conventional thinking says that students at the lower levels need to be mostly in practice mode. In other words, game mode is more for advanced players. This type of schooling assumes that **beginners**

do not master the shots' execution, consequently do not have the ability to control the ball and therefore **cannot play games**. The coach - "attending their needs" - feeds the balls repeatedly in the exact same way. As a result, practice becomes boring and out of reality. Many players, who do well in practice, cannot translate their success into a game situation, tend to become frustrated and constantly feel under-achieved. Despite all, in the best of cases, only the headstrong survive.

Practice mode is very common in high-level players a few times a year because they are mostly at game mode. When they are rarely far from competitive periods, opportunely use their practice sessions to fix their technique conveniently. However, it is prudent not to transfer advanced models of practice to teach beginners' levels.

Today, modern methods understand the need to help **students play games as soon as possible**. They may "sacrifice" some strokes technique in favor of helping their students with qualities such as coordination and dealing with changing situations.

The conclusion is that the farther a player is from the natural line, the more he needs to work on coordination skills such as making contact with the ball, court sense and dealing with changing situations. Therefore, the teaching should be less technical and more in a game mode. Nevertheless, it's also technical once deals with open skills and varied motor tasks too. The main question is where the focus is: in taking decisions, in controlling the ball spontaneously or in shaping the stroke properly. Only advanced players can do it all together. Beginners rather focus one by one so will be easier for them.

There is an old argument about the benefits of having many choices. The more choices we have the more our "appetite" increases.

At the beginning, players are happy just to hit the ball over the net. As time goes by, they acquire other skills that open many possibilities for creativity. When a player is able to aim to the right, left, high, low, harder, softer and understands how to make decisions based on offense and defense situation, he feels he has decent tools, so his appetite to use them grows.

Some think that too many choices create confusion, and some see that as opportunities. Any way we look at it, players need to acquire and sort the largest amount of tools and learn to use them all effectively at any given moment. This process is called mastery.

Shaping attitudes

During the initiation phase, all the basics are being taught. It is the stage where student's coach dependency is the greatest. Most students that take lessons start with the feeling that they will not succeed and that the coach will help them to learn. It is a crucial situation when ensuring success moves fears away. The responsibility of the coach not only determines what to teach but mainly the way to do it.

The mental aspects are about using effective teaching to create positive cycles of learning and emotional feedback. The way we teach the first phase affects students dramatically. It can determine if they will grow to become dependant frustrated and helpless, or independent mature problem solvers.

The mental aspects are mostly about attitudes during practice and games. Children tend to observe how we treat them, and often treat themselves accordingly. For example: if we judge them and their character, it will not take long before they judge themselves, something that will cause a frustration cycle. On the same token, if we model patience, non-judgmental approach, combined with non-emotional but rather **practical problem solving attitude**, that is the behavior they would adapt and the better they will become on the long run.

One of the most ineffective attitudes is being judgmental. Players always feel that they can do better. However when frustration and lack of patience become a way of being, the learning slows down and can lead all the way to even quitting the game.

In order to shape positive attitude for the long run, the player must understand where he is at, where he is going to, how he is going to get there and know that the pro is not judging him nor putting him down.

Playing doubles and **cooperative tasks** offer a great opportunity to educate attitudes. When a player keeps putting himself down we can asked him "would you treat your partner this way?" or "would you like your partner to talk to you this way?"

We shall keep in our minds that our beliefs and attitudes shape theirs and must teach them that in order to be good players they first learn to help each other including themselves.

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