

THE NET GAME; WILL IT DISAPPEAR? THOUGHTS ABOUT GAME STYLES AT THE MODERN GAME.

Predictability – the ability to predict

Of course, it is all about predictability.

I think this makes our sport interesting. At the beginning, we teach by turning an unpredictable game, open skills based, into a predictable one. The players, as they learn the game, get experienced and able to anticipate (take decisions); try to turn it unpredictable and unexpected to their opponents.

A smart phrase says, "Any repeated tactic is not strategic anymore".

Players better hide and keep their winner tactics for the important points based on percentage tennis and on information about the opponent.

Coming to the net, for example, gives the net rusher about 70 % of the points. Compensates!

Teaching – providing tools to invent

Many aspects decide the players' style of play. Their personality and physical characteristics play a dominant role for sure. Above all, the tennis culture where they come from (surface, idols and tradition) can play even more and their coaches' philosophy, sadly, sometimes worse.

We know that for many years many coaches did not allow the kids to slice being afraid they will not learn to hit topspin. Add to it the questionable idea that two handed backhand is easier/better for kids.

Result: NO ONE HANDED BACKHAND / NO SLICE / NO VOLLEY / NO NET GAME.

By the way, I think that two-handed backhand happens more as result of improper equipment – heavy balls and long rackets – and should not be imposed by coaches as a definitive solution. Nothing against a two-handed backhand. Just let the players decide for it and, in this case, assure they use a continental grip on the backhand.

When teaching, based on our past and present experiences of the game, biomechanics... it is important to support the players with a complete arsenal of abilities and so further options. Even more, I believe, is important to help them develop athletical skills and allow them to create a completely new game. Imitation takes part on the learning process but creativity is more important and only appears when allowed.

Slice – a useful tool

Concerning about teaching the strokes, it is worth to consider that the technique fills a tactical function. Learning the strokes should mean to increase the player's options while playing the game.

For example the slice, forehand and backhand, reappeared to improve defensive options. Many players chip the return of first service and we see more and more the use of an open stance forehand slice to reach wide shots. Both are also useful to reinforce the attack as well. Develops touch for drop shots and shapes safe volleys at the net. Federer reintroduced the backhand slice to open the topspin forehand - tactic so used in the past on clay courts.

Not all the students we teach play at the higher levels and/or are able to develop a powerful game as the pros. Most of them are not. Believing that tennis is a recreational sport for the whole life, the slice shot should be an obligatory resource for every player. It is also necessary to remind how important is to master the use of the continental grip to improve the players' dexterity, finesse and feel for the ball, also transferred to the overhead shots.

Success rules – examples to follow

Can we affirm that the high-level players' game is a result of their experiences when they were young? Can we also say that the reigning high-level players' game influences the development of the next generations, the young players and their coaches that observe and copy?

For some generations, successful young players did not come to the net because it was too risky. They were too short, the court was too big to cover, the balls were too fast. They were unexperienced in that pattern. Therefore, they developed a solid game style from the base line.

Preferring immediate results at young ages, it was rare to see coaches developing a complete game style looking ahead considering the adult players' size.

A player who has got success under 14-16 playing from the base line will face difficulties to develop and add the net game to his winning style. Girls will suffer the most. Then, the risk is that this style will not be successful for much longer.

Nevertheless, we can appreciate a great example of dedication among the greatest players as they try to add new elements to their game. Base liners like Wilander, Kuerten, Nalbandian and also Chang, even Borg, approached to the net. Sampras finished his successful career with a complete different game style, exclusively playing at the net. Who does not claim from Federer to come more? It looks Paul Annacone does. Agassi and Nadal, who is actually coming to the net, improved and included the backhand slice. Have you recently watched how much Djokovic and Murray slice?

Despite all, they all try to improve their shots, mainly the service. Djokovic pointed to the improvement he did lately on his service and forehand.

Sorry for not reminding all the improvement inspiring examples.

Prediction – changes ahead

In sports, the predominance of game styles is cyclical. The game evolves within the alternation between attack and defense. A winning defense challenges the attack to get better and vice versa. The specialists become predictable and/or limited. Top players feel it and good coaches know it.

Those who are not ready for changes will not stay at the top for long. The game is changing because the top players, ready to make changes and advised by good coaches, readapt their game and become more complete. Within this process, the game evolves and teaches us all. Good lesson.

I have a strong belief and hope that the game, now adapted to the size of the kids, will affect a tremendous impact on the next generations. At least, the adapted dimensions allow more kids to play a game they could not dream to be able to play at bigger scales.

Besides the long rallies, observe how they enjoy playing at the net on mini tennis courts with low pressure balls.

Net game will not abandon tennis and players will not give up from master it.

Coaches should allow it, stimulate it and always promote doubles!