



Establishing a game-plan

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ITF Coaching and Sport Science Review 2015; 66 (23): 18 - 20

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the importance of a clear game plan when approaching match play. It describes each phase of the game planning process from prioritising game styles to evaluating matches as well as how to put the game plan into action with the ability to be flexible when change occurs.

Key words: game plan, tactics, awareness, flexibility

Received: 14 April 2015

Accepted: 15 July 2015

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INTRODUCTION

A game plan is vitally important to the player's overall success in match play because it provides an initial direction from the start of a match. At the beginning of matches, usually players focus on being competitive and getting off to a good start. A game plan can add more purpose. Players must be careful when establishing a game plan because its success is contingent on the execution of shots, and sometimes what the player thinks will work may not work as well as was hoped.

GAME PLANNING PROCESS

The game planning process is exactly that – a process – and it should be used to help the player formulate the best possible scenario to help the player's competitive level. The following steps can help players and coaches design a basic game plan:

1- Prioritising game styles

The player should list their preferred game styles from favourite to least favourite which will heavily depend on the individual and what they consider achievable and comfortable. Players must have their best game plan in mind, followed by their second, third and fourth best plan of action

2- Assessing strengths and weaknesses for first and second favourite styles

Players assess their strengths and weaknesses in their number one and two playing styles. For example, if a player's top style is serve-and-volley style, the player's strengths might be the serve and first volley, and a weakness may be rallying from the baseline. If the player's number two style is the aggressive baseline style, a strength might be attacking forehand inside out, and a weakness might be the backhand up the line.

3- Prioritising patterns of play within the style

These patterns of play are options within a style. Players should prioritise options for both serving and receiving games. For example, if a player's game style is a serve-and-volley and attacking baseline hybrid, this player might use the following options for service game:

Option 1 – Slice serve out wide on the deuce side, approach the net, and volley into the open court. Kick serve on the ad side, approach the net, and volley in the open court.

Option 2 – Serve up the T, look to move around the next ball, and attack with a forehand.

Option 3 – Jam serve into opponent's body and volley into the open court.

The player might use the following options for return games:

Option 1 – Neutralise the return up the middle of the court, try to apply pressure with the forehand to the opponent's backhand, and come to net.

Option 2 – Take the opponent's second serve and hit it up the line coming to the net behind it.

4- Practicing the options

Players should practice each option two or three times a week by playing games with a friend to 7 points. If the option the player is working on is to return up the line and the player mistakenly hits

crosscourt, then the point must be replayed. The player should practice each option slowly and deliberately.

5- Playing practice sets and recording results

The player should play three to five practice sets a week and keep a journal on performance with different options within the playing style. The player can use practice sets to record emotions, focus, intensity, and any positive or negative strategic adjustments made during the practice sets. Players should rate these categories from 1 to 10. These ratings can be referred to later, and players can analyse their practice sets and how they connect to improved match play.

6- Playing under pressure

The player should enter a tournament or league competition and be diligent playing the options under pressure. Competition will be the test of the player's perseverance and discipline.

7- Evaluating matches

After each match, the player must consider whether any action or lack of action might have helped the player play better. The player should do this for a month after each practice set, practice match, or real match. Doing this helps all players learn about themselves and their game. They effectively create a blueprint for reproducible top performances.

Although having a good, sound strategy against an opponent is important, the game plan should be simple. A few simple points can go a long way toward helping a player in times of need, but more important, it can keep the player from being overloaded with details. Some tennis players like to obtain a lot of information on their next opponents and some like to know less. Regardless of preference, the player should keep the information simple and remember to focus more on things that can be controlled, such as the player's own skills, attitude, and confidence. The following section includes additional tips that

can help make the game plan more effective.



GAME PLAN IN ACTION

The following tips for assessing game plans in action are based on a player maintaining flexibility for what is working on a particular day, staying with what is working, and evaluating and making any needed adjustments. Oftentimes during a match, a player's technique can break down, so self-correcting techniques such as triggers can help the player refocus. However, at the end of the day, players need to learn how to compete regardless of how well they are playing or how good they feel. Following are some tips for implementing a game plan:

- Being flexible – one of the best forms of a good game plan is acquired while playing an opponent. Perhaps something the player thought would be effective is not working because the player is not hitting a particular shot well on that day, or maybe it is a bad game style matchup. Regardless of the situation, a game plan is subject to change, and a player must be flexible when change occurs. As a matter of fact, rarely do competitors play a match in which every attempt works perfectly. When playing a match the player should try seeing oneself as an accountant who constantly tries things, notes the reply, and then stores the information for later use.
- Assessing the game plan – Evaluating how well the player can counter an opponent's shots is the beginning of the process of assessing how well the game plan is doing in any given situation. The player should keep in mind the following strategies for countering an opponent's shots to get an idea of how the competitor's game plans match up.
- Going toe to toe – Part of a good defensive strategy is to be able to go toe to toe with an opponent. The player must assess this immediately and quickly decide whether to change the game with a variety of shots. Going toe to toe with an opponent either makes the opponent change the game or causes the opponent to make more errors. In this situation, the player is effectively doing what the opponent likes to do and reacting to the opponent's shots. This strategy can be very intimidating and forces the player to reevaluate his or her own methods of winning points.
- Defence to Offence – The ability to take an opponent's better shots and create an offense off them is very effective. This can and should be done because it gives players the best chance to win points. When players shift from defence to offence, they take the ball earlier or they

reply to a shot with a better shot. Each point vacillates between offence and defence and vice versa, so consciously thinking of it improves footwork and shot selection.

- Making tactical changes when needed – If the player is winning with a game plan, the player should not change it. If the player is losing with a particular plan, then it may be that the chosen game plan is playing into the opponent's strengths. For example, a player has chosen to play like an aggressive baseline player but now switches to counterattacking. The player's shot pace is feeding into what the opponent likes. It is then imperative that the player makes tactical changes in the game style. For example, a player can try to apply pressure by hitting the ball harder. If that does not work, the player should try switching to a predetermined alternative plan or strategy within his or her chosen game style.
- Being aware of breakdowns in technique – It is important to note that a game plan can fail as a result of a breakdown in technique. Having good technique allows the player to counter an opponent's shots more effectively. When the player has poor technique, a weakness can hinder the player from hitting an effective enough shot to recover offensively.
- Not getting caught up on feel – some players show excessive emotion and frustration at missing shots, including banging their rackets, checking the tension, wondering why it doesn't feel right, and shouting that they don't feel it. When everything a player does on a particular day works and every shot feels good, the player is in the zone and can do no wrong. However, achieving this zone can be elusive, so a better approach is to compete and work hard during every point. Players who allow frustration about their lack of feel on a particular day to overwhelm them have no chance of achieving the zone.

CONCLUSION

When it comes to creating a distinct game plan for each opponent, each player is different. Some may prefer specifics that include a strategy for each phase of the game. For example a player might choose to use mostly kick serves, hit high and heavy balls to the backhand side on returns, go back behind the player on transition shots, or explore the opponent's speed moving forward. Other players prefer to just focus on what they do best, and may use their own game style as the basis for the game plan. When a player uses the preferred game style, it is important to know the opponent's tendencies. Regardless of how specific the game plan is, the ultimate goal is to remain flexible, stay with what the player does best, and be prepared to explore different ways of executing the game plan.

REFERENCES

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