



Troubleshooting in Tennis

Scott Williams (USA)

ITF Coaching and Sport Science Review 2015; 67 (23): 3 - 5

ABSTRACT

This article discusses troubleshooting your own game and specifically your serve, and return. The article approaches this subject through the use of the SMARTS system which includes six fundamental skills: Seeing, Movement, Adjusting, Rotation, Transfer and Swing.

Key words: troubleshooting, SMARTS, improving, self-teaching

Received: 20 July 2015

Accepted: 10 August 015

Corresponding author:

Scott Williams

Email: humank@hkusa.com

INTRODUCTION

The SMARTS system outlines basic stroking skills. Every shot you make on the court involves seeing, movement, adjusting, rotation, transfer, and swing. Being an individual sport where no mid-match coaching can take place it is important for players competing at all levels to manage their own game and be able to troubleshoot when strokes are misfiring. However, this is not something that comes naturally to all players, therefore this troubleshooting guide for serve and return will enable you to apply corrective SMARTS to your game when in both practice and match situations.

TROUBLESHOOTING YOUR SERVE

1- A player foresees themselves double faulting and then does so

a. Seeing – The player must improve their imagery. By watching pro players deliver winning serves the player can then try and put themselves in the professional player's shoes and see the path of success their serve will take.

2- The serve goes into the net

- a. Seeing – Keep head up until the impact is complete.
- b. Adjusting – Is the toss too low or too far in front of the player's body? Counter by adding more height and spin. The rhythm of the toss and backswing may be too quick or the player might not be extending their legs enough. Check the player's balance by adjusting their stance. Their feet may also be too close together. For the second serve, a tennis player should look to toss the ball above their head more and brush up on the ball as if their hitting a ground stroke with topspin. Rely on wrist more; keeping it loose. Also by aiming higher and deeper over the net.
- c. Rotation – Too little rotation in the forearm (pronation) may be creating too much slice on the ball. Counter by using an alternative spin, perhaps a kick serve or flattening out the slice.
- d. Transfer – If a tennis player is hitting too many serves into the net the fault may be the result of not utilising the legs enough to push upward to the ball. Or the player may be hitting down on the ball.
- e. Swing – Another potential problem could be pulling down on the ball with the elbow too soon. This can be countered by adding spin to the ball, especially on the second serve. Additionally the ball toss may be too low, meaning the backswing may be ready prior to the toss being finished. The tossing arm needs a head start to get fully extended; the racquet arm will catch up.

3- Footfaulting

a. Rotation – If a player is stepping over the baseline with their back foot, their hips are opening too soon or not rotating enough at the start of the coiling motion.

b. Transfer – If faulting with their front foot, a player should ensure they are transferring weight from the back foot to the front foot, angling their hip while keeping the front foot anchored to the ground. A player can try to correct this by practicing serving with their weight just on the front foot angling the hip over the baseline to transfer weight. Then by accentuating the extension of their tossing arm, and bending the hip over the baseline, but keeping their feet on the safe side.

4- Lacking power on the serve; just arming the ball

a. Adjusting – The player's body may be straightening too soon. A player should look to get their legs into it, bending and extending them more. Then check other power sources: rotation, transfer, swing.

b. Rotation – Could be standing too open when making contact. Check the swing path.

5- There's a hitch in the serve

a. Adjusting – Check the timing. The player may be tossing the ball too high and taking the racquet back too quickly. Practice the whole sequence step by step. Toss first, then start the backswing.

b. Swing – Perhaps the racquet head is not staying up but dropping between the player's shoulder blades too soon.

6- Jumping at the serve

a. Adjusting – Feet should only leave the ground as a result of upward extension. A player shouldn't jump to reach the toss, if this occurs the toss may be too high or the player may be swinging too soon.

7- Losing control of the toss

a. Adjusting – Check that as a player you are not releasing the ball with a flick of the wrist. Also check that you are opening all your fingers at once and only when your arm is fully extended. Try tossing the ball as if you are holding an ice-cream cone.

8- Serve goes long

a. Adjusting – This may be a result of moving under the toss, so move the toss more in front. Speed the wrist up to move the racquet through impact more quickly. Add spin and reduce pace: aim shorter in the box.

b. Swing – Possibly the ball is being hit too low. If holding the racquet with a forehand grip, try a continental grip to put spin on the ball, pronating the wrist and forearm. Accelerate the

wrist more to get the racquet through impact faster. Speed up the follow-through.

9- Serve goes wide

a. Adjusting – Pronating the arm more, meeting the ball with a flat racquet face can counter this. Aiming with greater margin of error away from the lines.



b. Rotation – There is likely too much spin on the ball due to an open racquet face at contact and an over-rotation of the hips and shoulders. Focus on using the tossing arm as a decelerator across the body to stop rotation.

10- Elbow seems as if it's not being bent properly during the serve

a. Rotation – A player may be serving from their elbow, commonly known as the 'waiter serve'. The problem may be that the right hip is opening prematurely. Try a closed stance for several weeks as the whole body learns to rotate into the serve.

b. Swing – If the elbow is not bending at all, go back to the trophy position and serve with the racquet head up for a few days. Dennis Van Der Meer suggests taking a full backswing and tapping your back twice with your racquet before making contact, then after a few more serves tapping once, then not at all.

11- Legs aren't bending at all on the serve

a. Transfer – Check the cadence of the serve. You may be rushing the backswing and decelerating the finish. Emphasise your stance and trophy pose.

12- My opponent repeatedly kills my serve

a. Seeing – Look at your opponent's grips before you serve. Let that help you decide where to serve the ball.

b. Transfer – Your weight transfer actually may be going backward, giving it less power, making it easy to return. Transfer your weight upward and forward into the ball, and get a strong push off the ground. Then follow your serve into the court a step or two.

13- My rear end sticks out when I'm serving

a. Transfer – The upward transfer happens too soon. Check your trophy pose. Load and explode. Fully extend before impact when the toss is on the way up.

14- When you can hit the serve with enough spin

a. Swing – First be sure you are tossing in the right place for spin serves (1 o'clock for slice and 11 o'clock for topspin for

right-handed players). Then from the trophy pose extend upward to your toss, keeping your wrist loose at contact, so the racquet quickly can brush the ball.

TROUBLESHOOTING FOR RETURNS

1- Being caught often with the wrong grip

a. Seeing – Is your opponent studying your grip? If so, let him or her know you are aware of this by constantly switching it or waiting until they start their serving motion to establish the grip.

b. Swing – Don't grip the racquet too tightly in the ready position. Let the nondominant hand turn the racquet in the hand. If still being caught, try preselecting a grip that is suitable for the spot where your opponent will likely serve. This will likely be a backhand; but even if you have to change, you can move quickly to a continental or eastern forehand grip or the grip of your choice.

2- Returns are going all over the court

a. Seeing – Keep your eye where you are aiming.

b. Adjusting – Adjust your starting position.

c. Swing – Measure the backswing and take a shorter backswing.

3- Getting aced in the same place over and over

a. Movement – Take the split step as the ball is struck to get ready to move quickly.

b. Rotation – Vary position (deep in the court, on or inside the baseline).

4- Often can't reach second serves

a. Movement – Start closer to the service box and use shuffle steps to move forward.

5- Always swing late on returns

a. Seeing – Make sure to carefully watch the opponent's toss.

b. Adjusting – If too close to the ball, start further back.

c. Rotation – Make unit turn faster.

d. Swing – Shorten backswing.

6- Often jammed on returns

a. Adjusting – Work on moving around the ball, running around the anticipated contact point to get proper position.

7- Returns go short in the court

a. Seeing – Pick the spot for where the return is intended.

b. Adjusting – Get proper distance to swing. Clear the net with more height and spin. Add pace to the return.

c. Transfer – If hitting in a closed stance, rotate and transfer weight into shot.

d. Swing – Accelerate the racquet head and hit the ball with a complete follow-through.

8- Returns going wide

a. Movement – Make sure the first step is powerful.

b. Adjusting – Do not jam yourself. Give yourself proper distance from the ball.

c. Swing – Swing may be late or not accelerating when meeting the ball. Aim away from the lines.

9- Returns going into the net

a. Seeing – Pick spot for the return.

b. Movement – Adjust position by challenging the return with shuffle steps or transition movements.

c. Adjusting – Try to aim higher over the net. Try a different spin.

- d. Rotation – Stay low and work on speeding up your unit turn so not waiting for the ball. Continue to adjust location until the ball is being met at a height with which is comfortable.
- e. Swing – Shorten the swing and open the racquet face slightly when blocking second serves. Add topspin or slice to give you more net clearance.

10- Returns go long

- a. Adjusting – Work on shuffle steps and adjust position.
- b. Transfer – Weight might not be being transferred correctly, weight might all be on the player's heels, especially when on the defensive.
- c. Swing – May have too big of a wind-up on second-service return. Work on shuffle steps with a shortened backswing. Add topspin. Check to see if grip is changing. Lower the height of return. Aim shorter in the court. Close racquet face more at contact.

11- Timing seems off

- a. Adjusting – Adjust position further back so that you have more time.

CONCLUSION

The ability to troubleshoot your own game during competition can often be the difference between winning and losing. Although each tennis player's game varies greatly by familiarising yourself with the SMARTS system it can help a player from overthinking during competition by just analysing their game through the six fundamental skills. This troubleshooting guide provides improving players with methodology to correct circumstances that can occur frequently during tennis competition. It is important for a

player to be aware of what is causing these recurring errors and having the ability to troubleshoot their own game will greatly enhance their learning and knowledge of the game.

REFERENCES

Excerpted from the book *Serious Tennis* (Human Kinetics), written by Scott C. Williams. Reprinted with permission from Human Kinetics

RECOMMENDED ITF TENNIS ACADEMY CONTENT (CLICK BELOW)



Copyright (c) Scott Williams 2015



This text is under a [Creative Commons BY 4.0 license](#)

You are free to Share - copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format - and Adapt the content - remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially under the following terms:

Attribution: You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.

[CC BY 4.0 license terms summary](#) [CC BY 4.0 license terms](#)