



Gestalt-tennis: A coaching technique, a psychotherapeutic support and a psychosocial activity

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ABSTRACT

Club players can easily deploy on court their unique 'bag of nerves', cramping their game. Following practical tests on court, this paper explores how a Gestalt approach to tennis coaching supported by an extensive application of mindful breathing can help players improve their tennis by increasing awareness of their body and emotions, with a beneficial impact on their well-being.

Key words: gestalt; full contact; mindful breathing; self-awareness.

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INTRODUCTION

This preliminary study was stimulated by acknowledging the obvious: whatever their age or skills, tennis players are people. People with often complex lives, bringing on court their unique cocktail of emotional experiences. A background which, as any coach has noticed, has repercussions on their game and efforts to improve it (Chung et al., 2020; Perry, 2020; Van Der Kolk, 2014).

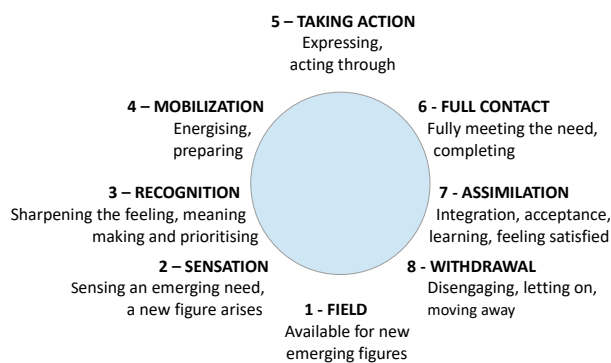
After studies in psychotherapeutic skills (Bond, 2010; Clarkson, 1995; Joyce and Sills, 2010) followed by practical tests on court with 28 adult club players, I suggest that thanks to an extensive implementation of mindful breathing and self-awareness experiences stimulated by a Gestalt approach to tennis coaching, any club player can improve their game in a more gratifying, self-empowering way. Beyond that, I argue that they can benefit from new, self-constructed emotional awareness which transcends tennis and can have a broader positive impact on their lives (Posadzki et al., 2010). Finally, I propose that this interpretation of coaching can develop a lesson into an explicit psychosocial activity, where the primary goal is the socio-emotional well-being of the players (Lay & Barrio, 2019).

GESTALT-TENNIS AS COACHING TECHNIQUE

Gestalt, the psychotherapeutic theory developed in the 1950s by Drs. Fritz and Laura Perls, is nowadays highly respected in the field of Psychology (Yontef, 1988). With its holistic approach regarding the individual as a whole of body, mind and emotions experiencing reality in a unique way, the central pillar of Gestalt is the self-awareness of what is happening from one moment to the next, in the 'here and now', starting with the exploration and acknowledgement of physical sensations (Ginger 2007; Joice and Sills, 2010). In this light, Gestalt can provide great insight for the interpretation of tennis, where the management of the 'here and now' of ball and body is evidently fundamental to control the game

situation. In a striking example of structural theoretical similarities, in Gestalt the apex of a positive experience is named 'full contact' (Perls et al., 1951), while in tennis the apex of an effective shot is the 'contact point' (figure 1).

GESTALT – CYCLE OF EXPERIENCE



TENNIS – SHOT CYCLE

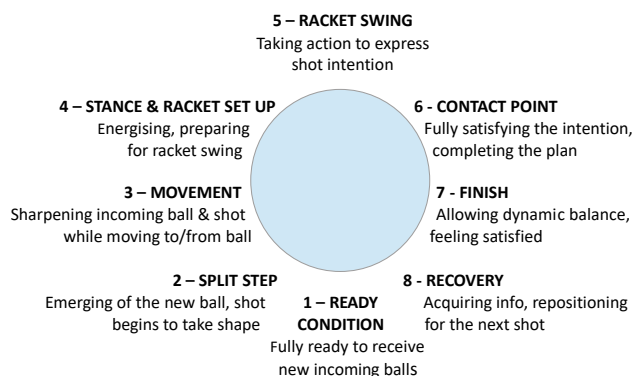


Figure 1. Gestalt 'cycle of experience' vs Tennis 'shot cycle'.



Mirroring the relevance attributed by Gestalt to bringing the person in the 'here and now' before supporting them towards any adjustment (Ginger, 2007), a Gestalt-inspired tennis session aims first at bringing the player into experiencing their body through mindful breathing, that is to bring the focus of the attention on inhaling and exhaling (Van Lysebeth, 1973).

Unfortunately at club level breathing is generally taken for granted, considered a given by both coach and player. Mindful breathing is traditionally associated with Yoga or Pilates, where a student is invited to link their movements to the 'natural' rhythm of their breathing from the very first class. Aiming at stimulating self-awareness from the start of any tennis experience, Gestalt-Tennis fully embraces such focus on breathing as a priority, but reverses its correlation with movement.

Here the guidance becomes to adapt the cycle of breathing to the 'natural' movements of the body in relation to the 'here and now' dictated by the incoming ball. Of course, traditional technical advice would also be offered; but all body and racket movements would be linked to breathing, encouraging the player to adapt the timing, pace and volume of their inhalation/pause/exhalation to each individual ball, now seen as an unique breathing opportunity. In other words, the player is invited to consider each ball as a snowflake: there will never be two exactly identical; and to be hit at best, each ball requires movements and breathing which perhaps are very similar to others but which are in fact unique. In this way the player is encouraged to enjoy tennis as a creative process and to perceive the ball as a partner, with often immediate results: looking at it carefully while setting up the shot becomes spontaneous, hitting it a moment of physical joy and reward.



To quote players K and F, receiving the ball feels 'energising', to play the shot 'liberating'. From this perspective, a Gestalt-Tennis lesson includes at the beginning a short warm-up exercise to experiment with breath control. These simple practices (table 1) aim at inducing the player to reduce their rational thinking and increase the awareness of their body.

Table 1

Examples of warm-up mindful breathing exercises.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While sidestepping along tramlines, throw/catch ball focusing on inhaling when catching, exhaling when throwing. Increase difficulty/speed/variety (beginner/improver)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ball tap-up with racket, focusing on breathing in when bending the knees and breathing out when extending knees (beginner)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volley focusing on breathing in/out in synch with receiving/hitting. Vary distance, speed (improver/advanced)

The implementation of the lesson in all its technical and tactical aspects can now take place in a fertile context of 'feeling' and consistently linked to breathing (table 2).

Table 2

Examples of mindful breathing applied to teaching point/progressions.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When trading, synchronise loading legs with end of breathing in at ball bounce, control pause between breathing in and out to adjust contact point (beginner/improver)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On serve, breath out to complete ready position, then breath in at ball placement/racket set-up, pause, breath out when swinging. (beginner/improver)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adjust pace and volume of breathing when executing a delicate drop shot as opposed to a powerful drive down the line (advanced)

GESTALT-TENNIS AS PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC SUPPORT

As mentioned above, average club players are people with complex lives who are likely to bring on court 'tensions' related to off-court emotional circumstances. This doesn't mean that every player necessarily arrives at a tennis lesson with some emotional knots to disentangle; but the reality is that many do, with profound implications for their game. It would be great to ask player J, T2 or V to 'just relax' and forget about their disabled child, abused childhood or relational struggles. Indeed by playing tennis they might seek solace from those difficult experiences. The catch is that such ambition can be frustrated by tensions unleashed precisely by those off-court events which the player might wish to escape.

In order to address these dynamics I suggest that tennis coaching can borrow directly from Gestalt theory and techniques (Joyce and Sills, 2010), with the goal of helping the player to first feel and become aware of those tensions, and then try to unlock them. This is one example, recollected by the player, of how stimulating physical awareness can lead to an emotional breakthrough and game improvement:

Player: T2; 29/6/21 ; ct. 7, Clissold Pk, London N16

"I arrived and we played points, I didn't enjoy and there was no pleasure in hitting the ball. We began chatting and you said how I looked uptight when playing. I said I felt like it was a fight. Every muscle tight, ready to defend myself, reacting quickly and lashing out. You talked about how tennis is a bit like a fight - confronting your opponent face on, weapon in hand, winner takes all. Come to think of it, even the language 'shot' and 'hit' have echoes of violence. I reminded you about my upbringing: I was always ready for a fight and somehow tennis reveals that part of my character. Your acknowledgement that tennis can feel like a fight was useful because it made me understand the way I feel when playing is disproportionate but not crazy. We then talked about breathing, and reminding me of this and that tennis is not actually a fist fight allowed me to change my approach.

When we next started hitting I remembered to breathe and I was looser, calmer and I played so much better, hitting the ball with speed and accuracy. The difference was huge. Now I've written this I realise just how much is going on. To be encouraged to think how I feel when playing tennis allowed me to understand why I feel like that and make adjustments. I started to feel better, happier. It felt quite freeing."

The evolution recorded above highlights how the way a player experiences the game is crucial. What emotional value do they attach to playing tennis in general and that ball in particular? Following Gestalt, it's only by helping the player to become aware, accept and explore these issues that they can then overcome the 'tensions' dragging down their game. And perhaps achieve more than that. Feeling better, happier, freed: the words by T2 point beyond the tennis court. Indeed the player has identified an emotional disturbance that was preventing them to achieve full contact in a specific situation, and then found within themselves a way to overcome it. A successful experience in emotional control and problem-solving that can be transferred to everyday life (Posadzki et al., 2010).

By following this path, a coach can reach beyond teaching a good forehand and backhand. While they do that, they can encourage the player to develop emotional self-awareness and help them to experience their ability to make their own judgments and choices, to change and correct from within, relying on their own resources and maturity (table 3). Indeed, as player T2 indicates, there can be a lot going on in a tennis lesson.



Table 3

Main principles of Gestalt-Tennis.

- Invite any player to focus on what they can control: their breathing.
- Help them experience how to control breathing helps to control the body, therefore to control racket-ball-point.
- Encourage players to develop a physical, close relationship with body and 'field' (court/racket/ball) as opposed to an abstract, cognitive relationship.
- See the tennis lesson as an opportunity for self-awareness, and bring the player to get hold of the obvious, of the situation in which they find themselves in.
- Help them to identify and deal with emotional dynamics and tensions that might be limiting their enjoyment of the game.
- Encourage playing tennis in a sensual, experiential way.

GESTALT-TENNIS AS PSYCOSOCIAL ACTIVITY

Considering the opportunity for therapeutic support that a coached session can provide if sustained by a Gestalt mindset, I believe that tennis can be developed towards a full psychosocial activity, that is an activity completely dedicated to improving the 'social health' of the participants and their ability to maintain healthy relationship with others (Lay and Barrio, 2019). Here the emotional and relational well-being of the players are the explicit and declared goals and, with due diligence and professional supervision (Bond, 2010), a group session could be entirely dedicated to self-awareness and self-control with relative interest in balls 'in' or 'out'. This proposition has been well received at the on-line international conference 'Gestalt Beyond The Border – Projects For The Community' held in January 2022, and will be developed in partnership with the Florence Gestalt Institute, Italy (Puccioni, 2022).

CONCLUSIONS

The preliminary tests referred to in this paper have received clear, positive feedback from all players experiencing Gestalt-inspired coaching, with two common themes emerging: improvement of the ability to control the ball and improvement of the overall enjoyment of the game. As respective examples, for player M "It felt like being in the Matrix, being able to slow bullets down. Only I was trying to hit them"; for player A instead "It makes you feel more alive". These type of remarks offer now a strong incentive to design and set up a more structured and rigorous qualitative study, with between 6 to 12 participants, to explore in more details their experiences of this approach. This will aim at providing increased understanding of how a bridge between Gestalt and tennis coaching can help players improve their game alongside their emotional well-being.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST AND FUNDING

The author declares that he does not have any conflict of interest and that he did not receive any funding to conduct the research.

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