



# How to train aggressive clay court strategy and tactics.

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## ABSTRACT

This article outlines a successful school of thought for developing clay court players with a more aggressive game style than traditionally used on clay. Some underlying strategic principles for effective clay court play are discussed, as well as the use of drills that develop tactical awareness and competence. The article aims to provide coaches with principles that successfully foster clay court competence within their players.

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## INTRODUCTION

A successful clay court player usually has the following characteristics; a more consistent game, very strong groundstrokes, patience and good physical endurance. However, clay court specialists often have their disadvantages, primarily including less focus placed on the development of their serve and net game (Martinez, 2002). During a career working with players including Jim Courier, Monica Seles, Andres Gomez, Mary Pierce, Eva Majoli and Andre Agassi- all of whom were more all-round players than clay court specialists, but who have won the French Open- the key factor for their success on clay, was that these players all understood the importance of being very familiar with the surface. They knew how to move on it, they tailored their training to clay, and most interestingly, they approached the game tactically in a very aggressive way.

The traditional and stereotype clay court player, is one who stays much further back and often reacts to their opponents more so than dictating play. It is also commonly agreed now however, that the existence of this counter- puncher game style is relatively extinct (Martinez, 2002). The modern player is now able to hit and dictate aggressively from all areas of the court whilst using a number of sound clay court principles (Kopsic & Segal, 1995). Players such as Andre Agassi achieved great success using a very aggressive style of play when compared to traditional clay court play. When working with these players during the clay season, they were not encouraged to back up and it was instructed that they stayed close to the base line. Numerous coaches have suggested that with an aggressive

style like this it was impossible to win on clay. This was proved wrong many times by the list of successful players above.

## PRINCIPLES FOR EFFECTIVE CLAY COURT PLAY

### Movement

Players should move by sliding and use the court to their advantage with a 'slide, hit, recover' sequence. They have to be able to move side to side with equal dexterity, forward and backwards, with an emphasis on keeping their balance while they execute the stroke. On clay, it is particularly important to keep a low center of gravity and use wider stances.

### Close to the baseline

We make sure that our students play as closed to the base line as possible, backing up deep to defend is not an option.

### Physical shape

To win on clay the players have to be in great physical shape, the points on this surface are longer. That is why it is important to work daily on movement with tennis specific exercises; this is done on clay courts, with the racket, executing shots.

### Patience

They have to be consistent and patient, it is very difficult to hit straight out winners; the bounce of the ball is slower and higher, therefore heavy topspin is very useful in this surface when compared to attempting flat winners. Especially on clay,

players have to follow a very disciplined sequence while building the point: control, hurt, finish.

#### Attack a player's movement

Attack movement, the players must work on opening the court, this is done by hitting side to side and then behind, also attack movement with angles, slices and drop shots. The idea is to hit the ball to all areas of the court, deep with high heavy spin, middle of the court with angles and the short court with drop shots. Keep the opponent off balance.

#### Control the centre of the court

On clay more than any surface it is imperative to control the center of the court; the player that controls the center has the upper hand. The first serve should be wide 70% of the time, to take control of the center right away, the next shot the server hits should be a forehand to the open court and once in a while behind the opponent. Once the opponent is on the run keep attacking movement (control), once you have him out of position and off- balance (hurt), then take advantage of the short ball and finish the point being aggressive (finish).



#### Neutralizing returns

The return should be high and deep to the middle of the court to neutralize the serve, when returner has time and the score in his favor he should go down the line.

#### Mental toughness

Another vital part to be able to win on clay is the mental part, the players have to be smart and aggressive, but also tough, relentless and very disciplined to endure the longer physical battles.

#### TRAINING STRATEGY FOR THE CLAY SEASON

At least one month before the clay court season starts, the player and team should move from hard to clay in order to provide time to adjust their game. The following drills and principles were adopted during this preparatory training period with Monica Seles, Mary Pierce, Eva Majoli, Andre Agassi,

Marcelo Rios, Jim Courier and many more players who reached the latter stages of Roland Garros.

#### HIGH NET

##### Objectives:

- To hit the ball high over the net with enough margin for error, no mistakes.
- By hitting the ball high it will also travel deep, high and deep. No balls in the net, no short balls.
- Getting used to hitting and receiving high and heavy balls starting with the topspin serve.
- Use the high net during the entire season, including playing matches.



##### Execution:

- Use two sticks with a rope, place them at the net posts on each side, the rope will be 2 feet high over the net.
- Start with balls down the middle working on consistency, make sure the balls are high, deep and heavy, no pushing.
- Hit cross courts first and then down the line.
- Do the same exercise applying movement, for example one player hits down the line, the other player hits cross court.
- It is very important to place the emphasis in the use of the legs to execute each shot.
- Lots of repetitions to create muscle endurance, build aerobic capacity, concentration, discipline and more than anything else confidence.

#### ANGLE SHOTS OUT OF THE BASKET

##### Objectives:

- Feel confident hitting angles from anywhere in the court.
- Hit angles from both sides forehand and backhand.



- c) Hitting angles on the run.
- d) Attacking the middle court.

#### Execution:

- a) The coach places the basket closed to the net.
- b) The first drill, feed ball close to the net, player has to hit a very short angles.
- c) Second drill, feed ball a little further back and closer to the service line.
- d) Third drill, feed ball between service line and base line.
- e) Four drill, feed ball to base line.
- f) These four drills should be executed using all forehands, 20 balls per set.
- g) Second basket, all backhands, 20 balls at the time from all the different positions on the court.
- h) Third basket, applying movement, side to side from the different zones.

#### SERVE AND RETURN

#### Objectives:



- a) Opening the court with the serve. The objective of the server is to control the center of the court from the first shot and then continue attacking movement.
- b) Attacking movement with the forehand after the serve.

- c) Returner neutralizing the middle of the court taking away the advantage of the server.

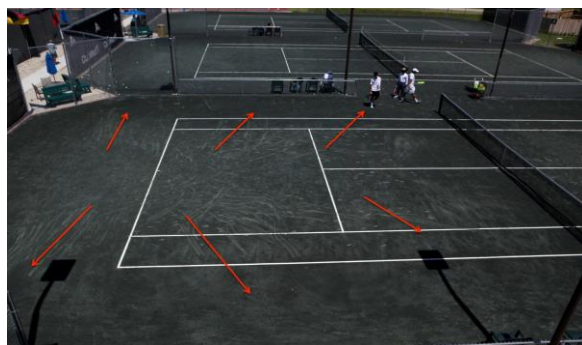
#### Execution:

- a) Using the high rope over the net, but just two feet higher.
- b) Players play the points keeping score.
- c) Server places the serve wide and then hits a forehand to the open court. The server always looks to hit the "forehand" after returner hits the ball back..
- d) Returner hits the return deep and to the middle of the court pushing the server back, the goal of the returner is to have enough discipline to neutralize the return playing high percentage tennis.
- e) Play sets making sure the players are following this basic pattern.

#### USING THE COURT AS A PHOTOGRAPH

#### Objectives:

- a) To visually study the way the players are using the court.
- b) Analyse the markings on the court from the ball impressions, as well slide marks- it will be easy to see the patterns of play.
- c) Using these marks on the court, the players can see if they are attacking all three zones of the opponents court: deep, middle ( use of angles), and short ( use of drop-shots).
- d) Easy to see the placement of the serves, and to make out the depth of balls.



#### Execution:

- a) Make sure the court is swept before the exercise starts, so there are not markings on the court.
- b) Players should play points without changing sides.
- c) After one set, take the players out of the court and if possible from a high position study the marking on each side, look for the depth, middle (angles), and short sliding. Also look for the markings on the serves, these marks on the court don't lie, it

will be easy to spot what the players are doing well and the areas they need to improve.

d) After the first analysis, sweep the court again and play a second set, make sure the players improve their ball placement and the way they utilize the entire court to attack the opponent's movement.

## CONCLUSION

This article has outlined some key principles and strategies that can and should be used on the game of clay, whilst also proposing the adoption of a more aggressive game style for success at the highest level. Modern tactics are continually evolving (see Crespo and Reid, 2002) and the coach must develop a player to be tactically smart in order to have success at any level. Principles and drills for preparing a player for the clay season were outlined, in the hope that coaches can begin to develop their players into clay court tacticians.

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