



Be aware of potential traps in strategy.

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ABSTRACT

To develop and implement an effective strategy is an on-going challenge for tennis players each time they compete. This article reviews common traps and key elements in strategy, including lack of ownership, over-confidence and inflexibility. Suggestions for coaches to help guide players to develop sound strategic skills are offered.

Key words: Strategy, traps, coach

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"I had gone into the match with strong mental preparation. I knew what I wanted to happen and what I wanted to prevent from happening...When things were getting desperate I had a mental compass that kept me on course and gave me a way to get back in the match. Instead of rolling over and accepting defeat, I believed there was a way to win." - Brad Gilbert.

INTRODUCTION

To develop, and implement, an effective strategy is an on-going challenge for tennis players each time they compete. In his book, *Winning Ugly*, Gilbert (1993) suggests that the best players in the world come to matches armed with a strategy that starts when the first point is played. Given the critical importance attributed to strategy in the tennis literature (e.g., Crespo, Reid and Quinn, 2006; Young, 2008), it is no surprise that players who play well are frequently praised for exercising good judgment and making the right decisions. But developing strategy is not an easy process and there are many potential pitfalls.



The purpose of this article is to review common potential traps or flaws in strategy, and in doing so, to identify key elements of good strategy and the role a coach might play in guiding a player to develop sound strategic skills. For the purpose of this review, 'strategy' is defined as "the overall game plan for a certain match" (Crespo & Reid, 2009, p.87). In this context 'tactics' are how exactly a strategy will be executed. Accordingly, a 'tactic' refers to "the practical application of the strategy during the match" (Crespo & Reid, 2009, p.87). It is noted that, in the tennis literature, the terms 'strategy', 'game plan' and 'tactics' are frequently used interchangeably. So, what are the common traps in strategy? Some of these will now be briefly described.

COMMON TRAPS IN STRATEGY

The lack of ownership trap

Here the player does not genuinely believe in, or is not committed, to a strategy that has given to him/her by a coach, parent, friend or others. With little or no input in the planning process, the player has simply adopted the strategy. In these circumstances, the strategy can quickly start to unravel when things do not go to script!

The too complex trap

While the human mind is a marvel, it can only process a certain amount of information at any one time. Accordingly, when strategy is overly detailed with things the player must be aware of, and attend to, it can be simply a case of 'overload'. A strategy that is too complex will generally fail.

The 'It worked before' trap

It is wrong to assume that, because a strategy worked before, it will always continue to do so. Circumstances may well be quite different (e.g., different court surface, opponent has improved) from the time when the strategy was previously successful. Players who are complacent and do not assess current conditions and factors may well be surprised in their next encounter with an opponent if no modifications to strategy are made.

The overconfidence trap

It is great to feel confident going into a match, but too much of this positive feeling can be detrimental to effective decision making. Being overly confident can lead to a lack of planning, errors in judgment and/ or taking one's opponent too lightly. As a result, a lack of attention to detail and appreciation of the actual situation can be costly.

The 'Too little too late' trap

Leaving strategy until the warm-up, or early games and first set, is a ploy fraught with danger. Granted there are times when a player does not know anything about his/her opponent, and must leave strategy to the match itself, but these circumstances are relatively rare (given a player's coach can scout an opponent, enquiries can be made etc). Delaying strategy to the match is often a recipe for rushed and scrambled decision making.

The inflexibility trap

This occurs when players fail to factor uncertainty into strategy. Not everything can be accurately predicted, anticipated or known before a match. Failing to adopt a flexible strategy, where uncertainty is the norm, often leaves a player floundering when things change in a match. Where was Plan B or Plan C?

The eternal hope trap

Sticking with a strategy, believing it will eventually work, can be a risk. Players are sometimes mistaken in their unfailing commitment to a strategy, even when facing defeat. In doing so, they fail to remember that the phrase, 'change a losing game' was coined for good reason!

The lack of insight trap

A player who lacks a sound understanding of his/her game and what he/she wants to achieve will find it difficult to plan strategy. Like a house, strategy without strong foundations or building blocks (i.e., knowing one's strengths, weaknesses, goals) is likely to crumble under pressure.

The false consensus trap

Sometimes there is a general view shared amongst players and coaches as to how to play a certain opponent. Simply adopting this, without undertaking one's own due diligence, can be a mistake. Just because it is a widely held opinion does not necessarily make it a correct or appropriate one for everyone. Yes, it may represent a safe option, but there are risks this strategy may not be right.

What are the implications of these common traps in strategy and what can be gleaned about good strategy?

ELEMENTS OF GOOD STRATEGY

A review of the common traps in strategy (described above) provides clues as to what constitutes good strategy. These clues suggest good strategy contains a number of inter-related elements including:

- Owned by player – player is actively involved in developing strategy
- Well researched – accurate information underpins the strategy selected
- Comprehensible – player clearly understands what the strategy entails
- Robust but flexible – strategy suitable for entire match but, if need be, can be adapted or changed to Plan B.
- Feasible – 'doable' given player's game and capabilities
- Appropriate – there is a fit between player's game and desired outcome
- Simple – contains up to 4-5 key points (that could be written on one piece of paper for player to take onto court)
- Individualised – relates to player, his/her opponent and match conditions

Not only are these elements of good strategy, they also are a set of criteria to assess strategy. Is the strategy owned by the player, is it well researched, comprehensible etc. This is a valuable checklist but it should be remembered that the real and ultimate test of any strategy is whether it worked. Was it successful? Did the player achieve his/her goals? The right strategy is therefore one that is judged in hindsight to have been effective in facilitating a desired outcome. Does this necessarily mean the player won his/her match? No, effectiveness must be assessed in light of the desired outcome, and in some instances, this is not about winning but rather developing a player's game and playing as well as a player can against a much higher ranked and more experienced opponent. So, how can a coach assist a player in planning strategy?

ROLE OF THE COACH

Coaches can play a vital role in guiding a player to develop sound strategic skills. Here is a couple of suggestions for coaches to consider.

Integrate strategy into teaching the game

Time scheduled to discuss a player's strategy before and after matches is time well spent. Before a match, a coach can check to see if a player has a strategy and whether its premises and assumptions are sound. Has the player correctly analysed his/her opponent's game? Are the player's desired outcomes realistic? Is the planned strategy easy to execute? What problems might occur? In reviewing strategy after a match, a coach can assist a player to understand the value, or otherwise, in the strategy adopted. Did it work? If so, why did it? If not, why not?.

When a coach integrates discussion of strategy into teaching the game, it encourages a player to develop good match habits. Strategy is a key part of match preparation and review. It can also provide both coach and player with important information about how that player can continue to improve his/her game. Much can be learnt when both winning and losing strategies are reviewed from two perspectives, being the player and coach. It is also very valuable, when reviewing strategy, if the coach has had the opportunity to see a player's match first hand.



Challenge player with 'What if' scenarios

A coach can help a player develop sound planning strategy skills by providing 'what if' scenarios. Here the coach challenges a player to develop strategy when playing certain players or under varying conditions. For example, the coach may ask the player, "Suppose you were to play someone who has a two-handed backhand, loves clay etc, what strategy might work?" Or, "What strategy would you adopt if playing your closest tennis friend whom you have never beaten" This activity can be a useful tool for coaches to help build a player's decision making skills.

Practise strategy

A coach can organise simulated match play when a player practises a set strategy. This can give a player tremendous confidence to use a new or different strategy under match conditions. For example, if aggressive play is required against an opponent, it is best to trial this in practice rather than waiting for a match when fear of losing may act as a deterrent for using this strategy. A practice or trial run can also give a player the chance to 'iron out any kinks' or difficulties in strategy before a match is played.

Learn from champions

Accounts of matches played by champions in major events are relatively easy to access in today's computer age. Such accounts often provide valuable insights into the minds of champions. Recorded match interviews can be particularly insightful when a champion discusses the strategy he/she adopted in a match and why it worked (or did not work). Coaches can share these accounts with a player to learn from champions who obviously have considerable first-hand credentials in planning and executing effective strategy.

Confront possible traps in strategy

Rather than pretending difficulties in strategy do not exist, a coach can tackle potential traps 'head-on' with a player. Discussions between coach and player of possible pitfalls in strategy can enhance awareness for the latter. Being aware of traps can be an important step in preventing mistakes or errors from occurring.

Offer to gather information

A coach can provide a player with relevant information in the strategy process. For example, a coach may know details about an opponent's game. Alternatively, a coach can find out such details by various means including scouting matches and practice sessions, video analysis of matches played, analysing match statistics and/or making enquiries with other coaches. While ownership of a strategy belongs with a player, a coach can bring relevant information to the table for consideration by the player.

CONCLUSIONS

Strategy can be very simple. Just ask Serena Williams who recently said, "I know if I play my game I can beat anyone on the other side of the net". What however is critical is that a player has a strategy. Strategy provides a 'blueprint' or means for a positive outcome and instils a sense of purpose into a player's game. This article highlights common potential traps in strategy, and in doing so, suggests key characteristics of good strategy and a role for coaches to play. What is wanted at the end of matches is for a player and his/her coach to say,

"Everything went to plan". For this to happen, a good strategy is essential. It is hoped this article provides clues as to how a player and coach can work together to effectively plan what needs to be done to fulfill a player's potential. Well, at least that's the strategy!

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