



# The modern game of doubles: A tactical perspective

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## ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the game of doubles from a tactical perspective. The primary author, a four-time doubles Grand Slam Champion, outlines some observations of how the game of modern doubles has evolved, whilst still retaining some of the core aspects that the game is unique for. The article then focuses specifically on the long-term development of the doubles player, and emphasises not only tactics, but the physical and mental requirements that are demanded of a player on route to the highest levels of the game.

Key words: Tactics, strategy, doubles, long-term development.

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## INTRODUCTION- MODERN DOUBLES

The modern game of doubles is undoubtedly very different to the game of previous eras. Along with the evolution of the singles game, doubles nowadays has changed predominantly due to the presence of much greater power. The speed of the modern day groundstroke has made poaching, interception and general net play much more risky and a more difficult endeavour. A knock on effect of this has therefore seen a reduction in dominance of the net player when compared to the game in previous generations.

### Power versus touch in the modern game of doubles

In tennis, the optimal execution of any given stroke, at any level, requires different adaptations of learned skills in coordination with the requirements of strength, speed and power (Faccioni, Pierce & Fisher, 2004). Within doubles, both power and touch are important at the highest level. One cannot win a slam with one of these elements missing, but touch certainly plays a relatively smaller role nowadays in relation to the importance of power. With the game having such an emphasis on power, winning at the highest level has become more about the big serve and hard return, as opposed to a focus on getting a first serve in and making the first volley. In previous generations, making first serves and placement was paramount, whereas nowadays, spin, power and groundstrokes appear to be key. There is of course still room for touch, but only when combined with power. Indeed nowadays, combining touch with power through varying the

pace of your shots is becoming more and more successful, due to the majority of players being so used to constantly receiving the ball at a rapid pace. Therefore the use of a simple variation of pace is now more effective than ever for breaking the opponents' rhythm.

## LONG-TERM DEVELOPMENT OF A DOUBLES PLAYER

### Singles as an apprenticeship for doubles

Singles is a great apprenticeship for doubles for a number of reasons. Firstly, it allows you to develop a well-rounded game-style. Singles can complement doubles because it allows you to practice all your shots, whereas just specializing in doubles means that you often work so much on serve and first volley, that you forget more about your second shots and follow up groundstrokes (which today are needed in a doubles player's repertoire).

*"A good recommendation is to practice singles serve and volley on full court, as it stretches the comfort zone of the doubles player"*

Good serving, returning and groundstrokes should therefore be learnt out on the singles court. To prepare a doubles player for success, singles can really benefit. Players should work a lot on the basic singles drills such as cross courts, and line exercises, and inside out forehand work for example, that will

contribute to developing an overall game. It is important also to remember that practising the whole court, and not just to focus on playing half court helps doubles development. For example, when practising net play for doubles, a good recommendation is to practice singles serve and volley on full court, as it stretches the comfort zone of the doubles player whereas only working on a half court can hinder your movement, and a player won't learn to stretch out for the wider balls as effectively. Singles is also beneficial due to the athleticism required to drill in singles, which makes doubles easier when you come back to being responsible for just half the court.

#### Tactical progressions from junior to professional

**Develop the net game:** As stated earlier, at the Grand Slam level, the baseline game is more important than before. Whilst this is true, it is important not to over emphasise this at the junior level, largely due to the fact that at this level, the net game of juniors is largely underdeveloped when compared with the baseline game. Juniors should work on their net play more, and learn to take charge of the net better throughout their development. Learning to dominate the net more should be seen as a 'bread and butter' skill, with the introduction of heavy and powerful baseline play brought in at a later stage of development as the player matures physically. Coaches should therefore look to spend more time working on the net game with juniors, and incorporate more drills that develop the player's tactical awareness at the net.



**Develop tactical awareness:** A second key difference tactically between the junior and senior game relates to the fact that at junior levels, tactical awareness in doubles is underdeveloped. In explanation, juniors trying to make it on the doubles tour need to do the 'little things' more often within the match environment. This can include elements such as poaching more regularly, getting into the opponents head, and effectively assessing opponents' strengths and then taking them away, e.g. when playing a certain top ten team, a useful tactic was to use the "I formation" and swing a serve into the backhand body of the player on the deuce side. This would

then ensure the returners natural up the line return, which the net player could cover confidently and therefore really impose. Another example of a smart play would again be the I formation serving to a left handed player on the advantage side. Serving a slider up the T with the net player covering the middle to left side of the court. With the serve swinging away from the player, it is very difficult for the returner to pull the return up the line if the serve is executed well, which again gives the net player confidence to impose on the return and apply pressure.

Assessing players to this degree is very rare at the junior level. With juniors, often if they play well they win, and if they play bad they lose- making the transition to the senior game is often down to tactical awareness, and trying to develop some of the characteristics mentioned above, so that a player can win matches on any day.

#### GAINING A DOUBLES WORLD RANKING- THE FIRST RANKING POINT

##### Keeping it simple

One of the main reasons players struggle at this level is simply not doing the basics that well. Even at entry level, if you have weaknesses in your game you have to go back to the drawing board and work on them. The vast majority of players making their first points on the doubles tour are singles specialists. This can often mean that their net game and tactical patterns are not as well developed for doubles as it is in singles. Whilst strong singles players can 'get away' with being singles specialists in doubles, to continue onwards up the rankings, a key component for players is to simply work more on exercises that develop their net game and tactical awareness in doubles. Drills that focus on serve and volley, approaching, passing and the smash are key here.



##### Your partner

A second key aspect for making your first points on tour, is for players at this level to consider carefully the partner they

choose. This consideration is key on two levels; both game style and personality.

Playing with the wrong partner can make success on the double tour very difficult. A good partner needs to compliment your game. For example, if a player is a good returner, they should pair up with a good server. One left and one right hander is also often favoured, due to having better options to position a player according to where their strengths are, opposites attract basically.

Personality of the pairings is also a critical factor. Doubles partnerships should be harmonious and without major conflict. Players should share similar work ethic, ideals and should of course respect each other on and off the tennis court.

## MAKING THE TOP 100

### A mental challenge

Tactically, the game is very similar between a top 100 player and a top 300 player. The difference merely being a jump in the level of play. Of course everything a player does has to get better to reach the top 100- you must be physically, technically and mentally stronger, but tactically, the game is very similar. To progress into the top 100 is often more of a mental challenge for players. Research in singles transition has shown that players, who progress to the Top 100, take on average 4.8 years (and up to 9 years) to do so from the time of making their first point (McCraw, 2011).

*"Frustration tolerance should improve at this level, so that a player can experience repeated adversity and still remain calm and collected"*

This lengthy time span can often test players' discipline. More maturity on the court is required at this level. A player must throw away the bad habits they have. Concentration must improve and a player must be able to remain focused for up to five sets and across lengthy tournament blocks. In addition, frustration tolerance should improve at this level, so that a player can experience repeated adversity and still remain calm and collected. When entering the top 100, a 'bottle neck' often occurs, making it very difficult to defend previously gained points, and constantly accumulate more from bigger tournaments: often, a player must and return to lower tournaments to get more points and hold their position, which takes humility, grit and determination.

### Physicality- power, speed, agility and endurance

Doubles players must be able to apply tactics that rely on a powerful serve and big groundstrokes, like in singles. Therefore

it can be argued that the physical demands from a power, speed and agility perspective are similar. Secondly, and again as in the singles game, to execute a successful game strategy requires an emphasis on staying sharp and fresh physically when playing tournaments. However, when comparing the endurance requirements of a top ten singles to a top ten doubles player, one can argue that there is no comparison. The 2012 Australian Open final between Novak Djokovic and Rafael Nadal was an example of where the endurance requirements of the singles game do not map onto a doubles court, from a court geometry perspective if nothing else.

One contrast however between singles and doubles, is the longevity of a doubles player's career compared to a singles player - a good example being the 2012 doubles champion of the Australian open, Leander Paes, winning another grand slam title at the age of 38. This longevity of the career is not seen in the singles game. This therefore alludes to the different physical nature of doubles, when compared to singles.

## CONCLUSION

This article has outlined some of the key developments in doubles, specifically regarding how power has adapted the game of today, as well as the role of touch. Using singles as an apprenticeship for doubles, as well as general long term development of a doubles player has been discussed. The second part of this two article series will continue to discuss the game of modern doubles through a tactical lens. Part two will specifically discuss tactical preparation for a grand slam, as well as giving on-court exercises and successful patterns for training high level doubles players.

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