Introducing the net game to starter players.

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ABSTRACT

This article provides practical guidelines for introducing the net game to starter players. Applying modern teaching methodology, scaled down equipment and smaller courts creates the opportunity to develop a successful net game from the very beginning. The feeling of success and competency are important motivating factors, which will encourage players to practice their net game and make it an important part of their game style.

INTRODUCTION

Today's tennis is based on a strong baseline game supported by excellent serving and returning. The traditional way of approaching and playing at the net has almost disappeared from the modern game. What we actually see is that players are coming to the net in order to finish the point or create an element of surprise by using serve and volley tactics. Nevertheless, the net game is still a very important element of the players' repertoire and should be developed from the very beginning.

The traditional way of introducing the net game can be summarized by:

• Catching the ball

• 'Blocking the ball'

• Establishing a rally (player/coach) within a close distance

• Improving the volleys by increasing the rally distance

• Adding approach shots and playing points

Usual consequences of 'traditional way':

1. Bad or no decisions

2. Big backswings

3. Static positioning around service line

4. 'Running away' from the net

5. Developing 'defensive technique' (Hitting from low to high)

By taking a closer look you can recognize that in a traditional way of introducing the net game follows the same 'logic' as is used for developing the baseline game with the main goal of developing the rally! However, in order to be successful at the net game players usually have one or two shots to finish the point by playing away from the opponent.

Because of the above we need to think about a different way of introducing the net game by taking into account the following elements:

• The main tactical intention of playing at the net is to finish the point.

• Quick reaction and decision-making.

• Simple stroke mechanics, which will be stable under time pressure.

• Quick footwork and optimal positioning on the court.

• The above elements can be achieved if the teaching methodology applies the following principles:

• Create progressive game situations, which will integrate perception, decision making, execution and positioning on the court from the very beginning.

• Developing technical skills in a tactical context (technique should fulfill the tactical intention).

• Using effective questioning to make players understand the consequences of a particular shot.

• Using shot variations in order to learn from differences and develop unpredictability.

• Using the possibilities for implicit learning whenever possible (player is not aware of the teaching point).

6 KEY STAGES IN INTRODUCING THE NET GAME

In the following table you will find the overview of the technical and tactical elements for the 6 key stages in developing the net game for starter players.

	STAGE	KEY TACTICAL ELEMENTS	KEY TECHNICAL ELEMENTS
1	Catching the ball before the bounce.	Perception / reaction.	Hands (contact point) in front of the body.
2	Catching the ball in the air over an obstacle.	Creating advantage by 'hitting away' from the opponent.	Contact point in front of the body.
3	Intercepting the ball	Staying in the point by preventing the ball to pass. Covering the court.	Contact point in front and aside of the body. Convenient grip.
4	Directing the ball	Creating advantage by hitting away from the opponent.	Racket movement from high to low during the hitting phase. Convenient grip.
5	Closing the net	Creating advantage or finishing by hitting away from the opponent. Covering the court.	Timed split-step.
6	Approaching the net by using approach shot or drive volley	When/Where to hit approach shot. Covering the court.	Footwork before the 1st volley.

Table 1. Technical and tactical elements for the 6 key stages

Catching the ball before the bounce

Receiving skills are usually the weakest skills of starter players. The shorter reaction time available when compared to the baseline game creates even higher demands on these skills in the net game.

For this reason and in order to provide reasonable levels of success, starter players should develop the ability to catch the ball in the air in very simple situations. The easiest one is after a vertical toss of the ball or after a vertical drop, which is more demanding for starter players (photo 1.).

Photo 1. Vertical toss.

Already at this stage, it is very important to check for an alert ready position and quick reactions of the hands in front of the body.

Catching the ball in the air over obstacle

At this stage the player is still catching the ball. The major difference is that the ball is moving in the horizontal as well as in the vertical plane, creating new demands on receiving skills.

Photo 2. Throwing ball away from the oppnent.

Already at this stage the player should start developing tactical thinking through good court positioning according to various directions of the oncoming ball (photo 2.) as well as by 'throwing' the ball away from the opponent toward the 'left or right' side outside the court.

Mental „readiness" in the starting position and positioning of the hands that enables meeting the ball in front of the body are important checkpoints for coaches.

Intercepting the ball

In this stage the player should develop the ability to intercept the ball in the air with the racket (photo 3.). In theory if the player is able to prevent all balls from passing him he will at least stay in the point, and probably win it.

This approach will foster development of the contact point in front of the body without a big backswing, which is the most common problem for starter players!

Photo 3. Intercept ball.

Key tactical checkpoints for coaches are consistency and court positioning as well as contact point in front of the body, footwork and reaction to different ball trajectories.

Directing the ball

Quick positioning and decision-making, together with shot accuracy, are crucial for a successful net game at beginner as well as at the professional level.

In the directing the ball stage, the players are using accuracy together with hitting away from the opponent in order to win the points (photo 4). This approach will enable the development of decision-making for starter players. At the same time creating a target area close to the net, which doesn't require power, will encourage directing the ball instead of early development of a big backswing.

Photo 4. Decision making.

Racket movement from high to low is an important technical checkpoint that will enable players to develop an offensive attitude at an early stage in the development of the net game.

Closing the net

By starting to play points, players will discover the difference between building up and finishing volleys from a tactical point of view.

At this stage it's fundamental that players develop a functional split step through optimal timing followed by moving forward towards the net (photo 5). In addition, at this stage the players' level of receiving skills should enable early recognition of the

lob and backward movement, which is crucial for successful smashing.

Photo 5. Moving towards the net.

Approaching the net by using approach shot or drive volley

Increased space in orange court provides the opportunity for discovering different net game tactics by players. First of all, players will add the approach shot to their net game. Understanding the purpose of hitting the first volley into the open court and finishing with a short angled volley is just one example of the high percentage solutions needing to be developed at this stage.

Photo 6. Approach shot.

In achieving the above-mentioned tactics coaches should keep in mind the following technical checkpoints:

1. Moving forward before and after the split step.

2. Firm grip in the contact point.

3. Adequate backswing depending on the court position and tactical intention.

CONCLUSION

By applying the scaled down equipment together with the smaller courts and appropriate methodology young players will have the opportunity to develop a successful net game from a very young age. Success and feeling competent are key motivational factors, which will motivate the kids to come more often to the net and practice this part of the game frequently. In addition, the kids will be able to enjoy and develop their

doubles game by interacting with each other and achieving common goals as a team.

The net game will continue to be an important part of the game in the future. The players are becoming more powerful, faster and applying extreme spins in baseline strokes. As a consequence, by developing the net game for the future, we should prepare the players to counter it by developing sound fundamentals at a young age, on which the successful net game can be developed.

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Note

The full presentation together with the video clips of all Key stages can be found on the ITF Tennis iCoach,

http://www.tennisicoach.com/Tennis_play_and_stay_for_rally_development

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