



Developing stroke flexibility.

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ABSTRACT

Variability is the key to greatness in cooking, tennis and probably anything in life. True mastery can only be achieved through maturity, and maturity is nothing more than an accumulation of a great variety of experiences. Therefore, to develop more effective shots, the traditional way of training needs to be adjusted to allow players to practice with a much greater degree of variability, forcing the players to constantly adapt and thus develop the desired stroke flexibility.

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INTRODUCTION

Even at a beginner's level, the concept of variability should be an integral part of the learning process. Ideally, the coach should teach beginners to rally with each other as soon as possible, avoiding the use of the basket as the main teaching tool. When players learn mostly by hitting balls fed from a basket, they face a huge shock the first time they try to play with someone other than the coach. They realise that it is a lot harder to play tennis when the ball is not fed at an ideal height and speed or that it is very difficult to keep a rally going when your shots go all over the court.

A much better alternative is to learn to play tennis by modifying the length of the court and the type of balls used beginners experience the game from the first lesson.

Players will enjoy the game much faster if they are taught a form of real tennis from the first lesson. Real tennis involves great variability and a large degree of control: two players hitting with each other, not one feeding a ball from a basket and the other one hitting it over the net. By starting the players close to the net and using slower balls (foam or slower balls are readily available), a coach can allow players to experience the feel of the game from the first lesson. As the players improve their ability to rally with slower balls from a shorter distance to the net, the coach can proceed to lengthen the distance between the players and use other types of balls until the players can comfortably rally from the baseline with regular balls. (In fact, in this respect the teaching industry is slowly changing, and introducing tennis to children and beginners by modifying equipment and courts is much more common.)

Once players can rally comfortably from the baseline, the coach should force the players to constantly adjust, by offering

lessons with a high degree of variability. Players should experience hitting the ball at different heights, speeds, spins, and direction every time they are on the court. Here are a few drills to help beginners and low intermediate players experience ball control in a whole new light.



Different heights

Players have to hit the ball at three different levels: low, up to four feet over the net; medium, between five and eleven feet over the net; and high, over 12 feet. At first, the players should focus on constantly keeping the ball at a certain height. After they are comfortable doing this, then they should vary their height in the same rally.

Different lengths

Players should experiment with three lengths: short, inside service box, medium, just past the service line; and long, close

to the baseline. One good progression is to start by trying to keep the ball inside the service box, then move back and try to hit the ball as close to the baseline as possible. After a while, players should work on rallying while letting the ball bounce twice to force them to hit the ball short.

Both bounces should land inside the baseline. Finally, players should try to rally hitting very short shots that will bounce three times inside the baseline every time.

Different speeds

Player should experiment with three different speeds: slow, medium and fast. The ideal speed will be different for each player, but the idea is to stay under control, even with the fast hits. If players are missing too much, they should adjust their swing speed accordingly.

These are just a few drills to help you understand the concept. Devise your own drills, mixing up all the variables according to your players' ability

Once the players acquire a certain degree of control the coach should introduce the most important element involved in developing flexibility: spin.



THE MAGIC OF SPIN

Understanding the magic of spin is the first large obstacle for beginning and intermediate players, and one most players fail to overcome. Being able to hit with different spins is the main advantage advanced players have over everyone else. Spin

opens the door to a whole new world of possibilities, allowing the players to control the ball much better at higher speeds.

There are three types of spin that any aspiring player should master: flat drive, topspin and slice. Every shot in tennis has one of these types of spin to different degrees, and the ability to hit the ball with different types and degrees of spin will provide the groundwork to achieve the necessary ball control to develop as a player.

The following exercise will help the players understand and feel comfortable with the concept of spin.

SPIN DRILLS

Introduction to spin

There are several ways to introduce spin to your players. Here are a few ideas that have worked for me.

Use a large light ball

Using a large ball will allow very young players to safely experiment with spin. By brushing up along the side of the ball or down under it while the coach holds it with his index fingers letting it spin, the players will be able to experience firsthand what it means to spin an object. The size of the ball and its slow movement provide excellent feedback to the players.

Use the palm of the hand

Using the palm of the hand of your non-hitting hand to press the ball against the strings provides a great platform for novice players to understand spin. From this position the player can move the racquet up or down, keeping the hand still, and observe the ball's rotation.

Bounce and spin

A good way to introduce the slice is by having players toss the ball up, let it bounce and then try to make the ball spin by using a chopping motion with their racquet across the bottom of the ball. Once the players are able to make it rotate, they can try to keep the ball in the air without letting it bounce by constantly chopping under the ball with spin.

Use the net tape

By pressing the ball against the net tape with the racquet and then brushing up to drop it to the other side of the court, the player can feel the concept of hitting up on the ball to make the ball rotate forwards.

Use the frame of the racquet

One of the easiest ways to introduce spin is to instruct the player to hit the ball with the frame of the racquet. For topspin, ask the player to try to hit the incoming shot up to the sky with the upper part of the frame. Then instruct the player to use the same swing but to brush behind the ball as opposed to hitting with the frame. This concept of brushing up can be emphasized by having the player stand very close to the net and hand feeding balls right up in front of him. The player on the other side will have to swing up on the ball to avoid hitting the net with his follow through.



OTHER SPIN DRILLS

Once the players are able to hit the ball with different spins, use the following drills to perfect their control of spin.

Slice

Instruct players to rally hitting only slice. As they improve, they can rally trying to keep the ball past the service line, then they can alternate between shots bouncing before the service line and past the service line.

Topspin

Ask players to rally hitting only topspin. As the players become better, they can alternate hitting one flat shot, one shot with slight topspin and one shot with maximum topspin.

Topspin and slice

Have player rally alternating one slice and one topspin shot.

Low, high, very high

With the same racquet head speed, the players rally trying to hit one ball low over the net, one high over the net and one very high over the net. The players will have to hit the ball with

incremental amounts of topspin to keep it in the court. Make sure the swing speed remains high and constant.

Long, middle, short

Players should rally crosscourt hitting a deep shot, an angle just past the service line, and an angle landing before the service line. Just as in the previous drill, the players will have to hit the shots with incremental amounts of topspin. Make sure the swing speed stays constant.

Developing a feel for different types and degrees of spin is the first step toward gaining solid control over your shots. The next step is to understand how to use this control and stroke variety to become a better player.

CONCLUSION

As one can see, an effective tennis practice has to be structured. The basic strokes, forehand, backhand, volleys, overhead, serve and return, need to be further subdivided to include all the shots a player might need during a match. This is key to developing better weapons for battle – stroke flexibility. This is not always easy to do if we do not plan ahead. We all have drills that we tend to use over and over, and it is very easy to neglect different areas of the game. Moreover, players have a tendency to like the drills that they can do well and hate drills that they have a hard time executing. But, to develop better players it is very important to identify those areas of difficulty and work more on them.

REFERENCES

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