



The many colours of match analysis in tennis

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces a new method of match analysis, which could serve as a useful and simple tool in learning to understand the game. The described method can be applied to all levels of players – from beginners to advanced.

Key words: Match analysis, Point tracking.

Received: 10 February 2011.

Accepted: 15 April 2011.

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INTRODUCTION

A former top-ten Swedish player, Joachim 'Pim Pim' Johansson was often asked the same question: "Why, having one of the most effective serves in the game he wouldn't rush to the net behind it?"

What puzzled the others, was a logical choice for Johansson. He knew that his forehand was much better than his net game and preferred to take the ball early and on the bounce with his strongest groundstroke. In 2004, Johansson showed the best serve results on the ATP Tour- he won more games on his serve than any other ATP Tour player. The Swede's stats were even better than Pete Sampras's - a strong argument in favour of Johansson's serve tactics. Johansson followed his powerful delivery by a big forehand from mid-court to finish the point.

"All the players can play really good, it's a question of using the right tactics- insists Johansson- we have to teach them in the right way from a younger age, we need to talk about tactics so they understand the logics of the game and help them develop their own individual styles". This is what the game based approach to match analysis is all about. At beginner and intermediate levels, new teaching methodologies (the 'game based approach' or 'teaching for understanding') place a great emphasis on the importance of understanding the game (the strategic and tactical aspects) as opposed to simply hitting balls (Crespo & Reid 2010).

The major challenge the coach faces while guiding kids through that "discovery of tennis" is in the adaptation of what they teach, so that it is appropriate to the age, level and cognitive abilities of the learner. A coach's knowledge should be "relayed to players...such that they are not deterred by overcomplicated analysis" (Over & O'Donoghue, 2008). In

other words, discussion of match strategy with a beginner should be a bit different from that you might have with a pro.



- With a beginner you might apply "five balls over the net" tactics.
- With advanced beginner it could be "long and high to the backhand"
- With an intermediate player you might use a combination of "one top-spin one slice to the same side".

To work out strategies on the pro level, players often need much more information. ITF, WTA and ATP tournaments provide a great number of useful match stats. There are also special firms and coaches who specialise in processing the match data and working out recommendations on how to play a certain player – what to expect and which strategy to apply.

Young aspiring players are often just as interested in their match performance as the professionals, if not more. And understandably they are very eager to listen and absorb anything the coach wants to share with them. This useful time period in a player's development, however short it could be, has to be used to the utmost.

THE POINT TRACKING METHOD

Score line: 3, 4, 0, 5, 5, 1

What is suggested here is a novel "match recording" (point tracking) method, adaptable for any level of play, that would help young players better understand the game and provide coaches with facts they can use in creating individual training plans for their students.

Here are the advantages of this particular "match recording" if compared to the many good match analysis techniques already in existence:

1. Simple to follow
2. Understandable and conveniently presented
3. Gives a good picture of the match flow, from start to finish
4. Provides data for match analysis and thus for practice planning
5. Keeps parents from being overstressed
6. Could be adjusted according to the needs of a specific player

The base for this "match recording" is keeping count of the number of shots hit in each rally. It is imperative to count only the shots that are in the court.

Thus, instead of :

15-0, 15-15, 15-30, 30-30, 40-30, game;

You will be getting:

3, 4, 0, 5, 5, 1.

What does this particular line of digits tell us?

1. Even though we don't see the regular score line, the score is followed very easily: an uneven number of shots indicates a winning point for the serving player, and an even number of shots indicates a winning point for the player returning the serve.

2. We can see that in the third point (at 15-15), the server made a double fault - «0».

3. We can also see that this double fault didn't discourage the player, but instead triggered his resistance level, and he won the next three points and took the game.

4. In the middle of the game we see the two longest points – this could be an indication of fierce fighting. Both of these went to the same player.

5. The game's shortest rally was on the game point. That can tell us that the return player was too discouraged or tired to offer better resistance.

6. To the credit of the losing player, we can say that his return was quite stable – he only missed it once. Unfortunately, this happened on the game point. As juniors seldom hit aces, we can guess that it was an unforced error and might think about planning special stress-related drills into training sessions.

There are numerous variations of how this data could be interpreted. It is important though to look for actual positive details, even in a lost match. Kids are smart, and if you just say "good effort" after a bad result, they won't believe you. But when looking at your notes, if you can specify with examples, there will be more weight behind your words:

- Look, you made him/her really fight for every game, you never lost on the first game-point and always stretched him/her to the longest rallies in that situation. Once, you went for 24 strokes and won that point!

Hearing that the junior will sense that you really cared, and be more trusting of the message you're getting across.

Some other useful data that can be deduced from our "match tracking" system is:

- Dynamics of important points (for example break or game points). Whether they were won easily or after a long struggle.

- Serve progression. At what stage of the match the serve (or return) was most effective, or in which square the receiving player always got the return in. This can be an indicator of two things: the weakness of serve in a particular square, or the strength of the returner's forehand or backhand.

By counting the occurrences of the number "1" as opposed to "2" for every player we can easily see what was more effective, serve or return. "1" indicates a point won on serve, "2" suggests a good return.

A near complete picture

The suggested match recording can expose not only technical and tactical level of the player but can give us some ideas about his mental and physical form.

Thus the player who was winning most of the long rallies could be applauded for his good physical shape. A game that goes 13, 2, 2, 4 and 6 might expose the server's lack of physical form. After winning the longest point of the game, he went on to lose two quick points and was able to get "back in the saddle" only towards the end of the game (where there was a 6-stroke point). On the other hand, it can be said to the server's credit that there were no double faults in that game, despite the server being obviously physically drained after the first point. That's an indication of a stable serve!

By paying attention to how the first point in every game was played we might get some information about a competitor's frame of mind. It can perhaps tell us something about his attitude, how charged he was to get into battle gear.

If a player starts each of his own service games with a double fault, it could be a sign of an inability to self-correct, or it might indicate too much dependence on the coach. The most basic self-correction on serve is this: when the ball keeps going into the net, think "chin up", as Terry Rocavert, a famous Australian coach used to say. If the ball sails long time after time, think "snap it down".

Of course the system can be further developed to include other aspects of the game the coach is interested in - by adding an apostrophe after the digit, we can mark a second serve. So 3' would mean that the point started with a second serve.

It's up for a user to adapt it to his needs.

CONCLUSION

The simplicity of this system allows not only a coach, but even an inexperienced parent or a fellow player to follow it, and its diversity fills post-match discussions with colour and meaning.

Thus the score of the match becomes not a final sentence, but a step in the tennis learning process.

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