

ITF Coaches Education Programme

Coaching High Performance Players Course



ADVANCED TACTICS: CONCEPTS, FEATURES AND 5 GAME SITUATIONS

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By the end of this session you should be able to:

- Introduce some winning singles strategy concepts.
- Explain the main features of tactics at top level.
- Elaborate on the main tactical principles and objectives for advanced tournament play in the 5 game situations.



WINNING SINGLES STRATEGY CONCEPTS

Winning Singles Strategy Concepts

- Basic concepts to adhere to in order to insure a winning tactical game plan.
- Determined by the dimensions of the tennis court, which do not change no matter where you are playing in the world.
- Some basic principles to follow with respect to strategy and tactics.
- Use the following 10 concepts in developing your decision-making skills in singles.

Winning Singles Strategy Concepts

- **Concept 1 - Play consistent percentages**
- **Concept 2 - Know the zones**
- **Concept 3 - Understand The Target Areas**
- **Concept 4 - Limit Direction Changes**
- **Concept 5 - Center The Ball**

Winning Singles Strategy Concepts

- **Concept 6 - Attack The Short Ball**
- **Concept 7 - 1-2 Sequence**
- **Concept 8 - D.N.O.** Defensive, neutral, or offensive.
- **Concept 9 - Hold The Line**
- **Concept 10 - Change Gears**

Concept 1 – Play consistent percentages



- Simple plan:
 - Reduce the amount of points lost by unforced errors
 - Increase the amount of points won by forcing your opponents into errors.
- Unforced errors: Mistakes with no opponent's pressure
- Forced errors:
 - Not necessarily mistakes
 - Loss of a point from applied pressure from your opponent.
- In singles, the three most important shots for consistency focus are the serve, return, and approach shot.

Concept 2 -Know the zones



- Use the analogy of a traffic light as follows:
- Red Zone:
 - Baseline area: safe, consistent play
- Yellow Zone:
 - Mid-court area: proceed through, approach
- Green Zone:
 - Forecourt area: go, go for the put-away

Concept 3 – Understand The Target Areas



- The closer to the net the greater the potential angle (130° at the net vs. 19.6° on the baseline).
- Height equals depth:
 - Aim for a 3'-6' window over the net.
- Safe line:
 - Imaginary alley inside singles sideline (for approach shots)
 - Do not necessarily aim for the sideline.
- Safe spots:
 - Predetermined target areas
 - When forced wide, hit high and deep down-the-middle to buy time for recovery.

Concept 4 – Limit Direction Changes



- The difference between down-the-line and crosscourt is very small (19.1°).
- The prospect of committing an error increases when changing direction off a deep crosscourt ball.

Concept 5 – Center The Ball



- The best error to make is long.
- When drilling use the two-bounce concept—
an imaginary line extended from the sideline,
that the second bounce has to land in
between.
- Centering the ball will reduce the opponent's
hitting area and angles.

Concept 6 – Attack The Short Ball



- Determine your short ball range:
 - The number of steps taken to reach a good volleying position (G.V.P.)
 - By the time your approach shot bounces.
- Approach:
 - To the opponent's weaker side: the side they hit higher and longer
 - Approach up the safe line and move through the approach shot to gain proximity to the net
- Effectiveness at the net should result in winning 2 out of 3 points (66%)

Concept 7 – 1-2 Sequence



- Use the 1-2 sequence for the following:
 - Approach and volley
 - Low volley and high volley
 - 1st then 2nd passing shot
 - Serve and volley
- Emphasise winning the point on the second sequence:
 - When an opponent advances to the net, hit your first passing shot at them or to their weaker volley.

Concept 8 – D.N.O.



- When on the baseline:
 - Play according to your position:
 - Defensive is behind the baseline,
 - Neutral is on the baseline and
 - Offensive is just inside the baseline.

Concept 9 – Hold The Line



- On low volleys at the net:
 - The percentage play is to hit down the line
 - Use the safeline target

Concept 10 – Change Gears



- Change tactics and rhythm by using:
 - More or less topspin
 - Underspin backhands
 - More height over the net
 - Stay on the baseline longer
 - Vary speed of the ball
 - Attack only on a very short ball
 - Hit your 1st serve as if it was your 2nd serve
 - Take more time between points



MAIN FEATURES OF TACTICS AT TOP LEVEL

Main features of tactics at top level

- Shot variation
- Court coverage
- Speed and intention of baseline game
- Role of the double handed backhand
- Positioning around the baseline
- Basic tactical intention

Main features of tactics at top level

Shot variation

- Topspin:
 - Previously provided for a far better quality of shot
 - Players are now able to vary the amount of topspin
 - They now hit the balls considerably flatter (lower), deeper and faster
 - The return and passing shot have become increasingly dangerous
 - The precision and safety of all strokes has not suffered with the application of this new topspin

Main features of tactics at top level

Court coverage

- Players are able to cover the opposite side of the court more effectively
- Can play strokes with greater precision and power from any zone of the court
- Have been better able to place their opponents under pressure

Main features of tactics at top level

Baseline game is considerably faster and more aggressive

- Significantly greater physical potential of the players
- Technical perfection,
- Modern racquet technology
- Application of modern movement and training science (biomechanics, anatomy, methodology, physiology, etc.).

Main features of tactics at top level

Powerful Double H. backhand (DHB)

- Have changed match strategy:
 - Baseline game dominates tennis.
- Problems for the serve and volley player:
 - DHB players can hit perfect returns and passing shots from both sides of the body and from all heights.
- DHB players put pressure on their opponents with very fast and aggressive shots in all positions

Main features of tactics at top level

Powerful Double H. backhand (DHB)

- DHB can negotiate all difficult situations by changing to SHB slice or volley
- DHB allows for drive mid court volley
- DHB players have virtually no weaknesses in their groundstroke game

Main features of tactics at top level

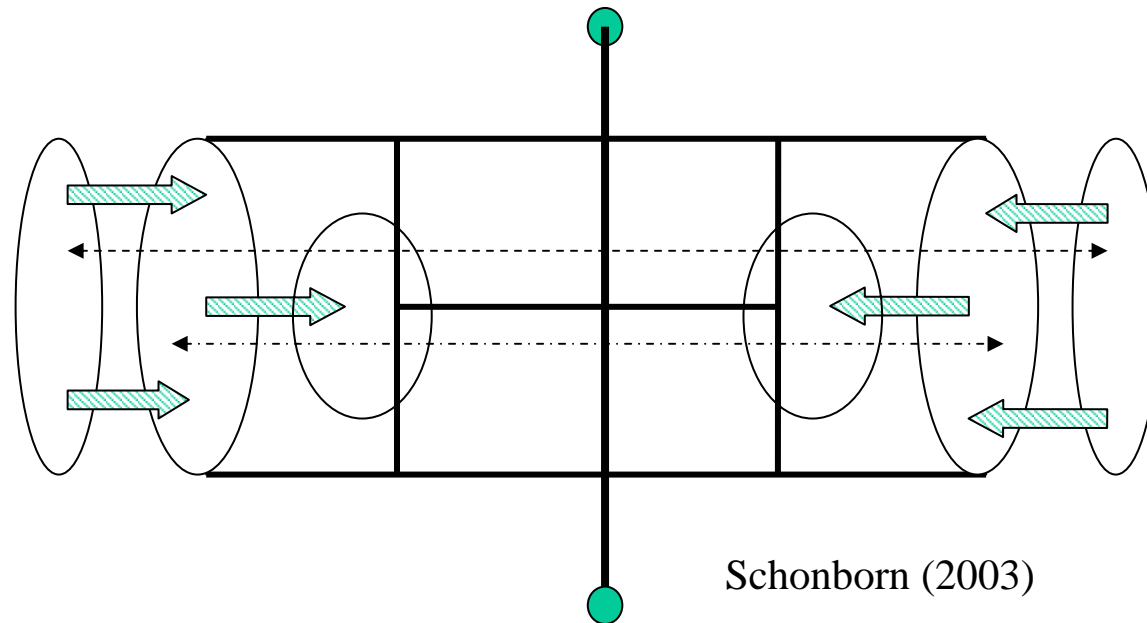
New basic strategy for all top players

- Most players prefer to hit a very hard winner or attempt to force their opponent into error

Main features of tactics at top level

New positioning around the baseline

It shortens the distance between the two players.



Schonborn (2003)



MAIN TACTICAL PRINCIPLES AND OBJECTIVES FOR ADVANCED TOURNAMENT PLAY IN THE 5 GAME SITUATIONS

Tactics at top level

Introduction



- Players are very proficient at executing a game style and the corresponding tactics
- The opponent and the environment become of secondary importance
- The main objective is to simply impose their games on the opposition

Serve tactics

Where and what to serve?



- Many different styles and types of serves on the circuit
- Up until a few years ago, there were many different serve and volleyers.
 - Sampras, Rafter, Edberg, Ivanisevic, Henman, Cash, and Becker all with different service styles and used to different effect with different results.
 - Rafter, Henman and Edberg:
 - The most successful servers of their type due to their quick movement and a style of serve
 - Allows them to create great position at the net

Serve tactics

Where and what to serve?



- Most modern players tend to go for the aces, why?
 - In part to the increasing effectiveness of the return and
 - The slower court surfaces on the world circuit.
- But what if they have a bad day?

First serve tactics

Main features at top level



- In men's tennis, power abounds.
- Very few cannot hit first serves at least 110 miles per hour (mph).
- Regardless of their game style or surface preference, most players can hit aces and unreturnable serves.
- The big servers are those that can consistently hit first serves over 120mph.



First serve tactics

Main features at top level

- The number of players in the upper end of the serving spectrum has continued to rise
- Several players capable of serving speeds over 135mph
- Seems to be little advantage of even harder serves once speeds of around 125mph can be reached.
- Andre Agassi commented that he would rather have 141mph on his racket, than a 120mph ace go by him.

Second serve tactics

Main features at top level



- Very few Grand Slam titles are won by players that do not have a serve that is an effective weapon
- Bigger second serves is the most visible development of modern tactics at top level
- Second serves of 110mph and higher are more and more common.

Serve tactics Percentage



- Points won:
 - The percentage of points won is a telling statistic.
 - Among the top players it is usually over 80%.
- The percentage of first serves in is equally important.
- Second serve:
 - Players have raised the speed of the second serve in order to reap the same benefits.
 - The fact that they are likely to throw in a few more double faults is a matter of calculating the risk vs. the possible gain, and each individual has to find the correct balance.

Serve

Tactical points



- Placement:
 - When in doubt serve to the weaker side.
- Body serve:
 - Often under-used by big servers
 - It gives the receiver a third variable to contemplate
- Receiver:
 - A receiver with an extreme Western grip tends to have difficulty returning wide serves on the forehand.

Serve

Tactical points



- Slice:
 - A hard slice down the centre in the ad court will make the receiver move more than a flatter serve.
- Pattern:
 - Chart the serving patterns to ensure that the player has a reasonably “random” pattern.
- Positioning:
 - Varying the starting position can pay benefits.

Return of serve tactics

Importance on clay courts



- Average games/match:
 - Approximately 30 games are played in a best-of-three-set tennis match.
- Average points/game:
 - 8 points/game= 240 points
- Average shots/point:
 - 6 shots/point= 1440 shots per match=720 shots per player

Return of serve tactics

Importance on clay courts



- Shots/rally:
 - Each player plays 3 shots/ rally
 - One out of three of these shots is either a return or a service
- 15% of all shots are returns.
- On clay courts 30 - 33 % of all points are already over immediately after the return

Return of serve tactics

Importance on hard courts



- Average:
 - 5 shots/ point
 - 1200 shots/match
 - 600 shots/ player
 - 2.5 shots/player/ point
- Out of these, one is either a return or a service:
 - About 20% of all shots are returns!
- 37 - 42 % of all points are over immediately after the return!

Return of serve tactics

Importance



- Points ended with the third shot:
 - Clay courts: Additional 11% of all points
 - Hard courts: Additional 17% of all points
- Points ended with the fourth shot:
 - Clay courts: Additional 6% of all points
 - Hard courts: Additional 11% of all points
- Points ended with the fifth shot:
 - Clay courts: Additional 7% of all points
 - Hard courts: Additional 9% of all points
- Points ended with the sixth shot:
 - Clay courts: Additional 8% of all points
 - Hard courts: Additional 5% of all points

Return of serve tactics

Importance



- As the number of shots per rally increases, the number of points that are decided decreases
- The beginning of every point is, therefore, particularly important

Return of serve tactics

Importance



- The return outcome depends to a great extent on the quality of the service
- The outcome of the third shot (the second shot played by the server), depends on the quality of the return!
- The third shot + the fourth shot (the second shot of the receiver), determine the outcome of 17% of points on clay courts and 28% on hard courts

Return of serve tactics

Importance



- This outcome depends, according to a very high probability, on the quality of the preceding service or return (mid-court winners, put-away volleys, etc.)
- **Altogether about 50 - 70 % of all points in a match depend on the quality of either the service or of the return!**

Return of serve tactics

Importance



- The return contributes to:
 - About 25 - 35 % to the overall success or failure rate!
 - Approximately one third of the match!
- In today's tennis, the quality of the return is of crucial importance for the outcome of the match!
- The outcome of the fifth or the sixth shot:
 - Account for 15% of all shots
 - Depends:
 - On the previous shots
 - Which are very strongly influenced by the service and the return.

Return of serve

Tactical points



- Affected by:
 - Type, speed, and overall quality of the serve
 - Height of the bounce
 - Technical abilities of the receiver.
- Change in the nature of traditional serving patterns:
 - The DHB return
 - Ability of SHB players to play shoulder high balls offensively
- Plan:
 - Have a specific plan on every return
 - May have to resort to emergency shots on many fast serves
 - Be ready to move in after you hit a good return

Return of serve

Tactical points



- A short, high ball is exactly what most players are looking for to attack
- 2nd serves like that makes the return one of the best opportunities to be offensive.
- If either serve is generally weak, an effective receiver will move in and punish the server.

Return of serve

Tactical points



- Direction:
 - Down the centre is under-rated on both returns and baseline play
 - Players tend to do better moving to the ball, rather than moving out of the way of the ball.
- If the ball is served quite wide:
 - Returning down the line to a server staying back is not the best option
 - The same geometry applies to returning serve as baseline rallies.

Baseline game

Tactical points - Positioning



- Primary issue is optimal positioning
- Not too many pro players able to play consistently near the baseline
- Some players had to:
 - Move back off the baseline to avoid losing points outright
 - Hit the ball hard enough to survive in the point
 - Have some forward momentum when the opportunity to attack arises

Baseline game

Tactical points - Defence



- In the past:
 - A blocked shot or floating slice
- Now:
 - High slow topspin
 - So much offence being used in the game
 - Also a great deal of defence
 - Possible that there are less neutral shots being played now than before

Baseline game

Tactical points



- Less running around the backhand than existed just a few years ago
- Due largely to:
 - The evolving ability of players to change direction of the ball with ease
 - Particularly when hitting backhands down the line

Approaching the net

Tactical points



- Approach shots:
 - Largely changed in the men's game
- Players:
 - Very good at moving in to finish shorter, high balls
 - Far less proficient at handling low, short balls

Approaching the net

Tactical points



- Direction:
 - To the forehand is risky since top players have 3 options:
 - Down the line
 - Crosscourt
 - topspin lob
 - Mid-court balls wide to either SHB or DHB tends to reduce the options of the defender
- Do not forget the benefits of hitting down the centre
- The slice is very effective against two-handed and extreme grip players

The advanced net game

Introduction



- In men's tennis, the serve and volley exists and is effective
- Many baseline players are adding volleying skills to their arsenals
- Best volleyers:
 - Avoid pushing volleys to the open court
 - Hit more offensive volleys, particularly backhand cross-courts that are very effective.
 - Just getting the ball deep is not good enough at the professional level

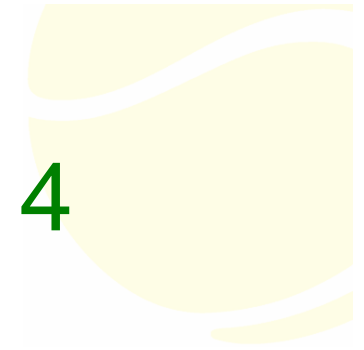
The advanced net game

Where to volley?



- Modern game: Changed the focus for the first volley
- In the past:
 - Quicker courts made life a little easier for the S &V player
- Now:
 - Where to volley on clay or slow hard courts?
 - Simplicity when volleying can often make a huge difference to a player's consistency at the net

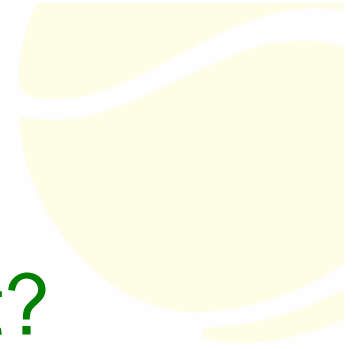
Tactical importance of the first 4 shots: Practice tips



- Rallies very often do not last even 4 shots
- But the winner, passing shot under pressure should be practiced
- These are very often the shots that will make the difference in important matches
- Players should practice the fifth or sixth shot only if they have created a situation where they can finish the point

The advanced net game

How to intercept the passing-shot?



- The answer is experience
- Common positions to which most players like to hit their pass
- Use anticipation (read a player's intention)
- An attacking player only needs one or two of these shots to go over to frustrate a baseliner, who in return, will tend to aim closer to the lines, likely producing more errors