

# Playing *Within* Yourself

The art of maximizing shot effectiveness while minimizing errors



Playing within yourself. What exactly does that mean? Try this: not over hitting, not under hitting, but playing mostly in between.

Maximizing shot making effectiveness while simultaneously minimizing unforced errors is the end-all to performing at one's peak. Race car driver Danica Patrick's take on this balancing act – in a go-fast sport where possible loss of life and limb is a constant – strikes a relevant chord: "We're always right on the brink of crashing." Back on court, go for your shots, but know your limitations. Being outplayed and outgunned by a better player or team is one thing, but at the end of the day, a self-destructive pattern of unforced errors leaves a very bad taste.

A number of components contribute to tweaking the most out of your game, win or lose. Shot margins-to-the-lines and margins-to-the-net particularly represent the PWY core, whether you're on offense, defense, just playing "rally ball" neutral, red hot or stone cold.

The lines on the court merely inform you of what's in and what's out. A different set of boundaries, pictured in your mind's eye, should represent *your* realistic placement goals. "Play calling," or visualizing where the ball is intended to land should provide a bit of safety, be forgiving and, as a result, actually promote aggressiveness. It might be surprising to learn that Roger Federer's self-proclaimed greatest ability is just that: "...recognizing what's coming and then seeing my shot. I think I do that faster than anybody."

Committing to safe parameters – that's venturing no closer than 3-5 feet from the lines (still a very effective shot!) – will

immediately reduce overzealous, needless, frustrating mistakes that can ruin your day. It will also foster a more relaxed brand of ball striking – playing freely – that eliminates the self-induced pressure to hit well-intentioned but unforgiving thread-the-needle bulls-eyes in the corner, for example. If your shot does get away from you despite good "quarterbacking," the built-in safety often results in a shot that may be dangerously close to going out, but that often wins the point. This is the unintended reward of PWY. Always act like you meant it, but don't buy into it!

Understand that even a very average club player makes the majority of their mistakes either in the net, where there is zero chance for success, or long, with shots passing over the net at too great a height for the pace they were hit, causing them to sail beyond the baseline. Errors made to the left or the right of the sidelines are comparatively few and far between. Yet, when I ask aspiring players how much they intended to clear the net by, particularly after they've dumped one into the net or hit the back windscreen, it's not at all unusual for them to pause and then glaze over without a definitive response. Being unaware of vertical intentions is a recipe for poor play.

Realize that since you can see through the net, the fact that it's a formidable barrier is easily forgotten. If it were a brick wall instead, there would be far fewer mistakes made in the net or beyond the baseline, and no one would have to be made aware of the necessity of visualizing a "flight plan." It would be that obvious. In fact, if you were to stand at the baseline and imagine that brick wall net, none



of the court lines would be visible...unless you were John Isner. The net is not your friend, so turn it into a positive by making use of it as a “fly-over” reference point, or connecting dot A above the net to the dot B on the court.

Safe margins-to-the-net intentions come into play on every shot. Instantaneously determining your intended amount of clearance (like Federer does) is a blend of several components. Shot trajectory – varying rainbow topspin, floaty underspin and laser-like balls hit flat – along with shot speed and your court position all factor in to zeroing in on the degree of clearance that fits each opportunity.

Playing to the score – by always knowing the score before the next point is played – also plays an important role in shot selection. With a 40-0 lead, for example, margins can be narrowed since you have “one to waste.” Go big if you’ve got an inviting ball. Why not! Flatten your shot out with less net clearance, and go ahead and flirt with the lines. Some of the time you’ll succeed and make a winner, or cause a forced error. When *you* make the error, no worries; you’ve still got two game points and, believe me, a message has been sent that you will jump on any meatballs served up.

Then there are the pivotal “swing points,” where it’s 15-30 and you need to level the score at 30-30 or fall precariously behind to 15-40. Here’s where you pull back a bit and engage opponents with bigger margins all around, along with slightly less pace, looking to draw an unforced error by luring an opponent into playing outside of themselves. Commenting on playing Serena Williams at Wimbledon, Lindsey Davenport said: “Serena is the best at taking

pace off her shots and concentrating instead on placement in key moments.” Other score lines dictate their own strategies and tactics along, factoring in how well you’re playing at the time. Adapt to the task at hand.

It’s interesting to note that many are not cognizant that, with the obvious exception of the game winner, the very first point played in each game is the most important. That first point is instrumental in setting the tone for how the game will play out. Statistics reveal that those who win the first point, among players of similar ability, are far more likely to be successful, not to mention the impacting built-in psychological advantage. This is *not* the time to “waste one” as so many do by playing a loose, out-on-the-jazz first point that immediately puts them in a hole.

Be real. Make them play. Stick to it. 