

the joy of --- PRACTICE

In this age of ever-expanding organized play – United States Tennis Association leagues, independent local leagues, regional K-Swiss competition, statewide National Tennis Rating Program events, Senior Olympics, regularly inked-in games at clubs and parks – the pure joy and satisfaction that can be experienced through practice, with a partner *or* completely by yourself, has an increasingly faint pulse. Even among aspiring players, it's in danger of flat lining in favor of playing match after match after match.

Even the pre-match warm-ups – tennis' unique dynamic of warming-up *with* the opponent – have been impacted in all this competition, in part, by television coverage that has really stepped up in the last few years. Viewers finally have the luxury of seeing the five-minute pro tour warm-up, including serves, that's beginning to be shown in more and more telecasts. Good for showing the cooperation between the players about to do battle; bad for subliminally indicating that it's all you need. The 45-minute to one-hour warm-ups that are not shown –which are *always* utilized by professionals well before their actual match time – influence club players to embrace the express warm-up example.

Since convincing others to take the time to practice with you is challenging at best, practicing on your own is often the club players only option. And individual practice has evolved into being perceived as strictly limited to using pay-for-play ball machines, which feature an array of bells and whistles that are an operational mystery to most. It can be a tedious and often unsatisfying business that involves first getting it out onto a court and then tweaking the

settings for speed, trajectory, spin, shot interval and direction to meet *your* needs while occasionally having to deal with the dreaded jammed ball.

Unfortunately, the venerable backboard or hitting wall has become, as a direct result, an endangered species heading rapidly towards extinction. It's too bad really, because what could be more interactive in its cozy confines? Just walk up and play. It's user friendly and fast paced. And it's a great workout with the inherent development of ball watching, footwork, split stepping, racket preparation and margin to the net visualization skills.

More disturbing, the days of small children first embracing the game by gravitating to these backboards with a beat-up racket and one used ball are mostly gone. This is not a development that the stewards of the game, who constantly advance the rallying cry to “grow the game,” appear to recognize. How many great champions of the past spent hour after hour banging away all by themselves? And how many older recreational adult players still playing today got their start on a wall? Simple was good.

The forgotten beauty and intrinsic value of solo practice, accommodated so perfectly by backboards then and by ball machines now (if accessible), remains just that: you can play by yourself. The hugely attractive appeal of the same dynamic in golf, and the insight by golf's stewards to offer designated practice areas and putting greens at just about all courses public and private, encourages solo practice and simultaneously promotes the game. Golf gets it.



If a backboard — think well-suited, three-wall outdoor racquetball courts sometimes found at parks and colleges — or a ball machine are not readily available, no worries! Drop-hitting, or “dead ball” practice, along with practicing first and second serves, can absolutely represent some of the most rewarding, pleasurable and productive time spent refining your core strokes and an accompanying positive mind set. Calmly dropping balls in your forehand and backhand wheelhouse from different court positions will enhance that all-important feel-for-the-ball as well as open up pathways to experience a zen-like focus. Commonly regarded as “being in the zone,” it’s the end-all elusive state of mind that all players seek, but one that becomes increasingly difficult to experience when you’ve become relegated to just playing matches under pressure *ad infinitum*.

Even multimillion-dollar baseball players, when slumping at the plate, practice hitting off a tee, or enlist a kneeling hitting coach positioned in close proximity to gently toss up meatballs in their wheelhouse to get their hitting stroke back. Simple is still good.

If you do find a wall, know going in that they all have their own unique rebound quotient. Some, the ones typically constructed of concrete block, are so solid that you can approximate the normal baseline distance from the net — about 12 giant steps, or 36 feet, from the wall — and play the ball as usual on one bounce. Others, made of wood, often produce a shorter rebound requiring two bounces to simulate the same ideal hitting distance. Bring a yardstick or tape measure along with a piece of chalk to make a

small but visible line on the wall representing the top of the net (3 feet) as a reference point.

When a ball machine is available and affordable, forget trying to sort out the multiple shot programs that might be featured. Stick with simple, one particular shot at a time. Thinking doubles for example, place the machine on the deuce side at the baseline, delivering cross court shots that you return back to the machine, deep. Then, by moving the unit slightly left or right, create balls coming in at sharper angles to practice hitting on the run out on the wing, or the inside out backhand or the run-around by jamming yourself. As an option, experiment with the topspin and underspin controls to become more adept at handling the bounce characteristics of those shots.

The serve, neglected despite being the most important shot in the game, typically becomes one’s least-practiced shot. Regularly working on your serve in solitude will groove it and build confidence. When you do practice it, once you’ve warmed-up, go to the next step and effectively simulate real play pressure by playing one set against yourself. Alternating sides as usual, keep score by awarding yourself the point if you have placed a first or second serve into the service box quadrant that you visualized, or award your alter ego the point if you have failed to do so.

Yes, you’re supposed to prevail over your other self 6-0. That’s the joy of practice! 