

Defending the Court by Reading their Mail



The outcome of every single tennis point played is always the same: the last player or team to successfully hit the ball in the court wins the point every single time. No ifs, ands or buts about it. Also, it's best to also keep in mind that there are no extra points awarded for attempting difficult shots and no penalties for those who never attempt anything more than high flying floaters.

One needs only to flashback to this summer's US Open final between Rafael Nadal and Novak Djokovic, where there were several 30-stroke rallies and numerous can-you-match-this extended exchanges. Aggressive, all-out court defending — particularly when parrying opponent's more penetrating and well placed shots — becomes the name of the game at any level. Perseverance prevails.

In clubland, offensive skills develop far more slowly than defensive ones. Clearly there is a much higher difficulty factor involved in quick strike, thread-the-needle tennis to attempt an ambitious, outright win versus being mostly motivated to hit one more reasonably paced and placed ball than the other guy or team.

But I'm certainly not suggesting becoming a "pusher" — the dreaded P-word — or one who lobs incessantly and without ever revealing a hint of intentional, aggressive ball striking, even when an inviting opportunity presents itself. Commenting on these types of players in a Nike print ad campaign a few years ago, John McEnroe said, "If they arrested people for being annoying on the tennis court, they'd be looking at doing 15 to life."

Always play aggressively — by actually trying to play the game the way it was meant to be played — but well within your shot-making skill level, with safe and realistic margins to both the net and the lines.

Again noting the momentous Nadal-Djokovic encounter, the Serb, more than anything in the end, outlasted and wore down Nadal — previously thought impossible — in four grueling sets, prompting the Spaniard to say, "He's enough confident, is always thinking, one more ball, one more ball." Marian Vajda, Djokovic's coach, refers to this blow-for-blow tactic as utilizing "working shots" for as long as it takes until an opponent is worked out of position, then allowing a fairly routine placement to finish the job.

"Tennis is now all about defense," said Mark Kovacs, a United State Tennis Association sports scientist. Sam Tanenhaus, New York Times tennis columnist, had a similar take, "The dominant of the moment are not creative shot makers like McEnroe and Roger Federer, who end points quickly, but counterpunchers like Nadal and Djokovic, highly athletic versions of the 'grinders' from the past."

The advice I offer club players, those who tend to impatiently get out-on-the-jazz trying to be too offensive is to: a) expect the ball to come back; and b) and not even mind. How can you win the battle if you're unwilling to engage the enemy and make them play — heck, let them play — without flinching or panicking?

Of course clubbers are not as fit or fleet footed as tour professionals, so "reading" opponent's shots, or more specifically, predicting where the ball will be struck in relation to their body position, will create an all important jump-on-the-ball and compensate for being slower afoot than the big boys and girls.

In the accompanying image, although viewed from the side, one gets the concept of developing "triple-vision," the ability to focus directly on the ball while, through a layered periphery, still being able



to “see” a player’s stroke path and their court position simultaneously in order to read and better anticipate an opponent’s shot direction as early as possible.

The first step in developing this shot-reading skill, very much a learned one, is to become very cognizant of consistently tracking the ball in both directions: into your point of impact and then, once the ball is struck, tracking it all the way to the opponent’s impact point. Since the human eye isn’t good enough to maintain a 100 percent connection completely through these ball flights, the brain joins in and taps into all, if you will, existing ball flight data on your inner hard drive to work in concert with the eyes to recognize and lock onto familiar flight patterns.

Unfortunately, too many are guilty of impulsively looking up at the court or opponent precisely at their moment of impact, which not only adversely alters their swing path — the head moves, the body follows — and the smoothness of the racket’s acceleration-deceleration, but also disconnects them from both the opponent and the ball itself! Interestingly, the aforementioned “creative shot maker” Federer serves as an excellent model to aspire to in that he keeps his head still at impact well into the follow through and then looks up in plenty of time — even at the bullet speed of his groundies — to reconnect with the ball as it approaches the opponent’s hitting zone.

Once reconnected and focused primarily on the ball — the opposing player “seen” only in his periphery — and after having seen his opponent previously play a number of forehands and backhands early on, he can anticipate with regularity approximately where the racket face will be positioned at impact.

That stated, forget about a well intentioned cue I hear among players periodically, “Watch their racket.” There is no way the human eye can follow a racket speeding through an impact zone. But one can estimate, after a bit of trial and error observation, where the racket will meet the ball. It’s all about the ball. And disregard those “guessing” comments constantly repeated by television announcers to describe how players successfully make great saves when in difficult, but doable, straits versus those when they actually are sitting ducks and do randomly guess to move to one side or the other with a hope and a prayer. Big difference.

Definitely not to be left out of the mix, the split-step becomes the necessary physical component if successful “reads” are going to be fully taken advantage of. Landing your split-step at the precise moment of opponent’s impact lends itself to quick, energized first steps that will pay huge dividends in covering more court more easily and also trigger better hitting positions for your own shot response!

The resulting movement fluidity, in synergy with maximized anticipation through highly evolved ball tracking, will serve to marshal your focusing skills by shutting off the completely ineffective thinking (guessing) where they’re going to hit it syndrome, create a more relaxed perception of slowed action and result in greater court coverage with less wear and tear on the body, all while continually giving opponents one more opportunity to self-destruct.

And by the way, no worries, reading other people’s mail, at least on the tennis court, is perfectly legal. 