

Embracing the Shot-Making Chain

Players serious about their games are absolutely correct when they tell me, with predictable frustration, that “there’s too much to think about” when they first become exposed to mechanical ball-striking flaws and are motivated to improve. When recognizing the long-term limitations of sketchy technique, corrective fundamental information — even when offered in small doses — can be potentially overwhelming and result in shot-making paralysis through over-analysis.

Nonetheless, recognition remains the first step in game improvement. Yet many misperceive the improvement process. They think that since they made the effort to seek out professional help, and typically experienced an immediate improvement on the lesson court, they’ll be able to jump right back into match play, with all its considerable pressures, and retain the new skills their muscles have not yet memorized. Hardly realistic.

World No. 1 golfer, Rory McIlroy, who struggled mightily early in the 2013 season, explained trying to right himself this way: “This year, we knew it was a little bit of a problem, and we were trying to find the balance between making a bit of a swing change and finding some playability in it so that I can actually go out there and play and not think about it. But we realized there are no quick fixes in golf.”

Nor are there any in tennis either.

Players can become disappointed when they don’t realize the miracle match-play transformation they expected following the quick success they had in that first session with their pro. When they return for a follow-up, it’s not unusual for them to declare they’re

not playing at the level they expected, sometimes stating that they’re “playing worse.”

Unfortunately, an old, misleading adage is still around: “After a lesson, you get worse before you get better.” Because, despite qualifiers from their pros regarding the necessity of non-match play practice repetition *before* jumping back in the fray, that’s often what happens.

When you find yourself *thinking* about your new correctives in the middle of a match — precisely because you have not put in the necessary practice time to absorb a new motor skill into your random-access memory (e.g. getting your racket ready sooner or retaining your newly re-balanced off-arm position on your forehand follow through) — you’ll become conflicted and won’t be able to walk and chew gum.

Thinking about the “how-to’s” in the shot-making moment at 30-40 won’t work. You can *only* monitor mechanics kinesthetically, maintaining a soft-grip tension, using a full range of motion backhand follow through or managing racket-head speed and the like for optimal results. Play by feel, if you will.

Conversely, left-brain analytical thinking about the mechanical necessities of the game in the midst of striking a ball makes it extremely difficult to keep your eyes fully focused on the ball — eye function is closely linked to which part of your brain you’re accessing. And yes, this very possibly results in you playing worse.

It is, however, empowering to know that in live action, the very same kinetic sequence of events occurs every single time, which

means getting into a groove is very doable when the process is understood physically, technically, mentally and emotionally. Tennis coach and humorist Vic Braden used to smilingly advise us that the key to tennis success was, "Being able to successfully hit the same old boring shot in the court over and over again."

Q: How many practice reps does it take to "own" a new or altered technique?

A: Unknown, but a lot. Not to mention the variable from player to player. But with sufficient practice, the shot-making chain can become second nature, a literal no-brainer while you, liberated from a ball-striking checklist, can focus on the ball and visualize instead. Note: daily rebooting in a diligent warm-up is always an absolute necessity.

Let's keep in mind that tour professionals practice hit — not play matches! — practically every single day to ensure playing freely and *unconsciously*...and to keep improving.

The sequential ball-striking process, work in progress or not, always begins with tracking your own ball's path into an opponent's racket. At their impact, you have landed your split step, and, upon recognizing their shot-response direction, you begin turning and preparing your racket simultaneously while initiating position for intercept.

In this first fractional moment — a 3.5 player has approximately .91 seconds to both assess and re-direct a 60 m.p.h. approaching ball — you "read" the speed, trajectory, spin (topspin, underspin, no spin), predict where it will touchdown and commit to how you're going to play it.

One of the three primary reads is realizing that the ball is approaching in a relatively low arc over the net and won't have an especially deep landing. Its resulting bounce won't be very high due to its low angle of descent, and you'll have plenty of longitudinal spacing to allow it to descend into your knee-to-thigh-high wheelhouse, everyone's favorite, most anatomically neutral hitting zone.

Another is noting an incoming ball's high rainbow trajectory well over the net (with or without topspin), but still with a landing point that's not particularly deep in the court. The steep angle of descent into the court will produce a high bounce that allows for an opportunity to play the shot at the ball's apex, or around shoulder high. Not only

does this take time away from your opponent's positional recovery, it also eliminates the long-term, self-limiting habit of some players — especially in doubles — who choose to back up, often well beyond the baseline, to allow the ball to drop into that ideal low zone. Active net players love these easy to poach, one-dimensional ball strikers.

The other primary read is realizing that a shot is approaching very deep (with or without pace), necessitating that you're going to have to play the ball on-the-rise — still in front! — immediately after bouncing shin-to-knee high, at times a half-volley ground stroke if it's in very close proximity to the baseline or your position.

Once the read is made, visualization, or what you're going to do with your response, registers in a flash. This "flight plan" includes both direction *and* margin to the net, the latter being where the majority of unforced errors occur. This is the right brain *thinking in pictures*, which does not interfere with visual ball tracking.

Then, with two-thirds of that .91 second shot making time frame still unused, you arrive mentally clear and unhurried in position to breathe through the shot you've committed to make, unencumbered by over thinking and indecision, and recover into the next appropriate defending or attacking position while tracking your own ball out — not looking up at the opponent — into their racket. And so it goes. Over and over.

Dialing this sequence back-in from the first ball struck every single day will pay big dividends in not only calming and quieting your mind, but also putting an end to any hamstrung, reflexive, counterproductive over-thinking that's trying too hard to win, or afraid to lose, especially in those pivotal match moments when the pressure is on. ■■



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