

Getting the Warm-Up Right

Harbor Fitness

Story by Jak Beardsworth

I have no idea why so many players perceive the warm-up as a waste of time, especially those playing doubles. Why rush through the warm-up in order to play a lousy first set?

There are a number of reasons why club players, even experienced ones, misperceive how the pre-match warm-up should proceed, resulting in well-intentioned but hopelessly inefficient approaches.

First and foremost, club professionals should be held accountable for turning their collective backs on it and failing to address the long-established warm-up protocol with their players.

Second, viewers are seldom permitted to see the warm-up on television — which would be an excellent learning tool — prior to the start of a pro tour match since commercials take precedent.

Third, many players in warm weather climates are transplants from up North, who, being used to paying a premium for indoor court time, speed through the warm-up in order to “get their money’s worth” before the next group bell rings.

Fourth, there are the trite attempts at humor to proactively end the warm-up as soon as possible. Here are my least favorite three: 1) Let’s hurry-up and start before I’m too tired to play; 2) Let’s start before I use up all my good shots; and 3) Can we get started since I’m not going to get any better.

Now that I’m getting warmed-up on the topic, here are two additional issues that also undermine a productive warm-up: 1) the number of balls used and 2) poor sportsmanship.

The best professional doubles players on the planet would never attempt to use only three balls to warm-up four players. No wonder clubbers are in a hurry to begin their match and end the frustration. Use two cans!

Regarding the sportsmanship component, the warm-up is expected to be a cooperative effort with both players hitting to each other, not away from each other. It’s not placement practice. That’s even in U.S. Tennis Association Code.

Proper Warm-up Protocol



Back to the actual pre-match protocol. Whether you’re warming up in Paris or southwest Florida, there is indeed an understood universal script. First, ground strokes are exchanged. Then one individual takes the initiative and comes to the net for some volleys. Before giving up the net, that player asks for “some up” in order to get some overhead practice. Once that individual retreats back to the baseline, that signals the other player to follow suit with their volley and overhead practice.

Typically, once volley and overhead practice is completed, no further groundies are hit back and forth. Now players begin warming up their serves. But first make sure that your partner is ready to serve as well. Do not unilaterally agree with your opponents to begin serving practice. Consult with your partner first, and, if time constraints allow, stall a bit for your partner's sake.

When you're taking your practice serves — from both the deuce and ad court, please — the receiving player should stop, or catch, those serves, gather them up and serve them back. This is not return of serve practice. For every serve you return you are giving up one of your practice serves in the time frame allotted. However, if you feel that you have dialed in your serve to your satisfaction, and practice serves are still being taken, then feel free to get a handle on your return as well.

If you encounter an opponent who immediately begins returning your serves without hitting any themselves, simply ask them, "Aren't you going to take any?" Since they can't have it both ways, it's up to you to explain the protocol to them instead of being victimized by ignorance or otherwise.

All practice serves must be taken before the start of the match. Once the first point of the match is played, there's no more practice permitted of any kind.

Incidentally, the spin of the racket — to choose serve, return, side or defer — should take place before the beginning of the warmup so that you warm-up on the same side of the court that the first game is played on. Since sun and wind can play a role, this decision should be carefully considered. Nothing like warming-up on the south side, spinning the racket and ending up playing the first game from the north side where the sun can be problematic at certain times of the day.

Unfortunately, there will be times when all goes wrong, when you receive no cooperation from your opponents at the start of the warm-up even after both requesting and explaining it. Thankfully, it's within the rules to announce to them that you would prefer to warm-up directly with your partner instead. Try buying them a soda after the match because it's likely that they're now going to get a bit huffy about their own boorish behavior.

Positioning is Paramount

Where to position yourself for the first few balls of the day is paramount to getting off to a good start. The most functional place for those initial forehands and backhands is smack dab in the middle of no-man's land, or at three-quarters court. This spacing between you and your opponent is now sufficient enough to allow for a full stroke through the ball, albeit a relatively slow one, to capture that special, optimal, world class, tactile feel for the ball on the strings. Re-inventing your timing and rhythm on a daily basis is never to be taken for granted in a game as finite as tennis.

Players choosing to begin at the service line, or worse yet in the middle of the service box volleying right off the bat, are in complete conflict with developing good feel as early on as possible. Sudden, quick ball poking undermines any efforts to create fluidity. Also, avoid immediately sprinting full-out in order to play the ball on one bounce. It's the warm-up! Allowing a shorter ball to bounce twice creates a considerably better practice opportunity, not to mention the fact that it's considerably kinder to your still-cold muscles and joints.

In an inter-club league match, you may be expected to warmup beginning from the baseline, a good reason to arrive early and warm-up for the pre-match warm-up if courts are available. If not, meet your partner well before your match time at another location. It will make a huge difference in how you start the match, and that can influence the eventual outcome in a big way.