

MAXIMIZING

the Health Benefits of

Tennis



I can't think of another activity that can keep you fit, from head-to-toe, in your post-school years like tennis. Frequent tennis players of all ages, including those playing mostly doubles but playing it dynamically, enjoy a unique health advantage over their sedentary peers.

Despite the obvious benefits inherent in the sport — cardiovascular, cardiorespiratory improvement, enhanced muscle tone, increased stamina, bone mass enhancement, flexibility, agility, balance and even brain function — there are a number of all too common pitfalls that can seriously undermine these gains.

The most serious of these is the near epidemic of breath holding as one is in the act of striking their shot. I regularly explain to clients who have improved enough to engage in long, physically demanding exchanges, “If you're going to play that well, you're going to have to breathe!”

Grunting, as in audibly exhaling through the ball-racket collision, is often negatively viewed by the unenlightened, but is absolutely necessary in warding off the onset of oxygen debt and the resulting premature fatigue. Repeatedly holding one's breath on every shot leads to unnecessarily elevated and potentially dangerous heart rates, not to mention the ill effects on physical play performance and the poor decision making that's a byproduct of the diminished brain function that goes along with it.

Lack of quality footwear is another example of where devoted, well intentioned players put themselves at risk unnecessarily. Inadequate or worn-out tennis shoes will ultimately take a toll,

possibly a severe one if left unattended, on ankles, knees, hips and the lower back.

In evaluating your current shoes, it isn't how long you've been wearing them, it's how many hours you've played in them. Once the insoles are compressed to the point where they've lost their cushioning, you begin to pay a price. It's a slow process, and it will sneak up on you. I urge you to pay close attention and notice when the smooth, comfortable ride you once enjoyed is no more.

Then, of course, there's the physically self-destructing warm-up habits of so many otherwise intelligent individuals who start their day positioned at full-court, immediately hitting balls at match speed while simultaneously sprinting for every ball in order to play it on one bounce. There is no “warm-up.” People treat their automobiles better than that! Starting up slowly, deliberately and methodically positioned in no-man's land, choosing to *not* chase errant balls and even playing warm-up balls on the second or third bounce will collectively allow your hitting machine to comfortably ease into the task at hand without experiencing the always lurking negative physical consequences.

Many players greatly underestimate the importance of an inexpensive, fresh over grip, *at least* every other time you play, but ideally every time out, to contribute to a relatively relaxed upper body. Clean grips, especially in warm weather, create optimal hand-on-racket friction that allows for low grip muscle tension resulting in improved shot making and reduced hand, wrist, elbow and shoulder injuries. Old, dirty, greasy grips encourage handle strangling and



inefficient muscling of the ball. I prefer the white rubbery type that clearly show the fast dirt build-up and signal a change.

Monitoring one's pulse rate during play represents yet another tool in maximizing both your health and your performance. Starting points prematurely while experiencing a highly elevated heart rate, or beginning a point with an understimulated rate, will both work against your success. If, after a long and grueling exchange, you find your heart jumping out of your chest, use all of the 25 seconds allotted in between points for recovery. Go to the towel like the pros do; they're not doing it for effect. Additionally, breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth to optimize that recovery before starting the point.

Conversely, if you're involved in a match that's slow going with quick points and very few extended rallies, and your heart rate is at the low end of the spectrum – less than 100 bpm – you'll find yourself in an under-aroused athletic state. This results in sufficiently sluggish and lackluster play, especially in terms of footwork and focus. When this is the case, energize your feet while shuffling in place just as you see the pros doing so often. This will elevate your pulse up to a more optimal 115 bpm in order to begin the next point more physically engaged. A pulse monitor is an ideal way to quickly get in tune with your actual status while playing.

Now a word on stretching. Cold muscles are not stretchable! It's not uncommon to witness players walking on the court, stone cold, and immediately launching into a ballistic stretching routine. Wrong! Your muscles have to be warmed-up *before* stretching or

you can actually do damage. Try jogging very slowly around the court or parking lot for 2–3 minutes to elevate your core body temperature before doing any static stretching exercises. And don't over stretch. Work well within your range of motion at that specific time, not what you would like your range of motion to be, or what it was yesterday. Stretching should be comfortable and enjoyable. Just observe your cat or dog stretching. Clearly it feels very good to them, and it should to you as well.

Stretching after play is also important, if not more important, in order to reduce the degree of any stiffness experienced later in the day or the next day.

If you do injure yourself during play, typically a pulled muscle or a back gone into spasm, stop immediately and ice the affected area. Continue icing as often as possible for the remainder of the day.

Sure, you're a fighter and you're going to want to push on and not "ruin the match" for everyone else. But true friends and teammates will understand, accept your predicament and offer encouragement to stop play and begin treatment immediately in order to minimize the seriousness of the injury. Continuing to play will most certainly exacerbate the injury and extend your time away from the game for longer than you thought possible at the time. 