

Playing with a Live Arm

We've all seen it. Junior players barely over 5 feet tall, weighing in at 100 pounds with string bean arms and legs, launching shots off the forehand or backhand side with startling power. How do they do it? How do they generate so much raw power?

On occasion, even at the highest level, we see the same dynamic. Witness Alexandr Dolgoplov, the exciting young Ukrainian, all 5 feet 9 inches and 150 pounds of him, who has risen in the Association of Tennis Professionals rankings to #21 in the world, competing against the game's very best, just about all of whom are mostly well over 6 feet tall and nearly 200 pounds of solid muscle. Just think of the best American men, all in or around the top 20: Mardy Fish and Andy Roddick, 6 feet 3 inches; Sam Querrey 6 feet 5 inches; John Isner 6 feet 10 inches.

How does the comparative little guy hold his own with the big boys?

The answer lies, in great measure, in the ability to play with a very "live arm." For some, it's inherent in being gifted genetically, like Dolgoplov. As of late, the television commentators have been gushing over his special talents, particularly in light of his diminutive stature. On the women's side, there is no "livelier" player than the smallish 2010 French Open champion Francesca Schiavone. If size was a major part of the ranking equation, they would surely both be the world #1's.

But for the majority, at any level and of any physical stature, it's in the commitment to develop efficient ball-striking technique. Regarding the aforementioned youngsters, it's also found in their youthful fearlessness, often a product of not yet being intimidated by the possibility of negative consequences. "Losing is not my enemy; fear of losing is my enemy." ~Rafael Nadal.

Pete Sampras, approaching 40 years of age, ancient by today's standards, can still bring heat on serve, the shot that catapulted him, as a slightly built youngster, to becoming U.S. Open champion at age

19. His legendary running forehand was, and remains, a weapon to be contended with as evidenced in his recent results versus current tour players on the exhibition circuit, including a win over #11 Fish in an exhibition prior to the French Open. How does he do it? It's the live arm that keeps on giving!

So what defines a live arm, and what do club players need to understand about motor skills in order to liven-up their arms to play bigger, and easier, at any age?

Live arms are, more than anything, loosey goosey. Relaxed muscles are smart. As a direct result, they are fast on call, explosive and free wheeling, which ultimately translates to being tennis powerful. They facilitate not only controllable, smart racket speed — essential in delivering shots with power and placement — but also allow a heavy racket "swing weight" that dominates the ball-racket collision to produce big shots that can be stunningly effortless. This is why those 100-pound junior players can generate such unexpected "gas" with a racket in their hand.

How does one foster a relaxed hitting arm? Becoming cognizant of the fact that a human arm weighs approximately 6 percent of your total body weight is a good place to start. So use it! Let's say that the average man weighs approximately 175 pounds, and the average woman 135. That equates to fully juiced arms that weigh about 10 and 8 pounds, respectively. That limb weight, in unencumbered motion, can become a big part of the mix for striking tennis balls "big" with sticks that have scale weights of less than one pound.

This can only be achieved through a relatively low grip tension that's enabled by early preparation on all the shots, and in a nicely synchronized service motion. Note: none of this is going to be very



doable, especially in warm, humid weather, if you complacently remain one of those players who neglect their hitting tool and seldom replace dirty, wet, slippery grips. The resulting low hand-on-racket friction coefficient absolutely will trigger racket strangulation. And tight muscles are dumb.

Gripping your racket in a relaxed fashion will allow you to generate a serious ball striking kinetic chain — a consistently sequential transfer of effective force from one body part and segment to another, culminating in a powerful but relatively effortless racket-on-ball moment — that’s readily replicated. Your arm goes live!

Recognize that any shot really begins at the moment of impact as opposed to ending there. Question: In an ideal world, when do those balls that you’ve hit particularly well leave the racket face? Answer: When they’re ready. Stay out of it. Stop muscling the ball. Once embraced, smoothly accelerating and decelerating strokes are born. Less becomes more.

It’s impossible not to notice that there are individuals out there that drive with one foot on the gas and one foot on the brake at the same time, which exemplifies an obvious perfect storm of opposing forces. Forward movement is still possible, but impeded and slowed. Swinging a tennis racket is no different.

As top player Fernando Gonzalez said a couple of months back on the Tennis Channel about the way in which you always have to play in order to do your best: “You have to play freely!” Learning to trust letting it go — the arm-racket connection — is the best chance for a positive outcome, and, more importantly for aspiring club players, to then be able to realize continuing ball striking improvement until the day arrives when the wheels fall off and you’re forced into croquet.

Of course, arms can go “dead,” too, almost always a result of long-term over use, even if your mechanics are stellar. Take U.S. Davis Cup Captain Jim Courier, for example, a finely tuned athlete, two-time French Open champion and perennial top 10 player. Towards the end of his career, he had to take months off from the game because of what he identified as a “dead arm.” And dead arms happen in clubland more than is realized.

There are those individuals who love playing so much that it’s not unusual for them to play 6–7 days a week. Since tennis is definitely a very physically cumulative activity, striking ball after ball after ball, days on end, can result in a dead arm sneaking up on you. Rushing out and getting a new racket when you’re feeling flat is usually not the answer.

One day a week off is absolutely essential. Two is optimal. A good schedule, if possible, is three days of play followed by a day off, then two more days of play followed by another day off, or any variation of that theme. Some maintain a routine of playing Monday–Friday and taking the weekends off. Fine.

So if you’re going to make those feel good, effortless, penetrating shots more consistently, take a lesson from a Cuban friend of mine, a hard working, always trying harder kind of individual who, at times, would fall victim to attempting to jam square pegs into round holes to play bigger. One day, following an effortlessly struck laser beam forehand, he rattled off something in Spanish with a big now-I-get-it grin. Upon asking him for a translation of his obvious epiphany, he happily explained with emphasis: “First you relax; then you do nothing!” 