

# Bobble Heads

## A Guide to Understanding Ball Watching

# Swivel Heads

It is well established that there is a big difference between “sight” and “vision,” and that we, at best, utilize only about 30–40 percent of our visual potential. Factor in that athletes in ball sports, at all levels, are required to focus on small spheres moving very quickly through the air — far more demanding than simple static or “near point” acuity — and you’ve got a daunting task that is, ironically, often taken mostly for granted.

The great baseball hitter Manny Ramirez, when asked about his seemingly preternatural ability to successfully connect a round bat with a round ball being thrown at him by trickster pitchers also armed with raw power, unassumingly quipped, “I see the ball. I hit the ball.”

Compared to the ball-striking skills of a great tennis shot maker — think Roger Federer — club tennis players routinely sabotage themselves in the same stick-on-ball, moment-of-truth dynamic. They are inadvertent victims of bobble-heading (suddenly looking up) and swivel-heading (rapidly turning back). They have “seen” the ball, but they have failed to fully “track” it. Ball game over.

There’s more. The eyes are absolutely affected by outside influences like stress and fatigue, both serious detriments in undermining one’s performance. The stress of the ball-striking moment, particularly on the big points, as well as physical fatigue, can be overwhelming and result in an ineffective, “glazed-over,” peripheral-only ball watching.

I ask players all the time, “Are you good enough to play tennis without watching the ball?” Naturally, they answer “no.” I correct them by explaining, “Yes you can, that’s what you’re doing, and it won’t be very good.”

The eyes are, of course, required to work together, as a team if you will. This is referred to as “binocularity,” the ability to quickly, and smoothly, blend stimuli — the ball — into a clear three-dimensional image. The most difficult task in tennis!

Leaders and innovators in the field of dynamic visual skills, Drs. Leon Revien and Donald Teig, have identified a number of key visual skills for ball sport athletes: accommodation — the adjustment of one’s eyes to see objects at varying distances clearly; convergence — fixing

both eyes on a specific point simultaneously; depth perception — judging the distance between objects at different points in space; peripheral vision — perceiving and recognizing objects to either side at the corners of the eyes outside the “normal” area of acuity; span and speed of recognition — recognizing, interpreting and reacting to what is seen; spatial awareness — maintaining good posture, balance and orientation while moving.

Sports vision trainers also address player’s minds as well as their eyes. By eliminating distracting thought patterns, “visual concentration” is improved. And they strive to improve an athlete’s ability to block out unimportant images known as “visual noise.” You can’t be looking primarily at the opponent, or court, and expect that your attention to the ball isn’t going to suffer.

Back to Federer, at the height of his powers a few years ago, he indicated that he thought his greatest skill was his split second recognition of incoming shot speed, spin, trajectory and projected bounce point, and then “seeing,” in his mind’s eye, his response. The always modest Swiss superstar believed that he was able to achieve all of that faster than anybody in the game.

On the specific difference between sight and vision referred to earlier, well known optometrist Joseph Shapiro maintains “sight” as the perception of objects around us, but regards “vision” as involving our powers of interpretation. Because interpretation depends greatly on one’s experience level, “vision” is learned.

The eyes are the body’s prime mover and are the first sensory apparatus involved in any physical activity. The sooner the eyes can correctly inform the brain about the incoming ball’s flight, the quicker one can correctly respond.

Bottom line: the more flying tennis balls you have seen and experienced in your tennis life, the more accurately the brain and the eyes, working very much in concert, can in large measure predict when and where it can be engaged, and, as a result, how it should be struck back.

Indeed, the role of visualization plays a large part in

maximizing ball tracking. Those who hope for a good shot, or hope they don't miss, without visualizing their own shot response "flight plan" are guaranteed a sub-par performance. Stress, a by-product of not clearly visualizing your shots, will rear its ugly head and result in a disconnected peripheral sighting at best. Try catching a ball while staring at nothing in particular and thinking "don't drop it."

Beyond a better understanding of how the eyes and the ball-tracking process really work, and since you're probably not going to seek out a professional sports vision trainer, you can still markedly improve your visual acuity by, simply, keeping your head still while motoring around the court and especially at the shot-making moment.


Unfortunately, club players are often guilty of bobble-heading and swivel-heading while swinging the racket through the ball. The head moves, the body follows, the stroke is altered from its originally intended path, you lose the ball, and you've got a mishit or worse.

Making it a point to always keep the ball in front of you — right-off in the warm-up each and every day since good habits get grooved into our minds, too — will eliminate any last second swivel-heading. And monitoring not looking up at the court or the opponent, instead tracking the ball both "in" and "out" to the best of one's visual ability — watching it both ways — with a relatively still head (think Fed again) will end the auto rear window bobble head doll imitation. You will also experience a completely unexpected and startling perception that the ball is moving slower and that you have more time.

In a moment of zoned clarity, experienced as I warmed-up with a fellow pro at Stanford University just prior to presenting an on-court seminar to the USPTA Northern California pros a couple of years ago, I was able to simultaneously track the ball in-and-out to the nth degree, effectively visualize my shots with a high success rate, breathe and, out of curiosity, manage to peripherally locate a couple of dignitaries as they entered (the latter is not recommended!) Over a half-century of playing experience provides you with lots of practice and a pre-loaded hard drive of good habits.

In the final analysis, once the point is on-going there are only two primary tasks at hand: tracking the ball as described and visualizing your shots — a right brain activity that does not interfere with



tracking — immediately upon recognizing the approaching ball. It's all you can manage. Sure, you're monitoring footwork and technique as well, but that's kinesthetically. You're not thinking about it, you're feeling it on a sensory level. You cannot think (interfering left brain activity) and hit at the same time! 



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