

It's STILL About the Warm-Up



How can so many players, players who love playing tennis, get this so wrong? The mutations that I regularly witness regarding the pre-match warm-up in both United States Tennis Association league play and in friendly matches — despite a universal protocol that has existed for eons — is disturbing and tarnishes the game.

Although players certainly have a responsibility to comport themselves in accordance with tennis' published guidelines when warming-up, how can they be solely blamed for being at odds with them if they've never been coached-up by their pros? Ignorance is no excuse, but it is the reason why they've made up their own rules.

Look no further than the United States Professional Tennis Association and the Professional Tennis Registry, the two main certifying professional organizations numbering 25,000 strong, who have done virtually nothing of any real consequence to promote the education of tennis-playing America on the warm-up protocol.

Just drop by any club or public park in the country and observe the dysfunctional chaos, often coupled with frustration that can become outright combativeness before the matches even begin. Everyone loses.

No wonder I hear players repeatedly saying non-sensible things, after only a couple of minutes into their versions of warming-up. "C'mon, let's get started. I'm not going to get any better." And, amazingly, "Let's not waste any more time warming-up." Correct, they're not going to get any better with those warm-up habits, and, interestingly, their first set is typically marked by a deluge of unforced errors. Let's hurry up and play lousy.

First and foremost, as stewards of the sport, we tennis professionals should be held accountable. When was the last time you saw an

article in *Tennis Magazine*, or anywhere else for that matter, shedding light on such an integral part of the game? Inexplicable, particularly since tennis is the *only* sport where opponents warm-up *with* each other (unfortunately that's often *against*).

In a seminar I presented not long ago at the USPTA-New England convention, I asked the pros in the audience, tongue-in-cheek, if they were aware of the pending class action law suit being brought against the USPTA for *not* teaching, and preserving, the long-standing proper pre-match warm-up routine. Both quizzical and guilty expressions appeared in the ensuing silence.

It's all right there, and has been all along, in the USTA's *The Code*, first written by Col. Nick Powell way back when, in the "Warm-Up" section, "*Warm-up is not practice. A player should provide the opponent a 5-minute warm-up (10 minutes if there are no ballpersons). If a player refuses to warm up the opponent, the player forfeits the right to a warm-up. Some players confuse warm-up and practice. Each player should make a special effort to hit shots directly to the opponent. (If partners want to warm each other up while their opponents are warming up, they may do so.)*"

Regarding serves: "*Warm-up serves and returns are taken before first serve of match. A player should take all warm-up serves before the first serve of a match. A player who returns serves should return them at a moderate pace in a manner that does not disrupt the server.*"

So, for those of you currently practicing your winners in the warm-up while a more enlightened opponent hits right to you, and who immediately starts practicing their serve returns while announcing that they'll "take theirs later," let's get with the program!

For the more visual among us, I am now featuring a short video



on my website (www.JakBeardsworthTennis.com) of Roger Federer and Novak Djokovic warming-up — note they are warming up at less than full power — prior to a tour match. And I'm told that the Tennis Channel, in its *Tennis Academy* series, has recently been airing top junior coach and former tour player, Nick Saviano, instructing viewers, with an added caveat for club players, in the very same cooperative give and take, universal warm-up technique demonstrated by none other than the world's two best players.

That caveat is where to first position oneself to begin rallying back and forth. Beginning in no man's land, as most often utilized by tour pros like Serena Williams, for practice sessions is commonplace, though not for match play (full court start) since pros always warm-up on a back court prior to their match. From there, you're far more able to dial-in your full stroking paths, albeit with minimal racket speed compared to match level (see video on my website). This is in a positive, total contrast to those who, well intentioned no doubt, stand in close proximity to the net and initiate rapid fire volley exchanges to start the day. Rat-tat-tat. That's a practice drill, not a warm-up technique!

And there are those who choose "short court," or mini-tennis, right around the service line. Here, ball control is marginal at best and freely hitting through the ball is not very doable, resulting in inefficient, highly tensioned, truncated strokes.

At the three-quarter court position, initial ball control is maximized; one gets a better feel for the ball and playing the ball on the first, second, third bounce matters not. The warm-up is about finding

your timing and creating the best possible shot-making rehearsal. It is not about immediately flying around the court with your hair on fire trying to get every ball on the first bounce. Wait, doesn't that just encourage those who practice winners?

Once players have hit 15-20 balls each, they should drift back for a seamless transition to the baseline. One player, after a number of full-court exchanges, then takes the initiative to move into the net for their volleys, *always* followed by a few overheads — after all, isn't that your answer to the ever popular lob? — prior to retreating back to allow opponents the same opportunity.

Once all players have had their turn at the net, it's on to serving, where one player serves the balls they have and the opponent gathers them and serves them back, from both the deuce and ad sides.

Question: How on earth do four club players expect that they can warm-up effectively with three balls?

Answer: They can't.

Shouldn't the four-ball can that the Europeans use be utilized in doubles? Yes, it is available in the US. And think about the fact that in professional doubles, players are provided six balls *and* a team of ball kids. And we're trying to warm-up with three, which always leaves two players with only one ball. C'mon folks, this game is already tough enough!

Going forward, let's all take a deep breath and get on the same page. Reduce the unnecessary testiness exhibited in too many warm-ups and show our opponents a little courtesy, not to mention good sportsmanship, with a truly cooperative warm-up.

Then, okay, it's time to rumble. 