

It's Now All About the Strings

It's not so much about the racket anymore. Sure, it's still very important to have a stick that matches your swing speed, swing length and fitness profile. Nonetheless, it's really difficult in 2013 to find a badly designed one. The research and development money spent by today's leading manufacturers is unsurpassed. Couple that with some clandestine reverse engineering by competing but undercapitalized rivals, and you have dozens and dozens of frames with excellent playability across the spectrum.

With such a level playing field, it reasons why top pros are being paid enormous amounts of money to play with this brand or that since players drive sales. It's also why club pros and journeymen tour players receive theirs for free.

So, when I heard '87 Wimbledon champion Pat Cash, no spring chicken at this juncture, say, when asked about the "new strings" in an interview at the 2013 Championships, "I can hit shots now that I couldn't hit when I won here," it really got my attention.

These polyesters, versus the more traditional nylons and natural gut, have been in the tour headlines for a few years now. Visit the local pro shops of stringing gurus Will Wrigley and Matt Protz and check out the dizzying array of choices.

This past summer, in a surprising convergence, a very good college player I knew, now in his 40s, arrived in Lake Placid looking to hit. We sparred from the back of the court for longer than my body wanted, just trading but doing so pedal to the metal. A fit lefty, he always played big topspin off his forehand, but what I experienced that day, 25 years since our last hit, was something else entirely.

Although no Nadal in stature, he was bending in look-alike forehands, sharply descending rainbow rockets that were exploding

off the court, pushing me back off the baseline even when they weren't that deep in the court! I was having to take most everything aggressively on the rise, or back up way off the baseline to buy space and time, something my player ego was not about to allow.

"David, you're crushing the ball," I told him during a break. "Are you living at the gym these days?"

He laughed, "No, it's these strings. They don't move," referencing the amount of ball rotation he was generating off his mains. He handed me a set of his polys out of his bag, one of the multi-sided, sharp edged ones that don't move but also, apparently, gripped the ball far more than the David I remembered ever did.

The jury had been out for me since the early polys, which had become generically known as Luxilon — even though that was really just one of the brand names — and had a reputation for stringing up very tight and being tough on the arm. With 55 years on the court and counting, I think it prudent to always err on the side of caution.

But, first Pat Cash and now David.

I'd been playing the same hybrid nylons for a decade, slightly textured Head Intellistring 16g mains with Head Power Gel 16g crosses in my trusty, dated Head Intelligent iS2 98s. Although important to vary tensions 2-3 pounds based on temperature, humidity, court surface, altitude and current physicality, I stay mostly at 65/62 pounds.

Having started playing tennis as a youngster with a heavy wooden racket in the late 50s — ugh — my game does not exactly resemble Nadal's in any way, shape or form. But, if the polys could enhance my moderate topspin forehand, my skidding backhand slice, and bend my second serve in at an even steeper arc and angle of descent, I'd be all for that.

Since they do indeed string tighter, but now also come in slightly softer versions — easier on the arm — I chose the newer, more forgiving Babolat RPM Team 125mm/16g and Luxilon Savage 127mm/16g mains at 60 to go along with my usual Gel crosses in my other two frames, and headed out for a playtest. (I took particular notice of the near disclaimer on the Lux packaging: "Savage strings are for powerful players who take big cuts and want to hit a heavy ball. The unique six-sided shape provides 'savage' amounts of spin and kick for all shots.")

Switching back and forth between my norm and the polys, I found that although the Gel crosses still retained some of the softer, bigger ball pocket feel that I prefer, even with the poly mains, I also noticed a stiffer overall sensation, even at their recommended lower tensions (approximately 10 percent) compared to my usual nylon mains.

The question came soon enough: Can I up my typical swing speeds, firmly entrenched on my hard drive, to sufficiently take advantage of the edged, tighter playing polys to get more ball r.p.s. (revolutions per second) — Nadal currently leads the tour with about 50 on his battering ram mega topspin forehand, compared to Pete Sampras' more laser-like, somewhat flatter 25 — without changing my grip and normal stroke paths?

Not really. Nor, I ultimately realized, after a solid hour of hitting against a good player, did I want to. But experimentation typically yields a pearl. I also realized I should at least go ahead and try replacing my regular 16g mains with the thinner 17g version to get a

bit more bite on the ball without reinventing my game.

Curious, I decided to ask both Wrigley and Protz, along with area pro Margit Bannon, all excellent players in their own right, what racket they played and what strings they preferred.

Wrigley wields a Babolat Aero Pro Drive 100 (think Nadal), strung with Babolat N.Vy 16g, his favorite, at 62/62, which he described as a "soft nylon synthetic gut that reduces ball load and shoulder, elbow stress." He also uses Technifibre X-One Bi-Phase 16g, a polyurethane similar in construction to natural gut, but at 55/55 for the same feel.

The Head Radical Mid-Plus 98 (Andy Murray) is Protz's stick of choice. He's used every version of that frame since Andre Agassi first put it on the map. He's also stayed with the same Head string all along, Head Rip Control nylon 16g at 55/55. He commented, "strings don't create topspin; they can only enhance it," recalling customers seeking instant mechanical fixes through polys.

Bannon's preferences were not dissimilar. She plays with the Wilson Blade 104 (Serena Williams) with Wilson 17g Pro nylon at 55/55. "I haven't changed tension or gauge in about 20 years," she told me. "The low tension with 17g gives me a nice power-spin combination... and I rarely change rackets."

These folks know their games, know what they like and tend to stick with it.

Today's pro players are the fastest, quickest, strongest, fittest ever, men and women alike. They swing through the ball at Mach 1 racket speeds to take full advantage of the polys unique ball gripping characteristics. Their extreme forehand grips, triggering open-stances and exaggerated over-the-ball stroking techniques with new follow through paths — like Nadal's lasso — have evolved in lock step with the string technology.

The game's always naturally evolving and improving, as an excellent TV feature during the US Open so aptly illustrated, in marked contrast to the constant, annoying announcer references to the "modern game," with subtle, sometimes overt, discrediting connotations towards all that preceded it.

Being willing to experiment with your string set-up can potentially maximize your current ball striking skills, but it won't change your mechanics. So, at the very least, restring as many times per year as you play on average per week for your personal best, day in and out. 



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