

Blind Tennis... Playing by **EAR**



Sooner or later, just about everyone who plays the game realizes that watching the ball is absolutely the holy grail of tennis – the difference maker, if you’re going to have any shot at playing your A-game.

Ed Rice, an older gentleman I knew in Lake Placid, NY, who played well for years with a patch over his glass eye, was a master at it. What he could do on the court was both amazing and something to admire since without one’s normal binocular vision – both eyes working in concert – depth perception, a hugely important component in tracking flying tennis balls, was completely undermined.

I make it a point to never stop trying to get aspiring tennis players to fully understand the difference between completely ineffective peripheral ball sighting and direct tracking – only-the-ball both incoming and outgoing. On occasion, for more years than I now care to admit, I would offer up to those frustrated with their up and down play mostly due to complacent focus on the ball, “Hey, c’mon, there aren’t any blind people playing tennis.”

Turns out I’ve been dead wrong all along.

Blind individuals have been playing tennis, albeit adapted, since 1984. And if you watch Miyoshi Takei – the so-called Roger Federer of blind tennis – on the internet (www.hanno.jp/matsui) versus another excellent player, you will not believe your eyes. His performances have been referred to as “transcendent” by able-bodied journalist Thomas Lin (who tried, repeatedly whiffing, playing with a blindfold on), which may not even do them justice.

Takei, still just a teenager, designed the very first “sound-adapted”





Miyoshi Takei (above and on opposite page), the inventor of blind tennis, sits with the sound-adapted foam balls he created.

Photos courtesy of Ayako Matsui

tennis ball. By 1990 he organized the first national tournament for the blind in his homeland of Japan.

So, you're wondering exactly how is this even possible, blind individuals participating in a sport with visually following a fast-flying, small yellow sphere at its core?

The human brain's extraordinary visual cortex not only processes what you're seeing, but also what you're hearing (auditory) and what you're feeling (tactile). According to Dr. Robert Gotlin, Director of Orthopedic and Sports Rehabilitation at Beth Israel Medical Center in New York, the visually impaired "can also perceive objects in space using other senses," which have always entered into the able-bodied tennis sensory mix as well.

Remember all the commotion back in the mid-1980s at the US Open, when the world's best, with razor sharp vision and highly evolved ball-tracking skills, complained vociferously that the deafening jet noise directly overhead was adversely affecting play by eliminating the auditory informational cues of the ball being struck?

Try playing with noise canceling headphones on sometime and you'll immediately experience what those players did – that all the senses are indeed in play. Or, conversely, play past dusk and you'll become aware of a heightened auditory awareness as the light fades and vision becomes severely compromised.

Takei's prototype, a sound-adapted, low-bouncing foam ball impregnated with tiny noise producing ball bearings rattling around at its core was the first step in making tennis doable for the visually impaired. A smaller than normal court with raised lines, a lower net, shorter rackets, and up to three bounces – wheelchair players are allowed, too – were collectively added to the format to make blind tennis doable for those motivated to learn.

Because of the obvious, players cooperatively announce before serving, "You ready?" Receivers respond, "Yes," and the points begin.

When Takei tragically lost his life in a train accident at 42, Ayako Matsui, a special education teacher, took up his cause: "He wanted to make society better with able-bodied and disabled playing tennis together and understanding each other."

Blind tennis is now played worldwide not only in Japan, but also in China, the Philippines, Singapore, Australia, Canada, Spain, Italy, Argentina, South Africa and the Bahamas, and it has recently gained traction in the US.

Institutions such as Lighthouse International in NYC, the Perkins School for the Blind in Boston and the California School for the Blind in Fremont, Calif. are leading the way for volunteer sighted players to be paired with visually impaired students – just as Takei had hoped – to facilitate and advance learning the game.

When Dan Guilbeault, an upbeat participating teenage student at the Perkins School says with sincere incredulousness, "I never thought I'd be able to play tennis," you cannot help but take that to heart. After treatment for a brain tumor at the tender age of 3, he was left with seeing steadily increasing faint shadows at best.

Yet, despite the adversity he has been dealt, he keeps moving forward with an expansive mind-set that's expressed when he wishes out loud that "they had this [program] for public school kids who are blind all across the country."

The very first blind tennis tournament in the US was held this past January at a Boys and Girls Club in Mission, Texas, where traditional spectator silence during the points, as one might envision, was an absolute necessity. Martha Rodriguez and relatives traveled three hours from Laredo to watch her son Cruz, whose special school in Austin brought him to the event, participate. She noted that he has become generally more independent since he began playing tennis, and, "He's more confident in the things he does now."

Matsui, who regularly witnesses the accompanying emotional frustration that often includes tears of frustration for the beginning younger players, sums up the end game perfectly: "I love their smiles when they can finally hit a ball and it flies over the net."

Try imagining what that must be like.

On a personal note, I experienced a retinal hemorrhage last season, ultimately leaving a blob of dried blood over one eye for some time – Ed Rice came immediately to mind – which made tracking the ball effectively, something I would normally take completely for granted, far more demanding and not even close to my norm. A mere hiccup in the world of the seriously visually impaired or especially those without any vision at all, but enough of a wake-up call to get my attention with regard to my own gift of sight.

Make the most of yours on court; be grateful for it, and then enjoy your best tennis. 🎾



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