How to Beat Better Tennis Players – Most of the Time!

Advanced strategy and tactics for the serious amateur player

by Dr. David Stone

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Chapter "Love"

The Quest

Tennis is a life-long quest. It is the one sport where you can continue to get better every year. Your foot speed might decline, but your shot-making can improve season after season. Your agility may dissipate as you lunge for those volleys, but your shot-selection in making the approach should win more points without having to lunge!

You may well marvel at the athleticism of the young energetic challengers filling the club or public courts. But they will be even more amazed at how you—in your aged body—can beat the tar out of them. Of course they'll just blame their off-day, or the wind, or the sun, or make some other silly excuse. They simply won't understand what you are doing to them.

If you are one of those youthful challengers, you need to get some insight on the wily and sneaky tactics of your elders. There is nothing more embarrassing than getting whipped by someone twice your age, who runs half as fast, and has squirrelly looking strokes! I'll help you avoid that humiliation.

To appreciate the perspective I offer in this book, let me give you a little of my background. I'm an over 50-year-old amateur tennis player. I wasn't on a college varsity, although I've whipped some varsity players since then. I work full time. I've always had a full schedule of professional life, family (wife, kids, pets), church, etc.

Tennis has to fit in the gaps. Well, I admit I have worked to create enough gaps to satiate my competitive lust. But over the years I have basically played a couple of times a week. Once I hit my 40s, I've found that anytime I try to go beyond 3 times a week on a regular basis, my body starts to break down in various and discouraging ways.

Satiating competitive lust through tennis is a marvelous privilege. Professional life is so constrained and ordered, especially if you're in any kind of a management position. On the tennis court, however, you can go to war. Within the rules, of course. Sportsmanlike behavior is perfectly consistent with maximum competitive fervor. I'll have more to say on that in the chapter on *etiquette*.

I'm not a teaching pro. I'm not a pro has-been. I'm not one of those incredibly boring TV analysts who dispense such trite and repetitive pseudo-wisdom as, "He really held the ball on his strings a long time on that shot." Garbage.

Ability-wise, I'm a 5.0 on the USTA NTRP scale. (See Appendix 1 for the official description of this quite effective rating scale.) I'm fairly proud to be a 5.0, considering that tennis has always had to squeeze into the gaps during my life. In my not-so-humble opinion, full-time working stiffs can only aspire to the 4.5 or 5.0 levels. From 5.5 to 7.0 you basically go from the top of the collegiate varsity ranks through the pro satellites to the top 100 in the world. Most adults at the 5.0 level, in fact, are actually ex-varsity players and / or teaching pros.

An "aside" for aspiring youths: You really shouldn't be reading this book anyway. I want to teach the old geezers how to beat you! I'm not sure I want to give you any edge. If you study the principles to follow, you're likely to be tempted to go pro some day. Therein lies a dangerous trap. There is a lot of serious talent around this game that still isn't good enough to make money. Note that out of the top 100 there are usually less than 10 Americans. Most of these guys last in the top 100 for perhaps 3 years. You're far better off playing the lottery to make a living.

This book is basically about STRATEGY. Strategy is correlated with our human frailties. The more flaws that we have, the more strategically brilliant we need to be.

Here's what I mean. I'm going to give you the only non-strategic tip you'll ever need the rest of your tennis life. Get ready. After this you'll never need to read another book (including the rest of this one) or take a lesson. Ready for the ultimate wisdom of the tennis universe?

Hit every ball with tremendous pace
into the corners.

That's it. Just do it. Go ahead. Oh yeah . . . you're right . . . nobody's good enough to do that, including the pros. Why not? Our opponent, our lack of self-confidence, our woeful coordination, the sun, the wind, or our weakening eyesight works to prevent us from hitting the ultimate shot every time.

So we make compromises. Strategy is about compromising to get the most out of every situation, every shot we hit, and every one of our meager abilities, real or imagined.

This book is about singles. Not doubles. Now, doubles is a great game, but it's really very different from singles. Maybe I'll write another book about doubles some time.

Singles bares the soul, challenges the mind, tests the character, and strains the body in ways that doubles does not and, frankly, cannot do. You're on your own in singles, buddy, and you may make excuses for a bad loss to others, but deep down you know you lost because you FAILED!

It's easier to take a loss in doubles. After all, it was your partner's fault, the buzzard!

Don't get me wrong. Doubles can be fun. It can even be competitive, but only if you are evenly matched with your partner. I've discovered that the best player in a 4-some gets perhaps 1/8 of the balls. The other team just keeps playing to his partner.

If doubles is used as an interlude to sharpen some strokes or bide the time between singles matches, that's fine. But some grown males actually seem to specialize in doubles! Horrors. That's too much of a step toward . . . forgive me for even saying it . . . GOLF!

Another issue of scope. We're going to look at this from the viewpoint of a player with a 1-handed backhand. Those of you with 2-handers can take the mirrored point of view on my comments. But my sympathy is with the 1-hander who is trying to whip that guy with the 2-hander.

In partial justification, let me assert for the moment (evidence provided later) that the 1-hand backhand is superior in versatility, aesthetics . . . and it's more *green!* (It saves energy.) The 2-hander has just 1 tiny little advantage, but even that disappears as the player ages. It also has several disadvantages. But we'll get into that later.

The tips in the material to follow will be useful for players at all levels—from the beginner at an NTRP rating of 1.0 to the top-100 touring pro at 7.0. But most of the truths herein are intended for the serious amateur—especially those folks between the levels 3.0 and 5.0.

Men and women will benefit equally. I'll be writing from the viewpoint of a man, although the principles are identical for women. Most of my "professional" examples will be from the men's tour, simply because I have paid more attention to it over the years. So please have patience with my male perspective, if you're a lovely lady. The major difference between men and women amateurs is a statistical difference in strength. Now this may be a bit controversial, but I've observed that the "strength delta" amounts to about 1 point on the NTRP scale. In other words, a woman at 4.5 is usually well-matched with a man at 3.5. The woman in this case is far superior in stroke aesthetics, overall technique, and tactics. But the man can muscle his body into position and oomph the strokes enough to compensate. Not as aesthetic, certainly, but he is well-matched enough to put the issue in doubt.

Exceptions will abound, of course. The only reason to make the point is that I will be discussing match play tactics for mano-a-mano or womano-a-womano contests. I'm not going to get into "mixed

singles." I don't think mixed singles is a good way to foster relationships anyway. Mixed doubles—sure. But stay away from mixed singles.

I'm not going to provide kindergarten-level instruction on grips and forms you would get from a teaching pro or a conventional tennis instruction book. I'm assuming that you know all that stuff, which is easily accessible online. My objective is to get into your head, transforming you into the toughest on-court competitor in your area. If you embrace the principles in the chapters to follow, you will be feared by men, loved by women . . . Ok, maybe that's going too far, but you'll certainly become the "toughest out" in your league.

One more thing—I'm going to be a little rough with you. Like I'm your coach. I won't pull punches and I'm going to try to knock you out of your comfort zone. Can you handle it?

Chapter 1

Paradigm Shift

The death of finesse

The game is getting tougher every year. The TV analysts wax philosophic about the olden days, when the game involved more touch, more finesse. There is truth in this reminiscence, but it misses the point. The pros of yesteryear had available to them the same ultimate non-strategy cited in the introduction to this book, namely: "Belt the ball as hard as you can into the corners."

But when you can't, finesse is a good second choice. The analysts' favorite whipping boy for the changes in the game is "high tech." New powerful rackets constructed from space age composites have transformed the game! Baloney. They've missed the larger issue.

There is some advantage in the newer rackets, especially if you go light to add whip and topspin to your strokes. But the big advantage is in the new *psychology*. One or more of the pros shift the paradigm about every 10 years.

Ken Rosewall epitomized the finesse game from the late 1950s to the early 1970s. You old codgers: Remember the Wimbledon and Forest Hills finals of 1974? Many of us watched with genuine sadness as our model of class and stroking aesthetics was destroyed by the "brash" ball-smashing Jimmy Connors. But we also realized that the paradigm had just shifted. Here was someone who drilled the ball close to the lines, skimming the net, and dominated the wimps who relied on margin and finesse.

What happened next? Down through the amateur ranks, players began to shift toward more power. Not necessarily emulating Connors' strokes. God forbid! But pushing more toward the limits of gravity. Specifically, how hard can you hit the ball and still rely on gravity to keep it in the court?

Borg was the clay version of Connors' hard court style. (Now stay with me. Borg and Connors were both good enough to win on grass, snow, and mud. But their games were built for clay and hard court, respectively.) The clay game at the pro level has unduly rewarded the topspinners from Borg to Muster to Moya – until recent years. Borg was the paradigm shifter for clay.

In the 1980s, Lendl produced the next shift. What about McEnroe, you ask? John McEnroe was an anomaly. Nobody before or since had his timing and touch to excel with the finesse game the way he did.

Athletic capitalism

Ivan Lendl brought the pace up. He outhit everybody and dominated the circuit for years. (Don't even mention grass to me from this point. Grass is a ridiculous excuse for a surface! The ball would bounce low, skidding through the court, and restricting most Wimbedlon points to one to three shots. Boring. The organizers finally transformed the grass and the dirt beneath so that Wimbledon is now much like another hard court tournament. Groundstrokers can win again.) Lendl forced others up to his level. By the time Lendl's injuries forced his retirement, everybody was hitting at least as hard as he was.

Courier and Agassi brought the smash-baseline game to the next level. Nick Bolletieri, of course, gets much credit for this shift, both for the men and the women. (He really shouldn't get so much credit. Read Agassi's biography for an insider perspective.) Hit the ball even harder and do it on the rise!

On the clay, Bruguera and Muster defined the winning pro game with punishing topspin and baseline winners. In the late 90s, however, the strokes started to flatten out, even on clay. And the clay has gotten harder and drier – more like hard courts. Having just watched the 2011 French Open, it's clear to me that even clay has become more like hard courts.

The last top "complete" player was really Pete Sampras. Out of his 14 majors, he won 7 at Wimbledon, mostly while the grass was still slick, rewarding big serves and relentless net rushing. His 5 wins at the US Open certainly qualify him for "complete." But wait, isn't Federer a "complete" player? He has even more skill across the board than Sampras. But the modern game doesn't reward headlong net rushing. Federer sets up most of his points with the big forehand. All the top players work hard to avoid difficult volleys. Volleys are now intended simply to conclude the point, undramatically. Consider how the commentators make a fuss over just how many "net points" a player wins. They keep hoping that diversity will return with a balance between net rushers and baseliners. No chance. Give a modern pro any time at all on the pass, and the guy at net is toast. In olden times, sliced approaches and even chip & charge were recommended tactics. Now, such graceful approaches are suicide.

Is this history made possible by construction of new rackets with composites? No no no no no! The game jumped when a gutsy player jumped above his peers. It's Adam Smith-style capitalism. It's McDonald's giving birth to Burger King, Wendy's, and Taco Bell, and menu items multiplying to stay ahead or at least even with the competition.

For the women, Martina Hingis was a good parallel to Pete Sampras. As an exercise for the reader, trace the development of power in the women's game from Margaret Court to Hingis. Hingis' "all-court" talent was to no avail when she attempted her comeback. At that point in her life, she was just as good as before, but there were too many women who had leaped ahead.

In short, paradigm shifts occur due to the simple recognition that if Joe Superstar can smack the ball and it stays in the court, then, by golly, maybe the same laws of physics apply to me. The other pros adjust or lose. The amateurs see what's happening and say, "Hey, let's try some of that!"

Michael Chang may have been the most amazing individual paradigm shift "adjuster" in the game. His 1999 self would have killed the 1989 self that won the French Open. He persisted near the top of the rankings even as the game changed around him. Look at the tape of his victory over Lendl in the French. That game wouldn't get past the qualifiers today.

You can trace a similar story through every "skill" sport. Look at the Winter Olympics—men's and women's figure skating. The winners routinely produce stunts once considered impossible. A quad - triple combination is now mandatory! I'm old enough to remember when a single triple-loop was impressive. The athletes are stronger due to continually improving training methods. And more strength allows more control for advanced moves.

Consider football with respect to the increased sophistication of pass-oriented offenses and rotating zone defenses. In basketball, everybody's got magical moves now. Baseball pitchers create an awesome variety of curves, cut sliders, and screwballs. Once someone shows it can be done, everyone else follows. No need to search for high tech explanations.

At this writing, Lleyton Hewitt is barely hanging on to a career. Once at the top of the rankings, he failed to make the adjustments to stay there. His stiffly constructed forehand and two-hand backhand were good enough to beat everybody, due to his blazing foot speed. But now everybody's forehand drops the wrist and racket head just before acceleration, adding that extra pop. He didn't learn and so everyone passed him by.

The point for the serious amateur is to keep watching, keep learning to find out what good players are doing on a court. It just could be that you can emulate "best practices" and come up a notch. You

can't overcome the limitations of court size and gravity, but you should be working to get as close as possible to those hard limits. A lot of amateurs play too conservatively because they simply don't know that they can be successful by bringing up their aggression. Lendl's competitors simply didn't believe that they could hit the ball as hard as often as he did. Until they were forced to. We amateurs, for example, don't seem to realize that it is often "safer" to hit the ball with high racket head speed than with timidity. On the physical side, I would never hope to have the biceps that Nadal sports, but every little bit of increased strength and flexibility will translate at some point into a win that would have been a loss.

Anybody that works for a living and "has a life" – including wife and kids, for example, clearly cannot devote hours per week to working out in addition to a couple bouts of tennis. But even one workout per week, strengthening the relevant muscles and stretching the appropriate joints, can make a big difference. Simple strength and flexibility exercises can prevent injury, too.

So, we know we're not going to go pro, but we can certainly build the best strokes and footwork within our bodies' physical limits. More importantly, we can train our minds to bring out best game to the court, not just on any given day, but from point to point within each match. On the mental approach to tennis, I don't think there is a lot to learn from the pros. Most of them seem to be pitiful in this area. We amateurs can do better, as we'll discuss throughout the book.

Chapter 2

Tenacity

That next level

How about you? In your quest to be the ultimate amateur tennis player that can fit into your brain and body, are you striving to shift your personal paradigm? Do you have the tenacity at the life-strategic level to keep improving as the months and years go by?

That's really the most fascinating and exciting thing for me about tennis. There's always another level. Another mile per hour on serve. Another rpm of rotation on the topspin forehand. A new precision in busting the opponent's angle (which the analysts call "changing direction"). A new tactic to break down his mind.

How can you incorporate this principle into your game? Expect to learn something every time you play or even watch someone else play. Analyze. Don't get mad when you miss a shot. Isn't it fascinating how much self-anger you see out on the courts? And the names people call THEMSELVES! "Idiot! Jerk! Butthead! Moron! Can't YOU do anything right?" I keep waiting for a response to the self-insult, like "I'm an idiot?! No, YOU'RE the real idiot!" This could precipitate a spirited self-argument and maybe a bloody self-fight.

If you missed, it simply means that you're not good enough yet. Is that a surprise? Shouldn't be. Analyze the error. Quickly. Not that you're going to change something every time you make an error. You'll make a certain percentage of errors on every shot in your arsenal. Sometimes you're just human and have to let it go.

Be TENACIOUS in learning and in developing your game. I was faster when I was in college, but I'm pleased to say that I could whip college-Dave well into my forties. I'm smarter now, having seen several paradigm shifts. Plus -- I can hit some shots I didn't seriously dream of back when I was 20.

To tank or not to tank

Let's move from life-strategic tenacity to match-strategic tenacity. During a match . . .

Never give up! Never, never, never give up!

The scoring system is designed so you don't have to give up! No matter how far ahead the guy is, he still has to come up with a way to beat you in that last game and in that last point.

Basketball and football aren't like that. If you're behind by 20 points with 2 minutes to go, you're going to lose even if you begin to totally dominate your opponent. In tennis you can always come back.

Let's say you're down 6-0, 5-0, 40-0. Should you hang it up, get depressed, dump the next ball into the net? Hang in there! Scramble for the point. Your opponent might sprain his ankle. It happens.

Furthermore, it's an opportunity. Think of the story you can tell if you make the ultimate comeback. For example, let me tell you one of mine (he bashfully offered).

It was a hot, humid, Mississippi (!!) summer day some years ago. I was playing my archrival in the tennis club. On clay. We were the only two 5.0 level players on the membership rolls. He was 10 years younger than me, ran like the wind, and stroked the ball with classic perfection. Tommy prided himself on getting to every ball and then hitting the cover off of it.

In fact, he was whipping the tar out of me. I was down a set (an hour long 7-5 set) and 5-1. I was thinking that it might be over shortly, which made me really determined to hang in there to at least get in more tennis with this guy. Also, there was lots of ribbing around that club among the guys. As a minimum, I wanted to make the score more respectable. So I fought like crazy and managed to hold serve from deuce to go 2-5. Well, that was one game, at least.

I could tell he really wanted to finish me off on his service game. My best success against him was to mix up the pace, throw in some dinks, keep him moving. In all of our matches I made him run more than I did. I used all of my tricks with maximum confidence in that game. (Don't worry. I'll share them all before the book is done.) I was loose. After all, I was going to go down unless I raised my game.

I broke serve after multiple deuces. I noticed that he had faltered a bit in his footwork on a couple of points. That gave me hope. Maybe, just maybe, he was starting to cramp in the heat.

Changing tactics, I determined to play my service game at 3-5 with absolutely rock-solid consistency. No undue chances. Keep the ball moving to the corners. If he was having trouble with leg cramps, he wouldn't be able to get into his normally perfect position to hit magical shots off my solid ones. (When he was fresh, he could!)

Enjoying a 30-0 lead, I could see some concern in his face. I willed him to know that I could hit 100 solid (albeit not creative) groundstrokes in a row without missing. I even bounced up and down a bit to show that I could stay out there all day. Two more solid points later, I was down only the one break.

The "solid" pattern continued to bring success for me, winning the first 2 points on his serve. At 0-30, I went for the jugular. A drop - lob - drop combination. In other words—off of one of the rally groundstrokes I played a drop shot short to his backhand side. He struggled to get there, just managing to play it back deep and get positioned to cover my pass. But I just played a lob to his backhand corner. He was still quick to get there, driving a good topspin backhand in reply. I deliberately hadn't followed my lob in. I wanted to end the match with this point. Physically and psychologically. So I responded with a drop shot identical to the first. He didn't even try for this one.

Love-40. He couldn't hide his problem with cramps now. I bounced up and down waiting for him to get ready to serve.

He double-faulted. 5-5. He walked up to the net. Said, "I can't go on. I'm cramping badly. I'm going to have to give you this set."

With compassion, I smiled back and said, "And the 3rd set, too!"

My only regret from the experience is that I wasn't down a set and 5-0 before coming back! But what's the point? Never give up. Never never never give up.

Till the fat lady sings

What is it with these pros that tank during a match? I can't understand tanking even in a weekend for-fun match. The pros actually have money on the line. In addition to spectators, pride, and the competition itself. And do they really want their opponent to know that they cave so easily?

Especially with the pros, you would think that they would understand that it's not over 'til it's over! At their talent level they should be optimistic that they can always turn it around.

Related to this anomaly is a comment often made by the TV analysts during any of the Grand Slam events. It's a hot day. The player in question just went down 2 sets to love. The commentator says, "Well, it's really going to be tough now. He's got a lot of work ahead of him if he's going to come back now. I don't know if he's up to it."

What? Has he got somewhere else to go this afternoon? A hot date? A tee-off time? Why isn't the natural thing to see incredible determination because of the OPPORTUNITY presented by the best-of-five format. If it were best-of-three, it would be over! "Hallelujah! I'm still in the match," the losing player should proclaim.

And some do, of course. Aaron Krickstein was famous for his comebacks in 5-setters. Just guts . . . sheer guts. That should be the norm.

Focus

Tenacity is more than overall match-level determination. It's about point by point, shot by shot, maxed out concentration. As an amateur, you're only out there for maybe 1 ½ hours, twice a week. Simply immerse yourself in the experience. You don't want to think about the job or the bills or the trouble your child just got into, do you? Lose yourself in the tennis for just that short period of time. That's much of the pleasure of it.

Winning tennis is very much about statistics. A few screaming winners don't win the match. A lot of unforced errors do tend to lose the match. You can beat a more talented player by "being the best you can be" shot by shot. Many points are wasted by not being totally focused at the start.

For example: When I get ready to serve, there are a few mental keys I like to focus on. Pick my target point in the service box. Pick the type of serve I'm going to employ after a quick analytical "feel" about what might work and what might be unexpected. Then concentrate on toss, weight transfer, and flow of my whole body into the shot.

When I get lazy and neglect some of these elements, my statistics go way down. To win, I've got to deliberately focus on the same pattern, serve after serve after serve.

Boring? First of all, winning is not boring. I always feel better about an ugly, tenacious win than I do about an aesthetically pretty loss. Secondly, there's a profound joy in immersing myself in the total concentration of the moment, the physicality of it, the competition. No thoughts of the troubles of life. Just blood and guts competition, shot by shot by shot.

The safety scam

Extending the thought—let's apply the principle of continuous tenacity to a point scenario. You and your opponent are well-matched. First set, 4 games to 4, your serve. Deuce. Big point. You concentrate hard to get a good first serve in. But the other guy is good. The return comes whistling back deep to your backhand. Your tentative heart goes into your throat and for a split second you don't want to believe the return is going to be in. But you get moving in time to track the ball down. It's a big point so you absolutely don't want to take an unnecessary risk and make an error.

Snap decision. You play a nice slice backhand to midcourt. You would have liked it to go deeper, but your caution robbed a little racket speed from the stroke. Mainly, you are giving your enemy a chance to blow the point. But your opponent is tenacious. That's what he's been looking for. The sliced backhand sits up nicely for him to run around and crack the forehand into your far corner. You don't get there. Point over. Now you're down break point. Your confidence is down. Your opponent is all over you.

Now let's change the scenario. Instead of a lily-livered heart, your chest thumps with red-blooded American tenacity. The return comes whistling to your backhand corner. Your instantaneous reaction is

anger that your opponent has momentarily seized control of the point. The anger gets you to the corner a step ahead of schedule. You realize that the worst risk of all against a good player is to hit a "safe" shot.

There's nothing safe about a safe shot!

Your shoulder turned early, you minimize *match-risk* by driving a hard topspin backhand crosscourt deep into the corner. Your shocked opponent, smugness turned to fear, scampers frantically to cover it, managing a weak sliced backhand to your midcourt. That's what you've been waiting for. You run around it and crack a forehand into his other corner. He doesn't get there. Your confidence soars. He hangs his head. You're about to hold serve and make the other guy serve to stay in the first set.

So what's the difference? Winning and losing, is all. Yeah, you're taking some *point-risk* by belting the ball in that situation. But statistically, over the course of many matches, you are reducing your *match-risk* by using the talent that YOU KNOW YOU HAVE and employing it aggressively to seize control. And the more you do it, the better you become and the lower the risk gets.

Besides, what kind of story do you want to tell back at work? Even if the insipidly safe slice works to produce an unforced error, how can you make a good tale out of that? And, more importantly, what have you learned? You've only reinforced the belief that the way to win is to just hope the other guy blows it. No improvement lies ahead on that road.

Tenacity involves instantaneous snap decisions on shot selection, pace, and depth. You're in the middle of a long point. Your enemy throws in a deep moonball. You're tempted to lazily throw back a comparable moonball. You have lots of time to decide what to do. There's actually a second to catch your breath and rest! But you're tenacious. Rest comes between points. So you hustle on your footwork, get in the best position possible, and work to get the most topspin, pace, and depth on the shot that fits the tactical situation. Don't throw a 4.0 shot back at him when you can work a bit and throw a 5.0 shot in his teeth.

Every shot. Every point. The closer you come to that ideal, the more "better" players you will beat. In other words, you will have progressed to a higher level.

Analyze or lose

Sometimes you can make just a single adjustment to turn around a match. Even if it's an ugly adjustment. I was in the middle of a clay-court state championship final a few years ago. It was a war of attrition. I'd played my opponent several times before and had always beaten him readily. But that day he jumped quickly ahead of me in the first set. He was being uncharacteristically patient and using his superior strength to track down my normal variety of angles and loops. And, worst of all, he had this smug look on his face.

I got frustrated. After all, I deserved to beat this guy easily again, didn't I? This was the match that counted. The others had been just for fun. You see, the guy was my doubles partner and he knew me as well as I knew him. And my experience was that he always blew up at some point. But not today.

Between points I analyzed. I realized I had to give him something to break his concentration. I had to do something that I wasn't comfortable with but that would make him even more uncomfortable.

I started throwing moonballs with excess topspin to his backhand. Very unsatisfying to the spectators. Even more unsatisfying, though, to my opponent. I started to break him down, point by point. The lead evaporated, his confidence evaporated, and I walked out of there with a straight-set win and the trophy.

Killer instinct

Tenacity isn't just about hanging in there and coming from behind. I've seen some marvelous players who lift their games when behind and become really tough to put away.

It's harder to find players with a tenacious killer instinct. Get ahead and then BURY the opponent! Lift your game as soon as you nose in front. It's too easy to get a bit tentative or a bit relaxed once you get ahead a couple of games or after winning the first set.

Think of it this way. You're serving first, get a break up and then hold to go 4-1. Our favorite dingbat tennis commentators talk about the "crucial seventh game of a set." Baloney. Every game is important. They don't make that comment until the score is 4-2. Well, DON'T LET the score get to 4-2. Hustle like crazy to get to 5-1. Once you get to 5, the opponent has to get to 7.

I'll tell you what—at 5-1, go ahead and relax and enjoy the moment—for a maximum of 4 seconds before the first point. THEN HUSTLE LIKE CRAZY and finish the guy off at 6-1! And then—THE FIRST GAME OF THE SECOND SET IS THE MOST IMPORTANT GAME OF THE MATCH!

Don't play a sloppy game when you're ahead. Work at breaking the other guy's spirit. Give him no breathing space. Give him no opportunity for his own comeback story at your expense. Give yourself no nightmares about wishing you had tried a little harder or played a little smarter in the 6^{th}, or 4^{th}, or 1^{st} game of each set. Hey, once you're engaged in a match, stay engaged until you're done. It's only an hour or two.

You see, you're likely to play him again some time. If you beat him decisively this time, the next time he will be susceptible to self-doubts. Then when you get ahead, his confidence will break even more quickly.

I've been on the other side of these stories, too. I've lost matches by choking. Getting tentative, not investing in the footwork or the stroke production necessary to play at the level I had trained. Losing from timidity is one of the worst experiences in life. Well, maybe "recreational" life. Let's keep this in perspective. It's still a game, after all. Shhhhh! Don't tell anyone I admitted that.

This is an area where so many of the pros fail miserably, especially among the women, but also with the men. The underdog gets ahead of the highly seeded favorite and then chokes. The footwork disappears, the elbow locks in concrete, and the shots suddenly miss by yards. Didn't she *want* to be ahead? Didn't she look forward to the challenge of beating the "better player"? What must happen is that the underdog starts to think that she *should* win, now that she's ahead. And then gets fearful that she might not win and how horrible that would be, since *everyone* would see it. *Don't think like that!* The best players are great front runners. They get 3-0 and want 4-0, etc. Getting ahead should motivate you to play more perfectly in footwork, strokework, etc. You can train yourself to think this way. The more you immerse yourself in the moment, the easier it is to think constructively on the point of the moment, and not wallow in fearfulness. Tennis isn't about fear! It's fun!! And it's fun to get ahead and then bury your opponent.

Confidence can be trained. Think tough, positively. "This guy can't beat me! He's overrated!" Confidence is willful. Good attitude connects to your stroke making in every way. You stay motivated to take the extra step or two on the groundies. You concentrate on the extra 5 mph oomph on the forehand. You make the toss just perfect. Did you see Schiavone win the French Open in 2010? She kept pumping herself up and that translated into footwork and strokework energy. She beat several better players in that run.

You should enjoy playing a better player. It will bring your best stuff out on the court. If you manage to win, that's great. If you lose, you can still enjoy it thoroughly, especially if you shock your opponent by winning a set. Don't be surprised to lose the 1st set. You didn't want to go home without playing 3 sets anyway, did you? It's fun to hit balls against the best player all day long.

Pros don't seem to train the mental aspects. They often act pitifully, even at the top level, when things don't go their way. A notable exception is Rafael Nadal – even when he's missing, he stays tenacious. He hustles to keep it close until his mind / body figure out how to find the range again. Nobody (among the commentators) worries about Nadal's attitude. Note the TV analysts making the point that his underdog opponent (even if it's Federer, Murray, or Djokovic) really "needs" the first set. The first set is "far more important to (the underdog)". Why isn't it so important to Nadal? If you asked him, he would say it is. But everyone knows that the mentally tough will fight even harder after losing a first set and won't give up. But that's all willful. It's the underdogs that are deemed more fragile. The overdogs are usually overdogs because they are more mentally tough. You can *choose* to be mentally tough by staying in the moment and embracing the challenge.

Besides, showing a bad attitude pumps up your opponent. It's stupid to cheer him up. Even the top pros show a bad attitude quite regularly. If and when they recover mentally, suddenly their footwork improves, the racket head accelerates through the ball, and the shots have more pop. Why not just keep the attitude up?

Chapter 3

Your Biggest Weapon

The next few chapters break the game into its technical subdisciplines. Then, armed with the necessary mechanics of the sport, we'll synthesize the elements into game, set, match, tournament, and life strategies.

The TV analysts talk about "weapons." Edberg's big weapon was his impeccable volley. Ivanisevic developed his serve into the ultimate weapon. With Lendl, it was the forehand. Ken Rosewall's micro-precision backhand was an intimidator. Connors used the service return to take quick control of the point. Nadal's hyper-topspin crosscourt backhand must be hated and feared by every opponent he faces. Murray intimidates with his foot speed. Djokovic works to have no matchup weakness whatsoever. Federer's forehand was the best shot in the game of tennis for several years.

What's your weapon? Or, if you don't think you have one, what would you like it to be? Let me make a recommendation. Make a nuclear weapon out of your footwork!

Bedrock

Footwork is the technical foundation of every shot you hit. If your footwork is immaculate, so shall your shots be.

I've observed that the biggest technical difference between games at the 4.0 and 4.5 level, between 4.5 and 5.0, etc., is the footwork. The better players are there for the shot. Camped. Waiting. Almost bored!

You can watch two club players warm up. You don't know that Joe is a 4.0 and Bob is a 4.5. The shots look crisp. The velocities and the spin look matched. Maybe you notice a little kink in Joe's backhand, but it doesn't seem to affect the quality of the shot.

Then you watch them play the match. Guess who wins? Bob -- 6-2, 6-1. Joe looks just as much the athlete as Bob, but doesn't seem well-prepared on many shots. Those crisp warm-up ground strokes deteriorated once play started. The kink in the backhand seemed to produce a lot of errors and short balls, especially when Joe was on the run.

What happened, in short, was footwork. Joe didn't hustle as hard or employ as precise a judgment in estimating where the ball was going to be as he moved to hit the shot. He had to lean forward on some shots and seemed cramped on others.

The objective of footwork is to position your body and prepare your racket for the ideal stroke every time. It's easy in the warm-up. You hit it back and forth at each other. If the ball is too far afield, you let it go and pull the next one out of your pocket.

But in the match, the ball is going every which way and you've got to try to track them all down or you lose. And we hate to lose, right? (If not, please find someone else to give this book to!)

Now imagine the ball coming right into your hitting zone. The perfect height, the perfect speed, your body positioned gloriously, your racket winding up to knock the fuzz off the ball. When your imagination is fulfilled on the tennis court, you know that you can do amazing things to the ball.

The whole point of footwork is to get yourself into that position every single time! The more you succeed at that, the more you win!

Think about this. The only reason the backhand exists is because we're not quick or energetic enough to hit a forehand on every shot. So we compromise. We learn to hit the backhand. But whether

you're hitting a forehand, backhand, volley, or overhead, your footwork determines the quality of the shot. On a statistical basis. And good statistics win tennis matches.

Inventiveness loses

What goes wrong with the shot when the footwork is off? Here's one of Dr. Dave's secrets of the tennis universe. (Or less ostentatiously, a good way to think about it.)

When you're slightly out of position, you have to invent a new shot—one that you haven't practiced and, therefore, at which you stink!

Imagine the forehand that is wider than you anticipated. Your feet don't quite get there so you bend over at the waist, leaning to reach the ball, your weight going parallel to the net instead of into the shot. You haven't practiced that shot. You didn't hit one like that in the warm-up. So guess how well you're going to hit this "invented" shot. (I'm amazed at what Nadal can do with the ball while stretched out of position, bending over, and barely reaching it with the end of his racket. He can still rifle it into a corner. But that's one guy out of 7 billion people on the planet. What I don't know is whether he actually practices those shots.)

A Similar problem arises for a ball that's tight to the body. Your knees straighten up instead of flex. Your elbow comes in tight to the body. Your backswing is constricted. You wait longer on the shot, hitting it late. This is an unusual shot, and one that is mechanically unsound. Also, it's avoidable by moving your feet properly!

On several occasions at a local university's courts I observed some of the varsity players practicing before the start of their season. I only watched a little because I was always there to play, not primarily to watch.

One of the players was a little guy, perhaps 5'4". He was dwarfed by all of his bigger, stronger teammates. He hit the ball nicely, though. His serve was limited, of course. There is only so much you can do with that, depending on your height.

My impression was that perhaps he was the number 6 man or, even more likely, that he was an "extra", not enjoying a starting position on the team. Silly me. Getting fooled by "practice" appearances. After all, it looked like his teammates cracked the ball much more effectively during their warmups and drills.

I happened to go out to see a varsity match early in the season. To my surprise, the small fry was playing #1 singles. I hated to admit to myself that I was wrong, so my first thought was that the coach was evilly stacking the lineup!

Then I watched the match. Our #1 was matched against a stereotypical full-size athlete. In the warmup the big guy looked quite capable of outhitting the midget. But David absolutely crushed Goliath. Outhitting him all the way. How? Footwork. "David" was so quick to the ball, so prepared to hit it, that he could get everything he had into the shot. Goliath was on his heels much of the time. The giant couldn't seize the opportunity to employ his strength.

After the match I dropped by to shake "David"'s hand and complimented him on use of his big weapon – footwork. It was no secret to him.

The "David" in the story wasn't blessed with Murray-like speed. But he was thoroughly invested in gut-wrenching hustle to get to the spot before the ball got there. He knew that was his one chance to excel – and to topple the behemoths on the collegiate circuit.

It's OK to sweat

That's what I'm trying to kick you in the butt about. Hustle!! Tennis is a sport. It's not like golf. You are expected to sweat. You are expected to be sore afterwards. Tennis can actually improve your conditioning and your physical appearance. IF YOU MOVE YOUR FEET YOU LAZY BUM!

Good footwork can be extremely deceptive to the spectator. Watching the pros on TV, it often looks effortless. They always seem to be in the right position and are able to belt the ball 100 mph without the appearance of enormous effort.

So the muscular hacker goes out to the court, moves his body with little effort, and smacks the ball 100 mph right into the fence.

Use your DVR on the next televised match. Replay a number of the shots in slow motion or, better yet, frame-by-frame. What you'll often see is superb effort, multiple micro-shift adjustments with the feet, and throwing-the-whole-body-into-it stroke production. The pros try to make the shot as easy as possible by investing all of their sweat and muscle into both preparation and execution.

I was surprised by a compliment I received some time ago. A couple of folks were watching a friendly (but still blood and guts) match I had with a friend. My buddy and I were both well over 40 years of age.

The compliment was that our match was very enjoyable to watch because our footwork looked so effortless. We both seemed to spend precisely the correct number of steps to get to each shot.

That was partly an illusion. We were certainly working hard on footwork. But we knew that to survive a long match at our "advanced" ages, we had to conserve energy. Now it always pays to invest enough energy to win every point possible. If you are lazy on 1 point and lose it, you have to win at least 2 more points than you did before to get back ahead.

As you get old enough to be concerned about conservation of energy, you learn by necessity to spend no more, but no less energy than necessary to get into the optimum stroke-making position. Fortunately, this becomes easier as years and hundreds of thousands of shots of experience accumulate.

The beginner has to work like crazy to get the ball into his strike zone. The experienced player knows where it's going to be. Pretty much. You still have to make those little micro-adjustments, though, to avoid "invented" shots. Losing shots.

The beginner crawls up the learning curve faster by hustling on the footwork and convincing his body to get experience on the infinite variety of trajectories, spins, wind effects, and other variables that push the ball into tough positions to stroke.

Specifically, especially for beginners—

Take 1 more step than you have to.

I'm serious. Take an extra step every time to get into just the right position. I've tried to get people to do this. It's very hard. The natural human tendency is to save that energy. Even teenagers who have energy reserves comparable to that of the Alaskan North Slope!

Even when you try to take 1 more step than you think you need to, you will be lucky if you have worked hard enough to just barely get into position. You see, unless you're a 5.0 or higher, I'm guessing that your footwork has LOTS of room for improvement. And it's a fact that the top 10 players in the world make a number of footwork errors in every match they play! Once you get tuned into these principles, observe how many unforced errors at the pro level are caused by lazy footwork. Not hustling

enough to get into just the right position, the pro executes the stroke *just as if* he had perfect footwork. But he doesn't. So he makes a micro-adjustment in his stroke – producing a newly invented stroke – and the ball goes out.

If you can get to the point that you are taking a truly EXTRA step, you will quickly enjoy a quantum leap in your tennis ability.

One common footwork error that occurs at all levels happens when the ball looks like it's already headed right for your power zone. So you don't have to move your feet at all, do you? Wrong! If you fail to hop a bit and move your feet, you have just invented a no-footwork stroke. Standing still and hitting the ball is an unusual occurrence. Most shots in both practice and play require footwork. So when the ball comes right to you, move your feet anyway. You need the motion to provide rhythm for the shot. No footwork, no rhythm – the ball goes into the net.

I'm going to give you one key on footwork that will win you some matches all by itself. This one tip is worth the price of this book all by itself!!

Recover . . . Recover . . . Recover

No matter how good or how not so good you are, you will bring your match-winning ability up a notch simply by adding some hustle to your recovery between shots. Recovery is the footwork required after you hit the ball to get you into position for the next shot.

Most players focus primarily on their stroke mechanics in executing a shot. Secondarily, they may be focusing on the footwork before the shot. Other thoughts also intrude, including their choice of shot plus concerns about what their opponent is going to do next. Of utmost importance, however, is the transition from one shot to the next. This is not something that most players think about point by point.

As you are completing a shot on the baseline or a volley at the net, your weight should immediately be transferring into a step toward your recovery position. Where do you want to be when your opponent hits the next ball?

You learn by analysis and experience, of course, where your desired recovery position is, so I won't spend much discussion on that. For example: You hit a crosscourt forehand from your forehand corner. Your desired recovery position is about midway between the corner and the center of the court.

You dare not recover consistently to the center of the court, because that makes you too vulnerable to the wrong-foot crosscourt return. It's better (generally) to dare your opponent to hit a winner up the line, over the high part of the net, where he also loses the safety of the extra court length offered by the crosscourt.

My key point here is not the geometric analysis. What I want you to do is *consciously add hustle* to your recovery. The not-so-serious player drifts over to hit the forehand and – for at least a fraction of a second – lingers after the shot (admiring it?) and perhaps even drifts farther to the right before initiating the recovery.

While you are still in your follow-through, wrench your body into that first recovery step. You will usually save a full step by deliberately adding hustle to this aspect of your game.

At the pro level, the most outstanding examples I've seen are Stefan Edberg and Patrick Rafter recovering at net after making a volley. They made a living at the net. Nobody in today's game even tries to do that. These guys expended enormous energy to be ready for the next volley – even if they thought they had hit a winner. On the baseline, all of the top pros pay the big price to stay on top of the rally with recovery footwork. You can learn a lot by watching them move after they have hit the ball. That's not where the spectator's eyes normally go, so you'll have to concentrate.

More personally, I've been amused by the number of folks over the years who compliment me on my speed, my court coverage, or my general ability to seemingly run down everything they hit.

The fact is that I'm not any faster than most of the people I play. But I know that I outhustle them in recovery. This is something that they cannot observe when they are playing me. As soon as I hit the ball, they are tracking the fuzzy spheroid – not looking at my feet.

Over the course of a match, an extra step gained on every stroke really adds up. Now this is not easy! It takes a lot of determination to hustle to this degree. But you have to think of it as an investment. If you fork over the energy on recovery, you shorten the points in your favor, win more of them, and shorten the match, ultimately spending less total energy over the course of a match. So you don't really have to be in better shape. Conditioning helps, of course. The main thing is to gut it out at the right time. Recovery is the right time. If you're playing a weekend tournament, this one tip can get you to the final with more energy in your tank than your opponent.

Chapter 4

Emulatable (or not!) Shots

The next few chapters explore ways to transmogrify your brain about the key shots in the game. We admire the great shots of the best players, but note some interesting distinctions. For example: Of those 5 or 10 players with the best forehands, why are there so many differences in the way the stroke is produced?

Differences in body type, training, the way an individual's brain is wired to his body shape, even psychological differences come into play. I have very compact strokes, which are derived in part from my incredibly conservative outlook on life . . . also because I played for some years in the wind of Oklahoma.

Putting all the shots together – who would be the best composite pro of all time? And is it possible to emulate the shots of this fantasy-man? This is a fun subject for debate. But I'll give you my opinion, based on the pros I've seen during my lifetime. (I don't really have observational experience that goes back past the late '60s, though.)

If you're looking for ideal form, emulating the pros is not a bad idea. But watch out if you're trying to emulate an ectomorph's fluid shot with your endomorphic body. Or copying a mesomorph's compact power with your lightweight, yet gaunt physique.

Anyway, this subject is too fun to resist, even if it has only limited application to us 3.0 - 5.0 players. So here we go . . .

The Serve: Pete Sampras

I might just as easily go with Andy Roddick or Roger Federer. I'll exclude giants like John Isner and Ivo Karlovic. You can't choose to be nearly seven feet tall, so there's not much to learn there. Sampras, Roddick, and Federer share the same physical genius in the serve, namely perfect form. The form is simple with no wasted motion. Every useful muscle comes into play. I'm not going to dissect "perfect form" for you. There are tons of conventional tennis books and videos online if you are so inclined. As always, I'll try to give you an edge you won't pick up from your local teaching pro.

What gives Sampras the edge over all is that he *believed* that he could hit his second serve at 110 mph consistently under pressure. Other players could do so if they believed it, but Pete really *believed* that he could. And demonstrated it time and again, winning many free points on it. A lot of guys can crank the first serve between 125 and 140. Your second serve tests your mental limits.

Now, I could never hit my first serve at 110 mph. (John McEnroe couldn't either.) The point is that you can probably hit your second serve more aggressively than you do now. Every 5 mph addition may give you another free point or two per set. Close matches are decided by such margins.

If you work on more perfect form for your first serve, your velocity goes up, your accuracy improves, you save energy, and injuries are less likely. If your second serve uses *exactly* the same form, simply trading some pace for some spin, then you will rarely double fault. Frankly, you ought to be pushing the edge enough to double fault once or twice per set. No more, though. But if you consistently double zero times per set, you're not pushing it, and you're making the returns too easy for your opponent.

Court Position: Roger Federer

I would go with Andre Agassi here for dominating the baseline, minimizing his running, maximizing the pain of his opponents, and consistently punishing with his groundstrokes . . . except that he didn't take the net enough to really take advantage of his baseline game. Federer does. He resists yielding real estate during a rally, and is consistently brilliant in turning a rally or even a defensive position to offense, and taking the net. In his later years, he has clearly slowed down a bit, so you'll have to watch the tapes from a few years ago. As your body ages, it is especially vital to hug the baseline. When you're in the center of the court, standing on the baseline, you're only three steps away from covering a shot to either corner. If you're eight feet behind the baseline, that corner shot keeps angling away from you and you're at least five steps away. I marvel at the idiots who play pro tennis who don't seem to understand this. (I'll mention one below.)

The forehand: Ivan Lendl

I have to take a little license here. There are many players who hit the forehand now harder and with even more effect than Lendl did. But only because he lifted the game and forced others to respond, which forced still others to respond, etc. His simple, yet powerful forehand weapon is the template for Federer's stroke and for many other.

Lendl's forehand was beyond his peers. And for a time during the 80's he had no peers. The forehand was his weapon. In fact, my recollection is that the term "weapon" in tennis really caught on through describing Ivan's dominance.

The forehand I would least like to face would be Nadal's hook to the right-hander's backhand. But nobody on the planet could hope to emulate that stroke, which can produce 4500 rpm on a tennis ball. So I'll go with the classic form. The classic form has an optimal mix of pace and spin. Good footwork allows you to make the identical stroke thousands of times per season with confidence that the ball will go where you intend it to. As we age, it is the classic form that will keep our arm from falling off!

The backhand -- 1 handed: Ken Rosewall (slice) and Roger Federer (topspin)

Slice first . . . This is an easy choice, despite the beauty and power of the strokes belonging to Stefan Edberg, Richard Gasquet, and even Stan Wawrinka or Justine Henin. Rosewall's stroke represents perfect, simple form. (Do you see a trend in my analysis?) He could hit a firm sliced or flat backhand deep in the court all day long. This is a wonderfully emulatable stroke for the aging amateur or even for the young competitor, challenged to conserve energy over a 5-match weekend tournament. While your younger opponents are burning megawatt-hours of caloric energy to rip on their 2-handers, you can drive them nuts by planting your reply time and again within a foot of the baseline.

I give the topspin backhand to Federer because he has developed the shot to handle everyone on the planet except Nadal with his forehand. If RN is your opponent, your only recourse is to borrow Djokovic's 2-hander . . . see below. Federer's simple, classic, and fairly compact form allows him to camp on the baseline and consistently hit the ball on the rise. He isn't known for his backhand simply because his forehand, serve, volleys . . . well, everything else is just *so good!* While Gasquet draws oohs and aahs from the crowd when he winds up on his backhand, he's often 15 feet behind the baseline to give himself the time for his long, fluid stroke. Pretty, but he can't beat the top guys when he gives up that much ground.

You need the simple, classic form so that you can camp on the baseline, and keep the other guy on the run. If you retreat, you run, and you lose.

The backhand -- 2 handed: Novak Djokovic

As I write this during the Spring of 2011, I'm assuming that ND's game won't deteriorate in the years to come. His 2-hander has no wasted motion. His footwork is impeccable, of course. His stroke reminds me of the old-time baseball batting champs who flirted with .400 batting averages, like Ted Williams and Pete Rose. Perfect balance, weight transferring into the shot, taking the opponent's pace and driving it right back down his throat. It is clear that Djokovic has developed the perfect counter to Nadal's crosscourt forehand, to the point that he welcomes that matchup.

But I'm not recommending a 2-hander in this book. More discussion later, but the main point is that the stroke is too limiting as we get up there in age.

The service return: Jimmy Connors

The service return is really different from the forehand and the backhand, as we'll discuss in a dedicated chapter. Jimmy Connors made the service return a power shot, having more fun with it than should be allowed. Emulatable aspects included his quick preparation, short strokes, flat trajectories, and maximum hustle to get weight and upper body rotation into the shot. Andre Agassi would be second in this analysis, and actually had more talent than Connors. But Connors was more disciplined statistically. Less flash, a bit less power, but statistics wins. Like Connors, you don't have to have a better serve than your opponent. The issue is whether the combination of his serve / your return and your serve / his return balances in your favor.

The forehand volley: John McEnroe

No contest. Really. Power, touch, and precision. And he didn't even care about form. In fact, if I have to lump the forehand and backhand sides into 1 shot, namely, the "volley," then McEnroe has to be judged the best ever. John is not emulatable, however. Only 1 guy has been born on this planet (as far as we know) who can deftly weave volley magic like he does.

The best emulatable forehand volley belonged to Pat Rafter. He hustled more than anybody in history to get his body, knee bend, etc., in just the right position. His strokework was *so beautifully simple* it looked like he would never miss a volley. Look at the tapes. Brilliant.

The backhand volley: Stefan Edberg

Yeah, I know that the whole universe has declared Tony Roche's backhand volley to be the ultimate. Well, write your own book!

Unfortunately, I don't remember much about Roche's volley. I didn't get to see him much on TV when I started to get tennis conscious in the '60s. But I saw a lot of Edberg and I can't imagine that another human was more solid on this shot. Emulatable? Yes, indeed. Solid, classic, infinitely repeatable form. He handled the racket on this stroke like a master swordsman executing a lethal cut.

The overhead: too hard to call

Go ahead -- lob the ball to a pro. Any pro. Unless the lob is brilliant, the point's over. The hacker often gets scared at the prospect of muffing an overhead. The pro sees the lob go up and says, "Whew! Glad this point's over. What should I have for dinner later? Hmmm. Oh yeah – the ball's coming down now so I'd better bounce it into the stands."

The whole package: Roger Federer

Dominating the pro tour in this age is an awesome feat. Although Nadal may eventually catch him in majors and continues to dominate the head-to-head matchup, you have to be born Nadal in order to play the game like he does. Federer's footwork, strokes, tactics, and mental toughness are all emulatable, however. At whatever level you play, you can learn by watching this textbook tennis player.

The dropshot: Who cares?

Shall we get back to serious business? Nah, let's not, yet. How about the "worst" composite pro? Among the great players, who has displayed the worst form and results on a given shot?

The serve and the overhead: Jimmy Connors

Did the guy have cement in his wrist on these shots? For all the fuss made over Connors' "sky-hook" overhead, the only reason he hit so many of these stiff armed shots was that he didn't have the confidence to let the shot rip.

Now, I was a Jimmy Connors' fan, believe it or not. I consider it a tribute to his tenacity and street smarts that he was able to dominate during his peak despite having such pitiful over-the-head shots. Not just pitiful for top 10, but pitiful for top 200!

Court position: Andy Roddick

How many TV commentators have wept over Roddick's continual refusal to step up to the baseline during rallies? He gives his opponent lots of time to respond to the next shot – when you're behind the baseline, the ball takes extra time to travel both to you and from you, giving your opponent plenty of time to relax or take the net away from you. With his serve and athletic ability, it is pitiful that he won only one major. It is obvious that many coaches and friends tried to get him to play a more aggressive baseline game, but he must be extraordinarily stubborn. And I know that he has the talent to hit the ball on the rise. Out of desperation he played a match accordingly on only the rarest of occasions. He won one Master's event, beating Nadal in the final on a hard court by camping on the baseline and driving his groundies. I thought he might have figured it out at that point. But no . . .

One thing to learn from his bad example . . . if you want to win, it's less about what makes you feel more comfortable shot-to-shot, but rather what is more effective against a given opponent on a given surface, etc.

The forehand: Stefan Edberg

If he had possessed the forehand of *anyone* else in the top 100 during his prime, *nobody* would have touched Stefan. What a strange, quirky flaw for one of the best ever!

The backhand -- 1-handed: John Newcombe and Yannick Noah (tie)

I believe that much of the motivation behind these guys' aggressive net-rushing game was simply to avoid having to hit a backhand. When they had to, they were weak and defensive.

The backhand -- 2-handed: not applicable

There is such a sameness to most of the 2-handers among the pros that I don't think there is a real dog among them. The 2-hander, although largely unimaginative, is such a naturally solid shot that I don't think there has been a top player with a real weakness on this side. (That still doesn't prevent me from recommending against the shot for a life-long tennis player.)

The service return: Sergi Bruguera

This guy actually chipped a lot of his *forehand* returns. What a wimp! Those forehand chips put him on the defense a lot. If you do that at even the 4.5 or 5.0 levels, you're dead meat. I guess it's a tribute to the rest of his game that he could recover so well from tough defensive positions and win the French Open twice.

The volley (combined forehand/backhand): Andre Agassi

Come on, Andre! Why didn't you learn how to volley!? He had all the talent in the world. This had to be a mental thing. What we saw was a timidity in his stroke that produced bad form. The reason he tried so many swing volleys is that he got discouraged missing so much with conventional form. I note that the commentators raved about that small fraction of swing volleys that he actually made. Winning involves statistics, however.

The dropshot: see above

OK – let's really get back to work now. In the next chapter, we're going to rebuild your approach to stroke-making.

Chapter 5

Scintillating Serves

Milliseconds matter

We've all seen the frame-by-frame and step-by-step descriptions of the ideal serve. But note that everybody's serve in real life looks different. No surprise, really. Different body types and slight variations in our musculature and joints give us each a different ideal rhythm.

There are several features common to the best serves, however. Regardless of how they wind up, the best servers are fully extended at the point of contact. Their bodies are pirouetted upward and forward, leaning into the court. The racket head at contact has its maximum velocity and the ball is in the center of the strings.

By the way, forget about those silly diagrams showing the center of the "sweet spot" somewhere in the lower half of the racket. No racket has ever felt that way to me. Even if a racket has been foolishly designed with a sweet spot in the lower half of the strings, you lose too much velocity by hitting there. The pros seem to know this instinctively. In slow motion, you'll see their hit point on most strokes just *above* racket head center.

Why is this? Note that the top of your racket is traveling a lot faster than the handle. So, to a lesser but still significant degree, a spot in the lower half of the strings is moving slower than the center of the strings. It would therefore make more sense, actually, to design a sweet spot in the UPPER half of the strings. That would make a very head heavy racket, however. Not comfortable. Regardless of the nuances of the design of your favorite racket, you quickly get a feel for what makes the ball fly fastest.

Everything after contact is irrelevant. Follow-through is only a result, not a goal. The wind-up and toss are merely preludes to the critical few milliseconds of ball/string impact.

So no matter how you get there . . . find a way to get there! Over the years I've fooled around with a lot of different stances, tosses, and wind-up rhythms. What now works for me isn't exactly what worked for me when I was in my twenties. For one thing, I could leap a lot better back then. But I've still got to extend as best as I can now.

Flow like a river

My key recommendation – work on *flow*. Find a rhythm in wind-up, toss, and motion that feels incredibly smooth and repeatable. If you can lock into this idea of flow, it will save you energy for the 3rd set, and will allow you to serve well when you're tired.

I've noticed that my first serve percentage is often much higher in the beginning of a match than at the end. This occurs especially if I'm trying to muscle serves to keep the pace up after I get tired.

"Muscling" a serve is, in effect, an invented shot – one that you don't normally practice. Something, therefore, that you're not very good at. Do this a lot and YOU LOSE.

You can also injure yourself. During my 30's I went out for an early Spring match. Everything felt great for my first week out. I was serving especially well. So I kept going for more and more. In basketball, they call this a "heat check." You know – you make a few in a row and you've got to see if you can keep doing it forever!

The next day I noticed soreness I hadn't had before in a certain place. I later learned that this place is called the "rotator cuff." It took a year before it felt entirely normal again. So be careful. Especially as you age!

Back to flow. Ideal flow will engage your whole body, letting your weight (or more properly, momentum) add pace to the shot. More precisely, every bit of pace you can add to the shot from momentum flow allows you to swing the racket with less musculature. The harder you swing the racket, the less accurate you will be.

In other words, you should think of maximizing momentum flow in order to improve your accuracy for a given shot velocity. Don't think of this as a way to maximize the pace of shot. That "mental key" will tempt you to keep adding muscle to the shot and your percentage will plummet.

An additional way to think about this – Hit your flat serve at 80% of your maximum velocity. I'm not sure what the 'right' percentage is. Just get a feel for a good velocity at which you have very good control. You'll note that as you get *inches per hour* closer to maximum velocity, your accuracy will get worse by *yards and yards*. And your fatigue will increase. And as you get older, your risk of injury increases.

One evening I had a sore arm, forcing me to reduce my serve's velocity during an evening of doubles. So I really concentrated on flow. Amazingly, (to me) this resulted in more service winners than I had hit in many weeks. Flow optimizes power with control.

The overall objective here is to get the most out of your serve. But you have to think statistically with respect to a point, a game, a match, and even a tournament.

For example, if you're only thinking about the next point, here's the trap you can fall into. First point of the match. You know your opponent's backhand return is weaker than his forehand, so you naturally pound a hard flat one down the T. Are you going to do that every time? That's a sure way to get your nemesis' backhand return grooved. And to develop a sore arm.

My point is not the trivial one of serving with variety. You need to think like a distance runner. Save something for the end of the 2nd or 3rd sets. If you have a "kick" left late in the match, you can put away many a close match and leave your opponents muttering to themselves. If you start muscling the serves early, you will just be missing them late.

Eighteen flavors

But let's talk about variety. There are basically 6 preferred locations to master and 3 spins. That's 18 different serves. Yes, they are really different. When you read those classic serving tips in the magazines, they are just glossing over the fact that there are EIGHTEEN DIFFERENT SERVES! All with differences in stroking technique. Which one of the 18 is the tip referring to?

The 3 spins are flat, slice, and twist (or kick – same thing). I'm not going to describe these and how to hit them in any detail. There are tons of instructional material out there on the subject.

The 6 preferred locations are, of course, wide to the forehand, wide to the backhand, and right at the body – in both the deuce and the ad courts. For reference sake, we'll call wide to the forehand – "wide right" – and wide to the backhand – "wide left." That's from the receiver's point of view, but, after all, that's our target so let's use the target's directions as our references.

A lot of our serves are, unfortunately, right into the hitting zones of the opponent's forehand and backhand. These locations are not preferred!

The body shot is an immensely neglected option. For one thing, it's fairly easy to hit a serve right at the opponent. You've got a target! And the target appears a lot bigger than the tiny slivers of service box that represent wide right and wide left.

I'm reminded of what Woody Hayes (former volatile coach of the Ohio State Buckeyes) said when asked why his team rushed so much and neglected the pass. His reply was to the effect that when you pass there are only 3 things that can happen and 2 of them are bad.

When you serve wide right or wide left, Woody's dictum applies. If you're not perfect, you either miss the serve for a fault or the ball drifts into the opponent's hitting zone.

You actually have a lot more margin on body shots. If your serve is accurate to within 3 feet laterally, you force the returner to move his weight laterally to get out of the way to free up his stroke. With his weight moving sideways, the pace of return is greatly reduced.

The best spin for the body shot is the flat serve. It gets there quicker and gives him less time to get out of the way. Occasionally a heavy slice or twist might cause him indecision on whether to return on the forehand or the backhand side. But winning a point on that kind of indecision is just luck. You won't average 1 per match against the better players. There is simply too much time to get the body out of the way of a spin serve.

Furthermore, against a body shot, the returner must "invent" the shot to some degree. He doesn't practice those very much.

Nobody has fun returning balls that aren't in the hitting zone. And the less fun he has, the more fun you will have. Hey, remember, we're operating on the principle that winning is fun! If you want your opponent to have as much fun as you, then please don't keep score.

Now, you can't neglect variety. I'm certainly not preaching that you should restrict location to body shots. Variety is the spice of life, I've heard.

Recall that my point of view is that of a right-hander playing a right-hander. I'll deal with playing left-handers in a little while.

The lower you go in the NTRP scale, the more benefit you get serving to the backhand. More errors and more weak returns. Once you get to the 4.5 and 5.0 players, you're going to run into rock solid backhand returns. They are still likely to be less dangerous than forehand returns, but may well be steadier.

So you've got to mix up the wide serves. Typically you should use slice for wide right and flat or twist for wide left. BE CAREFUL, HOWEVER. If you use twist too much, especially as you get older, you are going to have some lower back pain.

It's great to know how to hit the kick serve. But use it sparingly if you're going to make tennis a life sport. Save it for the big points in the ad court in the big matches. And make sure you do a lot of stretching to protect your back.

If you serve well early in a match – especially if you are hitting the wide serves – stay aware of your percentages. You're likely to start missing those slivers of court as some fatigue sets in.

Lion or mouse?

Also, be aware of your confidence level. If you're in a zone, you might be on top of those slivers. But it doesn't take much of an error in rhythm, toss, coordination, or any of a hundred factors to take that serve a few more inches OUT!

Face it – no one is hitting all 18 serves with precision throughout the course of a match. If you're hitting 2 well in each court, you have a good chance to win. Be aware of what's working on a given night.

Just because you were hitting all those aces up the T last Tuesday night doesn't mean you're going to hit a single one on Saturday morning. Biorhythms and all that. Just deal with the reality and go with what's working.

But be tenacious! You may be able to make real-time adjustments to bring back a shot that starts off askew. The usual case, though, is that stubbornness is mistaken for tenaciousness. You keep missing your normally favorite serve until you're down a set and 2 breaks. Too late. Adjustments and tenacity must be totally under the control of your desire to win the match.

When confidence is in short supply, use the mental key of "going for stuff." "Stuff" is a combination of pace and spin. If you're not in or near the "zone," going for corners just produces faults. But you can still go for *stuff*. Give your racket head plenty of velocity, especially when your confidence is a tad shy, but add spin for margin. Don't be tentative. Free the wrist. Throw the racket head.

Playing through your fear is an investment in your future. Tell yourself that you're willing to blow this match. But you've got to learn to fight through the tremors and come up with *stuff* on your serves. I'm telling you, this will actually work and give you confidence for the rest of this and future matches.

For location, use the body shot. Use the target your opponent represents. Your accuracy will be just fine and you won't lose any tactical advantage by throwing solid *stuff* serves tight into his body. In fact, you may turn the match around quickly.

Aces or snake eyes?

Now that you've got your confidence back, let's talk about those precision wide serves again.

The key advantage for connecting on the wide serves is NOT to rack up the aces. At our level, aces are fun for the memories, the locker room, and swapping stories on the club veranda. But consistently going for aces reduces your chances of winning.

To ace the guy, you have to have 3 factors going simultaneously: pace, location, and surprise. Pick only 2 and he gets his racket on the ball. Also, by location, I'm talking about location within the sliver. Namely, a sliver of the sliver.

I feel like I've got a fairly decent serve. But I have to be near 100% in pace, achieve surprise, and then still paint the line to get an ace. And then sometimes the butthead will call it out. This is another reason I like clay over hardcourt. I can get a look at the mark.

So what is the key advantage for connecting on wide serves? It's to make the opponent STRETCH on his return and then run a long way to the other corner, where my next shot is going. The stretch has to be perfectly coordinated to allow a solid return. That's why you get so many service return errors or short balls off of successful wide serves.

You don't have the bragging rights on these little return error successes like you do on the aces. But more importantly, YOU HAVE THE BRAGGING RIGHTS ON WINNING THE MATCH!

The other reason I just mentioned for successful wide serves is for point construction. Wide right in the deuce court and wide left in the ad court open up the court for your next shot, hopefully a solid forehand into the other corner of the court.

Note the classic tennis instruction books would advise a "volley into the open court" rather than a forehand. Well, we don't play on grass much, do we. On hard or clay, and for most body types in the world, serve and volley doesn't win. The occasional surprise serve and volley can be priceless. But you can't employ it often. I have more to say about these matters in another chapter, however, so I'll leave you in suspense on my reasoning for now.

Lefties—don't read this section!

You can basically forget about kick serves entirely when serving to left-handers. It's not very effective going to their forehands. Anyway, they will have seen enough kicks to the forehand in the ad court from unwary right handers that you won't get any payoff.

So what is a good serving strategy to use against the nefarious lefty? You simply must employ the slice wide right in the deuce court. It does the same irritating thing to him that his "swerve" does to you in the ad court.

Interestingly, a lot of right handers don't seem to hit this serve very well. This is probably because of habits when serving to right handers. Too many serves to the backhand or mere cannonballs to the righty's forehand. The slice to the forehand of the righty is neglected by many.

Here's a conclusion for you. Even if you don't get much payoff from the wide right slice to the righty, you need to employ it enough in practice matches so that you have it in your arsenal against those loopy lefties. It will irritate them. They are used to the flat one to the backhand, but less accustomed to being swerved as they are accustomed to swerve us!

Body shots are even more effective when used against left wingers than against righties. Especially against lefties with loopy forehands. They hate to be jammed. The reason they are more effective in general is that righties usually try so hard to adjust their serves to hit the backhand more consistently that they forget about the body shot entirely.

The attempted wide serves often wind up in the hitting zones. More so than against righties because our serving pattern is so disrupted against the rare lefty that we play. This disruption also amounts to a distraction so that we don't even notice that we're delivering more balls to the hitting zone than we normally do against righties.

Lefties get comfortable with our discomfiture. But therein lies their weakness! We simply have to find a pattern that they are not comfortable with. If you're having trouble, you might simply go with a steady diet of body shots. After all, that's the easiest way to avoid the hitting zone.

Off the wall tip

I'm going to give you a tip now that worked for me. It may not work for you. You'll just have to experiment.

Observe the wide variety of set-up stances among the pros. The two extremes from the last generation are probably John McEnroe's closed stance and Goran Ivanisevic's open stance. (Note that the most extreme wackos are lefties!) Therefore, there is no school solution. Find the start-up position that works for your body type, your degree of flexibility, and your favorite flow.

For most of my life I used a stance where a line drawn from my right big toe through my left big toe was directed at my opponent's backhand. As my game progressed through the ranks, I served a lot more to the backhand than to the forehand. I've always had good accuracy to the backhand corners in both boxes, but been somewhat erratic to the forehand corners.

Late in my tennis life I changed what I'd been doing for decades. I opened the stance up. For both service courts I set up the toe-line wide right of the opponent's forehand corner of the service box. The adjustment is analogous to changing from a closed stance forehand to an open stance forehand. The follow through is a bit freer and is less constricted by the arm pulling across the left side of the body.

These are the advantages I have found in making this adjustment:

(1) My accuracy to the forehand corner improved immediately, because I wasn't coming across my body so much as I uncoiled the shot.
(2) The serves to the backhand corners now feel like "off forehands," so let's call this the "off serve." The adjustment was easy. In one week I had achieved just as much accuracy to the backhand as I had before.
(3) The spinner to the backhand feels more natural, just as it is more natural to hit a topspin forehand off of an open stance.
(4) My upper body flexibility is more limited as I have aged. With the open set-up, I coil my body as much as I like and I find that the "uncoil" is a lot easier because the left side of the body is out of the way. The younger, more flexible bodies find it easier to coil and uncoil from a closed stance.
(5) The whole experience puts less strain on my upper body and my shoulder. I'm less tempted to muscle the shot and, therefore, less likely to suffer a shoulder injury.

In summary, I haven't noticed any increase in pace, but I haven't lost any, either. Overall, the accuracy to the corners is definitely improved, however.

I recommend that you experiment with these ideas in mind. Find the set-up and rhythm that feels just right for you.

Chapter 6

Your Forehand – Finicky or Ferocious?

The forehand should be your premier stroke. Yes, the serve is important, but you only get to use it in half the games and you may have physical (like height) limitations that limit the ultimate effectiveness.

But the forehand comes into play in almost every point. And repeatedly. Every time that you can get in a good position in the backcourt to belt a forehand, try to do some damage with it.

Complexity and variety

The forehand is far more complex than the backhand. Look at all of the variations in style. These variations are possible simply because the mechanical strength of the human forehand motion allows for lots of variability.

Complexity is both an asset and a liability. As you develop forehand skills (a lifelong quest!) you can learn to vary the topspin from flat through roll to moderate top and ultimately the big dipper.

You can loop the forehand like the Spanish clay-courters or punch it with the simplest of motions – like John McEnroe. His forehand stroke was about as simple as is humanly possible.

If you develop too much variety, however, you have to be able to make quick and correct decisions. Shot selection is crucial to winning matches.

Proficiency with a variety of forehand spins and trajectories is especially important in a tournament. You find yourself playing a variety of opponents you may have never seen before. A full draw can throw at you a bewildering array of styles in stroke production, spin, and trajectory.

Example: Let's say you're the loopy type. I mean in your forehand. I didn't intend to insult you. You love rallies with high arc and moderate to heavy topspin. In the first round of a hard court tournament you play your stylistic twin. Beautiful rallies. Glorious spins and trajectories. Anyone watching is mesmerized by the parabolas, hyperbolas, conic sections . . . oops, I'm getting carried away by my topological tendencies.

But you're good, so you win. You feel unbeatable. In the second round, however, you meet a guy that's all flat and slice. Everything's low. You don't have time to load up the spin. You dump too many balls into the net. And every short ball you hit comes back as an oppressive approach shot forcing you to scramble to the corner, with the big brute blanketing the net.

What do you do? Adjust or lose. You have to be able to flatten out your shots. Am I suggesting to convert to his style? No, that's a losing proposition. He has more experience with his style than you do, obviously. You should still look for the balls that you can load up and loop. After all, the guy that hits the ball flat loves to hit against low trajectories himself.

Whenever you can force him to change the trajectory, from your loop to his flat, you reduce his comfort factor. His risk is greatly increased when he tries to flatten out a ball and send it back with a tight trajectory off of a high looping, heavy topspin ball that jumps vigorously off the court.

But you can't consistently hit loopers off of this guy's cut shots. To win you need to flatten more of your shots and insure that you get depth. The looper you played yesterday was far more content to hit a big topper back off of a topper that you dropped a bit short. But this guy will not sit on the baseline and allow you to remain in any comfort zone.

Choose footwork over muscle

One of the disadvantages of forehand versatility relates to footwork. You have the strength to hit the shot from awkward positions. So, rather than move your feet when you get tired, you simply adjust the stroke.

But the "adjusted" stroke is one that you don't practice, typically, and therefore can be categorized as "invented." Your 4.5 level forehand is now operating at a 4.0 level.

It is only possible to play to your top potential by putting the whole stroke package together: footwork, preparation, and full-blooded stroke work. Only as you do this thousands and thousands of times are you able to develop the confidence, strength, and timing to move up to the next level, keeping the quest alive!

Psychobabble

Another disadvantage of variety in your forehand is entirely psychological. When your confidence wanes, it's easy to get tentative. You have plenty of variation in how you can hit the shot, so you tend to chicken out and use those options that are reminiscent of pushers – shorter stroke, less spin, less pace, less depth.

Let's talk about several different forehands that come into play in a match. When to use them tactically and strategically is something we touch later. Now we'll settle for establishing the philosophical, mental, and physical keys for the strokes.

The run-around or "off" or "inside-out" forehand

Learn to run around the backhand to uncork your forehand weapon. But only do it if you can get around early enough to get set and take a chance on winning the point. Or at least put the other guy in a desperate position. Otherwise, several bad outcomes occur.

First of all, you open up the court for your opponent to control or finish the point. That's obvious. Less obvious, perhaps, is that for a good player (you should be striving to attain this status), a well-prepared backhand is more effective and saves far more energy than a hurried forehand.

The prototypical example is Jim Courier. His backhand was better than a lot of the overworked run-around forehands that he tried to hit out of an ill-prepared position. (In his senior years he still falls into the same pattern!) Yes, his forehand was his weapon. Yes, he won with it. But he often failed to judge whether he could get in position to really attack with the inside-out. On many occasions, getting his weight transferred into an aggressive two-hander would pay off more for him. And save him a lot of energy for later in the match or the tournament.

The physical key is adequate footwork. Until you get comfortable with the off-forehand, you're going to have to take 2 more steps than you think you do. The body must GET THERE with enough time to launch the weight (at least the upper-body weight) forward into the shot.

Don't get fooled by watching slow motion of the pros. They can often hit marvelous off-forehands while their bodies seem to be falling in the opposite direction. But watch the upper body torque. These are pro athletes and the rotational acceleration of their abs and shoulders is good enough to make money at this game. So go ahead and fantasize about it, but if you want to WIN you've got to take those 2 extra steps so that you can get your body moving in the direction of the target: the other guy's backhand corner.

The hook forehand

Now let's go one step further – literally. You run around the backhand and want to *hook* the forehand into the other forehand corner. Right up the line. You need even more preparation for this, including ANOTHER extra step.

This seems counter-intuitive when you're on the court. In moving left to get to the ball, you have your momentum already going in seemingly the right direction to hook that forehand in the corner. Go ahead and try to use that momentum if you dare, but keep statistics on the outcome! You'll find that a distressingly large proportion of your hook forehands go wide.

The hook forehand (from your own backhand corner) is a much harder shot than the off-forehand. The fundamental reasons are apparent:

(1) The ball is traveling over the high part of the net.
(2) There is less margin between the top of the net and the baseline. Gravity doesn't have as much time to work.

From your backhand corner to the opposing forehand corner (baseline to baseline) is 78 feet, of course. From your backhand corner to the opposite *backhand* corner is 82.5 feet. You say, "Hey, that's only 4 and a half feet farther. What's the big deal?"

Four and a half feet is huge on a tennis court. Consider all of the shots that you make or miss by a few inches or a foot, perhaps. When you miss by 4.5 feet, you feel disgusted with yourself.

Therefore, for the off-forehand, you can err in both distance and direction and still hit a pretty good shot. You've got the margin to play with. The hook forehand is targeted to a tiny patch of the court in the other, closer corner.

More subtly, because the target is a tiny spot, you have to get your body stabilized. Then you can effect weight transfer and execute a perfectly controlled stroke. All of this is required to maximize the precision of your shot. And it's still a tough shot! Watch how often the pros miss this one!

The huge advantage of the hook forehand is that it's often a winner when struck right. It also forces the enemy to honor both corners and not just camp on your off-forehand.

Make sure to get plenty of top on the hook. Gravity needs some help here. For the off-forehand, there is plenty of time and space between you and the other corner of the court for gravity to operate. You can hit that shot fairly flat and gravity will do the job to keep it in the court.

But no one – namely NOBODY – even at the 7.0 level – can *consistently* hit a hook forehand without plenty of topspin. Furthermore, you have to be conscious of *lifting* the ball to avoid the tape and get some air (depth). If you watch the pros in slow motion on this shot, they often wind up with their bodies up in the air because they are working hard to *lift* the ball over the tape. A lot of the taped errors that you see correlate with a failure to lift.

The approach forehand

The approach shot is strategically different from other shots in this sense . . .

It's worth about one and one half points!

The shot is going to make a decisive difference and settle the point one way or another. The extra half point derives from the fact that to get the short ball you have basically "won" the rally. Your penetrating ground strokes have elicited the weak return for you to pounce on. So you had better be sure to take advantage of it.

The approach shot opportunity includes a ball that's slower than normal, short, and near the center of the court. If the short ball is angled, you may be in trouble and have a hard time covering the net after the approach.

The philosophy of the approach shot has changed over the last few decades. Once upon a time, the emphasis was on setting up a volley to the open court. Conventional wisdom included approaching up the line, often with preference for a chip that stayed low as opposed to a flat or topped shot that bounced up into the passer's hitting zone.

The game has moved, though, not just at the pro level, but well down the NTRP ranks. Everyone's style is more aggressive. Now when you get a short ball, the objective should be to force an error or hit a winner.

At a minimum, put your opponent on the run. Nobody shoots as well on the run as when planted.

First choice: approach to the forehand or backhand? What about approaching down the middle? Some commentators say this is a good thing because it cuts down the angle for the pass. Well, my experience has shown that if you give a good player time to get set for the shot, he only needs about a milli-arcsecond of angle and, therefore, can pass you on either side. So forget that approach.

Against good players, it's usually far better to approach to a running forehand than to a prepared backhand. For the same reasons cited above. Indeed, at the weaker levels, some people can't hit a backhand passing shot to save their lives. Well, we're not talking about them. We're talking about a quest that includes beating the tar out of good players with excellent backhands!

However, because good players pass well with the forehand, the approach must be aggressive. Hard, deep, in the corner, with topspin. It's reasonable to go for this degree of perfection because you have a short, slower ball to get ready to belt.

Sometimes the short ball you get is also low, as from your opponent's sliced backhand that falls short. Don't equivocate on your aggression. You'll have to load up on topspin to produce enough stuff on the ball to force a running forehand from the other guy.

The mental key here is to GO FOR THE SHOT. Any time that you try to be careful on an aggessive shot, your "care" will send neural signals to your body to produce less racket speed. This often kills the topspin you need and the ball will sail over the baseline.

Test me on this. If you go for an aggressive shot in this situation, just make sure that you get plenty of "air" under the ball, namely, STAY AWAY FROM THE TAPE! You will only rarely make an error long. A well struck, high racket speed, heavily topped ball will dive well into the court. Any equivocation on getting "air" will only drop the ball short and give your opponent an easier pass. And a short, topped ball pops up into the passer's hitting zone.

Approaching to the backhand – YES! IT'S A GOOD IDEA! There aren't many people who can hit a good backhand pass on the run. If you get enough pace and angle on the approach to guarantee that advantage, you can cheat over to cover a crosscourt attempt. This is against conventional wisdom, I know.

Geometry would suggest that the passer's best option is up the line. And all the commentators seem to support this position. At levels below 7.0, however, humans have trouble converting the crosscourt approach into a firm and precise bullet within a few inches of the sideline. The timing is too tough and the target too small. There is a lot more margin for the passer on the crosscourt.

Another common misunderstanding: It is illusory to assume that the running opponent can only "just barely" get the racket into position to make the down-the-line pass, and is therefore unable to hit the ball that fractional second earlier required to propel it crosscourt. There is such a small difference in the preparation time for these two shots that you won't be able to anticipate this in time to adjust your net position.

In short, get lots of stuff on the ball and run him to the backhand corner. Cover the crosscourt and crowd the net. You will have time to cover any defensive lob and if you tempt him into an offensive lob off of a running backhand . . . well, he can try all those he wants. If he makes a majority of them, then CONGRATULATIONS: YOU'RE PLAYING IN A PRO TOURNAMENT!

The forehand pass

Your opponent hits an approach shot to your forehand and rushes the net. The highest percentage shot you can hit is a moderately topped shot crosscourt. Regardless of whether he's approaching from his forehand or backhand sides.

The first principle here is to cast away all fear and rush to catch the ball as early and as much on the rise as possible. Every fraction of a second you save represents inches to feet of distance between your opponent and his optimum net position.

The natural tendency for most players is to waste precious milliseconds worrying about the net-rusher and hesitating, ever so slightly, while figuring out just how to guide the passing shot. You can't afford to waste these milliseconds. Better to hustle to the ball and hit it aggressively. In fact, it's better to make the wrong choice sooner than make the right choice too late.

When he approaches from his forehand side, why is it still advantageous to go crosscourt with the pass? His momentum is rushing angled-left to cover the down-the-line pass. The principle of wrong-footing applies here. His momentum prevents him from covering hardly any court to his right. If you get him to even lunge a bit to hit the volley, control of the point shifts to you. Andy Murray has gotten rich off of this strategy. Observe how often his first passing shot goes cross court.

Over the course of a match, if the scenario recurs often, you'll probably have to keep him honest with an occasional drive down the line off his approach. But that can't be your bread-and-butter pass off the approach.

Why? Because off his forehand, you have to *bust the angle* to get the ball up the line. He is hitting an angled shot and you have to convert that to a very precise shot with no margin on your "straight" angle up the line. The up-the-line pass basically must land within a few inches of the line. It's very easy to miss it wide or give him an easy volley. You have a lot more margin in the angle when you go crosscourt.

Off his backhand approach (to your forehand), your up-the-line pass is a lot easier. But he's likely to cover that shot most of the time, figuring that "conventional wisdom" inhibits you from trying the "difficult" crosscourt angle.

When you hit the crosscourt, don't try for too much angle or too much spin. Be content with forcing a difficult volley. You'll see plenty of errors and weak volleys if you hit just a decently good shot. And sometimes, you'll get lucky and get a bit more angle than you intend, producing a clean winner. Great shot! In short:

Make him volley!

Brilliantly crisp lunge volleys early in the first set deteriorate into bad errors after some fatigue and pressure set in. Your brain likes to fantasize while you're setting up for the shot: *Oh boy! I'm going to hit a wickedly angled topspin pass that I can brag about tonight!* Well, on occasion, you may just do that. But winning is about statistics.

If you go for consistency, you occasionally will get the "accidental angle" winner that elicits oohs and aahs from the bystanders. Go ahead and let them think that it was intentional!

Work hard at getting to the ball early. A few inches can make all the difference here. A few inches is the difference between a volley with good weight transfer and a lunge volley. A few inches is the difference between a volleyer closing to drive the ball flat into the corner or popping it up gently with backspin, setting you up for the next shot.

Now let's take the case where he already has established a position at net. The percentage play is now generally up the line. The crosscourt angle is a lot tighter. Lots of instantaneous judgment is called for. You have to mix it up from point to point. Including judicious use of offensive and defensive lobs. But we'll devote a complete chapter to lobs.

The first principle for attacking a net player is . . .

Don't net it!

Every player *knows* this. But few seem to practice it. So get ahold of this: DON'T MAKE NET ERRORS! Give the guy a chance to make a volley error. The volleyer experiences this wonderful wave of relief when you dump your shot into the net. You don't want him feeling good at any time.

Better to make errors long. Why? He'll flag some balls and often make errors off of the flags because he's late physically or psychologically. (He suddenly realizes he's making a mistake but it's too late to stop.)

When driving up the line you have 2 choices. A hard drive with little topspin or a heavily topped ball. The hard drive is generally only possible if the ball is up high enough and you have time to line it up. It's a high precision shot. If you're on the move, you'll miss most of them.

The heavy topped ball – the big dipper – can be effective whether the ball comes to you high or low, whether you're on the move or already set up. You won't hit as many memorable or photogenic winners as with the flashy hundred-mile-per-hour drive. The objective is to force a lunge or pop-up volley.

Give the ball some air. Even if you give it a little too much and he gets a comfortable chest-high volley, it's not that easy to hit the volley winner. Especially off the dipper.

If you "accidentally" give it way too much air, your opponent has to hit an awkward and quick backhand overhead, laced with uncertainty about whether he's flagging it. You're going to win a number of those points.

One caution here: DON'T BE CAUTIOUS! You can't "guide" the shot. You need plenty of racket head speed when passing a player ensconced on the net. No room for equivocation. Accept a bit of uncertainty on the direction of your shot. Accept no compromise on VELOCITY and SPIN.

The moment you hit a good dipper up the line, cheat over to cover the crosscourt volley. If the volley is attempted up the line, he'll have to pop it up and you can recover back to the corner. If your dipper is not so good, namely, it can be volleyed above net level, then don't cheat. Keep your balance. Make him hit the shot. Don't provide an easy opportunity to wrong foot you.

This last bit of advice is not easy to put into practice! You have to think fast and hustle. But you can win a handful of points in some matches by making these adjustments. And some matches hang on just a couple of points.

How do you make the tight crosscourt angle? Hopefully, you can threaten a good lob often enough that he can't crowd the net too much.

In short, you'll have to load up the topspin. And don't telegraph the shot! Your footwork and preparation will have to be the same as for the dipper up the line. Be willing to force a lunge volley. You don't have to clip the sideline to win the point.

A couple or three keys to remember when you load up the angled dipper:

1. Watch – *really watch* – the ball. This is a high precision shot. You have to strike it cleanly.
2. Get down to the ball. Resist the temptation to stand upright and flick the shot with your wrist. Statistical success demands good body prep.
3. Lift the ball. Give it some air. Most errors on this shot at the amateur level are net errors.

The classic crosscourt drive

Hackers are easily impressed by good players cracking topspin crosscourt forehands back and forth. Back and forth. Back and forth. Personally, I find it boring.

From 4.0 on up, most players look sharp in crosscourt forehand exchanges. Once you get into one of these, you're just postponing the inevitable. Somebody's got to break the pattern and make something happen. It's kind of like going into a programmer's do-loop.

Once you're in this loop, you're really looking for the right shot to break the pattern. Namely, you want a short ball before the other guy gets a short ball to drive up the line.

To win these rallies consistently, simply keep plenty of stuff on the ball: depth, pace, moderate topspin, and keep it going toward the corner.

Resist going for the memorable shot. After a typical exchange gets going, the macho juices start flowing. Got to hit it harder than the other guy. Got to intimidate him with a wow-class angle. LET THE OTHER GUY DO THIS. If you keep stuff on the ball, you don't need to go for too much and he'll feel COMPELLED to go for the macho shot. Statistically, you win.

I have nothing to say about the mechanics of the classic crosscourt forehand. You already know all about it. But here's a little psychological trick to try occasionally. When you're in the rally, and you hit a good solid shot with stuff toward the corner, cheat a bit by staying near your own forehand corner. Don't recover so diligently toward the center. TEMPT HIM with an open court. If your shot has decent stuff on it, you have a good chance of drawing the unforced error. I have found that this works even against good, smart players.

The forehand "buster" up the line

Your patience is marvelous, so during the crosscourt rally, you are able to draw a ball that's just a tad short. I'm not talking about a seriously short ball here. In that case you have a prototypical approach shot opportunity. The "tad short" ball is just short and/or slow enough so that you have time for an extra footwork step to get some weight transferred into the BUSTER.

The "buster" is my terminology for a shot that busts the crosscourt angle pattern and sends the ball zipping up the line. Returning the crosscourt shot along its original trajectory is EASY. That's why so

many players enjoy getting into these rallies. I'll make a baseball analogy here. My little league coach advised me to try to hit the fastball back up the middle. This was just a mental key to improve timing.

The psycho-physics behind this is relevant, however. The simpler the geometry, the fewer variables the mind-body combination has to solve simultaneously. "Reflecting" the ball back to where it came from takes at least one variable out of play. That's why it's so easy.

Driving your opponent's crosscourt back up the line is a complex shot. You have to intuit just the right amount of angle change. A little too much and you lose the point wide. A smidgen too little and your nemesis gets an easy ball to drive with his backhand.

Reduce the danger in the shot by hustling your footwork, taking a couple of extra steps to get MORE distance between your body and the point of contact – more than you have during the crosscourt rally. And get your feet more in line with the sideline. If you normally hit with an open stance, you need to close it up a bit to improve your precision.

If you don't have time for this extra footwork, then don't hit the buster that time. Be patient, drive another shot crosscourt, and wait for the next one.

When you are set up for the buster, it's essential that you feel your weight transfer directly up the line. If your stance is open and your upper body weight is going left while your stroke is allegedly going up the line . . . well it won't get there, statistically speaking, which is what winners do.

You see, you're already adding an angle variable by executing the buster. If you add an additional variable by sending your body weight in the wrong direction, it's hopeless.

Let's say you hustle your footwork and decide to drive the ball up the line. You're going to hit it on the rise. No equivocation here. You can't be careful with a gutsy shot. The racket head wants to be wielded by a gutsy guy!

The shot can be fairly flat and even a little sidespin is OK. Pace is most important here. You want that ball in the other guy's backhand corner before he realizes that you just busted the pattern.

The shot often wins the point outright. But commit immediately to following it into the net. Yes, follow every buster into the net. Don't let him get away with a weak backhand floater back to your baseline. Get up there and knock off the volley.

An added benefit accrues for the commitment to attack the net: your weight transfer will be better as you lean into it and the shot will have more pace. You buy more margin, too, because every inch closer to the net you get before your racket head makes contact gives you a better angle over the net.

The running crosscourt looper

I learned this shot from a guy 9 years my senior. I couldn't believe how he could run down my best angled crosscourt forehands and return a shot that prevented me from controlling the point. But I did figure that if he could do it, I could too.

You're scrambling to your forehand corner to retrieve a tough crosscourt drive. You're a little bit in trouble because the ball is dropping to knee level or lower by the time you get there. The classic forehand form is not possible.

You may be a bit older and slower than you like and you've got to save some energy, too. So go ahead and use a little wrist on this shot. The objective is to hit a high trajectory moderate-to-heavy topspin ball into the other forehand corner.

The shot appears to be more of a whip or flick shot than the typical forehand. You don't actually need much wrist, though. Most of the strength in the shot is in the forearm and the grip. A firm grip is required for consistency.

Good racket preparation is essential. Get the racket back while you're on the run. You're not going to get down to the ball, so your stroke will have a risky upward component, in addition to the back-to-front component. This adds a variable, increasing the chance for error.

But what I learned from my buddy and by working on the shot myself is that you can be very consistent if you work on it and hit it with confidence. You have some things going in your favor. Corner-to-corner gives you lots of room. The natural topspin of the shot gives you even more margin. You don't want to be ANYWHERE near the net on your trajectory. You're not trying to beat him with angle – you're trying to neutralize the rally with a good defensive shot. The high trajectory on the shot gives you a chance to recover your balance and get back a couple of steps into the court.

To get the extra "air" on the shot, you have to consciously loft the ball higher. Your weight is going in the wrong direction and your stroke is more "across" your body than normal. So you have to deliberately lift it up there.

Even if your opponent is waiting in that corner, he'll have a tough time hitting an offensive shot off your ball. In fact, you may win the point quickly because he is tempted to drive the ball up the line. But your spin and depth of shot make this very risky.

It's interesting that even smart opponents go for too much after you hit this shot well. Here's why: their shot into your corner was so penetrating that they feel that they already *deserve* to win the point. It's hard for them to admit that your defensive shot effectively cancelled out the value of their marvelous offensive shot. So, in irritation, they go for too much, instead of just accepting the fact that the rally is back on even terms.

The flicked forehand

The opportunity for this shot might only come once or twice per match. But if you pull if off, you can exact a devastating psychological toll on the hapless fellow across the net. This shot is at the extreme boundary of the "running crosscourt looper."

You're on the full run to (and perhaps beyond!) the forehand corner and lunging for the shot. Your opponent is probably starting to relax because you most likely won't get to it.

Instead of trying to scoop a deplorably weak shot out of an impossible position, go ahead and whack it as hard as you can. As long as you get any string at all on the ball, you stand a fair chance of hitting a whistling return that could win the point outright.

If you can go crosscourt with this, that's your best chance. Lower net, longer distance to the corner, etc.

This is the one shot where the modern large rackets have a great advantage over the old small heads. Those last few square inches of racket surface basically didn't exist on the old frames.

The best I ever hit this shot, however, won a doubles tournament match for my partner and myself. I was playing deuce court. In the middle of the first set, we got to break point. An angled volley from the other team went skittering wide of my alley. As I lunged for the ball I instinctively knew I was going to partially frame the shot, so I put as much strength and racket speed into it as I could.

Sure enough, my framed forehand hooked around the net post and into the near alley for a winner. I gotta say that one "lucky" shot broke the other team's spirit. We cruised from that point.

The mini-moonball up the line

Similar scenario as the last two, but let's say that you get to the ball a little sooner and the ball is a little higher. It's a long point, you're starting to fatigue, you're still on the defensive, and you want to buy some time in addition to neutralizing the rally.

It's time to play *pusher* with a mini-moonball up the line. I'm actually surprised that so few players employ this shot. But then, too many players seem to care less about winning than about hitting classic-looking strokes. The only male pro I see doing this currently is Mardy Fish. And he makes it work at the 7.0 level.

The idea is simple. Just hit a slightly rolling forehand deep up the line. High trajectory. Slow pace. It's an easy shot. Something that pushers can hit all day long.

Accordingly, it can be frustratingly effective. It buys you time to catch a breath and recover to a position near the middle of the baseline. If your opponent has been cracking the ball, it breaks the pattern nicely.

The shot neutralizes the rally because it presents your adversary with a slow, high bouncing backhand. It's almost impossible for him to hit an attacking shot off of that.

The serious moonball

Don't bother with working much on a serious backhand moonball. If you, unfortunately, get into a moonball rally, you have time to run around the backhand. Your forehand moonball is going to be much more effective anyway – statistically.

You need the strength of the forehand, because this is more of a precision shot than anyone gives it credit.

"WHAT!" you exclaim. "A PRECISION SHOT?!?"

Yes, indeed, if you think of it as a weapon. Many players get into a moonball rally because one of them gets in trouble on a deep shot and lofts the high one back. The other responds in kind, sometimes out of lack of concentration or lack of confidence in the ability to convert the high bouncing ball into an effective drive.

What typically results is a moonball rally with most shots hitting close to the service line until someone feels confident enough to break the pattern again.

What you really want to do with this shot is hit it within a yard of the baseline and with moderate to heavy topspin. Every time. That puts enormous pressure on your opponent. His choices are unhappy: either scamper deep behind his line and return in kind or hang in on the baseline and hit a half-volley return.

The latter is risky. It's easy to get it back in the court, but not so easy to hit with any pace or consistent depth. And then you get an opportunity to take over the point.

The former is deadly. Unless he has invested the same practice that you have into perfecting the serious moonball. Like I said, the shot requires some strength and precision to consistently hit deep and with significant spin. That takes practice and work.

Most moonballs fall short because people don't appreciate how much margin actually exists on a high topspin ball. If you get good topspin, you can hit the ball awfully high and deep and still be in the court. It's a bit counterintuitive because you can't see how much the air slows the shot down while in transit and how effectively gravity keeps working on a ball moving slower and slower in the forward direction. The peak of the trajectory actually occurs *past* the net. Most of the drop occurs in the last third of the entire arc. Watch an amateur match from the side and see what I mean. Without this understanding

you will continually be tempted to hit the ball short because you think that the peak should occur right over the net.

Don't make the shot wristy at all. You need maximum consistency. Use upper body torque and a very firm, perhaps even stiff stroke motion to generate plenty of spin and launch the ball toward the moon. Just aim for the middle of the court. If you can get it a little toward the backhand, OK. You might tempt him to get lazy and hit a backhand. But you'll make silly unforced errors if you try too hard to hit the backhand corner. Let HIM try to hit YOUR backhand corner. Just be diligent to run around the shot and hit the same old boring and winning moonball forehand.

It takes much practice to get the feel of the shot. But once you do, you'll drive everyone nuts with it!

The "A" versus the "B" forehand

Get your imagination in gear. You've got to close your eyes – after you read this section, not while you're reading it! This section alone, if you get ahold of it, is worth the price of the book.

Most amateur players never get beyond a "B" forehand. They never get to experience the joy of repeatedly producing the "pop" in the forehand that advanced players regularly generate.

I'm treading close to stroke mechanics here, but the real keys are mental and rooted in your confidence level. Fantasize the flow in a forehand that you belt during a practice session. Compare the fantasy with the memory of the tense forehands you hit the last time you were in a close match.

Some players basically surrender to the tension of competitive matches and develop such a stiff-armed forehand that they will never generate enough velocity to make the shot a weapon.

OK, here it is: The "A" forehand must include all of these elements in just the right balance for your particular body, strength, etc.:

(1) Footwork that gets you THERE in time to get your upper body coiled and your weight ready to transfer THROUGH the shot. Remember that the best tennis players are strong athletes: here's where athleticism wins.
(2) A 'just big enough' backswing to allow lots of racket-head speed.
(3) Elbow bent so that you are bringing the racket head through the ball at the optimum distance from the body so you can FEEL the power flow.
(4) The 1st key point: Go ahead and put your forearm and wrist to work so you can feel the whip of the shot. Just before you accelerate the racket head, your wrist drops the racket head so that forearm and wrist together produce maximum acceleration. Don't think of this shot as "wristy." Find the optimum combination of forearm and wrist for controlled acceleration. That combo will be unique for your mind/body.
(5) The 2nd key point: Employ dangerously high racket head speed, trusting 2 things to keep the ball in the court: topspin and muscle memory.

You can't build a weapon without freeing up the forearm and wrist to a significant degree. I find that the only way to consistently do this is to concentrate on relaxing my whole body just for a split second as my footwork gets me into position for the shot. Without that relaxation key, I'm going to tense up, lock my forearm and wrist and suck all of the velocity out of the shot.

Also, with a freer stroke and high racket head speed, you have to WAIT on the shot. Once you've played this game a number of years, you will make more errors and produce more weak shots by being too early. It's beginners that are typically too late.

But somehow we don't seem to get over the beginner's adjustment of "Prepare early. Start that swing early. Racket back. Hit that ball out in front of your body." Et cetera.

The faster you swing, though, the longer you can and must hold the shot. When you get a bit tense, you start the swing a little early, note that you're early, adjust my reducing the acceleration of the racket head, and hit a wussy shot. Power comes with a patiently struck ball.

During the first few hundred of these weaponized shots, you'll feel almost disconnected from your racket head. Like . . . *Whoa . . . look at the racket just dominate the ball and . . . wow . . . the topspin DOES seem to drive it into the court.*

If you strike this shot aggressively and repeatedly, your muscle memory will find the proper range for the court and you will rarely miss a ball that you hit well. The errors will come when you get a little careful and reduce the racket head speed because you don't want to risk an error – which is dumb when you think about it.

Watch the pros. There is psychology, muscle memory, and physics behind their continual determination to whack the heck out of the ball. When struck well, the ball does seem to find the court.

Remember your worst errors? Most of them come from tentativeness, not from well-struck balls where you somehow misjudged the size of the court. Your muscles are smarter than you think. They know how big the court is.

Chapter 7

Beautiful Yet Beastly Backhands

The forehand should always be more powerful than the backhand because of mechanical advantages. You've got a great chance of winning, however, if your weaker side is stronger than his weaker side. Regardless of whether his forehand is a lot stronger than yours.

Once you hit the 4.0 level you should strive to dictate which side to rally on. You don't have to agree to have forehand to forehand battles. If your backhand is stronger than his, just hit to his backhand. Get the rallies going on the crosscourt backhand side.

This can get boring, though. When I was in college, I played a fellow in the intramural tournament whose game was almost a mirror image of mine. We both had mediocre forehands, but we both swelled with pride in our incredibly steady backhands.

He could hit 20 backhands in a row without missing. But I was sure I could hit 21! We both thought we were one backhand per hour better than the other guy. Our rally pattern became a macho display of an attempt to break down the consistency of the other guy's steadiest shot.

I suppose I was the first one of us to realize that day that it's possible to attack the other guy's forehand. To that point in my early tennis life I hadn't discovered the exception to the rule that forehands are stronger than backhands. In this match, I finally won by being a bit stronger on the forehand side and at net.

A key point of this is that the backhand can be a much STEADIER shot than the forehand, even though it is weaker mechanically. In fact, BECAUSE it is weaker mechanically, we devise a simpler stroke which is inherently more stable. The forehand is more complex and, therefore, can go awry under pressure. That's why I don't play table tennis anymore. It doesn't affect my tennis backhand, but crosswires my brain into chaotic tennis forehand behavior.

The slice backhand

The simplest backhand stroke is the slice, of course. Why is the slice so popular? Clearly, if we could drive the ball hard into the corner with topspin every shot . . . we would!

The answer is that the slice is the simplest and shortest motion available to propel the ball the length of the court. Backspin makes use of aerodynamics to float the ball farther with less momentum transfer from the stroke.

Aerodynamics? With backspin the bottom of the ball at every instant has a velocity which is the addition of the ball's forward motion and the ball's spin motion. The top of the ball has an instanteous velocity in which the spin motion is SUBTRACTED from the forward motion. Therefore, the bottom of the ball feels MORE air drag and the top feels LESS. More drag means more frictional force which resists the gravitational force pulling the ball to the ground. Another way to think of this is that the extra friction is equivalent to a thicker cushion of air that the ball is floating on. (Alternatively, the top of the ball doesn't see so much friction and so doesn't resist "going up." A topspun ball, on the other hand, has much more friction on top and so gets pushed down.)

In short, the backspun ball floats farther. Therefore, you don't have to hit it very hard to get it to the other baseline. Your stroke is shorter, allowing more simplicity and, therefore, more precision in the striking of the ball.

There are various reasons to employ the slice rather than a drive backhand on a given shot:

(1) Your slice is more consistent than your drive because your game hasn't developed enough to hit most of your drives where you want them to go.
(2) To break up the pattern and give your opponent something different to look at or think about.
(3) You are slightly out of position or late and you don't have time to prepare for a drive. After all, the slice requires minimal preparation in comparison.
(4) The ball is low and you can't effectively get under it to whip up a topspin drive.

When you choose to hit a slice you need to get some "stick" on it. *Stick* is a measure of the ball's total energy – a combination of good pace and strong backspin. The result is a shot trajectory that stays low and produces a low bounce.

How does that work? The more vertically the ball strikes the court surface, the more vertically it will bounce. A topspun ball dives more vertically into the court and, therefore, bounces high. The sliced shot with stick strikes the court at a small angle and "reflects" at a small angle.

If you have strong backspin, but not enough pace, the ball floats along, air drag slows it down dramatically, and gravity pulls the ball more easily into a high angle bounce. You need the pace to keep gravity out of the trajectory as much as possible. Gravity acts with a constant force, so give it less time to act by giving the ball more speed.

Generally speaking, the slice is more effective when struck deep into the court. I'll deal with the exception to this rule later on in discussing how to beat guys with two-handed backhands.

If the shot is deep, it has multiple advantages. Most of the trajectory is in the air and therefore at high velocity. Once the ball bounces, the ball slows down significantly. When the ball bounces short in the court, the player gets to judge the after-bounce trajectory, a slow ball, for a significant amount of time. This is easy to do.

When the ball moves fast and strikes deep, the change in velocity resulting from the bounce – let's call this "Delta V" – is big. The player follows the trajectory of every shot all the way with his eyes and organizes his footwork and stroke preparation accordingly.

When the shot is deep, he has little time to adjust to the precise value of the Delta V. With the heavily sliced backhand, the Delta V is especially big. That results simply because the rotational spin fights against the forward motion of the ball when the fuzz grabs the court.

A big Delta V coupled with little time to adjust often produces an error or a weak return. It's harder for him to find rhythm. His shot is more tentative because he has to wait and see just where the ball is going to be before he commits to high racket head speed. So it's worth taking some risk in trying to get your sliced shots deep and with stick. This is especially useful on a clay court, where the bounce is a little erratic, particularly near the baseline, which gets chewed up quickly during a match.

Alternatively, a short slice produces a big delta V with LOTS OF TIME to adjust. When you tentatively hit your slices short, you invite your opponent to attack.

How do you deal with the low sliced backhand of your opponent? In short, with patience!

The first thing is to avoid making an error yourself. But we have to talk a little tennis physics to get on top of this subject.

Imagine a topspin backhand crosscourt rally. The topspin ball jumps upward on contact with the string. You know this because a topspin ball jumps forward, doesn't it, on the flat court surface when it hits? A low, sliced ball has little forward rotation after it bounces. It does have a little. The friction of the bounce converts the slice rotation to a forward rotation, but not a *rapid* forward rotation.

If you hit the same stroke to attack the low slice as you do to attack the topspin drive, you'll drive the ball down into the net. You have to "get over the ball" to counteract the "jump" of the topspun ball. Doing that to the low ball will drive your shot into the bottom of the net. You really have to "lift" the low ball. Different racket angle, different mind set.

It's also hard to go low-to-high with any significant racket head speed when the ball is low. So if you do try to drive a topspin ball off of a low slice, you have to work at getting down low and muscling through the stroke.

It's safer, therefore, to be patient. Generally, return a low slice with a deep, low slice of your own. Trade these strokes until your opponent fails to get much stick on one of his and you can wind up for the attack.

The drive backhand

The drive comes basically in two varieties: flat and moderately topped. Gradations in between are not different enough to discuss separately. Let's talk about the topped drive first.

For the topped backhand drive, you need a longer stroke, developing more racket speed earlier in the stroke than for the forehand. There are two basic reasons for this:

1. The muscles used by the forehand in your forearm and wrist are much stronger than those employed for the backhand. This allows you to develop additional racket speed later in the stroke, using this muscle power.
2. Not often discussed is a more subtle effect: On a backhand, you don't have as much of your hand behind the handle.

Visualize the arm / hand / racket handle system. There's a lot more flesh behind the racket handle for a forehand grip. Therefore, with the backhand grip, the momentum transfer from your arm and upper body is reduced. It's a lot easier to "muscle" the forehand with a shorter stroke, in part, because more mass in your hand allows more coupling to the mass of your arm.

To illustrate this tendency, imagine the extreme case. Visualize yourself hitting a backhand while holding the handle with only your thumb and forefinger. If the ball coming at you has any velocity, it's likely to knock the racket back and out of your hand. No matter how strong you are, the racket won't impart much momentum. To get any speed on your shot in this extreme, your racket head speed will have to be very high to make up for the light mass behind the shot.

For you techies out there: Remember, from basic physics we know that momentum is mass x velocity. Low mass requires high velocity to produce a given momentum.

Back to the stroke – to get plenty of racket head speed, commit to the shot early and hit the ball well in front of your front foot. That forward contact point allows the speed to develop fully.

Face it: the 1-hand topspin drive is a longer stroke than the 2-hander. The 2-hander has plenty of mass behind the shot, producing high momentum transfer and allowing for a shorter stroke. That's an advantage, but not enough to convert to the 2-hander if you can master the 1-hander.

With the 1-hander your portfolio includes a wider variety of spins and trajectories you can use to torment the 2-hander. He has to expend an extra hundred steps per set in footwork in order to be in the right position to hit the shot. As you age, every step is precious.

The crosscourt topspin drive should be your bread and butter backhand as you hit the 4.5 and 5.0 levels. Work at getting this shot deep. You can get more free points by provoking errors and more weak balls to attack by hitting this shot deep than with any other tactic. So it's worth taking some risk and hitting near the other baseline. Even at the 5.0 level, there just aren't that many guys who can consistently hit this shot deep. Take advantage of that fact and be one of the privileged minority, namely, a winner!

The flat backhand is a good intermediate choice between the slice and the topper as a player is learning to hit the topper. But it's also a weapon to be used sparingly. The best time to use the flat drive is when you have an opponent on the run to his forehand corner. He scrambles, but succeeds only in hitting the ball up the line or near the middle, but to your backhand. You want to end the point with one shot. Aggressively step into the shot, catch it on the rise, and belt it flat and crosscourt for the winner. Now, when I say "belt", I mean a smooth drive at 80% of max velocity. You don't have to overhit. Just catch it cleanly and he won't catch up to it. But you have to hit it confidently. No equivocation.

A flat crosscourt drive is not a good choice for rallying. It's a lot harder to be consistent with this shot than with either the slice or topped ball. Some of this is physical. The topped ball has "trajectory margin": the ball has a lot of net clearance. The sliced ball has "contact margin": the simplicity of the stroke allows you to strike it very cleanly and precisely, overcoming the low trajectory margin on the shot.

The contact margin of the slice is largest when you make contact on a ball that is falling, after the apex of the post-bounce trajectory. Visualize it. The ball is falling on top of a racket face that is slanted upward to "catch" it.

Hitting a firm slice against a rising ball is more tricky. Visualize it. You're much more likely to catch the bottom of the frame on the ball. You have more contact margin on a rising ball by blocking it back flat or with a little roll.

The flatly driven ball has neither trajectory margin nor contact margin. It's in-between. Only gravity helps you on the trajectory. And your timing must be precise on the contact. You can't get away with hitting the shot late like you can on the slice. That's why it's best used in the scenario above, when your opponent is on the run and you get a short, slow ball. Your flat crosscourt wins the point whether it goes deep or bounces mid-court.

The physical dangers synergize with the mental aspects of the shot. A good flat drive is easy in practice sessions. There is no pressure and no care about whether the ball actually hits the court. Watch some good players just "hit" for a while. They can really cream the ball. A little bit of pressure in a match, however, and a little concrete in the elbow, and the errors will abound.

The punisher

This shot is exceptionally effective on clay, on a hot day, in a long match!

The "punisher" is a well-chosen slice hit up the line during a rally. It's OK to hit it a little short. The idea is to make the guy run, bend over, stretch, and recover back to the center of the court. If he is so foolish as to hit the ball up the line, your next shot is a topped or flat backhand drive to the other corner.

Especially effective in the latter stages of a tough match, the punisher can generate unforced errors because it's tough for a tired player to whip up an offensive forehand. He tries, but the body action isn't

as crisp as in the first set and mishits often result. Also, it opens up the court unless he hits a shot with a lot of stuff on it, meaning that you have added risk to his limited choices.

To hit the shot effectively, you have to relax. As a relaxed stroke directed up the line in the middle of a rally, the shot takes no energy to hit. Just don't play too close to the sideline. It's easy to hit it out. You have to wait for a ball about waist high. It's too hard to hit it off of a high-bounder, and a low ball will have to be lofted too gently to insure net clearance.

Once you get this shot going, however, it hurts your opponent both physically and mentally. It looks like such a dink-ball shot! But any shot that makes the other guy run and hit from a bent-over position is, in my book, a *WINNING* DINK-BALL SHOT!

Furthermore, you need this shot against left-handers. This is the shot they like to torment you with. They certainly don't appreciate a right-hander who can return the favor and get them running and stretching tiredly to their backhand side.

Comment on lefties

I've heard that as much as righties usually hate to play lefties, lefties REALLY hate to play lefties. When I was injured for a season with bad tendonitis I learned to play at about the 4.0 level lefty (physically), but with my 5.0+ brain.

I played a fun set against one of the 4.5s in the club who was a lefty. I lost the set 7-5, but apparently drove him nuts. He said that he REALLY has a tough time against lefties. I had to remind him that I wasn't a lefty. I was just playing left-handed.

Anyway, I have no sympathy. If I had the foresight, I would have learned from the beginning to play lefty for all of the natural advantages enjoyed thereby. Like Nadal did.

Now back to work.

The approach shot

There is a simple and effective approach shot I'll call the "penetrator." It won't come up too many times in a match, but it's still worthwhile to master this.

It arises mostly when you've run your opponent to his forehand corner and he returns a high topped ball short and in the center of the court. You want to get to it as early as possible, but if you do catch it early, the ball will be too high to hit a reliable flat or topped crosscourt drive. A 2-hander can handle a drive more easily from this position. But the "penetrator" is just as effective and probably even more consistent than the 2-hand drive.

What you do is hit a very firm slice to the backhand corner with virtually no racket work at all. Get your shoulder turned and just LEAN into the shot. Let your body weight do all the work. You'll get marvelous stick on the ball with virtually no risk because the racket work is so simple.

This shot is not likely to produce a clean winner, but it will give the guy a very difficult backhand on the run against a degree of stick he hasn't seen on any other shot you've hit to that point.

Then proceed forward and hug the net. Dare him to lob while he's scrambling wide past the backhand corner. You should win the point in at least 90% of these situations, assuming you strike the ball cleanly and with confidence.

On a short waist high ball (once again assuming a right-handed opponent), the bread and butter approach is a topped drive to the backhand corner. Put him on the run. Don't try to win the point

outright, although sometimes you will. Make it clear by your smooth consistency on this shot that every time he hits the ball short he's going to have to hit a running backhand from behind the baseline.

I don't recommend an approach using a low sliced backhand. This is the basic chip and charge tactic. Unless, of course, it's clear that whoever gets to net the most times is going to win the match.

I have used the tactic on hard courts when I'm playing a net rusher who REALLY hates to hit passing shots. I can't remember using chip and charge tactics on clay. At the 4.5 and 5.0 levels, people pass too easily on the dirt.

At 4.0 and below, however, if your net game is strong enough and you're athletic enough . . . hey, go for it if that's the way you win. My experience, however, is that there aren't too many players who actually win more by approaching off of just any kind of junk.

The off-backhand

2-handers seem to hit this shot a lot better than 1-handers. They have the "muscle" advantage on the shot. There's no reason that 1-handers can't master this shot, however. In fact, the 1-hander has an intrinsic advantage because of the larger variety of spins under his employ.

The secret to the off-backhand is to really work to transfer your weight in the direction of the shot.

The shot goes awry when you get lazy with your footwork and try to use your racket as a "reflector." The erroneous thinking is this: you think that you can take the ball coming near the middle of your court and attack it with normal footwork, compensating by adjusting your racket angle to reflect the ball in the off direction.

Result: unforced error.

Take the extra couple of steps to line yourself up in the off-direction. Don't think about using the pace of the opponent's shot at all. Generate your own pace by belting the ball flat or with a little roll toward the forehand corner.

If you're really cocky you can hit this with a little sidespin. If you're going to play me, I'd recommend that you do this often! I'll enjoy watching your attempts slip wide of the line. And I'll be sure to say, "Oh, too bad. Just *barely* missed. Tough luck."

If the off-backhand drive is used only occasionally, you will put your opponent into immediate trouble, because he will generally cheat to cover your crosscourt drive. Also, not many guys hit this shot well.

But it's not a hard shot, if you invest in the extra footwork to line it up!

The buster

"Buster" refers to busting the following angle: your opponent hits a crosscourt backhand to your backhand corner. You choose to break the angle and rip it up the line.

This is much tougher on the backhand than on the forehand side. 2-handers have the physical advantage here again. You don't have the same strength on the backhand. The stroke is longer and the timing is tougher. Even the pros make more errors off this shot than winners or forcing shots.

Off of a high speed or deep ball, just forget it. Don't try it. You're throwing away points.

The shot can be a success story for you if you practice it considerably. But even then, wait for a ball that's a little short and a little soft in pace so that you can get thoroughly lined up.

If you aspire to amateur greatness (don't we all?), you can make this shot a real weapon, even off of moderately paced balls. When I was a young player I marveled at guys who could pull this shot off. As I got older and learned to make the footwork adjustment, it became my favorite shot. But you'll have to work up to it. The secret is a completely coiled upper body and true devil-may-care high racket speed.

Only with high racket speed can you freeze the ball, so it appears to your racket head to be sitting on a tee, and drill it up the line. An additional advantage is that if you hit the ball plenty hard, you can hurt your opponent with shots several feet INSIDE the sideline.

The irony is that the advanced backhand buster will feel gloriously natural and will be viewed as demonically intimidating. Yes, you need good timing to pull it off. But mainly you need to BELIEVE that after a few hundred practice balls struck with coiled shoulder and speedy racket head that the *ball will actually learn to come into the court.*

Until you go for it, you're not going to believe me, though. Come on, invest 30 minutes of practice on this!

Backhand passing shot

Some of the comments on passing shots in the forehand chapter apply to the backhand of course. But not all.

If you're a baseliner and you're going to beat netrushers, you absolutely must learn to hit a decent backhand passing shot up the line. It's too easy for a big guy to camp on the crosscourt.

Use the crosscourt primarily for two situations:

(1) Hit it off the enemy's approach shot, employing extra hustle to get there early to generate as much topspin off a ball struck as close as possible to its apex. You don't have the same strength on this shot as on the forehand crosscourt pass, so you have to work harder to produce a good dipping angle.
(2) To keep the net guy honest after you have hurt him with 2 or more down the line passes.

Once he's ensconced at net, you basically can't get a crosscourt by him and still keep the shot inside the sideline. You have to hit the ball too near the center of the net to leave enough room for gravity to bring the ball down near the corner of the service box. And any shot that passes near the center of the net will be volleyed easily.

The shot up the line enjoys several advantages, however.

(1) It involves the shortest shot distance to get the ball past the volleyer.
(2) You have the full length of the court to let gravity come into play, although admittedly less than for the crosscourt.

Note that the gravitational logic is different for the pass than for the rally. But only because you don't have available to you a crosscourt shot to the court's corner. The crosscourt has to be angled to about the service box corner.

This is precisely why passing shots are so tough. Your "best" option is over the high part of the net and to the near corner.

The high part of the net also works to your advantage. Once you get it over the net, the enemy has a very difficult volley to wrong foot you to your backhand corner. He is almost forced to go crosscourt with the volley. Once you hit the pass, lean to cover the crosscourt volley. Only make it a *lean*, though. Don't spring madly or his wrong-foot volley will be too easy – just a simple pop fly back up the line.

The more top you can hit up the line the better. But you don't have to win the point with a dazzling, sizzling winner. A simple medium-paced flat ball, not too much air above the net, will dip enough to give the guy a tough volley, especially late in the match.

It's most vital to simply get the ball in the court. DON'T NET IT! Any decent ball up the line will make for a challenging volley.

Should you hit a sliced pass up the line? Sometimes the oncoming shot is too fast for you to uncork a topped or flat drive. So just make sure you step into the ball and give it a good chop. Don't get tempted into a lazy-footwork *reflection*!

A chopped pass will often produce a volley error if the net guy tries to hit a standard sliced volley off of your shot. That would be a mistake for him. His best response is a flat volley. We'll get into this more in the chapter on volleying.

If the sliced response to a fast ball gives you too much heartache, you'll find that it's not too hard to just block a moderately paced flat ball up the line. Don't try to do too much with it. Just make him hit another volley.

Note we haven't talked about the lob yet. A very neglected shot. That's why it's the next chapter.

Chapter 8

The Woeful and Disrespected Lob

Manliness

Why don't folks lob more often? More particularly, why don't *men* lob more often? I believe that women players are much smarter than men in tactical employment of the lob.

Women don't see the lob as a sex-based stroke. They see it as an effective weapon that can exploit the weakness in mobility or timing of the opponent.

Men, if you could force them to admit it, would explain, "The lob is an *unmanly* stroke." Read that sentence again, using a heavy German accent on the italicized word, and with a healthy dose of disdain in your voice.

"The lob is an unmanly *stroke."*

COME ON MEN! IT'S A SHOT, NOT A SYMBOL OF VIRILITY!!

Actually, I identify personally with the primal urge to rip a passing shot when my nemesis dares to approach the net, impugning my character by publicly implying that I can't deal with his anemic approach shot.

After all, I have etched in my brain the image of Jimmy Connors at the advanced age of 39, hitting the backhand pass on the dead run at the Open, pumping his fists to the roar of the crowd. So I know that if I were a *real man* I would just belt the pass every time.

Yielding to the primal urge, however, will destroy your statistics. For certain combinations of an approach shot's pace and placement that put you on the run, you are going to miss the majority of your passing attempts.

Also, your pass will be tougher and tougher as time goes on, because he'll be smart enough to crowd the net. And the more you flail at the pass, the more rabid will be the opponent's approaches to net.

So . . . try a lob. Come on, it's OK. We won't laugh.

Stroking precisely

The first thing about executing the lob is to recognize that it's a full-fledged stroke. It's not a stroke with very high racket head velocity, of course. But it's a stroke that requires a good bit of precision. Recognize that you're trying to hit a particular piece of court AND trying to produce a particular trajectory.

You've got to concentrate to hit a shot that demands precision. Consider how many pro lobs go out or fall short. I don't think they practice this shot very much. This shot is tougher than cracking a crosscourt groundstroke. On the groundstroke you have quite a range of depth and trajectory that will keep you on at least neutral grounds during the point. But on the lob, if you're not precise, the point is over, and often with emphasis as your opponent swells with pride and confidence after crushing a memorable overhead.

The temptation is to get lazy in executing the lob. Resist that tempation. Hustle your footwork. Get the racket back. Stroke through the ball deliberately, whether you're hitting an offensive or defensive lob.

I don't take much stock in the idea of "follow-through." Once you strike the ball on any shot it doesn't matter what you and your racket do. You can do inverted corkscrew handsprings starting the microsecond that the last molecule of fuzz leaves your strings.

For the lob, however, follow-through is a decidedly useful conceptual key to insure that you finish the part of the stroke that matters. You know that you aren't hitting the ball hard, so your racket speed isn't very high. You may yield to the temptation to flick or bunt the shot. RESIST! Keep the racket head moving right through the shot, heading toward the sky.

The other mental key is to make sure your racket head is actually *accelerating* through the ball. If it's not *accelerating*, it's definitely *decelerating*. After all, in between accleration and deceleration is 0.0000000% change in velocity. You're not going to be that precise.

The trick is to avoid the deceleration that arises naturally because you treat the lob as a light-weight dink-ball shot. Accelerating the racket head, however, will put *you* in control of the ball. The ball will *want* to obey you.

The same is true for virtually any shot. You don't want your racket-head speed to be dying, except maybe for a tear-drop volley. You don't need much acceleration. Just enough to be conscious of controlling the shot with opponent-destroying precision.

Don't try to hit too much spin. On an offensive lob, just a little roll is wonderfully effective. The heavy topspinner that bounds away behind the baseline is a wonderfully dramatic shot, but unless you make your living on the tennis court, you will not be able to hit a majority of these deep into the court. Frankly, the pros don't either. The objective is to win, not to hit a couple of memorable shots.

To get control, you've got to keep your wrist fairly firm. You might make the mistake of flipping your wrist a bit because you're trying to flip the shot up before he knows what you're doing. Believe me: It's far more important to hit a careful, deliberate shot than to get those extra few milliseconds of deception.

I know about that temptation. I want to fake him out. Get the lob up in a big surprise. But I need precision. And I can't get precision without taking the stroke *seriously* and producing it with *elan.*

The best defense

Offensive or defensive? How to choose? Simple, actually. Use the defensive lob when you're deep and on the run. Get that Jimmy Connors image out of your brain! Get it up high and aim for the center of the court. No need to fool with targeting the backhand corner. Then recover to the center of the court. Dare him to hit the bouncing overhead into the corner.

The professional can hit that corner, of course. But the amateur will often miss it. I observed in one particular pro match that it's not smart for them to always guess! On two different points player A hit a good defensive lob deep and near the center of player B's baseline. Both times A guessed and ran toward a corner just as B swung at the bouncing overhead. Both times B hit a winner, but only because his shot was conservatively near the center of the court, which A had vacated. And B was ranked 12th on the planet at the time!

Back to the amateur world. A good defensive lob gets you back in the point, with a plus! It irritates your opponent. He was just feeling that he deserved to win the point. Now he's got to be careful

to hit a decent shot off of a high bouncing ball that he doesn't practice much against, and feels the pressure of *having* to win the point because he *deserves* to win the point.

Most of your lobs should be offensive. I know this goes against conventional wisdom, but hang in there with me on this one. Remember that we're all a bunch of amateurs here, not pros that cover the whole court in a split second, can leap like NBA forwards for the slam dunk, and can generally chew up a fistful of tin lobs and spit them out as steel-nailed overheads!

The easiest offensive lob to hit is off of a waist-high forehand when you have a little time. Unfortunately, this is when you're most tempted to hit the pass. But even if you *can* hit the pass, *sometimes* you've got to mix it up with the o-lob.

The shot is easy (against a right-hander) because you can direct the ball right up the line and get it over the backhand side. Not many players can belt a backhand overhead, so you actually have lots of margin on this shot. Even if he can reach it with the high backhand, you're likely to get another shot. Possibly an easy pass, because if he does get the ball into the court, it's likely to be short and bounce up nicely for you to drill back.

Spin isn't important. If you can go for a little roll, that's fine. But flat is OK. Gravity is going to do most of the work, as it always does. The earth doesn't need very much help from aerodynamics. Even if you have to slice it a little, that's even OK.

Players think that they need to hit good topspin because they have an idealistic vision of the opponent in a futile lunge, despairing as the ball lands behind him and jumps madly toward the fence due to the unbelievable spin.

Too hard. It's OK if he gets his racket on the ball in a weak position. It's also OK if he runs the ball down. In that case, you have turned the tables beautifully. And you should be on top of the net, of course, if he is scampering back to the baseline. Few circumstances are more discouraging to the other guy than giving up his net position, hitting his own lob from a scampered position, and watching you crush an overhead like he had dreamed of doing. And what joy for you!

What if he pulls off the miracle pass from that impossible position after you have "foolishly" charged the net? That's GREAT! If he pulls that off, he'll be sure to try the same thing the next 10 times, too. So you win 10 out of 11 of those points. We can live with that.

If you're hitting the forehand lob up the line, it's more important to get the ball over his backhand side than to get it deep. On the other hand, if you're lobbing from the center of the court or from the backhand side, it's more important to get the lob deep than to get it over the backhand side.

Why does the logic change? On the shot up the line, you really want to take advantage of forcing the backhand overhead, even if you don't get the ball deep. Better to be a little short, but forcing the backhand, than to risk missing over the baseline and ending the point prematurely.

But from the center or left side of the court, you will miss too many lobs over the sideline by trying too hard to get it over the backhand side. He has too much time to sidestep and your shot takes a little too much precision.

Here's an exception to the rule. My young (35) and athletic opponent (a former college player and teaching pro) had just hit an angled backhand volley that I got to a few feet inside the baseline and right on the sideline. The ball was low to my backhand so I had no choice but to open the face of the racket for whatever shot I would try.

I basically had no shot from this position. Any sliced drive up the line would necessarily be slow enough so that he would cover the volley. Similarly, there was no chance for pace on a crosscourt shot that could possibly stay in the court.

Finally, inside the baseline, you don't have enough real estate to make use of a full lob trajectory. Any such attempt would provide an easy overhead for a guy with any athleticism, even if the lob were lofted well.

Instinctively, I tried the only shot that can work against an amateur and that would have NO chance against a pro. I scooped a quick offensive lob to get the ball high to his backhand. Any higher, to get it completely over his racket, and the ball would have gone over the sideline. So, basically, I dared him to hit a quick backhand overhead. And he butchered the shot. I said, "Tough luck."

He won't butcher that shot every time. But your odds on trying ANY other shot are effectively pitiful. So take advantage of the non-professional status of your opponents. Even if your shot is not memorable, your match victory will be!

Chapter 9

Crunchy Volleys

Let's talk about some *manly* shots now. Like the *c-r-u-n-c-h* volley. It's time to end the point. With an exclamation point! "Get that weak stuff outta here!" you're saying.

You've seen articles and heard instruction on basic techniques, so I'm not going to review much of that. You know, firm grip, punch the ball, racket head above your wrist, etc.

In real life, the emphasis changes depending on the circumstances. You also can't keep 5 keys in your head all of the time. The relative importance of the basics (or keys) varies with the position you're in and what you're trying to do with the ball.

Your basic end-the-point crunch volley is flat. Not sliced. You don't "add slice for control" when you're volleying to end the point, despite what the commentators say.

Whither slice?

Let's deal with the philosophy of the sliced volley right away. Ideally, you get a volley when you're right on top of the net, the ball is high, and you can belt it away from your opponent. No equivocation. You blast it flat for maximum velocity.

The farther you are from the net and the lower the ball is when you hit it provokes you to put more care into the shot. You have to hit the ball somewhat upward to clear the net and get it deep into the court. The shot with the "most care" is derived from the shortest racket stroke.

The shortest stroke employs an upward angled racket face so that the ball immediately travels a bit upward. Now, you do have to *stroke* the ball so that you impart some controlled velocity (speed plus direction) to the ball. The stroke plus the angled racket face *results* in a sliced volley.

This might seem like a subtle point, but it's pretty important because of the misdirection in conventional tennis instruction on this point. So I'll say it another way. Slice on a volley is a result of your attempt to caress a low ball into the court. If you could avoid the slice, you would choose to do so.

You don't really want slice on a crunch volley. After all, the slice will increase the Delta V from the bounce, giving the baseliner more time to wind up on the passing shot. But hitting a flat volley from a low position is tougher to execute.

Why? In desperation we'll resort to a golf analogy. A flat volley from a low position is like a fast downhill putt. A low, sliced volley is more like a comfortable uphill putt. The flat volley gets the most speed out of the least racket motion. When you're hitting it delicately to keep it in the court, the flat stroke is extremely abbreviated. Any error in racket face angle or speed is deadly because the amount of error will be a big fraction of the small stroke length.

The low, sliced volley requires a longer stroke because the angled racket face takes some speed off of the ball. Any error in racket speed is not as deadly because the given error will be a smaller fraction of the longer stroke length.

In the putting analogy, the small stroking error on the downhill putt can send the ball several feet past the cup. The small stroking error on the more extended stroke of the uphill putt won't hurt so much.

But when the ball is high enough to attack with the volley, hit it flat! But, you say, the sliced volley will stay low, making it harder to hit the passing shot. The flat volley, however, is more likely to make it *impossible* to hit the passing shot because the ball zips on through the court before he gets there.

My experience has taught me that in hitting passing shots, I would rather have more time to wind up on a low ball than less time on a higher ball. The big advantage of the net position is that it takes away time from the baseliner. Minimize that time every chance you get. The flat ball moves through the air faster and has a lower Delta V on the bounce. These are big advantages. Watch the pros. You'll see lots of flat volleys.

In trying to chop their volleys, amateurs get into big trouble against heavy topspin and heavy underspin groundstrokes. Use the flat volley to *knock the spin off the ball.* If you try to chop a chopped ball, you'll usually net your volley. Or frame it. During your chop, the ball will be sliding along your strings while your strings are working to reverse the direction of the ball's spin. If you're not perfect, the ball will slide right into the top rim of the racket head.

Knocking the spin off the ball will take a good bit of uncertainty out of your stroke. Make your racket head *dominate* the ball's speed and rotation. Also, against a heavily spun ball, you need a very firm grip. Don't let the ball jerk the racket around in your hand. Show the fuzzy spheroid just who the master is!

Crunch Crunch Crunch

When you get to hit a flat volley from tape height or higher, *end the point!* This is the time for glory and warm, fuzzy memories. Crunch that sucker. Don't give him another chance. Don't give *him* the opportunity for a warm, fuzzy passing shot memory.

Ironically, the aggressive volley is also the safest volley. Errors arise from excessive, gut wrenching fear. The *careful* stroke is of low racket head speed or of softness in the grip. The ball then tends to choose its own way, rather than paying homage to your intended direction.

You know where you want the ball to go. And with some practice on crunch volleys, your body will know how to find the stroke angle for a solid shot. You'll see that a well-struck ball CAN'T miss by much. You're actually far too coordinated to miss a properly struck ball badly. *Trust* yourself. Trust your muscle memory. Or at least trust me!

Get down!

On low volleys, it's essential for your grip to be very firm. You've probably noticed this: against a fast-moving ball that you volley inches above the court, your racket head actually hits the court a fractional second after contacting the ball. That shows just how much that ball is trying to dominate your racket.

The racket in your hand is not like a brick wall or the hard court surface. The brick wall or the earth is MUCH more massive than the ball. Your forearm / racket combination is not THAT much heavier than the ball.

Therefore, the ball affects the racket while the racket affects the ball. On that low volley you've got to be very firm in your grip and wrist to keep the racket head moving UP and through the ball. Otherwise, you'll net the volley. The firmer you are with your grip, the more your arm's mass is coupled to the mass of the racket. And the more your racket face will act like that brick wall!

Get down to that low volley!

If you don't, the stroke geometry gets too complicated for your cranial neural net (your brain) to solve. When your knees are bent and you're down low, the racket is nearly parallel to the ground and you only have to instantaneously figure out how to angle the racket face as you stroke.

If you're a lazy bum and don't get down, then your racket head is below your racket handle. In this position the head is moving faster than the handle. You've got to figure out the timing of that motion and execute it with some forearm and wrist action. It's no wonder that lazy volleys like this rarely find the court.

Systematic and random errors

I'm sure you've noticed how many of your low volley errors are into the net. If it's more than one-fourth, and my experience tells me to bet that it's WAY more than *one-half*, then you are making a SYSTEMATIC error. Your goal is to rid your game of systematic errors in favor of unavoidable human-being-type random errors.

Random errors arise from simple imperfection. You aim for the baseline. Half the time you're long and half the time you're short. Aim a foot inside the baseline and your errors long drop dramatically.

A *systematic* error is the culprit when you're consistently wrong in one direction. You overcome a systematic error by making an adjustment. I'm not saying the adjustment is always easy. In fact, it's usually a lot easier physically than mentally. Getting beginners to hit the ball deep is not a physical challenge. But their minds seem to be drawn to that net, along with their shots.

You start hitting the ball deep by aiming HIGHER. This sounds complicated, I know, but in coaching beginners I find that I need to remind the student several hundred times before they really believe it!

Furthermore, on volleys as on groundstrokes, you're not supposed to be playing with the net! Your volley should be heading for the baseline or for the sideline if you're going for the angle. NOT THE NET! That's why only a small fraction of your random errors should find the net.

Again on that low volley: the more topspin the oncoming shot has, the firmer and more deliberate you have to be in *stroking* the volley. Yes, it's a *short* stroke. But it's a *definite* stroke. You can't ever let the ball just bounce off a weakly moving racket face.

Cupping

Another no-no: Don't "cup" the volley. A "cup" is like a lily-livered "chop." The racket head is moving down before contact, but gently, because you're trying to caress the shot, due to some unmentionable motivation. Move the racket head *through* the ball, sending the ball in the direction that your racket head is moving.

"Cupping" arises from a temptation to follow the trajectory of the oncoming ball by moving your racket in a loop. Resist that temptation. Just think about crunching the shot. Get your racket behind the point of impact and stroke through the impact point.

Even on a ball below tape level, you can hit the ball surprisingly hard, if you get down to the ball, keep your grip firm, and stroke the ball aggressively.

If much of the above sounds risky, well, it is – for the first several practice sessions and matches you do it. But for the long term, namely, your quest for the next level of the game, it's worth taking the risk.

I have noted that many players love to crunch their volleys in practice or when warming up, but they get all wimpy when the match has begun. During practice they are thinking about hitting the ball. During the match they worry about where the shot is going to land. Which approach do you think works better?

During a match a psychological benefit accrues from aggressive volleying. You can severely hurt your opponent's self-esteem by crunching a volley off what he thought was his best dipper. He's likely to try for too much on his next attempted pass. Any time you get someone out of their game, the end is inevitable and often quick.

Drops

Drop volleys aren't technically "crunch" volleys, of course. Except philosophically. After all, you are trying to end the point with the drop. You are going for the winner.

Use drop volleys generously on clay, but sparingly on hard courts. The drop shot off of a groundstroke is almost useless on hard court. But the drop volley can work on hard court simply because the opponent has far less time to react to the shot. The ball has already crossed the net before he can make his first step.

A lot of drop volleys are unnecessarily risky, though. On hard court, if you can win the point with a drop volley, you can usually win it with a safer crunch volley. On clay, though, the ball bites harder, making for a longer run for the baseliner. Additionally, the baseliner doesn't get as quick a first step on clay because of the reduced traction. And a fraction of a step is a big deal in running down a drop shot.

Don't hit the drop volley up, unless your contact point is below the net, of course. Time going up adds to time going down plus additional time during a higher bounce. All this produces more time for your opponent to get there. A basic consequence of gravitational theory is that a projectile dropped straight down will impact at the same time as a projectile launched horizontally, no matter how fast. Both are dropping vertically with the same acceleration. So a good drop shot is angled away from the opponent, but launched in a trajectory close to flat – straight ahead. Let the ball get to the ground and die quickly.

Swingers

After 90 minutes of singles and another 30 minutes of doubles one evening, I was getting rather tired. An interesting point in the doubles match found all 4 of us near the net in a volley exchange. I was just inside the service line in the ad court.

The next volley came down the middle, but it was reachable. I was too tired to move quickly for good form. So I just took a big cut at it, cracking a topspin swing volley for a winner down the middle.

Aha! I discovered that if you commit FULLY (no tentativeness allowed) to the swing volley, generating high racket speed, you can hit it with a high percentage of success. The high racket speed freezes the ball; ie., it doesn't move as much while you are bringing the racket to the point of contact. Watchy slo-mo of a pro hitting a ball. The ball moves hardly at all while the racket moves quite a lot.

You can also cheat a bit on footwork. In fact, you need to free the torso away from your base to get good torque. The same principle applies to the open stance, heavily topped forehand. On such

groundstrokes, watch the pros leave their feet to increase the freedom of the upper body for maximum torque. The result is high racket speed plus control.

I hit 3 more winners (out of 3 attempts) during that set in the same way. I've got a new shot!

If there is any mental key on the swing volley, it's got to be confidence. You can't take care. GO FOR IT!

And forget about it on the one-handed backhand. You need the quick mechanics of the forehand to make it work.

Half- and quarter-volleys

The half-volley isn't really a volley, of course. But since the principles are the same for both backhand and forehand, I've decided to allocate this shot to this chapter.

Similar to the low volley, the athletic key to this shot, especially when executed from the service line or closer, is to get down to the ball. You don't need as firm a wrist as on the low volley, because the ball's speed has been significantly reduced by the bounce.

Your goal is to get the ball deep!

Don't try to get fancy. Forget the cute pro-like angles. Forget the drop shot off of the half-volley. If you try to get cute like that regularly, eventually you're going to be picking fuzz out of your teeth.

The drop shot is tough enough without trying to do it off the half-volley. You're most likely to pop the ball up short. Also, most good opponents will step inside the baseline when they see you're in trouble and hitting a half-volley. They are anticipating that your shot will be short. So it's almost impossible to pull off the drop.

Block the ball deep. Don't try to get any spin on it and don't worry about pace. Depth is everything. If you get it within a yard of the baseline you stand a pretty good chance of winning the point.

If you can direct the ball at all, choose to block it to his backhand side rather than the forehand. Every little edge counts. Then get the best net position you can, depending on your athleticism to cover passes and lobs.

So what's a "quarter-volley"? That's when you don't take the shot seriously and just flip it or wrist it back into the court. That kind of a "poke" shot is doomed, statistically. You'll generally flip it short or into the net, losing the point one way or the other.

The half-volley is a precision shot. It's not easy to get it close to the baseline. You have to watch the ball and stroke it very deliberately.

Baseline half-volley

This is a wonderful shot, especially for seniors. When the opposing groundstrokes come deep into your court, you can run around yards behind your baseline, letting the ball come down into your strike zone for your classic groundies.

Or you can save megawatt-hours of energy and glue your feet to the baseline. Step into the ball, blocking it back with a medium-paced stroke, imparting a little roll to it. Your wrist and grip are firm—but, once again, nowhere near as firm as for a low volley. Aim near the center of the court and give the ball good air so you get it deep.

In addition to saving energy, you actually get the ball back to your opponent's baseline much quicker this way. You may look flashy for the babes by winding up on your big toppers from 10 feet behind the baseline, but your opponent has less time to deal with the medium-paced blocked ball.

Your target is the middle of the court so you don't make silly unforced sideline errors by trying to run your opponent on this shot. The mindset is that your half-volley has neutralized the other guy's beautiful deep drive. That's good enough. He'll be tempted to hit the next one even harder and deeper.

If he succeeds, block it back again. You'll drive him nuts.

Learn not to hit it short, though. Short and down the middle loses the point against a good player. During a conventional baseline rally, you can get away with short and angled, because the other guy has to run. He can't easily make an approach shot because of his lateral momentum and his position near the sideline after he makes the shot. But short and center is death.

Deep and centrist also has the advantage of giving him little angle to make his next shot penetrating. It's a lot easier for you to keep blocking than for him to hit cold winners from behind the middle of his baseline.

Chapter 10

The Nefarious Drop Shot

Clay and clay alone

We've already dealt with drop volleys, so here we'll handle drop shots executed out of baseline rallies.

On a hard court, forget the shot. This is basically a clay court shot. If you NEVER hit it on hard court, you will likely win more points. I'll bet there isn't any player in evenly matched competition who wins more points than he loses when attempting drop shots on hard courts. So let's talk clay. The drop shot is a BIG TIME shot on clay.

First of all, it's one of those precision shots. You've got to stroke it. Take it seriously. Watch the ball. It's tough to win with this shot, statistically. Try to keep track of your points won and lost when attempting drops. You may not want to know the answer!

Don't try for too much deception. The pros need a good bit of fakery because they are all so blindingly fast on their feet. We amateurs are in more danger of missing the shot because we're trying to pop it off too quickly before the other guy sees what we're trying to do.

Not only is your opponent slower than a pro, he's also a good deal lazier. Many amateurs don't even want to believe that you're trying a drop shot, not to mention that you might get it in, or . . . even worse . . . that it will be a good one!

So they hesitate just a fraction to see whether it's worth the effort to run. That fraction will cancel out whatever little "telegraphing" you need to do in order to hit a well-executed stroke.

Don't be sexy

Don't try for too much backspin. Lots of backspin is cute and if you pull it off will be very memorable. And the babes will ooh and aah! After you succeed once, though, you'll try it 5 more times and miss every one. And the babes will think you're cocky and arrogant. Not good. Anyway, it's hard enough to get the ball in a good spot to hurt your opponent without trying for buzzsaw spin.

Furthermore, you don't want to hit a cold winner! No, really, you don't. Ideally, you want that buzzard across the net to run madly and dump his shot into the net. Then you win the point, tire him out, damage his confidence, and make him mad at himself for running all that way for nought.

Generally, try to angle the drop. That gives you a little more distance on the trajectory, which makes the touch on the shot a little easier. After all, the toughest touch shots are the ones that travel the fewest inches forward from your racket. (Remember . . . putting downhill vs. uphill?)

An angled drop also produces a bounce that carries somewhat away from the court and forces a longer run. That's good. The danger is that you don't want to miss the sideline. So, once again, don't get too cute.

Avoid fuzz sandwiches

One of the best times to hit a drop shot is in place of an approach shot. You are inside your baseline, your opponent is fearful of a drive deep into his backhand corner, so you plop the ball to his *opposite corner,* way up short on his forehand side. Since you are closer to the net than usual, your drop shot has a short distance to travel, which gives him less time to react.

This "approach drop" is admittedly a little gutsy. But that's ok because you're going for a winner. The approach deep to the backhand is not necessarily intended to be a winner. So don't be discouraged if you miss one occasionally. When you go for winners, sometimes you miss!

The pros quite often follow their approach drop into the net. I don't like to do that, myself. The guys that make money at the game are a lot more agile at the net than me. If the drop is a little high, they are more likely to pull off the reflex volley while I'm more likely to eat fuzz.

I prefer to hang back just about 2 feet inside the baseline. That's far enough forward to cover a return drop from my opponent, but still gives me time to recover to either corner if he is able to bunt the ball back deep. I've found that standing any further forward makes it tougher to recover effectively to a corner. Running backwards is not conducive to winning!

Unless he hits a marvelous shot, I'm still able to control the point from the back court. When I'm on the other side of this scenario, running down his drop shot, I generally prefer my opponent to crowd the net. My tactic then is usually to belt the ball right at him. Even if my shot would normally sail long, he has no time to judge it and probably can't get out of the way. And reflex volleys at the amateur level are dicey. I'm able to win a good fraction of those points.

Most players only "practice" their drop shots in match play. Even in pre-match warmups, it's not considered kosher to hit a few drops. I know that it irritates me if someone tries that! You will have to find a buddy to practice with and take turns hitting the shot off of baseline rallies.

Chapter 11

Overwhelming Overheads

Nirvana between the lines

This is the one area where there can be NO equivocation, NO nervousness, NO hesitation, NO fear, NO queasiness, and NO doubt.

The overhead is WHY we play tennis!

Tennis provides satisfaction in the physical, emotional, and perhaps even spiritual realms . . . well, maybe that last is a stretch, except when I'm praying that my passing shot goes in. But the MOST satisfying moment during a tennis match is experienced while crushing an overhead.

When that lob goes up your spirit is meant to exult! Your opponent has yielded to desperation. His pitiful lob is a public display of his inability to challenge you with a more manly shot.

Do you respond with gentleness? With diplomacy? With a notion of compromise?

Of course not! You knock the fuzz off the ball, then watch the laser-like trajectory of your shot as it ricochets off a spot deep in the court and thumps ecstatically into the fence. Then note the slumped shoulders, shaking head, and downcast visage of your hapless opponent.

Eat another candy bar

There are just a few keys to having a marvelous overhead. The first is hustle. Hustle back and move your feet so you can transfer weight forward into the shot.

Here's the trap that lazy amateurs fall into. They love the aesthetics of the pros on TV who seem able to snap off vicious overheads while leaping backward. But the guys who make money at the game are leaping back only when the lob is VERY good. Any time they are able, they are PLANTED and the weight is all forward.

The amateur gets lazy. Rather than hustling back far enough, he goes back a step or two short of the mark and then does the backward leap, while trying to snap his upper body forward to generate power. Unsurprisingly, the weekend warrior's body doesn't power-snap with the same ferocity as shown by the top athletes on planet Earth. So too many overheads are weak or produce errors.

Hustle! Hustle! Hustle! Get behind it every time if you can. Then use the "80% rule." Don't swing as hard as you can. You need smoothness and center-of-strings contact. An 80%-strength swing plus a clean hit will generate 100 mph velocity.

With that kind of velocity, you only need to hit one side of the court or the other. You don't need to be near the sidelines. You don't need to be near the baseline. Just pick one side or the other. Even if the other guy guesses right, he'll have to be lucky to get it back. And then it's most likely to be a weaker shot than the first one.

Double your money back

Deadliness of overhead is far more desirable than you would think. After all, you typically get to play it only a few times, at most, during a match. If your overhead has a pristine reputation, you will drive your opponent to try passing shots from the silliest of positions.

Most guys don't want to hit wussy lobs anyway. They will happily blast passing shots into the net or into the fence time after time. Some guys will miss 8 out of 10 passes, but have such a glowing memory of their 2 successes that they think they're doing well.

These are just the guys who will be most intimidated by your overhead. They would never admit fear and trepidation, but they so despise having their lobs blasted back past them that they happily give up the shot that they never practice anyway.

I mean, have you ever seen guys on public courts practicing their lobs? I don't mean feeding short lobs so the other guy can practice overheads. I mean actually hitting 50 lobs to deep spots on the court. No wonder most folks lob so poorly and infrequently in match situations.

The lower the IQ the better

As usual, I won't get into the basics of the shot. You've heard all of those. It's essential that you fine tune the basics of the shot during practice sessions. During a match you want to be focused on the ball and on your hustle. You can't be consciously thinking about your feet alignment or the position of your racket head or where your left ring finger is pointing.

All of those things fall under the single mental key of "hustle." Your body has to be very comfortable falling into the right pattern of preparation for the shot while you're concentrating on hustle.

During a match, think about your feet and you miss the shot. Think about your weight and you miss the shot. Think about your arms and you miss the shot. Instead, do all of that thinking while hitting a couple of hundred overheads with a generous friend in practice. My wife is the only one who has loved me enough to loft scores of lobs for me to practice against. That makes her a keeper!

Don't try to hit the overhead with any spin. Some guys look really cute by hitting sliced overheads. Nuts to that. Hit flat overheads for the next 50 years and you'll win every time. Flat goes faster anyway. And it's a WHOLE LOT more satisfying.

Don't worry about the guy guessing. Generally, don't try to hit behind him. Most of the time he'll just be saving energy and staying put, trying to fake you out. Hit to the open court. If you hit it cleanly, he's not likely to get there anyway. And if he wants to run all day, that's even better.

Shoot that U-2 down!

Work hard learning to hit overheads on the fly, even off of fairly high and deep lobs. The more you can pulverize high and deep lobs the more you will intimidate your enemy.

It's an easier shot to let it bounce, of course. But the ball moves many feet deeper into the court after the bounce. Remember that the ball is moving forward while it's coming down. The closer to the net that you cut it off, the more effective your shot will be. This also gives your opponent less time to find a favorable defensive position to await your overhead.

I recall playing a fellow who loved to hit "sky" lobs. He didn't really trust his backhand passing shot. I determined to take some risk early in the match by hitting overheads on the fly against his sky lob. Luckily, I succeeded. He was so discouraged that he gave up on his favorite defensive shot and attempted feeble sliced backhand passing shots henceforth. My risk on a few shots early on resulted in a very easy match.

Everything being equal, should your bread-and-butter overhead be angled left or right? The angled-right, or "off"-overhead is easier because it requires less body motion. You have to swing across your body to go left. That's just a little more complicated. The same principle applies on the forehand, of course.

Bounce if you must

When you hit a "bouncing overhead" – namely, after the lob bounces – you have to work more than you see your typical hacker do. Don't just get behind the ball. Get 2 or 3 STEPS behind the ball. Then "walk" into the shot with some real momentum transfer. This will give you pace plus additional rhythm to enhance your confidence.

The pros draw oohs and aahs when they successfully smash a high bouncing lob from behind the baseline. They get too much credit. This shot actually isn't all that hard. You have a full court to hit into. Make sure that you get behind the ball, use the 80% rule, and hit it flat and confidently. You're likely to hit a clean winner. That will REALLY discourage an opponent, who thinks he has just hit an awesome defensive lob.

There's a corollary, however. If you're not quite in position or not quite confident, don't hit a half-way, wussy sliced overhead. Just hit a moderately paced and deep topspin forehand. It's safer because you've practiced the shot a lot more often. It's also more effective because the ball will kick up with topspin. The swervy bounced overhead doesn't have enough spin to worry your opponent.

Man or mouse? The mouse wins.

Many years ago, in the 1998 Indianapolis pro final, I observed a wonderful example of how one overhead can determine a match. Andre Agassi had won the first set easily and was on track in the second. Alex Corretja got a lob over Agassi's head and hustled into the net. Agassi got back to the baseline just as it bounced, whirled and hammered the bouncing overhead right back up the middle.

The shot was too hot to handle. It hit Corretja in the upper chest area. He fell to the ground like he'd been shot. Andre had a horrified expression and rushed to Alex's assistance. Corretja's expression was one of agony. He waited for Andre to climb over the net and help him up. The crowd applauded as Corretja pulled himself together and the match resumed.

But everything was somehow different. Agassi's concentration was blown and Corretja played inspired tennis, winning in 3 sets. What Agassi didn't realize is that Europeans have this really wimpy soccer mentality where they're falling down all the time, trying to draw fouls. They flop more than Bill Laimbeer did for the Detroit Pistons.

It wasn't like he'd been hit in the gonads! That would have explained the collapse and the agony.

It was just a tennis ball in the chest!!

Come onnnnnn!!! Be a man, Alex! Anyway, if you ever (accidentally, of course) belt your opponent with the ball in a serious match, look concerned and say, "Hey, if you're really hurting, maybe you'd better default now. It's only a game." Maybe he will. Sucker.

Chapter 12

Returning . . . I mean . . . DESTROYING Serve

Overcoming genetics

I happen to be a fairly normal-sized guy. Five foot, 10 inches in my tennis shoes. I know that I'm never going to have the awesome, fear-inspiring serve that some oversize jerks were born into.

I'd love to have such a weapon, of course, getting 2 free points or more per service game. But, alas, it's not to be.

So how do I compensate for this disadvantageous quirk of genetics? Fortunately, tennis allows a multitude of successful designs for your game. The little guy typically has a mobility advantage. He can be quicker on the baseline and can often dig out the low volleys better, even though he doesn't have the reach for the stretch volleys.

Also, over a long match (especially on clay), the smaller body sustains its energy and endurance more easily.

But I don't want to yield ANYTHING to my nefarious opponent! Since I can't hope to match his service weapon with a comparable service weapon, what's the next best thing?

Destroy his weapon!

Take it away from him! Develop a return that smashes the confidence of the big server. Build a return of serve so that you can take control of the point, the game, the set, the match, and even your life! (Oops, stretching it a bit again.)

Speed kills

The little to medium guy has a physical advantage on the service return. The smaller body is quicker. The best returns come from quick feet, quick body rotation, quick weight transfer, and quick racket work. Even tiny advantages in each area can have dramatic consequences.

This is all about strength to weight ratio. I noticed in high school gym class that it was all the little guys who were able to climb the rope to the ceiling. The big muscle-bound jerks were mightily strong, but strength does not grow as rapidly as size does.

That's why it's physically impossible for "giants" to exist. Strength scales as the cross-sectional area of the muscles. But weight scales as the volume. Area goes as the square of the "size," whereas volume goes as the cube of the size. So volume wins. Ergo, weight crushes strength as a creature gets too big. The obvious evidence is the reduced agility of big athletes. We don't let the 7-footers play point guard.

But you must be willing to develop these advantages. (The big guys can too, of course, to the best of their ability. But I'd just as soon that big guys skip this chapter. So if you're over six feet tall, feel free to go back and read the chapter on the serve again. Don't worry about this inconsequential service return stuff. It will just distract you from the glory you lust for in counting your aces. And all of the attention you get from the babes! Focus on that! We'll catch up with you in the next chapter. Ok? See ya.)

Whew! Now that the gorillas have left the room, let's start talking secrets. The service return is the second most important "shot" in the game (after the serve). Especially on hard courts, which constitute the huge majority of American playing surfaces, most points are determined by whether the server or the returner takes immediate control of the point.

Key: Aggression

The returner can only get control of the point by being aggressive. Avoid simple blocked and chipped returns. The return is NO TIME to conserve energy. The return requires ABSOLUTELY MAXIMUM ALERTNESS AND QUICKNESS! It's your chance to seize control of the point and to eventually break the spirit of a big-serving opponent.

You see, most of his self-esteem is built around his serve. Take that away and you turn him into a mere whimpering shell of his usual cocky self.

Let's start with an example that brings out some of the physics of the service return. I was playing in a mixed double social with a 3.5-level woman player. The "social" at the club that evening was more competitive than usual.

The head pro had offered a reward to the winning team. So several teams were actually trying to WIN! With a smile, of course. It was a "social" after all.

Proving that there was competition in the air, our 4.5-level male opponent was boorish and unchivalrous to the point of hitting kick serves to my partner. Can you imagine?!? On our club's clay courts, the kick serve really bites the surface and jumps nastily.

In his first service game, my partner was completely befuddled on her return, spraying the ball in completely random directions. I resisted saying anything until she made a comment about not knowing what to do about that serve. (It can be dangerous to offer unsolicited coaching to a fellow tennis player.)

I asked her if she would like a tip. She was genuinely interested. I told her about knocking the spin off the ball. She was trying to be "careful" with her return, because she didn't know quite what to do. Being "careful" is the worst thing you can do with a madly spinning ball.

I advised her to drive her racket firmly through the return, letting the racket head dominate the ball. Don't let the spin of the ball take control of your strings. Just go for a firm and flat shot.

You can't predict how the fast-moving ball will reflect off of a slow, carefully pushed racket stroke. Your objective is to freeze the ball by accelerating the racket head quickly through the ball. Then you know where the ball is going to go. And don't add risk to the shot with spin of your own. When you hit flat, you present the largest cross section of your racket and aren't likely to frame the shot.

Anyway, she tried it. In the next service game she knocked two solid returns at his feet. We broke serve. We won the match. She was ecstatic.

I was fairly pleased myself. One simple tip doesn't usually turn someone's game around. And I never would have admitted that it took me FOREVER to make the same adjustment earlier in my life!

Skip the chip

Now this will be somewhat controversial with the teaching pros. Against net rushers, the drive return, even if slow, is far more effective than a chip. If you attempt to drive it, but don't hit it hard or cleanly, the trajectory will still have some loop in it (due to gravity) and will therefore be a bit harder to handle by an oncoming netrusher.

The slice return has the simplest of all trajectories to judge for the serve & volley player. In short, a crummy but flattish drive will tend to drop below net level and be more effective than a crisp slice that a good volleyer will punch to your opposite corner.

Some "experts" will advise use of the chip backhand to hit to the netrusher's feet, but will also advise a drive forehand return. If the chip backhand is so advantageous, why not chip the forehand return, too? The real answer is that it's HARD to drive a 1-hand backhand return. The 2-handers do have a strength advantage on service returns, but only at the lower NTRP levels. They have to learn a 1-handed slice return for the wide balls, anyway.

When you do hit the drive cleanly, it puts enormous pressure on a net rusher. He may knock off a few volleys early on, but his precision often crumbles as he faces more and more drives. The drive is simply giving him less time to react. That's always good – for you.

Drive the ball back where it came from. Typically go for pace. If you try to combine pace and placement, you'll make lots of errors. A hard ball right back up the middle will often surprise the server and put him on the defensive. It also gives him little angle to attack with his next shot.

Sure, it's nice to be able to belt the ball with pace into the corner. But if you can already do that consistently, THEN WHY ARE YOU READING THIS BOOK?

Make sure that you're just aiming for the center of the court. You will get "accidental" angles just by making small, random timing errors. If you go for the corners, you'll miss too much.

The toughest service return, statistically, is the drive up the line. "Busting the angle" is even harder for a service return than during a groundstroke rally. This is simply due to the higher velocity and bounce of the serve when compared with your opponent's groundstrokes. You have no margin for error.

The pros seem to regularly pull off the winning drive return up the line. They have the luxury, however, of practicing a single shot for hours at a time, if they need the work. But if you count winners versus errors, you'll see that even the pros' statistics are pitiful. And you won't do any better.

The crosscourt angled drive is a little bit easier. But you're messing with both the net and the sideline. It's flashy when you make it. We all go ooh and aah when the pro makes one of these. But, once again, statistics will kill you.

Remember, you have to be perfect to hit a hard ball in the corner. Especially off of a tough serve. It's just too hard. Go for statistics. The forced volley errors will come. If they don't . . . well, it just wasn't your day.

Key—Quickness

In returning serve you HAVE to move quickly. ANY effort to rotate your torso and get forward weight transfer will be rewarded with inches of net clearance and several mph in velocity. I've noticed that the difference between a taped ball and a strong return can be just the slightest extra effort in getting the upper body rotated.

Every bit of oomph you can get on your return helps. Even if you simply hit the ball right back to the server, whether he is net rushing or still on the baseline. What you want is to minimize his reaction time.

When you send a floater back to a good player, he will punish you with his next shot and either finish the point or maintain control of the point. You're on the run and he's the one having a good time.

The server who stays on the baseline takes a second or two to recover from his follow-through. He's typically standing a couple of feet inside the baseline. A good drive return will give him trouble

even if it's directed right at him. You cause him to float his next shot. Then you're the one having a good time.

Also, some of your returns will be serendipitously deep, right at his feet. Don't *try* for this depth. You'll make too many errors. But you will get free points on these returns. Learn to *enjoy* these points as much as your clean winners. You see, most of us macho types have this unfortunate quirk of selective memory that tends to focus on our rocketed winners. That's destructive to the statistics-based mentality that wins matches.

Compromising

Sometimes you must resort to a chipped backhand return. Some flat serves come in simply too hard or too wide for you to get your racket back into a driving position. The chip works because it requires the minimum of stroke motion to propel the ball into the far court. The sliced ball has extra lift to help it get there, so less velocity is required.

What I've discovered over the years is that if I have an aggressive "driving" mentality on each return – namely, if I'm getting ready to drive everything – then even if I'm surprised by an exceptionally fast serve, I'll have my body in a better position to hit the chip.

Why? Because an offensive attitude is essential to quick body movement and quick racket preparation. Get the racket back quickly on the backhand side and muscle it forward. You will be able to drive back firmly some of the hardest serves to control the point.

Key: Where are you?

This is the key that separates the recreational from the competitive amateur. If you're serious about the game, hit the return from inside the baseline. Start with your feet just inside the line and move your weight forward as you move into the shot. This automatically gives you the following advantages:

1. You get momentum transfer into every return.
2. You cut off the wide serving angles that stretch you out.
3. Your contact point is higher above the net: your racket "sees" more of the opponent's court.
4. You reduce the server's reaction time for the next shot.
5. You cut off the penetration effects of a big kicking serve.
6. You are positioned better for your next shot.

The disadvantage, of course, is the great timing you need to catch the ball early. With practice, this will come. The huge payoffs are well worth the investment of time.

While you're learning this, don't just do it during matches, which you might lose while making the adjustment. Find a practice partner who wants to hit serves. A lot of guys will love you for this, especially when they see how many service returns you butcher. While you're making the adjustment, your partner will feel like his serve is more awesome than ever.

The timing disadvantage is partially compensated by a luck factor. You'll hit more returns off center, especially at first. But because you're closer to the net, more of these balls will make it into the court! This has the added benefit of irritating your opponent who starts to think that you're unbelievably lucky.

A minor point: On hard courts you can actually stand *on* the baseline and then move forward. You can't do this on clay. The taped line is too slippery for you to get a quick jump on the ball. So on clay you really have to make a binary decision between standing behind or in front of the baseline.

Get a grip

You will have to come up with your own best way to get your grip ready. Personally, I await the serve with a forehand grip. I really want to punish the serve if I get a forehand.

I find it easy to rotate the racket with my left hand to change to a backhand grip if the serve comes to my left. For the backhand return, I want some body rotation and need to draw the racket back just a foot or two. I can use the ball's pace to hit a hard shot just by muscling through a flat return.

John McEnroe avoided the grip dilemna simply by using the same grip, a Continental, for both strokes. I think that's a bit extreme for most of us folks. But the same advantage can be obtained if you're concentrating on hitting primarily a flat ball. The eye / brain / body / hand combination required for a flat shot is easier than when adding the spin variable to the return off of a high speed serve.

The commentators talk about "blocking" the return. I disagree with the use of the term, but the thought is ok if you don't take it literally. You're *always* making a stroke of it. You have to move the racket head forward at least a foot! Perhaps you can think of the shot like Bruce Lee's "1-inch punch." He claimed that he could get enough power to knock a man down with just one inch of "backswing." So I'll let you have 12 inches. You should be able to "punch" quite effectively if you come through the shot flat and in the center of the strings.

Fish 'n chips

The chip and charge is based a good bit on hope. You're "fishing" for an unforced error or an easy volley. It's not typically practical to use it consistently during a match unless you are wonderfully athletic in covering the net. When the other guy expects you to chip and charge, he can usually focus his concentration to bedevil you with dipping passing shots.

The idea can be powerful, however, when employed as a surprise tactic on key points. I don't personally use it much. Especially as I age (and I'm not getting any taller, either), I don't like being jerked around and hitting stretch volleys on too many points. I much prefer driving the return and attempting to control the point from the baseline.

But here's where I love to use it. I'm in a fiercely competitive match. My opponent is serving at 4-5 to stay in the set. I struggle to get to deuce on his serve. I've stayed back on every previous service return. But now I'm coming. in. On either serve, but hopefully I get a second serve. Either forehand or backhand, I just semi-punch the ball to the backhand side of his court. In effect, I'm coming in on junk.

But the surprise very often pays off. He's feeling plenty of pressure. The last thing he wants on deuce at 4-5 is a passing shot, even off of a weak ball. You'll get the error more than you think you deserve.

Now you've got set point. You act like you're coming in again. Whether you do or not really doesn't matter. The guy is rattled and you're about to go up a set.

I did have one wonderful experience where I (the committed baseliner) employed chip and charge through a whole match. I was playing #1 singles for our club's 4.5 team many years ago. (I think I got underrated because my compact strokes didn't look "classic.") Our first match of the season presented a

youthful opponent whom I'd never met before. It turned out he had been rated "5.0 minus", but had appealed and been certified for the visiting 4.5 team.

My concentration was marvelously focused by Jack's behavior during the warmup. He belted his forehands in the corner and practiced a number of drop shots. Now that's really tacky – practicing drop shots during the warmup. It really ticked me off.

My assessment of his technical game during the warmup provoked me to try a tactical approach completely at variance with my usual game. He really crushed his first serve, but his spin (second) serve sat up soft and short. He had great speed and court coverage and used that to belt forehands from every possible position. His backhand looked defensive and had a quirk that led me to conclude that his pass on that side would be erratic.

So I decided to chip and charge at every opportunity on return games. I'm a baseliner (even more so on clay), so this took some guts on my part. But I didn't relish competing against his youthful speed and huge forehand.

Jack's percentage on 1st serves started low and got lower. I came in on every 2nd serve with a simple approach to the backhand side. Sure enough, he either missed the pass or gave me an easy volley. In desperation, he resorted to defensive lobs. I therefore experienced the joy of knocking off at least 15 overheads during the match. I don't think I missed one.

All this put more pressure on his 1st serve which contributed to more misses. Jack tried to turn the tables on me by using chip / charge on my service games. That's always a "Go ahead: Make my day!" opportunity when I'm playing on clay. I didn't have problems making the pass.

Final result – 6-0, 6-0. Jack was such a punk in his demeanor, even after the match, that I felt no sympathy whatsoever.

When I reported in to my team captain, he exclaimed, "What!? Are you crazy? What did you think you were doing?"

Shocked, I responded with "Hey, I thought you'd be happy about this."

He explained, "No, Dave, you should have let him win some games. The computer is going to bounce you up to 5.0 if you slaughter guys in the 4.5 league." It turned out he was right. I had to play 5.0 the next year. But I think I helped Jack stay in the 4.5 league!

Sometimes you go by gut feel and instinct on your game plan. I once played a strong young banger who had always succumbed to my game because of his erratic play and a mechanical weakness on his backhand pass. The last time we had played, though, he was exceptionally steady and had muscled his backhand pass by me consistently, despite the quirk that he had in it. I still managed to win, but barely this time.

My game plan for the next match was to stay in my comfort zone on return games: no chip / charge and concentrate on winning from the baseline.

In my first return game on the first point, he hit a short second serve into the middle of the service box. I had to step into it anyway and hit a good flat ball deep into his backhand corner. By instinct, I knew he was in trouble and so immediately rushed the net. I had violated my game plan on the very first point.

But he butchered the backhand pass. I though, "Hmmm. Let's do it again and see if he can actually pass as well as he did the last match." I did and he couldn't. Quick break. His confidence broken, the match was pretty quick, too.

You've always got to have a plan. But if you want to change the plan on the very first point, go with your gut.

Leaning into it

One of the best plays you have against the nasty high kicker to your backhand is to move well inside the court and lean into the slice. You often want to follow this shot right into the net.

Guys that are proud of their big kickers will get exceptionally frustrated if you put them immediately on the defensive. They are used to getting unforced errors or short floaters. Even if you come in on junk, you can break serve often with this play.

Think of the stroke motion as if it is a strong backhanded karate chop you make underwater. This is the same shot as the "penetrator" I described before. Strong, slow, and firm. That will put stick on the ball. It doesn't matter much if the ball winds up short. The short ball with stick will often force a weak lunging backhand from the server. He is in no mood to be scrambling on the next shot after his glorious kicker.

Chapter 13

Hard Court vs. Clay vs. Grass (??!!?)

The game changes as the court surface changes. Different skills are rewarded. Strangely, four weeks of the pro tennis season still feature grass, so it still has just a tiny bit of relevance. There are very few grass club courts in the entire world, of course. So let's talk about grass first and get it out of the way of the more important discussion: hard vs. clay.

Some traditions should die!

Grass is a stupid surface for the amateur. Especially because of the incredible cost and maintenance problems associated with the very existence of a grass court. The maintenance cost and low durability of grass courts make them too rare for the vast majority of amateur tennis players to ever enjoy them. Therefore, an amateur that develops grass court skill has very little to brag about, or even to be self-satisfied about, because he cannot compare or rank his abilities with the rest of the tennis community.

On the other hand, I'll grant the point of view that grass is a wonderful test for the pros. If they were really serious about it, though, there would be more than two weeks of grass tournaments before Wimbledon.

I see an analogy between Wimbledon and golf's U.S. Open. Golf's Open is played on a specially prepared course. The fairways are long and narrow. The rough is designed to exact a penalty for every shot that strays from the fairway. The greens are especially table-like and test nerves in a way that the typical week-to-week tour greens fail to achieve.

In short, golf's Open is a stringent skills test. It's about precision, nerves, and mental toughness.

I see Wimbledon as an analogous test for tennis' pros. But even more so. Grass court play represents a skills test differentiated from hard or clay that is far more stringent than the difference between golf's U.S. Open course and the conventional tour course.

Grass rewards precision in serving, volleying, adjustments off low balls, and adjustments off bad bounces. Although Wimbledon has worked hard to make their grass surfaces act more like hard courts, the challenges are still there. Grass rewards strong nerves because fewer shots count for more points, service breaks, and matches won. Grass produces more tie-breakers that tend to ossify the elbow with psychological concrete.

Clay at the pro level is much more of an athlete's game. The heavy topspin shots made available by more prep time and higher bounces allow for huge margins. The strong athlete can wear down an opponent through long points and long matches. Clay requires much running and less precision shot-making.

Pete Sampras' relative success on the two surfaces is explained by this analysis. Physically, he was more fragile than many of the European clay-courters. His precision shots did not have the payoff on clay, where most of the balls will be run down.

Alternatively, the topspinners can't get away with their high-margin shots on grass. (Unless you have almost-alien DNA, like Nadal.) When one of them hits a mediocre ball, their more "skilled" opponent will drill a return that skids low through the corner. Their excess athleticism and strength are insufficient to track it down.

What about Bjorn Borg? How did he win? He was smart enough to make the adjustments in his first serve and in the backswing on his groundstrokes. His volleying was OK, but could never be considered "skilled" even when he was winning. But his nerves and his quickness in making adjustments on returns and low balls was unparalleled in the late 1970s.

A red-blooded editorial comment

Before I leave grass, let me insert a comment here. There is something that really irritates me during Wimbledon. What in the world are these American players doing when they bow to the royal box after a match on Centre Court? Didn't we fight a war over some of that stuff back over two centuries ago?

Oh, you say, but that's just being polite while in the "British house." No, unfortunately, it's not about politeness. When you bow to a Japanese businessperson, you receive a bow in return. That's politeness. That's Japanese culture.

But when you bow to the royal box, THEY DON'T BOW BACK! Even on July 4th which occurs during the tournament! They receive your bow as an indication of subjection. Remember, over there the folks are called British *subjects.* In America the people are American *citizens.*

I'm sure it's a good thing for international relations that I was never good enough to play on Centre Court at Wimbledon. (Not to mention not being good enough to ever get beyond a 5.0 level!) Surely I would have made front page news by simply waving and walking off the court, while assiduously avoiding the prostration of my proud American citizenship.

OK, enough of that. Back to work.

The artist works with clay

For the pros, hard courts are in-between clay and grass. The hard court surface brings precision, athleticism, and strength into balance.

This is not true for the amateur, however. The amateur's ultimate surface is clay. There are more than twice as many shots available for selection on clay than on hard court for us amateur folks.

The drop shot is a wonderful and awesome choice on clay. You can go for several matches on hard court without having a good opportunity to use one, namely, where it's not simply easier to just bang the ball away for a winner.

Hard court rewards power. Finesse and precision are less important. The surface does not respond to spin as well. In particular, the Delta V is smaller for every shot. More importantly, there is less *variation* in Delta V for different spins.

Here's what I mean. When a topped ball bounces on clay, the Delta V is bigger than it is on hard court. When a sliced ball bounces on clay, the Delta V is *much* bigger than it is on hard court. The sliced ball on clay digs into the surface a bit and piles up a little dirt ahead of the ball, significantly reducing its forward speed after the bounce.

The result of these differences in Delta V is that a wide variety of spin choices on clay produces a wider variety of patterns and requirements in timing for your opponent to deal with.

More elementarily, the higher Delta V on clay allows more time to load up different degrees of spin and choose alternative trajectories to torment a weaker-nerved opponent.

In short, clay is for the amateur artisan. Hard court favors the bang-bang boomer. My game and personality are perfectly tuned for clay. But when I play hard court, I tone down the creativity and pump up the pace. Winning is more fun than avoiding adjustments.

One of the challenges of clay is dealing with mini-bad bounces. When the dirt gets pushed around after a few games, you're going to get these slight changes in direction. You don't often get a *really* bad bounce. But you see enough of a trajectory change so you have to make a slight adjustment.

The faster the shot is, the quicker you have to make the adjustment. Hitting the ball on the rise is therefore much more challenging on clay. That's one of the reasons you see the pros hang back on clay and wait for the ball to come down again after the peak of the post-bounce trajectory.

The true clay artisan can hit the ball on the rise, however, and produce more interesting angles to run the other guy. This takes a lot of concentration, however.

Chop up the loops

I played a guy named Marty once in the finals of a clay court tournament. He was a tall fellow who loved to torment his opponents with big loopy topspin shots. These were really mini-moonballs, but with plenty of top and directed usually to my backhand side. He could do it off both sides with good control. He had a 2-hander on his backhand side.

I realized quickly that if I played it safe and stayed back on these shots, I'd never be able to produce an angle and he would likely be all over the net, volleying away my floaters.

So I just glued myself to the baseline and concentrated like a maniac to hit my slice backhand off of his rapidly bounding shot. I was able to use his spin to accentuate the chop on my stroke and drive low angled balls to his backhand side. Being so tall, this discomfited his 2-hander and often made him resort to a 1-handed slice himself. But he wasn't well-practiced with the 1-hander.

This all served to drive him a bit nuts. He confessed after the match that no one really had employed that tactic against him, because the timing was so difficult, but that I apparently had no trouble with it.

I did not confess to him that I had to work like crazy to hit that shot cleanly. But also working in my favor was the consistency of his tactic. The timing got more natural for me as the match progressed.

Oh yeah – I won. But the real key was the pattern-breaking I employed in the 3rd set. I'll get back to my match with Marty in a later chapter.

More dirt – more art

Also on clay, the balls tend to get dirty and a little heavier. Dirty balls, coupled with slower bounces, necessitate much more creative point construction than the amateur needs on hard courts.

Why do you see a lot more topspin employed on clay than on hard? It's harder to generate topspin on a hard court because the ball comes through faster after it bounces. In order to generate good top, your racket head speed has to dominate the velocity of the ball. That's tougher when the ball is moving fast.

On clay, the ball sits up nicely to let you carve it up with spin. On the other hand, it's easy to generate good slice on your backhand against a fast-moving ball. The slice backhand requires only a compact movement. The angled racket face does all the work, converting the linear momentum of your opponent's shot into the angular momentum (backspin) of your shot.

Making the transition from playing one surface to another can be difficult. The Delta V is bigger on clay, especially for sliced groundstrokes and volleys. You get punished more for short shots on clay than on hardcourt.

When you get a mid-court shot to attack on clay, it's good policy to get your opponent running to the corner. You don't really care whether he gets there or not. If he does, you can dangle him on a string, going corner to corner. On hard court, you're more likely to win the point outright or after the first ball that comes back.

Flat physics

This is a good spot to elucidate more on the differences between flat and topspin shots. The flat ball gets to the baseline faster for several reasons. First of all, your racket head is imparting more direct momentum. You're not wasting energy by "brushing up" on the ball.

Secondly, the trajectory is flatter, so the ball has a shorter distance to travel through the air, as opposed to the loopy topspinner.

Also, however, the topspin ball experiences more air friction. The top of the ball feels more air speed than the bottom of the ball because the forward rotation is added to the forward motion of the ball. The bottom of the ball's air speed is reduced by the same amount.

So what? Doesn't the higher friction on top balance the lower friction on the bottom? Well, a simple model of *aerodynamic drag* shows that the frictional force is proportional to the *square* of the velocity. Double the velocity and the drag goes up by 2x2, or a factor of 4. Triple the velocity and the drag goes up by 3x3, or a factor of 9.

The result is that the top of a topspin ball experiences dramatically more drag, while the bottom of the ball's drag is reduced by just a bit.

The topspun ball slows down significantly as it travels through the air. Because of the extra friction on top, the whole ball feels a net increased drag. And therefore, the ball decelerates faster as it moves through the air.

You see the effect dramatically by noticing the extra dip just before the ball ends its trajectory. The same effect in pitching a curveball or a sinker in baseball fools the batter because the ball is traveling much slower at the end of the pitch than at the beginning. Gravity is always pulling with a constant force, but you note that the ball is dropping more per unit forward distance when the ball is moving more slowly. That's why the baseball "breaks more" as it approaches the plate.

The net velocity difference between topped and flat is not such a big deal on clay, because the baseliner is going to be able to run down the slow bounce anyway. But on hard court, the topspun ball loses effectiveness dramatically in comparison with a flat shot. Thus, the bangers get an extra edge on the hard surface.

Priorities change

Here's another way to summarize the differences between clay and hard for amateurs. On clay the most important shots are rank-ordered as follows:

(1) forehand
(2) backhand
(3) service return

(4) serve
(5) touch volley
(6) drop shot
(7) crunch volley
(8) overhead
(9) lob

On hard court, the prioritization is:

(1) serve
(2) service return
(3) forehand
(4) backhand
(5) crunch volley
(6) overhead
(7) touch volley
(8) lob
(9) forget the drop shot

I'm distinguishing the forehand and backhand groundstrokes from those used in service returns. These shots are really quite different anyway.

The forehand always get priority over the backhand because of mechanical strength advantages and the player's opportunity to play balls near the center of the court on his stronger side.

Service power gets neutralized a good deal by the clay surface, emphasizing the importance of the baseline rally. The clay service return is really the start of the rally.

On hard court, you really want to develop a penetrating service return to neutralize the server's advantage derived from the speed of the court. Not as many points survive into an extended rally. Not that so many points are just 1 or 2 shots in length. But it is likely on hard court that after the service return, one player or the other will be in control of the point. That's not as likely on clay.

Crunch volleys and touch volleys swap places on the 2 lists for obvious reasons. You get a lot more out of deep volleys on hard court and a lot more out of drop or angled volleys on clay courts.

Overheads are more important than lobs because you MUST be able to finish points off of any lobs that are not wonderfully placed. If your overhead is weak, you will get picked on. On the other hand, if your lob is weak, it doesn't matter so much. Most of the time when you're forced into a lob, your odds of winning the point are low anyway.

The drop shot is wonderful on clay. But you don't actually need it on a hard court. Even us old geezers can run down drop shots on hard courts. On clay, you're often going for an outright winner with the drop.

Clay as a magnifying lens

Clay magnifies the differences between players. You can have a kink in your backhand and get away with it on hard court because the ball comes through with more velocity and you can reflect it back accordingly. On clay you need to generate much of your own power and so form is far more important.

You can therefore punish a weakness more easily on clay. For example, you can easily punish a weak backhand. A defender who insists on running around it will do an enormous amount of running, corner to corner. You can even punish a weak volley because it's a lot easier to draw someone in safely on clay.

I've noticed that a 5.0 level player may typically beat a hard-serving 4.5 level player 6-2, 6-3 on a hard court, but will usually wax him 6-0, 6-1 on clay. The clay points are longer and so the skill differences come out more often during a given point.

Think about what it takes to win a game. The weaker player has to win 4 out of 6 points to win a game. When the points are long, that is much less likely to occur.

Chapter 14

How to Beat Better Tennis Players

Brain damage

It's time to put it all together. What does it take to beat a player "better" than you are? He has more pace, more spin, more speed, and a more classic form. Shot for shot you don't have a prayer. Yet you can beat many of these jokers! How?!?

You must destroy his mind.

I'm not talking about gamesmanship. Don't be one of those insufferable boors who try to psyche out the opposition by making comments or doing things to irritate. Never entertain temptations leading to unclassy behavior. Be gracious. Be a gentleman. Be a pleasure to be around.

But drive him nuts with your game! Let's start by talking about Dr. Dave's metric for Total Shot Quality: TSQ.

TSQ = Energy + Location + Pattern + Context + Pretext

Develop a gut feel for your TSQ shot by shot as you go through a match. Now, of course, you can't analyze everything in detail while you're playing. But you CAN develop a sense of whether you're on the right track as the points roll by.

TSQ-thinking involves much more than just hitting the classic, crisp groundies drilled into you by your club pro. As your TSQ rises, your confidence grows as your opponent's deteriorates.

He may not ever realize what's going on, even when the match is over. Some of my favorite match memories include my opponent shaking his head as he shook my hand, lamenting over how badly he played, and sometimes even *apologizing* for not giving me a good game. He obviously didn't have a clue what I'd done to his head!

Let's break down TSQ one component at a time. Then we'll put it all back together.

Energy: AC or DC

The simplest component of Total Shot Quality is "energy."

Energy = Pace + Spin

Spin can be top, slice, or even sidespin for groundstrokes. For serves you can add any combination. You can trade off pace for spin and still maintain a given energy for your shot. I don't really care what kind of spin you use, as long as the shot goes in. Heavy slice produces a nasty Delta V. Heavy top adds "jump" to the ball after the bounce. Either effect is valuable because it fouls up the other guy's timing.

During one particular year of my life, I regularly played two different fellows. Both of these guys were younger, stronger, and faster than me. Shot for shot, they looked even or better – certainly more "classic" in form.

One used a good bit of topspin. The other hit hard and flat. Against either player I needed plenty of shot energy. Against the "topped" player, though, I liked to flatten out my shots to put him on the run and take away his time for winding up on the big loopers.

Against the "flat" guy I liked to load up topspin, especially late in the rally, to tempt him into going for the big shot, and hitting plenty of unforced errors.

Both tactics were successful. I had to be careful, of course, that the "flat" opponent wasn't playing steadily enough to put *me* on the run, like I tried to do to "topper." Against "topper" I had to watch out for my own unforced errors as I tried to drive him to the corners.

To make energy tradeoffs effectively, you must have a good sense of statistics for both your errors and your opponent's.

Let me tell you a little more about Marty – that really tough character I played in a clay tournament a few years ago. He was tall and lanky and had no life outside of tennis. I had watched him play his semifinal and I knew that he could be a nightmare for me.

He had plenty of energy on his forehand and his two-hander, but it was all in spin. That's wonderful for clay. Especially because he would hit heavily topped loopers deep to my backhand and come into the net. At net his arms seemed to reach from sideline to sideline.

I had to quickly adapt a shot somewhat out of my comfort zone. I had to fight his topped energy with heavy slice. I threw just as much racket speed – energy – into my counterstroke as he did into his wicked looper.

Fortunately, I was able to get grooved on it, hitting buzzsaw sliced backhands low to his backhand. He didn't like that. I never admitted to him that it seemed like every shot was an adventure to me.

The simple point here is that I had to counter energy with energy, but the optimum mix in this case was to maximize my backspin, employing his topspin to generate my spin. This approach enabled me to *stay in the match.* I'll tell you later what I needed to do to get on top of him and win.

We old guys occasionally get matched up with young collegiate types who whip their 2-handers with oodles of top. Go ahead and hit a zillion short crosscourt sliced backhands. Fortunately, most of these guys don't hit good approach shots from that position. They love to bang toppers back and forth with guys just like them. Machines love to play machines.

Also, they have an apparently limitless supply of stamina. Whereas your supply is far more precious. It takes gobs of glucose to sprint around all day hitting topspin drives. You'll just drop over dead trying to match up this way.

Fortunately, the young tykes don't have very much patience. Their errors will mount with their frustrations as you persist in converting their buzzsaw 2-hand topspinners into low tablesaw sliced backhands. And it's obvious that you aren't spending much energy to do it! You're using the incoming ball's energy to generate most of the heavy slice. If you're footwork is good, you just have to lean into the shot firmly and your shot will have plenty of energy.

You need a complimentary tactic for the other side, of course. When you do get a forehand, flatten it out and run him crosscourt. Guys with extra big loopers love to play guys *with extra big loopers.* They don't like to generate their forehand loop off of a fast moving flat ball.

It's not that hard to flatten out your forehand against these lads, even if it's not a normal part of your game. Their topped ball is jumping up high, so you have plenty of margin over the net. Also, you don't need much of a backswing to generate a quick ball off of a high jumping ball. Little more than a

firm punch is required. It may not look aesthetic, but you'll have the joy of beating some punks who sneered at first when you even suggested a match!

The same game plan can apply very well against the lefty with the big loopy forehand. You'll do better with the tactics above rather than attempt to get him in patterns of backhands down the line. The lefties know that game a lot better than righties do.

Location, Location, Location

You see a lot of allegedly savvy players blasting first serves, hoping to win points merely on pace. At any amateur level, this just isn't very effective. Once you've been playing a while, it's no great trick to "block" (short stroke) fast balls back into the court.

I'd much rather hit a medium-paced serve that stretches the returner a bit, or forces a little footwork to adjust to a body-shot serve.

Why? The more complicated the returner's shot, the more likely an error. Make him stretch a bit and he is hitting a shot that he really doesn't practice much. A good returner will move his feet quickly and transfer his weight properly. But even good returners occasionally lose a bit of concentration, don't religiously move the feet, stretch a bit to compensate, and dump the ball into the net.

You see, they forget to compensate for the stretch and the reduced weight transfer. When you stretch you must simultaneously adjust your racket face to get more loft, simply because your weight transfer is lower. Otherwise, the ball finds the net.

The same principle applies on groundstrokes. Move the guy to the corners with medium balls rather than blast big shots into the middle of the court. (Recall that if you can consistently *blast* big shots into the corners you ought to be making money at this game, not reading this book.)

But, you say, he runs like a gazelle. He looks like he enjoys running to the corners and back. The point is to make the shot more complicated by making him hit it on the run, or at least after he runs to it. Occasionally, his footwork will fall short, resulting in a bit of a stretch or lunge into the shot, and an error results.

You have to invest in this approach early in the match. Sure, he's fresh, but the more you run him early, the more fatigue will affect him in the second and third sets. Think about your own experience. Just the slightest bit of fatigue tempts you to cheat on your footwork. Then the energy and location on your shots deteriorate.

Extend the concept to all of the other shots. Make him stretch just a bit on the volley. If his backhand volley is weaker than his forehand volley, then dare him to hit winners with the weak side.

If his *high* backhand volley is weak, don't be ashamed to win by hitting easy balls up high to his backhand at net. It's a lot easier than drilling passing shots! You're actually doing him a favor! Most of the developments in my game over the years arose because I got sick and tired of a weakness in my game that someone was taking advantage of! Somehow, though, I've never thought of going back and thanking those folks that did me such favors.

Achieving location on heavily topped groundies is tough for most folks. The key issue is this: the ball bounces up high, so you had better not hit it short or the other guy will drive it down your throat.

The high bounce occurs because the ball's looped trajectory is driving DOWN into the court, causing a more UPWARD reflecting bounce. Therefore, the ball is not penetrating into the court so quickly. The forward spin counteracts this, however, and restores some of the pace after the bounce, but much of that pace is in the UP direction.

If you love the heavy toppers, just make sure that most of your shots have some angle. You want your opponent sending his body weight more to one side or the other. Every ball that you send down the middle of the court increases the odds of producing a short ball that he can get his full body weight into, going forward. Not good for you.

Angled heavy toppers have a very subtle psychological payoff that most people don't even realize. The heavy topspin ball is moving a little slower through the air. Late in a match, after you're feeling a little fatigue, you unconsciously cheat a bit on footwork, pacing your move to the corner in proportion to the velocity of the oncoming ball. But if you don't play against heavy topspin all the time, you don't perfectly judge the "jump" after the bounce. Sometimes you're just a fraction of a step late in getting ready to hit your shot.

The mental discipline must be very high when playing these guys that hit the wicked loopers to the corners. You must get to the corner EARLY in order to hit an effective shot. If you're always a fraction late, you'll be hitting short and . . . well, at least you'll be getting a lot more exercise than your opponent! Remind yourself of that while moping around the house after the loss! (Did you ever notice how exhaustion feels *satisfying* after a tough win, but *miserable* after a tough loss?)

Pattern: hatred overcomes love

I remember playing singles in an away team match. I'd only been playing for a few months after a rather long layoff due to an injury. So I was still working on getting my game back.

The odds were rather stacked against me in this match. All my practice and match play had been on clay, and mostly in the daytime. This away match was on a poorly lit, fast hard court. My opponent was the teaching pro at the facility, so he obviously knew the lighting conditions and the bumps and wiggles in the court surface like he knew his wife's . . . well, the point is that HE was comfortable with the conditions and I wasn't!

During the warmup it was clear to me that on return games this guy loved to crack classic groundstrokes from behind the baseline. I was also aware that he loved to play classic serve and volley on all of his service games.

In short, his aesthetically classic game was going to be a really tough matchup for me on a slick hard court. So I decided to throw a pattern of junk at him. Not that I had a lot of choice. Having trouble seeing the ball, about the best I could do was try to hit soft, high, deep balls to keep him back in the court.

Apparently, this pattern of mine was really irritating to him. Several times I heard him muttering something about me "hitting like a little old lady." I wonder if some of his more mature female students would have appreciated that comment.

I had to work hard this way to keep holding my serve. His first few service games were wonderfully, well . . . classic. He dug out all of his volleys, deftly carving them into the corners and winning points easily. But what I've learned over the years is that serve and volley perfection early in the match often deteriorates with just a little fatigue and a bit of nerves. So I just kept trying to make him play everything, kicking back feeble returns, trying to keep it low. But get it back no matter how much the shot resembles a wounded duck!

Late in the first set, I actually managed to get a break point. I got a return down low. He volleyed it deep to my forehand corner. For the first time, I got every ounce of my being into the shot, ripping a crosscourt winner at about 100 miles per hour (or so it seemed to me!).

That one shot won me the match. I had established a pattern that was driving him nuts and then . . . oh, the sheer audacity of it all! I ripped a gloriously classic forehand past him. Far prettier, actually, than any of his strokes had been to that point.

On the changeover I could tell from his mutterings and body language that it wasn't FAIR that I played a little-old-lady-like game and then hit a REAL shot!

I served the set out, quickly got two breaks in the second set, and cruised. In the second set his volleys were flying wide, my decent but unremarkable lobs were producing erroneous overheads, and his mutterings got more and more vocal.

After the match, one of his teammates came up to me and actually apologized for the behavioral display. Apparently, this wasn't a common occurrence. Giving an appearance of thoughtfulness, I accepted the apology.

What I didn't explain was that I get a huge kick out of a serious opponent losing his cool. "Serious" implies tournament or team competition. It's no fun at all, of course, for a good buddy to lose his cool in a strictly for-fun match. Well . . . most of the time.

What principles do we learn from such joyfully memorable (to me, anyway) experiences? The first is elementary.

You don't deserve to win just because your strokes are prettier.

My opponent got flustered in part because he felt his game was elegant and he should be beating me handily. A teaching pro ought to know better.

Give him what he hates most rather than hitting what you like best.

You win more often by giving your opponent what he hates most rather than by hitting what you like best. You may have more *fun* hitting your favorite shots in your favorite pattern. But if you're into *winning*, work on patterns that break down your opponent's mind.

When you beat someone, it's rare that he has the character to simply say, "Well played. You were better than me today." Much more often you get excuses and explanations for why he played so "badly." Well, since that's all the credit you're going to get anyway, you might as well work on shot patterns that help him to "play badly."

For example, most players at 4.5 level and below just despise soft, high loopers to the backhand. So I learned to make that shot one of my favorites, thus matching my best with my opponent's worst. It's not easy for someone to turn that pattern around on you. Creating a new pattern in your play while in the midst of a match does not often pay off.

I recognize the conflict in priorities here. For the long term, you want to develop your own weapons. So you want to work on what you do well, even if your opponent doesn't mind it so much.

The answer is this: Experiment in practice matches. If you experiment consistently in the "fun" matches, you'll have the confidence to hit the higher risk shots in matches that count more to you.

A favorite experimental time for me is after winning (or losing) a fun match in 2 sets. We don't want to quit playing yet, so we play a 3rd "fun" set. That's the time to experiment. I don't care about losing that set because I'm investing in the future of my game. Interestingly, though, some of the best tennis I've ever played has been in those "fun" sets. I've learned where my performance envelope is and how much I can push it.

On the other hand, go for the jugular with your well-established, high confidence tactics in tournament or "rivalry" matches. Namely, any time that your blood and guts are on the line.

Pattern breaking is effective psychological warfare.

Humans don't like change. Once you establish a pattern, like the "pusher" pattern I described above, your opponent depends on it. He's working hard to find a way to defeat your pattern. At just the right moment, you break the pattern. If you're successful, the benefits go well beyond that point. Now he can't *depend* on you to fit his stereotype anymore!

If your forte is driving hard service returns, or even just blocking them back high and deep, then break the pattern on a key point. On the first break point you get, chip and charge. All you have to do is get the ball *anywhere* into the court. Your probability is very high for drawing an error on an attempted pass that he never expected to hit in that situation.

It's easy to break the pattern in the midst of a point. Don't let him get in a groove cracking hard groundstrokes. Throw up a moonball occasionally. If he doesn't seem to like that, throw up a bunch of them.

When you break the pattern of a classic rally with the moonball, your macho enemy will not want to give in to responding in kind. He doesn't want *you* to dictate the style. What he neglects is that the most consistent reply to a moonball is a moonball. Now, he doesn't have to turn into a complete pusher just because you might choose to do so. But more patience is required to defeat the moonballer than most people have. He has to pick his time to attack.

I mentioned earlier in the chapter how I used "energy" to hang in there with Marty. But I used pattern breaking to finally beat him. We had knocked each other around the court to split the first two sets. But the momentum was his because he had won the 2nd set handily. In the third set I decided to do some pattern breaking.

Serve-volley on slow clay is not a winning tactic. But I did it on game point three times to hold my service games in the final set. The unexpected net rush allowed me to make easy volleys off of "deep" returns intended for the back court. And I waited until deuce or break points to chip and charge. The extra fatigue and nerves in a third set make these tactics far more effective than they would be early in a match.

The other side of the coin: I recall losing two consecutive matches in my youth because my game was *too flexible* and I didn't understand the principle of pattern breaking.

The first loss was against a really accomplished pusher. I thought I could beat him because I could play a really fine conservative style, too. But I lost a close one. Then I played a guy with a crisp, classic game. I felt that I could respond with my most crispy game and win that one, too. But I lost.

With a flash of crystal clarity, I realized that my supposed wonderfully flexible game had simply tempted me to play the style dictated by my two opponents. With that approach, the best that I could hope for would be pride that I could play a *close* match using *anybody's style!* That's when I began to realize that the adaptability in my game must be used to disrupt the style that my opponent favors.

Context: The knee bone's connected to the shin bone, etc.

How well you play and, more importantly, whether or not you win depend on a huge number of interrelated factors.

A simple example: wind. You're just not going to be as precise in your shot-making on a windy day. Don't gripe about it. Rather, determine to make the adjustment better than your opponent. Let him use the wind as an excuse after he loses to you.

Wind is simple. Stay away from the lines. Avoid getting in situations where you have to lob downwind. Make the other guy lob downwind by getting in and crowding the net. Amplify the swerve on your slice serve by taking advantage of a right-to-left wind. But don't waste time hitting the slice against a left-to-right wind. That just produces a slow-ball serve. But a kicker is good with a left-to-right wind.

Topspin groundies fall shorter against the wind and don't grab as well downwind. Make the adjustment.

Shorten your service toss and shorten your forehand and backhand backswings. Make sure your volleys are *very* short in their punch. Keep your feet light on groundstrokes because the wind will push the ball off the expected trajectory at the last split second.

The other day I was playing in a fairly substantial crosswind – left to right from my side on a key point. My opponent got to the net and volleyed a ball to my backhand, but near the middle of the court. The more natural shot from this position, which fortunately he covered, is a crosscourt topspin dipper. It's dangerous, however, because the wind will tend to push it out. So I played a medium-paced flat ball in the "off" direction, letting the trajectory *die* against the wind before the ball could sail out.

The result was a wonderfully unexpected clean winner. I heard him muttering something about why he didn't cover that shot. The neat thing about that play is that when he sees me cuddle that ball into the wind, there will be at least a microscopic hesitation because it looks like it will sail out. Any hesitation is enough to get the ball by him or make for a tough stretch volley.

Don't neglect the sun. Near midday, look for opportunities to lob into good old Sol. Also, don't neglect your fluids on hot days. I'm sure you've heard all of the advice from other sources: seek shade, take good breaks, start fluids two hours before match time, use sunscreen. Knowing this stuff isn't good enough. You've got to *do it!* Your opponents generally won't take such care. That gives you an edge.

What about those sparkling days when you're feeling sharp and playing in ideal conditions, perhaps indoors on a fast surface. The *context* dictates that you go for your shots. Push the envelope on safety to increase aggressiveness. Under ideal conditions you *can* play your best. There is no reason to equivocate. In fact, if you don't, your opponent will. And he'll take control of the match away from you.

Furthermore, this is the context to explore the boundaries of your envelope. Maybe you're actually better than you think you are! What a shame if you don't find out. Look at it this way: if you're going to get to the next level, you're going to have to play that way some time. Ideal conditions give you a chance to raise the level a bit and take a few steps along that road.

I once enjoyed a marvelously unique context for tactics in a tournament match on the Gulf Coast. I was playing a big, strong, classic, and – frankly – better player. But the fog rolled in more intensely than you would believe.

My opponent wore glasses. The longer I kept the point going, the worse his vision got. Also now, you won't believe this unless you have learned to trust my veracity, a good defensive lob into the fog would actually disappear above the court!

I must have hit 50 lobs during the match. Drove him nutser and nutser. Eventually his overhead evaporated completely. I managed to win in three sets.

I never used "gamesmanship" on him. I didn't make irritating comments or employ delaying tactics, etc. Completely within the bounds of sportsmanship, I still managed to blow his concentration.

If that hadn't worked, then I would have probably lost. So what. Don't blow your ethics or your reputation over tennis. Tennis is a part of life. Be as honorable on court as you would be in business. Just make your game ruthless!

Another aspect of context involves your confidence level and "sharpness." Are you feeling sharp? Are you able to hit your strokes with the confidence you want? What if you can't?

Sometimes you just have a bad day. No mental gymnastics seem to get you on top of your game. All right, so be it. You can still win.

I had a day like that playing a hard court tournament in my youth against an older fellow with a funny game. You know the type. The strokes were kind of odd, but extremely steady and effective. I'd never seen him before, but knew I was in a dogfight within the first couple of games.

I must have been at my biorhythm minimum. I felt weak, slow, tired, and insecure. If I persisted in playing with my favorite style, my confidence would disintegrate even more quickly and errors would multiply.

So I hunkered down. I told myself, in effect, "OK, I really stink today. And he's got the kind of game that I hate to play against. But I'm going to win just as ugly as I need to."

I kept my shots away from the lines, ran down everything, and determined to make the other guy beat me with great stuff. On those occasions where I did get a clear advantage on court position, then I went in and attacked. Since my driving approach shots stunk, too, I simply dinked in chipped approaches from both sides. But I made *him* come up with stuff he wasn't used to.

I was puzzled to see my opponent get more and more angry as the match progressed. But I won ugly in 2 sets. After the match he told me off. He said that he hated to play against my "passive / aggressive style."

Well, I'd never heard that one before, or since. But it dawned on me that what he hated was playing a mirror image of himself, except that the image was "better looking." I had outdinked a master dinker!

I confess that I had lost to guys like that when I was younger. Stubbornly refusing to alter my *classic* style, errors went up and confidence went down, and *I* would be the one muttering with my tail between my legs on the way to the parking lot.

The commentators make a big deal out of "big points." Certain points in a match *are* different from others. Statistically, however, they all add up the same. You don't get the break point unless you get at least 3 points prior. But on so-called critical points, the psychology changes.

We would like to be immune to psychology, but let's live in reality. When you're down a break point, you're not going to be as relaxed as when you're up 40-love on your serve. Why? Simply because you *care* about winning. The mind is so intertwined with your body that you won't be as devil-may-care loosey-goosey fluidic on such points.

On break point down, recognize this and stick to your bread and butter. Don't bust the angle with your backhand. Don't try those shots that only work 70% of the time or less. Under pressure, the percentage drops even further. The slightest bit of tightness will destroy the perfect rhythm and racket speed you need to hit a low percentage shot.

Make the other guy hit a low percentage shot! If you hit solid and deep shots, you will force him to come up with the magic to take the game away from you.

Don't be fooled by the pros here. They have hit the gazillion balls necessary to go for the gusto at critical junctures. In fact, they *have to* because they are matched up against other 7.0s who will do it to them first. In the amateur ranks we can take advantage of the fact that we're playing against mere amateurs.

Sometimes. One match I thoroughly enjoyed, but lost, presented me with a marvelous psychological problem in context. I'd been playing for the previous year on honey-slow clay at sea level on the Gulf Coast. On a business trip to Albuquerque, I called a local club and asked the teaching pro if he could set up a match for me. I told him that I was a middle-aged 5.0. He was gracious enough to offer himself up. I guess he needed some exercise that day.

It turned out the club was up the side of the mountain (Sandia Crest) at about 6,000 feet altitude. The club was very nice, but it had been some years since the hard courts were resurfaced. So they were slick.

I couldn't have changed playing conditions more dramatically unless I played on the moon at 1/6 standard gravity. As I warmed up with my host, I had trouble hitting the ball anywhere near the court. I started to feel very embarrassed. The pro started to softball the warmup shots. I knew that he was thinking what a liar I was about being a 5.0.

I walked up to the net and motioned him to join me. I explained that I was adjusting to a violent change of conditions and that I would do just fine in a few minutes. I then asked him to SHOW ME NO MERCY! I told him that if he could double-bagel me, then I would consider it a great honor if he would do just that.

Just before the warmup ended I decided that there was no way I was going to adapt my topspun defensive clay court game in any way to the current conditions. I determined to play just as if I had been a member of his club for years. Flatten the shots. Go for everything. Dang the unforced errors! It's winners that count! Serve and volley consistently.

As much of a physical adjustment as I had, the psychological adjustment was that much more. In a well-played clay court match I might suffer 5 unforced errors. I'd work the points, changing speeds, spins, and angles continuously.

But if I wanted any chance to WIN on this mountainside court, I had to fully embrace the contextual conditions. Discarding my mild-mannered clay-court Dave persona, I became *wild and crazy Dave.*

Well, I had great fun with it, playing well enough to win a set (the second set), much to the shock and chagrin of my host. But he was just too much over the course of 3 sets. Which is good. If I'd won that match somehow, I don't think I could have ever crammed my ego back into my humble little personality!

Pretext: Defeated by fear itself

Pretext is about investing certain shots early in a match to provoke a favorable response later on. It's about establishing some doubt that, hopefully, will grow into fear and a resulting destruction of your opponent's confidence.

A simple example first: Even if you have no desire to serve and volley – ever – do it once within your first or second service game. Make the guy think about it. After you do it once, even if you don't win that point, you can fake it a few times and draw some return errors.

How do you fake it? Follow your serve in just a couple of steps, but stomp your feet a bit on those two steps so he thinks you're on your way to the net. The returner's tendency will be to take more risk. That will give you an occasional free point.

Now let's turn to "statistical pretext." When you blast a winner you have an abundance of energy and location, but it's easy for the opponent to shrug it off.

"Big deal!" he grumbles. "So you hit a lucky shot," he thinks.

It's often better to force an error than to hit a clean winner. The obvious point is that he has to expend a lot more energy to get to the shot and stroke it. If you just rip it past him, he gets to relax.

More subtly, with the forced error, you have done at least a little psychological damage. He always thinks that he *should* have gotten the ball back and probably *should* have won the point. His confidence has been hurt more by *his failure* than it possibly can suffer from *your lucky shot!*

The forced error therefore pays benefits later in the match. It's not as flashy, but remember: winning is SO MUCH MORE SATISFYING than losing with a few flashy shots.

The classic bangers hate to think about the fact that the super-steady blokes win a seemingly disproportionate share of matches. Some of these wins are born in the first few points.

You see, forcing *unforced* errors is even more psychologically damaging than provoking forced errors. The banger whose UEs mount early starts to think that he's playing lousy and having just one of those bad days. That attitude is a quick poison to confidence. His favorite shots and patterns can deteriorate quickly.

I have two wonderful recollections of matches that I managed to win by maximizing pretext. One I already described in the earlier chapter on *tenacity,* when I came back from a set and 5-1 down.

The other was in the final of a 40-and-over state hardcourt championship. I had just won a tightly contested first set, but my opponent's confidence was on the rise. He had nearly come back after spotting me a big lead.

We both were just a little fatigued. It was a warm day. My opponent was bigger and stronger, but slower and heavier. I knew he wasn't in the shape that I was.

On the very first point of the 2nd set (his serve), I got him running corner to corner. After a few shots I realized that I might be able to run him into the ground if I could keep the point going like this. I actually had a couple of shots that I could have put away, but resisted the urge.

I was able to mix in both short and deep angles and a couple of drop shots (on a hard court!) sandwiched around a lob. The point went at least 26 strokes. Finally, when he just stopped moving after retrieving my second drop shot, I knocked the ball past him.

That point effectively ended the match. He was completely exhausted. I quickly moved over to the ad court to receive serve and hopped up and down a little bit. I thought he might enjoy my enthusiasm!

I broke at love, then held at love, and then broke again, before he got his game entirely back. Even then, his confidence was gone and I ran out the set.

Several times in that first point I "unnecessarily" risked losing the point. I was *investing* in a strategic objective: winning the match and the tournament. Clearly, he should have been wise enough to go for a winner much earlier in the point and leave his stamina intact.

Once in a tournament match on slow clay I found myself against my good friend and doubles partner. John had never beaten me in singles. He liked to employ his size and bull-like strength in aggressive play, which allowed me to employ my beloved counterpunching tactics.

In this match he shocked me by being patient. Matching me rally for rally, drive for drive, and even moonball for moonball without falling into his characteristic slash and burn persona. In short, John was playing *smart!* That didn't seem fair to me. He had never played smart before!!

Well, I certainly didn't feel comfortable about increasing the aggression in my tactics that day. I had walked into the match a bit complacent and found that I couldn't now summon up the spark or the precision to pick apart his suddenly savvy defensive game.

I knew I had to break the pattern without stretching my own envelope too far. I decided to test his resolve. John is a lefty. I proceeded to develop a rally pattern matching my forehand against his backhand

by running around all of my groundstrokes and hitting mini-moonballs with extra topspin. If he insisted on countering by hitting a forehand from his backhand corner, then I would drive him nuts by angling a short sliced backhand the other way.

I wanted him to understand clearly that for him to win he would have to hit hundreds of high backhands off of topspun mini-moonballs.

The price that I would have to pay was in energy and, less important, in aesthetics. The people watching the match were not going to enjoy this one. But I put *winning* as the top priority.

The rallies were long and John tried for quite a while to stick with his newfound patience. But in the end he reverted to type. He couldn't beat me at my own game and so went with his normal game. Which suited me just fine. Even though the match took almost two hours, I won in straight sets. Tired is ok, as long as it goes with victorious.

Instantaneous TSQ

How many styles of game are there? Tennis commentators seem to recognize only 2 styles in the game: (1) baseline, and (2) serve & volley / chip & charge.

But there are an infinite variety of styles. Imagine all of the possible combinations of spin, arc, pace, location, etc., that can be thrown into a match or even into a single point.

We also choose our intervals between points and between serves, within legal limits, of course. We choose whether to counterpunch or to dictate play. That can vary point to point and even shot to shot.

There is no law against the baseliner employing the chip & charge on occasion. There is no restriction against the net rusher trying to hang in there on baseline rallies.

The real art is to understand what style you can employ within your abilities that best fits the current match situation. But this is more than starting with a specific game plan. It's about maximizing your *Instantaneous TSQ*.

Instantaneous TSQ (ITSQ) is an advanced way to think about shot selection. ITSQ separates the smart players from the dumb. I suppose that if we conducted a survey, we would find out that at least 90% of tennis players consider themselves to be above average in tennis smarts. They might not always win. (Actually, 50% of all matches are lost!) But the "real problem" was clearly a serve that was "off" or a backhand that got a kink or the wind that pushed their shots just barely out.

In my personal observations, I believe that 90% of serious amateurs are BELOW AVERAGE in savvy. This can be true because I'm defining "average" as being the norm for an individual based on his God-given intelligence. I marvel that so many apparently smart people – like engineers, scientists, doctors, lawyers, business people, and so on – can play so *dumb* on the tennis court.

Let's get specific. I'm in the middle of a crisp crosscourt forehand rally. I'm anxious to get a short ball that I can drive into the backhand corner. So I'm inching onto the baseline, hoping that the next return will be the one to chomp on.

But my opponent's next forehand comes harder and deeper than the previous ones. I immediately know, of course, that this is not the shot to drive. (If I'm a *really dumb* player I might, though.) The split-second choice that confronts me is the one that most players stumble over.

The wrong choice is to keep the crosscourt rally going. I'm in too close, I'm a bit surprised by the depth and pace of the shot. I'm not in rhythm to crack back the next forehand. If I try to do so, the probability of a UE goes way up. This is where many points are lost.

Let's say I try to crack the return again. Just as I'm about to hit it, my racket already moving forward, I can feel the bad timing and I turn the shot into a bunt that falls short. I still lose the point, but it's one or two shots later. And if I'm really thoughtless, I'll curse myself for the almost impossible pass that I missed after he cracked his approach into my corner, rather than curse myself for the bad choice on the forehand.

The choice I must make is based on reality: Hey! I'm on the defensive, so let's hit a good defensive shot. I fall back even as I prepare to hit, so I can get an extra fraction of a second to stroke the shot cleanly. I then loft a high and deep ball between the middle of the court and the backhand corner, avoiding the sideline for safety.

But with total concentration, I put as much into that defensive shot as I safely can. I muscle as much topspin into it as practical. And I work hard to get it precisely near the other baseline. I'm maximizing TSQ with every fiber of my being.

All of this happens very fast, of course. A couple of seconds ago, I was optimistically dreaming of a driving approach shot up the line. Now, over the course of about 2 seconds, I've done a lot of analysis and worked hard to choose the right shot and get the TSQ high.

The result is a TSQ that has been maximized. The TSQ is high for my choice because:

1. *Context* dictates the need for defense.
2. *Pattern* necessitates the break from the crosscourt rally.
3. *Location* calls for a safe target on the opponent's backhand side.
4. *Energy* is required to get as much on the ball as possible from an awkward position.
5. *Pretext* results from the enemy's frustration that his classic drive was met by an aggravatingly deep mini-moonball to his backhand. "Is that going to happen every time?!?" he whines.

Let's extend the example to illustrate the complexity of style from point to point. After my deep mini-moonball, my opponent hits a less than satisfactory backhand of only moderate pace that stays near the center of the backcourt.

I move to wind up for a solid crosscourt forehand. That corner is a bit open so I can put him on the run. But as I prepare for the shot I *feel* the ball coming right into a perfect hitting zone for me. My footwork has gotten me into the absolutely ideal weight transfer position. Everything is zoned.

So as I begin the swing, sensing that the shot is perfectly lined up, I add more and more muscle and torque into the forehand as I come through the ball. I didn't originally intend to blast the ball, but conditions are perfect. The blast comes from the setup position. I'm not doing anything different, other than adding lots of oomph as I hit it.

The result? The ball screams from my racket and races into the opposing forehand corner for a clean winner. Very satisfying.

Let's consider again the relevant elements of TSQ. My instantantaneous feel for the zone I happened to fall into gave me the *context* to maximize *energy* and *location.*

Also note that the 2-shot *pattern* constitutes wonderful *pretext* for later in the match. The enemy is frustrated because the 2-shot combination came out of his initially rifled forehand. My mini-moonball was an annoying response to his hard crosscourt. Then I had the gall to follow up a dinkball shot with a cannon shot. That combination of shots doesn't even show up in his nightmares.

Players that can make the instantaneous adjustments are the ones that seem to win above their level. If you haven't yet tapped the potential of this concept, you can increase your NTRP level a solid

half-point without any stroke improvements. Alternatively, you will start beating the tar out of everyone at your level, even though your strokes don't rate a level change.

How do you begin to enhance the ITSQ in your game? Mainly, you've got to THINK about it. Think between points, analyze on changeovers, and get a sense for what you're doing, what your opponent is doing, and what you SHOULD be doing.

Then do it!!!

Don't get mad at bad choices. Treat your game like a physics problem. Analyze, analyze, analyze. Why do people get mad at stupid shots? Doesn't an error simply mean that we're not good enough yet to hit a winner on every ball? Is that really a surprise?

Furthermore, no serious tennis player actually wants to play *perfectly* every time . . .

That would terminate the quest! Then what would we do? Play golf? God forbid!!

I firmly believe that if you apply the principles in this chapter (and the rest of the book) you will usually beat players that are at your level or even somewhat higher. But what if you run into someone *a lot better?*

I was stationed at Maxwell Air Force Base, Montgomery, Alabama, earlier in my career. Maxwell is host to a number of organizations, including the Air Command and Staff College, which I was attending at the time. One of the lesser known institutions on the base was a minimum security prison.

The security was so "minimum" that prisoners were regularly detailed to perform routine jobs around the base, such as helping on golf course maintenance and doing laundry at the gym. In other words, these prisoners could literally walk away from their confinement, if they wanted to risk big-time trouble.

I discovered that the prison actually had 2 tennis courts and that a few of the inmates fancied themselves to be fairly good at the game. So I got up a team to play them at their home courts. I had the privilege of playing #1 singles for my team and wondered what I would run into.

Well, the whole prison turned out for the match. The courts had sizable bleachers which were soon filled by fairly enthusiastic partisans. I confess that it was just a little bit intimidating. But I wouldn't let that affect my game!

My opponent was tall and fit. I discovered in the warmup and in the first couple of games that he had a game superior to mine in the following areas:

Serve
Service return
Forehand
Volley
Lob
Overhead
Quickness
Strength
Anticipation
Endurance
Crowd support

Youth
Good looks

I started to wonder, "Who is this guy?!!??" You know, kind of like Butch and Sundance wondered about that tracker on their heels. Unfortunately, I don't know the tennis equivalent of jumping off the cliff into the mountain stream to escape.

I was optimistic, however, in that I thought that my backhand was just a skillionth of a whillimeter better . . . maybe. On the other hand, it was also clear that he was at least as smart as I am on a tennis court. And I bashfully admit that I am paying him a great compliment!

So . . . what do you do in a situation like that? Well . . . basically . . . you LOSE! But you can have a great time doing it. No point in equivocating or holding back in any way. Let the strokes fly! Besides, there was a big crowd watching.

The best that I could do was to try to force as many backhand crosscourt rallies as possible to try to get some edge on some points. This tactic helped me avoid the double bagel. I went down 6-2, 6-1.

But I thoroughly enjoyed the match. It is a scrumptious treat to play someone substantially better and see what you can do to match up. I find it very easy in such a situation to be gracious and complimentary, even awestruck at times, when such a fellow zings magical strokes by me.

After the match I asked him about his tennis pedigree. It turned out he was on the pro satellite circuit before being nabbed with some marijuana upon returning to the States. At that point I felt fairly good about getting 3 games off of him.

Every match should be a learning experience. I was clearly a long way from being able to beat that fellow. But I reveled in the experience. What did I learn? I observed the differences in velocity and control that separated me from the next level. I observed nuances in footwork, preparation, and balance that enabled my opponent to generate such high TSQ on so many shots. I learned how far I had to push my own envelope in order to hang in there with him on even a few games.

When the differences are that great between you and an opponent, count it a learning experience. You're not going to win. But I've observed a number of matches between players, one somewhat better than the other, where the better player ALWAYS seems to win. My conviction is that the weaker player, even if separated by half of an NTRP point, should win at least occasionally. And if the separation is under a half point, then the weaker player can win consistently if he applies the principles outlined in this book.

I remember watching a couple of matches between two of the young teaching pros at a club a few years ago. There was a definite order between these fellows. Jose was "somewhat" better than Juan, but ALWAYS beat him.

I noticed that most of the points lost by Juan were unforced errors. Errors that he never seemed to make against me or anyone else. But Juan pressed when he played Jose. He believed that he didn't have enough natural ability, so he departed from his normal statistical envelope.

Going back into the archives . . . The finals of the 1998 ATP World Championships in Hanover provides an even more poignant example. Alex Corretja was matched against Carlos Moya in a best-of-5 sets contest. Moya had beaten Corretja 3 times that year, all in straight sets. He had his number, it appeared.

Moya won the first two sets easily. The TV analysts made much of Moya's superior strength and power. But what the stats showed was an abundance of unforced errors that were uncharacteristic of Corretja's normal game.

Corretja started to hang tough in the 3rd set. It was clear to all, including Alex, that he had to work harder than Moya to generate a given shot. That can be frustrating. You're expending oodles of energy, while your brute of an opponent seems to glide effortlessly into a shot and then calmly knock the cover off the ball.

But Alex had evidently decided to leave his blood and guts on the court if need be. He made it clear to Moya that Moya would have to hit nothing but miraculous shots to win.

By crunch time in the 3rd set, I felt that a touch of fatigue and Corretja's effusive tenacity were taking a toll on Moya's precision and confidence. Moya was feeling like he already deserved to win and that his opponent should just roll over. But Alex won the set 7-5, and then continued to gut out the next two closely fought sets.

The weaker player had won. He had worked perhaps twice as hard, but victory is not determined by measuring the amount of energy expended! Shot by shot, Corretja invested all available energy into hitting the best shots that were within HIS game.

That's enough to beat . . . most of the time . . . players that are up to half an NTRP point "better" than you are!

Chapter 15

Etiquette

As much as I've talked about ruthlessly dismembering your opponent's game, you might have gotten the wrong impression about me. I do believe that when you're in the "battle" you go for the victory. But outside the battle, our tennis community should work a lot harder to be gentle, gracious, considerate, and even professional in its decorum around the tennis court.

In this chapter we won't exhaust the subject of tennis etiquette, of course. But I am going to cover a number of pet peeves that have arisen in my experience and that I don't usually see discussed in other articles.

Simple promises

Do you know somebody like this? You set up a 3 pm match with your buddy. As consistent as the sun rising in the east, he arrives at 3:05 and mutters a pseudo-apology for being a bit late. He says he'll be ready "in a minute." But then he has to change into his tennis duds and then go through his stretching routine. You hit your first ball at 3:15.

Do these guys treat their bosses this way? Of course not. They know there will be consequences. But they don't have the character to give you the consideration that you are due as a human being.

Keep your commitments. If you err, let it be on the early side, perhaps wasting a mite of your time, but not someone else's.

A dearth of backhands

Let's talk about warming up with your opponent before the match. In a tournament match you only have about 5 minutes to warm up, so efficiency and consideration for each other are absolutely required. But the same principles apply to friendly matches.

The polite thing to do is to give and receive an adequate number of forehands, backhands, volleys, etc. One of my good tennis buddies has a real character flaw in this area. We start out by warming up our groundies. But he seems determined to hit every ball to my forehand corner. I hit to his forehand, he hits to my forehand. I hit to his backhand, he hits to my forehand.

It's clear that he doesn't want me to warm up my backhand. Now, I know from experience that when we get into the match, we're going to have a ton of backhand-to-backhand exhanges.

Before I knew him too well, I would step around some forehands and hit backhands from the forehand corner . . . you know, just to give him the message politely. But he would try to hit even further into my forehand corner.

I finally had to make the point verbally EVERY TIME WE PLAYED that I needed some backhands before I would agree to start play. He invariably seemed surprised when I asked. Other than that, he's a perfectly nice and reasonable guy.

Warming to perfection

The warmup is not intended for you to learn or master a stroke. It's simply intended to get the muscles lucid on all the basic tennis motions and to remind your eyes and body about the timing on tennis ball trajectories.

Nevertheless, some guys act like this is their one opportunity to perfect some stroke they are having trouble with. Most often, this seems to be the overhead. They want to pound ball after ball into the corners, oblivious to your growing irritation as you play ball boy, retrieving balls from all over your side of the net.

The following is proper etiquette on warming up the overhead: Hit the first several with moderate speed back to your opponent. Don't slam every one out of reach. And don't try to decapitate your buddy on the ones you're sending back to him. You can finish with one in each corner. If you really need to practice the shot, do so some other time, not in the warmup. You're not going to improve your game or fix a flaw in a 5-10 minute warmup session. The game you bring to the court will come out during the match. You'll only worry yourself by trying to do something special in the warmup.

You do have to watch your own temper if you run into one of these jerks. When I was a brand new Air Force 2nd Lieutenant, I was invited to play by a Lieutenant Colonel who happened to be a couple of levels up my chain of command. I figured I'd be a good bit better than him. I certainly wouldn't throw the match, but I determined to avoid waxing him.

During the warmup, this guy repeatedly belted balls to each corner: not just on overheads, but on groundstrokes and volleys. I saw red. By the time I got my perspective back, the match was over. I had won 6-0, 6-0.

Oops! I suddenly remembered what the larger picture was. Had I put my career in jeopardy? Nah! He turned out to be a good sport. We played many times over the next couple of years and I even got promoted on schedule. And he even learned not to be such a jerk in warmups.

Surviving the practice volleys

After warming up groundies, I'll saunter up to the net to hit some volleys. Some idiots try to drill balls at me at 100 mph. They never hit passing shots that hard during a match. What? Is the guy trying to intimidate me? Make me afraid to ever approach the net? At best, he's merely trying to deny me the opportunity to practice my volleys. Let your opponent warm up his volleys by hitting medium balls at him. Keep the "rally" going so he can finish that part of his warmup quickly.

Efficient serves and returns

Don't hit your warmup serves into the net. Now I know that's a little difficult. But you ought to be targeting the service line anyway and avoiding the net. The secondary reason is the time delay in retrieving netted serves.

If you do net a practice serve, then toss it to your opponent when you retrieve it. Don't bring it back to the baseline to give yourself an "extra" practice serve.

If you get done with your practice serves first, go ahead and hit returns off of your opponent's practice serves. But hit them in his general direction. I know that some advise that it is gauche to practice returns at all during the warmup. But it's ridiculous to avoid returning when your opponent is hitting extra serves.

Racket spinning

Settle choice of side and who serves before the warmup. You would think this shouldn't be such a big deal. But I've known any number of guys who play the following cute game:

They delay the racket spin until after the warmup. If I win the toss and choose to serve, then they choose the side that I have been warming up on. Like that's going to give them an incredible edge. It's irritating just to think that they are thinking that! Maybe *that's* why they do it!

Fuzzy balls

Take turns supplying new balls. Go ahead and keep track if need be. And when it's your turn, don't bring used balls. Unless you're a particularly destitute junior, you can afford new tennis balls whenever you play. Playing with used balls isn't worth it. The game is not the same when the balls are fuzzless and pressureless.

If you have a full-time job, bring new balls every time even if your opponent is too cheap to take his turn. Also, if you have a full-time job and you're playing a junior or someone un- or under-employed, bring the new balls. Don't make a big deal about it. Just do it.

The biggest etiquette issue of all: Line calls

We can't look to the pros for examples here. Tennis pros are much like their football and basketball counterparts. They feel like anything they can talk the ref into is fair.

On extremely rare occasions, once every few years, you'll see a pro reverse a bad call in favor of his opponent. But I don't recall ever seeing that happen late in a close match.

It galls me to say it, but truth is truth. Golf's pros are the ones to emulate. It's amazing what they will do to themselves to preserve the character of the game. But that's what it's about: *character*. That's what you do when no one else will find you out.

Here's the deal:

1. You call your side of the net.
2. You call balls out only when you are sure that they are out. You don't guess. You don't wish.
3. If you see that your shot is out (yes, on his side of the net!) and your opponent doesn't see it, you call it against yourself, even if he called it good because he couldn't see it clearly. *You don't take advantage of his honesty*. I've done that even on match point, and I have no regrets.
4. If you are out of position and ask your opponent for help, you abide by his decision. And if he's not sure, the ball is good.
5. If your opponent calls your shot out and you are sure that it's in, you politely say, "I saw that ball clearly in. Would you consider changing your call?" There's no point in merely asking him, "Are you sure?" That's not what you intend to communicate. Be clear.

I wish that I didn't have to write this section. It amazes me how much dishonesty is out there, even in club or public court matches. If I see a player who regularly hooks (cheats) his opponents, that's a guy I wouldn't trust in a business relationship. It's conceivable I might do some simple business transaction with him in "real life." But not if it involved any trust.

If your opponent hooks you more than once, you have a decision to make. If it's just a friendly match, and you want to preserve the tennis (or other) relationship, then you probably let it go. At least mention it, though. If it's a tournament match, you contact the tournament director immediately. Life is too short to put up with garbage like that.

Edmund Burke put it eloquently many years ago:

"The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil
is for good men to do nothing."

Furthermore . . . don't foot-fault. Foot-faulting in a non-refereed match is cheating. Just in case you skimmed by that:

Foot-faulting is cheating!
Foot-faulting is cheating!
Foot-faulting is cheating!

Learn to play fairly. That includes serving according to the rules.

During the match—miscellaneous niceties

Try not to return a first service fault into the net. It will occasionally dribble back and you'll have to go retrieve it before the second serve. Some say that you shouldn't hit the ball at all. But that's not practical. Too many faults are too close to the line to let you "turn off" your return.

So just return the fault deep into the other guy's court. Look – the ball is going to wind up in either your back court or the other guy's. He was the one that hit the ball out. So there is nothing wrong about the dead ball residing against *his* back fence.

Don't cuss. Be a man. If you miss a shot, analyze it. Don't cuss it. Don't cuss yourself. Don't throw your racket. Have some self-respect. If for no other reason, don't let your opponent know that he's getting the best of you.

Compliment your opponent's good shots. Even in a tournament match. It's not like every point will determine whether you put food on the table for your children. Ultimately, tennis is a game. You'll enjoy it more if you foster an atmosphere of good sportsmanship.

But don't carry that too far. I regularly played a fellow who complimented my shot even when he lost the point on his own pitiful unforced error. That's no compliment at all!

If you're gracious to an opponent who is waxing you, you are more likely to be offered a return match. And it's important for the development of your game that you regularly get matches with superior players. You can buy the balls for those matches, too.

Final thought

Tennis is a glorious game. It challenges us at many physical and psychological levels. I encourage you to continue your quest, your safari to destinations yet unseen. And, just like a safari, your objectives are FUN and SATISFACTION. So keep it light. And if you need a hitting partner, just give me a call. I'll bring the balls.

Appendix

NTRP scale

The NTRP (National Tennis Rating Program) has been employed since 1978. It is designed to assist in setting up team and tournament competition so that players are well-matched. It also provides a quantitative scale so that players can set up matches sight unseen and still expect to get a good game.

Most importantly, it helps you to measure where you are in your lifelong quest for skill-level excellence. Below are the widely published definitions for the skill levels. The USTA (United States Tennis Association) can provide literature with amplified explanations for each level.

1.0 This player is just starting to play tennis.
1.5 Has limited experience and is still working primarily on getting the ball into play.
2.0 Needs on-court experience. Has obvious stroke weaknesses, but is familiar with basic positions for singles and doubles play.
2.5 Learning to judge where the ball is going although coverage is weak. Can sustain a rally of slow pace with other players of the same ability.
3.0 Consistent when hitting medium-paced shots, but is not comfortable with all strokes and lacks control when trying for directional intent, depth, or power.
3.5 Has achieved improved stroke dependability and direction on moderate shots, but still lacks depth and variety. Exhibits more aggressive net play, has improved court coverage, and is developing teamwork in doubles.
4.0 Has dependable strokes, including directional control and depth on both forehand and backhand sides on moderate shots. Has the ability to hit lobs, overheads, approach shots and volleys with some success. Occasionally forces errors when serving and teamwork in doubles is evident.
4.5 Has begun to master the use of power and spins and is beginning to handle pace. Has sound footwork, can control depth of shots, and is beginning to vary tactics according to opponents. Can hit first serves with power and accuracy and place the second serve. Tends to overhit on difficult shots. Aggressive net play is common in doubles.
5.0 Has good shot anticipation and frequently has an outstanding shot or attribute around which a game may be structured. Can regularly hit winners or force errors off short balls and can put away volleys. Can successfully execute lobs, drop shots, half volleys, and overhead smashes. Has good depth and spin on most second serves.
5.5 Has developed power and / or consistency as a major weapon. Can vary strategies and styles of play in a competitive situation and hits dependable shots in a stress situation.
6.0 Will generally not need NTRP ratings. Rankings or past rankings will speak for themselves. The 6.0 player typically has had intensive training for national tournament competition at the junior level and collegiate levels and has obtained a sectional and/or national ranking.
6.5 Has a reasonable chance of succeeding at the professional level and has satellite tournament experience.
7.0 A world class player who is committed to tournament competition on the international level and whose major source of income is tournament prize winnings.