

TennisMindGame

Tomaz Mencinger

Tennis Strategy

ENCYCLOPEDIA



Start winning against
players you've never
beaten before

www.tennismindgame.com

TENNIS STRATEGY ENCYCLOPEDIA

Start winning against players you've never beaten before

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FOREWORD

Author's Note

The English language is going through a change that makes using a third person pronoun to refer to a person of unspecified gender difficult, even for native speakers of English. There are many pitfalls. For example, you cannot always write in the plural or always use they instead of he in the singular. Native speakers instinctively know when they can do so without ambiguity and when they can't, because they learn by speaking and thinking in English all their lives. I am not a native speaker of English. So, please accept my apology for simplifying things by writing the traditional way using he/him/his as though speaking to a male reader. I am not really doing so. This book is for girls and women too, and by he, him, or his, I mean a person who could be either male or female. Again for simplicity, I write as though for a right-handed reader. Left-handers, please accept my apology.

Tomaz Mencinger

This book is a gold mine. Oh, how I wish I'd had it when I was a teenager.

That's because there's much more to playing tennis than how you hit the ball. Yet many players obsess about the details of form, never getting into the game itself. They blame all their problems and every lost point on how they move their feet or swing the racket. They forever pursue that elusive goal of satisfaction with their results by tweaking or perfecting yet another detail of mechanical technique.

I am continually amazed to discover that players highly knowledgeable about the fine points of mechanical technique often lack even a basic understanding of strategy and tactics. Their knowledge in this area is often limited to a few maxims of conventional wisdom, which they don't understand and therefore apply by rote — often misapplying them as a consequence.

They have no idea how much more there is to know about strategy, tactics, and the inner game.

I suppose this overemphasis on form is partly because your strokes are the part of your game that shows. But the object is to win the match, not to impress people with how good you look out there. You'll never experience a sense of fulfillment in that.

What's more, your strokes improve faster if you don't worry about them. Consciously thinking about your strokes as you hit them is the hard way to develop them. It's the kiss of death to try to do that during match play.

Tennis instruction itself overemphasizes form. Form is easy to teach (even if the teaching isn't effective). You teach from a huge body of established knowledge on the mechanics of stroke production, so little trail blazing is necessary. With high-speed photography and video, producing snazzy instructional materials is a snap. Hence, there are no end of books, articles, and videos out there on how to hit the ball. The sheer abundance of this material gives the impression that that's all there is to tennis.

No. There's more. Much more. But, unfortunately, there's a limited supply of good instruction on the mental aspects of play — strategy, tactics, and the inner game.

The Tennis Strategy Encyclopedia changes that. It's the first truly comprehensive guide to tennis strategy and tactics. But that isn't all. A crucial factor in the success of any endeavor is your approach. Just ask anyone who's made it to the top of Mount Everest. In The Tennis Strategy Encyclopedia, Tomaz Mencinger starts you off on the right mental approach with the secret to playing good tennis.

Then he systematically guides you through the four basic tennis laws, the six general tennis strategies, basic tactics, advanced tactics, expert tactics, and special tactics. Then he shows you how to modify your strategy for game-type, integrating it with a mental plan for the inner game in each type of match. Next, he shows you how to adapt your game to different court surfaces and special situations (viz., wind, a left-handed opponent, etc.) Finally, he explains the process of shot selection and the intuitive play. Throughout, The Strategy Encyclopedia is well organized, stays on track, and gets straight to the point clearly and concisely.

Let me be frank: this is an excellent book, the best tennis book I've read, and I've read nearly all of them. I'm no slouch on tennis strategy and tactics myself, but I've learned a lot from it and applied it to my own play with great success. Deeper understanding of the game and the inner game not only makes you win more, it also enriches your playing experience, increasing your fun and enjoyment.

So, read on, win, and enjoy!

Kathy Krajco, <http://www.operationdoubles.com>

INTRODUCTION

**The secret of playing
good tennis**

Is very simple but very difficult to implement and understand. It is... to play good tennis. All right, now what does that mean? Of course, we all try to play good tennis, don't we? No, probably not.

Most players are not focused on playing good tennis: they are focused on trying to beat their opponent. (In fact, some are focused on not losing, but that's another story.)

When you try to beat your opponent, you are too focused on him instead of on tennis demands, statistics, and rules. Some of the shots you may play are very low-percentage shots. But if you see that they would bring success against your opponent, you try them anyway. Big mistake. You beat yourself, because you play against statistics and tennis laws.

The other problem is that you may try shots that you are not skilled enough to execute with good percentage and effectiveness. You are trying the right tactic but you are not good enough to do it.

Your ego is your biggest problem here.

You don't want to admit that you are not good enough, and you have zillion excuses why "today" for some "strange and unlucky" reason your shot didn't go in.

Sorry, you are not good enough. There is no mysterious force preventing you from playing your best. It's not your bad karma or Murphy's Law. No, you are just not good enough... yet!

This doesn't mean that you won't be good enough or that you can't improve. But you must face the truth and reality if you want to play your current best tennis. Your current best tennis depends on the condition of your game, both outside and inside — your skills, tactics, physical abilities, and mental toughness.

You must be totally honest with yourself and accept yourself the way you are now — maybe with a solid forehand, weak backhand, insecure volley and overhead, and a low fitness level. Only then you can realize what your good tennis looks like.

And only then will you be able to set realistic goals and prepare tactics for your best tennis. Maybe it won't look like Roger Federer's, but you will win matches and you will be satisfied.

That doesn't mean that you must resign to your fate. That doesn't mean that you shouldn't try better shots. That doesn't mean that you should risk and just go for it. There is intelligent risk and not-so-intelligent risk.

There is also the golden middle that you need to find inside your mind: you need to accept your current state – your technique, tactical knowledge, physical abilities, and mental skills. You need to feel good about them and yet desire to improve.

Your four main areas will not serve you well if you feel bad about them. You will miss many more serves if you feel bad about your serve and think that it sucks than if you accept you serve as it is and feel good about it.

It's technically the same serve with the same motion — but in the first case you won't hit it well and in the second case you will.

You need to nurture yourself and your four main areas like you would nurture a garden with apples, cherries, peaches, apricots and other fruits. You see them flower in the spring, and everything is going really well. But you don't look for mistakes, and you don't feel that your apple tree is too low or too wide.

You just accept it as it is, because it's a developing thing, not a defective thing. You are therefore motivated to water it, to cut some branches and to make it more productive.

We are so used to being motivated only if something is wrong and we try to fix it. This isn't the best approach. Why? Because we begin our fixing process in the negative mindset. We are filled with negative energy, and we work with it. We block our creative powers, because we use only the left side of the brain, which is strictly analytical.

Only when we accept our current state, feel good about it and are still motivated and enthusiastic about improving it, do we get the best results. We won't force the creative process; we will have positive energy and will be able to use the whole brain. That's when beautiful and great things happen.

So, search your life experience for when you felt like that before. When did you feel good about something and still wanted to improve it? When you find that memory, you'll know what this means.

And now transfer this idea, this experience to your tennis game. Question your beliefs about your tennis, and see where you may not be thinking logically. Does your weak backhand really mean anything about you? Is there any logical connection between your backhand and you as a person?

When you cut that connection and realize that there is none, then you'll be able to see your backhand with compassion and will do your best to help "it" grow and improve. But as long as you see your backhand as "bad," "weak," a "loser" backhand, then "it" won't respond to your attempts to fix it.

You won't go with the flow and with the improvement that comes in due course. You will force things too much, and that will slow down or even stop your progress. Actually, you can even make your backhand worse by constantly feeling bad about it. It will become less and less reliable. You are feeding your backhand with negative energy, and it shows.

So, back to the secret — how to play good tennis. You've probably heard these phrases before: Just play. Point by point, and Play the ball, not the opponent. Are they clearer now that you've read this far?

If you want to play good tennis and win matches, you need to focus on playing good tennis. My personal judgment is that a good player is focused 80% on playing good tennis and only about 20% on how to outplay his opponent.

He does adjust his game to make it difficult for his opponent, but his main focus is on the game of tennis.

Because that is the real game played out there: two people are demonstrating to one another which is the better TENNIS player. Not which is a better human being! They are both playing this game called tennis, which has certain rules. And the better player of this game wins the match.

Winning the match doesn't mean that one player is better human than the other player. It means that he plays the game of TENNIS better than the other person does.

Imagine that your coach was feeding balls to you from the basket and you have certain targets to hit. You are not playing against your coach, but you are playing the game of tennis — aiming to hit this ball fast and precisely into that target.

It's almost the same when you play a match. Your opponent will send over the ball, and then you will show him how fast, how precisely and how tactically correctly you can hit the ball over.

In the long run, the one more skilled at doing this wins the match. That person is a better tennis player in that moment. That doesn't mean the winner is a more worthy person, even though that's what the whole world tries to tell us.

Now, what if I take Roger Federer and make him play baseball against minor league players? Would he be better than them? I'm sure that he wouldn't be! Is he less worthy now? Does that make him a lesser human being? No, it has nothing to do with his inner sense of worth.

Back to the secret: one of the main points about the secret of playing good tennis is to see it separate from you — from your inner self worth. If you can keep the distance between missing an easy shot and feeling anything about yourself, then you have found one of the secrets to good tennis.

The next secret is that you need to focus on the game of tennis. Play the game, not the opponent. Understand the basic tactical patterns — when to hit crosscourt, when to hit down the line, how to cover the court properly, where to serve and return, and so on.

These tennis "rules" must make 80% of your game against anyone. The other 20% of your tactics are adjustments to your opponent's weaknesses and strengths.

So that brings us to the third secret — how to play against a specific type of player, considering your tennis skills and the outer conditions. But that's only 20% of the whole game.

So, next time you get on court, see if you can play only the tennis game and not compete with your opponent. See if you can cut that connection between missing a shot and your inner worth.

The Tennis Strategy Encyclopedia will show you ways of playing the game of tennis and the ways of playing against your opponent. And of course there will be mental tips too since that's what usually tips the scales of a match in the crucial moments. But first you must get there . . .

1. TENNIS STRATEGY — THE WAY TO WINNING

When you progress in your tennis career, you quickly realize that there is more to tennis than just fancy technique. Actually, you realize that technique doesn't mean anything against experienced players. Some play all sorts of shots with sometimes awkward, sometimes funny movements. And yet they win matches. Others have great technique and can make you realize that you are a tennis greenhorn.

They are masters of tennis strategy. They know how to deal with any situation and know how much they can adapt their style of play so that they are still successful. They don't beat themselves, and if they lose, their opponent was really the better player.

What is their secret? First, they are clear on how they must play the game to be most successful. They know exactly what their style of game is, what their strengths are, what their weaknesses are, and how to make the best of both.

They also know what their opponent's preferred style of play is and how he is likely to play. They realize that even in the first few minutes of the warm up.

When an experienced player — a tennis master strategist — starts his warm up, he attentively watches and observes his opponent. He looks for weaknesses in technique, movement, weight transfer, reaction time, and overall tennis knowledge.

He makes mental notes about his opponent's strengths and tendencies, about the types of shots he prefers. He also observes mental characteristics — whether his opponent is nervous, too emotional, or quickly annoyed. How does he approach the match? Is he overconfident, respectful? Does he believe that he has a chance?

Yes, you can spot all these nuances with a good eye and lots of tennis experience in the first 5 minutes of the warm up. Much more information will come during the match, but an experienced tennis strategist already has a plan before the first point. His plan is based on his preferred tennis strategy and perceived opponents preferred strategy of play.

1.1. SO WHAT IS STRATEGY AND WHAT IS TACTICS?

Tennis strategy is one of the four main areas of the game — besides technique, physical preparation and mental game.

The broadest definition of tennis strategy is using your strengths, both natural and learned, against your opponent's weaknesses to gain the advantage and win more points.

Your game type is your strengths and your way of playing the game.

You can also view tennis strategy as an overall plan on how to play against a certain opponent on a specific court.

Tactics, on the other hand, are more detailed ways of achieving this general strategy. If your main strategy is aggressively playing from the baseline, your tactics to do that can vary. One player's tactics may be to use as many inside-out forehands as possible (like Jim Courier). Another player's tactics may be to hit the balls on the rise and put pressure on the opponent (like Andre Agassi). The same strategy (aggressive baseline play) but different tactics.

Tactical decisions are even smaller units in tennis strategy and tactics. These are actually the building blocks of a single point. Every time the ball comes over the net, you need to decide what to do with it. You will learn about tactical decisions at the end of this tennis strategy encyclopedia.

The game of tennis is not so much about who plays better: it's more about who executes his game better. If you watch one player, for example Robbie Ginepri, you'll see that his main strategic game is the same regardless of whom he plays. He makes but small adjustments to his game and only if he has to.

Don't fall into the trap of changing your game for your opponent. Play your game very well, and make your opponent adjust to you.

Don't fall into the trap of exploiting your opponent's weaknesses if you are not up to it. To do so, you'd probably have to change your favorite type of play. First take advantage of your strengths! Play your own game the best you can and only then adjust if you have to.

1.2. WHOM ARE YOU PLAYING AGAINST?

Since you are reading this book and have come so far then it's pretty accurate to say that you want to learn how to play tactically good tennis. But before you jump to conclusions and want to find out how to outplay your opponent you need to know something else.

You are not playing ONLY against your opponent. There are TWO more opponents that you must deal with. Tough, isn't it? You alone against three opponents.

Three opponents

1.2.1. *Tennis*

Surprised? Yes, the tennis game itself is actually the main opponent that you play against. Tennis is very demanding and challenging. If you have ever seen beginners play tennis (and remember how it was for you), then you know what I mean.

It is very demanding for the mind to calculate the ball's trajectory so quickly and send appropriate commands to the body, which must move with coordination and balance and precisely right timing to hit a little yellow moving ball while your racquet is moving as you are moving.

And even when you are a good player this game is still very challenging. You may be totally focused but still unable to hit the ball in the middle of the racquet most of the time.

So before you actually try to play your opponent, which in this case is your opponent Number 3 (yes, there is one more opponent before that — you'll see soon), you need to know how to play tennis strategically correctly so that you don't beat yourself.

These are the most typical ways of beating yourself:

- playing too many down-the-line shots
- not covering the court correctly at the baseline and at the net
- serving in the wrong directions
- going for too much
- not going for anything
- changing your decisions
- attacking in the wrong directions
- defending in the wrong directions
- and many more ...

The first part of the Tennis Strategy Encyclopedia will deal with tennis strategy and tactics regardless of your opponent (except playing to his weaker shot). You need to play tennis correctly before you upgrade your strategy to the next level, which is playing specifically to take advantage of your opponent's weaknesses and your own strengths.

1.2.2. *Yourself (negative you)*

It's just a part of yourself that you are playing against. We could say that it is that negative, doubtful, fearful, or angry you. Any emotional way of thinking is NOT in your best interest.

This part of yourself will stop you and will interfere with your game and your progress whenever you reach a critical situation in the match.

You may overreact to bad line calls and your game falls apart.

You may miss an "easy" sitter and lose focus for the next two games.

You may have a set point or a match point and not take advantage of it, quickly losing that set or match.

And there are many more situations and responses for each individual player.

This is another part of the tennis game. You can find answers and solutions for it in [The Mental Manual for Tennis Winners](#). In it you will learn how to:

- quickly refocus
- control your emotions
- think positively and not too much.

In my 20-year tennis career I recognized 29 situations that prove to be the most critical for players. The Manual is written with the player under emotional and mental stress in mind.

If you were ever coached during (or before) a match, you saw that your coach was not analyzing or explaining things to you. He gave you quick, simple and useful instructions on how to get back into your best tennis “mode”.

He also knew what to tell you when you were “down” or “too high” so that you were able to quickly find your ideal emotional state.

This is exactly how the information in the manual is presented. For each specific critical situation, you’ll find coaching tips that work for most players. And for those players who may find an occasional coaching tip not the best for them, the manual has special free space for writing down your own tips and ideas.

1.2.3. The opponent

Finally, when you know exactly how to play good tennis and you know how to control your mind and emotions to make them your best ally, you are ready to start playing against your opponent.

There are certain traps that many players fall into. The most common is changing your game too much. Players do this to play in a way that makes things difficult for their opponent. They may know the best way of dealing with that opponent, BUT their tennis skills are not good enough to be able to execute this tactic consistently and successfully.

The adjustment of your game needs to be within your current knowledge and tennis skills. The second part of The Tennis Strategy Encyclopedia deals with different strategies and tactics depending on your style of play and your opponent’s style of play.

1.3. MAKE YOUR MIND YOUR BEST ALLY

Here's why playing tennis can be very challenging unless you make your mind your best ally: you have to play against tennis, against your opponent and against the negative you!

To explain this graphically :

YOU	against	TENNIS OPPONENT NEGATIVE PART OF YOU	= 1:3
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And then you wonder why you lose? You have practically no chance of winning! That is, so long as you are playing against someone who is mentally a good player and is not damaging his game with his negative part.

The score is actually a little different and it is usually 3:3. That's because your opponent also has to deal with tennis and with his negative part too.

So it looks like this:

YOU TENNIS NEGATIVE HIM	against	OPPONENT TENNIS NEGATIVE YOU	= 3:3
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BUT, if you make your mind your best ally then the battle looks like this:

YOU (without negative part — every part of your mind is playing for you) TENNIS NEGATIVE HIM	against	OPPONENT TENNIS	= 3:2
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Now those are much better odds, aren't they? This is the way to winning. When your negative part doesn't exist and when most of your opponents still have it, you have the edge.

How does one make his mind his best ally?

The [Mental Manual for Tennis Winners \(http://www.tennismindgame.com/mental-tennis-tips.html\)](http://www.tennismindgame.com/mental-tennis-tips.html) shows you the way. But remember, there is a difference between knowing the path and WALKING the path.

The Tennis Strategy Encyclopedia will show you how to master the “TENNIS” part and the “OP-PONENT” part.

So let’s first learn how to play intelligent strategic tennis!

PART I

General Tennis Strategies and Tactics

The tennis game is based on certain rules. The court has certain dimensions, and the height of the net is different at different parts of the court. There are geometry laws that govern the tennis game in the same way as they do in mathematics.

And then there are players. We are humans and we cannot do some things perfectly or as fast as supercomputers. A tennis court is too big, and the balls fly too fast for a human being to have total control over them.

That's why playing excellent strategic tennis doesn't mean that one never misses. It means that the player chooses shots, combinations of shots and court coverage that give him the best PROBABILITY of winning the point in a certain situation.

2. 4 BASIC TENNIS LAWS

If you are just starting with tennis competition, or just want to refresh your knowledge of how to play points, then following these four basic tennis laws will give you the foundation to build on.

Tennis matches on all levels still have one common characteristic: there are more errors in the game than winners. Especially shots that one of the players cannot reach. I tracked these statistics in a match between Roger Federer and Jiri Novak in the Masters Championships a couple of years ago.

Only 4% of the shots were clean winners. This means that only every 25th shot was unreach-able, including service returns. (Aces didn't count, because I wanted to know how many winners they hit in exchanging regular shots.)

So the first and the most basic tennis law is...

2.1. DON'T MISS

Although I don't like negative instructions and could maybe say this as "hit inside," I wanted to point you to four ways (ok, maybe five) of missing the court.

You can lose a point by:

- hitting into the net (too low)
- hitting too long (too hard and/or too high)
- hitting too much to the left
- hitting too much to the right
- (you can also miss the ball completely)

So if you want to be a successful tennis player, you need to AVOID these mistakes. Here is another interesting tennis “law”:

You never (ok, almost never) hit what you aim at.
You may object and say, “But I aimed crosscourt and made it.”

Yes, but where EXACTLY were you aiming?

Most players don’t know exactly the point on the ground they aim at. Either they play by just hitting the ball, or they have a general sense of where they want to hit it.

Good players know exactly where they aim (especially on the serve), but it’s a rarity (or an accident) to really hit that spot.

If you put a ball as target somewhere on the court and then aim at it from the other side, you’ll notice a “spread” of hits around that target. And you probably never hit that ball even if you attempt to hit it for a couple of minutes.

Now imagine that you aim to hit a ball on the line. Where do the balls that are “spread” around your target land? Around 50% land inside the court, and around 50% land outside the court. A 50-50 risk is too big.

But if on the other hand you put your target in the middle of the court (on the service T), you’ll see that you rarely make a mistake. The downside is that your shot is too easy for your opponent, who can hit a winner from there or make you scramble to reach his return.

What you need to find is the best target area, so you can be very consistent and, at the same time, hit fairly difficult shots for your opponent.

When playing at the baseline, there are two main targets that you can aim for, which top ATP and WTA players use too. These are the spots in the middle of each half of the court behind the service line. In other words — if you divide the area behind the service line to the baseline in half and then find the middle point of each half that’s your target.

It is approximately 2 meters away from both the sideline and the baseline, and it’s a fairly safe target to aim for.

An interesting thing happens when you start aiming for that target. When you miss to the inside you play a deep shot almost down the middle, which is not a bad shot, but it doesn’t stretch your opponent.

When you almost hit the target, it’s a good deep shot to the side that makes your opponent move a little.

The best thing happens when you miss to the outside. That’s when your shot is really good — close to the sidelines, yet still in. You missed your target but hit your best shot.

This is how most professionals play — it's just that they don't tell you so. You don't really notice when their shots land close to the middle of the court. But when they hit the line you think they are so good they can do that intentionally.

Nope. They missed their safely chosen target more to the inside of the court, hitting the line instead.

Only in difficult situations when, for example, your opponent is at the net, do you need to take that risk and aim close to the line — either as a passing shot or a lob.

Now that you know where to aim in the court, you also need to stay away from the net. The same "spread" applies here: you (almost) never hit at the exact height you aim for.

When playing from the baseline, a good height to aim for is around 3-5 feet above the net.

If you combine this height target with the two court targets in the middle of each half court, you are automatically playing consistent — percentage – tennis, which also makes your opponent run whenever you miss your target to the outside.

And one more thing: this principle also applies to the serve. Serving is, on one hand, harder, because you have a smaller target to aim for; but, on the other hand, it's easier, because you are in control of the ball. Plus, it's moving much slower.

So, your first law of serving should be to hit the service court. That means you need to hit your serve with a good margin from the net, the service line, the sideline and the center line. Aim in the middle about 3 feet over the net with moderate speed. You'll find that safe serve with practice and experience.

2.2. PLAY MORE CROSSCOURT SHOTS THAN DOWN-THE-LINE SHOTS.

You've probably heard these suggestions many times, but let's quickly refresh your memory:

- The court is longer in the crosscourt direction than in the down-the-line direction.
- The net is 6 inches lower in the middle than at the posts.
- A crosscourt shot is more natural to play, since we swing in that direction. For example, right-handers stroke a forehand from right to left -- the same direction a crosscourt shot travels. So, a player has more control on a crosscourt shot than on a down-the-line shot.

These are the reasons for better control and higher percentage of your shots when playing cross court.

But there are two more important reasons why you should play more crosscourt:

First, you make your opponent run beyond the sideline. Let me explain: if you play your shot down the line, then it is almost impossible for your shot to cross the sideline (or the imaginary

extension of it behind the baseline). This means that your opponent stays within the sidelines.

But if you hit crosscourt (with a good enough angle), then your shot crosses the sideline, and your opponent must run wider to reach it. Which is good, right?

Another reason why it is better to play more crosscourt shots than down-the-line shots is included in the next general tennis strategy...

2.3. CORRECTLY COVER THE COURT

No, you won't cover the court with a blanket like they do in Wimbledon in case of rain. You need to cover the court with your movement and positioning so that you can reach as many of your opponent's shots as possible.

Too many players just return to the middle of the court after they hit a shot. But you need to position in the middle of all the ANGLES your opponent could return it at.

What does that mean?

Let's say that your opponent is playing from the forehand side of the court about 3 feet from his side line. If he plays down the line, his shot may end up near your backhand sideline, but it is still inside the sideline.

But if he hits crosscourt his shot will intersect the sideline on your forehand side, and you'll end up hitting from OUTSIDE the sideline.

To have the same chance of reaching both possible returns – the down-the-line one and the crosscourt one – you must position yourself midway between those two shots. That isn't the middle of the court: it's a little to the crosscourt side of center.

It's the middle of all possible angles of your opponent's return shots.

If this sounds too complicated, here is a quick recipe for where you should stand. Imagine that the center service line is extended to the baseline, dividing the court in two halves. When your opponent plays from the left side of the court (his forehand — for right-handers) you position on your RIGHT side of the court (your forehand — for right-handers).

How much to the right?

I'm sure there is a mathematical calculation, but probably no one who covers the court properly knows it. You need to find that distance by experience.

When learning, you may move too far to the side and be vulnerable to down-the-line shots. Then maybe you'll overcompensate and stay too close to the middle of the court, unable to reach good crosscourt shots.

Eventually you'll find the golden middle -- where to position yourself to have the best chance of getting to all the shots.

2.4. SECOND SERVE TO THE INSIDE OR TO THE WEAKER SHOT

A common scenario with beginner and intermediate players is this: they serve their first serve with full power, and if they miss they just push their second serve in.

Let's forget for a moment the first serve and focus on the second serve. Because if you miss your second serve it's an automatic point for your opponent, and if you serve it in the wrong direction it's an easy ball to attack.

Your primary goal when serving a second serve is not only "not to miss" but also to prevent your opponent from attacking. Don't be content with just "not missing" your second serve. You'll probably miss a second later when you are under attack.

You need to find out what is your opponent's weaker shot and direct your second serves there. You don't need to be super precise (depending on your level of play). You just need to direct the ball there. If you hit half of the service court on the side of the weaker shot you're on the right track.

If your opponent likes to move around and play his best shot, or if his weaker shot is good too, then you need to serve to the middle of the court — to the T.

This prevents your opponent from attacking with an angled shot, which can pull you out of the court. Remember — your second serve is a short ball inside the service box. Most players will be quite aggressive on that ball. And if they attack with a good angle, you are immediately in big trouble.

If you serve to the T, your opponent can still attack with full power, but it is very difficult for him to take you out of the court. You can observe this tactic on the women's WTA tour.

Most female players have a much better service return than second serve. So, most of them look to have a high percentage of good first serves. When they do have to hit a second serve, they serve down the middle to prevent their opponent from attacking with an angled shot.

And even though the returner expects the second serve down the middle it's still the best tactic to use if your second serve is not really good.

A quick recap of four basic tennis laws:

- Don't miss. (Positive-thinking version: Hit in!)
- Play more crosscourt than down the line.
- Correctly cover the court.
- Serve your second serve to the weaker side or to the inside of the court.

Remember, you are still learning to play tennis strategically without even considering your opponent (except where his weaker shot is). These and the next strategies are based on tennis scoring, rules, court geometry and biomechanics.

If you apply these four basic tennis laws (strategies) to your game, you'll see that the number of unforced errors decreases significantly. You'll also keep your opponent from attacking and forcing many errors from you.

Even though these four basic laws seem simple and "basic," I challenge you to watch a match on the ATP or WTA tour and see if you can "see" the application of these laws:

- Don't miss: Where do you think they aim their groundstrokes when they play from behind the baseline? How high over the net do they play? (If the camera shoots from high above the court you won't get the correct perception!)
- Play more crosscourt: The slower the surface the more crosscourt shots you'll notice.
- Covering the court: You'll be surprised to see where the players wait for the ball. They will be in the middle of the court only after they hit a shot down the middle (or when they are on defense and still running across the court).
- Second Serve: Notice which is the returner's weaker shot and how many second serves go to the T. There is a reason for that.

3. TENNIS STRATEGIES AND TACTICS

There are six general strategies that a player can apply to the tennis game that are effective regardless of your opponent's skills. You will apply them to five playing situations to find out 30 different combinations of playing the game.

Then you'll become familiar with tennis geometry and some laws (physics!) that show you which ways of hitting your shots and covering the court are most effective.

Let's start!

3.1. 6 GENERAL TENNIS STRATEGIES

These general tennis strategies are more advanced ways of playing the game yet they are still quite basic. They are effective regardless of:

- your level of play or your opponent's level of play
- your type of play or your opponent's type of play
- the court surface
- any other outside conditions like wind, light and so on.

These strategies are based on tennis rules and how they affect the scoring, the time and space demands of the tennis game, and the general difficulty of playing tennis successfully. Each of these strategies can be played separately or in combination with others, which is usually the case.

They are listed by the order of difficulty of implementing them.

1. Keep the ball in play (Tennis Law Number 1 from a different perspective)

This one still holds true for every level of play. If you put one more ball in the court than your opponent, you win the point. Maybe your opponent hit 10 good shots, but you hit 11 and then he misses. That makes you stroke-wise only 10% better, but you win 100% of the point. The whole one!

This is the favorite tactic of counter-punchers, whom you will meet later. They are tough players to beat if you are at roughly the same level. "Keeping the ball in play" means that you focus mostly on tennis and not on your opponent.

It means that when the ball comes over to your side your intention is not to win the point with your shot or to make it hard for your opponent to return: your aim is to keep the ball within tennis rules — above the net and inside the court. Good counter-punchers add the element of a deep shot to keep their opponent from hitting winners.

2. Make your opponent move

Everyone feels that it's easier to hit the ball back when you're standing still than when you're moving. Making your opponent run is the most basic strategy and one of the most effective ones. If your opponent is moving while hitting a moving ball with a moving racquet, he is surely more likely to miss or miss-hit.

The latter is the goal of ATP and WTA players, because when they play each other, they probably won't miss just because they are moving — they are used to that. But eventually they will fail to contact the ball in the center of the racquet strings. The resulting shot is shorter, because racquet strings are the most "bouncy" in the center. Therefore, when you miss the center (the sweet spot) the ball doesn't fly as fast (and far) as usual.

And when your opponent gets a shorter ball, he can use his strength to finish the point. Which is the next strategy.

3. Use your strengths

Your strengths can be many things.

They can be your strokes – a powerful forehand or serve, excellent volleys and net game, great drop-shots or low slices. Your opponent will then be under more pressure (time, space, mental) if you play your best shots most of the time. He'll have less time to cover more ground (space), and he'll be on defense (under mental pressure) most of the time. These things cause him to make more mistakes.

Your advantages can also be:

- your physical abilities — your power, speed, stamina, agility
- your mental abilities — perseverance, good concentration, mental toughness, good strategy and tactics (especially after you read this e-book)

4. Exploit your opponent's weaknesses

Most of the time we look to attack the weaker shot of the opponent. This can be his backhand, second serve, overhead, just to mention to most common ones.

It can also mean your opponent's physical abilities. Maybe he is slow, and you intentionally play more short crosscourt shots and drop-shots to make him run. Maybe he is not physically fit, and you intentionally play longer points to tire him.

Your opponent's weaknesses can also be mental, and they cause him to readily get emotional, negatively affecting his game. If you play someone like that, it's important to stay calm and let the tennis pressure affect your opponent without taking risks yourself at important stages of the match.

5. Gain court position

The closer you are to your opponent when you hit the ball, the less time he has to play it back. Even if you move just 3 feet closer (which reduces your opponent's reaction by just 1/10 of a second), it does make a difference in a fast game like tennis. That's because a ball can travel 4-to-8 feet in that time.

And, when you are closer to the net you can play sharper angles, making your opponent run much farther.

Getting in closer to the net also enables you to get to the net faster and play volleys at a more comfortable height.

6. Vary your game

If you haven't experienced this personally, then you are probably unaware how challenging it is to keep good timing and rhythm on balls that come to you in different ways. If you get one ball low with lots of slice, and then the next one comes high with topspin, it's hard to adapt so fast and hit a good clean consistent shot.

Another way of varying your game, besides varying your strokes, is to vary your tactics. You can mix up your serve placement — out wide, at the body, high with lots of kick, and so on. Or you can serve-and-volley occasionally, staying back on the next point.

This keeps your opponent in a constant state of uncertainty, so he cannot predict what your next move will be.

These six basic tennis strategies are then applied to five playing situations:

- serving
- returning
- both players on the baseline
- approach and playing at the net
- passing shot and lob.

Your goal is to identify which combination suits you best and then work on it until you master it. There are 30 different ways of applying these strategies; therefore, let's just take a few examples so that you understand this clearly.

Let's apply those six basic strategies to approaching and playing the net:

- Keep the ball in play: attack with intelligent speed (within your limits), and aim at least 3 feet from each line of the court.
- Make your opponent move: attack the net only when you have previously stretched your opponent wide in the doubles alley. Play volleys to the open court.
- Use your strengths: approach with a forehand down the line, not with your weaker backhand. Wait for the opportunity.
- Exploit your opponent's weaknesses: approach against his weaker side; play volleys to that side.
- Gain court position: take the ball at the top of its bounce when you approach the net; move in closer after your first volley.
- Vary your game: sometimes approach the net with slice and sometimes with topspin; play deep volleys and drop-volleys.

You can then do these combinations for the other areas of the game, and you will significantly expand your strategic expertise.

3.2. BASIC TENNIS TACTICS

These tactics are more specific types of strategies. You will recognize some of the general strategies in these tactics; some will even look the same. That's because the strategy is so simple that there aren't any different tactics to achieve that strategy.

Basic tennis tactics are used by beginners and by professionals. They establish the foundation of your tennis game. The goal of these tactics is mostly to play percentage tennis — to minimize the number of unforced errors, to cover the court correctly with the least amount of movement, and to deny your opponent easy shots that he can return for winners.

Advanced and expert tennis tactics will deal with more risky types of play. Remember, all these tactics still have nothing to do with how your opponent plays the game. They are general and work against most players. That's because all players are human and must move around the court, because the geometry of the court is the same in every situation, and because tennis requires moving and hitting the ball with consistency and precision.

We'll cover the basic tactics for serving, returning serve, baseline play, net play, passing shots and lobs.

3.2.1. Serving

a) First serve

Your first goal (especially if you are a beginner) is to make a high percentage of first serves. So, you need to find the right speed and trajectory, which you can hit fairly consistently.

This will take the pressure off your second serve and enable you to take control of the point with your next shot.

After you learn to control your serve with consistency, you can move to more advanced serving, which is the first basic strategy you can use against your opponent.

That strategy is to force a short return or an error. The easiest tactic to achieve this goal is to play at the opponent's weaker shot. If you get a short reply, you can immediately take control of the point.

DON'T serve to your opponent's better shot. He will neutralize your good serve, and you'll be equal from the baseline, even though you hit a good first serve. The only problem was that you hit it the wrong direction.

Variation: serve occasionally to the better side just to keep your opponent guessing and to keep him from getting comfortable with his weaker return. Often, if your opponent's weaker shot isn't really bad, he'll eventually get used to your serves and return them quite consistently.

b) Second serve

The first basic tactic is to make a very high percentage of your second serves - at least around 80%, even if you don't aim for anything special. Then you move on to the next tactic....

You should aim for the weaker side or the T, as mentioned in the general tennis strategies section. Serving to the weaker side gives you better odds of a short return, and serving to the T keeps your opponent from attacking with a sharp angle.

DON'T serve to the outside AND to the better side of your opponent. You'll just pick up the ball at the side fence after their return.

3.2.2. Returning Serve**a) On the first serve**

The most consistent way of returning is to play the shot in the direction of your follow-through. Your goal at this level is to get the ball in play deep on the other side. The direction of the follow-through (for the right-handers) means that if the ball:

- comes to your forehand on the deuce side - you return crosscourt
- comes to your backhand on the deuce side - you return down the line
- comes to your forehand on the ad side - you return down the line
- comes to your backhand on the ad side - you return crosscourt.

Important: even though you return crosscourt or down the line, you shouldn't aim at the sidelines. On the contrary, you should aim at the center of either half-court. The directions given above are just guidelines for which general direction to steer the ball.

Since your first serve is a fast ball, it's hard to return with good precision. You should aim for the center of the court obviously, but if you also return in the direction of your follow-through, then you'll be even more consistent.

DON'T return sharply angled first serves down the line. That's a low-percentage shot. Why? Because if you are just a split-second late (as often happens!), your point of contact is too far back, and your shot goes wide.

b) On the second serve

You want to attack your opponent, since you got a fairly soft ball short of the service line. If this second serve goes wide, see if you can get a sharp angle immediately. If it goes to the T, play it at a 90-degree angle to the net — down the middle. Don't go for too much: the server played the tactically correct shot, so you had better look for a chance to attack later in the rally. You can still be aggressive though, just to send the message of aggression to your opponent.

DON'T go for too much. It can be very tempting to blast such a short ball, but you need to stay within your limits.

3.2.3. Playing from the baseline

There are three categories of baseline play:

- attacking
- rallying (neutral)
- defending

Attacking

In attacking baseline play, you get a short ball and you hit it either hard, closer to the lines or both. On this basic level, you have two choices:

- Attack the open court: this is one of the first laws of tennis — deny your opponent time to set up for his shot and possibly hit a winner. “Attack the open court” means “play a faster or more precise shot to the area not well covered by your opponent.” He isn’t in the middle of all possible angles that you can play, so take advantage of that. Make him run!
- Attack the weaker shot: do this especially if your opponent has a distinctly weaker shot. Perhaps your opponent plays only sliced backhands that float quite high over the net. It is much better to attack this weaker shot — and possibly come to the net — even when he is standing there than it is to attack to the open court where his big forehand will frustrate you with great passing shots. (Think Pete Sampras. His running forehand was better than his non-running backhand [although his backhand was a good shot too]).

Rallying

When you and your opponent are both at the baseline and neither has an advantage, you have two objectives:

- to gain the advantage in the point
- to prevent your opponent from attacking.

At this basic level you are not looking for winners from the baseline. Your imagined targets should be:

- in the middle of the court depthwise, just beyond the service line — that’s achieving objective Number 2
- in the center of each side of your opponent’s court, again just beyond the service line. (See “Don’t miss” on page 5 for a detailed explanation.)

If you play shots with good pace and depth, aiming at those two targets, you will achieve both objectives at the same time. Your shots will keep your opponent from attacking because of their depth and because they make him move. In addition, occasionally one of your shots will be so close to your margins for error that it will be a very good shot that forces a short reply.

So, you can play:

- down the center
- crosscourt (most of the time)
- or to the weaker side of the opponent

DON'T aim close to the sideline from behind the baseline. Your "spread" at this distance is too big, so you will make too many unforced errors. Also, don't just passively keep the ball in play. Your shots must be aggressive, yet safe and consistent. So shoot for big targets with plenty of margin of error.

Defense

This tactic of defense applies when you and your opponent are both on the baseline, not when he is attacking the net. Your objective with a defensive shot is to (a) buy enough time to get back into the proper position on the court, so you can cover all the angles and (b) to prevent your opponent from further attacking.

To achieve that you must play deep crosscourt shots with enough height over the net — at least 5 feet. You can also defend with a sliced shot — usually on the backhand — playing it deep and low.

When you hit crosscourt, you are already on the side you must recover to – that is, to the position from which you can cover all the angles of your opponent's return shot. Also, when you hit crosscourt, your shot travels farther, thus giving you more time to recover to that ideal position for covering your court for his next shot.

DON'T defend down the line. You can't pull your opponent off the court with a down-the-line shot, but his return can be a crosscourt shot that pulls you off the court. Also DON'T defend with low fast shots unless you are counter-attacking. IF you hit a fast ball on defense, it will come back in the other corner before you make two steps in recovery.

Variation: you can also defend by hitting down the center. Doing so denies your opponent any angle of attack. Most players are not as good at attacking from the center as they are at attacking from near a sideline.

Playing at the net

The main objective when playing at the net is to deny your opponent recovery time so you can put the ball away. The most basic tactic of net play is to play the ball into the open side of your opponent's court.

It is also very important HOW you come to the net. You need to come behind a down-the-line shot you hit. Otherwise, you can't cover the net properly.

Notice that covering the net is exactly the opposite of covering the baseline. To cover the net,

you need to position on the SAME side of the court as your opponent. This means that if your opponent is (a right-hander) playing from his forehand corner, you need to be on the left side of the court (from your perspective) — just a little left of the center line.

Again, you need not know exactly how many feet or centimeters from the center. You will find that place with experience.

And when you play your volley to the open court, again aim for a big target. Even if your opponent reaches your volley, it will be very hard for him to play a controlled passing shot or lob, since he has so little time to prepare.

You will sometimes have to hit overheads when you play at the net. The overhead is potentially your fastest stroke. You need only aim it into the open court. Pick a big enough target.

DON'T aim too close to the lines. This goes for volleys as well as overheads. Remember that your opponent is under time pressure and positioning pressure. This means that you are in a much better position to finish the point than he is. He must take risks to win the point. So, you will most of these points — unless you too are taking risks and hitting many volleys and overheads into the net or out.

Also, don't come to the net behind a crosscourt approach shot. You won't be able to cover a down-the-line passing shot even if it is a poor one. And, when you run full speed to cover that down-the-line side, you are very vulnerable to getting wrong-footed by a crosscourt return behind you.

I attack with a crosscourt approach shot maybe 1 in 10 times, just for a little variety. And when I do, I know that I'm risking a lot.

Passing shot and lob

There are many ways of passing your opponent at the net – actually, there are many ways of winning the point. At the most basic level, you should pass crosscourt. Why? First, it is easier to impart good topspin to the ball, making it dip after it crosses the net. Even when your opponent gets to your shot, he will have to hit up, so you'll have a good chance of passing him on your next shot.

Moreover, if he wants to play to your open court, he will have to play that volley down the line. This means that he cannot pull you wide, so you have a much better chance of reaching the ball.

Also, for most players, volleying down the line is harder than volleying crosscourt.

DON'T try to aim low when lobbing your opponent. Your main goal is to play a high and deep lob. Play it flat and simple with no special rotations. Spinning lobs requires very good tennis skills and timing. Aim crosscourt, because the court is longer in that direction than down the line.

Just using these basic tennis tactics, and being disciplined in their use, will make you a very good tactical player. Indeed, most club players make tactical mistakes at this basic level. So, if you know how to take advantage of them, it's easy to win matches.

Although they are basic tennis tactics, they make you an advanced player if you stick with them. You will make few unforced errors, and you will make it hard for your opponent to beat you.

3.3. ADVANCED TENNIS TACTICS

Here the objective is a combination of playing smart percentage tennis and, at the same time, making it very difficult for your opponent. There will be some mental tricks and tips included, since they are an important ingredient of advanced tennis tactics.

They are advanced because you need special skills to execute them with good success. For example, advanced attacking tactics include sharp crosscourt topspin shots and drop-shots. So, you must be fairly consistent and skilled with those two completely different strokes to use them to good effect.

One more important point: the conventional old school of tennis taught that the player first needed to perfect his strokes; only thereafter was he taught how to play tactically good tennis.

The modern teaching method combines tactics and technique in the so-called "game based" approach. Technique is actually a consequence of tactical demands. For example, the tactical demand is to play a short crosscourt shot, and when the player practices this shot he DEVELOPS a topspin stroke. This is called "Form Following Function."

So, if you want to improve your strokes and your tactical play, don't first focus too long only on your strokes. When you practice, just pick one of the tactics and work on it. Your strokes will adapt and change to become most effective in executing that tactic.

Before you learn how to play at 5 basic playing situations (serving, returning, both at the baseline, playing at the net and passing shot and lob), you can begin your tactical planning even before the match. If you have the chance to scout your opponent in his previous match, then here are some pointers to help you prepare a plan:

- What are his weaknesses? Check his strokes, his movement, what style of play he avoids (e.g., Does he never play at the net?).
- What are his strengths? Consider his strokes, type of play, and mental strength.
- What kind of player is he? That is, which of the four typical game types does he have?
- How does he respond to pressure and how does he play under pressure? (For example, some players like to serve and volley, whereas other back off even farther behind the baseline and wait for you to make a mistake.)

When you decide what kind of play would be best against your opponent, you must first be honest with yourself and know whether you are skilled enough to actually execute the plan with consistency. If not, you need to take off the table all the options that you are not good enough at. Stick with your tennis game and adjust it just slightly.

Another view to consider is that you should try to make your tennis so good that other players must change their game to competently play against you.

These advanced tactics will help you play effectively against most types of players:

3.3.1. Serving

a) First serve

At the advanced level you still look to play to your opponent's weaker side most of the time. But one of your main objectives is to be unpredictable. When your opponent is predicting with good success where you will serve, then he already moves or at least leans in the direction of your serve. He is ready mentally and physically to play a certain shot. The return is pre-programmed in his mind and body. And when the ball actually flies in that direction he can execute that return with good consistency.

But when you keep your opponent guessing, he can't pre-program his mind and body for a specific type of return. He needs to see the ball first. Only then can he start programming his return. This makes him a little slower.

How can you make your serve unpredictable?

- Change direction, but still hit most first serves to the weaker side.
- Change spins — serve flat, with topspin, with twist or with slice.
- Change the speed of your first serve just a little, even when you're serving at your best. This makes timing the ball very difficult for your opponent.

An excellent but often overlooked serve is the one aimed right at the receiver's body. In fact, in my personal experience, I have discovered that, if your service speed is below 160 km/h or 100 mph, then it is best to serve mostly "at the body."

The reason for this is that if you serve wide of the player below that speed, he has just enough time for a good swing at the ball, AND the ball is usually at just right distance from him. Hence he correctly transfers his weight into the shot.

But if you serve at his body, he can't swing freely, and he shifts his weight away from the ball. Most players are poorly balanced when they hit like that. The result is usually a returned ball, but as a short shot without pace.

The final variation that you can use on your first serve is the serve-and-volley combination. If your opponent starts finding a good rhythm on the return but returns safely with a deep high return, you can start coming in and intercepting those safe returns.

You'll make your opponent hit with more risk and thus make more errors. Just find the right mix of staying back after the serve and serve-and-volley approaches to keep him guessing.

DON'T blast first serves with full power. This drops your percentage of good first serves too much. It's better to serve at 80% or 90% of your top speed and have a significantly better percentage. Though you may not hit as many aces, you'll probably get just short returns that you can immediately attack.

b) Second serve

The serve is obviously a short ball into the service court, so it gives the receiver a chance to attack. Therefore, you still need to serve to his weaker side. You also need to serve to the T most times, to keep him from attacking with an angle.

What you can add with advanced tactics is keeping your second serve unpredictable. Don't mix it too much though. You may be losing too many points when serving wide or to your opponent's stronger side.

Serve to his better side or at his body when you see that he is reading your serve with good success and that he striking the ball cleanly on most returns, even though you're serving to his weaker side.

DON'T be too predictable with your second serve or too cautious. The best mental attitude to have on the second serve is decisiveness.

3.3.2. Returning serve

a) Returning first serves

Returning in the direction of your follow-through and close to the middle works at all levels. But sometimes you cannot really get into a good returning mode. Here's what you can do:

- Stay far behind the baseline so that you have more time to return. In this case, you have to aim the ball higher for good depth. It also gives you enough time to recover if the serve was wide.
- Always move toward the ball even if it's coming really fast. You may need to shorten your swing or just block it back, but move your weight forward.
- This is a psychological tip that usually works: if your opponent is successful with big serves when you return from your usual position behind the baseline, step inside the court and try to return from there. Most servers react by really trying to blast the ball at you, and usually they lose their rhythm and concentration. Their percentage drops. Then you can move back to your original position for better chance of consistent returning.

DON'T fall to temptation to hit the ball back hard. That is the recipe for disaster. Start your body turn very early, and keep the racquet speed low and steady. The serve is not as fast as it seems.

When you try to hit the ball back hard, you need to hurry your movements, and that makes you feel as though there isn't enough time, that the serve is extremely fast. But when you slow your movement, you have enough time to execute the stroke, and then the serve seems much slower. Try it.

b) Returning second serves

Stick with the basic tactic of opening up the court when your opponent serves wide. The more advanced tactics of returning a second serve are:

- Attack down the line, especially if that shot goes to your opponent's weaker side. Keep him guessing where you will go with the return.
- Change your returning position (if you are skilled enough) and sometimes return from inside the court, sometimes from your usual position, and sometimes from deep behind the baseline. This makes it hard for your opponent to time his split step, so he can be wrong-footed. He can't react quickly to your returns, especially if they are unpredictable.

DON'T be aggressive without precision! At the advanced and expert level, it is much more effective to be precise than to hit hard. Why? Because when you play against a good player, he isn't really troubled by your hard-hit shot. On the contrary, he uses the speed of the incoming ball and spends less energy to hit it back equally fast.

But when you hit with precision close to the line (DON'T aim for the line; aim 2-to-3 feet inside it), your opponent must stretch and run. That makes it much harder for him to play the ball back with consistency, speed, and precision.

3.3.3. Playing from the baseline

Basic tennis tactics are again the foundation of your game. Advanced tactics are a smaller but very effective part of it though, a part that challenge your opponent's fitness, tactical knowledge and mental toughness.

Attacking

- Attack down the line: A chance to do so usually comes after a crosscourt rally till your opponent sends you a shorter ball. The difference between the attack to the open court and this one is that this time your opponent is covering the court properly but you nonetheless have a chance to attack. Why do you choose to hit down the line? Because the ball travels a shorter distance and thus lands in your opponent's court sooner. –So, he has less time to set up. Also, you can follow a down-the-line shot to the net, since your net position will be correct for covering the net. Important: when you attack down the line, it's best to play the ball perpendicular to the net, at a 90-degree angle.

DON'T attack down the line and angle your shot too close to the sideline. If you are just a split second late (and you will be sometimes), your shot will go wide. If you aim at a 90-degree angle to the net and are late, there is a good chance that you'll make the shot.

- Look to hit angled crosscourt shots that can either pull your opponent out of the court or immediately win the point
- Try to wrong-foot your opponent: aim behind him while he recovers toward the center. Don't overdo this tactic though. If your opponent anticipates it, he'll just wait over by the sideline and quickly move from defense to attack. This tactic works best if you take the ball just a little earlier than usual, because then your opponent probably won't time his split step to come at the right moment. As a result, you hit that ball while he is in the air, so he's late making his move to reverse direction.
- Play a drop-shot. The best situation is when you are inside the court and your opponent is behind the baseline. One of the most important points about the drop-shot is that it should be disguised and unpredictable.

DON'T attack too soon. Be patient and wait for your opportunity. Play the "rally" part of the point until your opponent hits a short ball. As a rule, attack only when you are standing on the baseline or inside the court.

Rallying

Just to refresh your memory: The basic tactic in rallying from the baseline is to play mostly down the center, crosscourt beyond the service line, or at the weaker side. On a more advanced level, you can try playing straight down the center with a different intention. Here's why this can work well: your opponent may be tempted to attack and since he has no good angle of attack from the center, he may go for too much and make an unforced error.

But if he's smarter, he just plays an average crosscourt shot to one of your sides. You probably won't have trouble reaching this ball, and you will now have a very good angle of attack open to you.

This tactic works very well against better players. They can play angles and down-the-line shots better than you, so you must avoid those situations. Play down the center and let them open up the court first with an angled shot – which you can attack with an even better angle or a down-the-line shot. Then they are on the defense, making it much harder for them to outplay you.

Another good universal tactic is to play into the open court. Thus you keep your opponent moving. This is, of course, one of the general tennis strategies at all levels. A player on the move cannot time and hit the ball as cleanly as when he can set himself to hit it.

DON'T be too passive. This is a common tendency. Many players get into a "rally mode," in which they just play back deep shots without any special intention. This style of play is somewhat good for keeping your opponent from attacking, but it rarely forces a short ball. Your opponent always has the time to set up for his shot and therefore can play very consistently.

So be aggressive even when you are rallying. A good point to remember is: Big shot — big target. Play aggressive baseline shots but at a big target — away from the sidelines. When you then miss your target (remember the “spread”?) a little wide, you have just hit a nice shot.

Defending

Deep crosscourt shots are still the basis of good defense. On an advanced level you can add an occasional moon ball, which gives you extra time to return to the middle. You can even defend down the line with this shot, especially if it goes to the much weaker side of your opponent.

Also defend with slice. Slice usually helps your backhand more than your forehand, so use slice mostly for backhands. But slicing your forehand when fully stretched works really well, too. Even if the shot isn't very low or fast, if you keep the ball deep, your defense will be a solid one.

When you have no other way of defending, move farther behind the baseline to buy yourself time. But be alert for the next opportunity to move into a neutral position on the court. What is that opportunity? It's the next short ball your opponent sends you.

DON'T defend too passively and just for one ball. If you defend against just that one difficult shot, your main goal will be to “survive” the attack. That results in a very safe shot in the middle of the court. Guess what happens next? You are again under attack and this time you have even less chance!

So when you defend, always think ahead; you need to defend against current shot AND prevent your opponent from attacking you again with his return.

Playing at the net

Advanced play at the net is similar to advanced play from the baseline. You can try to play behind your opponent and try to wrongfoot him. The drop-volley is another very effective tactic, but be careful with this one. Play it only when you have enough time to really set up well for playing a drop-volley. Attempting a drop-volley when stretched or running usually means trouble. Either you miss or your opponent gets an easy sitter close to the net.

The same goes for your overhead: you can try to wrongfoot your opponent.

If you happen to play the smash close to the net and a little to one side, you have a very good angle to hit the ball beyond your opponent's reach. You needn't hit it hard, because you have much success even when your opponent reaches that ball, since he is way out of the court. Observe this tactic in doubles where this situation happens more frequently.

DON'T go for too much speed on the volley. This is an unnecessary risk. A good firm volley behind your opponent poses enough problems for him. Moreover, you'll close in on the net for his next attempt, which gives you an even greater advantage in the point.

Passing shot and lob

The advanced method of passing is, of course, using both your down-the-line and crosscourt options - whichever first comes to mind. Don't change your decision once you commit to one direction.

DON'T hit the ball with full power. You risk too much that way, and fast shots don't dip as they cross the net. For an advanced or expert player, your dipping shot is harder to volley than your fastest one. Your goal on a passing shot is to put a lot of spin on it or to make it dip below the net level with little pace. That keeps your opponent from playing a good volley even when he gets to the ball. He must volley upwards, so you will probably get another chance at a passing shot.

Advanced lobbing is playing your lob crosscourt where the court is longer or over your opponent's backhand side. Most players do not have an effective backhand smash, and you'll either force an error or get a short ball.

A good player quickly moves sideways to play a lob to their backhand with their forehand smash. But that is a very challenging move because of the awkward footwork it requires. So, it's still very difficult for him to play a really good overhead in that situation.

If he still consistently manages to hit a good smash, then don't lob anymore.

And remember that, when you are really in trouble and out of the court and must lob, hit a stratospheric lob. It's very difficult for your opponent to smash in the air, because the ball accelerates to a high speed downwards. And if he lets it bounce before smashing it, he will be quite far from the net, which makes his next shot difficult.

These advanced tennis tactics combined with basic tennis tactics make one an excellent tactical tennis player. He takes advantage of opponents' weaknesses, plays good consistent percentage tennis, and plays in ways that are difficult to overcome.

3.4. EXPERT TENNIS TACTICS

These tactical ways of playing the game are for very skilled players. They demand expert tennis skills that are consistent and effective. They are useful for players above 4,5 NTRP. If you are not yet at that level, you can still use these tactics to master them. But you may make too many mistakes to be really successful with them in match play.

However, playing and practicing these tactics, regardless of whether you win or lose the point, is the best way to master them. There are no more DON'T's in the expert tactics, because all the major mistakes were already covered in the basic and advanced tactics. Now you just have to upgrade your tennis IQ to the top level.

3.4.1. Serving

1. *First serve*

Unless your serve is like Andy Roddick's, the best way to make your first serve really effective is to be unpredictable.

1.1.

You can win the first psychological and tactical battle in your first point. Most players expect you to serve to their weaker shot usually the backhand. Serve to the forehand.

This immediately signals to them that they made their first predicting mistake. You win the first battle of intelligence.

1.2.

Unless you feel extremely well on your serve, hit with 80 percent of your normal speed in the first game. That way you will find your rhythm, you won't force your serve too much, and you will get a high percentage of serves in. You'll also hit fewer second serves, which can be affected by your starting nerves and produce a double fault.

1.3.

Hide where you will serve. This means that, even though it is easier to hit a slice serve when you toss the ball a little to the right, try to slice your serve from a normal toss.

1.4.

Disguise your serve. Toss the ball very obviously out to the right, as if you are going to hit a slice serve, and then hit flat down the middle. With some practice, you can do it. It works wonders. You not only trick your opponent, you do something even more important: you show him that you are intentionally tricking him. Thus, you show him that you are outsmarting him. Another psychological victory for you.

1.5.

Change your rhythm. One of the rare players who does this is Andre Agassi. He has his typical rhythm on his serve, but occasionally he throws a serve quickly, from a much lower toss. This makes timing the split step very difficult for your opponent, and it again shows him that you are intentionally trying to outsmart him.

1.6.

Serve from the sideline, and aim wide. This is another tactic Andre used to play on clay courts. You serve from the very corner of the singles court and aim very wide to the outside of the service box. With practice, you'll be able to hit at a sharper angle than most opponents think possible. They adjust their position by only a foot or two, which isn't nearly enough to cover the angle you can serve at. Even when they do reach that ball, they usually risk too much with a very difficult down-the-line winner or just push the ball back so you can easily play into the open court. Use this serve rarely so that your opponent doesn't get used to it. Use it on some big points and see what happens.

1.7.

This is the most annoying serve of all (to return of course): on the deuce side, slice a serve down the center, aiming at the receiver's left hip or a little to the right of it. Put a lot of slice on the ball so that it curves into his body. The returner sees the ball coming to his backhand and he prepares his swing – for a backhand. What he doesn't see at first is that the ball is heavily side-spinning and curving toward his body. More and more as it approaches. He gets jammed by his own stroke as he tries to move toward the outside of the court to play the shot with his backhand. This almost always draws a poor return or error. I follow this serve to the net to confront the receiver with an additional problem. If he realizes after a couple of these points that it was all intentional, not just luck, then you score another psychological victory.

1.8.

This is a mental battle tactic I learned from watching Boris Becker. If, for example, he hit a first serve to his opponent's forehand and got a winning return back, he almost inevitably served AGAIN to the forehand. Why? If he served the next point to the backhand, the returner would win the psychological mini-battle by scaring Boris away from that forehand. So, Boris showed his opponent that he was not intimidated by that return. Also, hitting a winning return of a good first serve is improbable. So, Boris usually won the second point and immediately tipped the psychological scales back in his favor. He was now the one who demonstrated whose shot was better.

1.9.

And since we are revisiting the 1980's, let's not forget the favorite tactic of Stefan Edberg. He used a heavy kick serve that jumped really high. It allowed Stefan to come really close to the net, because this serve eats a lot of time and makes the returner play the ball downward, which is very challenging. If the return didn't go down steeply enough, Stefan had an easy volley; and if the return went down too steeply, it ended in the net.

2. Second serve

Some expert tactics for the second serve are the same as for the first serve:

2.1.

Be unpredictable, especially on big points where your opponent may decide before the serve that he will move around his backhand and attack with the forehand.

2.2.

Change speed, placement and spin with topspin (kick) or slice serves.

2.3.

Sometimes follow your second serve for a volley, especially with the delayed approach already mentioned in the advanced approach to the net (page 19). This tactic again shows your opponent that you are thinking, that you are unpredictable, and that you have guts. This signals many psychological strengths.

2.4.

This tactic is similar to the most annoying serve mentioned in 1.8 — Expert First Serve Tactics: you can use the kick serve to the ad court to the same effect. You hit a second topspin kick serve to your opponent's forehand. Aim at his right hip, not straight down the center. He will see the serve coming to his forehand and prepare for a return. But then the ball will kick more and more toward him and he'll have to move away (toward the outside of the court) to hit it back. It will be hard for him to return effectively, and his moving to the outside of the court delays his recovery to the middle for a few tenths of a second. This is lots of time at this expert level. (If the ball is flying at a typical expert groundstroke speed of 30 mph, then it travels around 4 feet in 1/10 of a second!)

2.5.

Disguise your serve, especially when serving to the ad court. Usually you serve with a lot of topspin out wide to your opponent's backhand. And you usually toss the ball behind your back to get a good spin and kick on the ball. So occasionally toss the ball exactly the same (behind you), which your opponent reads as a serve out wide. At the last moment of the service motion, change the direction to serve down the line. It isn't as difficult as it sounds. You just need some practice, and the effect is great. You win the point, and you outsmart your opponent, which is another psychological victory for you.

2.6.

Hit your second serve the same as your first serve. This is, of course, very risky. But doing this sends all sorts of messages across the net. Use it when you feel really comfortable on your serve and usually at 40:0. Winning that game in such a way gives most opponents a very bad feeling. They feel helpless, and this feeling is totally self destructive. You just need to evoke it in your opponents — but this is another topic — the psychological warfare in tennis.

3.4.2. Returning Serve

1. Returning the first serve

Return against serve-and-volley play

Again, hit most returns down the middle and in the direction of your follow-through. Here are other expert ways of returning the first serve:

1.1. Blocking the ball back: use the blocked return when you face really fast first serves. You don't have the time for a proper swing, and even if you did, it would be very hard to control the ball. Always move forward if you can, and focus on seeing the ball well. One option is to block the ball but play it up, almost like a moon ball. This way the ball loses a lot of its speed and lands deep in your opponent's court. He can dictate the play on his next shot, but at least you survived the big serve.

1.2.

Using a short slice: chip to control your return. Use this type of return when your opponent serves fast and unpredictably AND you have trouble changing your grip fast enough. Decide before the serve that you will slice the ball back from either side, and hold a continental (i.e., volleying) grip. You won't have to change this grip, and your swing will be almost the same as for playing a volley. You can even dink the ball low to the feet of the server if he is coming to the net.

1.3.

If you play against a serve-and-volleyer, you can either return aggressively (mostly crosscourt) or try to take the pace off the ball and play it low to the feet of your opponent. Step more inside the court, and shorten your backswing. Look for a winning pass on the second ball — half volley or a volley from your opponent.

1.4.

If your timing is good that day, you can try to be aggressive on wide serves, which you can drive back deep crosscourt. A down-the-line return is a risky shot even when you're on. That is, of course, if the first serve is fast. When you return crosscourt you hit over the lowest part of the net, over the longest distance within bounds, and in the direction of your follow-through. These factors somewhat lessen the risk in hitting a fast serve hard.

2. Returning the second serve

Even at the expert level, your goal should either be to open up the court with a good crosscourt return or (if the serve goes to the T) to attack down the line. Yet here are more ways of expert returning:

2.1.

If the serve is wide and not too fast, return it crosscourt at an extremely sharp angle. This is a short shot short (like a passing shot inside the service court). Angle is the key, not speed. You can drive your opponent wide of the alley if you hit a good shot.

2.2.

Chip-and-charge: if you are a skilled volleyer, chip your return (with a short, sliced stroke) down the line and close in on the net. Even if you lose the point, every time you attack the second serve like this, you put pressure on your opponent's subsequent second serves, making him more likely to double fault.

2.3.

Drop-shot the return: use this return after you have hit quite a few returns deep and hard before that. Your opponent expects a fast return and moves back as soon as he serves. If you step in and play a drop-shot, his weight will be moving backward and you'll probably win the point.

2.4.

Run around your backhand and attack with your big forehand — only if you have a good forehand, of course. The danger is that when you run around your backhand on the ad side you take

yourself out of the court, so you really need to go for a good shot. But when you return from the deuce side, running around your backhand brings you to the center of the court, which is great. You also pressure your opponent's second serve this way, because he knows in advance that his second serve will be attacked. Double faults may follow....

3.4.3. Playing from the baseline

There are a few more expert tactics when you play from the baseline...

1. **Attacking**

In the basic tactics we covered attacking down the line. In the advanced tactics, we covered attacking with crosscourt openers, wrongfooting shots, and drop-shots. So there is only one more typical attacking tactic:

1.1.

Dominate with your forehand. There have been many Number 1 players in the world who adopted this tactic: Ivan Lendl, Steffi Graf, Jim Courier, Andre Agassi and many other great players.

To dominate with your forehand, you cover three-quarters of your court with it. Actually, the best forehand attackers liked to "camp" a little to the backhand side of center and make their opponents run all over the court.

You'll often have to move quickly to your backhand side to play your forehand. And that you'll often hit forehands from your backhand corner to your opponent's backhand corner.

One interesting thing that the coaches and players discovered by playing and practicing forehands from the backhand corner is that this shot is very difficult to read. The player sets up for the shot exactly the same way as when preparing to hit it down the line. He just contacts the ball a little more in front when he plays down the line.

1.2.

Attack with heavy slice: this type of attack is basically an attack down the line but is very effective on fast surfaces like grass and fast indoor courts. The ball stays very low and bounces very fast. The defending player has a hard time getting behind and under the ball. Even when he does, he plays the ball upward, which makes it easier to attack with either a groundstroke or a volley.

If you are an expert, you can also add disguise and faking to all these attacking tactics. For example, you can set up for a forehand the same way regardless of whether you play a down-the-line shot or a crosscourt shot.

Or you can trick your opponent by preparing for a shot in one way — say, with a sideways stance as if for a down-the-line shot — and then play crosscourt by just using a little more forward point of contact.

But remember that these faking and disguising tactics can work against you unless you master them. To do these things you go a little against your most comfortable position. You actually fight your body a little, and this can produce some unforced errors.

Of course, if you want to master these tricks you'll HAVE to go through that error-prone learning period before you get good at them.

2. Rallying

Expert rallying from the baseline has no more options when choosing the direction of your shots, but you can add much variety to your rally game:

- different heights over the net
- different spins — topspin, slice, flat
- different speeds of the ball.

Imagine playing balls back so that the first one is a fast, low, flat one; the second is a medium-paced, middle-height topspin shot that kicks up from the court; and the third is a low, sliced, floating backhand shot. This variety of spins, heights and speeds combined with different directions makes it difficult to rally with an expert player.

3. Defending

When you need to defend well, then the basic and advanced tactics cover all your defensive options except one:

3.1.

Defend with a short but low slice: This shot keeps your opponent from hitting the ball hard. Two reasons. First, he hits from inside the court, so his shot must be shorter than usual to stay within bounds. Second, he hits a ball below net height, so he must hit upward.

But you can also counter-attack from the defense:

3.2.

Either attack with a fast crosscourt shot (the favorite tactic of Pete Sampras) or with a down-the-line winner. For both options, to reach the ball comfortably so that you have a good chance to succeed with this risky counterattack, you must decide early.

3.3.

Defend with a drop-shot: Martina Hingis used this tactic very successfully. When you are stretched out and in a defensive position, your typical goal is to hit the ball as deep as possible, and your opponent expects that.

When you play a drop-shot on the defense you hurt your opponent two ways. First, you surprise him, so he may react late to your shot. Second, you make him have to hit the ball upward, and this gives you time to reach his return more comfortably. Moreover, if you have lured to the net someone who isn't very skilled there, you are now in a much more favorable position.

4. Playing at the net

There are three more ways of attacking the net at the expert level:

4.1.

Play the first volley or the approach shot down the center. Doing so denies your opponent good passing angles, so the most dangerous shot from this position is the lob. John McEnroe, Henri Leconte and Patrick Rafter often used the down-the-center approach either with a ground-stroke or with the first volley.

4.2.

Play a drive volley: The occasion for doing this usually comes when you stretch your opponent with a good crosscourt shot and he defends with a moon ball to buy himself time to recover.

You take advantage of the situation by moving forward to volley his shot, but you usually meet the ball behind the service line. You can then play it with a drive — a topspin volley to the open court.

Since you swing at this volley (rather than just “punch” it), it is a much faster shot than a conventional volley. Andre Agassi originated the drive volley, and it is now a must shot for every advanced player, especially in women's tennis where players often defend with a high, loopy moon ball.

4.3.

An advanced way of approaching the net is a delayed approach. To trick your opponent into giving you the kind of return you want, you don't immediately approach the net after your shot, so that your opponent doesn't know you are coming in. When he commits to playing his shot, you move in and intercept the ball for a volley.

This also works well in approaching the net after a serve. Just delay your approach for a split second so that your opponent thinks you are staying back and commits to a return. His goal will be to play a deep shot, which means that it will probably have a nice height over the net — just what you want. You can then quickly move in for the volley.

Just one more thing — you will rarely be able to hit that ball for a winner since you'll have to play it from around the service line as your first volley. But you will surprise your opponent and put pressure on his next shot, for which you will be much closer to the net.

There is one more useful trick, one you can use when playing the overhead. You need to prepare and turn with your body sideways to your right side (opponents's left — for the right handers) and it will be very obvious where you will play the smash. Then at the last moment when

you are rotating the shoulders and your body to hit the ball — just turn a little more and hit the ball a split second earlier.

That way you'll actually smash the ball to your left and you will lure your opponent to your left because of your body position. Another psychological win for you.

5. Passing shot and lob

In the basic and advanced tennis tactics, we've covered the directions for passing shots and lobs — crosscourt and down the line.

However, you needn't always try to "pass" your opponent. You can also play down the middle to his feet. Use heavy topspin to make the ball dip as it crosses the net. Your opponent has no good angle to play from center and must hit the return upward. Or you can just hit the ball down the center really hard. Your shot probably won't be low, but, again, your opponent has no good angle to play from the center. Moreover, it's hard to play a good volley when the ball is coming right at you.

You can also disguise your passing shot the same way you'd disguise an overhead. Prepare as you do to hit down the line. Put on a good act by making it obvious that you're positioning your body to play down the line. Then just hit the ball a little sooner, more in front of you.

Doing so automatically turns you into the correct position for hitting the ball crosscourt. It's much harder to do this the other way — to position as if to play crosscourt and make contact a little late to hit down the line instead.

If your opponent played a volley or an approach shot that lets you set up really well with plenty of time, delay your passing shot for a split second while being aware of which way your opponent moves.

Most players get used to your typical timing and move in the direction they think you're going hit at the instant they expect you to make contact. If you delay your passing shot just a little bit, you can spot which way they move and aim the other way.

But be careful — this is really top-class tennis, because you aren't concentrating exclusively on the ball. You must be a veteran tennis expert to hit the ball consistently and precisely even while paying attention to your opponent's movement in the background.

Expert lobbing tactics use an aggressive, topspin lob aimed crosscourt (where the court is longer) or over your opponent's backhand side.

3.5. REVIEW OF BASIC, ADVANCED AND EXPERT TENNIS TACTICS

Playing situation	BASIC	ADVANCED	EXPERT
Serving			
Serving 1 st serve	Hit the court consistently At the weaker side	Be unpredictable – better side In the body Change speed Serve & volley	First point to the better shot Disguise Change rhythm of your motion From the side to wide Slice to the body Back to the good return Top spin kick + volley
Serving 2 nd serve	Be consistent – don't give free points Weaker side or at the T	Unpredictable (better side) In the body Decisive	Unpredictable on big points Change speed, spin Serve and volley Kick to the body Disguise Serve as your 1 st
Returning			
Serving 1 st serve	In the direction of the follow through close to the middle	Other direction (not in the follow through) Stay further back Move toward the ball Stand inside the court	Block Short slice – chop Aggressively + cross court Dink at the feet
Serving 2 nd serve	On wide serves – open up the court with a cross court On middle serves – 90 degree – to the middle	Attack down the line Change your returning position	Extreme cross court Chip & charge Drop shot return Run around and attack with forehand
Playing from the baseline			
Attacking	Open court (make him run) Weaker side	Down the line (after a cross court rally) Sharp cross court Wrong footing shots Drop shot	Dominate with your forehand Disguise or fake Attack with heavy slice
Rallying	Down the middle Cross court over the service line Weaker side	Down the middle – different intention To the open court (make him run)	Add variety – change speed, spin, height
Defending	Deep cross court OR down the middle	Moon ball Slice Far behind the baseline	Low and short slice Counter attack – cross court or down the line, drop shot
Playing at the net			
Volley	To the open court	Wrong foot Drop volley Serve & volley	Down the middle Delayed approach Drive volley
Overhead	To the open court	Wrong foot Sharp angle	Disguise – from backhand to forehand side
Passing shot and lob			
Passing shot	Cross court	Down the line	Middle hard or to the feet with top spin Disguise
Lob	High and deep	Cross court or over the backhand side Stratospheric lob	Top spin cross court or backhand side

One of the most important lessons about these three types of tennis tactics is that basic tennis tactics are NOT for beginners only. On the contrary, the best tennis players in the world base their game on these basic tennis tactics.

To illustrate this point I have made a detailed statistical analysis of the 2005 US Open final between Andre Agassi and Roger Federer. They are great champions and experts in tennis strategy. How do they play? Are they using the basic ways of playing the game?

In the table below, you'll see the percentages of tactics played, based on this system of basic, advanced, and expert tactics.

Some of these tactics will not be used at all. That's because they may be written as a next level for someone at the beginning stage. For example — basic tennis tactics is to return the ball crosscourt after a wide serve. And advanced tennis tactics is to move towards the ball. Andre and Roger both move towards the ball but I still count that as a basic tactic.

The numbers are percentages, except for volleys, overheads, passing shots and lobs, where the numbers are the actual number of shots played. There are but a few instances in which too few shots were played to calculate a reliable percentage (e.g., when only 2 or 5 shots were played).

The numbers in percentages give the most accurate picture of player decisions, because they represent many shots. For example Federer and Agassi played more than 170 rally shots and, based on this system, used basic tactics 91% of time.

Here is the detailed analysis of their match — the 2005 US Open final between Roger Federer and Andre Agassi, which Roger won 3:1 (6:3, 2:6, 7:6, 6:1).

Playing situation	BASIC	ADVANCED	EXPERT
Serving			
Serving 1 st serve	At the weaker side – 49%	Be unpredictable – better side – 34% In the body – 1% Change speed – 12% Serve & volley – 1,5%	First point to the better shot Disguise – 0,6% Change rhythm of your motion From the side to wide Slice to the body – 0,6% Back to the good return – 1% Top spin kick + volley
Serving 2 nd serve	Be consistent – don't give free points Weaker side – 61% or at the T – 14%	Unpredictable (better side) – 7% In the body – 16% Decisive	Unpredictable on big points Change speed, spin Serve and volley – 1,5% Kick to the body Disguise Serve as your 1 st – 1,5%
Returning			
Serving 1 st serve	In the direction of the follow through close to the middle – 81% (including 12% that were hit very aggressively – expert)	Other direction (not in the follow through) – 12% Stay further back Move toward the ball Stand inside the court	Block – 3% Short slice – chop – 4% Aggressively + cross court – 12% Dink at the feet
Serving 2 nd serve	On wide serves – open up the court with a cross court On middle serves – 90 degree – to the middle – 65%	Attack down the line – 10% Change your returning position	Extreme cross court – 6,5% Chip & charge – 1,6% Drop shot return – 5% Run around and attack with forehand – 13%
Playing from the baseline			
Attacking	Open court (make him run) – 33% Weaker side – 5%	Down the line (after a cross court rally) – 20% Sharp cross court – 8% Wrong footing shots – 7% Drop shot – 4%	Dominate with the forehand – 23% Disguise or fake Attack with heavy slice
Rallying	Down the middle – 28% Cross court over the service line – 53% Weaker side – 9%	Down the middle – different intention To the open court (make him run) – 4%	Add variety – change speed, spin, height – 5%
Defending	High cross court – 17% Down the middle – 36%	Moon ball Slice – 15% Far behind the baseline – 1%	Low and short slice – 2% Counter attack – cross court or down the line – 29% drop shot – 0
Playing at the net			
Volley (12 volleys)	To the open court – 5	Wrong foot Drop volley – 1 Serve & volley	Down the middle – 3 Delayed approach Drive volley – 3
Overhead (1 overhead)	To the open court – 100%	Wrong foot Sharp angle	Disguise – from backhand to forehand side
Passing shot and lob			
Passing shot (13 passing shots)	Cross court – 9	Down the line – 3	Middle hard or to the feet with top spin – 1 Disguise
Lob (2 lobs)	High and deep – 1	Cross court or over the backhand side Stratospheric lob – 1	Top spin cross court or backhand side

What can we learn from this?

Let's analyze each section and see what the main theme or idea is behind their decisions.

Serving

1st serve:

Almost 50% of serves go to the weaker side (backhand) and 34% to the better side. This means that both players have such a good first serve that they can afford to serve quite often to their opponent's stronger side. Both of their forehands are top-class strokes, and they can hit a winner from almost anywhere on the court. Notice that 21% of their first serves were served with a different speed. The players do this either to get more first serves in (lower speed) and/or to disrupt the returner's timing.

2nd serve:

They hit 75% of their second serves either to the weaker side or to the T. 16% of the second serves go to the body, and only 7% to the better side. The players know that they are playing with fire when they serve to the better side. Despite that, however, they do so occasionally to add the element of unpredictability to their serving.

Returning

Returning the 1st serve:

Here they play by the basic rules. 81% of the returns go in the direction of the follow-through. Those that don't are often just late hits, not intentionally aimed in a different direction. Notice that 17% of those 81% were hit very aggressively — like a counterattack. The player hits these returns when he receives the ball in his "strike zone" and can add more power to his return.

Returning the 2nd serve:

Again, 61% of the returns follow the basic tactic of returning. There were more attacks with the forehand (where the player runs around his backhand) — 13% — than returns down the line — 10%. Both players attacked with the forehand, although Roger did that more often. His forehand is such a weapon that he can hit a winner even when drawn way out of the court.

Playing from the baseline

Attacking:

The court surface at the US Open and the play style of these two professionals is very fast, so they look to attack to the open court and did so 33% of the time. They attacked down the line 20% of the time, and they tried to dominate the point with the forehand shot 23% of the time. Just to clarify — this means that they ran around their backhand and played a forehand on the backhand half of the court.

This statistic is similar to that for the return of the second serve. Why? Because the second serve is basically a shot in the short court and can be attacked immediately.

Rallying:

As expected, 53% of groundstroke rallies go crosscourt. Perhaps surprisingly, many shots went down the center — 28%. My guess is that both players are waiting for the first opening. (Check advanced tennis tactics.) I'll ask them if I get a chance. And only around 5% of the shots were played with variety. My guess here is that the play was so fast they didn't have the time to mix it up a lot. They both had to move fast and hit hard to have any realistic chance of winning the point.

Defending:

Interestingly, 35% of the defensive shots went down the middle and only half that (17%) went deep crosscourt. I assume that the players knew how well their opponent plays angles and chose to defend down the center to prevent an attack with a sharply angled shot.

Playing at the net

Volley:

Only 12 volleys were played in this match, but we can still see the main pattern. Five of those volleys were played to the open court, which is the basic objective at the net. They also played three volleys down the middle but they didn't seem to hit there intentionally, because the net player was already in trouble on that volley.

They played only one overhead so I can't comment on that except that it was played to the open court.

Passing shot and lob

Passing shot:

The players were very disciplined here and played 9 out of 13 passing shots crosscourt and only 3 down the line. If the net player reads the passing shot and gets to it, the defending player usually still has a second chance if he played crosscourt. Check the explanation about that in the basic tactics of passing shots.

Lob:

There were only 2 lobs in this match, so we can't really analyze this part of the game from this match.

If we put Andre's and Roger's tactical decisions and strategies into this system of basic, advanced and expert tennis tactics, we can see what kind of tactical decisions they play.

Playing situation	BASIC	ADVANCED	EXPERT
Serving			
Serving 1st serve	49 %	48 %	3 %
Serving 2nd serve	75 %	23 %	2 %
Returning			
Serving 1st serve	81 %	12 %	7 %
Serving 2nd serve	65 %	10 %	25 %
Playing from the baseline			
Attacking	38 %	39 %	23 %
Rallying	91 %	4 %	5 %
Defending	53 %	16 %	31 %
Playing at the net			
Volley	42 %	8 %	50 %
Overhead	100 %	0 %	0 %
Passing shot and lob			
Passing shot	69 %	23 %	8 %
Lob	50 %	50 %	0 %

What do this more general statistics tell us?

Both players mix basic and advanced tactical play on the serve. They rarely use any expert tactical plays, but when they do it's often in the crucial moments in the match. They save their surprise shots for the big points.

In returning serve, they are disciplined and play "by the book." They play most returns in the direction of their follow-through — either in a more controlled or a more aggressive way. They both quite often take chances in returning the second serve (20%), because that is a short ball, one of the few short balls they get in the match.

The most diverse playing situation is the attack from the baseline or in transition to the net. This is where they have a chance of winning the point and both players mix all possible tactics to be unpredictable. They, of course, have mastered every attacking combination.

Rallying from the baseline at that pace of play is very predictable. 91% of the shots went down the center, crosscourt and a few to the weaker side. This means that playing down the line in a baseline rally is an exception. Why? Because the player is too far from the ideal point of covering the court, and the opponent quickly takes advantage of that with a fast or angled crosscourt shot.

Defense in this match was a mix of good strategic defense down the middle or crosscourt and a counterattack. They needed to take risks even when on defense, because both are exceptional attackers. Almost every fourth shot (23%) on defense was a counterattack.

There was little net play and therefore few passing shots in this match. But most passing shots (9 of 13) went crosscourt. This is a good indication of their main intent when passing a net player.

If we combine all the shots from every playing situation into one big overview of this match, based on this system of basic, advanced and expert tennis tactics, we see this distribution of their tactics:

Playing situation	BASIC	ADVANCED	EXPERT
All playing situations	64 %	19 %	17 %

As you can see, Roger and Andre base almost 2/3 of their tennis on the most basic tennis patterns. That is the foundation of their game, from which they apply more advanced and expert tactical combinations.

Playing tactically smart tennis does not mean that you try to outsmart your opponent every time you hit the ball. It is a balancing act between playing consistent and reliable tennis mixed with risks and unpredictability.

3.6. EXPERT TENNIS PLAYING TIPS

These are tips for expert players and for players who want to become experts by learning these special tricks and ideas. They are each based on one of the tactical plays and show how to play it even more unpredictably or so as to make it even harder for your opponent.

Disguised drop-shot

The best time to play the drop-shot is when your opponent is behind the baseline and you are inside the court. BUT if your opponent anticipates that you want to play the drop-shot and is quick, then an average drop-shot won't be good enough.

So, instead of trying to play the perfect drop-shot you need to find a way to trick your opponent and surprise him with a drop-shot.

The best way is to drop-shot when it looks like you are about to attack. So, when you get a short ball, move decisively as though you are going to transfer all your weight into the shot and launch a rocket shot. Your opponent will lean or even move backwards to buy himself time to run down your shot.

That's when you change your shot and play a drop-shot instead. If you do this at the right moment, your opponent has practically no chance — unless you lob your drop-shot.

Another way to fake an attack works when you have previously attacked short balls with an approach to the net, especially with a sliced backhand.

Now that your opponent expects you to do this, you have him set up. So when you get a short ball on your backhand, attack it the same way you do when you approach the net with a backhand slice. Only this time you move your racquet below the ball for a sliced drop-shot. This shot even starts with the same movement as the backhand slice, because the drop-shot is just a backhand slice with a lot more underspin.

This shot is totally disguised. And, again, you can lose the point only by missing this shot or by popping up a high drop-shot. Otherwise, it's a clean winner.

Don't overdo this trick, because then your opponent can anticipate it. Play it perhaps once or twice per set.

Faking a drop-shot

This combination is very, very effective: I know, because I've been on the receiving end of it once or twice in my career. I personally used this tactic just a few times in my whole tennis history, but I'm pretty sure that I had 100% success with it.

What you do is that you put on a big show of preparing for a drop-shot. You stop, slow your movements, and show your opponent the exact drop-shot movie he has seen before. Of course, before you use this tactic, you need to play a drop-shot a few times so that your opponent starts anticipating when you are about to play it. (This is also the basic idea of the next expert tennis tip.)

So, when your opponent reads you and sees you planning a drop-shot, he immediately starts moving forward. In the last moment of your stroke, just push the ball long instead of slicing below it. You'll play a deep slice and your opponent will be already moving forward. Point for you.

The Pavlov trick — your Ace up your sleeve

Pavlov was a Russian scientist who experimented with dogs to discover a type of behavior known as the "conditioned response." He would ring a bell before giving dogs food. He repeated this pattern several times. Soon, whenever he rang that bell, the dogs began to salivate in expectation of food.

Although this may seem a little harsh, you can play a similar trick on your opponent.

Just always play the same shot in some particular situation. Your opponent won't think this is strange, because, as you've learned, there are general tennis strategies that have the best probability of winning the point. So, you stick to them. For example, when you get a short ball you always attack down the line. This is strategically correct because you'll be able to cover the net properly.

When you have attacked ball down the line many times, your opponent will expect that. You have conditioned him. You now have an ace up your sleeve for when you most need it.

For example at 5-5 and 30-30 would be a great situation to use this ace. So, when you get a short ball to attack, attack crosscourt. You'll win the point 99% of the time.

Other useful "aces" you can use:

- Serve to the backhand all the time: Ace — to the forehand.
- Always stay back after serving: Ace — serve and volley.
- When your opponent defends with a down-the-line shot, always play into the open court (crosscourt): Ace — wrongfoot him with a down-the-line shot.
- Same tactic but this time with a volley.
- Similar — play the whole set with deep volleys: Ace — drop-volley.
- This was mentioned in the previous point but just to refresh your memory — attack every short ball with a deep approach: Ace — drop-shot approach.

Double wrongfooting shot

When you pull off this one, your opponent has NO CHANCE. It goes like this: you play either a sharp crosscourt drive or a good serve out wide to pull your opponent out of the court.

He returns the ball and starts to hurry back to the middle of the court. He may even turn and run back. That's when you play a drop-shot behind him. This is worse than just wrongfooting him with a deep shot, because he is moving into a defensive position and therefore going backward as well as toward center.

Even if he tries to run down this shot, he'll have to run in a circle to get to the ball. He won't be able to take the shortest route and will run around the ball to get it.

This looks very funny when you pull it off and it can really "hurt" your opponent psychologically. Use this at your own risk.

PART II

THE OPPONENT

**Playing against a specific
type of opponent**

Before you start formulating your cunning plan on how to outsmart your opponent, you must first be crystal clear on what game type you prefer to play. You must know exactly what your strengths and weaknesses are and how much can you move away from your favorite game play and still be able to play consistently.

Study first the main game types and see where you fit in.

4. THE FOUR GAME TYPES

The players who adopt a certain strategy also have similar physical, technical and mental abilities. Each game type has a specific approach to tennis — consistency, attacking from the baseline, attacking from the net, or using all styles combined.

These four types are:

- Counter-puncher
- Aggressive baseliner
- Serve-and-volleyer
- All-court player

COUNTER-PUNCHER

Players with this general tennis strategy are masters of defense and know how to outplay the opponent in most situations. Their main strategy isn't to win points: it's to make their opponent lose points by missing a lot.

They have excellent groundstrokes and are almost always masters of passing shots too. They are very quick and fit so that they can endure many hours of running and sprinting.

The typical weakness of a counter-puncher is his net play. The best counter-punchers are also good attackers, but not in the same league as aggressive baseliners.

Their main mental strengths are patience, perseverance, a fighting spirit, and a never-say-die attitude. They are usually calm and focused, even in critical situations, because they rely on consistent tennis. And consistent tennis is hard to outplay, especially on big points when the attacker may be a little nervous.

AGGRESSIVE BASELINER

Players adopting this style of play try to force errors or to win points with clean winners. This

is a more risky type of play but also a more rewarding one. You may make errors, but you also win points.

Most aggressive baseliners like to dictate points with their forehand (like Andy Roddick and Serena Williams). Some have fantastic backhands too (like Andre Agassi and Marat Safin).

They usually aren't good defenders and often play too risky when pushed in defense. When their game is on, that surely means trouble for their opponent. But when they are a little off and try to counterattack from defense, too many errors creep in.

The main mental characteristics of these players are courage, decisiveness, and calm acceptance of making more errors than non-aggressive players do. They are very energetic and often impatient. Patience and offensive play can go together if you find the right amount of each.

SERVE-AND-VOLLEYER

They come to the net at every opportunity, especially on their serve. They have great feel for volleys, fast reflexes, and great body abilities enabling them to react and stretch at the net. They also know how to cover the net so that, at times, it seems impossible to pass or lob them. This style of play often prevents the opponent from developing good rhythm and timing, because of time and mental pressure.

Server-and-volleyers have a very good serve that forces many weak returns or at least prevents many great returns. Their volley is exceptional and flies fast and deep, staying low. There are no weaknesses on their overhead, even on the backhand side.

Their biggest weakness is defense, since they don't rely on it. They are also quite impatient, and long rallies frustrate them.

The mental abilities of serve-and-volleyers are courage and a high tolerance for errors. They don't get upset over a few missed shots. They are also ready to come to the net even if there is no clear opportunity to attack, which means that they are willing to accept risks.

ALL-COURT PLAYER

Their goal is to score points, and they can do it from the baseline, from the net, or from anywhere in between. They can adapt to all situations and opponents, and they have no major weaknesses.

Since they play in so many ways, they also know many tactical methods and patterns of play and are therefore very difficult to predict. Most of their strokes are good, and they can attack to force the game from any position on the court.

Their only slight weakness is that they usually don't have a great weapon with which they could win points quickly and easily.

Their main mental strengths are confidence, the ability to find solutions, and general adaptability. They have the right amount of aggressiveness and patience, which enables them to play the attacking game with few unforced errors.

4.1. 16 COMBINATIONS OF WINNING AGAINST ANY TYPE OF PLAYER

When you want to be a good strategic player and to play excellent tactically sound tennis (for whatever reason you want to do this — to be the best in your peer group, to win tournaments, to show off, to enjoy your mastery of the game regardless of the score or to enjoy your opponents feelings and reactions), then you must first KNOW THYSELF.

You must know what type of player you are, and you must have your general strategy mastered. This of course depends on your technical skills, body type, and mental strengths.

Only AFTER you decide whether you prefer counter-punching, playing aggressively from the baseline, attacking the net, or mixing all styles, you are then ready to start adapting your preferred style to the general strategy of your opponent.

There are four main strategies and, for each, four modified strategies, one for each type of opponent. So all together there are 16 adaptations of four main strategies.

In every variation you will learn the tactical and the mental battle that goes on (usually hidden from outside observers) in the match.

So why a TACTICAL and a MENTAL battle? Both of you have a strategic plan. You can actually look up, for example, how a counter-puncher should play a serve-and-volleyer, then look up how a serve-and-volleyer should play a counter-puncher.

They have opposing tactics. One will try to do one thing, and the other will try to prevent that and do something else. And vice a versa. So this is the tactical battle — when they both know how to play it's not so much knowledge as execution.

And for that you need to be mentally in the right mindset. That's where the two mental battles come in. One is the battle with your own mind, which might lead you to some other places than winning the match. So, you need to take care of your mind.

The other mental battle is with your opponent. Maybe it's a battle of patience or a battle to be immune to errors or something like that. It's a battle within the battle. While you execute your tactical patterns, you also compete with your opponent on a different level. And if you lose the mental battle, then your tactical plan is gone too.

That's why the tactical battle is only a part of the story. You also need to be mentally tough to get through all the troubles and setbacks you will inevitably meet in high quality tennis matches.

Let's explore each game type and its strategic and tactical guidelines for every game type of opponent play.

4.1.1. IF YOU ARE A COUNTER-PUNCHER AND YOU PLAY A...

COUNTER-PUNCHER

Tactical battle

Counter-punchers love the baseline. See if you can get him to the net with drop-shots and short but low shots. Then lob him. If he is really insecure at the net, play straight at him to "remind" him of that. This tells him that you don't even need to pass him to win the point with him at the net. Doing this might greatly upset him...

Also, see if you can employ many short crosscourt shots to make him run. Although counter-punchers have no problem running and getting everything back, they do prefer not to move much and just counter-punch the ball back.

Sharply angled (short) crosscourt shots make them run. (They are human too and will eventually tire, which is crucial in this type of the match where you can be sure to play for a long time.)

Moreover, they aren't fast shots, so your opponent has to generate speed himself. Counter-punchers aren't the best generators of pace.

Mental battle

Here are two fighters who base their game on tenacity, perseverance, and a never-say-die attitude. They are both ready to run and be patient. This is the ultimate test of your mental toughness and your ability to withstand the uncomfortable physical feeling of exhaustion, which will inevitably happen.

It's also a challenge to see who is more patient and who is smarter in the modified tactical plays. If you win the mental battle and your opponent realizes that you are even more patient and ready to work long hours than him, then he's likely to surrender — mentally. From that point on, it will be a quick match. But first, you must get there...

AGGRESSIVE BASELINER

Tactical battle

Obviously, aggressive baseliners like to hit hard. But they are even happier if you give them the pace so that they can hit even harder (think Andre Agassi). So a good tactical choice is to take some pace off your shots, playing deep, high balls. This should be your main tactic.

Other shots that aggressive baseliners don't like are drop-shots and low slices. If you are skilled enough to make them, try them. Drop-shots bring your opponent to net where aggressive baseliners are not at home. And low slices don't allow them to hit with full power. Thus you might frustrate them — see the mental battle.

Aggressive baseliners really like rhythm, and their rhythm may be your biggest problem. They like balls that come to them at a nice height, a nice speed and always with the same rotation. They soon get a feel for the ball and start firing like cannons with very few mistakes.

Since your style of play is counter-punching, you too usually rely on a consistent rhythm, depth and type of shot. If plan A (long deep shots) doesn't work, this is your plan B: vary rhythm, pace, rotation. Make your opponent keep adapting and adjusting to your shots.

One more thing — when aggressive baseliners are really on, they can blast through your deep shots anyway. This is the time for plan C. Aggressive baseliners are used to dominating the points. They are attackers, not defenders. So make them defend if you possibly can.

Of course, this isn't your preferred style of play, but if they demonstrate to you that they are having a good day and destroy your defenses, it's time to take this step. If you can occasionally serve-and-volley, all the better.

Lleyton Hewitt is a great example of how to upgrade a basically counter-punching style to world-class tennis. He is more aggressive and comes to net more often, and not just to shake hands.

Mental battle

Aggressive baseliners are typically not very patient players. They have weapons of mass destruction and are PROUD of them. Don't get intimidated. Keep your composure even when you see winners flying by and thumping into the back fence.

If you can neutralize their most precious possession, which they so much love to talk about, you will make significant progress in winning the mental battle. Rely on your patience and get everything back when you have to.

Since they like to hit aggressive shots, there is a good chance they'll start missing. This is the moment you've been waiting for. Without their main weapon and trust in it they are just baseliners. You are better here.

ALL-COURT PLAYER

Tactical battle

This type of player likes to play chess on the court. Think Roger Federer or Martina Hingis. They are planning their attack long before they actually attack. They have all the shots and can exploit your weaknesses.

Your main tactic (which again may be quite a challenge) is to make them run and rush. Don't allow them to settle into a nice rhythm from the baseline and work you around. Maybe on your very good day and on their off day.

But when you make them run, you put them in an emergency mode, where they can't plan and use their superior tactical ability and shot-making against you.

Their main tactic against you is to shorten the points and attack your shortest ball, which is your second serve. Therefore, if they know how to play they WILL attack your second serve with good success. Keep a high percentage of first serves in (take some pace off), and don't let them attack you.

Mental battle

All-court players have a very fast brain: they get creative ideas during the ball exchange. They are masters of tactics and shot-making ability. Their tennis is usually interesting to watch. So, they like variety and to make things happen. By now, you probably know what I'm getting at.

Make tennis boring for them. This may frustrate them even when they win an occasional point. They like to win a point with a super crosscourt drop-volley after they have stretched you wide with a sliced backhand approach. Winning a point because you make an unforced error isn't what they are looking for.

Your advantage here is again your patience and readiness to work for hours. They are not very patient, so if you win the battle of patience and hard work, they may surrender. This isn't tennis for them. They despise counter-punchers.

If you can make them play long, boring rallies from the baseline, they'll hate themselves for playing such tennis. And then they might start forcing their attacks too soon and make too many mistakes. You win.

SERVE-AND-VOLLEYER

Tactical battle

You immediately know what this player's main objective is. He'll come to the net — a lot. So first be ready with your service returns. Return low, at his feet, or with good precision. Also note which is your opponent's weaker volley (think Goran Ivanisevic and forehand volley) and hit to that side when you are under pressure.

Lob early in the match so that your opponent doesn't crowd the net. Remind him with another lob whenever he starts crowding the net again. Like all-court players, serve-and-volleyers will attack your second serve. Don't show them too many second serves.

If they serve really well (think Pete Sampras) and you have problems returning, you need to make them think. The only way they can hit fast serves in consistently is with an empty mind. Put something in it. Move on the return and change position frequently. Make them consciously decide where to serve and you have a good chance that they'll serve with less success.

When you play from the baseline, all they are thinking is how to get to the net. If you play counter-punching shots that are too passive, they will find a way to attack. Make them defend if you can. You needn't hit winners, but be aggressive and pressure them. If you keep them on the defensive long enough, they'll miss or lose patience (and miss).

Mental battle

Serve-and-volleyers like action, dynamic play, and adventure. That's why they come to the net. Do the opposite — as with the all-court player. Make tennis boring for them and play long points.

I'll let you in on a secret — what frustrates them the most. It's when you have a chance to hit a winner (maybe you've stretched them out wide and they replied with a very short ball) and you don't go for it but play the shot in such a way that they remain in point.

This shows them that they will not get a short point and that they will have to play every point you control for a long time. They hate that. They want the points to end quickly and move on. Keep them on court as long as you can. It's a rare serve-and-volleyer who doesn't get frustrated by that.

4.1.2. IF YOUR PREFERRED STYLE OF PLAY IS AGGRESSIVE BASELINER AND YOU PLAY AGAINST A...

COUNTER-PUNCHER

Tactical battle

Use your weapons smartly. The counter-puncher cannot consistently hurt you from the baseline, so be patient with your attack. Wait for the right opportunity. Their favorite situation is when they are well set up for the shot and the ball comes fast. They love this because you provide all the pace and they just counter-punch. So hit your big shots mostly when there is an opening. Create the opening with short crosscourt shots. And then bombard it.

Counter-punchers also don't like to be at the net, so bring them in with drop-shots or short, low slices. Then blast the ball at them with your super weapon. The next time they see a short ball pulling them into the net, they'll already be afraid. You can imagine what their attempt at volleying will look like.

Mental battle

Their strong points are patience and willingness to stay on the court forever. If you can match them — well good luck. But your main psychological advantage is your power and your great shots. When you keep them under pressure and hit winners, they might start believing that it isn't their day. That you are the luckiest guy alive because "everything" goes in. Keep attacking them with courage and perseverance. Even they can crumble under enough pressure.

They will return many shots that might have finished off other players. Be ready for that. Do not stop attacking. Your weapon can destroy them. If you just play from the baseline and fail to attack, you have very little chance. Prepare mentally so that even if your weapon misses for a while that you'll stay with it. (Think Serena Williams.) Go for your shots!

AGGRESSIVE BASELINER***Tactical battle***

The battle of the big hitters. If you just keep blasting at each other, it's anyone's match. So if you are a smarter blaster, you'll have an edge. Look to neutralize your opponent's main weapon and play to his weaker side. A lot. Don't try to be too fancy, just pound his weakness for eternity. When an aggressive baseliner cannot use his big weapon, he gets very disappointed. (Oh, that belongs in the mental part ...)

Do not provide your opponent with steady rhythm. You know you like this best, and so does your opponent. Change rhythm, pace and spin.

You may end up defending quite a lot. Unless it's your best day of the year, don't try your big shot when on the defensive. Remember to defend properly — deep crosscourts or down the middle. Aggressive baseliners tend to make mistakes. Give your opponent a chance to miss. Counterattack with your best shot when you really feel that it's a good opportunity.

Mental battle

The main mental battle in this match is about who is more immune to errors. Both of you attack a lot and try to keep the other from attacking. Since the best defense is attacking (in other words — staying off the defensive) you both must take some risks.

This also means that there is a possibility of many errors. If you let them influence you, together with your opponent's winning shots they might seem too big mountain to climb. So keep focusing on what you want and accept errors as a part of the game. You have to play that way in a clash like to this to have the best chances.

Another important point to watch for is your ego. Yes, you may end up competing with an opponent who has a bigger shot. Since both of you have big shots, you may just become too involved in showing off your mega shots instead of playing within your limits and strategically smart. Play the ball not the opponent.

ALL-COURT PLAYER

Tactical battle

All-court players are very dangerous when they can dictate the game. They have all sorts of shots and combinations and can really hurt your weaker side. So it's very important for you — and it's your natural game — to stay on top of them. You need to dictate the play and keep them far beyond the baseline. Aggressive play and good depth are your priorities.

Wait for the right ball to go for a winner. All-court players are usually very skilled, so hitting for a winner when they can reach the ball won't work, since they can be very good at defense too.

To dictate the play, serve a high percentage of first serves, so they can't attack your second serve. Start your aggressive play immediately after their return. Be aggressive on their second serve too. Otherwise they will take control of the point, and then you have less than a 50% chance of winning it.

Mental battle

Your approach to this match is the same as with aggressive baseliner. Both of you want to make points and must take risks to keep the other player from attacking. This again leads to very aggressive shot-making, which on an average day brings quite a nice number of mistakes. Don't let them get to you. You are on a risky mission, so errors will occur. Courage and determination are very important in this match.

All-court players will probably win points in more spectacular and unusual ways. Don't try to match them. They are all-court players, and you are an aggressive baseliner. They are better at this — they have been playing all-court tennis for years.

Stick with your game even when it looks more one-sided. (Think Jim Courier.) If your big forehand is your weapon, use it. Don't get into some fancy drop-shot-and-lob combinations if that is not your strength.

SERVE-AND-VOLLEYER

Tactical battle

Stick with the basic strategy when playing a serve-and-volleyer — lob early in the match, play aggressive returns (see if you can use your big shot on the second serve), serve a high percentage of first serves. Their goal is to use your weaker side to attack so you need to dominate the game again, as with the all-court player. They are usually less skilled in defense than all-court players, so use that to your advantage and keep them on the defensive.

It is harder for serve-and-volleyers to get to the net during a baseline rally than it is for all-court players. They don't have good enough shots to dominate from the baseline. So you can take some risk off your big shot when you have them at the baseline. If you keep good pace and depth and work them around, you are clearly in a more advantageous position.

Mental battle

Serve-and-volleyers usually are impatient. Patience isn't your best mental quality, either, but see if you can take advantage of this ability in this match. When you can keep them at the baseline, be patient. Don't just give them gifts with too many missed big shots. Patiently pound at them and keep them back.

Don't panic if they are on a roll. Sometimes a serve-and-volleyer can finish a game in two minutes. Don't try to match them with four winners from the baseline. Your chances of winning the game in two minutes are much slimmer. Stay with your game plan — aggressive play with a little more patience.

4.1.3. IF YOU ARE ALL-COURT PLAYER AND YOU PLAY AGAINST A...

COUNTER-PUNCHER

Tactical battle

If you approach this match with good tactics and the right mindset, you have the advantage. A counter-puncher cannot really hurt you from the baseline. You will have to work hard, but it's far from mission impossible. You need to be patient and plan your attack.

It may often happen that you have a chance for a winning shot, but the counter-puncher saves himself. You'll have to start again. No problem, you are the one dictating the play, and the counter-puncher will slowly but surely get into a defensive position again.

Attack his second serve, which may be his shortest ball. Take advantage of that. And since counter-punchers are very fast movers, play some wrongfooting shots — both from the baseline and (especially) at the net. Don't overdo it though, because your opponent may start waiting for your shot at the spot.

See if you can open up the court with short crosscourt shots and then attack to the open court.

Bring the counter-puncher to the net. This shouldn't be a problem for a player like you — drop-shot or play a short ball and then pass or lob them. Use drop-volleys more against counter-punchers. Don't let them use their excellent passing shots. Make them pass you in a territory where they are not so skilled. (Think Roger Federer against Lleyton Hewitt.)

Mental battle

Prepare to work hard, long and patiently. A counter-puncher will test your patience and determination. You needn't grind it out with him from the baseline, but be ready to play shots others couldn't get to. Be ready to wait for the right moment for quite a while. Your advantages are your better tennis skills.

See if you can demonstrate to the counter-puncher with all sorts of shots — baseline shots, midcourt shots, volleys, drop-shots — that you are a better tennis player. See if you can outplay him in ball exchanges at the net and similar situations. When a counter-puncher starts believing that you are a tennis master, his defenses may come down quickly.

Since you will be dictating most of the play, be prepared for more mistakes than usual. A counter-puncher won't give you free points, and you'll have to take some risks. You may miss some shots. Be mentally prepared for that. It's not about missing, it's about winning. Mistakes don't count at the end — only the win does.

AGGRESSIVE BASELINER

Tactical battle

They like rhythm and shots that come to them at a nice height and pace. You shouldn't have trouble avoiding that since you are all-court player. You can mix up spins and slices, varying the play a lot.

Do that with aggressive baseliners: don't let them get going with the punishing barrage of big shots they're capable of. You can constantly surprise them with drop-shots on the second serve, sliced approaches, short crosscourt angles and other variations.

Attack their weakness with every possible tactic that you can come up with. Here are some for a good start: serve-and-volley, slice approach, short crosscourt on their better side and then attack in the open court on their weaker side....

This is especially important if you want to exploit their weakness. If you just keep attacking it, they just stand there and their weakness doesn't show much. Hit a shot or two to their better side to open up the court a little and then charge at their weaker shot.

Remember that when you are in a defensive position, defend with long shots. Aggressive baseliners hesitate to come to the net, and you don't need to worry about that when defending.

And if you are skilled enough, you can bring them in with a short, low defensive slice shot that draws them into the net. Don't complicate things when you want to pass them. A good, low, crosscourt passing shot will do a lot of damage, even if they get to it. They are usually not skilled at the net, so you will get a second and even better chance to pass them.

Mental battle

This is the battle between a calm supercomputer and an aggressive fighter. Your goal is to outsmart and outplay your opponent. Don't fall into the trap of matching him with power. He is the master of that and you are the master of all-court play. Do what you do best.

Mentally prepare to see some big winners flash by you. It's just one point, the same as if you hit an unforced error into the net. Look for solutions and stay positive even when things don't seem to go your way.

Aggressive baseliners are rarely able to play their best tennis all the time, because of the risky nature of their game. Stay calm and plan your attacks in advance.

Make good use of the changeovers to calmly assess their strengths and their weaknesses, planning your tactics accordingly.

Aggressive baseliners are usually very energetic and tend to have emotional personalities. See if you can take some of that fire out of them by outsmarting them. Use some of the “winning ugly” tactics to make them lose their composure; like hitting a sitter down the middle instead into a corner, drop-shotting and then lobbing them, making them run with constant short crosscourt angle shots and so on.

If they lose their power generator (i.e., their positive emotions), the game will be a much easier hill to climb. You won’t face a raging storm on top of the Everest.

ALL-COURT PLAYER

Tactical battle

This is potentially one of the best matches that can happen. Both players can play every shot and tactic in the book. There are no obvious weaknesses that one of them can exploit. This is the game of minute differences, daily form and how well one executes a certain tactic.

There are of course intelligent tactical guidelines: the all-court player is better on the attack than on defensive, so look to attack whenever possible. Attack second serves, short balls, defensive moon balls, and so on.

Most players have one slightly weaker shot. Find that weakness even if it’s minute. Work on it. Try to find weaknesses in volleys, certain types of shots (e.g., low backhand slices) and focus on your strengths.

But don’t become obsessed with your opponent’s weaknesses and forget your strengths. Stick to general tennis strategy — consistency, make your opponent move, play aggressive tennis. Mix your tactics so that your opponent doesn’t have time to plan his attacks. Serve-and-volley occasionally to surprise him on the return.

Mental battle

Is the one that will almost inevitably decide this match. You know how your opponent plays and it’s tough to influence him mentally. In this case, it’s much better to focus on yourself.

Make it a priority to find the zone state as much as possible. Only in this state can you play your best tennis, and you are going to need it in this match.

Control your arousal — if you get nervous or upset, calm down. If you feel that your intensity has dropped, raise it with active jumping, decisive movement, and power words.

If it comes to patience, commit to being more patient than your opponent. If it comes to ignoring errors, commit to being calmer than your opponent. If it comes to perseverance and fighting spirit, be better and tougher.

If you support your tactical plan with these mental abilities, you are likely to win. If your opponent reads this e-book and does likewise, then forget the score, forget the reasons, and enjoy the opportunity to be involved in such a magnificent experience.

SERVE-AND-VOLLEYER

Tactical battle

Your attacking play will have to be used much more than usual. The best way to counter serve-and-volleyers is to take their game away and keep them on defense. That means that you should serve-and-volley regularly on the first serve and occasionally on the second serve.

Lob early in the match. When receiving, take his serves early to deny him time and space. Make a high percentage of first serves to keep him from attacking your second serve.

If you can get your opponent in a baseline exchange that's fine too. You have the advantage, and you needn't risk too much. If the serve-and-volleyer wants to come to the net during good baseline rallies, he must take big risks, so the statistics are on your side.

Mental battle

The serve-and-volleyer constantly pressures you to make good passes. Mentally prepare for that: visualize before the match or during changeovers; imagine how calmly and efficiently you pass him. You need to keep your cool in this match and focus on your game plan.

Serve-and-volleyers can break your rhythm, because the points played on their serve tend to be short. Find your rhythm on your service games if you have to.

Get yourself in an aggressive state. Not an overly aggressive state, of course, but aggressive enough to be ready to attack at any opportunity. Remember, a serve-and-volleyer is better at net play and you don't want to let him play his best game.

You can also rely on your patience when playing from the baseline. This is your strong point in this match. The longer you keep your opponent at the baseline, the better your chances of winning the point. Hopefully that will motivate you to remain patient in these situations and not try spectacular shots that might bring a serve-and-volleyer closer to the net.

But just to emphasize once more: patience doesn't mean passive play. You must be patient and yet aggressive so that you attack every short ball. But when there is no clear opportunity to attack, you needn't force anything. You can patiently work your opponent around until the opportunity appears.

4.1.4. IF YOU ARE SERVE-AND-VOLLEYER AND YOU PLAY AGAINST A...

COUNTER-PUNCHER

Tactical battle

Counter-punchers can be very dangerous on their service returns, which they can counterpunch with good consistency and precision. That's why you need to keep them guessing where and how you'll serve. Mix speeds, spins and placements, and don't allow them to settle into a pattern on the return.

Also, vary the placement of your volley. Short, sharply angled volleys and drop-volleys are good tactics against counter-punchers, because these shots make them play outside their comfort zone (behind the baseline).

Play volleys behind them to wrongfoot them. Doing so takes advantage of their speed and quickness, because these fast movers often move too soon to cover open court.

If a counter-puncher gets into a very good returning mode, you need to quit following your serve for a while and alter his service-return rhythm. Look to attack his second serves, and try and force the play. A counter-puncher will try to keep you back, so you'll have to take some chances to advance.

Be aware of your unforced errors. Though errors are inevitable, try to find the right balance between an attacking style of play and an overly forceful style of play.

Mental battle

The counter-puncher will make you play every shot that he reaches. He will also pass you sometimes when it seems impossible for him to do so. Accept that as a part of this challenging match. Stay focused at the net, and be ready for every ball, even when you seem to be in much better position than he is.

You must know in advance that you will get passed quite often. But how many times you get passed isn't important: what's important is whether you win more of these points than your opponent does.

Keep constant pressure on your opponent. If you get on a roll of great volleying and serving, you might frustrate your opponent with his inability to score points.

Remember to be patient when you get into baseline exchanges. You are not in immediate danger against a counter-puncher, but don't just play passively from there. Take an aggressive approach, and attack the first short ball you can.

AGGRESSIVE BASELINER

Tactical battle

An aggressive baseliner can be dangerous in returning serve if he is in the zone. He plays service returns early and aggressively, which creates your worst time scenario. You need to mix it up again: vary your serves' speed, spin and placement. And don't always follow your serve to the net when that isn't working (think Boris Becker against Andre Agassi).

If this aggressive baseliner has a weaker shot, you know what to do: crowd it with everything you have.

Of course, your priority should always be to come to the net early in the baseline ball exchange. Aggressive baseliners can hurt you from the baseline, and your defensive skills are not as good as your attacking skills. So look to attack his second serves, and jump on any semi-short ball you see.

Change your rhythm as much as you can when playing from the baseline, and try to bring your opponent to the net where he doesn't feel so much at home.

Here's a great tactic if you can employ it: play a drop-shot and follow it in so that both of you are at the net. This is your territory — take advantage of that.

Mental battle

This will be a battle of courage and who dares more. Both of you must take risks to keep your opponent from attacking. You must look for every half opportunity to attack, despite the threat that he may pose with his big shots. You will often get passed and bombarded, but you will also force a lot of errors.

This is also a battle to see who can get hurt but not fall. Both of you will score big points against each other. The one less intimidated and influenced by the other's show will be calmer and more focused on his game plan.

This is match where two boxers attack each other. It's not all about who attacks more: it's about who can withstand more punches. Be the tougher one regardless of how many booming forehands fly past you. (Think Patrick Rafter.)

ALL-COURT PLAYER

Tactical battle

An all-court player has many ways of hurting you. If he knows how to play against serve-and-volleyers, he will attack often. You don't want to defend in this match. That means that you must serve-and-volley almost always on the first serve and often on the second serve. Adjust only when you sense that your opponent settled into a really good streak of great returns.

All-court players are generally better from the baseline than you are, so you must be very aggressive when you play from the baseline. Attack every half chance to get to your favorite place — the net. Just getting there pressures your opponent, because he knows that average shots aren't good enough to beat you when you're at net. So he must raise his risk. That gives you more free points through his unforced errors.

Though they aren't evident, he does have weaknesses. See if you can find his weakness and concentrate your attacks there. Nevertheless, keep him guessing, because it's much easier for him to defend his weakness if he's knows you're going to attack it than if he doesn't.

Mental battle

Your opponent will outplay you in many ways (provided it's a challenging match). You must prepare for that, and ignore how he wins points. A point is a point — it doesn't matter how it looks. What matters is that you win more points when you attack and play the net.

You also need to be courageous and take risks. Attack at half chances, and keep your opponent under constant pressure. You need to ask him the next question over and over again: "Can you pass me again?" Not out loud, of course — ask him that with your game play.

Don't ever get convinced that, just because a player won a point in a certain way against you, he can do that repeatedly. Humans are emotional beings, and all sorts of things can happen when one gets emotional. Many players play very well until 4:4, and then it's a different story.

Some players play very well until 5:5 in the third set, and then they break down in two minutes. A lot depends on how psychologically fit they are — how long can they withstand constant pressure. Test them. Until the end. (And email me your conclusions. I'm sure we'll agree on many points.)

SERVE-AND-VOLLEYER

Tactical battle

All right, this is the war of the titans. This is attacking at its purest. No hesitation, no doubt, no secure play — attack and win or die. If you, as a serve-and-volleyer, get into a defensive situation against a serve-and-volleyer, you are in big trouble. That means you must launch a full-scale attack. Make a high percentage of first serves. Find your opponent's weakness and lay some heavy artillery on it.

Mix your returns — full power returns, blocks, slices, short angles — don't allow your opponent to settle into a volleying rhythm. Make him adapt every time to a different ball flight.

Go for risky second-serve returns if you have to. Maybe your opponent is on a roll, or you have a fine day with your return. You can force a double fault or two with this tactic, because it forces your opponent to aim for deep second serves.

And remember the Number 1 rule against serve-and-volley players: lob early in the match to keep them honest — lob again to keep them from crowding the net.

Mental battle

The one who hesitates is lost. The one who allows fear to control his actions is lost, too. The one who is uncertain of what to do is already late for the shot.

This is mentally very hard but at the same time very simple. You have NO other choice. Decide that before the match. Tactics and mental approach in this type of clash is very simple — go for it, ignore your mistakes or how the opponent wins points and attack whenever you possibly can (think Pete Sampras against Patrick Rafter).

Be aware of every little fear or doubt you have and just run over them. In this type of play everything happens so fast you don't have time to think or plan. You need to play totally automatically. And every mental activity will slow you down — your reflexes and your reactions.

Your decisions must come fast. To achieve that you need two conditions: you must have a clear game plan and your mind must be clear of every distraction. That's how you will win this battle of relentless attacking.

PART III

Specific situations

You've now mastered playing excellent tactical tennis whether that means playing smart in general or playing against a specific type of player.

You now need to take into consideration other factors that determine the outcome of the match and go even deeper in the understanding of how we decide during a ball exchange, how intuition helps us play better and more.

5. DIFFERENT COURT SURFACES AND STRATEGIES

You've now learned a lot of different strategies and tactics. But to be really effective you need to apply them where they are the most efficient. There is a generally different strategy when playing on clay courts than if you are playing on a very fast court.

Adapt your preferred strategy to the court surface and again evaluate whether your tennis skills are good enough to actually execute that tactic successfully on a specific surface. As you probably know, most Spanish players are not very successful on the grass of Wimbledon. That's because their volleying skills are not good enough to play serve-and-volley and because playing from the backcourt on grass is usually not the best tactic to use.

5.1. CLAY

The ball encounters a lot of friction when it hits a clay court. So it slows down. Clay is the slowest court surface you can play on. Clay also absorbs the impact of spin very well. This means that if the ball has a lot of spin, it jumps really high off clay, because the spinning fuzz gets a good "bite" into the clay due to the great friction between the ball and the clay.

General guidelines on how to play on clay:

- Be patient. Points last longer because it is harder to win a point with a clean winner. This also means that you needn't panic if you are put on the defensive. Just consistently return deep shots, and try to work your way back to an equal (neutral) footing with your opponent in the rally.
- The serve too is greatly slowed by the bounce. You must carefully consider whether it is profitable to use a full-speed serve (considering its risk) if you can't score direct winners with it. Many players use a three-quarters speed first serve. With it they aim to dominate the points, not to win any outright with the serve. Since they make a higher percentage of these slower serves, they are better off than they would be with a full-speed first serve.

- You needn't risk a lot on the service return either. You can position farther back and play a higher topspin shot to deep on the other side and you'll be in the neutral position afterwards (i.e., you won't be at a disadvantage).
- Play more crosscourt shots to open up the court, and then look for chances to hit winners or forcing shots.
- Use a lot of topspin, which kicks the ball high and thus keeps your opponent from hitting it in his power zone — between the knees and shoulders. If the ball is above shoulder height, especially on the backhand side, it is very difficult to generate pace.
- Drop-shots are very effective because of the soft clay which dampens the rebound of the ball.
- Do not play the ball on the rise. Clay is not a smooth surface, so the bounce often causes a small change of direction. If you play the ball on the rise, you haven't time to adjust. That's why most clay-court specialists play the ball on the way down or at the top of the bounce.

5.2. HARD COURT, INDOORS

The best attribute of the hard court is that the bounce is predictable. The hard court is faster than the clay court yet slower than the grass court. There are many different hard court variations. They play at different speeds and have rougher or smoother surfaces.

The court is hard on the body, because there is no amortization. So take care how you move on the hard court.

- The ball doesn't jump as high on a hard court as on a clay court (there are exceptions, like rebound ace in the Australian Open), so topspin isn't as effective. More effective shots on this type of court are lower, hard-hit shots with moderate spin for consistency.
- The rallying tempo is usually faster, because of the faster surface and lower bounces and because the players tend to stay closer to the baseline, hitting the ball at the top of its bounce or even on the rise. Be ready to attack the ball and move quickly.
- Hitting short, sharp angles crosscourt is thus more difficult. Therefore, the main tactic of hard-court play is to hit hard into the open space. But there is one important advantage of playing short crosscourt shots on hard courts: the defending player cannot slide the way he can on clay courts. He must run almost to the ball and must take at least one more step to change direction. That takes him out of the court and gives him less time to recover.
- Wrongfooting your opponent isn't the best option on hard courts, because players can quickly change direction. There is no sliding. (Kim Clijsters will of course disapprove here.)

- Drop-shots bounce very high on the hard surface of the hard court. You must use them very selectively to be successful with them.
- The serve-and-volley tactic works well on hard courts, which is something many serve-and-volley players who won US Open and Australian Open can attest to. You can change direction rapidly on the split step when approaching the net. Serves and volleys tend to stay low and skid off the court, making it hard to return them as passing shots.
- The aggressive approach is the best tactic on hard courts, whether from the baseline or the net.

5.3. GRASS — SYNTHETIC AND TRUE GRASS COURT

Not many people have the opportunity to play on true grass, since grass courts are quickly ruined and need a long time to renew themselves — with the extensive help of a gardener.

Synthetic-grass courts are similar to natural grass courts but a little slower.

- It's hard to change direction on grass, so wrongfooting shots work very well. Especially when you volley.
- The ball stays very low on this court, so you need to stay low too. Slices and low flat shots are very effective.
- Slice also works extremely well when you serve with heavy slice to make the ball curve away from, or into, your opponent.
- Using a lot of topspin isn't really effective, because the grass dampens the bounce. Play mostly flatter shots with just enough spin to be consistent.
- These courts are very fast, so when you play a volley from the net, your opponent has very little time to set up for the pass. That's why playing at the net is the best tactic here. Another reason is that the ball doesn't bounce correctly most of the time on grass, because the surface is uneven. So whenever you play a groundstroke, you risk a mis-hit due to a bad bounce.
- Drop-shots are effective on grass, because the ball really stays low after the bounce.
- If you get into a defensive situation, don't be content to just rally the balls back. Aggressive shots on grass are really fast, so your defense won't last long. Look to counterattack at the first opportunity.

6. SPECIAL SITUATIONS

There are some special situations in tennis matches regarding the outside conditions and your opponent. Let's see what can we do in 3 typical situations that happen quite often in tennis matches...

6.1. PLAYING IN THE WIND

If you've read Brad Gilbert's *Winning Ugly*, you know he suggests that, if you play in the wind, go build a tennis hall and call him over for a match.

Playing in the wind can be very frustrating if you don't know how to approach it. You need to have a clear tactical plan and to be mentally prepared for such conditions.

General guidelines for playing in the wind:

- Keep light on your feet, and be prepared to continuously adapt your position relative to the ball. The wind moves the ball around so that it doesn't end up where your brain first predicts it will. You'll have to constantly adjust.
- The wind also moves the ball after you hit it. This means that playing close to the lines and the net is too risky. You need a good margin for error from the baseline, the sidelines, and the net.
- This also means that, to be successful, you must play a more consistent and possibly "boring" tennis. Hitting fancy short angles crosscourt, hitting close to the lines, or any other risky type of play is doomed in windy conditions.
- You will often have to adjust your stroke at the last moment. If you shorten your backswing and play with more compact strokes, adjusting them will be much easier than if you play with humongous backswings.
- Adjust your service toss too. Toss the ball lower, or figure out where you need to toss it so that the wind moves it into your strike zone.
- You must be mentally prepared to see some of your "good looking" shots land out. The same thing happens to your opponent. Remember, the one who accepts this situation better will probably win.

If the wind is blowing in your face:

- This means that it slows your shots. You can hit harder and higher over the net to keep a good depth. Play with moderate spin and avoid slice shots. They lift and sit up nicely to be hit by your opponent.
- Be very aggressive, and try to avoid playing on defense. In the long run, you have little chance of success with defensive play. Hit through the wind, and be offensive.
- The lob and drop-shot are very effective shots against the wind. You can hit both a little stronger and they will still be good shots, because the wind will blow them back toward you.
- Hit both your first and second serves freely, with power and spin. The wind will pull the ball back into court.

If the wind is at your back:

- It will help your shots, but you must be careful not to overhit. If you hit at three-quarters your normal speed, you'll be consistent and yet hit with good pace. Just apply some topspin to the ball to keep it down in the court.
- Slices are very effective when you have the wind behind you. They tend to float really deep and stay low.
- Don't rush when you play on this side. You are in much better position than your opponent is and can control the rally. He is the one who must take chances, so if he is missing more of these shots than he makes, play your normal game.
- Hit second serves at three-quarters speed, and hit them cleanly with plenty of spin. The wind will do the rest.
- Be prepared for the wind to stop your opponent's shots so that they come down earlier than usual. Stay close to the baseline or even inside the court, and move toward the ball to take it on top of its bounce.
- Drop-shots and lobs are very difficult to pull off, so use other tactics. If you can't think of any, scroll up a couple of pages for hundreds of ideas.

6.2. PLAYING A LEFTY

This is a very tricky situation. Even more so if you don't notice that you're playing a lefthander. Yes, that happens too.

Typically, the left-hander's forehand is stronger than your backhand. Therefore, as soon as they get the chance, they start playing with their forehand to your backhand, which is a crosscourt shot for them.

If you defend tactically correctly with a deep crosscourt return, you play again to the lefty's forehand. He stretches you wide again. You now realize that he is too good on the forehand and then try to play down the line. And this can be a big mistake.

First, you aren't USED to defending down the line. Many of your shots will go a little wide, so that's a free point for the lefty. Next, defending down the line isn't a good option, because it allows your opponent to stretch you wide on your forehand side. You are not properly positioned to cover the court, so you'll have to run like mad to reach that ball.

And after a few points like this, you find yourself (a) making many unforced errors, (b) being stretched like mad on your backhand (lefties play this type of shot every day and are masters at opening up the court with the forehand), and (c) watching winners go down the line when they surprise you with a down-the-line forehand.

Soon there is total chaos in your head, and you don't know what to do. Your opponent knows EXACTLY what to do.

So what is the solution?

- When you are playing a lefty you must first recognize that. Next, be prepared for a long tough battle. There will be a lot of running and a lot of outsmarting out there.
- In most cases it will be a battle between forehands and backhands — that is, you'll try to play your forehands at his backhand, and he will try to play his forehand at your backhand. Your goal in every point is to dominate the point FIRST. This is your main objective! If a lefty starts pounding his forehand at your backhand side, you are in trouble. But, you can get out of it...
- When you defend in this situation, don't immediately try to play down the line to his backhand unless you have a good opportunity to hit down the line. Instead, defend properly with a good deep crosscourt shot.
- When the ball returns to your backhand, choose one of three options:
 - Play crosscourt again, trying to pull your opponent off the court. This is risky but can help you win the point.
 - a) If the lefty plays crosscourt again, you can now attack his backhand down the line, because he is far away from it. Or you can attack with an approach to the net. Or you can just play a deep down the line shot, which will turn the tables in your favor. If the lefty defends down the line, you can now stretch him again on his forehand or play a wrongfooting shot. And if he plays crosscourt you can now dominate the play with your forehand.

b) If he plays down the line you can immediately attack his backhand with your forehand. You can also follow this shot to the net.

- Play down the center. The lefty will probably move to play this shot with his forehand, but he won't be able to hit an angle that pulls you off the court. He may even make an error attempting a sharply angled shot. And if he plays an average crosscourt shot to your backhand, stretch him wide on his forehand or play deep down the line to his backhand. This time you aren't in trouble, so hitting down the line isn't so difficult.

- Play a high loopy ball down the line. It gives you the time to cover the court properly and get the ball to his backhand. It's a defensive and non-aggressive shot though, so you'd better be good at it.

- Every point starts with a serve and return. Use your serve effectively to attack his backhand and control the point from then on. You can use it best if you play a sliced serve out wide on the deuce side to his backhand. He'll do the same, trust me. Return first serves normally, down the middle in the direction of your follow-through. Return second serves to his backhand. Be aggressive — the serve is a short ball.

- How to deal with the typical lefty serve? That's the one out wide to your backhand on the ad side. Most lefties have perfected that serve, with which they open up the court so they can then dominate the point. First, cover that side much more than your forehand side. Take their best shot away. Make them hit an ace down the middle if they can. Second, if they serve wide, intercept the ball by moving forward toward it. That way you won't be pulled out so wide. Third, if you feel physically fit and your opponent isn't coming to the net, step back 10 feet and play the return from way back and out of the court. Play a deep topspin crosscourt or down the middle and RUN back. If you hit a really deep shot, you are at least in the neutral position.

- One typical play that you should execute often is to play a crosscourt backhand to his forehand. If his forehand reply crosscourt to your backhand is a little short, attack his backhand with a down-the-line sliced backhand approach to the net. (That is, if you're volleying skills are good enough — or maybe you can just bluff and see how many errors you can force this way.)

Summary:

At first, playing a lefty can be a very frustrating experience. You make unforced errors even though your opponent didn't play a nice shot. He just played a forehand crosscourt to your backhand, and you are in trouble.

That's his biggest asset. You make errors before anything actually happens. You are already in the future, and it doesn't look rosy. Be here and now. Play the ball the way it is played. You can also imagine that you are playing a right-hander with a very good backhand.

That way you'll probably play smarter. Don't panic if he plays his good forehand crosscourt. You'll play your forehand to his backhand later. Those are his strengths, and if you completely

want to eliminate them, you want what's impossible.

When Pete Sampras played Andre Agassi he always tried to eliminate Andre's excellent return. But could he do it totally? No way. Every few points a winning return whizzed past him. That's Andre's strength. Pete used his strengths to tip the scales in his favor. Sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn't. That's sport.

Playing a lefty is similar. He will win points with his forehand hitting on your backhand. He will play a winner down the line when you least expect it. But those are just some points. You needn't make a horror story of it. Win points your way, and focus on how you can best use your strengths. At the same time, see if you can take away his preferred style of play.

And when you apply the above tactics, mastering them, playing a lefty won't be so difficult. On the contrary, you'll be the lefty's nightmare.

6.3. WINNING AGAINST A BETTER PLAYER

This title is obviously misleading, because if you win the match then you are the better player. I personally make a distinction between a GOOD HITTER of the ball and a GOOD TENNIS PLAYER. Most people believe that a good hitter of the ball is also a good tennis player.

What is the difference between hitting the ball and playing tennis for points?

1. Tactics:

Are you hitting the ball in the direction that will probably win the point? Are you hitting the ball in a way that will cause your opponent a lot of trouble? Or are you just hitting the ball nice, low and hard directly into your opponent's hitting zone? Are you hitting the ball in a way that makes it hard for your opponent to predict where and how you'll hit it?

2. Ability to quickly decide:

Not just knowing, but EXECUTING a good tactical plan is the main difference between hitting and playing. So, when the ball is coming, you must quickly choose (without hesitating or doubting or changing your mind) the best possible shot in that situation. Just hitting the ball doesn't involve such decisions and is therefore much easier. So hitters are much easier to beat than players.

3. Mental skills:

Are you mentally tough enough to hit a good shot under pressure? Can you withstand that pressure? Can you direct your mind to the "here and now" where you find relief from pressure? Where you forget about it? Are you able to either accept your mistakes or quickly calm down if they upset you? And then hit the ball with the same aggression as before?

These are the main differences between good hitting and good playing.

So, when we talk about better players, we actually mean players who SEEM better or are just better hitters. They may also be better movers and more talented. But that is only half the game. The other half is in the three points listed above.

There are two ways to play a better player. One is the way to play a better hitter who isn't mentally tough and doesn't play tactically good tennis. The other is the way to play a better hitter who does play tactically good tennis.

a) He is just a better hitter but doesn't play tactically good tennis and isn't mentally tough.

If you apply most of the tactics mentioned previously (basic, advanced and expert) you are already miles ahead of him. You beat him with your brain, even though his shots may look prettier.

It is especially effective to first play down the center, letting him open up the court first. Remember, he is the better hitter, so if you open up the court first, he can counterattack with an even better crosscourt shot. Then you are in real trouble.

If you let him open up the court first, you get a good angle of attack and can force him into a defensive position.

Another way of playing a better hitter is to not play his game. Most better hitters are better from the baseline. If you get into long baseline rallies with them, you'll probably lose. Therefore, try and get to the net, so he must play a game he doesn't like. He'll be under pressure and not in control of the point.

Try to draw him to the net, and make him play his weaker shots — volleys and overheads. Be aggressive, and don't let a good hitter settle into a good rhythm. Doing so prevents them from hitting their best shots and frustrates them.

This is the next point...

b) If your opponent is not only a better hitter but also a better tactical player

Now what? Are you lost?

No, not until the match point. Here's how you can win this one:

Let's say that your opponent's best level of play is 100. And let's say that your best level of play is 80. As long as he is above you he is winning. So it seems that you are lost. BUT...

IS HE ABLE TO STAY THERE FOR THE WHOLE MATCH?

Most likely not.

A tennis match presents a player with many situations in which he'll either relax too much or get too tense. There are 29 situations identified in [The Mental Manual for Tennis Winners](#) that are the most common traps and pressure situations in which players DROP their level of play.

These are situations you need to be aware of and take advantage of. Battle their effect on your play, and capitalize on their effect in his play. At those moments, your opponent will play maybe at 70% of his ability. If you maintain your maximum playing level (80), you are winning.

Moreover, when your opponent sees that you are winning despite being a "weaker" player, he may be even more upset so that his level of play drops even lower. Or he may get very anxious, thinking about what will happen if he loses to a weaker player.

Therefore, against good (or better) players, you need to hold your maximum level of play longer than they can.

Tennis matches last from 40 minutes to 2 or more hours. A couple of excellent shots are just two out of 100 or more points played. Don't get intimidated by those two points.

Here is a little more mathematical perspective:

Let's say that you play for 100 minutes. Your opponent plays at level 100 and 90 for 10 minutes, at level 80 for 20 minutes, at levels 70 and 60 for 10 minutes and at level 50 for 40 minutes.

You on the other hand can play at level 80 for 50 minutes and at level 70 for 50 minutes.

Who wins?

He: $(100+90) \times 10 + 80 \times 20 + (70+60) \times 10 + 50 \times 40 = 190 + 160 + 130 + 200 = 680$

You: $80 \times 50 + 70 \times 50 = 400 + 350 = 750$

Your total score is higher so you win! It means that, overall, your level of play is higher than your opponent's, so you are more likely to win the match.

That's why pushers and counter-punchers are so hard to beat. They stay at level 70 or 80, playing neither well nor poorly. They are just very consistent while their attacking opponent may swing from 100 to 40. The average level of play usually decides the match.

Remember, when you see a better hitter, or even a better player, you need to ask yourself not whether he is a better player (for, that will discourage you since he seems better) but whether he can play at that level consistently enough to beat you, since you will stay at your level no matter what.

All right, so now you have hope and motivation, and you understand that better players can lose to you, too.

So how do you play?

1.

Keep your level of play high: Control your thoughts and emotions. Stay focused. Win with superior mental skills. [The Mental Manual for Tennis Winners](#) shows you how to win the mental game.

2.

Be a master of strategy: You also need to win the game of intelligence. Win with smarter play. Most of the answers are here in [The Strategy Encyclopedia](#).

3.

Take advantage of the momentum shift. Momentum shifts your way when your opponent's play drops from levels above you, where he wins more points, to levels below you, where YOU win more points.

The biggest mistake players make is relaxing too much. When they win many points, they think, "Aha, now I have done the hard part, and I can relax for a moment. No need to work so hard, I'm winning more points."

And when you drop your intensity you ALLOW your opponent to climb out of the hole he's in. His best level of play is higher than yours, so if he gets back to it, you'll be losing again. That means you must take advantage of the momentum shift and keep your intensity and concentration high for as long as you can.

Keep your opponent down at his lower levels while you accumulate point after point. That is the way to outplay even a much better opponent.

4.

Use the same tactical ideas you'd use against a better hitter. (See the previous chapter.) Be aggressive. Change the game. Don't let them play the style of game they prefer. Bring them to the net. And so on.

PART IV

Understand your mind and your game

You now have a good overview of the general and specific tennis strategies. You have also learned certain tactical plays. (Remember the tactical battle?)

Tactics are different ways of achieving a strategy. For example, if you want to make someone run, you can play (a) long crosscourt shots to the left and right, (b) short, sharply angled crosscourt shots to the left and right, or (c) long shot and drop-shot combinations to make him run forward and backward. All three tactics have the same basic strategy — to run your opponent.

There are many other tactics, and you can find many of them in the strategy section of Tennis-MindGame.com.

In this last part you are going to learn more about how our mind works and how to use all this information from the ebook (and your experience) to help you play your best tennis.

7. TACTICAL DECISIONS

There is one more term to introduce. (I know, you are already overwhelmed, but hang on...)

Tactical decisions.

You make a tactical decision every time the ball flies to you (or even before it does). You must decide what shot you are going to play: Are you going to just play the ball back? Are you going to open up the court? Are you going to approach down the line? And so forth.

This part of tennis strategy and tactics is often overlooked. It hasn't been deeply explored. You have a rare opportunity here to understand what goes on in the mind and how do we make these decisions.

Obviously, we are not thinking consciously when we play. If we try to do that, we miss the ball. Why? Because the brain is busy with all sorts of calculations during ball exchange. It must calculate the speed and trajectory of the ball, your balance, your timing (e.g., when to start the forward swing, which you DON'T consciously decide — your MIND does, starting your swing automatically!), which muscles to use and when in coordinating the kinetic chain, and countless other processes.

Conscious thinking interferes with this complicated and demanding processing, slowing it. As a result, your brain makes errors. It actually ditches some steps in the process to keep up. For example, it may take fewer "pictures" of the approaching ball. It may lump more muscle signals in the same export job. It may disregard more information.

The result is degraded perception and performance. Rather like a computer that can't keep up with the frame rate in a game or the action in a virtual reality game.

It makes errors even without interference, because players cannot possibly hit every ball in the sweet spot or always find the right distance to the ball or always swing the racquet and the exact right moment.

Despite these mistakes we can play tennis, even at fantastic levels. But as soon as conscious thinking is present, or any other mental activity, it interferes with these brain processes and consequently we make more mistakes. You can see hundreds of them even on ATP and WTA tour.

So how do we make decisions if we cannot think?

Here's the secret — you need to have an INTENT!

Intent isn't thinking or analyzing. An intention is just a thought in your subconscious from which your conscious decisions arise. What do you think is the intent of an aggressive baseliner? Yes, to hit the ball hard into the open space most of the time.

So, whenever the ball comes over the net, good aggressive baseliners decide quickly, almost instantly, how to play it. They are successful because they decide so quickly, without doubting their decisions or changing their mind.

An all-court player's intent is to outplay his opponent. All-court players usually have another strategy in play, like How can I be the first open up the court and then attack the net. So their first intent is to open up the court.

And whenever the ball starts flying toward them, their brains are already checking to see whether this ball can be played so as to open up the court.

Then a simple decision occurs — They choose YES and then play it to open up the court, or NO and then execute a backup plan. What is the backup plan? It's a shot that PREVENTS the opponent from attacking. This is the heart of tennis — playing deep shots that prevent your opponent from attacking while you look for an opportunity to attack.

So you needn't do any conscious tactical thinking during the ball exchange. It happens automatically but ONLY if you have an underlying intent or purpose. If you have no clear intent, you will play somewhere in the middle and often just hit the ball back without any special purpose.

This approach makes you vulnerable to good strategic players who work you around so that you are constantly reacting to their game. You make many unforced errors because you don't aim your shots at any particular part of the court and don't hit them decisively enough.

Playing with intent requires a high level of focus that many players aren't accustomed to. Even if they begin the match with good focus and intent, they lose it in pressure situations or situations that upset them.

When that happens to you, you must first know how to find your “zone” state again, regaining your focus. That skill is beyond the scope of this book; it’s what [The Mental Manual for Tennis Winners](#) shows you how to do. That book explains concentration, arousal, and the power of visualization in simple, concrete terms and then shows you how to deal with 29 mentally challenging situations in a tennis match.

You will learn how to refocus, how to think constructively, and how to approach and solve each problem situation. Thus, finding your energy and focus again, you’ll be able you play with your strategic or tactical intent again.

And, you’ll be able to think clearly again.

8. STATISTICS AND INTUITION

The left and right side of the brain — which is right?

The first part of The Tennis Strategy Encyclopedia describes ways of successfully playing the game of tennis regardless of your opponent. There are laws of geometry and human limitations you can exploit.

The second part of The Tennis Strategy Encyclopedia walks you through different approaches to playing specific types of players and specific situations in match play. Again, these are only recipes.

Since you use these recipes most of the time, they are predictable. Your opponent can quickly discover what you want to achieve. Think, if Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal play a match, how many shots that either man plays are unanticipated by his opponent? In other words, how many times do they surprise each other? My estimate is that only about 5–10% of the shots are somewhat surprising to the opponent.

These surprises come when a player does NOT follow the typical strategy or tactic in that situation. So here is the \$64,000 question: WHEN do you play against the rules? Because that is almost the only way of surprising your opponent. Good players not only know how to play, they also know what is the best shot from their opponent in a certain situation. So they anticipate the most probable and the best shot combinations from their opponent.

So how can you surprise them?

This is where intuition and feel for the situation comes in. There is rarely enough time during the ball exchange for you to consciously analyze the situation and decide “Aha, since my opponent is already running to the other side, I’ll wrongfoot him.” Sometimes what he’s doing is obvious and you do have time to decide what you’ll do. (You can think analytically only before you serve.)

But usually your first reaction, and tactically the most consistent and effective shot, is to play to the open court. This is a general rule, or guideline, that you should follow most of the time.

But sometimes an IDEA flashes through your mind, one against the guidelines. That is your intuition. If you stay with that idea and execute it decisively, it's most likely a very effective decision.

Don't confuse this intuitive idea with the ideas beginners and intermediate players get. They CONSTANTLY try to outthink you. They have no general strategy, and they don't follow the guidelines — they just want to surprise you on almost every shot.

That isn't intuition, that is overthinking. They make so many choices to play in a way you won't expect that the result is a total mess.

Intuition happens when you play by the "rules" of tennis strategy and know exactly what you usually play that is most effective (e.g., into the open court). In the same way, you suddenly clearly see what to play even when it isn't based on these rules.

Intermediate players get an intuitive idea and start to doubt it, because it is against the rules. This hesitation, this indecision, delays their final decision, usually resulting in an error. This unfortunately reaffirms their mistrust of these ideas so that they don't want to listen to them.

That's why they are intermediate players. They may play good tennis, but it is too predictable.

Expert players play the game most of the time by the rules of tennis strategy: they attack down the line, they defend crosscourt, they cover the court correctly, and so on. But now and then they play a shot that surprises their opponent and wins the point.

Doing this has a deep effect, because we humans have a very strong need for predictability. We want to know what will happen next, especially in the most important areas of our lives. If our world becomes unpredictable we live in a constant stress. We cannot relax and expect good things to happen. It's a survival mechanism still working deep in our brain.

Occasionally playing unpredictably, and with good success, puts a lot of stress on your opponent. He feels that he cannot predict your play and becomes very alert and stressed. This tires him psychologically, so that he cannot maintain a high level of concentration for very long.

To play your best strategic tennis, you must find the right blending of statistically and tactically smart tennis with your own intuitive ideas. It takes a lot of experience and a clear mind to be able to HEAR intuitive ideas and follow them confidently.

In my opinion, Martina Hingis is the best player ever at playing smart, strategically correct tennis mixed with cunning tactical plays that her opponents can't read. Even though these ideas go against recommended tennis tactics, they work for her very well. She uses them selectively and doesn't overdo them.

She relies on her intuitive ideas and trusts them. The fastest way to learn is to watch someone, so I invite you to attentively watch her matches and see what she does. She is a master of statistics and intuition, and you can be too.

9. HOW TO APPLY ALL THIS?

When you began this book, you probably weren't aware that there are so many strategic and tactical ways of playing tennis. Now that you've read all these ideas and combinations, you probably wonder "How the heck am I going to learn and apply this? Let alone become the master of tennis strategy?"

Relax, it's not as hard as you think. Remember when you first learned how to drive a car? (If you are old enough.) You had to think so many things at once: "Look in the mirror, turn the steering wheel, change gears, step on the pedal..." But soon all that became automatic. Now you just want to turn or accelerate and everything happens by itself.

If you've had tennis lessons and were learning to serve, you likewise had many instructions running through your head: Relax your grip, swing, loosen your arm, extend your left arm.... But now you just decide what you want to do and let go. The technique is automatic.

It's the same with these strategies. At first they may overwhelm you, but they will soon store in your subconscious. Then you can just decide to do something — define an intent — and these strategies will present themselves as choices in your repertoire.

The simplest way to practice them is to practice just one at a time. Pick, for example, the general strategy of gaining court position. When you play with this intent, you will see that you take the ball earlier, come to the net more often, and play up closer to the baseline. You will also want to keep your opponent farther back, so you will play deep shots. That will all happen automatically, because of your intent.

Then the next time you play, choose something else — perhaps one of the 16 combinations depending on the game type. You don't have so many options there: you will use only 1 of 16 in a match. Work on that one, and play it a couple of times. You will get used to it. You will react quicker and better.

Work on your intent. Be clear on what you want, don't just play the ball back into your opponent's court.

One of the best ways to learn this is to watch the matches of good players — club or ATP / WTA players. Try to figure out the intent behind every shot. Good players can explain why they play a particular shot. Because they know why.

The strategic part of tennis is a very interesting journey. Do not become obsessed with the final outcome. That is, do not become obsessed with achieving strategic perfection or eliminating all tactical error. Rather, enjoy the journey and your improvement.

EPILOGUE

Tennis strategy is based on statistics and on the mental and emotional characteristics of certain types of players. There is no set of tactics for a given match that is guaranteed to win it, because your opponent can use them, too. Who wins then?

Some people think that if they do everything correctly they should win. That they deserve to win. But there is no such thing as justice in sports (or in life). Maybe in the grand scheme of the universe there is balance, but in one tiny human life — which is nothing in billions of years of the universe — you cannot expect to always get what is just and “right”.

A tsunami took 250,000 lives, thousands are dying of hunger, and you expect justice in a tennis match? Wake up to reality. Often, things just won't go your way. I'm sure you have realized this. It isn't bad karma or anything. It's just statistics, which eventually pan out pretty much the same for everyone playing tennis. The main difference is what story you make out of your mistake and yourself.

Why are these stories empty? Why are they untrue? Because there are no rules. There is no known physical law that double-faulting increases your chances of double-faulting again. Yet the mind manufactures this story, so we start messing with our serve, not letting it happen the way it knows how to.

We interfere with the automatic system, and then it obviously makes a mistake. This seems like proof that double-faulting before makes us double-fault again. But we made that happen.

Someone may say, “Well, but I served perfectly once last year.” Yes, I agree but the statistics surely caught up with you later when you served horribly in one match two months later.

Perfection is an illusion of the child inside us who wants to be good. When we did things right as children, we got more love. But unfortunately we also got programmed that things can be done right — with no mistakes.

Yes, you can make your bed to look perfect. But you can't play perfect tennis. Nor can you raise a child perfectly. Nor can you succeed in business perfectly. Nor can you play any sport at the highest level perfectly. There is no basketball player who can score a basket every time he shoots. There is no quarterback in NFL who can play without ever throwing an interception.

These are just childish stories — trying to play good. You may find this is not true for you, but if I look around and see how many tennis players see mistakes and accept them as a normal part of the game — they are far below 0.1 percent.

99.99% percent of people think they shouldn't have missed a certain shot. Even though reality keeps showing them that this is NOT so, they stick with the illusionary story that makes them feel so bad.

If you can just laugh at your thoughts when they arise to tell you that you shouldn't "something" then you are free.

SPECIAL BONUS REPORT

HOW TO BEAT A PUSHER (HACKER, DINKER)

Either you know exactly what I mean by the word pusher, or you have no idea what a pusher is. If you don't know what pushers/hackers/dinkers are, then this report will hopefully prepare you mentally for what will happen sometime in your tennis future.

And if you know exactly what pushers can do to you (mentally and physically), then this report will show you ways of overcoming your mental barriers when playing them. It will also show you tactics you can use to crack their defensive game.

When you play this type of player, he is actually asking you two questions and making one statement. Not with words but with his style of play. They are...

»Can you make 4 points in one game before you make 4 mistakes in one game?«

AND

»Can you win more points than you lose (against my style of play)?«

BECUASE

»I will not make points and I will not make mistakes.«

This is what you are up against. Now, the first and the biggest trap that you can fall into is thinking that pushers don't know how to play, because their strokes don't look nice and their shots seem nothing special. You can immediately see that they lack good technique and that they won't hurt you with powerful winners.

They have been playing for a while like this, and they are masters of touch. You can hit with various speeds, spins and angles, but they can adapt to every shot and put the ball within three feet of the baseline. You are back to square one.

This is an incredible ability. Try it yourself. Have a friend work you around and try to place your shots in the last three feet of the court. You'll see that your shots start landing inside the service line and you are in trouble. Pushers can play long balls with solid consistency for hours. (I had to say this — to prepare you realistically)

They also know exactly how to defend. They are not good attackers, but they are master defensive strategists. They know how much to lift the ball so that it travels a long time, allowing them time to get back to the center. Yet they don't hit their shots too high so that you could advance and volley the ball.

They have an A+ in tennis geometry and usually defend with deep crosscourt shots or centered shots to deny you good angles. They can also play short, low shots to make you play out of your comfort zone. You either overhit or come to the net with a poor approach.

Most pushers will lob you, because they are not good at passing shots. Oh, and their lobs usually land in the last three feet of the court. Just had to mention that.

There are also master pushers who never pass you with a super fast booming shot. No, they demonstrate their touch again, with better short crosscourt passing shots than Roger on a good day.

And if you happen to reach the ball and volley it, they already know where you're going with your shot and calmly pass you on the second try.

Their next quality is that they know exactly what they are capable of. They will NOT — I repeat NOT — try to play beyond their abilities. They have a mortal enemy, which they hate from the bottom of their heart. His name is Mr. Unforced Error.

They don't want to see him no matter what. You can blast 100 winners by their ears and they will not change their game to force their strokes beyond their limitations.

They live in a different reality than you do. In their reality, their opponents hit good shots when it's not so important and make stupid mistakes when it matters most. So their goal is to make it to the point of the match when it matters most. They just stick with their game, and their opponents hand them the match by missing important points.

They have seen this scenario so many times that you have no chance of convincing them that you can blast winners past them all the time, that you will hit winners at 5:5 in a tie-break. You will break down: that's their reality.

Hopefully you now understand that, under no circumstances, must you underestimate a pusher.

Here is another trap you fall into when you underestimate pushers. You forget about the game. Tennis is challenging even without a tough opponent. You start thinking only about hitting good shots consistently and producing more winners than errors. Unfortunately, you are trying to do this while playing someone who's nick name is "The Backboard."

If you underestimate your opponent, you don't give your best effort. You aren't fully focused. You don't put enough effort into movement, and your intensity isn't high enough.

Combine this with the challenge of hitting a tennis ball only six centimeters in diameter moving at 40 kilometers per hour while you too are moving and your racquet is changing its orientation every 1/100 of a second as you swing at that ball.

If want to hit good, fast and precise shots, then your body and brain must function at between 99.78% and 100% of their capability. And if you underestimate, then you put forth maybe 70–80% of your maximum effort.

In this state tennis becomes 200% more difficult. The problem isn't your opponent. It's trying to hit a moving tennis ball while moving with a moving racquet. This is too difficult for a human body and brain to perform unless totally involved in it.

So you actually lose the contest against tennis' demands, not against your opponent.

Combine Trap Number 2 and with Trap Number 1, and it's no wonder why you lose. You have no chance to beat both the tennis game and your dogged opponent with but 80% of your effort.

Hopefully you are now convinced to put everything you have in this match.

NOW, what are good strategies to beat the pusher?

Disclaimer

Remember, there are NO SHORTCUTS. Unless you are two levels better than the pusher and can outplay him with your better shots and your tactical knowledge, you will have to work really hard. For a long time. But, it can be done.

Okay, now that we have cleared that up, let's start preparing a cunning plan of how to beat a pusher!

Let's see what pushers like most, and then you will know how to avoid that.

They like good pace on your shots so that they can use your power to return the ball with. Though they are ready to run for as long as they must, they would rather move less. This means that hitting them long shots with no angle is nirvana for them.

When you are frustrated by getting every ball back with no opportunities to attack, you start forcing your play and make tons of unforced errors. This is what they are playing for.

There is one big weakness in the typical pusher's game. Most have no Plan B. (Only a few pushers lack this weakness, and they are the baddest pushers you can play.) This means that if you find a way to get through their defensive wall, they won't know what else to do.

That is the biggest victory you can achieve. Because that's what can break them down. Yes, even pushers do break down. But you must work smart and long to achieve that.

When you start playing a pusher, imagine that you are trying to cut down a sequoia. That's the mental attitude you need to be successful against a pusher.

GENERAL STRATEGIES OF WINNING TENNIS AGAINST A PUSHER

1.

Pushers, of course, "push" the ball, which means that their ball has no pace. If you have solid volley and overhead skills, then your best tactic is to try to get to the net. There you have the best chance of finishing the points and keeping the pusher under constant pressure.

The pusher knows that his shots are usually not fast enough to pass you, so his main tactic is to lob or to make you play a low volley that tests your volleying skills. So be ready to back up as soon as the pusher hits the ball up. If you get a volley, play the ball firmly into the open court and close in on the net.

Serve-and-volley on your serve, trying to mix spins, placements and speeds. Your main objective in serving is unpredictably, not speed.

When you volley the service return, be ready to play more volleys. Pushers rarely miss — they actually prefer to see you hit the ball in, because then they get to hit another shot. Hence, they will test you — be ready.

Attack their second serves with a chip-and-charge. Open up the court immediately, and if they lift the ball to buy time for recovering, advance and intercept it for a volley.

2.

If your net skills are not so good, you'd better prepare for a long afternoon. You can still beat a pusher, but it will take considerably longer (unless of course you are so good that you blow him out of the court. But there are pushers at all levels, even on ATP tour. So it doesn't matter how good you are, you can always meet a pusher at your level. Therefore, keep reading....)

Before we go into specifics, I hope you are familiar with how Andre Agassi plays. His net skills are not so great, but he knows exactly how to play counter-punchers — pushers so to speak. He works them around like a yoyo.

When he was younger and inexperienced, he often lost to them because he was not patient enough and made too many unforced errors. But he learned his lessons and is a living nightmare of every pusher on the ATP.

Remember the sequoia analogy? Even if you are Andre Agassi — and you are NOT — you need to be patient. Respect the pusher and his excellent abilities to defend. You can win the match, but you have to put in the effort.

The best tactic with pushers is to play as many short, sharply angled crosscourt shots as you can. If you just hit hard with no angle, you'll get every ball back to the baseline. But if you open up the court with a short crosscourt shot, the pusher has to run much farther to reach your next shot into the open court.

Since pushers cannot hit really hard, they usually can't hurt you from that short crosscourt shot. So, enjoy making them run. That should be your main objective. Not winning a point with an outright winner. When you get a really good opportunity — a very short ball — then hitting a winner becomes your objective.

So keep your opponent running, and try to open up the court starting with your serve. I've seen many of Andre Agassi's matches with a pusher where the score was something like 7:5, 6:3, 6:1. It took Andre quite a while to start opening cracks in the pusher's defense. But once the pusher was in trouble, Andre just kept making him run and run some more.

3.

Pushers are emotionally attached to the baseline — or, better said, to the area up to two meters behind the baseline. Get them out of there! Get them into their uncomfortable zone — mid-court or even better — make them play at the net.

You can achieve this with drop-shots, drop-volleys, and low and short balls. But always be honest with yourself about whether your skills are good enough to pull off these shots with good percentage.

If your drop-shot is reliable enough, you can drop-shot the pusher's second serve. Pushers are so used to being under attack that they immediately hop backward at the end of their serve. Since their weight is moving backward, if you hit a solid drop-shot, it will be very difficult for them to reach it.

Once you have a pusher at the net, don't panic. Know that pushers feel uncomfortable there. They are insecure about their volley and overhead skills, so you can calmly choose your passing shot or lob and execute.

Even if they win some points at the net you still need to see the big picture: they don't like playing there and you have more chances of winning the point than they do.

4.

When you are playing with them from the baseline, work them around. If you just keep the ball down the center and deep, you are playing their game, and they can do it better. So you must look for openings in their defense, and you must make them run left and right.

One way of making their defense more difficult is to take the ball earlier and thus shorten their recovery time. Since their shots are slow, you can take their ball at top of the bounce or even on the rise.

Don't aim for too much though. Just keep them running, and take away their recovery time. A tenth of a second here and a tenth of second there adds up. After five or six shots they'll be in much more in trouble than if you give them more time by waiting to hit the ball on the descent of its bounce.

5.

Do not fall into their rhythm! The pusher is used to his slow shots while you are probably not. If you start pushing the ball yourself, you will lose your natural stroke rhythm. And it is very difficult to find it again.

So find your preferred and natural speed of shots and stay with it. You must also be careful not to overhit in frustration and impatience. That is the pusher's main way of winning points. If you take that away from him, he may become impatient, too.

6.

Focus on precision and placement rather than power. Make pushers run, open up the court, try to get to the net, give them short, low balls — these are all tactics that emphasize placement rather than speed.

Pace actually helps pushers play well, because their swing is slow. But they can use the energy of your hard shots to return them harder. If you deny them that energy/pace, they may have trouble keeping good depth on their shots.

7.

Most pushers are very quick around the court, but you can actually use that to your advantage. How? By playing behind them, wrongfooting them.

8. And lastly, keep it simple. Figure out what works and what doesn't work against a pusher. Then just stick with your winning strategy. We tend to complicate things, and that is really a bad idea against pushers. Their game is simple, and it defeats complex and inconsistent tennis.

Just a few tips regarding your skill level:

If you are two levels better than the pusher and usually win, but you don't want to play for so long or you become frustrated during the match:

- Stay focused: Don't let your intensity drop after you get a good lead. Pushers are relentless, and you need to be relentless too. If you get them down, keep them down.
- Placement mixed with the right amount of power + patience = very disappointed pusher.
- If your strokes are better than pusher's but you frequently lose to them:
 - You are probably underestimating the pusher and thinking that better tennis strokes win matches. No, when players of similar ability play, superior tactics and mental toughness win.
 - Before the match, prepare mentally for a long, tough duel. Apply the tips from this report, and you'll be surprised how effective your strokes can be when based on smart tactics.
- If your strokes are about equal to the pusher's:

The only way to win is to push the ball back longer than the pusher does. You can't blow the pusher off the court, and he or she can't blow you off the court. This is a match I don't want to watch, because I haven't that much time.

So, all the best to you, and start looking to book some lessons with a pro and research the Internet for its wealth of information on tennis technique and tactics. Good luck!

Hopefully you've enjoyed the pusher's journey as much as I did. Just some thoughts about me and my ideas: I lost to pushers many times before I learned my lessons. They've taught me a lot, and sometimes I use their tactic for a point or two in my matches just to test my opponent and to see how they react to certain type of play.

I respect pushers tremendously, and even though my strokes are usually better, I give my 100% for every match that I play against one. Tennis is not about strokes, it's about strategy and mental toughness. And this is the best challenge you can get — playing a dreaded "pusher."

Good luck with your tennis adventures!

Tomaž Mencinger

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