
CHAPTER 35

Everything You Need to Know About Balance

(2020)

"Footwork is the means to perfect weight control and balance." – Bill Tilden, in his 1925 classic, *Match Play and the Spin of the Ball*

"One of the single biggest causes of errors in tennis is poor balance." – Nick Saviano, in his 2003 book, *Maximum Tennis*

"Balance is the greatest asset one can have in tennis." – All-time great Pancho Segura

Strokes and tactics usually dominate the conversation among coaches and teaching pros about what makes elite tennis players. Body balance seldom gets the attention or credit it deserves.

A notable coaching exception was legendary Welby Van Horn, who famously taught only footwork and balance in many a student's first lesson. Nowadays, teaching pro Marty Smith, a protégé of Van Horn, carries the banner for balance. "It sets a foundation from which a swing can be powerful, consistent, and done with less effort. It also plays a crucial role in agility and movement," says Smith, a two-time NCAA Southern Conference champion and, for the past 26 years, Director of Tennis at the prestigious New York Athletic Club.

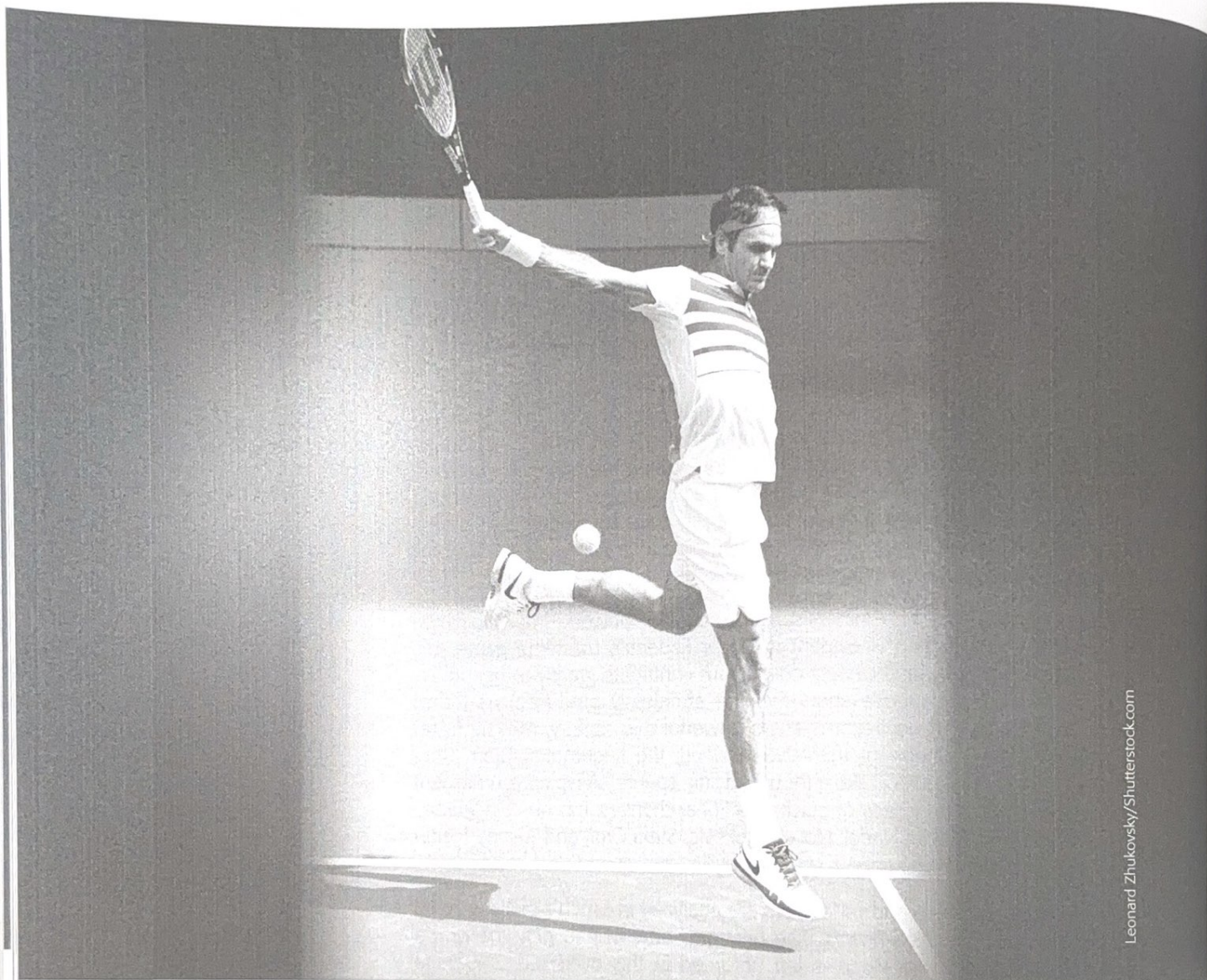
Smith's mission makes eminent sense. Proof of the powerful impact balance has on stroke production is evident in Roger Federer's masterful game. His unrivaled body stability and perfect equilibrium contribute greatly to beautifully timed, powerful, and precise shots that are effortlessly produced. As tennis shots on every level have become more powerful this century, moving faster has become more important than ever. Indeed, the fleet-footed Bjorn Borg once said, "A tennis match is like a thousand little sprints." A typical tournament match also requires hundreds of quick directional changes. It is no coincidence that all-time greats Rafael Nadal, Novak Djokovic, Steffi Graf, and Justine Henin also have featured blazing speed, uncanny agility, and exceptional balance.

The secrets of these and other stars are analyzed in Smith's brilliant 2017 instruction book, *Absolute Tennis: The best and next way to play the game* (New Chapter Press). No stone is left unturned in this oversized, 319-page tome. Perhaps the most valuable gem is his incisive treatment of balance.

In this comprehensive interview, the 52-year-old, Australian-born Smith summons his vast expertise, so players, teaching pros, and coaches can learn why and how excellent balance is critical for success in tennis.

Your Australian heritage and your resourceful mother played big roles in your tennis life. Please recount what happened.

I grew up in Warrambool, a town 260 km west of Melbourne. As a kid, I played three sports a lot—tennis, Aussie Rules Football, and cricket. When I was 11 years old in 1979, a competition in a national newspaper offered a prize of a free week at the Newcombe-Roche tennis camp, if you could get Tony Roche's middle name. Roche didn't like his middle name—it's Dalton—and even at Wimbledon, he wouldn't tell them, so his name didn't have the initial for his middle name on the scoreboard.



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Roger Federer, stroking a leaping backhand during his 2016 Australian Open quarterfinal victory over Tomáš Berdych. Leaping off of his right leg, Federer throws his left leg back for balance. He extends his left arm back to momentarily stop his shoulder rotation, and that causes his right arm to catapult forward into the ball. Federer's head remains still through and even after ball contact, and he finishes his follow-through high to impart topspin.

My mother researched and couldn't find any information on Roche's name, so she decided to call Roche's mother in Sydney. She asked Roche's mother what her son's middle name was, explaining she had a son who loved tennis and would enjoy the camp, and got Tony's middle name. I won the competition and did the tennis camp, where I was coached by an inspirational American coach. I improved a lot that week, got way into tennis, and within 18 months was the No. 1-ranked junior in my state of Victoria. If my mum hadn't made that phone call, I'm pretty sure my life would have been completely different.

I was ranked top five in the nation in the 14s and 16s and was fortunate enough to represent my state and country. I have such fond tennis memories from Australia—practicing on the grass courts in Warnambool in the summer, playing club tennis in Melbourne in the winter, training with great coaches, and watching the Australian Open at Kooyong.

When I was 17, I decided to look into playing college tennis in the U.S. I wrote to about 25 schools and received a few full scholarship offers, including from Duke and the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. This is 1985, before the Internet, and we knew very little about U.S. colleges. My parents suggested attending UTC because the best college in Melbourne is the University of Melbourne and the University of TN sounded the closest to it. Fortunately, it turned out to be a perfect fit. If I had gone to Duke, I would have lost my scholarship and returned home, because their team was too strong for me.

Why did you devote an entire chapter of your book, *Absolute Tennis*, to balance and then emphasize its importance even more by making it your first chapter?

I wanted my book to have a logical progression. Tennis is a very athletic sport, so I felt it made sense to begin the book with chapters on balance, the kinetic chain, and movement. I subscribe to the European philosophy of how to develop top tennis players—juniors should cross-train and play various sports as young kids first to learn balance and movement before spending many hours hitting balls on the practice court later as teenagers. I applied that viewpoint to the structure of the book by starting with the athletic principles, then moving on to the strokes, strategy, and finishing with psychology.

Without understanding how the body moves, a student cannot maximize their potential on their strokes. Poor strokes are going to limit strategic options, and without fluent movement, confidence in your strokes, and strategic knowledge, your mind will likely be frustrated instead of inspired. My goal was to teach the reader that tennis should be learned sequentially to help them improve their skills quickly and enjoy the game even more.

Additionally, I wanted to make the first chapter balance, because it is such an important foundation from which successful stroke production and other aspects of the game flow. To use a painting analogy that Welby Van Horn used to tell me: if the stroke is the painting, balance is the painting's frame that enhances the stroke's stability and structure. Poor balance inevitably diminishes the stroke's power, accuracy, and consistency. Balance is also an important factor in movement. Tennis is a game where the ability to change direction