



# How Australian Open Champions Shape Tennis' Past, Present and Future

By Marty Smith

Watching the Australian Open on television this week I was struck by how much tennis has changed since I was there as a kid 35 years ago in 1983. Improvements in equipment and training have sped up the game and modified some strokes. Interestingly, some of these modifications only became popular techniques after their successful use by a legendary player, including former Australian Open champions such as Jim Courier, Serena Williams and Rafael Nadal, who all played important roles in altered strokes becoming common in the modern player's repertoire.

It's a little hard to imagine now, but in the wood racquet era players seldom moved into the backhand side of the court to hit the forehand – a stroke called the inside forehand. The inside forehand didn't become an accepted stroke until the late 1980s, when coach

Nick Bollettieri and Jim Courier devised a game plan in which Courier would use his powerful forehand, especially his inside forehand, as much as possible. His world No. 1 ranking highlighted this stroke and it quickly became the most devastating baseline shot in tennis.

Similarly, Serena Williams ushered the swinging volley into the mainstream. At the 1983 Australian Open players used a short, punching motion on the volley. In the 1990s, Serena's successful use of the swinging volley proved that taking a long, full swing on the volley was the right technique in some circumstances. Her dominance transformed the swinging volley into a feared shot and sped up the game.

Rafael Nadal's use of the reverse forehand, where the right-handed player finishes with the racquet on their right side instead of their left, has led it to gain favor in the past decade. It is now frequently used by the pros to cope with the increased speed of the ball and to facilitate the sharp vertical lift of the racquet required for added topspin on certain shots. When Nadal first made this stroke popular, many pundits expressed concern that it would increase mishits and injuries. Now, it is the concern, rather than the reverse forehand technique, that has faded away.

I could cite more changes, but the point is that the game has evolved, and the question becomes: what strokes that are rarely used today might become more common in the future? In my opinion, the volleyball and reverse serve, dual forehand, and hybrid backhand are possibilities.

In the volleyball serve, players begin by setting up in their regular serving stance but stand about 18 inches behind the baseline. After initiating the backswing, the front foot steps forward to the baseline, and the back foot then joins the front foot before performing a regular pinpoint serve. The extra step forward with the front foot increases body momentum and power. Top doubles player Jamie Murray uses the volleyball serve; this technique also speeds up his movement to the net when serving in his doubles matches. Even though this technique complicates the service motion, the volleyball serve's advantages may prove valuable as the game continues to get faster and the players more athletic.

Although other sports routinely curve the ball right and left for various reasons, tennis players have always curved the serve in only one direction. In the reverse serve, right handed players brush around the left hand side of the ball, instead of the usual right, and this causes the ball to curve to the right, not left. Thus, the reverse serve allows players to curve the ball in two directions. I've seen former top 30 player Lukas Rosol

successfully use the reverse serve to add unpredictability and width to his serve. Again, as the game evolves, the gains realized by adding unpredictability and better court advantage may make the reverse serve a more common serving option in the future.

Will groundstrokes change? If the game continues to increase power and angles from the baseline, will the forehand's superior power and reach over the backhand make the dual forehand (i.e., playing with a righty and lefty forehand) a style we will see in Melbourne in 2053? It is also possible that the hybrid backhand groundstroke gains acceptance. The great ATP returners (eg., Connors, Agassi, Djokovic) have all been two-handed backhand players. However, because one arm can swing faster than two arms, one-handed backhand players like Federer and Wawrinka often hit with more power, spin, and variety during the rally than their two-handed backhand peers. Using the hybrid backhand — hitting the two-hander on the return and one-hander during the rally — might represent the “best of both worlds” for some ATP players in the decades to come.

These strokes may seem improbable today, but back in 1983, the strokes later adopted by Courier, Williams, and Nadal would have seemed unlikely too. Maybe these possible future strokes will also need a legend to get them jump started. Based on history, it does seem we will need proof from excellence before we believe that different could be better. Tennis is a finely balanced sport and small improvements in the past have led to shifts in how it is played. Look at how an upgrade in strings in the 1990s diminished serve and volley tennis. What kind of impact will a slightly more athletic and quicker game have on tennis? No one can say, but it is likely we will witness some changes and it's exciting to think of what we might see on Rod Laver Arena another 35 years from now.