



Coaching to Win Through Fun, Fitness, Data and Personalized Advice

By Marty Smith

As tennis coaches, we all want our students to have fun, improve their health and compete successfully. Enjoying the game and lifting the heart rate during lessons is relatively easy to do. What often sets coaches apart is their ability to give advice and set up drills that increase their students' chances of victory. If we want them to win, we must practice what happens in a match. Running up and down the court playing a game of offense/defense is fun and vigorous, but how many shots are hit this way in a match? In contrast, the return of serve is hit almost every point, yet this shot is often not highlighted during lessons. I believe it's a good idea to incorporate the important match shots into the lesson's games and cardio drills. This gets our students smiling and sweating, while at the same time helps them win more matches.

Another common mistake coaches can make is providing tips suited for high-level or younger players when the players on their court are intermediate or older. Some coaches teach the way they themselves play, but less skilled and slower players are

going to have different court positioning and shot selection guidelines compared to the “pro” method of play. For example, getting close to the net to volley is an important fundamental of high-level doubles, but if a student lacks the experience to anticipate the lob or can’t back pedal quickly, playing close to the net will be a court positioning easily exploited by opponents. Good coaches are observant and empathic. They can tailor their instruction to the skill level and degree of athleticism of each student on the court, and thus, increase their student’s likelihood of success.

Practice How You Play

Tennis statistics are clear. There have been many studies performed and the data shows the average rally in most matches lasts around four or five shots. If that’s the case, the serve and return of serve represent a large percentage of the game. Now what are the two shots that often receive the least attention in lessons? You guessed it—the serve and return.

The serve sets the tone of the point. If you serve well, you are usually in control of the point. If you serve poorly, you are often playing defense. It’s a shot that has a huge impact on the outcome of the match. It’s also the only stroke you can practice alone, but it’s my experience that most students rarely do this, so it’s our job to include serves during lessons. Placing an emphasis on serving in your lessons will have your students serving faster, more accurately, and with greater consistency. Additionally, it will lift their serving confidence and play matches in more relaxed and positive state of mind—an often underrated benefit of increased serving practice.

A complaint coaches often get regarding the serve is that it slows down the lesson. However, if the coach throws the ball to the server to begin the serve, the lesson isn’t being slowed down by any significant degree. You can also add rules like not allowing ball bouncing routines before the serve and permitting one serve instead of two to speed things up. Another complaint I sometimes hear (usually from poor servers) is that the serve is less fun than other strokes. You can add incentives to make the serve a favorite part of the lesson. For example, divide the service box into halves or thirds, and if the serving team hits the serve into the designated section and wins the point, they receive two points. Other bonus point scenarios could be aces, missed return of serves, or successful poaches following the serve.

A classic coaching doubles drill is playing five points and then making the four players switch positions. Instead of the pro feeding the ball to start all five points, have the students serve to start the fourth and fifth point and include bonus point scenarios.

Always feeding the perfect ball is unrealistic and can lead to repetitive shot patterns. Students serving better mimics match situations and results in more unpredictable and interesting rallies.

While the serve may be the most important shot at the professional level, at the recreational level, it might be the return of serve. At the recreational level, the return of serve it is often the easiest shot of the rally and the best opportunity to employ a strategy, or move an opponent and create chaos. For example, receiving a slow second serve may be the best chance of the rally to hit short and draw a strong baseline opponent up to net. Or in doubles, to lob over the net players' head and get the serving team scrambling. After the serve, recreational players are contending with their opponents' often faster groundstrokes and defending the full half court instead of the much smaller service box. It's important we teach them a strong return of serve and take advantage of this shot's favorable characteristics.

Some players don't give the return of serve the attention it deserves because they make the mistake of regarding it as just another groundstroke. However, the return is different from the rally groundstroke in several ways: the serve is hit from a greater height, creating a higher bounce; the serve can curve rightward or leftward; and because the serve's ball speed is often faster or slower than an opponent's groundstroke, it is returned from positions away from the baseline. It's a special shot that has a unique rhythm and technique that can only be developed through repetition. Also, unless there is a double fault, the return happens every point. Now, because it is a unique shot and happens almost every point, you would assume it would be the focal point of many lessons. However, because it requires a serve to do, it's frequency in lessons rarely matches it's frequency in matches.

How do we get the return of serve to become an important part of our lessons? We make it fun and do some serving ourselves. One simple but effective drill is to set up two players on the baseline on each side of the court. Two players serve cross court from the doubles position while the other two players return these serves. After the students serve once each, the coach serves from the singles position one time to each returner. The returns from the coach's serve have scoring incentives. For example, first returner to hit three returns down the line in the alley wins the game, and then players rotate positions. Or first returner to make three drop shot returns bounce twice before the service line wins, or set up a rope ten feet inside the court and make hitting deep past the rope the goal. There are numerous options. If you wish, you can lift your student's heart rate during this drill by requiring them to run and touch the back fence or do some other exercise between each serve and return.

No Man's Land For Most, But Not Everyone

Every coach has a different student mix, but for many of us the low-to-intermediate level player is a core group. Also, keep in mind the average age of tennis players is going up, so older players now represent a larger percentage of our students than ever before. It's important we give court positioning and shot selection advice that caters to these two types of players.

As I mentioned above, getting close to the net to volley is appropriate for high-level players but for less experienced, slower players, that position should be done with caution. Playing from the area between the service line and baseline—commonly referred to as no man's land—is another area of the court where advice should vary depending on the level and foot speed of the student. No man's land is considered a bad place to be because it's a zone where players are vulnerable to half volleying difficult balls that land near the feet. However, for lower-level and older players, standing three or four feet inside the baseline can be a winning court positioning for three main reasons. First, playing slightly inside the baseline gives them a much better chance to attack the net. Slower players will rarely attack the net if they are starting from behind the baseline. Second, they will retrieve greater number of short balls. Lower-level players and older players compete against opponents who hit slower, and therefore, are often forced to defend against the short ball. Third, it provides more opportunities for students to hit high balls in the air instead of letting high balls bounce and getting pushed back to the fence into a bad position.

I have charted many recreational-level and aged 60 and over matches and discovered sometimes over half of the groundstrokes were hit from no man's land. The truth is, even though they are usually taught otherwise, these players frequently return serve from no man's land and stay there until the end of the point. Remember, if we want them to win, we must practice what happens in a match.

There are many drills you can do to improve your student's play from no man's land. One drill I like is a doubles game which begins with one team standing in no man's land and the other team standing on the baseline with the coach. The coach feeds the ball and the baseline team runs forward and plays five points at net. The team in no man's land has to hit two shots before they are free to move forward or backward out of the no man's land area. After five points, the net team runs back to the baseline to start again. First team to score 21 points wins the game. You can include bonus points for the net

team if they hit a ball that lands in the court and past the players in no man's land, and bonus points for the no man's land team if they win the point before they hit their third shot of the rally. This drill achieves our three goals: scoring and fun bonus points situations, movement to improve fitness, and practicing what happens in a match, and thus, preparing our students well for competitive play.

Personalize Your Instruction

Coaches should also be cognizant that shot selection advice must vary depending on their student's skill level and age. For high-level players, hitting a powerful overhead is one of the most rewarding shots in the game. However, for less experienced or older players, hitting the fast overhead involves precise timing and can be a risky proposition. Some recreational players have strong overheads, but for those who don't, I often recommend playing the short, angled high volley instead of the overhead. It can be a very effective and reliable shot. When compared to high-level players, recreational players should also serve and volley less, look to take offense on the return of serve more, and aim their shots more inside the lines for a greater margin of error. Older player's slower foot speed will also tweak a coach's regular advice. Older players typically face opponents who are also older, and thus, should take advantage of the fact that the court is more than twice as long as it is wide and use the drop shot and lob frequently. Therefore, when teaching older students, coaches should spend more time working on these two shots than when doing lessons with younger clientele.

Students' strengths and weaknesses, mental toughness, and what form of the game they like to play are additional considerations coaches need to take into account. If a coach has three players on the court, one could have a strong net game, one good finesse on drop shots, and one a powerful forehand. This variability in student strengths will lead to an observant and engaged coach to occasionally give different advice to each player in a similar point situation. For example, if an opponent's shot lands around the service line, a coach may advise the player with the strong net game to move forward and attack the net, the finesse player to drop shot, and the player with a strong forehand to unload on a forehand and remain on the baseline. The "cookie cutter" advice is easier, but it won't maximize our student's chances of winning. Of course, tennis isn't just a physical game. It is also a mental game with long breaks between points where players reflect on their performance. A student's weakness may be their negative inner voice. This is an issue that coaches must address and look to improve so the student can better deal with adversity during matches. Lastly, many students only

play doubles so coach's should focus on the important doubles skills, such as transiting forward to the net from the baseline as well as conduct drills that involve a lot of volleys, lobs, and touch shots that keep the ball low. Teaching these players high, loopy topspin groundstrokes that work well in singles is not going to help them a lot in their doubles matches.

Conclusion

It's important that our students have fun and get good exercise. Those are the two main reasons most of our students play tennis. But we also want them to win. Fortunately, with a little thought and preparation, we can achieve all three objectives. Set up a lesson plan that includes the strokes that occur frequently in matches. Tennis research has accumulated significant data, and it shows that the majority of the action—and the winning—occurs in the first four shots of the rally. The player or team that wins the majority of the short rallies almost always wins the match. Therefore, spend some time on the serve and return in your lessons, and incorporate some fun scoring ideas into your serve and return practice. Additionally, always remember that no two students are the same. If you can personalize your court positioning and shot selection advice to each student's skill level, age, strengths, weaknesses, and other considerations you will lead them to more victories. Importantly, it will also show your students you are a thoughtful and empathic coach, and they will appreciate that too.

So always have your student's smiles foremost in your mind, while at the same time develop the strokes and learn the tactics that will also have them smiling at the end of their league matches and tournaments. It will distinguish you as a coach resulting in more lessons. Plus, you'll see your students enjoying the game even more than they already do, and with that accomplished, everybody wins.