

# Instinctive Tennis

*The natural way to learn, play and teach tennis*

**Happy Bhalla**



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*The natural way to learn, play and teach tennis*

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# Preface

I have been involved with the game of tennis for almost 38 years as both a player and coach. During this time I have had numerous experiences all over the world and seen many things from different perspectives. This book is an attempt to share some of the things I have learned from this wonderful journey.

For players at all levels, from the beginning recreational player to the world-ranked professional, this book will attempt the ambitious task of providing a systematic approach to help them improve their game. The key for players at all levels is to fall in love with the game. If we can maintain the intrinsic joy of hitting a ball, which is the primary motivation when individuals first begin playing this game, then playing tennis can be a rewarding experience. However, if we cannot, playing tennis, especially competitive tennis at the higher echelons of the professional game, can be torturous.

For coaches this book attempts to provide a comprehensive methodology that will help make their profession more fun and much more effective. There is a definite need for this because right now there are many individuals who really have very little idea how to go about teaching tennis to enthused students. Fallacies and misinformation about the game abound and age-old theories of teaching have to be questioned and broken down if something new and valuable is to emerge. Learning to play tennis has been made very difficult, yet if we can drop all that we know and replace it with a common-sense approach and a natural way of learning, many more people can enjoy playing this game.

For parents this book attempts to provide some insights as to how to handle the stress-filled environment of com-

petitive tennis and yet still have loving and conflict-free relationships with their adolescent children. This is done by examining the roots of the parent-child relationship: its goals and objectives and how they can be achieved. It is extremely important to find this balance because in the prevailing environment, parental nurturing is being sacrificed for material success, with both short- and long-term repercussions that are not pleasant for either party.

Underlying all these practical considerations lies the opportunity to transform our lives through becoming more aware of why and how we play this beautiful game. Most of us live our lives unconsciously; we have no real awareness of who we are, what we want and how to go about getting it. By bringing some awareness to these matters, we will be able to see our entire lives transformed. The beauty of this is that this journey for inner peace and contentment is entirely compatible with the pursuit of excellence. This book offers us the opportunity to embark on the journey towards making this happen. It is an ambitious objective and there is great risk involved, but a little introspection and a clearer assessment of our lives will reveal that we have very little to lose.

I would like to express my undying gratitude to all those who have helped me along my spiritual journey, in particular, Osho and Jiddhu Krishnamurti. Their light has made the journey that much brighter for me.

A special thanks also for all the tennis lovers who I have had the pleasure of trying to facilitate and whose enthusiastic approach to the game was an integral part of my learning process. In addition, Sam Whyte deserves mention for all the time he put into helping me with the early part of the manuscript. I would also like to thank Dave O'Meara for his graciousness in allowing me to use the words, 'Instinctive Tennis' for the title of this book.

Finally, I would like to express my grateful appreciation to my beloved, Margareta, for her unconditional support and constant love.

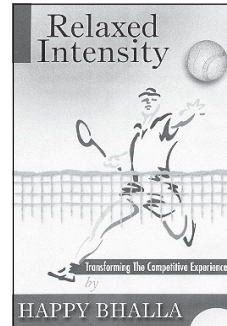
*Happy Bhalla*

*Another Title of Interest*

## Relaxed Intensity

*Happy Bhalla*

96 pages Softcover  
145 × 225 mm ISBN 81-901297-7-5



**This book is about more than just tennis. It is equally penetrating in its insights towards life in general and sports in particular.**

*'Relaxed Intensity* is the evolutionary next step from Gallwey's *Inner Game of Tennis*. It will give you insights into your deeper Self and your tennis game as a paradigm for your life.

Happy's viewpoints are refreshingly iconoclastic and filled with innovative ideas which combine tennis knowledge, modern psychology, and eastern philosophy.'

—**Dr Ron Rebhuen**, Sports psychologist,  
tennis professional and spiritual practitioner

'Happy Bhalla is a remarkable teacher who earnestly works with his students on many levels aligning mind, body and spirit. I would recommend anyone of any age, of any level to read his book ... .'

—**Dr Yenna Marcovicci**, author of *Dance of Tennis*,  
Sports psychologist and spiritual practitioner

'The spiritual part of this book has touched me very deeply; I wish the reader the same ... .'

—**Oscar Wegner**, author of *Tennis in 48 Hours*,  
tennis commentator, analyst and teacher

The author, **Happy Bhalla**, lives six months of the year in the Hamptons of Long Island, NY where he runs a Tennis Academy for both juniors and adults.



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**There is no fee. All are welcome.**

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# 1. Introduction

I have been involved in the game of tennis for many years. I started playing in London at the age of 10 at a public facility with my brother and continued playing there through my teens in Junior tournaments, at a local club and in school. When I arrived in the States at the age of 17, I played College tennis and continued with the tournament scene after graduation. Simultaneously, I started teaching at a Yeshiva in Forest Hills, New York at the age of 19 and taught for the better part of my twenties, thirties and now forties in Europe, Asia and North America.

Throughout all this time I have observed the teaching culture and been surprised at how haphazard it all was, filled with largely well-intentioned people not knowing much about something they spoke about with an authority that suggested otherwise, a group I was certainly a part of. This awareness of my ignorance led me to enthusiastically and diligently pursue the art of teaching tennis. This book has arisen out of a desire to share my journey as a tennis teaching professional, one that has been greatly influenced by my spiritual journey, which has been on-going concurrently.

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By the spiritual journey, I mean one that focuses more on ones being as opposed to ones actions, one that reflects ones consciousness and silhouettes the core of who we

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are. Not our personality, which is at our periphery, but our essence, that which we *really* are. Generally, in the material world we are focused on actions, and we operate under the assumption that by changing our actions, *we* change, but, my experience is that the exact opposite is true. As an awareness of ones own being grows, it is almost impossible for everything one does not to be transformed. Action arises out of consciousness, so as consciousness grows, action is transformed. Any change in behavior without a preceding change in consciousness is likely to be short-lived. However when consciousness changes through genuine understanding, behavior will, like a shadow, follow effortlessly.

As a youngster, I was never 'taught' how to play tennis; I simply played. In England, at that time, taking lessons was not a common practice, except for the rich. Yet, somehow, I emerged with largely picture perfect technique. A miracle? Hardly, as this book will illustrate. Do I think I would have been better if I had had some help? Absolutely, but only if it had been the 'right' kind of help! Actually, I was taught, not in the traditional sense perhaps, but by the professionals of that era, the members of my local club and by everyone else I saw playing. I am referring, of course, to the visual images that defined my game without my awareness. It was an unconscious learning, but a learning all the same.

When I 'fell' into teaching tennis for a living, I passionately absorbed myself in the study of the game and observed many of the most well respected instructors and visited teaching academies around the US. The better teaching professionals, meaning the most creative and experienced, had a number of different approaches to teaching and had found practical methods that worked in some instances. But no one seemed to have developed the depth of understanding that could yield a methodology

that could be applied to everyone. Tim Gallwey, to some degree, was a shining exception and his book, *The Inner Game of Tennis*, which was published in the mid-seventies, had a profound effect on me because it applied spiritual 'truths' to the very practical task of teaching and learning tennis. Most importantly, his ideas seemed to work. Gallwey laid a wonderful foundation for transforming the methodology of teaching, but it seemed he was advocating total non-interference in the learning process, a perception that was a little too much for the teaching industry to swallow. After much experimentation over a number of years, my own conclusion was that total non-interference was not the most efficient learning methodology. Many of the sincere instructors who were touched by Gallwey also experimented with his ideas and, I assume, came to the same basic conclusion. And so, after the initial excitement that Gallwey created had died down, the teaching profession reverted to a methodology of total interference. My position now is that there is a point between those two extremes that works best and it is that point I will attempt to sketch out in this book.

It was not until I met Oscar Wegner<sup>1</sup> in the early '90s that the final elements of my personal formula for effective teaching began to take shape. I am indebted to Oscar for all that I learned from him about open stance groundstrokes, both in their preparation and their execution. I recognized then that I had been teaching in a manner and style that made little sense; fortunately, I was continually experimenting in an attempt to be better and obviously open to learning. I distinctly remember one time being informed by a student that he 'felt' better

<sup>1</sup> Oscar Wegner is a creative and well-respected tennis professional who has written a book about tennis called, *Tennis in 48 hours* and has released a series of instructional videos. These items can all be obtained from his website at [oscarwegner.com](http://oscarwegner.com).

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when he hit 'open' instead of turning sideways to hit the ball on the forehand side. I '*instructed*' him that he '*had*' to turn sideways to hit the ball properly. I suspect I came up with an intelligent sounding reason why he should.

One of the most significant problems within the tennis teaching profession results from the hubris of the average

*The art of teaching tennis is distinctly different from the art of playing it and one can be extremely proficient at one while hopelessly inadequate at the other.*

teaching professional, someone who has come into the teaching field by virtue of being a good player, or who has extensively studied the game through books, videos or con-

tact with other teaching professionals. Those in the first category, having reached a certain level of play, consider themselves experts on the game and automatically qualified to teach.<sup>2</sup> However, the art of teaching tennis is distinctly different from the art of playing it and one can be extremely proficient at one while hopelessly inadequate at the other.

There are two major issues here. One is to clearly see what the end product should look like, a conclusion which is complicated by the fact that the teaching profession has in large part failed to notice what the top players are doing, so rigid is their adherence to their 'knowledge' of the game. Notice how even now 'experts' talk about taking the racket back quickly when preparing for a groundstroke, when this is simply not the case with the top professional players.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, if we are fortunate to have the ability to truly 'see', then we need to be able to articulate the process by which we can lead a beginner to ultimately become a professional by traversing all the

<sup>2</sup> In fairness to the teaching profession, this idea of being an 'expert' is sometimes projected onto them by an adoring public, one that is easily impressed by their 'amazing' playing skills.

<sup>3</sup> See section on 'Myths of Tennis' for more details.

levels in-between. For me, the 'seeing' is an essential prerequisite, but more important is developing a process of inner growth alongside that individual's physical transition from a beginner to an advanced player. The latter two go hand to hand, although it is possible to become a world-class player without any inner growth, which will result in material well being and spiritual deprivation and a prevailing sense of emptiness. Helping an individual orchestrate this journey is what facilitating tennis players is all about, although one needs to have walked this path oneself to some degree before there is any attempt to 'help' others.

That we have tended to put our teaching trust largely in the hands of those who have reached a high level of performance themselves has always seemed rational. If I can do something, the thinking goes, surely I can convey that knowledge to another person. Unfortunately, this is a false assumption because, while knowledge can be conveyed, playing tennis is not knowledge, it is an experience. Knowledge is objective, while experience is subjective. Consequently the subjective experience of playing tennis cannot easily be passed on to another. Some sense of that experience can be conveyed, but only if the student permits his or her experience to become the filter through which 'life' is injected into these words.

My contention is that the student needs to *explore* various aspects of the game of tennis rather than merely follow mechanical instructions. The active passivity and patience implied in the word *explore* are essential if the basic skills of playing tennis are to be learned in a natural, pain-free manner. Certainly, at the beginner level, some simple form and movements need to be introduced to the student. Yet allowing for some form to be introduced opens up a myriad of possibilities for false information to be received. The key is to offer guidelines with

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as few specifics as possible. For example, on the groundstrokes it is best to simply demonstrate a few forehands visually and see what happens or kinetically help the student feel the essentials of the stroke with your guidance.

The cold technical form can be provided by the facilitator, but it is the tennis lover, herself, who must breathe life into these movements. This can be achieved more easily when he or she is not inundated with information that may be 'correct', but does not contribute to the learning process. The simple fact is that good form is correct because it is biomechanically sound, which

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means it has a flow that arises out of the natural movement of the body. The human body, when in a state of relaxation, is predisposed to smooth and fluid movements. Awkward movements are impossible in a relaxed person and arise only when the mind-body continuum are in conflict. Relaxation happens when the mind is silent; conversely awkwardness that derives from tension appears when the mind cannot be silent. For the beginner, the source of the inability to relax is fear and a basic mistrust of the body's ability to perform. This results in the mind 'trying' to achieve something. For the more advanced players, relaxation is difficult because of the desires that surface from the will to win, to improve or simply to play well. This 'trying' or goal-oriented state of mind disconnects us from our body, rendering fluid movements almost impossible.

On the other hand, exploration and experimentation presuppose no right or wrong movement and consequently avoid the need for goals. It is simply walking along an

unknown path with a heightened sense of awareness, without direction or presupposed purpose, propelled along solely by the intrinsic joy of moving into the unknown, with safety and security zipped up on the sidelines (along with ones towel and spare racket). It arises from a deep trust of the body's innate capacity to learn and the process by which that happens.

This is a natural way of learning: the *instinctive* way. The paradox is that while it would seem that such an emphasis on individualism would result in chaotic movement and unusual-looking strokes, ironically the exact opposite is true. The more we let go of the 'right' way to hit the ball, the easier we will learn to hit like the best players. This is because they, as great athletes, have allowed their bodies to cede to the most efficient way to hit the ball. Club players, on the other hand, do not 'trust' their bodies and are consequently leading with the head, playing with fear and tension, which seldom result in smooth, flowing and natural-looking stroke production. We all have similar bodies, our joints and muscles move in similar ways and operate under the same laws of biomechanics. Consequently, it should not be surprising, if when relaxed, we hit in similar ways.

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As suggested above, when the mind is silent, the body will find the 'correct' way to hit the ball. When that action is repeated over and over, it becomes 'grooved' (a process referred to as muscle memory) and will only be scuttled if the conscious mind intervenes and becomes active during playing. An excellent example of this occurred in the mid-nineties, when I took some of my 'tennis lovers' to the US open. In the early nineties, when Agassi and Courier ruled the roost of world tennis, I spent a great deal of time studying their play on slow



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motion videocassette. I saw that they hit open stance on all forehands and many backhands.<sup>4</sup> This realization revolutionized my approach to teaching tennis and led me to eschew all 'expert' analysis of the game and instead watch the game more closely and develop my own understanding of what I saw.

During our visit that year to the US Open Qualifying tournament at Flushing Meadow Park in Queens, New York, it was suddenly announced over the loud-speaker that Andre Agassi would be practicing on the center court. Excitedly, I collected my troop and headed over there. Here at last, I felt, I would have an opportunity to give my youngsters a living lesson in the 'controversial' way I was teaching them to hit the ball, exhibited by one of the all time great talents of the game. I say, controversial, because most teaching professionals were still advocating the sideways approach to hitting the forehand. Only the most enlightened of them conceded that it was OK to hit open stance, but only if one did not have enough time! Imagine my surprise, then, with expected vindication only a short walk away, to see Andre slowly warming up with his coach, Brad Gilbert, and turning sideways and stepping forward to hit each forehand. I was speechless. However, as soon as Andre began hitting closer to his normal speed, I saw that he had 'reverted' to the open-stance forehand, the forehand that was so indelibly imprinted in my mind's eye, the one I had seen him hit in slow motion so often in the comfort of my basement, courtesy of the VCR. This incident illustrated to me that even Andre, perhaps, was not sure how he hit the ball. When he had too much time, he probably unconsciously replayed in his mind the way he had been taught to hit the ball, but as soon as he started playing, his mind fell silent and the natural intelligence of the body took over.

<sup>4</sup> As I have said before, my friend Oscar Wegner was instrumental in bringing this to my attention.

Ironically, in my arguments with teaching professionals on the subject of open-stance forehands years before the late '90s when they became more commonly accepted, it was interesting to note that almost all those proponents of the 'turn to the side and step into the ball' approach to hitting a forehand, hit open-stance themselves during the course of a match or during a strenuous hitting session or lesson, it is almost impossible not to. Even those advanced players who do turn sideways to hit a ball will have to allow their back leg to swing around after the hit.

This and other experiences taught me that learning took place not through the conscious mind, but in spite of the obstacles presented by it. It inspired me to look further and delve deeper into what this meant and how it could best be used in the art of teaching tennis. This book is a sharing of the outcome of this search. I am not advocating a passively anarchic approach to teaching and learning tennis, but I do think that an active, intelligently passive methodology is the way to go, something in between doing nothing and orchestrating every single body part.

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I can give you an example of how this has worked for me. One winter afternoon in the early '90s, I had a scheduled group lesson with local high school-level youngsters and due to the severe weather only one showed up. After a short explanation on form followed by a gradual progression and an hour of largely just hitting balls in silence, this young lady who had been hitting closed-stance forehands her entire tennis-playing life, and who had taken numerous tennis lessons, all of which had reinforced the closed-style forehand, began hitting powerful, open-stance forehands easily and consistently from the baseline as if she had been doing this her entire life. A marvelous transformation, with hardly a peep out of me!

### **Shifting Paradigms**

In the old paradigm of teaching, there is a teacher who imparts knowledge and a student who receives. I wish to propose a different paradigm, one which is more in tune with reality, one in which both teacher and student are giving and receiving. Both have to be open and receptive to wherever the process of learning takes them. This new paradigm requires a change in terminology. Consequently, I would like to replace the word teacher with *facilitator* and the word student with *tennis lover*.

The term facilitator more accurately depicts the role of what a 'teacher' should be: helping to create the necessary environment for learning to be a pleasant and effective two-way experience. In this text you will see the term facilitator frequently, and hopefully each time you see it, it will serve as a reminder of the new paradigm. Similarly, the term student is too one-dimensional; its connotation is simply one of receptivity and therefore too passive. It is a little too serious, while its replacement, tennis lover, more accurately describes the perfect mindset, a person who, regardless of ability or standard of play, is playing an active role in the learning process as opposed to sitting back and saying, 'tell me what to do and I will do it'. In addition, the tennis lover is more playful. He or she understands that the value of playing tennis lies in the process, not in the aspiration to reach a certain performance level.

Also, I think the word opponent is archaic and should be laid to rest because it reinforces the battle terminology within the old competitive paradigm. Opponent denotes an obstacle to be overcome, which with respect to tennis is a misnomer. Playing tennis, even competitive matches, is about one's own performance more than about beating the person on the other side of the net. Consequently, the

person on the other side of the net is really our partner;<sup>5</sup> someone who provides us with an opportunity to *'sing our song and dance our dance'*.

For this new paradigm, the emphasis is on the process, not the result; the playing and not the winning or losing. My understanding is that for the vast majority of players for whom winning remains the main focus, peace and contentment will elude them and while they may achieve some 'success', they will not find the happiness they truly yearn for. On the contrary they may often be torturing themselves, usually without even realizing it. Only deeper reflection will reveal that one can win without being a 'winner' and that losing can leave one 'gaining' in numerous ways. Inner tranquility can exist regardless of winning or losing, when ones focus is on performing. What good is it to suffer through two hours of an emotional roller-coaster, when even the victory (if it happens) does not bring any measure of peace for any length of time? However being relaxed and focusing on the here-and-now brings intrinsic joy, rendering the result almost inconsequential.

My contention is that performance in competition is largely about dealing with the demons within, like fear, anger and frustration. One has only to watch almost any competitive match and notice the emotional explosions (of varying degrees) happening. *Performance in competition is largely about dealing with the demons within, like fear, anger and frustration.* On the professional level they occur less often than they used to simply because players are now realizing that these outbursts hamper peak performance. The best performance happens to that individual who is most able to remain centered, relaxed and calm. He or she will then perform to the best of his or her

<sup>5</sup> My friend Jenna Marcovicci in his Dance of Tennis workshops in Upstate, NY at the Omega Institute emphasizes this point.

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ability with equanimity, regardless of the outcome. In order to perform from that emotional space, fear and doubt have to be transcended. This is the 'Inner Game' alluded to by Tim Gallwey. The outer game will continue simultaneously, but it is of infinitely less importance. The irony is, of course, that although the outer game becomes markedly less important once one becomes aware of the inner game, 'winning' the inner game will result in peak performance, which in turn will produce the best results you are capable of.

## 2. Foundational Information

In this section I would like to outline some basic information, the understanding of which is essential to the rest of the book because these themes permeate the very fiber of the learning process in tennis as I see it. My intention is to formulate a comprehensive methodology on the art of teaching tennis. This might seem a herculean task because of the seemingly innumerable ways people play this game, but I assumed when I started this project that there must be some common threads that wove through the strokes of all good players.

### **Mental Approach to the Game**

'There are very few tennis players who really love this game.' This is a pretty outrageous statement, but close observation of the behavior of players as they play the game (as opposed to simply asking them), will illustrate the truth of this statement. Players start playing this game for different reasons. Having fun is certainly one of the most often stated reasons for playing, but somehow the fun gets lost when the ego wiggles its way into the process. My observation is that as players improve, the simple joy of playing becomes more difficult to sustain.

The reason that fun is difficult to maintain on the tennis court is because too soon after we begin playing, we develop the 'wrong' reasons for continuing to play. After this, the more we play, the more the lack of this fundamental mental building block becomes a hindrance.

What are the right reasons for playing? *The right reasons for playing evolve around falling in love with the playing.* They must be intrinsic to the playing itself and not arise from an objective to be achieved. Playing for the 'wrong'

*The right reasons for playing evolve around falling in love with the playing.* reasons, such as for the aggrandizement of ego, will ultimately bring fear, tension and frustration to our experience of playing.

Consequently, it would be prudent to at least become aware of our own motivations for playing, the examination of which will give us the opportunity to infuse our experience with more joy.

Unfortunately, it is difficult for many people to be so aware as to know why they are doing the things they are doing. Often there is the reason we *think* we are playing for and then there is the *real* reason we are playing. One is an intellectual concept, which is revealed through words, but the greater reality is revealed by the actions of individuals, which are much harder to misinterpret. For example, someone may say they love their dog, but never playfully spend time with him or others may say they love children, but again, never joyfully interact with them. In both these cases, the concept of love exists as a noun, but unless this concept is transformed into a verb, resulting in *being loving*, it is not 'real'. Ultimately, the joy must be in the playing and not afterwards as a sense of accomplishment.

As an example, I once coached a young man who became extremely frustrated and angry on the court at the slightest hint of adversity; he played with a perpetual sourpuss face. His mother insisted, despite my concerns, that her son really did enjoy playing tennis. As evidence of this she offered up the fact that he was always eager to play and put an enormous amount of effort into practicing and playing tournaments. However, to me, it

was clear there was no joy in this young man's heart *while* he was playing tennis and this was obvious to even the most casual observer. His motivation was not joy or love, but ambition: the desire to achieve and gain recognition. He was playing solely to build his ego through winning and climbing the rankings ladder, but neither he nor his mother were aware of this. Thus, although he continued to improve as a tennis player, real joy eluded him.

Fun needs to be intrinsic to the activity if our overall experience is to be pleasant. For most players this is not the case; the 'joy' is in the winning or the playing well and consequently their experience is bitter-sweet. This is the acid test: if the joy you derive from playing remains the same regardless of how you play and regardless of the outcome of the match, then you are playing this game for fun. In addition, check and see if this joy is present throughout the match. How do you feel when you miss an easy volley into the net? How do you feel when you push a second serve into the net at 30-40? Compare these feelings with when you drive a back-hand return of serve straight past the net-rushing server or when you serve an ace right down the middle. How do you feel when these things happen? Compare honestly how you feel when you win with when you lose or when you play well as opposed to when you don't? If these events elicit different responses that means that the way we feel is dependent on external factors; in other words our happiness is based on the result and is not intrinsic to actually playing.

*Fun needs to be intrinsic to the activity if our overall experience is to be pleasant. For most players this is not the case; the 'joy' is in the winning or the playing well and consequently their experience is bitter-sweet.*

Please do not misunderstand what I am saying. I am not saying that we should not show emotion when we play or that showing emotion is bad. All I am saying is



that there are universal laws at work and why and how we play this game or do anything at all in our lives can be instrumental in developing a deeper understanding of ourselves and therefore our experience. So if your experience of playing this game is painful at times or if you become nervous, frustrated or angry during matches or if you are inexplicably unable to play your normal game in competitive situations when you most wish to, you need only examine deeply your real reasons for why you are playing this game in order to shed light on the

*Ones experience of frustration on the court will be directly related to the infusion of ego into our playing: the greater the pain, the greater the presence of the ego.*

phenomena. This shedding of light will, not so coincidentally, transform your experience because it will reveal to you that you are in total control of the situation. Ones experience of frustration on the court will be

directly related to the infusion of ego into our playing: the greater the pain, the greater the presence of the ego. Consequently, if our experience is unpleasant it is because we choose to make it so, not consciously perhaps, but it is our responsibility all the same. And if we have the power to affect the quality of our experiences, then it follows we may be in a position to avoid unpleasant experiences happening to us through introspection and an increased awareness through simple observation.

As I mentioned earlier, the attitude that will bring you the most peace and joy on the tennis court is if you fall in love with the simple joys of this game. The smooth stroking of the ball from the back of the court, the graceful side-to-side movements, the flowing service motion, the effortless volleys, the powerfully struck overheads, the angles in doubles, etc., etc. These are the 'ingredients' that make tennis so enjoyable for so many.

## Understanding How the Body Learns

It seems too obvious a subject to even consider. Clearly, the facilitator has just to give instructions and the tennis lover has simply to listen and follow. But the reality is not so simple. If the previous statement were true, every tennis player regardless of ability would have perfect form. After all, perfect form is not physically difficult to execute. For example, a forehand: you start in the ready position, slowly take a backswing, bring the racket to meet the ball squarely and follow-through over your opposite shoulder. How physically difficult is that action? How many people are not capable of doing such a movement when there is no ball? I have yet to meet even one in my travels. And yet, introduce a ball into the equation and the swing immediately changes. Why? The tennis lover has 'understood' the swing. He or she may even have practiced the swing 10–15 times without the ball, but as soon as the ball moves towards him, the arm seems to stiffen, tension ensues and an awkward-looking stroke emerges. Observing this phenomenon prompted me to look further into the learning process.

In the process, I was greatly inspired by Tim Gallwey<sup>1</sup> and his *Inner Game of Tennis*, which examined the division of the mind and body into two separate entities. Of course, we know that in reality they are not really two, but for the purposes of simplicity, let us temporarily accept this dichotomy. Gallwey called the mind, self 1 and the body, self 2. He offered the theory that although the mind was

<sup>1</sup> *The Inner Game of Tennis*, written by Tim Gallwey in the mid-seventies was a powerful book, which revolutionized the way we looked at learning tennis. Many people read and were affected by Gallwey's book, but most found the task of applying his concepts too difficult. Since nobody has built on his ideas, they have died as far as the mainstream teaching profession is concerned.

giving instructions and the body was receiving them, because they were speaking completely different languages, no communication was happening between the two. He pointed out that while it is true that words can translate into action, this only occurs as the words relate to general intention, not to specific action. In other words, if we have the thought to get up and switch the television on, that action will occur, but how we get up and the way the muscles are used to move towards the television set is something worked out by the body itself. If the mind actually began giving specific instructions to the body as to 'how' to do even the simplest of tasks, chaos would result, much as it often does on the tennis court.

In other words, Gallwey felt that the mind could be trained to 'understand' all instructions, even to the point of being able to repeat them verbatim, while leaving the body's ability to strike the ball unaffected. His conclusion was clear: as tennis coaches we were doing a good job of training the mind, while completely neglecting the body and thus making learning to play tennis an arduous chore that was turning many prospective players away from the game. We have understood the language of the mind; now we have to find a way to effectively communicate with the body as well.

*Training the Mind, not the Body*

One of the biggest criticisms I have of the teaching profession revolves around this tendency toward a largely verbal instructional teaching focus. I know that people have offered theories to 'prove' that different people learn in different ways, but this has not been my experience. I feel that, yes, some may feel more comfortable with a certain modality (visual, verbal, audible or kinetic), but my experience is that learning takes place most effectively when there is an absolute minimum of verbal instructions. If this game could be learned simply through

receiving verbal instructions then the teaching professional, like the wooden racket, would soon become obsolete because one could simply pick up a book and have access to all the information one needs. I make this statement fully cogniscent of the fact that there will be many out there who will completely disagree by contending that they can only grasp things through the spoken word. My experience, however, has been that while individuals may feel more comfortable with the spoken word, it does not help their performance.

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Certainly, some basic information has to be communicated, but this can often be done more effectively through kinetically taking the tennis lover through the stroke and, or, visually rather than by verbal 'cues'.<sup>2</sup> The problem is that when we use words to communicate an experience, the words can sometimes become obstacles that steer the tennis lover away from the experience. The words represent a certain feeling that the facilitator wishes to express; however, the tennis lover, not yet in tune with the feeling, holds on to the words because they are easier to grasp. Holding on to the words activates the mind and draws the listener away from the present moment. The result is awkward, mechanical movements. Consequently, it is more effective to engage the mind as little as possible, leaving the tennis lover with little to 'hold on to'; thereby forcing him to be present with the learning process and more open to the experience in front of him, guaranteeing him greater feel and better results. For many tennis lovers, this will

<sup>2</sup> We need to use visual images for instruction sparingly and wisely. We can use them to convey an overall feeling of smoothness and flow, but the facilitator must be careful that the tennis lover does not use the visual image to 'memorize' specific movements of body parts, which can impede his or her own individuality.

be an uncomfortable situation at first. Not knowing what is 'right' or what they are 'supposed' to do can be more uncomfortable to certain psychological types than to others, but by creating this unstructured environment, the tennis lover is almost forced to focus on what 'is' rather than what 'should' be. This serves to heighten ones experience of the body, which in turn makes the learning process easier and less painful and infinitely more effective.

A visit to the nearby public tennis facility or to your local club will illustrate the struggle many tennis players engage in who have not understood this. Watch the many players there, especially those who have taken numerous lessons or have studied the game exhaustively. They 'know' everything about how to hit the ball perfectly, but alas, do not seem to be able to do it. Their minds have the information, but the body is no 'wiser' for it. The reason is not because of a dearth of talent, but a faulty teaching methodology: one that engages the mind and therefore retards the natural learning process.

For example, the New York Yankees had a second baseman, a Golden Glove winner, who inexplicably and suddenly was unable to throw a ball from the infield to first base. It got so bad that he would sometimes throw into the crowd from second base. Now, how can an individual who has been doing a certain movement his entire life suddenly forget how to execute this simple action? The body cannot forget, but activity of the mind can greatly influence the body's ability to execute even the simplest of tasks.

I remember having one tennis lover come to me for a first-time lesson and explain to me that he had had numerous lessons before and all his pros had told him that he turned his wrist over the ball on the backhand, thereby making it go into the bottom of the net. He may have had some knowledge of this, but no real awareness of it; if he

had, how could he keep on doing it? Consequently, my task became one of trying to heighten his awareness of what he was doing so that the rolling over of the wrist became *his* experience. For me to tell him the same thing that everyone else had told him would have been a waste of his money and my time. Real awareness or knowing brings about immediate change. This is why it is essential for the facilitator to create space where knowing can take place, as opposed to simply providing knowledge.

*Effortless Effort*

By playing tennis with awareness, which requires a silent mind, feel is more easily developed because when we are present to every moment, our sensitivity to the entire experience is heightened. Activity of the mind draws our attention away from awareness of the body because the experience of the body is in the here-and-now and any activity of the mind is past or future. The two cannot co-exist; when the mind is silent, you are automatically in the here-and-now.

It is because of this that visual images are better teaching tools for learning the form, but the feel has still to be developed by doing. The facilitator has to be careful that the visual images do not engage the mind the way verbal cues do. Just ask the tennis lover to relax and watch the demonstrations like they were watching a movie, rather than trying to memorize specific aspects of the movements. There can be no goal or objective, no 'trying' to do something. When the mind is silent, we become perfectly in tune with our bodies and when that happens, the body can only move smoothly, gracefully and without effort. When movement is graceful and effortless it will also be biomechanically sound.

*When the mind is silent, we become perfectly in tune with our bodies and when that happens, the body can only move smoothly, gracefully and without effort.*

*Learning to Walk*

There exists no better example of what I am talking about than the process of learning how to walk. Bruno Bettelheim, the renowned child psychologist, has suggested that if we could talk before we learned how to

*If we could talk before we learned how to walk, learning to walk would be the single most traumatic human experience.*

walk, learning to walk would be the single most traumatic human experience. Fortunately, the conscious mind is not so developed when we learn the

complex motor action of walking. Watch how a child learns to walk: there is no self-deprecation or negative reaction when the child tries to take its first step and falls 'derriere' first. If there is crying, it will only be as a result of a bad fall or some other physical pain. There is no psychological pain (frustration, anger, etc.) throughout the entire process of learning how to walk; consequently it is a pain-free experience of relaxed concentration, transcending both joy and frustration. Despite the enormous variables in the athletic ability of all young children, it is truly amazing how similarly and efficiently we all walk as adults.

Contrast the experience of learning to walk I have described above with most people's experience of learning to play tennis. The latter is often exceedingly painful, both physically and psychologically. Physically, there can be tremendous feelings of awkwardness and discomfort, not surprising really given the contorted positions some players resort to in order to hit forehands, backhands and serves. Notice how many recreational players wear wraps over their wrists, elbows, knees, etc. as a result. Psychologically, there is often anger and frustration at every hint of 'failure'. And yet, the child learning to walk has no such problems. Because of the lack of strength in the legs there will surely be lots of wobbling and tottering and

even falling down, but none of this can be termed awkward, nor is any of the falling likely to be accompanied by exclamations such as: 'I am lousy at this!' or 'I will never be able to do this!' or 'I am such an idiot!'

*Learning Tennis the Same Way*

The logical question that follows is whether there is a way we can translate the lessons we learned from walking as children and apply them to learning to play tennis as adults. Perhaps the answer lies in becoming childlike again. Not childish, but childlike: fresh, innocent, with a look of wonderment at the world around us, and of course, without fear. The biggest difference in the states of consciousness of an infant as opposed to an adult is that as infants our conscious minds are not yet developed and so ego is not yet present, resulting in a pure, albeit unconscious innocence, while as adults of course this is not the case. By the time we reach adulthood, we have spent a lifetime building our ego, with full encouragement from all those around us; consequently, our mind has at this stage become our master. If we can make it our servant we will have returned order to our 'house'. To become consciously conscious is, for me, our life's journey and the tennis court is as good a place to start practicing this as anywhere else.

Right now the mind is in total control; we cannot turn it off for even a moment. See for yourself: walk from your front door to the car in your driveway. Is your mind silent during this activity? How about as you drive your car, are you totally and exclusively focused on the process of driving, or is your mind generating extraneous thoughts? How about when you are sleeping? Even then is the mind not active in the form of dreams, whether you remember them or not? Clearly, our minds are the masters and we are mere pawns in their grasp, victims of their every whim, their dislikes, likes, restlessness and fears.



*Trusting the Body*

The mind has to grasp some basic instructions and then step away or, as I like to say, the mind simply has to bring the body to the ballpark and then leave. Silence of the mind will occur if great trust can evolve; a trust, which only results from an understanding that the mind simply cannot help in the process of learning how to play. The body will learn all by itself. It has an amazing capacity to learn if the mind remains quiet and an environment is created to foster that silence. I have seen it happen over and over again! If we can silence the mind and become absorbed in the process of learning itself, learning becomes effortless, smooth and flowing. In short, an incredibly beautiful experience.

However, as anyone who has tried will verify, it is not so easy to still the mind. Observe how rare the 'zone state'<sup>3</sup> is. Why is this so? The reason is that we, as intellectual beings, have tremendous faith in our own minds (our ego) and as long as this faith remains, we will never be able to still the mind, and thus will fall short of peak performance. The process of stilling the mind will likely occur only when we observe closely the scattering nature of our mind and how this hinders peak performance. To do this we have to be alert and watchful of ourselves as we play. As we become more and more aware of the obstacles that the mind creates, they will drop away automatically all by themselves.

In addition, as we 'experiment' with silence we will soon see that our world does not crumble when the 'all-knowing' mind is left on the sidelines. On the contrary, we will discover that the fewer 'instructions' we receive from the mind, the better we seem to play. This is no

<sup>3</sup> The 'zone state' is that enigmatic state of being, in which peak athletic performance occurs.

coincidence. The mind's activity draws us away from this present moment because the mind functions only in the past or future. Consequently, when it falls silent, we are automatically in the present, which is the only source from which peak performance can spring forth.

*The mind's activity draws us away from this present moment because the mind functions only in the past or future.*

As this happens more and more, a trust is created. This trust is born out of a 'knowing' that there is an innate intelligence in the body, which can only be accessed when the mind is silent. This trust cannot develop through reading words in a book or through listening to a speaker, regardless of how penetrating the words or compelling the speaker may be. It occurs only through personal experience and that is why it is essential the tennis lover take these words out onto the tennis court and test them there. An existential experience is required, which will only happen if you trust first and then experiment with this. If trust came after the experience, it would not be trust; you would 'know' it works. However, this is not the case and trust has to be there before the experience and this is the problem. For example, while learning to swim, a certain amount of trust has to be there. One cannot stand on the side of the pool and say when I learn to swim, then, and only then, will I enter the pool. No, if one wishes to learn how to swim, one will have to enter the pool before swimming becomes a reality.

### **Quiet Mind, Fluid Body**

'Watch the ball' is a phrase commonly uttered by teaching professionals during most tennis lessons and dutifully repeated by players in self-admonition the world over during recreational or tournament matches. This can be

as easily witnessed at such hallowed venues as Roland Garros and Wimbledon as at your local country club or public park facility.

Why is this? How can players not be watching the ball? Have you ever seen a ball rocket towards someone's forehand while they move to hit a backhand? Surely this would be a common occurrence if we were really not watching the ball. So what do players and teaching professionals mean when they say, 'watch the ball'? Obviously, the physical eyes are focused on the ball and yet

*The biggest obstacle to seeing the ball is the activity of our mind.*

somehow this does not appear to be sufficient to 'see' the ball. How can this be? My understanding is that *the biggest ob-*

*stacle to seeing the ball is the activity of our mind.* In order for us to truly understand and explore this statement, we need to briefly look into the nature of the mind: its function and the manner of its operation.

The mind functions in the past when it recalls that which has already occurred or in the future in the form of hopes, dreams and ambitions. Both time frames are unreal, in that the past has already occurred and is over while the future is simply a wish, a projection of what we think we want and need. In the above tennis example, our mind can move towards the mistakes or missed opportunities of the past: the easy forehand volley that sailed long or the 15-40 opportunity of the previous return game, or, towards the future, in the form of 'if I win this point I will be up 40-15' or 'all I need to do is hold my serve and the match is over'. These are pretty gross excursions into the past and future, but more subtle ones exist as well. For example, waiting for an overhead and recalling the one previously missed; or, going for a backhand down the line and recalling the one that had just sailed wide; or, preparing to hit a serve and remembering that you

have missed four first serves in a row. The mind can just as easily drift into the future with similarly disastrous results. For example, chasing a drop shot and making up ones mind where to hit the ball before reaching it and then being unable to change your shot even though your 'partner' on the other side is anticipating it; or, thinking you are going to hit a double fault just before striking your second serve and serving anyway; or finding sufficient time on a groundstroke to consciously decide where to hit the ball. Any thought, regardless of its nature, inhibits our ability to see the ball and, in my estimation, this is the primary reason for all unforced errors.

To summarize, if we are in this present moment the mind cannot be functioning; conversely, if the mind is active we cannot be in this present moment. Guess where the ball is? Yes, in *this* present moment. As the ball leaves the other player's racket and travels through the air, we need to be alert only to that movement until we make contact with the ball. However, being in the present moment is easier spoken about than actually experienced.

It is a state of being we cannot actively pursue, but something that happens to us when we realize that this present moment is all there is. This 'understanding'<sup>4</sup> results in an automatic and immediate dropping of all goals, desires, dreams, hopes, ambitions and plans for the future.

*As the ball leaves the other player's racket and travels through the air, we need to be alert only to that movement until we make contact with the ball.*

To be contented and completely satisfied in our present state of being is not encouraged within our society in part because it is felt that in such a situation, the possibilities for advancement are compromised. The argument continues that it is dissatisfaction with the status quo and the

<sup>4</sup>This 'understanding' is not intellectual. It is an existential experience that arises out of awareness.

ambition this fuels that has brought our civilization forward. But what is 'progress'? Is progress moving around in luxurious cars instead of bullock carts or living in mansions as opposed to mud huts? Or is progress the transformation of discontented individuals into happy ones, the transcendence of anger, hate and violence, as well as the understanding that greed and the accumulation of possessions do not change ones life in any significant manner?

Silence will fall onto a mind that has realized that 'all that glitters is not gold'. Similarly, the attraction to things that build or enhance our ego will only shrink when we take the time to focus on the nature of ego and see it for what it is, a mere shadow, but not the real thing. Until that happens, the mind will remain active in order to reinforce itself.

Within the realm of tennis, the mind will always struggle with silence until it realizes that winning and losing are not inherently different in the greater scheme of things, that just as winning does not enhance who we are, so also does losing not diminish us in any way. When there is contentment within oneself, there will be no need to indulge in self-projected fantasies. If we can find the intrinsic joy of hitting balls, then there is no need to plan and calculate through the mind to achieve a goal that we think will bring us something it has no power to do: peace of mind.

As I stated earlier, this experience of silence has long been associated with peak performance in sports. In most studies of professional athletes who have experienced 'the zone', mention is continuously made of an effortlessness, which ironically arises through increased awareness.<sup>5</sup> Many

<sup>5</sup> This can more aptly be called the 'accidental zone' because the awareness that happens to most athletes is not through some deep insight and understanding. This is why this state of being is elusive, temporary and seemingly beyond our control.

athletes have spoken about how the ball slows down, almost as if moving in slow motion. This happens at times when we are really 'watching' the ball, with a completely silent mind and therefore really seeing it. When that happens, we are said to be in the zone. In reality, it is not that the ball slows down, but that the activity of the mind, which draws our attention away from the ball, appears to speed up the ball.

*Tennis as Meditation*

For all of us, tennis presents, as do all activities, an opportunity for meditation. The silence and peace of getting lost in watching the ball and *allowing* movement and stroking to happen is a wondrous thing. This meditative experience I am describing is, as mentioned earlier, commonly known in sporting circles as the Zone State. It is a state that allows us to play *Instinctive Tennis*, but which we know little about, although almost every person has had a glimpse of it at some time or other. However, what we do know is that the zone state is universally associated with peak performance.

The irony of the situation is that the desire to win, or achieve any goal for that matter, engages the mind (in order to work out *how* to fulfill the goal) and this very activity creates an obstacle to peak performance by taking us out of the present moment. If, however, we can let go of the desire to win (or even play well), and just be present, peak performance and therefore desirable results will happen more often.

It is important to note that meditation, as it relates to this discussion, is not a passive experience. To lose oneself in watching the ball is to be absorbed in the process. Meditation is not a falling asleep; on the contrary, it is a heightened experience of the present moment to the exclusion of all that is irrelevant to the here-and-now.

Winning is something that may or may not happen in the *future* and therefore is immaterial to this moment. In tennis we have a 'natural' object of focus, the ball. The ball is moving in the present. If we are to focus on it, we will have to also be in the present. To block out all distractions related to how or where to hit the ball requires great trust. We falsely assume we can do nothing without the mind, but only when we fall into silence will we see the 'natural intelligence' of the body.

Meditation is not an action; it is not something we do but a quality we bring to whatever activity we are engaged

*Meditation is not an action; it is not something we do but a quality we bring to whatever activity we are engaged in.*

in. So the goal becomes to play tennis meditatively; this is *Instinctive Tennis*. To play meditatively is to play from the silence that arises when the

conscious mind is completely inactive. Decisions will still have to be made and complex actions will have to be maneuvered but these will happen automatically and effortlessly.

*Is There Life Beyond the Conscious Mind?*

The word 'mind' when used in this book is primarily referring to the conscious mind, which is that part of the brain that most dominates our lives and which is most responsible for us living life unconsciously. How is it that the conscious mind leads to unconscious living? The reason is because life is happening in the present, and the conscious mind functions only in the past or future. Consequently, when the conscious mind is active, we are not in the present. When we are not in the present, we are living unconsciously. To live consciously is to be alive and present in the very moment. The conscious mind is that little voice in our head that is trying to direct our life in every conceivable way possible. Our conscious mind is

developed and influenced by the country or culture we live in, the religion we subscribe to or the family we are raised in. It is a collection of mental images and memories of our past that very much colors the way we think, feel and act. This is also called the conditioned mind. As long as we operate from this place, and all of us invariably do, to whatever extent we do, we cannot, despite all protestations to the contrary, be 'free' individuals. When we live through the conscious mind we are living from a set of beliefs, principles and assertions that we 'think' are true and real; when, in actuality, we are simply puppets on a string falsely under the illusion that we are determining the destiny of our own lives. In other words, we are living unconsciously, without awareness. The nature of this conscious mind is to operate from its memory banks by going into the past or projecting into the future. Unfortunately, neither of these time-frames exists. The only 'reality' exists in this very moment: there is no past or future. Consequently, there is not and never can be any connection between the conscious mind and reality. The conscious mind can never comprehend reality because reality is here-and-now and the conscious mind, by its very nature, cannot enter that time zone. The bottomline is understanding that *we* are not our conscious mind, although it is easy for us to identify with it because it is so much a part of our daily lives.

The brain has other functions besides housing the conscious mind. When we normally refer to the brain in common parlance we are actually talking about the conscious mind. However, the brain is a source of many things. One of which is control over our motor skills and eye-hand coordination. By shutting down our conscious mind, many of our physical attributes become heightened



rather than the opposite, which may be the logical assumption. As a result, if we are able to play tennis by turning off the conscious mind, we enter a magical state of being and begin playing *Instinctive Tennis*.

We are under the illusion that this conscious mind directs our entire lives (which, actually it does!). The illusion is that it need not and there is a life available to us beyond this controlling part of our being. Not only is there a life beyond it, but there is no living possible through it.

We are able to access this state of being through which *Instinctive Tennis* happens by being present, by letting go of all that we know, which is in the past, and all that we desire, which is in the future. By being present to the only reality there is, the other things fall away, naturally. When that happens, our body continues to function. The brain continues to send signals to various parts of the body and movement still takes place, the ball is still hit powerfully in different directions of the court.

Decisions are made about where and how to hit, not through the conscious mind, but from a much higher, all-knowing source. Almost all athletes have had some taste of this experience I am describing, albeit for a short period of time. For most of us, this has happened accidentally, but as we learn more about this state of being, and as we learn more about ourselves, perhaps we can live more consciously and allow this state of being to happen more often.

### **Rhythm and Timing**

I have watched thousands of hours of all levels of tennis either on television, video or in person; the vast majority of this tennis, not so much as a fan, but as a student and lover of the game. I have searched relentlessly for some common facet of stroke production that is universal to all

great players. After watching tennis over this span of 38 years, I have concluded that there is only one common element to all great shots. While many of the best players over the past 30 years have had major variations within their technique, two gifts they have all shared are extraordinary timing and a smooth rhythm to their stroke.

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Timing is a gift individuals come into this world with, although through practice it can be improved, by simply hitting the ball in a state of silence. Every great player has developed rhythm without specifically intending to. Unfortunately, most players enlist the help of teaching professionals who for many years, and to a great extent still today, have been unwittingly destroying the single most essential quality of a good groundstroke. This is being done by the seemingly innocent teaching cue of, 'take the racket back quickly (or early)'.<sup>6</sup> I have personally heard the 'best' coaches in the world offer this advice, but the fact is that most advanced players simply do not do this. What is truly amazing about this discovery is that despite this type of coaching, great players have still emerged. They have emerged with great rhythm in their strokes not because of the coaching, but in spite of it! These statements are not intended to disparage the teaching industry of which I am a part, but are a simple statement of fact as I see it.

So, what is the rhythm of a stroke and how can we help our tennis lovers who have developed bad habits reclaim that which should occur naturally? After allowing the tennis lover to playfully and patiently explore the meeting of racket and ball, eventually he or she will be

<sup>6</sup> I am indebted to Oscar Wegner for first bringing this to my attention.

ready for the full movement of the stroke. For the forehand, I describe that motion as going from A to B. Point A is with the racket to the side, slowly tracking the ball as it leaves the partner's racket, and point B is over the left shoulder for a right-hander. The rhythm is *how* the racket moves between these two points.

In the past, teaching professionals have always advocated that the racket be drawn back quickly. This would appear to make logical sense. After all, the quicker the

*When the racket is taken back too quickly, there is a subtle disconnection between the on-coming ball and the racket, which makes perfect timing more difficult and peak performance impossible.*

racket is taken back the more time one would assume one would have for the forward portion of the swing. Unfortunately, tennis, like life, is not always logical. When the racket is taken back quickly, there is a

subtle disconnection between the on-coming ball and the racket, which makes perfect timing more difficult and peak performance impossible.

A superficial understanding of grips may help the reader in understanding how this craziness developed. In the days of the fifties, sixties and seventies as well as before, a continental forehand grip was by far the most common grip amongst players of all levels. The professionals used it because most of the major tournaments were on grass, which yields a low bounce, and the continental grip was effective for stroking low bouncing balls. Another advantage of the continental grip was that this one grip could be used for all strokes and made learning the game easier. The continental grip is primarily a defensive grip on the forehand side because of its slightly open face at impact and thus, the racket head needs little speed moving forward. In fact, if there is too much racket head speed, without some kind of wrist adjustment, the ball will invariably fly long because of the open racket face.

When the racket goes back quickly, what often results is that it moves forward slowly. While that 'worked' for a continental forehand, it certainly does not for the more aggressive semi-western and western forehands of the modern era, which need tremendous racket head speed through the point of contact.

My experience has been that if you do not tell a player new to tennis anything, the racket will remain at his or her side and then will accelerate into the ball with a full follow-through. If the racket is accelerating through the point of contact, it will automatically finish over the shoulder. For those who have already been influenced by the tennis teaching profession, the focusing on the A to B becomes necessary, as well as the hours of practice to re-train the body, since it is always more difficult to break habits already developed than to create habits where none exist.

Timing is obviously essential in tennis and is linked to rhythm. When the racket is taken back quickly, because the rhythm is thrown off, the timing suffers. Yet you will see many players with this type of rhythm. Most of the players adopting this will be club level players, but there are even a few professionals who struggle with this. Obvious examples are Pete Sampras on his backhand and the early version (the first years they were on the tour) of the Williams sisters, on both sides. The result is numerous unforced errors and shanked balls. The premature racket preparation often results in the ball being hit too early, rather than late.

If we watch the top players in the world we will see that when their partner strikes the ball there is no hurried movement to take the racket back. Instead, the racket slowly moves to the side and the player 'tracks'<sup>7</sup> the ball

<sup>7</sup> Tracking is a focusing on the ball the moment it leaves the 'partner's' racket. It is a lining up of the ball with ones racket for the entire duration until ball contact is made.

as it is coming towards him. There is a harmonious relationship between the on-coming ball and the racket: as the ball comes forward, the racket moves back. Since balls are hit at varying speeds, there has to be some sort of adjustment of the racket. This adjustment is done when the racket is still at ones side tracking the on-coming ball. This may result in a pause in the swing, but the pause is to the side at the beginning of the swing, rather than at the back in the middle of the swing. Once the adjustment for the speed of the on-coming ball is made, there emerges a smooth, fluid, flowing and *continuous* swing, which results in better timing, faster racket head speed and more power than if the pause was in the middle of the swing.

I have observed that there are two different ways the top players adjust to the on-coming ball. In the first, there is an immediate movement of the racket to the side and a pause there for the approaching ball. Jim Courier and Boris Becker were two successful proponents of this method of play while Venus and Serena Williams are two examples of the problems that can ensue from this approach. The rapid take back of the racket can cause the swing to be choppy and lacking in fluidity, and if the racket is taken too far back instead of to the side and more towards the front, timing can suffer. It probably sounds presumptuous to suggest this, but the Williams sisters could easily become more consistent off the ground on both sides by simply daily hitting balls for 30 minutes, silently and without any instruction, first hitting forehands cross court and then backhands. The only emphasis need be on quieting the voice in their head, especially when it instructs them to get the racket back early and by focusing on finding a speed they can hit consistently with. Their forced initial racket movement, which is a conscious effort, would soon vanish and in its place a

natural rhythm would develop. This rhythm would be effortless and therefore could be repeated over and over, which is the key to consistency.

It may seem strange to the reader that the author is using examples of arguably the best male player ever and undoubtedly the two best athletes the women's tour has ever seen to illustrate what not to do. The fact remains that Pete Sampras has always been plagued by backhand errors on his 'off' days. In addition he has had little success on slower courts. Was it because he had too much waiting time, which accentuated the faulty rhythm on his backhand? I think so. Even though it is indisputable that his game is more suited to faster surfaces, his abysmal record on clay merits closer examination with respect to the breakdown on his backhand side.

Similarly, while there can be little doubt that the Williams sisters are phenomenal athletes who just may become the most successful players of all time, the fact is that they under-achieved in the early part of their career. If you look at their matches when they first started playing professionally, you will see that they committed a surprising number of unforced errors. I think the reason was their faulty rhythm, which threw off their timing. I would venture to guess that as their commitment to tennis becomes greater and as they begin playing more tennis, the rhythm of their groundstrokes will smoothen out and they will become more consistent and therefore more successful by playing more instinctively. However, the film of those earlier matches will always be a matter of record and it will be easy to notice the difference in the rhythm of their stroke as it develops.

#### *Attitude to Errors*

I encourage players that come to me to see our time together as scientific experiments. The court becomes our

laboratory where we can try different things and see what happens. By becoming detached observers we best facilitate the learning process and make the journey so much more enjoyable by creating an environment where the player can express herself freely and openly and give the body the opportunity it needs to learn through trial and error in a fun and carefree way.

There is a general tendency for players to focus far too much on technique. Errors are usually seen as technical problems and a solution is searched for, which triggers the mind and draws the tennis lover away from peak performance. Often, this is also true of intermediate players. I have seen many tennis lessons or even matches where every error is accompanied by a reason. The player misses into the net or long, and the teaching professional feels a need to give a reason why or the match player makes an error and feels the need to explain why he missed that ball. This is not productive at any level.

Finally, being able to look errors in the face, with our heads held high, without excuses of any sort, is the ultimate in self-acceptance. How would you behave if your doubles partner made an error or even two? Most of us would remain supportive and yet to ourselves we cannot be as loving as we would be to a stranger. Why? Learn to love yourself on the tennis court, accept who you are and how you play. This acceptance and love of oneself will completely transform the way you play tennis—and much, much, more.

### 3. Creating a Methodology for Learning

Regardless of the subject matter being taught, carefully considered methodology is an essential element in the art of teaching. By methodology, I mean the process by which we help the tennis lover learn to do something they could not do previously (in this case playing tennis) in a manner that is efficient, effective and fun. We move from the simple to the complex, ensuring that the tennis lover successfully attains the skill level required before moving to the next step. However, in breaking movements down we must be careful we do not lose the sense of wholeness intrinsic to the activity.

In my understanding, the art of teaching tennis is actually less about teaching than it is about learning. In reality, it is about both teaching and learning, but we have over-emphasized the teaching aspects and now, in order to find the proper balance, we need to move in the direction of learning. When the ego of the teacher is the dominant force on the court, a situation emerges in which the tennis lover is 'forced' to play in a certain way, according to some preconceived concepts, which may or may not be true. Conversely, when the ego of the tennis lover prevails on the court, a chaotic, conflict-riddled environment emerges, where the tennis lover feels that he needs no 'help' and yet has no idea how to progress. If, however, both facilitator and tennis lover can temporarily set aside their desires and humbly submit to the process, then the perfect situation emerges. Here, the facilitator is



not looking to 'create something in his image' in order to prove to everyone what a good coach he is, nor is the tennis lover discarding guidance because he wants to 'do it on his own'. Instead, both come together in the process of learning.

*Can we create a methodology for learning without walls, one which follows, not leads, one that has boundaries without creating fences?*

The question thus emerges: can we create a methodology without walls, one which follows, not leads, one that has boundaries without creating fences?

### **Developing Feel Through Progressions**

Tennis is a game of variables. One's objective in simplifying the learning process is to eliminate these variables and focus on the most basic fundamental building blocks, just as one builds a house one brick at a time, making sure each brick is firmly in place before placing another on top of it. Progress should be based on the tennis lover's ability to assimilate the lessons. By this, I do not mean intellectually understand; I mean to be physically able to perform. Although tennis lovers are invariably impatient to arrive at the other extreme of the continuum, represented by the spontaneous environment of match play, the controlled environment is essential to the learning process at the beginning. The key is to devise sufficient steps between these two points to make learning efficient, joyful and effortless.

For impatient tennis lovers who desire competition before they are ready, the facilitator can help by explaining that they will be playing this game for many years and that perhaps it would be prudent to spend a little extra time at the beginning to lay a solid foundation for the game. This foundation can then become a springboard for better tennis through simply playing. If we

cannot successfully convince our tennis lovers of this wisdom, we may lose them to the frustration of their own lack of success.

In creating this methodology we should keep in mind the information contained in Chapter 2 regarding how the body learns. The learning process seems to occur most efficiently and naturally with a minimum of both technical jargon and of attempts at choreographed movement, with a greater emphasis on being relaxed and centered. The mindset should be one of a playful explorer, rather than one of an impatient achiever.

*The learning process seems to occur most efficiently and naturally with a minimum of both technical jargon and of attempts at choreographed movement, with a greater emphasis on being relaxed and centered.*

Consequently, the role of the facilitator shifts from dictating how to hit the ball to creating situations within which the tennis lover's body can explore or 'figure out' the best way to accomplish the task at hand. It may be difficult for a teacher to shift into the role of the facilitator, to go from giving orders to quietly watching and creating situations and tasks. The facilitator needs to resist the temptation to lecture the tennis lover and instead create a situation whereby the tennis lover can himself learn through experience. What is often most difficult is exercising the patience necessary to allow the natural learning process to unfold, suppressing the inclination to interject a quick word here or there to accomplish a certain objective. The irony is that given this 'freedom', it is surprising how often one sees tennis lovers develop remarkably orthodox strokes.

I am convinced that anyone, regardless of athletic ability, can play this game at a level they can have fun at. Often, I run into individuals who claim they have 'zero' athletic ability and thus feel that learning this game is beyond them. I take great pleasure in trying to 'prove'

these individuals wrong. In assessing such a person, what is important is to identify what they can and cannot do and systematically and progressively allow their game to build up from that point. In other words, we need to establish the point of success for the tennis lover. For example, in teaching tennis, we occasionally come across people who cannot hit the ball at all. In this case we need to find a task that is easier than hitting balls so they can practice skills, which will ultimately help them make contact with the ball. In all situations, it becomes a matter of identifying where our tennis lovers' skills break down and then returning to the task performed prior to the breakdown. This allows more time for practice until greater feel is developed and then more difficult skills can be attempted.

It is said that *there are no bad students, only bad teachers*. This is true to the extent that if one is truly a student (motivated and intent on learning) then tennis can definitely be learned with the 'right' teacher; one who is able to patiently break down every skill to the extent needed.

### *Grips*

While there are advantages and disadvantages to every grip, I do not think it is necessary to focus too much on grips. Having said that, I would steer the beginning tennis lovers away from both the extreme western grip and the continental grip for forehands. For the club level player especially, I think the western grip will present problems. It is a difficult grip to become consistent with unless you play a great deal and club players rarely have the time to make the necessary commitment. The continental grip on the forehand may work for recreational players at a certain level, but for those players who wish to advance their skill level, this grip will adversely affect their ability to attack the ball on the forehand side. Stefan Edberg was

the last top professional to use this grip successfully, but even he struggled with it at times. Undoubtedly, his success was due more to his serve and volley skills than his ability to hit a forehand from the baseline.

I feel the eastern forehand and semi-western grips are best suited for the forehand and the eastern backhand and continental grips are preferable for the single handed backhand, although more extreme grips work fine for players who want to put more spin on the ball. For the double-handed backhand, it is important to remember that the non-dominant hand is usually the primary force when hitting the ball; it is a left-handed forehand for right-handers. Most players use an eastern forehand on their non-dominant hand for the double-handed backhand, however, some advanced players will go to a semi-western grip in order to generate greater spin. Again, allow the tennis lover to experiment and see what seems to work best, although at times you may want to interject a few thoughts, if you have a strong feeling about the tennis lover and his particular situation and skills. In general, the lower the skill level of the tennis lover the better off he will be with the more conventional grips.

It is good for the facilitator and the advanced player to know about grips and their respective advantages and disadvantages, but it is unnecessary for beginners and intermediates to be given too much information. Just allow them to find a comfortable grip that works for them and is not going to create a problem later on. The vast majority of these players will use a fairly conventional grip. Regardless of the grip a tennis lover uses, the following progression is necessary to master the shot of choice.

#### *General Technique*

It is important for the tennis lover to initially develop and focus on the connection between racket and ball.

However, when developing a full swing please keep in mind that the smaller body parts, the wrist and the arm are very closely connected to the racket face, consequently, if they are unstable inconsistency will result. However, if these body parts remain firm, without being rigid, the use of the bigger body parts, the shoulders and hips will add power and solidity to the strokes. This is especially true for beginners and intermediates. For advanced players smaller body parts can help generate greater power. The best strokes will involve the use of all the body parts and you can see the professionals launching their entire bodies into each and every swing. There is a progression involved in reaching this point and if the tennis lover is patient, he can get there.

*Introducing Movement*

Movement has to be worked into the progressions. In other words, each skill has to be mastered or at least controlled without movement and then with some movement. Movement cannot be introduced until some skill is attained. Sometimes, tennis lovers complain to me that they do fine in the lesson environment when I hit balls straight to them, but problems arise when they go out and play with friends. This will be true for a certain period of time and there is no getting away from it, but the simple fact is that learning must follow a path of progression from simple to complex. It makes no sense to ask a tennis lover to attempt to hit a low, running backhand until he is fairly adept at hitting a backhand that comes straight to him at waist height. The facilitator must decide when to introduce progressively more challenging situations to the tennis lover so that improvement is constant. It is easy to err on either side: to stay too long feeding balls in the strike zone and also to introduce movement before basic skills have reached a level of

consistency. The key is to allow the tennis lover's success rate to determine the speed of his progression. We do not want the tennis lover to constantly fail, but neither do we want him or her to remain stagnant.

### **Learning Progressions**

#### *Stage 1: Motor Skills*

This stage is particularly relevant for young children who are, as yet, still unfamiliar with their bodies. In many group lessons, relay games involving running, skipping, jumping, etc., can be the perfect warm-up to the lesson. These warm-ups are fun and helpful in the learning process. The younger the tennis lover, the longer these games should last, but adaptations of these games can be relevant for intermediate players too and a fun way to begin playing, especially in group lessons.

#### *Stage 2: Eye-Hand Coordination*

This skill is necessary to focus on and develop for all tennis lovers who are having a difficult time making consistent contact with the ball. I prefer to keep beginners at this stage until they are wholly comfortable because one cannot over-emphasize the importance of this as a building block to improve performance, especially for those individuals with limited athletic ability.

The tennis lover and facilitator need only remain within the service lines and focus on blocking the ball with the racket face. Initially, the tennis lover need only touch the ball with the strings of the racket, just by holding the racket so the strings face the on-coming ball. There is no backswing or follow-through at this initial stage. The racket can even begin at the player's side to make it easier. Later, the tennis lover can begin in the ready position (for the younger tennis lovers, the position is described as the

butt of the racket nestling in the belly button) and then practice moving the racket to the side to block the ball.

If this is not working well, there are numerous other ways to improve eye-hand coordination. The facilitator must find a simpler task that could lead the tennis lover towards attaining this skill. One example could be, 'choking up'<sup>1</sup> on the racket, making it easier to control. If this is a struggle, the racket can even be dispensed with and the tennis lover can try and meet the ball with the palm of his hand. If none of these steps work effectively, there are still numerous other steps to develop eye-hand coordination, from balancing the ball on the racket to trapping a slow rolling ball with the racket face from a short distance (a game called 'trap the rat'). In addition, there are popular games such as 'walking the dog' (pushing a ball along the ground with a racket), as well as games involving bouncing the ball on the strings, both up in the air and down on the ground. I have found it to be fun, especially for younger tennis lovers, to name all such games. One of my favorite games is, 'Don't worry, Hit Happy', where the tennis lover stands a few steps away from me and I gently bounce or roll balls towards him for him to catch. When the ball is caught, the player can throw the ball at me. I embellish the throwing, by making faces and sticking my tongue out at the players so that they are more motivated to hit me. Since throwing is a necessary skill for an effective serve, this game is doubly

beneficial.

*There are endless stages and situations a clear-minded and creative facilitator can devise that will help find the starting point for the tennis lover (the point of success).*

There are endless stages and situations a clear-minded and creative facilitator can devise that will help find the starting point for the tennis lover (the

point of success). Once the starting point is identified, the

<sup>1</sup>Holding the racket higher up the handle.

facilitator can alternate between that point and one slightly more difficult, slowly creating a path along which the tennis lover can travel. If the facilitator can be patient and process oriented to the extent that the tennis lover is not even aware that he or she is trying to learn something, improvement will happen without frustration. One of the nicest compliments our junior program on Long Island, New York ever received came from an 8 year old girl named Kyra who, in trying to persuade her younger cousins to join her for her group tennis lesson, said: 'Come on, you'll have a great time. They don't teach us anything at all, all we do is play games!'

*Stage 3: The Full Swing*

Once the tennis lover has become perfectly comfortable with 'bump' tennis, the facilitator can slowly push the tennis lover further and further back towards the baseline, but in increments gradual enough so that there is no breakdown in their ability to contact the ball.

As the tennis lover becomes more and more proficient with his timing, the next step would be to make the swing a little longer and that is done by adding a follow-through. This is where the A to B cue becomes relevant. Point A is racket to ones side, tracking the on-coming ball and point B is catching the racket with the non-dominant hand on the opposite shoulder.

*Point A is racket to ones side, tracking the on-coming ball and point B is catching the racket with the non-dominant hand on the opposite shoulder.*

In most situations, my experience is that as the tennis lover is asked to go further and further back in the court, the swing becomes longer and longer. A backswing emerges all by itself. The only time there is a backswing without a follow-through is when a fear response arises. In such situations, it is the objective of the facilitator to remove the fear by helping the tennis



lover see that the ball will not go over the fence if she or he follows through. Many players feel that there is a direct connection between where the ball goes and the follow-through and that a full swing will send the ball out. The facilitator has to convince the tennis lover that no such relationship exists, that direction is not given to the ball by the follow-through, but by the racket face at the point of contact. A simple way to illustrate this point would be to hit the ball with a full swing with the racket face pointing down. The tennis lover will most likely quickly correlate the direction of the ball with the racket face at the point of contact and not with the follow-through.

In club tennis, at the B level and below, the disappearance of the follow-through is the single greatest obstacle to better tennis. Incidentally, the lack of a follow-through is also the greatest contributor to tennis elbow and other aches and pains in the arms of tennis players. By continually moving the tennis lover towards the baseline and encouraging him or her to hit the ball a little harder, without losing control, a full swing will often emerge that is relaxed, yet effective and effortless.

Finally, sometimes the tennis lover can swing correctly with the arm and yet not be using the entire body. This can be corrected quite easily at this early stage. The best way I have found is to use a small 'medicine' ball, failing which, a tennis ball will be fine, and have the tennis player throw the ball over the net with both hands. In this way, he or she will get a sense of the entire body: legs, hips and shoulders being involved in the throwing process and then ultimately the hitting process. Often the left hand gets lost when one first learns the fundamentals of a forehand stroke, this technique will help the tennis lover understand that the left hand should go across the body as if both hands are going back. This will result in

the tennis lover using the upper body to hit the ball, which will, not only bring more consistency to the stroke, but also more stability and power.

It is helpful at this stage if the tennis lover gives little or no thought to the boundaries of the court, neither the net nor the white lines on the opposite side of the court. In many cases this is an impossible expectation, but the facilitator and the tennis lover will reap the greatest success when the tennis lover can free himself from the burden of hitting every ball over the net and within the white lines.

*The facilitator and the tennis lover will reap the greatest success when the tennis lover can free himself from the burden of hitting every ball over the net and within the white lines.*

#### *Stage 4: Uniformity of Swing*

The objective at this stage is to groove the stroke. The idea is that the tennis lover should be so comfortable with his swing that if he is off balance or surprised by a shot, he would still move his racket from point A to point B. At all stages, patience is an essential ingredient, but at this stage it is particularly vital because without it one's game develops far more slowly. Endless hours of hitting balls with the same swing will develop muscle memory and allow the body to hit this stroke instinctively and smoothly. There is no substitute or shortcut to being a good tennis player, or to developing skills at anything; you need the experience that comes from 'putting in the time'.

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Up to this point, both the tennis lover and the facilitator have been concerned only with the swing. The tennis lover is in total control of her own body and that alone determines where the ball goes. If one has gained this

modicum of control, then and only then will it be possible to go the next stage.

*Stage 5: Consistency*

It is at this stage that the tennis lover can for the first time pay attention to where the ball being hit is going. Long before this, of course the tennis lover will be concerned about the result of his swing and if this is the case, it is the facilitator's responsibility to focus the tennis lover's attention away from the result and squarely on the process of hitting instead. If this is done, the learning process will be far more effortless, joyful and fruitful.

Having ensured the swing remains the same through hitting numerous balls, the tennis lover and facilitator can now focus on where the ball is landing. The instructions to the tennis lover are simple: hit the ball high over the net and right down the middle of the court. Remember, at this stage we are unconcerned with winning the point; we are simply focused on getting every ball back into the court as defined by the rules of the game of tennis.

It is at this stage of development that the tennis skills of the facilitator begin to play a role so that the tennis lover can hit many balls back and forth with the facilitator. At first the facilitator can stand at the net and gently block the ball back. As the tennis lover's skills improve, the facilitator can slowly move further and further back until he is ultimately hitting back and forth from the baseline. Soon after the tennis lover is able to do this fairly comfortably, he or she will be ready to go out and play with people of similar ability and have fun hitting the ball back and forth.

People at this stage often ask if they can now play matches. The answer is, it depends! If the tennis lover can maintain his focus on the stage that he is presently at, despite the rigors and distractions of the match, then

there is no problem. But if during competition, the tennis lover is overwhelmed by the desire to win (or not to lose) and cannot remain calm and focused on just being consistent with the free swinging strokes that have been learned, then it is better to avoid competition for a little bit longer. It is not the competition, per se, that is good or bad, but our attitude towards it. If one can remain centered despite being in a competitive situation, then playing matches would be a satisfactory environment to play in. But if one has difficulty relaxing during competition, then it may be wiser to refrain from it for a while because you do not want to develop any unorthodox strokes in the formative stages of your game.

Tennis lovers often say to me, 'I have no problem competing, but my "partner" on the other side starts to get nasty and too competitive.' Even if your 'partner' is motivated by the desire to 'humiliate you', it does not mean you have to play from the same motivation. Your ability to relax and remain calm and centered is not related to anything outside of yourself, consequently, you can remain in that state of being regardless of the situation in which you are placed, although it is not always easy to do so.

*It is not the competition, per se, that is good or bad, but our attitude towards it.*

*Your ability to relax and remain calm and centered is not related to anything outside of yourself.*

#### *Stage 6: Direction*

When the tennis lover has become fairly consistent and can manage reasonably long rallies, while maintaining the form of the full swing, she is ready for the next stage, learning to accurately place the ball around the court. There are seven target centers on the court: one in each corner of the court on the baseline, one on each side T (where the service line and the side line meet), one really

short on each side of the court and finally one down the center of the court. If the tennis lover can consistently keep the ball in play, it is time to allow the body the opportunity to hit to all the different centers of a tennis court. How do we train the body to do this? Simply by creating a task that allows the body to work on this skill without any additional verbal direction.

For example, the court can be divided down the middle and the tennis lover can rally on one half of the court, first cross-court and then down the line. When the body is given such an opportunity, it will develop the skills to accomplish the task. As long as the mind is silent the body will not take long to learn how to hit to all the seven centers of the court. Drills can be set up to isolate each target center for each particular stroke so that the body can have an opportunity to learn how to hit that shot. For both forehands and backhands all seven centers need to be practiced, as well as for the underspin backhand, volleys, overheads, etc.

While practicing hitting to a particular part of the court, the player simply needs to have the intention to hit all the balls to that particular section and then just let go of any thought on *how* to get it there. Once the intention is there, all else can be dropped and the tennis lover now needs only to focus on the ball and let things happen.

A word of caution, when players are hitting down the line their stroke often becomes shorter with an incomplete follow-through. It is important that the swing does not change, regardless of where we want to hit the ball. In addition, many facilitators talk about hitting the ball earlier or later when trying to 'teach' direction. All this is unnecessary and worse, even harmful. Just place a target where you want the ball to go and watch it happen.

*Stage 7: Depth*

When the ball initially touches the ground, it loses a great deal of its power, thus allowing the 'partner' more time in which to respond. If one's shot bounces around the service line, by the time it reaches the advancing 'partner' near the baseline, it will have sufficiently slowed down as to be attackable (unless it is hit with excessive topspin). If, however, the shot first bounces closer to the baseline, it will allow the person on the other side less time to react. If the ball is hit with a lot of pace or spin, it may force him to retreat and hit the ball from well behind the baseline, which will normally result in a less aggressive shot or worse still, it will force a difficult half-volley from the baseline. This is the value of depth on your groundstrokes.

Drills involving the hitting of short balls, an effective strategy, especially in today's game where so many players have extreme grips, may aid developing an awareness of depth. In addition, short volleys can also be practiced later, as they are especially effective and seldom expected.

*Stage 8: Spin*

In order to hit to the seven target areas most effectively, some feel for spin must be developed. Underspin is especially necessary for hitting drop shots, but depending on the situation can be used effectively for all the target centers.

The same is true for sidespin and topspin, which is essential for the side-T's, but can be used more widely when the situation warrants. Topspin is an

*Topspin is an extremely important component in today's game because the racket technology allows us to generate much more power and spin is necessary in order to remain consistent.*

extremely important component in today's game because the racket technology allows us to generate much more power and spin is necessary in order to remain consistent.

For that reason, it is often learned immediately and all the progressions can be undergone with a basic swing (on both sides) which has spin.

*Stage 9: Power*

In working with youngsters especially, I have observed that they often try to begin with power, hoping to find some control later on. My experience is that this rarely happens, but what is certain is the frustration this process usually yields. Instead, if one can follow and be true to the progressive stages outlined above, the learning process can be remarkably frustration free.

Power, as we learned in high school physics, depends on both mass and velocity. Mass normally does not change until we reach the higher echelons of the game, when players like adding lead tape to their rackets, while racket speed is usually determined by how relaxed one is, since tension of any sort will cause the body to tighten with the result that the racket will move slower through the air. I am not excluding the importance of good technique in the creation of power, only suggesting that this is likely to be present if one is relaxed and has not been given false information in the past or developed 'bad' habits. Please note that any 'intention' to hit the ball hard will tend to result in errors because desire or goal-orientation by its very nature causes tension. It is far better to remain present and let the power your body naturally generates, assert itself. Having said this, there are ways to generate more power, even while retaining perfect technique. These include taking the ball early, increasing ones strength and fitness and selecting different equipment. With respect to equipment, there is not only the possibility of stiffer frames, but also heavier frames as well as variations in the type and tension of racket strings.

### *Different Strokes*

Regardless of the type of stroke a facilitator wishes to teach, the Learning Progression given in the previous section must be adhered to. For example, if one wants to add a topspin forehand or backhand to a game style that hits the ball with little spin, this progression could be followed right from the beginning for best results. The same holds true if one wishes to add an underspin backhand or any other new stroke to an already advanced game.

The tendency is for us, as facilitators, to be influenced by the impatient tennis lover and be too result-oriented. See first that the tennis lover develops feel for the racket and ball before introducing sound form. Then work on grooving the stroke until the form is uniform. Please note that it is not until Stage 5 that we make the tennis lover aware of the result: where the ball is going!

Within each category there are other progressions that can make the same task harder or easier. For example, a tennis lover should be able to hit a ball from a stationary position fairly consistently before being asked to move to a ball before hitting it. By adding movement, increasing the distance between the facilitator and the tennis lover and varying the height of the on-coming ball, the facilitator will be able to make gradual changes, exposing the tennis lover to progressively more difficult situations until ultimately the tennis lover is ready for the unpredictability that surfaces in match play.

### **Progressions for Facilitators**

The tennis facilitator's responsibility lies in creating situations for the tennis lover whereby learning can take place effortlessly and efficiently. Once a facilitator creates a situation or sets a task, the tennis lover's body will



naturally find a way to do what is needed if the mind does not interfere or if a habit has not already been formed. It is when habits are already in place that the facilitator will have to become more involved. The facilitator can create a series of progressions that will become increasingly more difficult and will allow the tennis lover to realize his own potential. In this way, it is the tennis lover who is really in control and not the facilitator, since it will be the tennis lover's ability to grasp one progression that will determine when attention can be shifted to the next.

*The tennis facilitator's responsibility lies in creating situations for the tennis lover whereby learning can take place effortlessly and efficiently.*

Frustration can be avoided if both tennis lover and facilitator can totally focus on the task at hand, with no sense of it being a part of a progression. The effective facilitator should not give the tennis lover a sense that a goal is being strived for, but make each stage of the progression an end unto itself. If a time comes when the progression is mastered, then we simply create a different situation and a new task, one that allows more advanced skills to emerge. If there is a sense of total absorption in the task at hand, wholeness always exists, even though this wholeness is constantly changing.

*Frustration can be avoided if both tennis lover and facilitator can totally focus on the task at hand, with no sense of it being a part of a progression.*

The facilitator has an opportunity to be tremendously creative in forming situations, and numerous tasks can be set up to lead one from the simple to the complex. In the following section, I offer some simple general guidelines for the reader, but a creative facilitator will be able to invent numerous additional variations using this information within each of the three categories.

### 1. Feeding or 'Dead Ball' Drills

As I mentioned earlier most tennis lovers are impatient to move to match play conditions immediately. They sometimes rebel against the controlled environment of dead ball drills<sup>2</sup> because they feel it is 'unrealistic'. However, they need to understand that being able to hit a dead ball feed consistently will help them attain the more difficult skills of hitting under match play conditions, when movement will be involved.

This is a good way to start largely because the beginner needs to have the ball hit to him with perfect placement and the dead ball feed allows the facilitator to do this. For advanced and intermediate players this can be a good warm-up as this controlled environment allows them to hit many balls in a short period of time, focusing only on form. There are many ways feeding balls can be utilized to give both advanced and beginner players not only a thorough workout, but also an opportunity to perfect technique or a newly learned stroke.

*There are many ways feeding balls can be utilized to give both advanced and beginner players not only a thorough workout, but also an opportunity to perfect technique or a newly learned stroke.*

#### *Example drills:*

1. Window-wiper drills, where two players are standing shoulder to shoulder at the center of the court and each one is moving a few steps to the side and hitting the same stroke over and over.
2. Line drills, where each tennis lover hits anywhere from one to any number of balls before returning to the back of the line.

<sup>2</sup> Dead ball drills are when a facilitator feeds balls out of his hand one after the other thus allowing the tennis lover to hit the stroke repeatedly.

2. *Facilitator Involved or 'Semi-Live' Drills*

It is good to graduate from feeding to semi-live drills, where the facilitator hits the tennis lover's ball back to him as soon as improved technique allows. Assuming the facilitator has good playing skills, they should be put to use as soon as possible.

*Example drills:*

1. Pinball drills, where players receive one point for every ball hit successfully to the facilitator. They attempt to sustain as long a rally as possible in a line drill situation.
2. Ping Pong, where players hit one ball to the facilitator in an alternating fashion and then make way for the following tennis lover to continue the rally with the facilitator. Award points for each successful hit. This drill requires constant movement by the players and is always fun.

3. *Self-Hitting or 'Live Drills'*

It is important that tennis lovers begin hitting amongst themselves as soon as possible. We need to make the transition from lessons to playing with friends as smoothly as possible. The facilitator should try to end every lesson with some form of this, even with beginners if at all possible. It could be mini tennis, half-court, full court or specific situational drills. The facilitator has a great deal of control with these games due to his ability to feed the first ball, which should be varied according to the skill level of the tennis lover.

In addition, the facilitator can bring a level of consistency to the games by participating in them himself.

## 4. The Beginner

In one club where I used to work, there was a teaching professional who worked almost exclusively with the ladies. Doubling as the league director, he would sign the ladies up for a series of group lessons and then promptly place them in a beginner league. The women liked the idea of competing so soon because it gave them a sense of actually playing. However, I felt that this method unintentionally retarded the overall, long-term development of the players involved. In a very short time, players would reach a ceiling beyond which their technically deficient strokes would not allow them to advance regardless of how many years they continued to play the game.

Competition encourages players to become too focused on result, and long-term development is sacrificed for short-term gains. If Linda has a weak backhand and a forehand that is functional, in a competitive situation she will 'naturally' avoid backhands and hit as many forehands as possible, which will not help her improve her weakness. In addition, it will also not help her improve her strength because she will not want to experiment or go for her forehand in case she makes errors, consequently 'push' type strokes develop, which place a premium on just getting the ball in play.

*Competition encourages players to become too focused on result, and long-term development is sacrificed for short-term gains.*

Many tennis lovers find tennis less enjoyable unless they are playing for points. We need to discover the

intrinsic joy and love that hitting balls offers, which transcends the ego gratification that the challenges of match play provide. The time to do this is right at the beginning. To view tennis as an art form, a dance, and to move

*To view tennis as an art form,  
a dance, and to move and  
hit the ball as gracefully  
and as smoothly as possible  
will allow this intrinsic joy  
to rise to the surface.*

and hit the ball as gracefully  
and as smoothly as possible  
will allow this intrinsic joy to  
rise to the surface. If, however,  
the result becomes everything,  
and the process of playing be-  
comes incidental to the winning, an ugliness will develop  
in your game, an ugliness on the outside (form) and an  
ugliness (frustration and anger) on the inside.

### **Equipment**

I would also like to mention the importance of equipment, especially at this stage when the tennis lover has little understanding of the game and is totally at the mercy of his or her tennis professional. My experience and understanding is that far too many players play with rackets too big for them. This is especially true of youngsters, who somehow equate size of racket with ability. Facilitators can also fall into this trap by encouraging their wards to play with bigger rackets as a sign of their continuing progress. I think it is important that beginners have rackets that will aid them in learning how to play this game. Please keep in mind that the smaller the racket is, the easier it will be to make contact with the ball and the more maneuverable it will be for those with limited experience and skill. I find too many youngsters playing with full size rackets or 25 or 26-inch rackets when they should be playing with 21-inch rackets. Please encourage your young wards to stay with a smaller racket until their foundational skills are firmly in place. Many bad habits

can arise with trying to play with a racket that is too big, habits that can last a lifetime if not corrected immediately.

Similarly, beginning adults should stay away from stiff, powerful frames because they discourage the player from stroking the ball freely. When strokes are fully developed the stiffer frames can provide more power for those who cannot generate the racket speed they used to be able to and the grooved strokes will ensure no lack of accompanying control. This will not be the case for the beginner. In addition, some adults may also consider beginning with a junior racket.

The determining factors to decide the size of a racket for a tennis lover should be a combination of the size, strength and skill of a player. The problem arises with extremely talented youngsters who have good groundstrokes that warrant a larger racket, but their size and strength are such that they have all sorts of problems serving with the same racket. My advice in this situation is to allow them to hit groundstrokes with the racket that best suits them, but when it is time to practice the serve, use a smaller racket so correct technique can be learned. The same is true of adults, especially women who may not have the upper body strength or prior history of throwing.

### Developing Feel

The fundamental building block of a tennis player is feel and this is something each and every tennis lover must develop for him or herself. All one needs to develop this feel is patience and the opportunity to become familiar with a racket (and ones own body) and the ball. Anyone can develop

*The fundamental building block of a tennis player is feel and this is something each and every tennis lover must develop for him or herself.*

feel regardless of athletic ability; for some it will come very easily and others may take more time, but almost everyone can develop the feel necessary to learn how to play this game.

If the tennis lover has limited playing experience, then time and attention should be paid to the basics. For young children, especially, it is important to become comfortable with a bouncing ball. Allow the tennis lover the opportunity to watch, play with and eventually catch a bouncing ball. It is truly amazing to consider the numerous aspects of a bouncing ball, something experienced players take for granted. This information, which has been assimilated over time for an experienced player can be overwhelming for a beginner who is fed it all at once. However, all this will be picked up effortlessly if a relaxed atmosphere of exploration can be created for the tennis lover, an atmosphere in which the tennis lover is not judged or in a rush to accomplish or prove anything; one in which he or she can simply experiment and 'play', much like a young child in a sandbox: not too much structure, no 'trying' to do anything in particular, just playing.

### *Patience*

Are we willing to play with a racket and ball for months against a wall or bounce a ball endlessly on our racket or down on the ground solely because we love it? Or play mini tennis with friends and teaching professionals as long as it takes to feel comfortable and gain control of the ball with the racket?

Players are often eager to play competitively because too often the 'fun' in playing tennis is derived solely from the ego gratification it provides. Instead, I offer to you the possibility of seeing tennis more as an art form. With an art form there is no goal or objective because it is not about getting somewhere; it is about the journey. The

destination becomes irrelevant because there is not more intrinsic joy or advantage in being in one place over the other. The joy is in the movement, in the feel of the ball making contact with the racket, in the sound of the ball coming off the racket. It is in the silence, in the effortlessness of it all, in the silent music that rings in your ear when you are experiencing *Instinctive Tennis*.

*The joy is in the movement,  
in the feel of the ball  
making contact with the  
racket, in the sound of the  
ball coming off the racket.*

When the goal disappears, time becomes irrelevant because joy is not somewhere out there in the future to be experienced when some particular destination has been reached, but it is right now in the very process of playing.

It takes time to develop skills and as long as we are enjoying the process impatience will not arise. The key is falling in love with the simple pleasures involved in hitting a tennis ball.

### **Building a Stroke**

Once enough time has been given to developing feel for the racket and the ball, we are ready for the basic stroke mechanics. Good mechanics are important because they allow the player to hit the ball efficiently, effortlessly and without risk of injury to the body. Please keep in mind that a full swing should not be taught too early. I often see beginners wildly swinging their rackets over their shoulder with absolutely no control. The full swing is not the beginning point.

What are good mechanics? What is a good swing? We move into an area of some controversy here because if we look at the top players in the world, we discover that they hit the ball in a variety of different ways; some of the differences are obvious, some are not. If any single conclusion can be drawn from this observation, it is that



there is no single best way to hit the ball. Having said that, we can also clearly see that there are some similarities in the way most 'good' players strike the ball. So, where do we stand? As tennis facilitators, when and how do we guide the tennis lovers and when do we leave them alone? For me, this is the subtle line not so easily discerned.

*Learning the Basic Principle of Good Mechanics*

The concept I am presenting to you is that good technique is not something that you have to remember or be taught too rigidly, but something that can happen largely

*Good technique is not something that you have to remember or be taught too rigidly, but something that can happen largely by itself if we simply get out of our own way.*

by itself if we simply get out of our own way. In other words, by showing the tennis lover some general sense of the swing and without going into the specifics of what the elbow, feet, wrist, forearm, shoulders,

hips, etc. should be doing, the tennis lover can experiment and find a way that works.

*Choosing a Forehand Grip*

First of all, the tennis lover needs to find a comfortable grip, which we have already spoken about. The vast majority of the time, tennis lovers will pick up a racket and begin hitting with the eastern forehand grip, which is probably best in terms of learning how to play in the simplest manner possible. This grip will allow the facilitator to break down the stroke and build it up through a series of progressions, which is extremely helpful, especially for those with limited athletic ability. Other players, for a variety of reasons may choose a more extreme grip. In most cases, if the player seems comfortable with this grip, I would suggest leaving it alone. In isolated cases where players of limited athletic experience or ability

make such choices and are obviously having great difficulty, it may be advisable to steer them towards an eastern forehand grip. In actuality, it is more likely that intermediate or advanced players will make a change from a continental or eastern forehand grip towards a semi western grip in order to generate more spin, power or consistency. With the extreme grips the learning progression for beginners will be a little different.

*Progression for Eastern Forehand*

Have the tennis lover stand half-way between service line and the net. We are beginning with the assumption that the tennis lover has fairly good coordination, but has an erratic stroke. There are a number of progressions that could precede the first one here for adults with very little athletic experience or for young children with undeveloped coordination skills. For example, stationary balls<sup>1</sup> dangling in mid-air are a fantastic starting point for young children.

1. Standing one-step from the tennis lover, on the same side of the net, simply drop the ball beside the player. Ask the tennis lover to line the strings of the racket to the ball and touch the ball with his or her racket. There should be just a slight movement of the racket forward but no backswing, simply line the strings to the ball and allow the ball to hit the racket. At this stage there is no emphasis on hitting the ball over the net.

2. Once the tennis lover is fairly successful at bringing racket to ball, the progression forward to 'bump tennis' can begin. The facilitator remains on the same side of the net as the tennis lover and bounces the ball in front of the player who tries to gently bump it over the net. The

<sup>1</sup> Joe Dinoffer's creative company, OncourtOffcourt, based in Dallas, Texas, supplies a number of innovative teaching aids that are worth exploring.

facilitator can start close to the net and gently work his way back until the player can do this successfully from the service line, after which it would be time for the player to move to the other side of the court. The facilitator can also guide the tennis lovers' hand and allow them to kinetically feel the bump.

Numerous games can be developed to make this entire process enjoyable. One game I like very much and have spent many hours playing is called 'Bump tennis'. In this game, the emphasis is on lining the ball to the strings, or tracking the ball, and trying to bump the ball gently over the net. Both facilitator and tennis lover remain inside the service line on opposite sides of the net. At the beginning, the facilitator places the ball right at the tennis lover's racket, but slowly, as the player relaxes and is successful, movement can be introduced without fanfare. It is important to note that there is absolutely no backswing in this game. A short swing at the initial stage of a beginner's development will help immeasurably in

*A short swing at the initial stage of a beginner's development will help immeasurably in gaining the necessary control.*

gaining the necessary control. Players with limited athletic ability can become competent players by spending a significant amount of time at this

stage and by giving their bodies ample opportunity to become comfortable with the timing between racket and ball. Players with athletic ability or previous racket and ball experience would need to spend less time at this stage. If the tennis lover is extremely tense or uncomfortable ask them to call out 'bounce' when the ball touches the ground on their side of the court and 'hit' as the ball touches their racket. More on this drill later, for now I would just like to say it will help them to focus on the ball better.

3. As the tennis lover progresses, the balls should be fed with a little variation of direction and height to allow

the tennis lover to move in a relaxed and effortless manner, all the time maintaining focus on the racket meeting the ball cleanly. In addition, the player can be moved further and further back into the court until he is on the service line.

4. The tennis lover can now be asked to make contact with the ball and *extend* the racket towards the facilitator's side of the net. This step need not always be verbalized. As in all situations, the less instruction, the easier it will be for the player to learn. Often, this extension can happen by simply placing the player further back into the court, but still have him focus on hitting the ball straight back to the facilitator. In order to do this successfully, the tennis lover will naturally have to extend his racket out further towards the facilitator. For players who already have faulty mechanics, this extension can be a wonderful corrective intermediary step to focus on for a while.

5. Next, we need to encourage the tennis lover to simply bring the racket over the opposite shoulder for a full follow-through. Once again the racket begins at the side, which becomes point A, and goes through all the way until it is caught by the other hand and rests on the opposite shoulder, which becomes point B. As the tennis lover becomes more proficient, we can ask him to begin in the ready position and move the racket to the side as the ball is coming towards him. There is still no backswing.

6. Finally, we arrive at the full swing. The backswing can occur naturally by simply asking the tennis lover to move further and further back, or, if this is not successful we can verbally instruct him to add a backswing, which is now necessary to generate the greater pace (racket head speed) needed to hit the ball over the net from further back in the court. When facilitating a backswing, there are two basic alternatives to consider; a straight back or a loop swing. The facilitator can first see if the

tennis lover has a natural propensity for either one; what happens when we just say take a swing at the ball? Note how the racket is taken back. Please keep in mind that there is no right or wrong way to do this. Conventional wisdom prefers the straight back for beginners and the loop for advanced players. The simple fact is that there are top players who hit the ball pretty well doing either one. Consequently, if the facilitator is going to guide the tennis lover, he needs to keep in the mind the specific and unique requirements of the individual in front of him. This is true at all times.

At this stage, it is important to encourage the tennis lover to focus, not on where the ball is going, but on his or her own self. The ball has no mind of its own. It does not travel at random; it moves in relation to the swing. If one controls the swing, one controls the ball. Consequently,

*The ball has no mind of its own. It does not travel at random; it moves in relation to the swing.*

the tennis lover should be encouraged to focus simply on the swing. After understanding where the swing begins and

where it ends, the focus should be on getting the racket from point A to point B as smoothly and as gracefully as possible. Point A is with the racket to the side, tracking the on-coming ball and Point B is over the opposite shoulder with the other hand preferably catching the racket at the end of the swing.

8. For a number of reasons, it is important to give the tennis lover something to do with the non-dominant hand right from the beginning. Most important is bringing the non-dominant hand back with the hitting hand at the beginning stage of the swing. This movement facilitates the necessary upper body rotation that is essential for good groundstrokes. The cues I use are: 'keep your non-dominant hand on the racket for as long as you can' or 'use your non-dominant hand to gently push the racket

back'. Also, at the beginner stage I recommend that the tennis lover catch the racket over his opposite shoulder for two reasons. One, it gives the tennis lover a definitive point to take the racket towards during the swing. Often, when beginners or intermediates are playing, their emphasis is so much on the result, where the ball is going, that their swing tends to become shorter and shorter. Catching the racket over their shoulder helps them focus more on the process of hitting, although sometimes it can be a struggle, judging by how often they need to be reminded. Secondly, the second hand on the racket is essential when getting the racket back to the ready position for the next swing. Catching the racket ensures that both hands are on the racket and that the ready position is thus easily attained. Many players at the beginner or intermediate levels, who do not catch their racket over their shoulder after hitting a forehand, often fail to return to the ready position with both hands on the racket. This invariably results in problems with grip changes, which often means the tennis lover will hit an underspin backhand rather than a topspin or flat drive backhand.

I often encourage tennis lovers to shadow practice their new swing in the comfort of their own home without a ball. The rationale is that the more frequently the body repeats this swing, the quicker it will feel comfortable with it and the easier it will become to repeat the swing on the tennis court when a live ball is approaching.

The tennis lover should stay at each stage long enough to feel comfortable with that particular movement before moving to the next. In that way, each stage adds something without focusing on the previous stage. As this building process begins, it is essential that we give the player only one thing to focus on at a time.

*The Semi-Western Forehand*

This swing cannot be broken down in the same way as the eastern grip. The nature of the grip requires a full swing at some speed, although not maximum speed. The reason is that with this grip the racket face is somewhat closed and so a brushing pattern must be developed on the swing as opposed to coming straight through the ball. However, even with this grip there must be some racket momentum going forward along with the brushing movement. This grip will eventually allow the tennis lover to hit powerfully and with varying amounts of spin.

1. The first step with this grip is to swing fully at the ball with both a backswing and a follow-through, but gently enough so the ball does not go beyond the opposite service line. So, with this grip we can start with the movement of point A to point B.<sup>2</sup>

2. Help the tennis lover to focus on the brushing up movement by placing targets above the net and encouraging the tennis lover to hit the ball well over the net but still into the court.

3. Once the tennis lover has developed a good swing, it is important that consistency through spin be the main focus. I encourage tennis lovers at this stage to focus on getting every ball over the net with spin and avoiding errors (especially those into the net). Slowly, but surely the tennis lover should be encouraged to move further and further back, making certain he or she is successful at each juncture, until they are hitting from the baseline. Lots of fun games can be developed to reinforce this quality in the tennis lover.

<sup>2</sup> As players advance, the follow-through often does not go over the shoulder, but to the side below the shoulder. This 'window-wiper-type' of swing will evolve naturally and the facilitator should allow it to happen as the advanced player tries to do 'different things' with the ball.

4. Players are sometimes discouraged by the high loopy shots over the net that are necessary at the beginning stage of learning to hit with topspin. It is necessary for the facilitator to motivate them to continue doing so because once the foundation is thus in place, they will ultimately be able to hit extremely powerful and penetrating shots lower over the net all over the court.

#### *Two-Handed Backhand*

With children generally starting to play so much earlier these days, the two-handed backhand has huge advantages over its single-handed counterpart, both short- and long-term. Short-term it will allow the tennis lover to hit solid backhands almost immediately because the addition of the second hand provides the necessary strength and support needed to control the racket head better. On the long-term, I feel the two-handed backhand is a more effective shot for almost all styles of players with, perhaps the exception of a committed serve and volleyer, who wants to take the net at every opportunity or a defensive player who wants to stay back and scramble (and who will therefore be hitting numerous underspin backhands). No professional will choose the latter option, but there are club players who undoubtedly do.

*Two-handed backhand has huge advantages over its single-handed counterpart.*

The first thing I do when facilitating this stroke is to help tennis lovers understand that the primary hand in this swing is the non-dominant hand. This can be done for a right-handed player, for example, by asking them to hold the racket in a normal grip<sup>3</sup> and then to either let go

<sup>3</sup> For the beginner the non-dominant hand is usually in an eastern grip, but making the non-dominant hand more of a semi-western grip can generate more spin and angles. This is recommended for only advanced players.



completely with the right hand (the dominant hand is the hand at the bottom) or to hold onto the racket with only the finger tips of that hand. By first playing bump tennis in this fashion and later the full swing with the racket

*For many intermediate players who have an ineffective single-handed backhand, I have found that it is much easier to learn a completely new stroke (the two-handed backhand) from scratch.*

finishing over the opposite shoulder, the tennis lover will develop a feel for the non-dominant hand pushing the racket. Whenever the facilitator is satisfied that the tennis lover has developed this feel, he can

revert to gripping the racket with both hands and go through the same progression described above for building a stroke.

For many intermediate players who have an ineffective single-handed backhand, I have found that it is much easier to learn a completely new stroke (the two-handed backhand) from scratch, rather than trying to modify a stroke they have developed muscle memory for over numerous years of playing. If they are mentally open to learning this new stroke, many of them are rewarded with almost immediate success.

A word of caution, one common problem for the two-handed backhand occurs when the left hand (for a righthander) comes immediately across the body rather than extending forward first. In such a situation, it is often necessary to slow down and introduce an intermediary step between bumping the ball and finishing all the way at point B. This step would have the player extending his left hand straight out in front of him after bumping the ball and freezing in that position. The freezing position would have the left hand extended straight out from the chin at shoulder level. Have the tennis lover freeze in this position long enough for him to feel it and then ask him to add the finish over the shoulder.

### *Single-Handed Backhand*

The key points to consider when facilitating the single-handed backhand are that the swing generates from the shoulder and not from the elbow or wrist. In other words, the only moving joint should be the shoulder joint. The wrist joint should be loose enough to come under the ball, but firm enough so that no wobble arises at the point of contact. Similarly, the elbow joint should be fairly straight without being rigid.

There will have to be a grip change from the forehand to the backhand. Without becoming too technical, suffice to say that we need to turn the racket sufficiently so that the racket meets the ball fairly straight. For more topspin, the racket face turns even more into a closed position. Please remember that if you are going to use the closed grip then you will not be able to break down the stroke as much and will have to begin, not from the bump tennis progression, but from the full swing stage, just as we did on the forehand side.

### *Movement and Footwork*

It is my experience that there is far too much emphasis at the beginning stage on footwork and how to move on the court. By far the most important factor at this stage is coordinating the racket and ball and having them meet at just the right time; obviously movement is involved to make this happen. However, how feet are placed in order to do this is largely irrelevant at this initial stage of learning and will only serve to confuse the tennis lover. I urge tennis lovers to focus on tracking the on-coming ball with their racket and invariably when they do this, sound footwork arises quite naturally. My experience is that the only time good footwork does not

*By far the most important factor at this stage is coordinating the racket and ball and having them meet at just the right time*

arise is when the player is 'trying' to move in a certain way that was told to him by a facilitator. When you give up the effort to hit in the 'correct' way, your footwork becomes more relaxed and natural and invariably correct.

In addition, conventional teaching wisdom has conspired to teach the 'wrong' way to stand to hit the ball for many years. Unfortunately, this is still true to some extent today. This subject will be dealt with more comprehensively in Chapter 6 when I address facilitators more directly. At this point, suffice to say that the tennis lover would be best served by thinking there is no ideal placement of the feet while hitting a ball.

*A Word on Corrections*

During these progressive drills, the facilitator needs to observe what is breaking down. A breakdown is an indication that the tennis lover has not had enough time to develop the skill prior to the breakdown. For example, at the full swing stage, if the ball is constantly going up into the air or into the net, it probably means the tennis lover's racket is not angled properly at the point of contact. If this occurs, it means we need to go back to the bump step of the progression, so that the tennis lover can develop increased racket awareness at point of contact. Or if the tennis lover is pulling the racket off to the side too quickly, which will often result in 'shanking' the ball to the sides of the court, the tennis lover needs to feel the extension more and the facilitator will need to go back to

*Verbal instructions are invariably confusing at the early levels of tennis, and only a little more effective with advanced players.*

the stage where the tennis lover can learn this part of the swing. Simply telling the player that the racket should be flush with the ball at the point of contact may not be very effective. Verbal instructions are invariably confusing at the early levels of tennis, and only a

little more effective with advanced players. A much better way is to create a situation in which the tennis lover can work on the correction by *doing*.

### Games for Beginners

It is important to be clear as to the purpose of playing games with beginners. The purpose is two-fold. Conventionally, games are used to help make it more 'fun', especially for young children, who are less motivated by the desire to improve than are adults. So games provide motivation and as such they become a double-edged sword. Yes, they often help the tennis lover focus, but unfortunately the focus arises for the wrong reasons. This type of motivation does not encourage the tennis lover to fall in love with hitting the ball, but instead promotes a love for the challenge and the opportunity to win. This latter motivation will lead us into the downward spiral that most competitive players are presently entangled in.

Instead, we can use games for a totally different purpose. We can use games to help the tennis lover focus on the process by awarding points, not just for where the ball goes, but also on how our swing is executed. In other words, a facilitator, to help the player focus on that part of the swing he wishes him to, can award points. For example, a player could receive two points if the ball makes a ping (hits the center of the racket) and one if the ball is hit by any part of the racket and perhaps another if the ball goes over the net or in a particular area. There are numerous situations that the facilitator can create to help the tennis lover focus on whatever it is he wants him to.

*It is important that the tennis lover is given a scoring situation that awards one point, at least, for something he can easily do.*

It is important that the tennis lover is given a scoring situation that awards one point, at least, for something he

can easily do and then extra points for that which he is aspiring to do. In this way, the tennis lover is motivated to focus on the process as guided by the facilitator.

*Examples:*

1. Place the ball cart in the middle of the service box and gently feed the tennis lover, who has to bump the ball towards the cart. Points can be awarded for hitting the cart and for hitting the ball into the service box. If the players' swings are too long, an extra point can be awarded for those players who freeze their racket at the point of contact.

2. In group situations, one tennis lover can stand on the coach's side of the net and try to catch the bumps of the other tennis lovers. After a certain amount of time, rotate positions.

3. Play lots of mini tennis with short strokes, where both players are on the service line. Keep the emphasis on control by allowing plenty of time to develop awareness of the racket face.

### **Having Fun**

Too often players just do not seem to be having fun while on the court hitting balls. This appears strange because one could ask why anybody would do anything unless they have fun. The truth of the matter is that most of the

*Most of the time we are doing things we don't enjoy in the misguided belief that our happiness lies somewhere in the future.*

time we are doing things we don't enjoy in the misguided belief that our happiness lies somewhere in the future, that a certain situation will eventu-

ally arrive when *real fun* can be experienced. Unfortunately, the future never arrives because when you realize one goal, another arises keeping expectations always one step ahead, as a result, happiness is once more pushed somewhere into the future.

Tennis is no exception to this 'rule'. Beginning tennis players always seem incredibly impatient to get to some imaginary level from where they can 'start' enjoying themselves. There is no level at which all 'expectations' disappear and bliss arises spontaneously. Players at every level are never 'satisfied' or 'happy' with the way they play. Everybody feels they can become better and perhaps they can, but there is no correlation between better and joy.

The beginner should wallow in being a beginner; in fact there is no need to be overly conscious of what level you are at. Simply focus all your energy into doing whatever it is you are doing and do it with your entire being. There is simply no correlation between a state of total acceptance and peace of mind and how well you play. That acceptance of who you are and how you play *right now* is the key to an enduring contentment.

So, I encourage all beginners to be playful in the learning process. Experience the joy and beauty of the graceful movements, the easy sliding to the ball, the beauty of a silent mind lost in simply watching the ball. Be open to the ecstasy of contact between racket and ball, the sweet sound and the effortless feel. The wonderful experience of being a beginner is no different from the joys of being an intermediate or the joys available to a professional. In each case the peace and contentment available to us remains ever-present.

*The wonderful experience of being a beginner is no different from the joys of being an intermediate or the joys available to a professional.*

### Summary

1. Be clear why you want to play tennis in the first place. The reason you choose will color your entire experience.

2. Spend sufficient time developing familiarity with racket and ball separately and then together.
3. Patiently play bump tennis until you feel comfortably able to control the ball.
4. Follow the easy progressions in order to develop good technique.
5. Be patient by allowing your body the time to become comfortable with the full swing.
6. Do not think too much at any stage of your development.
7. Avoid competition.
8. Be totally focused in what you are doing.
9. Have fun.

## 5. The Intermediate

The beginner stage involves laying a foundation for the most important strokes: primarily the forehand and backhand followed by the rudiments of the serve and volleys.

The intermediate stage can be seen as a solidification of the foundation. It is about gaining experience by allowing the body an opportunity to hit balls over and over again, thereby grooving the stroke and making it a part of ones muscle memory. It is also about learning. The learning is on different levels. On the technical level the tennis lover, by hitting lots of balls, will go to the next level with his forehand and backhands, while placing greater emphasis on improving the serve and the volleying techniques. In addition, when he reaches a higher level he may perhaps add to his repertoire of strokes. This might include the underspin backhand, the return of serve, the overhead, the drop shot, etc. By playing matches or in training sessions with a facilitator, the tennis lover will also begin to learn the rudiments of how to construct points and better understand and become familiar with the geometry of a tennis court.

A facilitator can be helpful by bringing some organized structure to the hitting, but he is, by no means, indispensable to this part of the process. In fact, the facilitator is least needed at this stage, if the tennis lover has arrived at this stage 'naturally', in the manner described above and if his fundamentals are sound. The absolutely primary focus of this stage of a tennis lover's development is hitting lots and lots of balls.



If, however, readers of this book are already intermediates, they may have certain technical flaws in their game that need 'smoothing out', in which case they can go back and re-read the beginner section and start from

*The absolutely primary focus of this stage of a tennis lover's development is hitting lots and lots of balls.*

scratch on the stroke or strokes they are having problems with. Since they have some basic skills, they will be able to advance quickly, but may have to

spend extra time in the real basics of the swing (getting from A to B). The tennis lover can also enlist the help of a facilitator. A good one will make the necessary minor adjustments in a way the body can understand easily and with the least amount of resistance. It is important that an intermediate understands that if he is to make a technical change in his game with a stroke that has been grooved through years of playing, it will not be easy. However, it can be done if the tennis lover is open-minded and willing to start from the very beginning, which can sometimes be difficult for the ego to handle.

As far as match play is concerned, I know that for most tennis players, tennis minus the competition is boring, but as I said earlier, at the beginner stage competition can be a detriment to developing ones game. At the low intermediate level, one can begin to play matches if one feels one must. But it is preferable at this stage to consolidate ones stroke production. As ones strokes become grooved and technically sound, match play becomes more of a bonafide option. Match play presents an excellent opportunity for all intermediates, indeed for players of all levels, to see what breaks down in ones game. This information determines what the player needs to work on during practices.

### **Passion**

I highly recommend encouraging tennis lovers to go out and hit with their peers. Every great player of yesterday, before the advent of the 'tennis teaching professional-obsession', where many young players refuse to step on the court unless accompanied by a facilitator, developed great skills purely through their tremendous passion for the game. This passion was reflected in overcoming incredible obstacles; whether it was the absence of playing partners and hitting against the wall or hanging out at courts all day long and playing with anyone available. Or perhaps it was the absence of courts in the proximity and therefore traveling great distances alone simply to have the opportunity to play. This is quite different from the present situation where, all too often, individuals or their parents decide tennis would be a good sport to pursue for a number of reasons, all of which are essentially goal-oriented or mind-based. Consequently, a real passion to just play the game rarely develops (love does not come from the mind, there is no logic to it!). Certainly there is an intensity to win, for the rewards the game has to offer, but this is not the intrinsic joy of playing arising from pure passion I am alluding to.

Youngsters have so many options these days and are pulled in so many different directions that often it is difficult for them to become passionate about any one thing. There is little down time in their lives to pursue something on their own, so obsessed are parents to fill each waking moment of their children's lives with some organized activity or other. The problem arises when down time is spent watching television or playing computer games. In fairness to parents, their motivation is pure; they are simply encouraging their youngsters to do something healthy. To encourage youngsters to hit balls with friends or others of similar ability would go a long way

in helping a real passion for the game develop. Without passion, one may develop skills, but individual transformation will not take place and nothing of *real* value will ever be gained.

My suggestion is that the playing to lesson ratio be at least 3 or 4 to one. Meaning for every lesson that an individual takes they should go out and play 3 or 4 times by themselves, on the wall or with friends. 'Should' is a problematic word to use because either there is a desire to go out and play 3 or 4 times. *For every lesson that an individual takes they should go out and play 3 or 4 times.* go out and play or there is not. In addition, everyone is different with a unique situation and exceptions will invariably surface. For beginners who have trouble playing with others of their own level, the facilitator provides an attractive alternative. For others, for whom finances are not an obstacle, it can be more pleasant to play with a facilitator who plays exceedingly well and is gearing the entire hour-long session towards their needs than it would be playing with someone of their own level.

### **Strengthening Fundamentals**

At the previous stage, the tennis lover developed basic mechanics and a feel for the ball. He also developed a full and smooth swing by not concerning himself with where the ball was going, instead, simply focusing on the movement itself and making it as fluid as possible by being totally relaxed. At the intermediate stage, the tennis lover can, for the first time, become cogniscent of the net and the white lines on the opposite side of the court. This awareness need not cause anxiety. It is a simple understanding of the rules of the game and once they have been understood, no other thought need be given to them. We do not need to make a goal out of it. The rules of the

game need to be understood, but not overly focused on. A runner may know where the finish line is, but remains focused on his running throughout the race. The finish line is not a variable; it is there and always in the same place. The same is true of the tennis lover's experience with the net and the lines.

At this stage, we wish to develop consistency, which arises from the effortlessness of sound technique. The first ground rule we must keep in mind is that the swing cannot change in order to achieve consistency and if we have spent enough time on the previous stage the swing will not break down. If the swing does break down, it is simply an indication to the facilitator or the tennis lover that more time needs to be spent becoming comfortable with the swing, without consideration to where the ball goes.

It is not a question of remembering the complete swing, since memory is a function of the mind. We are training the body, and the mind has an extremely limited role to play. This lifts a huge burden

*This lifts a huge burden off the tennis lover and allows him to relax if he is able to understand that the body learns in its own way and time and no 'effort' or 'individual will' will expedite that process.*

off the tennis lover and allows him to relax if he is able to understand that the body learns in its own way and time and no 'effort' or 'individual will' will expedite that process. Once that is understood, we have entered the stream and we need only relax because the stream will eventually find the river all by itself.

As we said earlier, the situational task is to consistently hit the ball over the net. Consequently, our target is the center of the court (away from the side lines where a small mishap may result in the ball landing out), and at least 2 or 3 feet over the net (ensuring that there are no errors into the net). The tennis lover must eschew all desire to hit into corners or with excessive power and

simply be satisfied with patiently bringing every ball back into the court with a smooth, easy and graceful swing.

Often the mind will not be satisfied with such a simple task and will want more, but it is essential that the tennis lover become completely absorbed in each stage of the process without any thought to the type of tennis he or she will ultimately play. This absorption can only take place if one falls in love with the process of playing. The stepping-stone between a beginner and an intermediate

*The stepping-stone between a beginner and an intermediate must be a genuine love for hitting the ball rather than desire or ambition.*

must be a genuine love for hitting the ball rather than desire or ambition. If it is not, frustration, anger, fear and disappointment will be your experience.

However, if love is your motivation, your entire experience of playing and competing will be transformed.

### **Games for Intermediates**

#### *Without a Facilitator*

The intermediate stage is a crucial phase for the tennis lover because it is here that the fundamentals learned at the beginner stage will become solidified and built upon. As we have said before it is important for the tennis lover to hit many, many balls to solidify these strokes. There are numerous games that can be 'invented' to facilitate this by isolating the basic strokes.

#### *Bounce, Hit*

If the foundation laid earlier is sound, all the tennis lover has to do is silently hit balls and allow the body an opportunity to learn. Consequently, it is a meditative state that we aspire to, which will allow this to happen. In my mind, the drills introduced by Tim Gallwey, almost 25

years ago, remain relevant today. The focus is on watching the ball because the ball is in the present.

Gallwey's idea to help keep the mind in the here-and-now was to have it focus on the ball so intently that it could not wander off. In order to watch the ball in this way, he suggested saying *bounce*, quietly to oneself, when the ball landed on ones own side of the court and saying *hit* when ones own racket made contact with the ball. This drill helps the player to focus and stops the mind from drifting by giving it a specific task to do. Practicing this drill over time will help quieten the mind and when silence comes, the bounce-hit can fall away. Different forms of this drill will be introduced for the advanced players, but for the intermediate this drill will work like a minor miracle if practiced correctly. What do I mean by correctly? It is easy for the tennis lover to start saying the bounce-hit automatically, without any correlation with the actual bouncing and hitting, which then allows the mind to drift off somewhere else. If this happens, silence will not happen and performance will remain unchanged. The tennis lover has to remain vigilant and aware. At times it could be fruitful to say the words out loud and have someone check if the words correspond to the ball's actions. For example, I have worked with players who have been extremely tense and as a result, were unable to identify these two simple occurrences. They would say, 'bounce' while the ball was still in the air and had not yet landed on the ground; more frequently they would say, 'hit' after they had hit the ball and when it was traveling over the net, or in rare circumstances after the ball had already landed on the other side of the court. The greater the tension, the less awareness the tennis lover will have and the more difficult it will be to play well.

Tennis lovers can hit forehands and backhands right down the middle of the court until they have gained

some level of proficiency. When this has been achieved, the partners can divide the court into half and hit into smaller target areas using cross-court and down the line shots for both forehands and backhands. These fun-sessions can last for many hours, weeks and months if one falls in love with the joy of simply hitting. All these drills can be played as a game and players can play for points and assign a winner at 11 or 21. Please understand that playing a game that has a 'winner' need not be goal-oriented. One can be absorbed in the playing and still understand that at 11 or 21 the game is over and another begins.

Falling in love with the intrinsic joy of playing will allow you to be the best you can be. It will allow you to maximize your athletic ability, but more importantly, the *Falling in love with the intrinsic joy of playing will allow you to be the best you can be.* journey, regardless of the destination (how good you become), will be of tremendous value and full of joy. When you are in a state of contentedness and peace, your human potential is realized.

### *Mini Tennis*

Mini tennis is a valuable game, regardless of the level of the player. We saw how beginners can use mini tennis to their advantage in the previous chapter by playing bump tennis; intermediates can also help themselves by hitting a full stroke within the service boxes. Direction can be worked on by hitting cross-court and down the line with your partner or with the facilitator, both with the forehand and the backhand.

Isolating shots in this controlled environment presents a perfect environment for working on technique. For example, I start many players with an underspin backhand by simply having them develop a feel for the stroke in the mini tennis warm-up for a minute at the beginning of

the lesson and after a while their proficiency at this stroke grows without ever formally learning it.

In addition, mini tennis can simply serve as a warm up. It is difficult to start from the back of the court and keep the ball consistently in play when one first comes out to play. Starting in the service box and slowly getting the feet moving and focusing on making good contact between racket and ball is an excellent way to warm up before stepping back and hitting from the baseline.

*Games for Intermediates with a Facilitator*

There are numerous games a facilitator can develop to ensure that the tennis lover hits many balls, which is the primary concern at this stage of development. A lot of feeding drills are still necessary to isolate the situation, but many of them will be semi-live drills, in which the facilitator hits the ball back and rallies develop. This is more easily done in private lessons, but can also be managed in group lessons. For example, one way to achieve this is to play with one person on half-court and have two other players trying to hit by themselves on the other half and one person picking up balls. This is a wonderful way to work closely with individuals in a group setting. However, it is important to keep an eye on the two hitting by your side and give them specific tasks, while also rotating at regular intervals. If the players cannot successfully hit with themselves from the backcourt, have them hit within the service box. The key is to challenge them with an activity that maintains their interest, all the while having them do something they are somewhat successful at.

Another game I enjoy playing with low intermediates is towards the end of the lesson when they are trying to hit with themselves. In this game, I feed the ball from outside the court and the players hit. Points are awarded



not for who actually 'wins' the point, but on the form. In other words, if the player hits with correct form (usually the emphasis is simply on completing the full swing) no point is won or lost. Another spin on the scoring system is that if the player realizes that he did not finish the swing and announces it out loud, then he or she only loses one point. However, if the facilitator identifies the indiscretion, then he loses two points. This 'forces' the players to really focus on themselves and the swing, which is what we want at this stage. You could play this game for 20 minutes and still have a score of 0-0. In reality, I prefer to play this game for 10 minutes and then introduce the factor of the net and lines. Then, the players lose an additional point for an error, but the previous scoring system remains intact. This game works very well and players who are inconsistent with their swings suddenly become less so.

### **Developing Your Game**

We have discussed in some detail how to hit forehands and backhands, which should be the primary concern of beginning players. As new players become comfortable with these strokes, they are ready to add to their repertoire.

#### *Taking Instruction*

It is essential that we broach this subject before getting into the instructional section of this book. It won't always be possible to enlist the help of a good facilitator, so it is important that we are able to process the information given to us by anyone, so that it can become an aid to peak performance rather than a hindrance.

As we mentioned earlier, playing tennis is an experience and words do not have the power to convey experiences very well, just by their very nature. Consequently,

when you hear words, understand that the facilitator is simply trying to convey the unconveyable; the words must not be taken literally or hung on to too stringently. Simply try and understand the meaning of the facilitator's message and then drop the words totally. Too many tennis lovers hold onto the words of the facilitator and even take them out on the court with them to play matches. No amount of repeating instructions will help your body reproduce those actions during a match; that will only happen if the body has had the opportunity to hit a sufficient (how many that is, is different for different individuals) amount of balls and developed the feel for that particular stroke. You cannot *remember* how to play tennis with your mind, it is learned on a cellular level.

*The facilitator is simply trying to convey the unconveyable; the words must not be taken literally or hung on to too stringently.*

*You cannot remember how to play tennis with your mind, it is learned on a cellular level.*

Tennis facilitators are very creative in using analogies that help you get a sense of the swing, but the examples cannot be taken literally. For example a single-handed backhand may be somewhat 'like' throwing a frisbee and a serve may be similar to throwing a baseball; both these examples can be helpful in conveying a general sense of the stroke, only if they are not taken too literally.

### The Serve

The key to teaching or learning the serve is progression because there are so many different aspects and variables involved in serving well. Many players will find serving with a continental grip difficult and sometimes and with some tennis lovers it may be better to hit the serve with a forehand grip. However, we need to keep in mind that a forehand grip, while it may allow for a functional,

consistent and sometimes even powerful serve will give rise to severe limitations, which will become more evident as the tennis lover attempts to add spin to a second serve in particular. My suggestion is for all beginning tennis lovers to learn the 'correct' (continental) grip from the beginning and see what happens. At some point, with some tennis lovers, you may have to move to a forehand grip, but if the tennis lover is patient, I think this will be the exception rather than the rule. However, often players are impatient to begin playing and for these individuals there should be no hesitation in allowing a forehand grip. I used to be a purist and want everyone to learn the serve correctly, but over the years I have changed because I discovered that many young players were not playing tournaments or trying out for teams simply because they could not serve. As a result they became discouraged with the game and sometimes even stopped playing.

We have already mentioned the need for a small and light racket for all those learning to serve properly. The loose wrist and the resulting pronation motion are best executed with a racket that the tennis lover finds light and extremely maneuverable. After correct technique is learned, the size of the racket becomes less critical.

### *Serving Progression*

#### 1. GRIP

Make the tennis lover comfortable with the continental grip<sup>1</sup> by playing games using that grip. Bouncing the ball up and down, and back and forth, etc.

<sup>1</sup> Holding the racket horizontally at eye level by the throat with the non-dominant hand and then using the dominant hand to grasp the racket by the handle can help you find the continental grip. Additionally, placing the racket in the arm-pit of your non-dominant hand and then pulling out the racket, as one would draw a sword from a sheath, will also give you the continental grip.

## 2. POINT OF CONTACT

Bring the tennis lover one step from the net and ask him or her to tap the ball over the net with the arm extended straight overhead. Slowly push him further and further back until he is half way to the service line.

## 3. PROGRESSIVE SWING

Depending on the skills of the tennis lover, different beginning approaches can be used as necessary. For those players who have limited athletic experience, breaking up the swing may be helpful.

1. This could begin with the tennis lover fully extending his arm above his head and the facilitator placing the ball in the air before bumping it as we mentioned above. Soon after, the tennis lover could him- or herself place the ball in the air.

2. When one is comfortable with the point of contact, have the tennis lover throw the racket at the ball only with his wrist. Thus, the arm remains basically extended and the backswing and followthrough become functions of the wrist. At this stage you do not want to use anything but the wrist to hit the ball.

3. Begin the racket in the cocked position as if preparing to throw a baseball and have the tennis lover 'throw' the racket at the ball.

4. Start in the ready position for the serve with both hands together and in front. I encourage the tennis lover to have two checkpoints, one before and one after the hitting. Before, check the grip is correct and after, see if the wrist is broken (did it pronate?) and see if your grip is still continental. Sometimes, players begin with a continental grip and during the backswing and by the time the racket contacts the ball, the grip has changed to the more comfortable forehand grip.

*I encourage the tennis lover to have two checkpoints, one before and one after the hitting.*

It is important that the full swing be employed as soon as possible or at least practiced even before the first two levels have successfully been completed. This is because if the player remains with the broken swing too long, it can become exceedingly difficult to feel the rhythm and fluidity of a full swing.

What constitutes a full swing generates some debate within the teaching profession. In the past, the racket hand was always encouraged to move all the way back (with the head of the racket pointing directly to the fence behind the server) before coming to the cocked position from where it is launched up and forward to the ball. There are players who do this and have excellent serves. However, many players have developed more abbreviated back swings, which allow the racket to ascend more quickly into the cocked position. While I am uncertain if there is a 'right' or 'wrong' way here, I do tend to lean towards the abbreviated method when a choice arises because of its greater simplicity.

#### *Key Teaching Points*

##### 1. LOOSE WRIST

To help the tennis lover feel this looseness, allow her to hit the serve, gripping the racket with the two bottom fingers off the handle and then progress to one finger off the handle and eventually to gripping the racket right at the bottom with the pinkie finger barely on the tip of the racket. With such a loose grip the tennis lover will be unable to grip the racket firmly, thereby locking the wrist, and pronation will take place naturally and effortlessly. Even if the player is using a forehand grip, a loose wrist will improve the general effectiveness of the serve.

##### 2. PRONATION

Pronation is another concept like the open-stance forehand that has gained a great deal of attention in recent

years. Before that, I used to ask world-class players how their racket moved during the serve and they would all, without exception, show me the path of the racket moving directly across the body. High-powered cameras have now proved to us that the wrist actually pronates and the racket face moves in the opposite direction than we originally had thought before coming across the body. This is something the naked eye could never have picked up. It is this type of thing that should make the conscientious facilitator wary of 'knowing' anything for sure and convince him that the best way is to let the body find a way to do things as naturally as possible. The actual pronation movement is very natural and the player need not have to even hear the word. If the wrist is loose and in a continental grip, the throwing motion will ensure that pronation happens naturally. The hardest part of the serve is developing the mindset to let go. The control issue is a big one for many people and simply throwing the racket at the ball makes us feel as if we have no control over the racket or the ball. Ironically, it is only when we can do this that we can control the ball.

### 3. SWING

The top players rarely use the more traditional long swing and there seems little reason to do so. The long swing necessitates a higher ball toss, which makes timing a little more difficult. Many top players use the abbreviated swing and the recent success of Andy Roddick has brought it much attention. Simple is almost always better.

In addition, conventional wisdom has always dictated that both hands should move up and down together during the swing, but recently some 'experts' have suggested that this may not be best. They suggest allowing the racket hand to lag behind a little so that it can then accelerate later in the swing to catch-up, which results in

greater racket head speed through point of contact. I suggest keeping an open mind and exploring.

#### 4. TOPSPIN

It is prudent to teach topspin fairly early. Personally, I encourage tennis lovers to focus on simply hitting a second serve and discourage all emphasis on first serves until the second is fairly proficient. The key element of a good second serve is topspin. Consequently, it is good to emphasize the upward path of the racket in a brushing up movement that will result in a high arc over the net. The tennis lover can practice hitting up on the ball by kneeling on one knee or sitting in a squatting position.

I recommend starting the tennis lover on the service line and giving him the task of throwing the racket up to the ball with a high arc with the focus on keeping the ball within the service box on the other side of the net. Such constant practice allows the body to learn the technique and at some point it will become automatic. When it does so, the tennis lover can be brought further and further back. Please do not worry, initially, about the arc being too high or the resulting serve being too easy to attack. Once the technique has been learned, it is a simple task to lower the arc and have more forward momentum, resulting in a powerful and consistent spin serve.

#### 5. THE TOSS

Finally, a comment on the toss, which has proven to be the bane of tennis lovers through the ages. Personally, I avoid the word, 'toss' and instead use the words, 'place the ball in the air'. Hold the ball gently in the finger tips with the thumb on top at waist level or higher; allow the arm to go all the way down and then extend it up as far as it will go. At the very peak simply release the ball. The momentum of the arm in going down before going up will allow the ball to reach the required height without

the extra effort from the wrist which is invariably what causes the ball to go awry for most people.

Also, in the past the teaching industry has indicated that the 'toss' should vary according to the type of spin one wishes to impart. Consequently, imagining a huge clock face in front of the server, for a slice serve the ball would be at 2 o'clock. For a flat serve the ball should be at 1 o'clock and at 11 o'clock for the topspin or American twist.

Research<sup>2</sup> has shown that hitting a ball that is thrown at 11 o'clock is not a good idea. It puts pressure on the rotator cuff, which if continued, could result in severe injury, since that is an unnatural movement. In addition, the strain involved in arching the back to hit the ball from that position frequently results in lower back injuries.

Certainly, hitting the ball from that position will generate tremendous spin and as such offers great rewards and temptations, but unfortunately at too high a price. This is true for all players, but it is especially so for youngsters who are still growing. Nowadays, the professionals spend a great deal of time in the gym and strengthening the shoulder, back and stomach muscles, which may allow them to do things the average player simply cannot. Consequently, it is far better to try and keep the toss between 12 and 1 o'clock for all the serves and use the wrist to generate different spins.

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#### 6. THE MENTAL

The struggle for consistency on the placement of the serve can be technical, but it can also be mental. I have found that players' service ills can be greatly corrected by

<sup>2</sup> Vic Braden's work, with the help of Dr. Brody, on this subject is worth noting. It is available on his video on the serve.



silencing the mind. There are a few ways I have experimented with this:

1. Ask the tennis lover to say, 'one' when the ball is released from her hand and 'two' when the racket makes contact with the ball.

2. Ask the tennis lover to say, 'one' when the racket hand starts moving down at the beginning of the swing, 'two' when it starts going up and, 'three' when contact is made with the ball. One could also replace the numbers with 'down', 'up' and 'throw'. This drill is extremely effective because it helps silence the server's mind and allows the body to 'do its thing'.

3. Ask the tennis lover to exhale completely before beginning the swing and then say, 'one' when the hands start moving, 'two' when the ball is released and three when the contact is made.

4. In cases where the ball placement is too far forward or back or too much to the right or left, the following awareness drills can be of tremendous benefit. To increase awareness of the tennis lovers' ball placement, ask them to identify where they are making contact with the ball by calling out a number as soon as they hit the ball. For example, by facing the server while straddling the baseline, the facilitator identifies a ball thrown directly over the server's head as a zero and then asks the server to call out a one, two or three to differentiate how far forward or behind the ball is thrown from the server's head. By calling out a number after each hit (it must be immediate, there can be no thinking or trying to remember back, instead there should be a definitive knowing). If the mind drifts off, the server will hesitate and in such cases encourage them not to say anything at all. By thus increasing awareness of the point of contact and by watching where the ball goes on the other side of the court, slowly a consistency will happen all by itself.

5. This same exercise can be repeated if the server is placing the ball at 11 o'clock. This time the facilitator places himself behind the server and the scale moves from right to left and from left to right. The ball in the middle, directly over the server's head, (at 12 o'clock) is a 5 and any fluctuation on either side can be noted accordingly with an accompanying number. *By simply increasing ones awareness of where one is making contact with the ball, change will occur.* By simply increasing ones awareness of where one is making contact with the ball, change will occur, as the tennis lover becomes more attuned with what feels comfortable and what is most effective. Awareness of anything brings increased sensitivity, which, in turn, invariably brings changes for the better, meaning it allows the natural to assert itself. That which is natural is invariably the best.

#### 7. ADVANCED PROGRESSIONS

If the tennis lover has a fairly good swing, but is not consistent, or if the advanced tennis lover wishes to add another serve to his repertoire, for example the slice out wide on the deuce court or the kick out wide on the ad court, then he or she can start to practice the swing from the service line. Just create a situation and find a place from where there is success and then build on that by bringing the situation closer and closer to match play.

#### *Games for Practicing the Serve*

To try and verbally explain the serve can result in total confusion because of its numerous variables. It is better to devise simple tasks for the tennis lover to perform, which automatically develop the tennis lovers' ability to serve.

The wrist and forearm pronation movement is essential and should be taught first, followed by the upper body rotation and finally the lower body involvement.

1. Challenge the tennis lovers to squat on the ground and brush up on the ball and hit over the net.

2. From the service line with two and then one finger off the bottom of the racket, encourage a throwing motion of racket up to ball and towards the service box.

3. Standing on the service line, serve with a full motion and try to serve down on the ground in front of the net. The purpose of this drill is to practice the loose wrist movement. See how far the second bounce lands on the other side of the court, if the ball goes over the net at all.

4. Fully facing the net, with both toes touching the service or baseline, throw the ball to the right (for right-handed players) and rotate just the upper body to serve. This will allow the tennis lover an exaggerated feel for the shoulder rotation, which is such an important aspect of an effective serve.

5. Once the player has a feel for the service motion have them start close to the net and without losing form, hit the ball into the appropriate service box. If it goes in, take one step back; if not, take a step forward. You can also start this game from the service line.

6. The server can begin this game anywhere between the baseline and the service line. He or she receives three points for hitting a first serve in and one point for a second serve that lands in the box. However, he or she loses one point for every ball that is hit. For example, if the first serve goes in, the score is 3-1. If they miss the first serve and make the second serve, the score is 1-2. On double faults the score would be 0-2. Usually, I play the first to 21.

#### *Common Corrections for Serves*

The most common mistake amongst club players is that they use the forehand grip, instead of the continental and this will limit their ability to serve with spin.

1. With young players, a decision has to be made when to make the switch in grips. I prefer not teaching the serve to youngsters unless they are ready to use a continental grip. This, I feel, is a good strategy for talented athletes, but for those with less athletic experience and ability, a time may come when they need to serve consistently in order to start playing games and yet not be able to serve with a continental grip.

*The most common mistake amongst club players is that they use the forehand grip, instead of the continental and this will limit their ability to serve with spin.*

In this situation, I think it is better to allow the tennis lover to serve with a forehand grip.

2. Holding the racket too tightly or too high on the handle, restricts the wrist's ability to pronate, which is an essential and natural part of the throwing motion.

3. Pushing the ball over by using only the arm to hit the ball. The tennis lover's ability to throw effectively, which requires the use of more body parts (especially a loose wrist and an extended shoulder turn), should be practiced and then applied to serving.

It is commonly accepted within the tennis teaching fraternity that there is a close connection between one's ability to throw the ball well and the ability to serve well. Middle-aged adults, who do not have a rich history of playing sports in their youth or have never thrown a ball, will struggle to learn to serve using the continental grip. For these tennis lovers it may be more prudent to allow them to continue using a forehand grip to serve, unless they are willing to put in the time and effort involved in making the transition. It is also a good reason to encourage both boys and girls to throw balls in their pre-tennis days.

### **Volleys**

The basic methodology remains unchanged, regardless of the stroke we wish to learn or facilitate. Some information, however, can help the tennis lover in his exploration of the net game. The main thing is the grip. Conventional wisdom demands a continental grip for volleys and overheads, and it is certainly true that almost all advanced players including all professionals will use this one grip for both forehand and backhand volleys. However, before we discuss how best to allow volleying skills to surface, I would like to point out that, although ideal, the continental grip is not essential for all players at all levels. The beginners through intermediates may have trouble with this grip and I think, for this level, a facilitator should allow the change of grips because it can be done successfully, especially for players of limited athletic ability.

It bears repeating that to learn new strokes it is essential that the beginning be slow and purposeful. Certainly, many players standing very close to the net will find ways to get the ball back over the net, but most of these ways will not be pretty. For long-term development through better technique, it would be far better to learn correctly right from the beginning and that means using the continental grip. This will be especially difficult for most intermediate players who have developed practical and highly individualized ways to be effective at the net at the level they play at. However, if they wish to proceed to higher levels, and some may not, they will have to temporarily regress in order to improve technique through patiently developing feel.

#### *Volleying Progression*

Start the tennis lover where appropriate along this progression:

1. The tennis lover begins holding the racket with the continental grip and with the racket placed to the side waiting for the on-coming ball. For young children or with adults who find holding the racket with this grip difficult, 'choking up' on the grip will render the racket lighter and easier to maneuver. Allow plenty of opportunity to become comfortable blocking many balls.

2. At first isolate both forehand and backhand volleys and have the players begin with the racket to that side. As this becomes comfortable, have the players begin in the ready position, with the racket directly in front and announce which side the feed will come. Later, the facilitator can have the tennis lover stand ready for either side and feed forehand and backhand volleys at random.

3. As the tennis lover becomes more and more comfortable with these movements, the facilitator can slowly increase the distance between the two until solid groundstrokes from the back of the court are being volleyed back and forth to each other. How long, or how many steps this may take is all dependent on the player.

4. Up to this point the focus has purely been on the tennis lover and his swing, but once the swing is fairly sound technically and becoming uniform, we can now introduce the other parts of the progression: beginning with consistency and then direction.

#### *Key Teaching Points for Volleying*

1. The focus at the beginning should just be on point of contact. The focus on preparation arises after consistent contact is achieved. In days past, the facilitator's favorite volleying cue was 'punch the ball'. Punching provides power and if we adhere to the progression provided in this book, we will see that power is only desirable after we have total control of the ball. Consequently, at this initial stage, a better teaching cue is, 'block' or 'catch' the ball.

2. For preparation on the forehand volley with the continental grip, the initial movement is a laying to the side of the wrist in order to line the strings to the on-coming ball. All too often, I find the enthusiastic tennis lover moves the entire arm, which forces the elbow behind the body. Instead, just by laying the wrist to the side and with a slight shoulder turn the tennis lover can meet the ball solidly in front and be on the way to great volleys. The elbow should be in front of the body and the key to making this happen is by ensuring that both arms are extended in front of the player in the ready position and by always moving the hands forward to the ball.

3. On the single-handed backhand volley, one of the keys is keeping the arm fairly straight from the initial preparation stage right through the point of contact. This is especially true the further back you are in the court. For extra power bending the elbow and meeting the ball with a slightly greater backswing will prove effective, but is only recommended for advanced players. This bending of the elbow is more common when players are close to the net.

4. Many beginners and intermediates feel more comfortable on the backhand volley with both hands gripping the racket. There is nothing wrong with this and it should be allowed. However, if the player is likely to progress to the advanced ranks, it would be wise to facilitate a shift to the one-handed volley at some stage.

5. It is important to ensure that there is no backswing or follow-through for beginners and intermediates. Backswing provides power, which is not a consideration at this initial stage. Since backswing and follow-through are intimately connected, there is unlikely to be a follow-through unless there is a backswing. So if a player has a long follow-through, by raising awareness of the backswing you may find that the follow-through disappears.

6. The power on the volley arises from the timing of the body moving forward and not just from the racket. The racket stays fairly still, but the body moves forward. The steady racket will provide the necessary control and the timing of the body moving into the ball will provide the necessary power. *The power on the volley arises from the timing of the body moving forward.*

7. The forehand and backhand volleys should be isolated and the player be given every opportunity to allow his body to become comfortable with each stroke by hitting balls over and over again. The facilitator faces the task of motivating the tennis lover to develop the feel that will lay the long-term foundation for their game without boredom setting in.

#### *Games to Improve Volleys*

The key to finding effective games for all levels is for the facilitator to be creative, which arises from being present. It is possible to create new games in the middle of a lesson and add to ones repertoire constantly. The key ingredients for any game are the needs of the present moment and those are unique to every tennis lover.

1. For beginners, especially, ensure that the game is process-oriented. This means focusing on the swing and not on where the ball goes. The facilitator, for example, can set up an obstacle behind the player, which will only be touched if there is a backswing. The obstacle can be the net, the fence, someone holding a racket or even a ball-hopper.

2. Points should be awarded to reinforce aspects of the swing. For example, asking the tennis lover to freeze after every shot will determine if there has been a follow-through and points can be awarded accordingly. Points can be subtracted for hitting the obstacles placed behind the player to ensure that there is no backswing.



3. Once the basic swing has become grooved then the earlier progressions kick in and awareness of consistency, direction, depth and finally power occurs. These variables should be applied to every type of volley, for example low volleys, high volleys, forehand and backhand volleys, both from the service line and from closer in.

*Common Corrections for Volleys*

1. The biggest problem amongst club players is the long swings on the volley. For all but the advanced players we should not use the teaching cue 'punch the ball' (even for advanced players I prefer the cue, 'go to meet the ball')

*The teaching cues should be more 'catching' or 'blocking'. ... The key to the volley is position, not power.* because it invariably leads to swinging at volleys. Instead, emphasis should be placed on freezing the racket at point of

contact and pointing the strings in the direction one wishes the ball to go. As we said earlier, the teaching cues should be more 'catching' or 'blocking'. The key factor here is control through very limited racket movement.

2. For more advanced players, more racket movement is necessary to impart underspin and power to the ball. The spin helps increase control and also keeps the ball low after the bounce. The further back a player is, for example for the first volley, the less the racket need move for an effective volley because the ball is usually coming in at great speed, and control is definitely more important than power on this shot. The key to the volley is position, not power.

3. As in all strokes, timing is crucial, and timing improves through hours of simply hitting balls. Timing and rhythm cannot be taught, but the tennis lover can find them for himself. The tennis facilitator can help by creating an environment that enables the player to isolate a particular shot and simply hit balls, silently.

4 A wobbly wrist is another frequent problem for intermediate volleyers and by keeping the wrist firm greater consistency will result.

5. Finally, many facilitators focus on the feet too early when teaching volleys. The first and by far the most important aspect of any swing is the hands and once the swing is there, awareness of other body parts can be introduced to maximize effectiveness. It does not matter at the initial stage which foot is forward when you make a forehand or backhand volley, just make sure the racket is squarely lined up to the ball so you make clean contact. Once that can be done on a consistent basis, we can move on. I have found so many players trying to memorize which foot moves in with which swing as they volley. As a result, they are simply not present and find it harder to develop the feel and sensitivity to the stroke. Ironically, once the swing is comfortable and the technique of the basics are grooved, correct footwork on the volleys will come naturally because if the hands move to the side with a slight shoulder turn only one foot can go forward.

For young children, again individual abilities and situations need to be considered and the facilitator must be vigilant and alert in determining what is best for the tennis lover. Certainly, consideration must be given to what works and does not work now because it is not healthy for the tennis lover to constantly fail. However, long-term development must always also be kept in mind for young players so that we don't unnecessarily handicap them and prevent them from realizing their full potential further down the road.

### **Swing or Drive Volleys**

This is an extremely effective reply from the middle of the court or deeper to any ball that is contacted from

waist to shoulder height. It is aggressive, effective and a high percentage shot for those players with closed grips: semi-western or western. For aggressive baseliners whose game is sometimes slowed down by moonballers or 'partners' who have been stretched wide and are trying to buy time to recover, this is the best way to keep their 'partners' on the defensive. Like all strokes, the facilitator needs to feed many balls to the tennis lover and allow her just to quietly hit balls and allow the body an opportunity to learn.

*Learning Progression for Swing Volleys*

1. Feed slow, high balls that are easy for the tennis lover to move underneath and hit up on from the service line. Slowly move further back until you are feeding from the baseline.
2. Ask the tennis lover to stand on the baseline, while you feed from the opposite baseline. The player must move in as quickly as possible to hit the shot.
3. Use the above progression for first the forehand and then the backhand.
4. Mix up the feeds so that the tennis lover does not know from which side he or she will have to hit the ball.
5. Play a groundstroke rallying game and throw in the high ball at unexpected times. The player must recognize when the high ball is being hit and come in and swing away.
6. Feed a short or attackable ball and allow the tennis lover to hit a forcing shot and force the high recovery shot from his 'partner'.
7. Feed a short or attackable ball and this time the partner can hit either a high recovery shot or attempt a passing shot. The player must be ready for either.

8. Play a baseline rallying game with the stipulation that all swing volleys will be worth 3 points and volleys 1 point and there is no other way to win a point.

*Key Teaching Points for Swing Volleys*

1. Movement to the ball
2. Swinging up loosely without fear of missing

**Overheads**

For long-term development the continental grip is the best grip for this stroke, just like for the serve. Like most strokes, there are two major principles to consider in developing an effective overhead. One is preparation and the other is point of contact.

*Like most strokes, there are two major principles to consider in developing an effective overhead. One is preparation and the other is point of contact.*

The swing is similar to a serve and the tennis lover needs an opportunity to develop feel by hitting many balls. The major difference is in the preparation since the racket need not go down as in the serve, but can go directly to the cocked position.

Conventional wisdom has the player point to the ball with the non-dominant hand, while the racket is cocked and ready to swing forward. However, this makes movement difficult and may not be the most effective preparation. The pointing tends to lead to an opening of the shoulders, especially for beginners and intermediates. A far better position for the non-dominant hand is on the racket as the initial movement to the side and up is made, thus ensuring the shoulder turn.

The idea as in all strokes is to give the least amount of instruction as possible and allow the body to find the most efficient way to hit the ball. On the point of contact, the tennis lover can be taken through various progressions, similar to those on the serve, to ensure consistent point of

contact in the middle of the strings. Obviously, we can start with an abbreviated swing if necessary, followed by a longer swing when the tennis lover becomes more comfortable and successful. It is important to swing slowly until ones skill level improves, since over-hitting is a common cause for error among club players and even competitive juniors.

*Learning Progression and Games for Overheads*

1. The facilitator can stand beside the tennis lover and gently place the ball into the hitting zone. Slowly and as progress develops, the facilitator can throw the ball up from the other side of the net.

2. Once on the other side of the court, the facilitator can begin by asking the player to allow the ball to bounce before him first before hitting the overhead. This results in the ball moving with less speed, thereby making it easier by giving the player more time to position himself underneath the ball.

3. Once this is comfortable the player can start hitting the ball on the fly. The facilitator can gradually move further back and eventually challenge the tennis lover to move and hit the ball.

*Key Teaching Points for Overheads*

1. A continental grip, similar to the serving motion is almost exclusively the preferred grip by advanced players. However, similar adjustments must be made for players of different abilities like we did for the serve and volleys.

2. Like the serve, it is a throwing motion. Unlike the serve, we do not throw the ball up ourselves, so movement is a necessary addition and an abbreviated swing makes preparation easier.

3. Other key considerations during the preparation phase are balance and movement. Bouncing steps with

the feet remaining shoulder width apart is a good way to adjust while waiting for the ball. The weight should be on the back foot during preparation. The result will be better balance, which will result in more pace and consistency. Lower body balance is a key ingredient to hitting a consistent and powerful overhead.

4. Keep the non-dominant hand on the racket during the initial racket preparation phase of the swing. The racket should be to the side and slightly in front of the body at about chest level. This ensures a good shoulder turn and makes movement much easier than the pointing to the ball with the non-dominant hand.

#### *Common Corrections for Overheads*

1. Not turning the shoulders and therefore just 'arming' the ball. The best way to use the upper body is by keeping the non-dominant hand on the racket during the preparation phase of swing.

2. Use a longer backswing. This will increase racket speed, which will ensure that you hit the ball instead of pushing it.

3. Do not let the ball drop too low. Instead, go up to meet it.

4. Balance: keep the weight on the back foot during preparation for the shot.

#### **Underspin Backhand**

More commonly referred to as the backhand slice. This is an effective shot that disappeared during the time that the two-handed backhands were the rage. Ultimately, it was realized that even the two-handed players needed an underspin backhand for both defensive purposes as well as for the attacking approach shot and sometimes just to provide a change of pace or rhythm. However, this shot

remains more popular and effective for those who have a single-handed backhand rather than with those employing the two-handed variation.

Some club players have a 'natural' underspin backhand because they fail to make the necessary change of grip from their forehand to backhand. However, if a forehand grip is used to hit the ball, the underspin backhand will be defensive and lacking in the penetration to make it a truly effective shot. If, however, the grip is a continental grip, the underspin backhand will be the most consistent shot the player has, despite its defensive nature and the problem will be more on the forehand side.

#### *Learning Progression and Games for Underspin Backhand*

This stroke is best taught to intermediates, so usually some sense of a continental grip is there and some level of feel has already been experienced. For many intermediate players a slice single-handed backhand has been developed through years of playing and is all they have. For these players the ability to drive the backhand will be one of the keys to joining the ranks of the advanced players.

1. Have the tennis lover stand just inside the service line and hit the ball with an open racket face, with little backswing or follow-through.

2. Slowly make the swing longer by first extending the follow-through forward and later by adding a slight backswing.

- 3 Allow the tennis lover to get a feel for the open racket face and the brushing of the underside of the ball.

My experience is that once you have decided to learn this stroke, it is effective to start every practice session with a few minutes of mini-tennis with backhand underspin. In a short while, the player develops a feel for

the stroke, and then the usual progressions can be used to help the tennis lover develop a comfortable shot.

*Key Teaching Points for Underspin Backhand*

1. A continental grip is the most effective way to grip the racket for this stroke.
2. The racket is open and the movement is slightly downward and forward.
3. The swing will be more consistent if the arm is basically straight from the backswing through the point of contact. The swing should emanate from the shoulders like the single-handed drive backhand, no other joints (not the elbow or the wrist) should move, although the wrist must be relaxed.
4. The use of the non-dominant hand is key in stabilizing the swing at the initial stage of learning this stroke.

*Common Corrections for Underspin Backhand*

1. Swinging down on the ball instead of through, will result in the ball being dumped into the net.
2. Having a loose, instead of a locked but relaxed wrist during the swing, will result in inconsistency and no power.
3. A common error is leading with the elbow on the swing and pushing forward only with the forearm.
4. Not going through the ball enough, results in the ball floating through the air and lacking penetration or 'bite'.

**Playing Matches**

It is crucial that intermediates learn to play matches from the right perspective. What is the correct perspective? It is one that allows their game to develop to the next level. In addition, the correct perspective primarily must provide intrinsic joy in the activity at hand, one that is without fear. The litmus test for the 'right' attitude is: are you



relaxed and having fun or are you frustrated and angry when playing? Many people fall in between those two extremes and moments of frustration are interspersed with

*It is crucial that intermediates learn to play matches from the right perspective—one that allows their game to develop to the next level.*

feelings of being relaxed. Closer examination will reveal that both sets of moments are not from an independent source of being, but related to how you are playing or doing in that particular moment or match. To become masters of our lives instead of slaves to the changing fortunes of the world around us, we need to be centered within ourselves. Admittedly this is not easy, but to walk the path regardless of the length of the journey begins with the first step, and the first step is to watch oneself and notice these fluctuations: when and why they occur, and where they arise from.

To be overly mindful of victory and defeat is especially unproductive at this level. In reality, to be overly conscious of the result is painful at every level, but at this level the foundation of one's game is at risk and if that is compromised, the tennis lover will severely limit his potential as a tennis player.

#### *When to Begin Playing Matches*

The basic skills of the game should be learned before the tennis lover begins competition. In my understanding most players begin playing matches far too early. Unless one has at least grasped the basics of forehand, backhand and serve and is able to maintain the form of those basics during competitive play, matches should be avoided.

In terms of the progression stated earlier, the tennis lover should at least be at the stage where the technique is solid and consistency is the goal. However, even at this stage, if the tennis lover gets lost in the winning, she will find the technique breaking down. It is far better to play

matches while never losing sight of the stage one is presently at and the short-term goals associated with that stage. For example, if one is at the consistency stage, play matches with the intention of hitting many balls over the net with good technique. If one is at the next stage, the stage of direction, then matches can be played, not with the goal of winning, but with the objective of moving the ball around the court by hitting into the 7 different target areas and practicing that diligently, but freely, with the understanding that errors will be made. That is the only way to improve.

The understanding that regardless of what level you play at, improvement and growth involve risk will help you deal with the frustration and anger that otherwise will arise from making errors. Obviously, mistakes will arise, but as long as the technique (the external form) of these shots is fairly sound, then simply playing will provide the opportunity for growth.

*The understanding that regardless of what level you play at, improvement and growth involve risk will help you deal with the frustration and anger that otherwise will arise from making errors.*

Basic form cannot be compromised and must be learned before rhythm and timing are perfected because once awkward stroke production occurs, hitting lots of balls will groove those strokes and subsequent change becomes even more difficult.

#### *How to Play Matches*

At the beginning, the objective should be to hit every ball over the net without the form breaking down. If one has legitimately moved on to Stage Five (page 50), then both groundstrokes should be fairly grooved at least in practice. The challenge will be to maintain these same swings during competition over and over again. Competition only becomes stressful if one is overly desirous of winning or

fearful of defeat, but if one understands that these types of matches at this stage of our development are simply an extension of practice, then a great deal of self-created pressure will automatically be released. Ultimately, all matches are to be seen in the same light.

*Stage One*

So the first stage, at the intermediate level, is to chase down every ball and simply return it to the other side of the court with a perfect and full swing from A to B. There should not be too much of an emphasis on where the ball lands, except that the target lies above the net and within the white lines anywhere on the other side of the court. In this situation, the best place to aim for is the center of the court and fairly high over the net, which will give one the greatest margin for error.

*Stage Two*

Once tennis lovers are fairly proficient at returning balls and the technique hardly ever breaks down, they are ready to move to the next level. The next level in the progression is direction. Consequently, the player can begin moving the ball all around the court during matches. However, it is important that we do not bring thought into the process at this stage. If the intermediate has practiced hitting both forehands and backhands down the line and cross court then all he or she need do in a match is 'let go' and hit the ball and watch where the ball goes. Try not to have an intention to hit in a particular place, but just watch and see where you do hit the ball. Wherever you hit to mostly will show you which shots you are most comfortable with. Armed with this information, your following practice sessions could focus on that shot that you do not tend to hit in matches. The objective is to be as comfortable hitting down the line as cross court. When

that happens, other, subtler criteria will be used to determine where the ball goes. If we allow it, these criteria will be processed not through our conscious minds, but more accurately by that part of our brain that is not controlled by the conscious mind. This may sound unbelievable, but this is where we operate from when we are in 'the zone'.

### *Stage Three*

When a certain amount of efficiency has been obtained, the tennis lover will see that when his partner is moved around, weak (short and soft) returns are often forthcoming. This will then be a good time to learn how to attack. Learning how to attack short and softly hit balls proficiently will herald the tennis lover's rise into the ranks of the advanced player from where there will be new strokes to learn and more fun to be had.

### **Club Players**

The vast majority of recreational players fall somewhere in the intermediate range. Many have been playing for numerous years and have reached a standard of play where they can play their regular foursomes with friends and improvement has not happened for quite some time. There is nothing wrong with continuing to play at the same level for many years. One can have as much fun doing this, and often more, than becoming obsessed with improvement. The obsession with improvement is based on a false premise, which is that the better I play, the more joy I will get from the game. As we have explained earlier, this is simply not true. Having fun playing tennis is completely unrelated to how you play

*The obsession with improvement is based on a false premise, which is that the better I play, the more joy I will get from the game.*

and totally a function of your attitude. With the 'right' attitude, fun (peace of mind) is available to each and every one of us regardless of how we hit a ball, how much money we have or what kind of house we live in or car we drive. To understand this simple truth is to shed oneself of a tremendous burden.

However, if from an artistic point of view, one wishes to hit the ball more efficiently or effectively, then one would probably have to back-track to develop a certain technical aspect of ones game. Invariably, most intermediates have technical weaknesses, which are preventing their games from reaching the next level. It is either that or not playing enough, because if the intermediate has a sound technical foundation then simply playing more will help them progress. However, if progress is not happening despite playing 3 or 4 times per week, then it is probably wise to enlist the help of a good facilitator. In addition, it is almost inconceivable that a player at any level would not benefit from an increased aerobic capacity, more speed and extra strength.

There is nothing wrong with wanting to improve; it is just that our motivation will determine the quality of our experience. If our intention is purely to build our ego through enhancing our tennis skills, the experience will be painful. If our intention is more intrinsic to the art of playing tennis, our experience will be a pleasant one.

### *Doubles*

Many club players mostly, if not exclusively, play doubles. Once again, I urge players to focus on execution rather than too much strategy. Make your returns, get lots of first serves in, come in and volley whenever possible and you will have fun and play the best tennis you can play. Yes, one has to learn where to move and how best to coordinate with ones partner and where best to hit the

ball on the other side of the court, but much of this is commonsense stuff that can be learned from simply playing and the rest should be saved until execution is better. At this level of tennis, execution is the single most important factor in determining the outcome of a match.

Many club players make the mistake of placing too great an emphasis on strategy and this masks the technical weaknesses of their game. The mind becomes immensely satisfied by engaging in the strategic battle, but the need at this level is more basic. Focusing on execution does nothing for the mind, but will do wonders for your game.

### **Summary**

1. Develop a passion for the game because without that you will be unable to hit the number of balls necessary to reach the next level and playing for the wrong reasons will not be fun.

2. Love for the game will motivate you to hit lots of balls, but there must still be some purpose and intention. Isolate strokes and work on everything you need to. Perfect your art.

3. At the beginning of the intermediate stage, most probably, you will be an intermediate as regards your forehands and backhands, but a beginner as regards your serves and volleys. Act like a beginner on those strokes and soon they will catch up with the rest of your game.

4. Start playing matches, but from the perspective of developing your game, which means making sure the basic form does not break down.

5. Focus more on execution in match play and much less on strategy.

## 6. The Tournament Player

As the intermediate player becomes more and more comfortable with the basic strokes, the option of competing becomes a reality. If tournament participation is based on a desire to achieve a ranking or for the gain of trophies or money, there will be plenty of frustration to follow, but if it is based on a sincere and intrinsic joy of an artistic endeavor, then it can be a source of great beauty. In addition, competition presents powerful challenges, the meeting of which causes repercussions that reverberate well beyond the boundaries of the tennis court.

The challenge is two-fold. Yes, there is the challenge the 'partner' presents, the power, skill, consistency, or the particular style of the 'partner'. The greater challenge, however, will not be the external challenge presented by the 'partner', but the internal challenge presented by ones ego, which interferes with our ability to play our best. The challenge of falling into the 'zone' is ever-present and extremely enticing and completely practical and related to life. It is the prospect of having peace and contentment in our hearts despite the fluctuating circumstances that life presents. It provides us the opportunity to play to our full potential effortlessly; to play *instinctively*. However, to get to this paradise the road is arduous and necessarily travels through fear, insecurity, self-doubt, etc. We cannot reach the peace and contentment without exploring and reconciling this 'dark' side through understanding and awareness.

So the tournament player will have to prepare on two fronts. He will need to practice every situation that could possibly occur on the tennis court. All aspects of the game need to be practiced so execution of particular shots or combinations can be done instinctively and consistently. In addition, the tennis lover will need to delve deep within himself and discover what makes him tick and why. Why is peak performance so elusive? Why is it so impossible to accept defeat without feeling sad? Why is it not possible to have fun playing all the time regardless of result?

*Why is peak performance so elusive? Why is it so impossible to accept defeat without feeling sad? Why is it not possible to have fun playing all the time regardless of result?*

The outer journey is relatively easy. I feel any fairly athletically-gifted individuals who sincerely dedicate themselves to the pursuit of excellence by committing the time and effort required will undoubtedly improve in leaps and bounds; but because the outer and inner are inextricably connected, whether or not the tennis lovers fulfill their athletic potential, especially in competition, will be determined by their ability to come to terms with their inner demons. The inner journey is not so easy, and I constantly see players who have excelled in the skills of the game, but are so lacking in any progress on the inner journey that they become tortured souls at worst and stressed and unhappy individuals at best. Either way, their physical gifts and whatever 'success' they achieve quickly become irrelevant because no joy exists.

One of the things that really amazes me is that many professional players and commentators remark on how much of this game is mental and yet no one seems to know how to improve the mental side. Certainly, very little time is spent training for the mental challenges that competing presents.



### **Keeping it Fun**

It is fitting that this section begins with the word fun, since very few advanced players seem to be having a good time when they play, especially during competition.

My experience is that the better players become, the less fun they have. You would imagine and most people assume that the opposite is true. Obviously, the truth is that it all depends on the individual. For some wise and lucky souls, joy is available at every level and these contented individuals are happy beginners, happy intermediates and happy tournament players. However, this type of person is exceedingly rare. Generally, as players begin to improve, their expectations rise in relation to their ability and peace of mind remains elusive. In addition, as players improve there is a greater investment in terms of time and usually money, not only for the player, but also for those around him, and therefore a greater part of one's ego is on the line during matches. As a result, the pressure one puts on oneself becomes greater and peak performance more difficult.

It is hard not to fall into the trap. The best way to avoid it is to keep returning to the basics, and there is nothing more basic than asking yourself why you are playing. We are playing this game for fun!!! If it is not fun, the ranking becomes immaterial as does the win/loss record, the trophies, and yes, even the prize money, which can bring you material comforts, but not the peace and contentment we all ultimately wish for.

Often the word, 'fun', is misunderstood. For some people, playing for 'fun' becomes a defense mechanism that prevents them from giving it their all. For them, playing for 'fun' is opposed to playing to win. For me playing for fun is not an excuse to 'fool around' or not give 100% effort, but on the contrary, the fun is about being so total that tennis becomes an effortless dance of immeasurable

beauty rather than a struggle or a war for domination. This distorted meaning of the word 'fun' has a counterpart and that is the word 'serious'. Some tennis lovers feel that these are the two alternatives. Faced with such a situation, I, too, would be in a dilemma. 'Serious' has a connotation that is wholly foreign to the possibilities that tennis presents to me. 'Serious' makes it sound like an obligation, a matter of life and death, while for me, playing is a passion; an art pursued out of love and joy.

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### Goals

Basically goals imply that we know where we are going and what is ultimately good for us in the big picture, but the truth of the matter is that none of us is that wise, although many of us think that we are. Personally, I avoid all goals because I have no idea what intention the Universe has for me and since I have long since seen the futility of material desires, I follow the path of least resistance through life, all the time living as consciously as possible, but without any predetermined destination. Living consciously makes us sensitive and that sensitivity becomes our guiding light, not the mind. All goals come from the mind and the more active our mind is, the less sensitive we are as spiritual beings in the human form.

In addition, all goals drag us into the future; and yet we know that peak performance happens when we are present to this very moment. Why is it so difficult to be present? Why do players have to constantly remind themselves to play each point one at a time? We are physically in the present, it is the only reality there is, and still the zone state (that state of being when the mind is

completely silent and we are therefore totally present) remains an extremely elusive condition. The root causes of our inability to be wholly in the present are our desires. A desire triggers off the mind, which then becomes focused on planning a way to achieve this desire. The desire is usually formulated in a goal. Goals are the tools by which we hope to fulfill our desires, but goals will keep us out of this present moment. By focusing on the future, we miss the reality of this moment. The goal is somewhere in the future; the present is where we are right now.

Also, our hope is that the fulfillment of this desire will lead to something meaningful and valuable. It never does and indeed, by its very nature, cannot because true peace and contentment or truth is within and lies not in any external situation.

Traditionally, there are three types of goals that I have come across: 1. Outcome Goals, 2. Performance Goals and, 3. Process-Oriented Goals.

### *1. Outcome Goals*

These are the most painful because you have absolutely no control over them. For example, you desire to play #1 on your College tennis team, or you wish to be in the top ten of your age group in the regional rankings or in the top twenty of the National rankings; all these could be potential goals you make for yourself. Unfortunately, because you have no control over these outcomes (in fact you never have control over any outcome because outcomes are in the future, which is always uncertain), you are placing yourself in a potentially frustrating position. You could make the sincerest effort possible and still fail in your goal due to circumstances completely beyond

your control (lack of natural ability or the skill, dedication and determination of others, etc.).

In addition, the underlying implication behind all outcome goals is that achieving these goals will in some way enrich your life. Certainly, achieving goals will bring material advantages to your life, but these advantages are not relevant to the big picture. The material advantages will not bring to your life those qualities that will be the ultimate determinants of how 'happy' your life is. I know this is a difficult concept for, especially, young people to understand because they have not yet had the benefit of experience that could verify this truth for them. In the absence of such experience they will need to continue to strive for everything they think will transform their lives and see if it does.

*The material advantages will not bring to your life those qualities that will be the ultimate determinants of how 'happy' your life is.*

These goals will only drop when one has seen their futility. To drop them prematurely would be a big mistake, it would be far better to bring awareness to your goal-oriented desires and see what they actually bring as opposed to what you thought they would bring you. If you do this enough times you may see a certain pattern emerging, in which case your behavior will change automatically; no one will need to tell you how.

The desire to play College tennis and not to have to pay tuition is a tempting goal to have, but when one realizes that making goals only makes them harder to achieve, they become easier to drop. Not only are the goals harder to achieve, but they also make the journey so much less enjoyable.

Not everyone will agree that there is no relationship between a college education and inner tranquility or between wealth and peace of mind, but the fact remains that there is no fixed correlation. Consequently the blind

pursuit of these material rewards in the hope that the inner rewards will be forthcoming will ultimately end in disappointment.

### *2. Performance Goals*

Performance goals have been adopted by sports psychologists and are certainly in vogue these days. Performance goals are barometers a player sets for himself, regarding performance. For example, if I am serving 45% of my first serves successfully, I could decide to make it my goal to serve 60% in the coming month or whatever time-frame I set for myself. The problem is, however, that I still have no control over this goal and making goals that we do not have complete control over is a surefire recipe for disaster. I may want to serve at 60%, and I may practice diligently to achieve my goal, but I may still fail for a number of reasons. All goals that we don't have total control over will ultimately lead to frustration.

Many tennis lovers can clearly see that they have no control over the result; they can see that winning and losing involves someone else and so they can never have complete control. However, it is sometimes difficult for players to see that although performance only involves oneself, we still have no control over it.

### *3. Process-Oriented Goals*

So what do we have control over? Only effort and attitude and actually, if we look a little deeper, we will see that these are not two separate entities, but closely interwoven into one state of being. This is the hardest thing for players to accept, that they have no control over even such a basic thing as their performance. All we can do is *try* to do our best by being total in all that we do, including both our practice sessions and matches.

An example of a process-oriented goal would be (to take the previous example of the serve) to commit to practicing your first serve three times each week for twenty minutes each time. You have complete control over this goal. When you have complete control over a goal, there can be no question of experiencing frustration, disappointment or anger. Process-oriented goals can be numerous, and can be geared toward a practical need in ones game. Once this need has been identified, the tennis lover can lose him or herself in the joy of hitting the ball. These types of goals do not interfere with the intrinsic joy we derive from simply playing this wonderful game, on the contrary they complement each other. All other types of goals will make the journey painful and frustrating.

Another example of a process-oriented goal is: perhaps I want to come into the net more during a match and I could make it a goal to come in every time my 'partner' is stretched sideways to hit a ball. It would not matter if I got passed or not because my goal is not related to the outcome. I have complete control over making the commitment to move forward.

A key factor in these types of goals is the ability to accept everything that arises from being total, from giving ones best effort. And remember, I mean the word, effort, in terms of process, not result. It is no use playing with words. If you are out there trying to make it happen, that is all you can do. You could have played the 'worst tennis of your life', but still done the best you could have on that day, at that moment in time. Take whatever lessons you can from that and move on with a smile on your face.

*A key factor in these types of goals is the ability to accept everything that arises from being total, from giving ones best effort.*

*Goal-Setting*

To set process-oriented goals is fine (like, my backhand drive is inconsistent, so I am going to commit to hitting at least 10 minutes of backhand drives at each practice session). However, for most people goals are always about the future and are always related to result, not process. If one can dedicate oneself fully and totally to the process of simply playing and allowing things to unfold ‘naturally’, then the journey will be both more fruitful and infinitely more pleasant.

Unfortunately, people are under the gross misconception that growth or improvement does not happen without setting outcome goals when exactly the opposite is true. If one could just commit to the process and play as hard and as often as one truly likes, and then make decisions spontaneously as the situation arises, one would see that things happen even without envisioning them first in the form of goals and dreams. And not only do they happen, but in a glorious and natural way, without frustration, pain or self-torture.

If one is in high school and good enough to make the high school team—play high school tennis; and if one does not make the team, continue playing the game you love and see what happens. Perhaps, next year you will play on the team and if you don’t you will have not lost anything because you were not playing to make the team; you were playing because you loved to play. If one is

*Just do your best with love and passion, get involved completely and accept whatever comes out of that totality.* good enough for a scholarship to play at college—play at college. If after college, one is good enough to play the satellites—go ahead, play satellites.

And if one is not good enough to play the professional circuit, do something different. Either way, one will have maximized ones potential in a loving and self-supportive

environment without pain and anger and without setting ceilings. Just do your best with love and passion, get involved completely and accept whatever comes out of that totality. To work with the Universe is infinitely easier than working against it and by making goals we are often swimming upstream. Goals arise from many sources, almost all of which are ego-generated, but to be at peace with ones self is about being at one with the Universe and that arises only out of sensitivity. We can only be sensitive to the Universe if there are no goals; when there is silence.

Sometimes misery arises when competitive tennis lovers know they have not been total in their effort. That creates a lingering dissatisfaction that continues long after the match is over. It takes great courage to be total; to risk everything; to have no excuse, if we lose. To be total is to lose oneself, but the irony is that by losing ones false self (the ego), one finds ones true self. The risk is great, but so too is the reward.

### **Practicing**

At this stage of your development, if you have followed the above instructions and have no major technical flaws, the keys to continued growth are: mental, tactical and physical. Competing is wholly mental; it is the challenge of being relaxed enough to play to the best of our ability. We cannot learn new strokes or improve shots that we do not hit well *during* a match. Practice is where the game is developed. Hours of drilling and isolating situations and practicing them over and over will allow your game to move to the next level. Practice defines the quality of your game and it is essential that you practice with purpose and direction. Matches and tournaments are where the glory lies and as a result players have no problem



being total when playing a tournament, but I rarely see the same intensity in practice, and this is a big mistake. Practicing properly will give you the tools to build your game and unless you fall in love with the joy and challenge of building the 'perfect' game, the tournament scene will be frustrating, painful and unfruitful. The pursuit of excellence as an art form arises out of a complete absorption with the process (art for art's sake) and not as a means to an end.

First we will discuss the concentration drills that can lead to the silencing of the mind, which is so central to peak performance.

#### *Mental Training*

It is important to practice hitting lots of balls with a minimum of emphasis on technique. This premise is, of course, based on the assumption that there is no major technical flaw. One knows there is a technical flaw by recognizing one of the following:

1. The stroke constantly breaks down in the form of either errors or weak shots.
2. Immediate pain while you are hitting a particular stroke or pain developed over a period of time while hitting a particular shot.
3. An inability to maximize the effectiveness of the stroke in terms of power or consistency. In other words, if a certain stroke is unable to take you to the next level.

For me, the main criterion to be considered when assessing whether a tennis lover has a technical flaw or not, is whether the shot can be hit in practice or not. If a player can hit a particular shot perfectly in practice, but that same shot breaks down in a match situation, then the problem is mental, not technical. A perfect example of this was Steffi Graf's topspin backhand, which we were told was consistent and effective in practice, but which

Steffi could not bring herself to do on a consistent basis in match play.

For the purposes of this section, I am assuming that the tennis lover is consistent in practice and that the technical breakdown occurs only in matches. If that is not the case, then the facilitator needs to take the player back into the teaching progression and allow him to hit as many balls as possible from where the breakdown occurs.

My assertion is that most unforced errors in matches are due to mental lapses or fatigue and not technical breakdowns. Since we will deal with fitness later on in this section, let us focus on cultivating the mental qualities necessary to play at your highest potential. It is very common for individuals to look for some solution every time an error is made, as if the error is a problem that needs to be solved. The thinking about a solution activates the mind more, which draws us further away from the silence that is essential for peak performance. My understanding is that at this level, most unforced errors result because the mind drifts from the here-and-now into the past or the future. In Chapter 2, under the heading 'Quiet Mind, Fluid Body', I have gone into great detail about this.

*My assertion is that most unforced errors in matches are due to mental lapses or fatigue and not technical breakdowns.*

Practice provides us an opportunity to develop a quiet mind so that we can play instinctively, so that we can fall into 'the zone', so that we can allow peak performance to happen. As our mind becomes more silent in practice, it will become more silent in all situations, including tournament play. A mind becomes silent when the tennis lover is simply focused on the ball. It is not really an active focusing; neither is it a passive watching; it is a state of

*A mind becomes silent when the tennis lover is simply focused on the ball. It is not really an active focusing; neither is it a passive watching; it is a state of relaxed intensity.*

relaxed intensity: a transcendence that includes both but becomes something completely different. However, the process of being able to watch silently passes through concentrating on the ball. Concentration is a narrowing of focus onto a particular object. It implies great effort and force, especially since the mind does not seem to 'naturally' be able to do this without numerous thoughts entering the mind. However, watching can be a much more passive activity. There is no force implied and it is a 'softer' observing, meaning, yes, the ball is the center of focus, but the periphery is also there and the tennis lover is open to whatever cues enter his field of awareness without looking for anything specific. On the other hand, thoughts are separate. They have nothing to do with simply watching and more to do with internal commentary. In fact, thoughts become an obstacle to just watching because the mind drifts off into the past or future. When thoughts arise, they need not be indulged in or fought against; instead we can simply acknowledge their presence and return to watching the ball.

#### *Specific Drills for Mental Training*

As we have mentioned earlier, the drills Gallwey introduced more than 25 years ago are still extremely effective and will continue to be so because they are based upon thousands of years old standard meditation techniques that are timeless. To keep the mind focused, we need an object of focus, and obviously, in tennis, that is the ball. Gallwey suggested ways in which we could remain more focused on the ball. His idea was to say, 'bounce' (or one) when the ball touched the court on our side of the net and, 'hit' (or two) when our racket made contact with the ball. When greater proficiency was reached at this, he suggested we do the same thing on the other side of the net as our 'partner' hit the ball. These pronouncements are acknowledgements of events happening in the present.

This is not true silence, but it is deep concentration and as we become more and more focused we can eventually drop these mantra-like words and silence will happen to us.

#### *Concentration Drills*

I would like to reproduce Gallwey's drills here, because I think they bear repeating, and share with you some slight variations that have worked for me.

1. Ask the tennis lover to say, 'one' when the ball bounces, 'two' when he hits and 'three' when the 'partner' on the other side of the net makes contact with the ball.

2. On the volleys, 'one' when you hit the ball and, 'two' when your 'partner' hits the ball. For those who have more time, it can be, 'one' when you hit the ball, 'two' when the ball bounces on the other side and 'three' when your 'partner' hits the ball. In doubles, this type of drill can be particularly effective in helping you focus, especially if there is any anxiety about volleying or about having so many people on the court.

3. On return of serve, 'one' when the server strikes the ball, 'two' when the ball bounces and, 'three' when you strike the ball.

4. On serve (this has been repeated in the section on serve in Chapter 5), 'one' when you begin the swing, 'two' when you release the ball and 'three' when you make contact with the ball.

Hopefully, the reader can see that there are numerous ways to help us focus on the ball to the exclusion of thought. The narrowing of our concentration towards the ball is a step closer to the zone state, but ultimately we need to make our concentration a little softer so that we can take in the ball and whatever else is happening on the court relevant to the game itself.

The goal is to hit with awareness and watch how the mind finds it almost impossible to remain silent. One

thought after another is passing through our head even as the ball is flying towards us at great speeds. Thoughts on how or where to hit the ball are most common, but the thoughts can be unrelated to tennis at times also. The more we are able to watch this restlessness of the mind, the more silence will come to us: there is no other way.

#### *Off-Court Mental Training*

The silence necessary to play *Instinctive Tennis* on court can be nurtured and cultivated both on and off the court because the silence is the same. If our mind is active on the court that same restlessness exists off the court. Once we start watching ourselves, we will see that even in the most mundane tasks of life, it is almost impossible for the mind to remain silent and therefore be totally involved in the activity at hand. For example, do you eat while watching television or reading the newspaper? Do you read in the bathroom? How about when you are taking a shower, is your mind silent when you are rubbing soap over your body? Are you mindful when you are combing your hair? Are these simple tasks getting your full attention? The answer to these and a host of other similar questions probably reveals that it is impossible for your mind to be silent when doing mundane activities. The restless mind is a reality for all of us. By simply watching the 'monkey' mind, silence will begin to come to us. If we can bring ourselves totally into every simple task that we do, we will be practicing bringing the silence into our lives, which will ultimately enable us to become the best tennis players we are capable of becoming.

In addition, moving meditations like Tai Chi, Yoga and Qi Gong, to name a few are wonderful training supplements, which will help us to relax and become more sensitive to our bodies, as well as more meditative in the way we live our lives. This will be of tremendous value

on a variety of different levels. Even simple things like mindful stretching before and after practice can be of great help. In other words, stretching without talking, listening to music or allowing the mind to wander away from the activity at hand.

In short, by living more consciously and more meditatively we will be nurturing the silence that is the key to playing *Instinctive Tennis* and in the process transform our entire life.

*By living more consciously and more meditatively we will be nurturing the silence that is the key to playing Instinctive Tennis and in the process transform our entire life.*

*Practice, Practice, Practice*

It is important even at this level that the basics are reinforced regularly. The basics are: forehands, backhands, serves and volleys. Consequently, the first 45–60 minutes of every practice should consist of simply drilling these strokes in isolation: meaning to hit just forehands (cross-court and down the line), just backhands (both drives and underspin need to be practiced), forehand volleys, backhand volleys and overheads, etc. In all these drills the emphasis should be on consistency, on finding a speed where the technique does not break down. Certainly, practices should be based on individual need, but this is a good way to begin all practices. It is important not to drift too far from the basics for any length of time. It should be understood that to hit 10–20 minutes of forehand cross-court offers not only physical benefit, but, even more importantly, mental benefit. It takes deep silence to hit balls for 10–20 minutes without an error. That means without a miss-hit of any sort and every ball in the middle of the strings. The object is not to castigate oneself because of an inability to do this, but simply to get out there and create the situation to practice this over

and over again. Yes, a uniform swing and good technique will have to be there to make this happen, but many players who have that, but not the ability to keep the mind silent, will have lots of trouble with this. The mind becomes restless or bored and may want to hit hard or crack a winner, but to develop the patience and focus to stay with the ball for that length of time and beyond is a quality very few players of any level have. This is especially true of advanced and talented players, for whom doing something like this seems easy and 'unchallenging' and consequently unworthy of their attention.

As time goes by and the player becomes more and more comfortable and consistent with this speed, he will find that he will automatically begin to hit harder. There need not be any conscious effort to hit harder; it will happen naturally, as the player's stroke becomes smoother and more instinctive and as timing improves through practice. The conscious desire to hit harder will cause errors. The beauty is that if we just let things happen, instead of trying to make them happen, we will maximize our ability to generate power. There is a progression here and players need to find a speed that will allow them to successfully complete this drill with a minimum of errors. Once again, don't make a goal out of this; the goal cannot be to hit every ball in the sweet spot, even though that may happen. We are simply creating a situation in which silence can happen to you. Just go out there and focus on the ball. The more you do the practice, the quieter your mind will become. The quieter your mind becomes, the more clearly you will see the ball. The more clearly you see the ball, the less frequent the miss-hits or errors will become. The value of the drill cannot be measured by how many errors you make, but in the quality of your absorption in practice. If the absorption is total, the dance will happen all by itself and an incidental byproduct of that will be enhanced performance. But it is

a process, and understanding that the journey through necessity involves going over bumps along the road will bring great peace of mind and allow you to enjoy the scenery along the way.

As you practice this drill, watch your mind, notice if it drifts away from the object of its focus, the ball. If it does drift, simply be aware that it has moved away. No need for any negativity here; simply notice that your mind has drifted and bring it back to focusing on the ball. Sometimes, you can simply watch where it is going, but more often just notice that it is somewhere other than on the ball; let it go and simply come back to the ball.

#### *Drilling the Basics*

Progression is important and based on the needs of the player. For example, once I was working with a world-ranked player with whom I had eight weeks of training to help him with his game. I spent the first two weeks simply observing his game in tournament play (not really my choice, but he was already committed to the tournaments). He was an excellent athlete with a good serve, excellent hands and technically excellent volleys. He had a grooved underspin backhand and an erratic backhand drive. For the first two weeks we spent each training session (we played tennis twice a day) simply driving forehands and backhands (both underspin and drive) cross-court. The first 45 minutes of each practice comprised simply of this. As he became more consistent in the basics, which he undoubtedly did, we moved closer to match play conditions in gradations. For example, we graduated to drills where his practice 'partner' stayed in one corner and was allowed to move the young man I was facilitating from side-to-side. This, too, is a basic drill. We kept score to emphasize different things. For the player moving side-to-side I wished to emphasize consistency, while I wanted the other player to work the ball



around the court. Consequently, the player working on consistency lost two points for each unforced error and one point for each forced error or winner his 'partner' hit. The other player simply lost one point for each error he made. There are endless variations in this scoring system, which will completely change the game. For example, if the player working the ball around the court is too strong and is hitting too many winners, a facilitator can award two points for each error he makes or increase the points awarded for a point won by his 'partner'. The goal is to make the game competitive and also work on the specifics for each player. This can be done in a number of creative ways. When drilling the basics in the volleys, a creative facilitator can come up with numerous games that can make practice fun for their players while not sacrificing the need to address their requirements.

It may seem obvious to recommend hitting lots of forehands and backhands in isolation, but it never ceases to amaze me how many advanced players simply do not do it. After all, this is a simple game and forehands, backhands and serves are fundamentals that you ignore at your own peril.

#### *Specific Needs of the Player*

After the first 45 minutes to an hour of practicing the basic strokes, now you can move to more specific practice. The specific practice can be geared to your style of game or to your strengths and especially to your weaknesses. For example, if you are having trouble with your high forehand volleys or backhands down the line or underspin approach shots, you just need to isolate that shot and give your body an opportunity to hit zillions of them. You will see that the stroke will improve even without any instruction. A good facilitator can help by suggesting things here and there and by pointing to different areas for you to explore.

Similarly, as a player you need to determine your most comfortable style of play, both physically and mentally. Although, it is best to stay as open-minded as possible and the ideal is to be as comfortable in every area of the court. The psychological aspect is the key-most, especially for youngsters. The example of Patrick Rafter is a good case in point. Pat was a smallish youngster, but fell in love with the serve and volley style of game. His parents relate how their little tyke would come off the court after a match beaming after charging the net at every opportunity despite the fact that he lost because he just did not have the physiological tools to be 'successful' with that style of game. They explained they simply did not have the heart to tell him he couldn't or shouldn't play this way because he would never win, so thrilled was he playing this way. Now in Pat's case, he obviously grew and filled out in a manner that allowed him to become a 'successful' serve and volleyer, but my feeling is that even if he had not grown, his parents did the 'right' thing to encourage his natural instincts.

Patrick Rafter was an extreme case in that he was completely enthralled about a particular style of play. More often, kids will ideally learn to hit all the various strokes and become comfortable playing an all court game by falling in love with and seeing the beauty of every style of game. In fact, usually, if kids have an aversion to a particular stroke or style of play it will most often be rooted in fear. It is crucial that the facilitator help the tennis lover to see this fear. In addition, sometimes a tennis lover may be inspired by a particular player (perhaps, the latest number #1 in the world) and may seek to imitate him, thereby closing himself off to learning other aspects of the game. Again, it is up to the facilitator to recognize this and encourage the tennis lover to forge his own path rather than follow in the footsteps of another.

*Combinations*

Having ascertained the general style of game the tennis lover enjoys playing (and there is a danger here of oversimplification and forcing an individual into a narrow category), the next step is to re-create the particular patterns of play that best utilize the player's strengths. For some players the focus could be on using different combinations and creating situations to get to the net as quickly as possible, for others it could be playing consistently and avoiding unforced errors, while for still others it could be playing aggressively from the baseline and finishing the point either with an easy volley or a powerful groundstroke off a short ball. More likely, it will be some combination of all of the above.

For example, I am presently facilitating an 18 year-old young man who is a baseliner with no major weapons. He has a semi-western forehand and a two-handed backhand and can do all things pretty well, although in match play he often stays back and tries to dictate play by moving his 'partner' around until an error occurs. Obviously we practice his strengths and weaknesses; this example concerns his strengths. Let us begin with his ability to open up the court with his short cross-court forehands and backhands to the side T's. The first 45-60 minutes of a 2 hour practice or the first 30 minutes of a shorter practice is always spent on mini tennis and reinforcing the fundamentals of forehands and backhands with silent drilling from one corner to the other from the baseline or sometimes with me at the net. After that, we will go into specific themes. One theme is hitting the side T's. The drill we utilize is: I stand at the net and feed him a ball and he takes a few steps to the side and hits the ball with spin towards the side T. This is done in silence with no instruction on how to hit the ball. I explain the drill and the intention. The tennis lover needs to clearly

understand the intention and then drop it and simply focus on the ball. Once a certain comfort level with this shot has been experienced, we can move to the next progression.

In the next progression, the tennis lover hits the first forehand to the facilitator at the net and the subsequent wide return towards the side T. Once again, the focus is not if the ball hits the side T or not, but on simply attempting this shot over and over again in complete silence and without judgment. The next progression would be to hit a few shots down the middle which the tennis lover would drive cross court to the facilitator and wait for a ball that is a little wide, which he can then spin towards the side T.

Ultimately, this same drill can be done with the facilitator on the baseline. The next step could involve a half-court game of only forehands with the tennis lover hitting towards the side T whenever the spirit moved him. The key is to take enough time in the early stages of developing this shot so that the player is completely comfortable. Mini tennis is another way to isolate the shot and do it over and over again. The experience gained from hitting this shot will teach you all you need to know about how to hit the shot even if you cannot explain what you are doing. The key is to just do it!

Ultimately, each player should have 5 to 10 different combinations he feels comfortable with in order to win a point. These different combinations should be practiced repeatedly. Then, in a match, if the tennis lover is playing silently, when a suitable situation arises one of these options will be chosen instinctively. Examples of different combinations are: chip and charge (both on the return of serve and during a point), serve and volley (there are a host of variations within this one combination), short-angled cross-courts, inside out forehand, work the point

and look to win the point by volleying to the open court, drop shot (both off the return of serve and during a rally), attacking a second serve by running around the backhand and ripping a forehand, hitting down the line following a cross-court rally, 3rd ball attack (attacking the return of serve in a variety of ways), etc.

For example, the return of serve is a fairly predictable situation, in that there are only so many variables you can come across. When playing a right-hander, the tennis lover is going to see the same type of serve continuously: for example on the deuce side of the court, there is the flat serve down the middle and once in a while out wide, the slice out wide or into the body, and the high kick to the backhand or the forehand. It is good to practice all these shots and the different areas where they can be hit. Matches show us what we need to work on more. Remember, the 'goal' is to feel comfortable hitting each shot anywhere on the other side of the court.

In addition, there are returns against a baseliner or against a net rusher and the tennis lover has to practice all these returns against both types of styles. Other variables include: first serve or second serve of the server and the forehand or backhand of the receiver and then of course all these variables exist on the ad court also. In addition, there are often multiple responses for the returner off the same serve. For example, a high kicking serve to the backhand can be met by an underspin backhand, by stepping back and driving the ball as the ball is descending, or by moving in and driving the ball on the rise. Initially, all these options must be practiced individually so that the tennis lover can see what feels most comfortable to him or her, but as time goes on preferences will arise that reduce the options, although it is valuable to practice everything once in a while. After hitting the initial shot there are numerous combination

opportunities suitable for the second shot. The attacking combinations are commonly known, but it is also important to practice defensive combinations that allow you to neutralize a 'partner's' attacking shot and get back into the point.

This is simply one small aspect of the game and yet you can see that the possibilities are numerous. In order to really do justice to this type of training, watching the tennis lover's matches becomes an essential part of the facilitator's responsibility. Similarly, a player needs to be aware of what is happening in a match, how he is hitting individual shots and not just how he is winning or losing points because you can hit a weak shot and win the point due to the 'partner's' error. Winning in that way will not help you become a better player.

#### *Mini Tennis*

Mini tennis is a wonderful way for advanced tournament players to warm-up, but it is also a great way to work on spins and angles, as well as consistency, rhythm, timing, fitness and mental skills. To be able to hit balls over and over again with lots of topspin and therefore racket head speed without shanks or miss hits will develop all of the above skills. Sometimes, I have spent a full 20–30 minutes on different drills in this situation, although 5–10 minutes is more common. These drills are both enjoyable for players and of great benefit. The more creative one is, the more games you will come up with to practice the various skills.

#### *The Value of Practice*

During training sessions, I often ask players who show various degrees of anger, frustration and disappointment after making errors, what is the purpose of practice? Often they are puzzled by the question, but their behavior clearly illustrates that the purpose of practice is to be

perfect because they show negativity every time they miss. They are, however, missing the point. If they were perfect in practice, the practice would be useless. One of the main tasks of the facilitator is to find things the player cannot do and create situations whereby this shot or combination can be practiced over and over until more consistency arises. If the practice were perfect, as a player I would suggest finding a different facilitator.

No, the value of practice lies not in the result, but simply in the doing. The fact that a player is out on the court hitting a shot he cannot hit or working on a combination he is inconsistent with, means that he is walking the path of progress. It doesn't matter how often you are

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missing; the body will take its own sweet time to learn, but learning happens when the body has the opportunity to do over and over again. If the mind is silent and does not interfere with the learning process, then learning is inevitable,

but if frustration sets in and the mind becomes active because one is not present to this moment, learning will not happen or be much slower.

At this level of play, technique is not usually a consideration. If, however, a particular stroke needs technical improvement, then the player, regardless of his overall level, must, for the purposes of that particular shot, go down to the level of his ability to hit that shot. For example, there are many world-class players who may not be able to volley very well or hit a one-handed underspin backhand. These players may need to become beginners or intermediates as far as these shots are concerned and work the progression on these shots until they are at a par with the rest of their game.

*Playing Practice Matches*

Playing practice matches is different from playing matches in a tournament. Bjorn Borg and Vitas Gerulaitis were good friends who practiced together often. In practice, Vitas won almost every single set they played and yet in tournament play Borg won 16 straight matches, before Vitas finally won for the first time against him.<sup>1</sup> In tournament matches, the goal is to play *Instinctive Tennis*, by becoming totally lost in the playing. In practice, the tennis lover is also totally lost in the playing, however, there is usually an objective the player is working on. For example, when I was facilitating a young man who was a committed serve and volley player, I would sometimes ask him to play practice sets where he had to chip and charge on every second serve he faced. Now in a match, he would obviously mix it up more, but the purposes of practices are different. The fact that his 'partner' knew that he would be coming in made passing shots easier for him, but that was not our concern, in fact the better the 'partner' played, the better it was for the player I was facilitating because he would then have the opportunity to face more difficult shots thereby having a better opportunity to improve his 'reading'<sup>2</sup> ability on the volleys.

<sup>1</sup> This victory elicited the famous remark by Vitas as he walked into the press conference after the match at the US Open in Flushing Meadows, 'Nobody beats Vitas Gerulaitis 17 times in a row!'

<sup>2</sup> 'Reading' is an awareness of what is happening on the court beyond the ball. It refers not only to the obvious situations involving movement of ones 'partner' and determining if he is on the offense or defense, but also to the more subtle determining of where the ball is going to be hit based on the partner's racket and body preparation. It is important to understand that this reading is instinctive, it arises automatically and is a function of being silent. It does not arise from the conscious mind and no analyzing can help. In fact, if the conscious mind is active, the subtle cues will be missed.



Similarly, there are numerous other situations whereby I would ask various players to work on various parts of their game.

Please understand, the intensity of the player was no different than if he had been playing the Wimbledon final, it is only that he had been given a task to do, which he was committed to. Similarly, on his own serve; one set I may ask him to serve and volley on both and first and second serves, while in the next set I may ask him to stay back and get into a baseline rally and then work the point in order to get to the net. In yet another set, I may ask him to grind from the back of the court. It all depends on what his needs are. Use valuable practice time wisely. If a tournament is coming up shortly, you may want to free the player from any conditions so that he can practice playing *Instinctive Tennis* and this is important too.

#### *Fitness*

I am not going to outline how to get fit, since this lies outside the scope of this project, but suffice to say there is a great deal of literature available for interested parties. It would be prudent to have help in this area from a specialist who knows something about tennis under the supervision of your facilitator. What I am going to do, however, is to emphasize the importance of fitness in the modern game. Andre Agassi has, as a thirty plus year-old, illustrated the value of fitness recently. Actually, Andre's fitness level is a statement, on not so much his age, but the levels he jumped as a player because of it. Andre was a superbly talented player and a world-beater on any given day, but unable to sustain that level of play for any consistent period of time. I don't think fitness can be solely credited for his huge success since the late 1990's,

but it was unquestionably a factor, which served as a catalyst for other areas of his game to blossom.

In addition, youngsters especially, I have noticed, do not understand the value of warm-ups and warm-downs. Too many aspiring talents fail to address the needs of their bodies as far as preventive health care is concerned. It is understandable and certainly a common experience, to be young and feel invincible, but I would urge these youngsters to pay more than cursory lip service to the times before and after playing. For example, an afternoon session at 3:00 pm means the tennis lover should arrive at 2:45 pm and stretch for 10 to 15 minutes before stepping on to the court ready and able to give 100%. In addition, the tennis lover should have a towel, spare shirt and his own drinking water container and spend a solid 15 to 20 minutes after the session stretching every muscle in his body. The more advanced the player is, the longer the time frames should be. To get into these habits will be of immense benefit, not only immediately, but also for the long haul.

Often it is difficult to motivate young players to practice preventive health care; however, one way to encourage it would perhaps be to extol the virtues of stretching and its relationship to power through faster racket speed.

#### *Attitude in Fitness Training*

Without going into what to do in order to get fit, I would like to touch upon the mind set as it relates to fitness training. Too many players and coaches talk about pain when they talk about training, and the most common cliché is, 'no pain, no gain'. I beg to differ.

As far back as you would like to go, whether on television, movies or the written word, pain has always been associated with getting fit, and I don't think it has to be that way. In the mid-eighties, my friend and I

decided to run a marathon and since she had not run for years, she asked me to help her prepare. The first day, we went for a walk around the block. The second day we ran for about 100 yards. My instructions to her were to run for as long as she could comfortably and then stop. I told her that pain was her body's friend and that she should stop whenever her friend began expressing discomfort. We followed the same routine, with one day off, each week for about 8 weeks. At the end of that period she was able to run 10 miles nonstop and most importantly without pain or suffering.

When we are working with the body, we need to tune ourselves to it and develop the sensitivity to listen to its constant communication. Consequently, fixed routines are to be avoided and flexibility is essential. If one does not feel good on a certain day, take off and rest. When one is going to work on aerobic capacity, pick a maximum time you do not want to run beyond, but no minimum. When one is doing weight training, don't get fixated on a certain amount of repetitions. Choose the number of sets you need to do and work to maximum after finding the correct weight for the approximate range of repetitions you wish to do. Certainly, I am not saying workout randomly or haphazardly, but what I am saying is listen to the body and work with it. As you become stronger, you will lift more. As your legs become stronger, you will run longer and quicker. The key is to give your maximum

*While working out, listen to the body and work with it.*

effort and attention whenever you are doing whatever you are doing without overdoing it.

Your body will work at its own pace and will get stronger and faster, just be patient with it and acquiesce to its greater intelligence.

In this way, training will be something to enjoy, not something to be endured in order to achieve a desired

result. There are far-reaching consequences to adopting such a shift in attitude. In the smaller picture, perhaps the fitness results will be a little slower at the outset. However, in terms of general health and fitness throughout ones life (even when the competitive career is over), enjoying the process will keep fitness a part of ones life forever. In addition, being in tune with ones body will reduce injuries because there will be no violent effort to force the body into pushing further and quicker than it should.

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I know that this attitude may be an extremely foreign concept for most people to accept, but it is possible to be at peace with oneself and play at the highest levels. Certainly, a price will have to be paid in terms of time clocked in, but if everything you do is because of its intrinsic joy, then it will not be a chore. Most advanced players derive little joy from playing this game and are only kept in the game by dreams, hopes, ambitions and the adrenaline that ego gratification provides. However, over a period of time, a new generation of players would arise that are much more at peace with themselves and are more balanced and centered human beings.

### Strategy

There is a reason why I have not mentioned strategy until this stage. I sincerely and strongly feel that strategy is overrated and introduced far too early to juniors and club level players. The foundation of the game is execution, and sufficient time should be spent on learning how and becoming comfortable with hitting the ball before the subject of strategy is broached.

I have watched so many lessons where club professionals teach strategy to advanced beginners and intermediates and while the comments being made are not incorrect, the students have no need for this knowledge because their fundamental stroke production is still lacking. Basically, my understanding is that strategy should only be considered a topic for discussion when the tennis lover has obtained the skills to hit a variety of different strokes quite competently, and any discussion on strategy before that point should be very basic, like, 'remember, the object of the game is to hit the ball over the net and between those white lines'.

Strategy cannot be a thought process; it is a spontaneous response to something that is occurring right *now*. Too many players, in the name of strategy, give full rein to mental activity during the course of a match. However, everything we know about peak athletic per-

*Strategy cannot be a thought process; it is a spontaneous response to something that is occurring right now.*

formance suggests that in order for it to take place, the mind must be silent. So the challenge before us is, how can strategy (the understanding of court geometry and our strengths and weaknesses and those of our 'partner') be utilized and yet not become a hindrance to peak performance? Top players and coaches talk about strategy all the time, so there is something to it, but we also know that when we begin instructing ourselves on where or how to hit the ball, errors usually result. So where is the balance?

Strategy is best developed by playing and through experience. If we leave strategy alone until the stage I suggest, players will have gained a great deal of experience and understanding of how things occur on a tennis court in a very 'instinctive' way, by simply playing. This so-called natural way is far more effective than the analysis

and 'understanding' that comes from exchanges from the conscious mind. Simply put, anything learned through the mind will have to be remembered and is therefore prone to be forgotten. However, when we learn through doing and watching, the understanding goes much deeper and is not dependent on memory, which leads to mechanical movement and therefore errors. This former type of understanding becomes instinctual, and there is tremendous benefit of instinctual knowing over intellectual knowledge.

Having said this, I think a good facilitator can still help a tennis lover by pointing him towards things of interest. For example, I worked with a teenager who worked the ball excellently around the court but would not come into the net to put the ball away. Instead of simply telling him to come in, at which stage he would have to make a decision if to come in or not, I asked him to become a little more aware of his 'partner's' movement to the ball. Over time and with a little discussion, he became more attuned to what was happening on the court and was thus able to play more instinctively and approach the net whenever he saw the opportunity.

In addition, we have already spoken about combinations in the practice section. Practicing combinations is effectively working on strategy and when this is done properly, players will instinctively realize when a situation arises in which a combination can be played.

#### *Basics of Strategy*

1. The center of the court is constantly shifting depending on where the ball *lands* on your 'partner's' side of the net. In other words, if you drew two straight lines from the spot where the ball bounces on the other side of the court straight out towards the opposite sidelines, you would be

able to see the range of your 'partner's' possible return without spin (spin allows for greater angle).

Consequently, the objective is to stand squarely in the middle of that range by the time the ball reaches you. What that means is that if I am standing on the baseline and I hit the ball to one particular corner, the best position for me to stand would be one step over to the *opposite* side of the court. If I hit the ball down the middle of the court from the baseline, then I should stay in the center of the court.

However, if I am at the net, everything changes. When I am at the net and I hit to one corner, the best position for me to be in, in order to cover all possible shots would be one step slightly over to the *same* side as I hit the ball. How far I step over towards that side depends on how far wide my previous shot was hit. The more I pull my 'partner' off the court the more I will have to shift over to cover the down the line shot.

These are the rudiments of court geometry and it is important to understand the consequences of this information. For example, by hitting cross-court you will be running the least. Conversely, the more you hit down the line, the more running you will do. This can be easily illustrated to players by having them play. One hits only down the line and other only cross-court. Consequently, it would be prudent to hit down the line only in those attacking situations when you have enough of an advantage to render your 'partner' on the defensive. Similarly, when you are on the defensive it is best to return the ball cross-court, since hitting down the line would open up the court and allow your 'partner' the opportunity to keep the pressure on by hitting into the open court. This understanding can help you determine how to play against a 'partner'. If you are quicker, more patient and more consistent than him, then it makes sense to hit lots of

balls cross-court and only hit down the line when the advantage is clear. If, however, you are on the other side of the above equation, you would probably be better off looking for the slightest advantage, which would render an opportunity to hit down the line and open up the point, which will inevitably lead to shorter points.

2. It is important to know what you can do and what you cannot do. To know your strengths and weaknesses is important because as much as possible you want matches to be played around your strengths; while in practice you work to eliminate weaknesses. When you reach the level where neither you nor your 'partner' have any major weaknesses, then only the ball, its speed, direction, depth, its position on the court, spin and the need for variation will determine your response and shot selection, and this will be done instinctively.

3. Similarly, it is necessary and will be beneficial to be aware of what your 'partner' can and cannot do. This is not only true of matches past, if you know your 'partner', but more importantly in relation to what is happening right now on the very day the match is being played. On changeovers during matches, I often ask my players to ask themselves two questions: how am I winning points? And how am I losing points? The answer to these commonsense questions will usually make it very clear what needs to be done in the short-term.

The more varied ones stroke production and the more awareness one has of the geometry of the court and what angles can be hit and are most effective against what kind of player, the more 'successful' a player will be as a competitor. Can a facilitator help and share his understanding with the tennis lover? Absolutely, but rather than just talk about these things, the best way would be for the facilitator to set up drills and allow the tennis lover to be exposed to different situations over and over



again. A word here and there along with the experience the player has already accumulated will work wonders.

*The Big Point Theory*

The big point theory is another ideal that seems to make sense on a superficial level, and yet on closer examination, proves to be incongruous. The concept that some points are more important than others is a popular one within the tennis community. That it is popular, however, does not make it true.

Two perceptions can arise if one buys into the big point theory: one is that the player can become so nervous because he considers the point so huge that he cannot function loosely and freely. The second is that an individual who loves to compete can be motivated by the challenge and thus be spurred to greater heights. There are very few people who fall into the second category and even those who do must forget the importance of the point as play begins; they simply use that idea for motivation, to *prepare* for the coming point.

Let us examine this popular concept, which is almost universally accepted as gospel. It is true that tennis is a game where one player can lose more points than he wins and yet win the match. This leads to the seemingly logical conclusion that not all points are worth the same; consequently we have the birth of the big point theory. However, as logical as this sounds, there are a couple of problems with the emphasis on the big point.

If one is going to play ones best on a big point, the implication is that on other points one is doing less than ones best. Are we willing to accept that we play some points short of our best? Are we comfortable telling juniors not to play every point as hard as they can under normal circumstances? How can players raise their game on the big point?

Brad Gilbert<sup>3</sup> in his book *Winning Ugly* defines a big point as any point that can win a game or any point that if won would lead to a game winning point. This logic is untenable. Imagine a four-rung ladder, from which an apple can be plucked from a tree. The object is to pluck the apple. From the fourth rung one can reach the apple, but unless one climbs the third rung, the fourth rung cannot be reached; similarly the third rung cannot be reached until one has already arrived at the second and so forth. This metaphor illustrates that climbing each rung is equally important, because one leads to the next. At the very least, we would have to call each point big. Actually they are equally important or equally insignificant, with the emphasis on equal.

Another question, which arises, is how can there be twenty or thirty big points per match? Commentators on television call at least one or two points of each game big. By definition winning a big point should give you a huge opportunity to win the match and yet an individual can win many 'big' points and still lose the match.

A point should be played on the basis of tangible factors. The height, speed and spin of the ball, where on the court the ball bounces, as well as ones ability to hit certain shots and the 'partner's' susceptibilities to, or disdain for, certain shots are all factors that determine shot selection.

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It seems absurd that numerous reputable coaches should advise students to play points based on something as abstract as the score and yet this theory is so accepted that it is considered blasphemy to question it. Even if we

<sup>3</sup>A long-time coach of Andre Agassi.

are to buy into the fallacy of the big point theory, the problem arises how to play those points. One theory suggests that on such points one should surprise ones 'partner' by doing something different. How sensible is it to do something unusual, such as serving and volleying if you are a baseliner? If it is a surprise to your 'partner', it is going to be something that you have not tried too often during the match. If you have not tried this particular tactic, it is probably because it is not something you consider your strength. If you were not completely comfortable with this tactic, why would you want to try it on what you consider an important point? Conversely, if you can be successful with this tactic, then it should be sprinkled throughout your match in an unpredictable manner. Remember that a 'partner' can only be surprised once, so what will you do on the next 'big point'. Or how about going for a big serve on a 'big' point? Does that mean going for a serve that is bigger than you normally hit? Unlikely, because players are trying to hit a first serve as hard as they comfortably can and to hit harder could distort the technique or rhythm and render the chances of success too low.

Another theory suggests that one should play within oneself on such points and avoid giving away easy points; however, giving up opportunities to attack allows the 'partner' to gain the initiative; in addition, hoping your 'partner' will make an error or not come up with a big shot will not take you to the next level. Other theories abound, but all are similarly unconvincing.

Even if players themselves buy into the big point theory and are successful, my contention is that they are able to put that thought out of their mind when the point begins. Invariably, those who are aware of the importance of a point while the point is in progress will struggle to reach peak performance and be mentally weak in competition.

At the very best, the big point theory reminds a player to be present focused, which he or she should be for every point regardless, but once a point begins the player cannot afford the luxury of being aware of anything but the ball and the periphery information directly relevant to playing out the point.

*Those who are aware of the importance of a point while the point is in progress will struggle to reach peak performance and be mentally weak in competition.*

For me, someone who plays the 'big' points well is someone who plays the point as well as they can, but not better than they play other points. In other words, the less affected you are by the magnitude of the up-coming point, the more likely you will play the point to your potential. If you are able to do that, I guarantee you will be considered a big point player. So, the irony is that big point player reputations are made by players who refuse to recognize the big point and therefore play a normal, solid point or by their 'partners' who do recognize the big point theory and become nervous and play below their potential.

*The less affected you are by the magnitude of the up-coming point, the more likely you will play the point to your potential.*

Facilitators are more and more looking into statistics to evaluate their players, but, while statistics make good television copy, they are very limiting for evaluating players. Each point is different and you can win a point in a variety of ways and yet regardless of how an individual point is won, it just shows up in the win column.

It is unhealthy for youngsters to buy into this theory because to do what is necessary to win will not necessarily help them to develop as tennis players. If I play tentatively on match point and my 'partner' finally makes an error and I win the match, what have I won? How have I become a better player? What will happen when I play a stronger 'partner' and he does not make an error,

but instead takes my tentatively hit ball and whacks it for a winner? The point is, if you get an attackable ball, attack; regardless if it is 15-15 or 15-40. The physical situation you find yourself in should determine your response, not the score.

The more you tie into the big point theory, the less chance you will have of being a mentally tough competitor. Instead, play each point with the same psychological mindset, in a state of *relaxed intensity*<sup>4</sup> (intensity comes from a total commitment, 100% effort, and the relaxation comes from detachment from the result), and in present focus, waiting to pounce on the first opportunity your 'partner' presents you.

To play when the conscious mind is silent allows you to play *instinctive tennis* and when you do that you are accessing a much higher intelligence from where peak performance can happen by remaining completely open to the limitless opportunities each moment of play presents. Connors was an excellent example of this. He prided himself on playing his best every point, every match and every tournament, regardless of the situation. Unfortunately, this attitude is not typical of all players and that is why they are not as mentally tough as Connors was.

When the Archer shoots for nothing  
    he has all his skill,  
When he shoots for a brass buckle,  
    he's already nervous.  
When he shoots for a prize of gold,  
    he goes blind, sees two targets,  
    he's out of his mind.

<sup>4</sup> This oxymoron describes the perfect mindset for competition and is also the title of the author's first book.

His skill has not changed, but the prize  
divides him, he cares.  
He thinks more of winning than of shooting  
and the need to win drains him of power.

Chuang Tzu

*Good Strategy Evolves from Being Present*

It is important to note that every match ebbs and flows and is an organic entity. What this means is that changes are on going and though your 'partner' starts the match hitting forehand winners, there may be times in a match where his forehand may go off the boil. A present focused player will be alert to these kinds of fluctuations and play accordingly. You cannot go into a match with fixed ideas. Yes you may have seen your 'partner' play many times and indeed you may have played him many times in the past, but did he play the same way in all those matches? By being in the present you will be open to a host of information that would overload the conscious mind if it tried to calculate them. But when the mind is silent and we are wholly present, we will be able to play instinctively and this will help us reach a much higher level of performance.

Certainly, there is some advantage to be had by having a facilitator who has competed a great deal to share his experience with you. However, that competitor, himself, learned most of what he knows from playing and you will too. There may be a few things here and there that you may not notice, but generally, if you are present to this moment, you will see what is developing in front of you and respond spontaneously. The role of a good facilitator is to point you towards the factors you are not noticing and then allow you to see for yourself. It is as if the tennis lover must make all the discoveries the facilitator already knows, as if he is doing it all himself.

*Strengths and Weaknesses*

It is obviously important to know ones strengths and weaknesses at all times. Not only so that we know how and what to practice, but also so that we can, in match-play situations, use our strengths most of the time.

In addition, it is also important to understand the strengths and weaknesses of our 'partner'. In order to do this we need to feed him various balls at differing heights, speeds and directions in the warm-up itself so that we can see what he can handle effectively. It is very rare that players do not have a weakness. The reason is that each grip has built-in limitations: a continental forehand grip renders high balls difficult, while the extreme western and semi-western grips are great attacking grips, but not so effective for defensive purposes. Consequently, short, low and wide balls are difficult to return with this grip. These are generalities that can be useful, but each individual is different and will execute different strokes at differing levels of proficiency at different times. The tennis lover has to be totally present in each match to see what is actually happening.

*The Theory of Momentum*

In the world of physics the theory of momentum suggests that an object moving in one direction, will have a tendency to continue moving in that direction. This term has been used frequently in sports to suggest that an isolated incident can precipitate a change in direction that can then, in turn, create momentum, which can affect the outcome of a competitive contest.

I do not think that it is possible to use the same word, momentum, in both situations because in physics the theory relates to inanimate objects, while in sports it relates to human beings. I have no desire, nor am I qualified, to argue the merits of the momentum theory as it

relates to physics, but in sports the theory, in my understanding, falls hopelessly short. So what is momentum in the world of sports? It is a well-worn word used liberally in all sports by coaches, commentators and even competitors. Yet, has anyone stopped to think if it makes any sense? Does it exist? What is it?

Momentum is an illusion based on the falsehood that there is continuity from one moment to the next. Yet we know that this is not true! When we win a point by acing our 'partner', or by powering a forehand down the line, what advantage do we start with on the next point? Obviously there is no real advantage. We may 'feel' better about ourselves, but this 'feeling' based on an external phenomenon is a double-edged sword. This becomes evident when you observe how you 'feel' after a double-fault. In reality, there are gaps between each moment. Each moment is a completely separate entity, but we build a bridge between the moments and suffer the consequences thereof. That bridge is created by our mind and is commonly called momentum. It leads to a host of conflicting emotions that range from confidence to frustration. Remember, it does not really exist; we have simply created it ourselves. The good news is that because we have created it, we can also make it disappear. In order to do this all we need do is to be present to the moment at hand and let go of the past. The past is over and if we can let it go, the bridge will be gone and the mystery of momentum will be solved.

### *Confidence*

If we won the last point or game or match we feel good about ourselves and this feeling of confidence is turned into momentum because we play the next few points in a confused sense of, 'I can do it'. Conversely, if we play a few points, games or matches poorly and lose, we feel



an overwhelming sense of 'I cannot do it'. But, in each scenario, there is no connection between the past and the present. It is the *belief* in any connection that will lead us into a vicious cycle, from which escape will be difficult. It is interesting to note that we cannot have one without the other, in other words if our confidence can be built through 'success', then it will *necessarily* have to suffer through 'failure'.

The alternative is to play each point in present focus and not allow the previous moment's performance to color the present. The ball is coming to you in the here-and-now. Any remaining vestige of the past will only impede peak athletic performance because it will draw attention away from what is happening at this very moment.

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When the individual brings all his attention to the present moment, only then will peak performance occur. The objective is to play each moment or point of a match to the best of your ability. If your

'partner' hits a great shot for a winner, becoming discouraged will only affect your performance adversely. It is as if that one shot will be worth not one point, but a half dozen. Does this make sense? For example, a player who enjoys and is effective coming into the net gets passed a few times at the beginning of the match and never ventures to the net again, when this could provide him the best opportunity to win the match.

Obviously, there is a flip side to this, which is playing with 'confidence' after you have hit a few good shots or played a few solid games. As players, we are drawn to the latter state of being, but recognize and want no part of the former. Herein lies the problem. Players see these two states of being as separate and they are not. All

dualities are actually one because they are two sides of the one single coin. They have an interdependent existence: one cannot exist without the other. When you are confident, doubt is waiting in the next room and will be coming soon—guaranteed! But many players do not understand this and so they strive for the state of confidence and focus only on that, but are confused when doubt and fear enter. The only way out of this quagmire is transcendence. Transcendence happens through being present to this very moment. It involves letting go of the past immediately. Regardless of whether you hit a winner or an error, let it go! If you hit a winner or are playing great, stay focused on the point or match being played and if you are not playing your best tennis do exactly the same. It is in this state of equanimity that *Instinctive Tennis* will happen to you and it is then that you will play your best tennis. In addition, you will experience a joy of playing hitherto foreign to most players, although everyone has had a little taste.

*It is in the state of equanimity that Instinctive Tennis will happen to you and it is then that you will play your best tennis.*

Do not tie into the illusionary concept of momentum. It does not exist and belief in its existence will only interfere in your endeavor to be the very best you can be!

### **Tournament Play**

Matches are an extension of practice. Why do players almost universally play better in practice as opposed to matches in tournaments? The court dimensions are the same. The racket used is the same. The net remains the same height and the balls are the same. But often what is going on inside us is vastly different and it is because of this that performance varies considerably.

Our attitudes are very different in matches during tournaments than they are in practice matches. In tournaments we 'want' to win; we 'need' to win; we 'have' to win. In practices the outcome is less important and consequently we are more relaxed. Is there any doubt that we play our best tennis when we are relaxed? If the desire to win creates tension, how will it help us to play our best tennis? Many players may intellectually be able to 'see' that they are creating their own obstacles and that if they could simply 'let go' of the desire to win, they would enjoy their tennis more, perform at a higher level and get better results. However, still they are unable to

*Unless we learn the art of being relaxed, our lives will continue to be stressful and peak performance will elude us.*

do so. Unless we learn the art of being relaxed, our lives will continue to be stressful and peak performance will elude us, except for those times we accidentally fall into a state of deep relaxation and play 'out of our minds'.

### *Stress Management*

Once the process of developing trust is begun, the player will begin to enjoy playing matches in tournaments rather than fearing them. Unfortunately, for most people playing matches becomes an issue of stress management, and there are two different categories of people that I have observed:

(1) There are people who hate how competition feels. They feel they are being judged constantly and feel uncomfortable in this environment. Strange as it sounds, this is an ego issue too. There is fear of losing and there is a false belief that losing will make them somehow less, that it takes something from them. These types of people will generally shy away from competition. So they deal with the pressure through avoidance.

(2) There are individuals who say they love competition and yet you can see from their behavior that they are suffering immensely. They are pulled towards competition because of the opportunity to build their ego, but when losing becomes a possibility they lose control. These individuals will show anger and frustration to varying degrees and the outcome is rarely pretty.

The above two extremes can be seen as the endmost points on a linear continuum, while the vast majority of people fall somewhere in between. They feel stress, but not enough to deal with it through complete avoidance or extreme displays of anger. But, there will be some who although not avoiding competition completely, will compete as little as possible or only in 'safe situations' or with 'safe partners'. Another manifestation of this form of stress management is only playing doubles and avoiding singles play as much as possible. Singles play generally creates more stress for individuals because there is no place to hide. It is you against me; one wins and one loses. Doubles is about us against them. It is less confrontational; us losing is somehow less stressful than me losing.

The important thing to note is that all stress is harmful for both your physical and mental well-being. There are some who argue that stress can be a great motivator and that they work better under stress. All I can say is that this is not my experience. I constantly see the damaging factors of stress, and there is nothing that I have seen that has been accomplished with stress that could not have been done more effectively, gracefully and graciously without it.

*The important thing to note is that all stress is harmful for both your physical and mental well-being.*

There are many people, both in the world of sports and business management spending a great deal of time, money and resources in order to reduce stress. The really

funny thing is that there is no stress! What I mean by that is that stress has no tangible, independent existence.<sup>5</sup> We create stress and then we look for a way to release it. Would it not be simpler to stop creating it? Stress is fear-based and when we examine our fears closely, we may be able to observe what it is that we are really afraid of. As we look into this deeper, we will see fear more clearly and as we become more familiar with fear, we will see changes automatically occurring within us. The key is simply to bring more awareness to what is happening to us and be able to accept and deal with whatever arises out of that.

#### *Competition*

Competition becomes much more fruitful if we focus on performance rather than vanquishing our 'partner'. And peak performance is not about trying to *do* something, but about removing the obstacles which make peak performance impossible. It is as if when our mind is silent, that is when peak performance happens, but our mind becomes filled with dreams, goals and desires of building our ego as reflected in the eyes of others. This activity of the mind, stimulated by things we *think* will enhance who we are becomes the self-created obstacle that makes competition so painful by creating stress. The good news is that winning will not accomplish what we think it will; neither will money, power or fame. Good, because if we can drop the struggle to achieve these things, then our dreams, goals, ambitions and desires will 'naturally' fall away too, and what is left is peace and contentment, which is the soil from which peak performance and inner contentment grows.

<sup>5</sup> See the book *Relaxed Intensity* by the same author for an in-depth look at what stress is.

It is important when playing competitively to realize that one is always playing the ball and not the person on the other side. The ranking, reputation or past performance of the person on the other side is immaterial. It is all about you and the ball and to realize this is to free oneself from a host of potential problems that arise when we feel we have an 'enemy' to beat.

### *Match-play*

Execution is the single most important determinant in the outcome of a competitive tennis match. This is true at every level. Yet we put a great deal more emphasis on strategy and tactics than we do on execution, especially at the more advanced levels. At every level I have coached at from club players through to the professional ranks, I have seen matches won and lost either through errors or through excellent shot making. To be successful in both the inner and outer game, simplicity is the key. Consequently, for the outer game, elaborate and complicated game plans are to be shunned. By playing basic tennis, which means minimizing unforced errors, attacking when possible, scrambling when forced to, and by working the ball all around the court you will be as successful as your athletic skills will allow you to be.

For me, execution in match play is largely mental. As I have said before, my understanding is that most unforced errors are mental. If you are relaxed, centered and present during competitive play you will play to the best of your ability, which is the goal of match play. You can only do in a match that which you are able to do in practice. If there are technical shortcomings in your game they will have to be addressed in practice, you cannot expect that to happen in a match. In addition, technique cannot breakdown

*If you are relaxed, centered and present during competitive play you will play to the best of your ability.*

easily: if you have been hitting a stroke in a particular way for many years, your body will not one day, all of a sudden, forget how to hit that stroke. Muscle memory works on a cellular level and not on a mental level. So grooved strokes can breakdown if fatigue sets in, but they cannot easily breakdown otherwise, unless there is a mental melt down. This is an important point for professionals and aspiring professionals to understand.

Consequently, during match play observe what is happening on the court and see what areas of ones game are breaking down: simple observation, without the accompanying judgment or negativity. For example, I was working with a young man who was hitting many forehands into the net while playing a match. I could have simply *told* him to hit higher over the net, which he would then have proceeded to repeat to himself every time he missed a forehand into the net in subsequent matches. The problem with repeating these words during matches is that they activate the mind, which we know does not help us play better. Instead, in our very next practice session, I asked him to hit forehands 2 feet over the net. He tried to do this silently for the next 10 minutes and consequently we made this a regular part of our practice sessions for as long as it took for me to see that he no longer put balls into the net. In the second scenario he had nothing to remember, consequently in a match situation, nothing that would trigger off his mind. In fact, he may not even have realized that a slight change had happened in his forehand stroking pattern. In the first case scenario, he would have cursed himself every time he hit a forehand into the net, either in practice or in a match, and reminded himself in negative and frustrated terms to hit up on the ball. The telling does not usually make a change, the doing does. If we have digested the early section of the book, where it is suggested that the body learns

by doing, not through words, this will not come as a surprise.

*Dealing with Errors*

There is a seemingly 'universal' negativity surrounding errors. Certainly, there are different levels of intensity, but that is only a qualitative difference. I see that at all levels of play with almost all players and I think it is unnecessary and even harmful. Why cannot we go out and simply play and enjoy the beauty and grace that this wonderful sport gives us an opportunity to experience without punishing ourselves by becoming irritated every time we miss a ball?

*Why cannot we go out and simply play and enjoy the beauty and grace that this wonderful sport gives us an opportunity to experience without punishing ourselves by becoming irritated every time we miss a ball?*

If the tennis lover can become more aware, through quiet observation, of his or her negativity without judgment and see how it affects them and how unpleasant it is, it will be easier to drop. Unfortunately, most players are in denial, especially those who are mildly negative, and see negative comments or body language as 'natural' phenomena that have no major ill effect. The reverse is true, a little bit of poison is as dangerous, over time, as a lot of poison; the effects are simply not as dramatic or as sudden. *Focusing too much on the outcome causes the frustration, anger and the resulting negativity that invariably follows errors.* I want to win the point or hit the ball in a certain place and when I don't, I feel frustrated. To understand the root cause of our misery is a good place to begin. Does this negativity help us in any way?

*Focusing too much on the outcome causes the frustration, anger and the resulting negativity that invariably follows errors.*

How does it feel? Watch and thereby feel the pain.



In addition, negativity immediately after an error makes us insensitive to the error itself, it is almost as if we are denying that it actually happened. Instead, if we can silently be with the error, we would become more in tune with our body and thus become more aware of how the error actually felt and this information is of immense usefulness in the learning process. The error happened *here* somewhere within us, the symptom can be seen out *there*, to focus on *there* is to completely miss the valuable information that will allow learning and growth to happen right *here*.

At the advanced level, this is particularly true. Players at this level invariably have solid strokes, and physically these strokes will not break down because they are grooved and have been hit so many times that they have become second nature. And yet in match situations, or at times in practice sessions, these strokes do appear to break down. The important thing to realize is that the root of the breakdown is usually mental; it can be physical if one is tired, but it is rarely technical. The physical manifestation of, for example, a slowing down of racket speed on a second serve and a resulting double fault, is not caused by a technical flaw, but the fear the tennis lover is experiencing. This can take a more subtle shape too. For example, I coached a nationally ranked junior who would experience great anxiety during competitive situations. This was reflected in different ways. One was that when he hit his forehand (usually his best shot) he opened up too soon with his upper body resulting in 'arming' the ball and a complete lack of power and effectiveness. Every passer-by could see the technical flaw, but the 'correction' would not be to work on technique because as soon as we returned to practicing and he began playing with me, he would keep his shoulders turned and explode into the

ball. No, in order for him to really improve we needed to address his anxiety in competitive situations.

Many players at various stages of their development would come to me on Monday practices and tell me about their weekend tournaments if I was unable to watch them play. Many times, they would explain how they were suddenly and mysteriously struck by this inability to hit a particular shot. This 'mystery' was soon clarified. For example, one player once talked about his sudden loss of a backhand passing shot down the line for the last set and a half. I immediately stood on the backhand side and asked him to stand at the center of the backcourt and fed him deep balls to the backhand side. The result was obvious; he had not 'lost' the ability to hit the shot. It was simply that during competition he had become too active mentally. Without a silent mind, *Without a silent mind, it is impossible to perform at your peak.*

By thinking about it so much, he had become a little tentative, which resulted in the 'technical melt-down'. The 'problem' was mental, not technical. Poor mechanics were simply the symptom of the situation, not the cause of it. In fact, the 'problem' was that a 'problem' was perceived in the first place. A player can often fall out of a quiet mind for numerous reasons; one is by looking for a solution to a 'problem'. If one does not see errors as problems, there is no need to look for a solution. Since it is the looking for a solution that creates 'noise', when this is dropped, the 'problem' dissolves miraculously and silence happens more easily. In match play situation, if you miss a shot that you can perform effectively in practice, resist the temptation of going into the memory banks and finding a solution. Instead, clear the mind and refocus on the on-coming ball in the next point; peak performance is enhanced only by silence and the search for solutions only activates the

mind. For those players who become very mentally active during match play I suggest visualizing a huge blackboard with all their thoughts written on it and then ask them to imagine themselves wiping the entire blackboard clean.

Instead, look for patterns. If, for example, you miss numerous first serves long, perhaps some thought can be applied. Or, if forehands keep going into the net. It does not take a genius to decide what to do if such patterns are recognized by a player during competition. The recognition of such patterns will happen more easily if one is silent and can watch without judgment.

*If one does not see errors as problems, there is no need to look for a solution. Since it is the looking for a solution that creates 'noise', when this is dropped, the 'problem' dissolves miraculously and silence happens more easily.*

#### *The Value of Game Plans*

It is of some benefit to know how your 'partner' plays before the match begins, but game plans can become double-edged swords. They are usually based on the 'partner's' performance in the past on a particular day, but how he will perform on this day no one knows until play begins. Consequently, it is difficult to plan for it, although there can be some structural deficiencies in a player's game, which will obviously not change day to day. Certainly, the warm-up and the first few games of a match will also reveal the same things, but then one would have to experiment and vary the types of shots hit in order to discover what the 'partner' can and cannot do.

A game plan is a common tool for advanced tournament players. It is often recommended that a player go into a match with a game plan that should be strictly adhered to. However, often in the same breath, when strict adherence leads to defeat, coaches talk about

knowing when to abandon game plans and going to plan B. This creates a dilemma: how do we know when to abandon the game plan? If we continue persevering and attacking our 'partner's' perceived weakness, perhaps it will eventually break down. On the other hand, does the fact that we are losing mean our game plan was wrong and we should abandon it as soon as possible? Obviously, it does matter in what way the game plan is failing. Is it because of poor execution on our part or is it because the game plan itself is faulty? In either case the tennis lover is in a dilemma.

My preference as a facilitator is not to devise a strict game plan for the player and neither do I encourage the player to devise his or her own game plan. If we have the opportunity to watch a future 'partner', I would certainly suggest that my players do so and observe whatever they can. However, we should keep in mind that every day is different and how someone plays on any given day may vary. Certainly though, a future 'partner's' style of game can be assessed in advance, and the player can tentatively appraise how his own strengths would best match up against this particular style of game. The real value in watching a future 'partner' play is in seeing how he plays and what he likes to do and then, if possible, practicing against that style before a match. For example, if you are playing against someone who comes into the net a lot, or a player who uses an underspin backhand a great deal or someone who has a high kick on his serve, or someone who plays left-handed, etc. (the examples are endless), it could be of great benefit to have the opportunity to play against this style before the match.

The most important factor in competition is execution. So my focus is less on devising brilliant strategies and much more on getting the player to play instinctively by

being relaxed and focused so that he can play the best tennis he is capable of.

*What to Do When a Stroke Breaks Down During a Match*

I was watching another player compete at a tournament, when I observed he was experiencing trouble with his serve. Of the 6 serves he missed during a single service game all of them hit the net. This pattern continued throughout the match with very few of his serves going out. Later on, when we were discussing the match he admitted that although he had realized that he had not served well, he had not observed any pattern in his serve. He became mentally very active, both in trying to 'figure' out the problem and in the resulting frustration and anger and general negativity that followed failure, but nothing fundamentally changed in the way he hit the ball throughout the match.

My experience is that playing tennis, especially in competitive situations is more about taking things away rather than adding things on. For example, Michaelangelo would begin with a huge block of rock in front of him. To transform that plain looking rock into a beautiful statue, he would not have to add anything that was not already there, but when he took certain pieces away, he was left with a beautiful statue like his *David*. Similarly, we all have beautiful tennis within us, to the extent that we have trained our body and honed our skills, and to access that beauty within us is about removing that which is unnecessary. When we remove the goals, needs and desires, the anger, frustration and fear all disappear too and when all that is gone, we are left in total silence and it is out of that silence that a tremendous beauty arises. It is out of that silence that *Instinctive Tennis* can happen to each and every one of us, regardless of the level we play at, every time we step out on the court. Being in 'the zone' will not allow you to play like Andre Agassi or

Pete Sampras, but it will allow you to be the very best you can be at this very moment. You will still need to joyfully continue hitting many balls to develop your game further, but that is a different issue. Match-play is about playing your best right now, without fear or tension, the way one would do in practice.

*Pre-match Preparation*

Obviously, most players are aware of the need to prepare the body for the ardors of tournament match play, but how do we prepare mentally? We need to nurture the silence that will be the key to how well we play. The best way to do this is to find a quiet spot somewhere just before the match and quietly and meditatively stretch and then sit in silence until the match is called. It is better to avoid loud talking or anything too vexatious or stressful. Even if you have to physically remain in a crowd, mentally we can still be very much alone by silently focusing on our breath, oblivious to the noise surrounding us.

**Rankings and the Pursuit of Success**

There is no greater obstacle to peak performance than the over-awareness of rankings. Coaches, parents and players, both in the junior and professional ranks, are consumed by the numbers game. Why are they so consumed? The reasons are simple: for the coach, his self-worth is measured by how 'successful' his players are. And success is determined solely by the rankings. For parents, their ego is based on how well 'their' child plays and what he or she is ranked. For the players, the numbers reflect their performance at tournaments, and are directly related to them, so it is obvious that they are going to identify with the ranking number and get a sense of who they are from that number.

*A Vicious Cycle*

Parents seek out 'successful' coaches for their children, with dreams of success and glory. This in turn puts pressure on coaches, whose continued livelihood is based on the number of top-ranked players in their stable. The coach then puts pressure on the kids to perform and becomes result-oriented in his dealings with the players. The players perform less than their best when they are pressured like this and suffer, especially during competition. Even when players are successful, stress continues to take its toll, but all concerned seem to accept it as a necessary evil. The parents see their children in turmoil and wonder if this is all worth it. Do they really want their kids suffering like this for a game, when the pressures of school and the 'real' world are already so burdensome?

This is an endless cycle and each party has the opportunity to break it. However, in this chapter I am addressing the players (in later chapters both facilitators and parents will be addressed). The players need to take a step back and see that a preoccupation with the rankings, the wins and losses, does not help them progress as players. Peak performance rarely takes place in a pressure cooker and that is the atmosphere being created by watching the rankings too much. Instead, players need to focus on their effort (intensity) and attitude (relaxed) during performance both in competition and in practice because that is all they have control over anyway. Being anxious or impatient about improving will not help; it will not help them become better players and it will not make the journey any more pleasant. So why do it? Most of all they need to have fun, not when they reach some pre-determined destination, but on the journey itself. *RIGHT NOW!*

It becomes easy to be process-oriented when one loves what one is doing. Not love because of what one hopes to get at the end of the road or along the way, but a pure

and simple joy for just playing the game. When one loves what one is doing, there is no question of pressure or stress or even fear. Unfortunately, there are very few advanced players I have come across who really love playing the game. Perhaps they loved the game earlier, when they started, but as improvement happens the innocent joy is replaced by ambition.

*It becomes easy to be process-oriented when one loves what one is doing.*

Is ambition bad? Surely not, it is so openly embraced by society and considered a catalyst for all that is good in the world. In my understanding, ambition is 'bad' in the ultimate or 'spiritual' sense. In some way, perhaps it helps you focus on the goals you have set for yourself (of what real value are those goals?), but does it bring any peace and contentment in your life? This sense of focus may bring us some short-term relief, perhaps a sense that we are doing something meaningful and it may provide some sense of purpose that we 'need' to have, but in reality it is no different from an ostrich sticking her head in the sand. You may not see what is coming, but it will come any way. And what comes for most people, are different degrees and forms of dissatisfaction and unhappiness. In addition, the really negative quality of ambition is that it prevents the search for real peace and happiness. The underlying assumption of all ambitions and goals is that while I am not happy now, when I achieve my goal, then all will be well. These beliefs delude us and keep us in darkness. Peace and contentment have remained elusive for the most ambitious or 'successful' of people. Why?

*The really negative quality of ambition is that it prevents the search for real peace and happiness.*

Many players I have spoken to tell me that the emotional ups and downs that I speak of are a 'normal' part of life. They cannot perceive of a state of being that transcends this ebb and flow and quite frankly there are not



too many examples I can point to that can serve as their role models. Personally, I do not need role models and the fact that this state of being is rarely attained does not serve to discourage me. I am content bringing as much awareness into my life as possible about suffering and happiness: their causes and their nature. Wherever that leads me I am comfortable. Whether or not there is an ultimate state of eternal bliss is a philosophical question of no practical relevance and so unworthy of my consideration.

*The Irony*

The irony is that if the advanced tournament player can forget about rankings, he or she will play to the best of their ability and as a result, their ranking will be exactly where it 'should' be. We need to understand that wanting our ranking to be higher will not make it higher; peak

*Wanting our ranking to be higher will not make it higher; peak performance will, and peak performance will only happen when we are totally relaxed.*

performance will, and peak performance will only happen when we are totally relaxed. We will be totally relaxed when we are absorbed in the process and are completely oblivious of the

result. To be totally absorbed in the process is to forego all goals, ambitions and desires. This seems to be so simple; why is it so difficult to incorporate into our lives?

The fun is often missing from this level of tennis and we need to bring it back into the game. People talk about so much being at stake and that is why it is so difficult to forget about the result, but re-read the above paragraph, does it make sense to you? If it does, then you will understand that a de-emphasis on results will improve performance and therefore results will be better, although that cannot be our motivation. We cannot 'pretend' we do not care about the result in order to get the result we desperately want.

Another thing to consider is: what is at stake? Only material things are at stake. If happiness is the ultimate goal, then we know that all the material things in the world will not help us become happy. But if peace of mind happens we have everything. So, we need to look to what disturbs our peace of mind and focus on that.

On the professional circuit I often come across players traveling the globe in search of the 'easy' ATP points that will boost their rankings. My message to them is always the same: focus on perfecting your art by improving your game through practice. Hitting lots of balls with direction and purpose will yield the results that you are entitled to. Improved rankings are only of value if they reflect an improved game (art form). To have the higher ranking without the corresponding growth in your game will not bring you any long-term benefit.

### Summary

1. Is your motivation for playing, love or ambition?
2. Practice silently with purpose and direction.
3. Never stray too far from the basic fundamentals in practice.
4. Practice systematically by recreating all situations that occur in a match.
5. Learn to play *Instinctive Tennis* in matches by cultivating an inner silence through watching yourself and becoming introspective.
6. Don't over-focus on strategy. Allow things to happen, instead.
7. Transform competitive tennis from a battle to an art form.
8. The greatest challenge is with ourselves and not with the person on the other side of the net.
9. Have fun!

## 7. A Word for Teaching Professionals

As a teaching professional myself for about 28 years, I have seen my effectiveness as a facilitator evolve. I was offered an opportunity to teach quite informally as a teenager and took to it immediately. I never pursued an elaborate plan to make this my career, but continued to do what I loved all over the world as and when the occasion arose. I have always been sincere in my efforts to be the best instructor I could be, although looking back I can see I made numerous mistakes. I was and still am a work in progress. I have observed coaches all over the world and tried to learn from those whom I felt had something to offer, but most of all I have watched players of all levels, especially the professionals, and through watching I have learned the most about how the game is played.

I have always wanted to share what I have learned on my journey with my colleagues and hope that my observations and comments are taken in the spirit in which they are offered. I have spoken out against the teaching profession for many years now because I feel that as a collective unit we have done a great disservice to the public. Our lack of collective professionalism, commitment and dedication to our chosen profession has made it increasingly difficult for people to develop the skills necessary to play this game. This assessment of the teaching professional is not vindictive, I have also had the pleasure of meeting some sincere, eager-to-learn, open-

minded tennis instructors, who have studied their art and put in the time and effort necessary. But far too many instructors churn out the teaching hours with little thought or creativity. This latter group teaches basically the same way year after year and learns only by browsing through *Tennis Magazine* each month for a few tips. The fact that they are working with a population that knows very little and considers their pro to be the ultimate authority only makes matters worse.

*Far too many instructors churn out the teaching hours with little thought or creativity.*

For too long, good players have automatically been accepted as bonafide instructors because of their obvious athletic prowess. Unfortunately, if we were to list the skills necessary to be an advanced player and the skills necessary to be a quality tennis instructor, the two lists would have very little in common. The natural assumption that if I can hit the ball a certain way, I must be able to teach someone else to do the same is simply not true.

In addition, for the most part, tennis-teaching professionals are spoiled. There is no other profession that I can think of where evaluation of one's work is not an ongoing phenomenon. Years ago, I joined the teaching staff of a big club near where I lived. After a while the owner made me his Director of Tennis, with a view to improving and making uniform the instructional coaching at the clubs and camps he owned and operated. In my attempt to do this, I bumped heads with teaching professionals who had been hard at work for 20 years, but who were completely unaccustomed to having to answer to anyone about what they did on the court. They were very unhappy to have someone assess their work in an objective manner, although in fairness to them, perhaps my approach could have been gentler and less threatening.

My advice to all aspiring tennis instructors is to learn as much about your profession as possible from a variety

of sources and then apply your own filtering process. This can be done through books, videotapes, tennis teaching conferences, watching and networking with other

*Learn as much about your profession as possible from a variety of sources and then apply your own filtering process.*

professionals and most importantly from watching and reflecting on what you see and bringing some common sense to the table. As I have said

before, watching world-class players in slow motion helped me a lot, but so did watching club level players, from beginners to advanced. So learn as much as you can, but always remember that this learning process is on-going.

There are two major aspects of a good facilitator. First and foremost are the personal traits necessary to succeed in anything you do. These traits include: sincerity, dedication, desire, good communication skills and a passion and joy for the opportunity to help the tennis lovers that come to you. The second major aspect of an effective facilitator is an expertise in your art, in this case, tennis. This includes the understanding and knowledge about the game itself, as well as the process of learning and the ability and passion to play the game competently.

Sincere individuals put in the time and effort to become USPTA, USPTR or ITF qualified, but can still be hopelessly ill equipped to be effective facilitators. These courses should not be considered the end of your learning journey, but just the beginning.

### **Making the Change from Teacher to Facilitator**

It is possible to make the change from teacher to facilitator. One simply needs an open mind and the capacity to drop the idea that we know. And it is this transformation that will be of the greatest help to the tennis lovers that cross your path.

*Knowing What You Don't Know*

The first thing to understand is that there is a great deal we in the tennis teaching profession simply do not know and I am now referring to the so-called leaders and experts of our sport, not about the vast majority of teaching professionals who get all their information second-hand from these experts. As long as this is our premise and foundation we will not go far wrong. Problems always arise when we are working from a body of knowledge that we think is etched in stone. When we know, we do not pay attention. However, when we do not know, we remain present and focused in a more exploratory mode.

In addition, there is a difference between knowing and knowledge. Knowledge is a body of facts determined in the past that we continue to reach back into our memory bank to access. Knowing is completely different. It is an awareness of something that is happening right now. The world is constantly changing on a number of different levels and knowing is keeping abreast of those changes in the here-and-now. It is being open to the reality that is unwinding before us right now. It is real. Knowledge is a thing of the past; it may or may not be true now. Even if it is true, it is borrowed; it is not our own. Knowing will transform you, while knowledge will score you points in a debate, perhaps win you some arguments or admirers, but it will not touch you at your core. Knowledge will not transform you or help you grow in any substantial way. So in the ultimate sense, it is of very little value. A word of warning. Be careful that knowing does not become knowledge. It must always remain knowing, meaning whatever we learn is only good for that moment and we have to continuously keep dropping all that we know. Our glass has to remain empty.

*Knowing will transform you, while knowledge will score you points in a debate.*

Observe yourself the next time you are on the court; are you really present? Is every word you use measured and considered carefully for the unique situation unfolding in front of you at that present moment? Every time you are on the court, are you seeing things for the first time or are you simply putting things into categories and going into your memory bank to look for the answer? Are you simply repeating words that you have heard elsewhere or said before by rote? Is your understanding of the game growing? Are you open to adding or even changing the way you are teaching at this very moment if you are shown a better way? Are you making any efforts to search for the possibility that there is a better way?

In the early part of 1994 I was working at a tennis club in New York when a meeting was called because a number of my colleagues were perturbed because I was teaching a forehand that involved a follow-through that went over the opposite shoulder, commonly called the 'wrap around'. They were teaching a 'fence to fence' stroke, in which the follow-through finished with a straight arm pointing in the direction the ball went and confusion was arising in the club among the members as to which was the correct way. There were six career tennis-teaching professionals and two owners, who had themselves been teaching professionals, present at the meeting. The heated discussion that ensued ended with me in one corner, six in the opposite corner and one on the proverbial fence. The six professionals that opposed a long 'wrap around' follow-through had been teaching tennis collectively in over 75 years. They had a vested interest in defending their position, quite apart from their egos. If they were wrong, they would have to come to terms with admitting to

themselves that in the past they had not given their students the best help possible and perhaps more importantly, they would have to move out of their comfort zone and learn something different in order to ultimately teach something different. I am not condemning these professionals in any way whatsoever because these types of fears are present in all of us to different degrees. In addition, the simple fact is that, at that time, the stalwarts of the teaching profession, all except Bolletieri (and even he did not think it was appropriate for any but the most advanced players), taught that way and there are a slew of old tennis videos to prove it.

The problem is that a teaching professional comes to his or her position, as an expert, someone who knows, and certainly we do know something and possibly more than the people we are teaching. But the fact is that most of us do not know much and none of us know everything. It would be far better to approach your job as someone who does not know, with what the Chinese call, 'the beginner's mind'. In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, so there is tremendous alertness, but in the expert's mind there is only one possibility so there is no need to look carefully because he knows. But how can we teach others and charge large fees and not know? Certainly, the situation is difficult. My understanding is that we immediately become better instructors or facilitators as soon as we can admit we don't know everything.

The simple truth is that there is no one-way to hit a ball. A cursory glance at the world's top players will clearly illustrate this point quite dramatically. However, I do not want to say that we know nothing; there are things we do know. We know the biology of the body and the way joints and muscles move. Consequently we

*Most of us do not know  
much and none of us know  
everything.*



know that hitting the ball a certain way that forces the joints to move in an 'unnatural' way may cause injury. We know some physics and how power, spin and direction can be imparted to a tennis ball. And there is a great deal more we know too. But the point is that when the conscious mind is silent we access an intelligence that is infinitely greater and knows so much more. That too is a part of us; in fact, it is a much truer part of who *we really are*. The conscious mind is the false ego and yet that is the part of us that we identify most with and this is the source of all our problems.

To stay present during lessons is to let go of all that you know. If you hold on to the things you know, you will go on repeating things over and over again, but when you are present your understanding will deepen and you will be amazed at the creativity that arises. I am still astonished at the new things that come up for me when I am on the court after all these years. Admittedly, I am also aware of the times that I am on the court and

*If you hold on to the things you know, you will go on repeating things over and over again, but when you are present your understanding will deepen and you will be amazed at the creativity that arises.*

working simply from memory: when I am not really there! It takes tremendous trust to let go so completely of all that we know. There is the fear of silence, the fear that perhaps I do not know anything or that I

will not be considered good at what I do. But, if we are to trust and let go, the rewards will be great. We all have the ability to see, but seeing can only happen when all knowledge is dropped.

I know that I am a better facilitator today than I was last year and that, since I am continuing to learn, I will probably be better next year. I also know that this means that in the past I have not given my tennis lovers the best help possible. This awareness reminds me to be very

Careful and think deeply before opening my mouth and telling a player something.

*Corrections After Each Stroke*

A common teaching error I have observed for years is the mistake of talking too much. Again, it is understandable. A professional is being paid money to be on the court and as a conscientious individual one wants to feel that one is providing something of value in return for this money and the best way to 'prove' this to the tennis lover or ourselves is by talking and imparting information. A few other professionals may be on ego trips and just like the sound of their own voice. Sometimes, it is the tennis lover, himself, who needs to know why he missed after each error. Regardless of the reason, spare a moment to consider the value of identifying, after each error, the 'cause' for its occurrence. Tennis is a game of numerous variables and to call out a reason after each missed shot simply serves to confuse the tennis lover and certainly does not help in improving his game.

Slowly the tennis lover herself falls into the habit of trying to identify the reason for every missed ball. The reason identified is very rarely the real reason the ball went awry. For example, I have had many tennis lovers miss a ball into the net and say, 'oh, my feet were in the wrong position'. When I questioned them about why they felt that way, I have been informed that their tennis pro had told them their feet should be in a particular position in order to hit the ball. My immediate response to this type of remark is to cross my feet, lean back and hit a perfect forehand or backhand onto the other side of the court with the accompanying words, 'I could stand on my head and do this as long as my racket meets the ball flush'; luckily no one has ever challenged me on that one!

The simple fact is that the fundamental key in determining where a ball goes is point of contact, and the greater control one has of the racket face, especially at that point, the more control one will have of where the ball travels. This is not to say that feet are irrelevant or that other factors are not contributory to an effective stroke, but just that at an early stage it is best to focus on the single most fundamental factor: point of contact. This is, of course, one example of problems that arise from the need to constantly correct; there are numerous others that are similar in that they cloud the most fundamental object of focus for the tennis lover.

In addition, to spew out one 'correction' after another for an hour-long lesson will only serve to confuse our protégés. This exchange of knowledge or intellectual information does nothing but train the tennis lover's mind and we are not here to provide information or to train the mind. Our objective is to help them play better tennis and this will not happen using this type of methodology because we need to train the body; it is the body that

*The body learns by developing feel through conscious doing and activating the mind only serves to make sensitivity to feel more difficult.* plays, not the mind! The body learns by developing feel through conscious doing and activating the mind only serves to make sensitivity to feel more difficult.

Furthermore, the desire or need to provide a reason after each error facilitates a situation wherein the professional feels obliged to say something even when he or she has nothing productive to say. It is simply amazing to silently watch and listen to some of the things that are said during lessons. They make no sense at all! As a society, we have a problem with silence, but it is in silence that improvement will happen. The tennis lover

should have no more than one simple task in mind at any one time. To have someone bellow one command after another can be extremely intimidating, and as I have said before, serves no purpose and renders the learning process useless.

*Making the Transition from Teacher to Facilitator*

The teacher is more invasive; he leads by force and touches only the surface. The facilitator prepares the ground and allows the learning process to happen by itself. The teacher is impatient and works on a surface level, while the facilitator has endless patience and provides an opportunity for the body to learn by itself and at its own pace. The teacher is the doer; he wants to make things happen. The facilitator realizes that all doing must come from the tennis lover, so he nurtures, supports, gently guides and creates situations where learning can take place.

*The facilitator prepares the ground and allows the learning process to happen by itself.*

To be a facilitator you need to know a great deal, but what you will discover is that the more you know, the more you will become cogniscent of all that you don't know and when you realize how little you do know, it becomes much easier to play a more passive role in the learning process. Also, knowing more will allow you to see that it is in the tennis lover that things need to happen and thus by becoming more aware of the needs of the tennis lover, it becomes easier to work at her pace and not our own.

Although less common, the opposite extreme of talking too little must also be avoided. To hit balls over and over again without purpose or without the gentle guidance that a good facilitator can provide, although better than too much instruction, is also not ideal. The facilitator

must find that subtle balance where he is leading and following, both at the same time.

*The Dangers of Ego*

It is so easy to identify who we are with what we do, and the tennis professional is no exception to this general tendency. The simple fact is that we are not (meaning our essence is not) tennis professionals; it is just something we do. Who we are goes beyond what we do. As a result, when the tennis lovers we are facilitating become good players we need to understand the limitations of our role in making that happen. The more we understand about the learning process, the easier it will be to downplay our role. After all, the facilitator simply facilitates. Can we make it happen? I know that I have tried my best to help various individuals in similar ways, and yet individuals have shown a variety of different aptitudes and consequently played at vastly fluctuating levels of tennis. The variable lies, not in my facilitating but in the athletic ability, dedication, commitment and mental and physical capabilities of the tennis lover. Simply making the transition from teacher to facilitator will shift the way we see things and help us minimize the emotional roller-coaster that results from mistakenly taking too much of the credit or blame for the way things turn out.

Why do we become so intricately and personally involved with what we do? Why do we make what we do a battlefield for proving who we are? Why do we get a sense of who we are through what we do? The questions are the same for the tennis facilitator as they are for the tennis player, although the situation is more intense for the player. The questions answer themselves. We don't know who we are and we feel incomplete so we try and fill that emptiness, that void, in order to get a sense of wholeness. It is easy to identify with what we do be-

cause, generally, we have such a great investment in it and because it exists so much on the surface it is easy for others to see. And yes, we do get a sense of ourselves through the eyes of others.

Unfortunately, it is not about what we do, but about who we are; unfortunate in the sense that doing is much easier to change than being. We will never understand who we are or even get a sense of who we are through what we do. It is a lack of wholeness that motivates us to strive for more and ironically it is this very striving that becomes the obstacle to feeling whole. We are already whole and complete, but we are unaware of this and so we continue to search for things to fill the void, things that will make us complete. However, 'things' do not fill the void and the wholeness is never felt because nothing outside of ourselves can possibly fill the void or make us feel whole—not having a student win Wimbledon nor coaching a world-class player, what to say simply of gaining the respect of colleagues in our local area or even in our club.

To be a good facilitator, or anything else for that matter, we need to have walked the inner path to some degree because whatever we do will be affected by our being. Walking the inner path simply means bringing some introspection and awareness into our lives. Never having walked the inner path will result in the ego becoming a major obstacle, not only in helping the tennis lovers that come to us, but most importantly in helping ourselves to a more content and peaceful existence. Ultimately, to be an effective facilitator you will have to look into yourself, into your own being; otherwise you will be looking in the outside world for that which you feel is lacking within you. And that search for meaning will not only create an obstacle to being an effective whatever it is you want to be, but in addition, the search will be fruit-

less; it has to be. Many of us live our entire lives in that fruitless search.

When we can act without ego, the action itself undergoes a dramatic metamorphosis. As facilitators we will be constantly trying to improve and learn more instead of protecting the little we do know. *When we can act without ego, the action itself undergoes a dramatic metamorphosis.* We will seek out those who may know more and ask for help, rather than becoming defensive over the slightest perceived criticism. Above all, to act without ego will bring intrinsic joy to all our activities and remove all stress. It will transform our lives beyond recognition. The irony is that we will not be able to act without ego until our lives have already been transformed.

### **On-Court Professionalism**

As professionals we have a responsibility to the individuals who come to us. If we are to honor this responsibility, we need to prepare as much as possible to be the very best we can be. We need to understand our role and the reasons people come to us and act accordingly. Most of the comments in this section are common sense and I am sure there are many omissions, but these arise from my tennis experience and I hope they can be helpful to you. *The facilitator should always have a written lesson plan before he steps out onto the court.* Most of the following information will be useful for group situations, but can also be modified and applied to private lessons.

#### *Lesson Plan*

The facilitator should always have a written lesson plan before he steps out onto the court. The plan should be for 10 minutes longer than the time allotted for the lesson, so

that there is a sense of urgency from the facilitator. It should always appear to the casual observer that the 60 or 90 minute lesson does not provide the necessary time to do all the things the facilitator wants to do, rather than someone looking to just fill time until the lesson is over. In addition, the extra options provide a safety net, in case of the unexpected. The lesson plan should be a guideline for the good facilitator, not necessarily something to be followed rigidly. For the good facilitator, the lesson plan provides an opportunity to bring some advanced thought to the needs of the individual or group he is facilitating, while still leaving room for the lesson to 'live a life of its own'. The more inexperienced a facilitator is the more closely he will follow his lesson plan, but an experienced facilitator may go off at completely different tangents, but the value of a lesson plan remains valid for both parties. It is very rare that I walk onto a court without a lesson plan, sometimes written sometimes not, but almost always some thought will have been given to what I think is necessary to do. The exception is obviously first time lessons whom I know nothing about and even then at the time of booking I generally ask about the general level of the player. In such cases and in almost all private lesson situations, the first question to ask the tennis lover as soon as you step onto the court is what he wants from this hour together. I have found the following structure useful in making lesson plans in group or camp situations:

1. Personal greetings
2. Introduction of theme and demonstration
3. General warm up drills or mini tennis
4. Progressive drills related to the theme
5. Point Play
6. Review



*Facilitating the Beginner*

The theme provides the facilitator with a sense of purpose and direction. For example, for beginners it is important to spend all of the initial court time helping them develop a forehand, backhand and serve. These are the rudiments of the game and we should not stray too far from them. That sounds pretty basic enough and one may think, 'how is it possible to spend weeks and months on just forehands without driving yourself and the players nuts?' Believe me, it is possible. The closer you look at the progressive steps in the teaching section of this book, the more you will see the tremendous possibilities that are available in teaching these basic strokes. Make the theme as specific as possible and you will see that in a one-hour private lesson or a 90 minute group lesson there can be an organized progression that will provide you direction in your facilitating and make the learning easier for the player.

Most of the themes at this level will surround developing basic technique on the forehands, backhands and serves. For each of these strokes, however, the tennis lovers will be at varying places of progress and so careful attention must be paid to the specifics involved with each particular stroke.

*Facilitating the Intermediate*

Once again be as specific as possible with your theme. What are the needs of the tennis lovers for each stroke? Perhaps, it is movement on the forehand, but maybe the backhand still needs foundational work. The serve may still be at a very basic stage. The themes at this level need to be specific to the strokes of your player or group. You may have to have one or two themes. However, within each theme there has to be progression and purposeful intention. Regardless of how basic the need of the player

is, we as facilitators have to devise a progression that allows the tennis lover to develop the skills required.

Most of the themes at this level will be focused on uniformity of swing and consistency. Players at this level need to hit lots of balls and to find creative ways to make this happen is the goal of the facilitator. Simple combinations can also become themes as we slowly lead the tennis lovers towards the nuances of match play.

#### *Facilitating the Advanced Player*

For high intermediates through to world-class players many themes can be devised to help players play out actual points. For example, a theme could be attacking the net with an underspin backhand. Once more, the progression is the key. We would have to begin by warming up and practicing the backhand underspin approach and the volleys through dead-ball feeds. After that, we could continue feeding and slowly walk the players through the combination we have chosen, in this example it is an underspin backhand approach followed by a volley into the open court. Thereby allowing them to develop a feel for the movement and the timing of the split step before volleying. After that, the facilitator could use semi-live drills by playing out the point with the tennis lover, but still being very predictable with the shot pattern. At the beginning, the underspin backhand would be directed down the line and the pass would also be directed down the line so that the player could volley cross-court into the open court. Varying the placement of the underspin backhand, the passing shot, and the volley provides numerous combinations to practice before placing one player at each baseline and feeding a short ball to one of the players and playing out the point. Ultimately, more match situation games can be devised so that the tennis lover can determine when to come up to the net.

These could arise from various games that begin with a backcourt rally and allowing players to play out the point, each one waiting for an opportunity to come into the net. Simple rules like awarding points simply for coming to the net would encourage the players to practice coming in. The awarding of points for competitive players and especially youngsters is an excellent way to encourage players to practice those parts of the game the facilitator wishes them to practice. This is just one theme. A few others are: serving and volleying, consistency from the backcourt, opening up the court with an angled ground stroke to the side T, using the inside out forehand to control the point, developing a weapon, playing defensively, etc. There are also numerous themes that can be developed for serving and return combinations. Each one of these themes and the resulting progressions could provide situ-

*No matter how simple the theme, the facilitator must have an objective and a progression towards accomplishing it.*

ations for tennis lovers to have fun and learn the skills necessary to play this beautiful game. No matter how simple the theme, the facilitator must have

an objective and a progression towards accomplishing it.

For more long-term facilitating like indoor winter sessions which generally last 10–16 weeks, the facilitator could devise a long-term program for the entire season so that he had an overview available to him in order to ensure progress and also to guarantee that all necessary strokes are touched upon to the extent that the facilitator wishes them to be.

The facilitator should bring all the tennis lovers together at the beginning and end of each class to create an intimate and friendly atmosphere and to explain the theme or to review. In the review, I always like to ask the tennis lovers, especially the young ones, what they learned from the previous hour. Some of the answers are amusing and

some insightful, but all of them are helpful in some way to me. Once in a while I will have a tennis player who feels he is too good for the group and he will say I learned nothing because I already knew all this. Often, I use this opportunity to share one of my favorite stories about the wise man and the fool.

Two men go for a walk in the park. One is wise and the other is a fool. They walk for a while and eventually sit down on a park bench and talk. Who learns the most, the wise man or the fool? Most imagine the fool learns the most because what could a wise man possibly learn from a fool?

Actually, the wise man learns the most because a man becomes wise by having the aptitude to learn. The fool is a fool not because he has not had the opportunity to learn, but because he lacks the capability. Both have had equal opportunity because wisdom is all around us. Life in all its splendor teaches us all we need to know, but only the wisest amongst us have the awareness to learn. The rest of us remain fools because we live with our eyes shut unconsciously, completely oblivious to the riches sitting right in front of us. Consequently, the wise man learns from every situation.

So, the next question is: if you have learned nothing from our hour together, which one are you? The wise man or the fool?<sup>1</sup>

### *Sincerity*

The tennis professional, in order to be effective, needs to be totally absorbed in his role as a facilitator and as such his entire attention must be focused on the individuals in

<sup>1</sup> I have reproduced this story from my first book, *Relaxed Intensity*, because I feel it bears repeating.

his class who have placed their trust in him to help them improve in a fun-loving way. Too often in my travels around the world I have seen tennis professionals who *I have seen tennis professionals who are burnt out, and this is reflected in their body language.* are burnt out, and this is reflected in their body language: the manner in which they feed balls, the way that they stand on the court, the nonchalant way that they hit the ball back to the tennis lover, the frequency and duration of water breaks, the length of casual chatter, sometimes, even in the manner they address their tennis lovers, etc.

If the facilitator is really focused and total, then he will spend every minute of the session giving the tennis lover an opportunity to hit as many balls as possible. Certainly, it is necessary to explain the purpose and manner in which a particular drill is to be explored, but these verbal exchanges should be brief and to the point. However, I will acknowledge the fact that sometimes in private lessons with adults it is the tennis lover him or herself that wants to talk or rest, in which case, the facilitator should engage the needs of the tennis lover, all the while waiting to see the opportunity to continue playing again. Adults take lessons for various reasons and it is important for the facilitator to be totally in tune with the needs of his client.

### *Burnout*

This is a reality among many full-time teaching professionals. It seems difficult to remain focused and enthusiastic doing the same task over extended periods of time day in day out, all year long. The main consideration is to avoid greed. The practical necessity and allure of maximizing income is tempting indeed. However, there are other considerations apart from greed that render the situation difficult. The nature of the business is usually seasonal or there are certain holidays during the year,

which can become very busy. Often, it is a case of making hay while the sun lasts because there are lots of cloudy days too and down time. This is the nature of our profession and we need to do the best we can in the situation we find ourselves in. However, despite these obstacles it is important that the facilitator is sensitive to what is happening to him or her and act accordingly.

Generally, it is essential to take a lunch break and it is imperative for individuals to determine how many hours in a row they can work without becoming tired, ineffectual, or when facilitating stops being fun. Again, this is not always easy to calculate because some lessons are more taxing than others, but it is essential to have an approximation and use it as a guideline without straying too far from it. For me, at this stage of my life, the ideal situation is 3 hours in the morning and another three hours at the end of the day with at least a three-hour break in the middle. Sometimes, the 3-hour teaching sessions become 4, and often that is all right too because I teach privates mostly only on weekends. At this frequency my facilitating is fun for me, but I am fully aware that part of the reason for this is that I am not churning out the 50 to 60 hours a week, 12 months a year that many professionals are.

### *Boredom*

Boredom is different from burnout, although the two are related to some extent. I have found that facilitators that are bored are usually not good facilitators. Boredom happens when you are not *doing* anything, but aimlessly hitting balls back and forth. On the contrary, the effective facilitator is always watching the tennis lover intently and constantly trying to guide him from one stage to the next.

*Boredom happens when you are not doing anything, but aimlessly hitting balls back and forth.*

My observation is that if you are actively facilitating, it is impossible to be bored, so if you are feeling bored, focus on becoming a better facilitator and the chances are that you will decrease your chances of burnout too.

*On Court Productivity*

When I worked at an indoor facility, one year, I had the pleasure of facilitating a number of youngsters in group (never more than 4) lessons. I elicited the help of a number

*Teaching aids can be of tremendous help, not only in developing necessary skills, but also by increasing fun and decreasing the down time that is always the challenge in group lessons.*

of teaching aids, which allowed each child to be continuously occupied with an activity that was giving it an opportunity to improve skills. I feel teaching aids can be of tremendous help, not only in developing

necessary skills, but also by increasing fun and decreasing the down time that is always the challenge in group lessons. In addition, in my enthusiastic desire to utilize each moment of our time together productively, I never stopped to pick up the balls as a class, but instead rotated the tennis lovers so that someone was always picking up balls, and I was always giving my full attention to at least one child, but usually two. I remember one colleague of mine in particular being considerably upset with me, ostensibly because he said this created an unsafe situation for the children because they could be hit by an errant ball, but more likely because he enjoyed 'killing' 10 to 15 minutes of each hour long lesson slowly picking up balls. Having me do something differently on the next court, made him look 'bad'. Certainly, there is a possibility that a ball could hit a youngster, but warning the ball retrievers in advance can minimize this risk and the benefit of the continuous and increased activity makes the slight risk tenable. In all the years I have been doing

this, while I have had minor incidents, no one has ever been hurt in any, even slightly significant way. The facilitator, when seeing that his ball supply is short, should move to a drill that involves a rotation which would allow either one or two of the players to pick-up balls whenever possible. The only exceptions to this rule are when the theme is to be changed, or after serving, or the last few minutes of a lesson.

The reason for this is simple. The facilitator's time is valuable, and every minute of the lesson should be spent utilizing his special skills. When two children are picking up balls, the other tennis lovers can receive some more personal attention and this is infinitely better than the facilitator helping the children pick up balls.

*The facilitator's time is valuable, and every minute of the lesson should be spent utilizing his special skills.*

### *Punctuality*

The facilitator should plan to be at the club 10 to 15 minutes before a lesson begins. The balls have to be prepared, the lesson plan reviewed, and the facilitator should go on the court relaxed and composed, as opposed to stressed and hurried. In addition, the players can be greeted as they arrive and parents can take this opportunity to talk with their child's facilitator if necessary. Every lesson should ideally end and begin on time.

### *Safety*

The facilitator must ensure that all the drills are safe and that players are not swinging rackets wildly or too close to each other. For the younger children, it is good to encourage them to hug their rackets when they are waiting for their turn to hit. Organizational skills, which include clear and precise instructions on where tennis lovers should stand and how they should move before and



after hitting the ball, will ensure a safe environment for all group situations. For example, using ball hoppers as markers to show tennis lovers where they should go after hitting the ball and how far they should stand behind the person hitting balls in a line drill is often a good idea. In addition, the facilitator should constantly be making sure that all balls are removed from the court during drills or games so that there is absolutely no possibility of tennis lovers tripping over balls.

Finally, children when not closely supervised in group situations tend to become impatient and restless. This restlessness can manifest in many ways and the facilitator must always be alert. One of the more common occurrences is that individuals start hitting balls aimlessly into the fence or around the court. This can be dangerous and must be prohibited from the beginning. Swinging rackets and balls aimlessly are the major causes of accidents on a tennis court and taking precautions in advance against these things happening will go a long way in ensuring the safety of your tennis lovers.

### *Motivation*

An inspired, enthusiastic and motivated facilitator will usually be able to convey these same qualities to his tennis lovers. The keys to motivating tennis lovers are communication skills, knowledge, enthusiasm, sincerity, genuine care and a sincere passion for the game. In addition, there should be relevance too; tennis lovers must feel that what they are being asked to do will make them better tennis players. Not all tennis lovers will be self-motivated or enthusiastic, so we have to find ways to make the lessons fun and interesting. One way is to have numerous drills at your disposal, so that the lessons are varied in their presentation, but more important than that is the enthusiasm, commitment and organization skills

we, as professionals, bring to the table. If you as the facilitator have a plan and are moving in a certain direction with purpose and in a loving way, the tennis lovers are more likely to be involved with what is happening on court.

When we communicate with the tennis lovers, especially with the younger ones, we should bring the entire group together and speak to all of them at their level, both physically and psychologically. The players should be made comfortable and the facilitator should be acutely aware of any tennis lover who may be having a difficult time for any one of a number of reasons. It is essential that the facilitator not spend too much time with one player at the expense of the others. If the ability level of your group is not balanced, inform the Direc-

*When facilitating, there should never be any doubt as to who is in charge on the court without being overly strict or oppressive.*

tor immediately. When facilitating, there should never be any doubt as to who is in charge on the court without being overly strict or oppressive. It is not always easy to walk the fine line between informality and chaos and yet we must strive to create an atmosphere that is relaxed, disciplined, organized, friendly and conducive to learning.

Finally, we have to accept that we can do all the right things and yet 'fail'; actually, in these cases the failure is with the player. As long as we have done our best without compromising the integrity of the game or the parameters of professionalism, we can simply move on without regret or guilt.

#### *Crime and Punishment*

Facilitators should not tolerate unruly behavior by tennis lovers. Cursing, racket, or verbal abuse, or any other unsportsman-like behavior towards the facilitator or, especially, towards the other tennis lovers must be dealt with

quickly and firmly. Mildly deviant behavior by tennis lovers should be ignored if possible when not disruptive to the class; otherwise, erring tennis lovers should be isolated from the rest of the class with timeouts. The professional *Mildly deviant behavior by tennis lovers should be ignored if possible when not disruptive to the class.* must never shout or physically or emotionally abuse the child or reprimand him out of anger. Simply explain to the child why he or she is being punished and what you expect from him or her in the future. Isolate the child for a short period of time and try to bring him or her into the fold as soon as possible. Burning bridges with tennis lovers by becoming angry never works and neither does making an enemy! The goal for even the most difficult youngster is to bring them into the mainstream. This will not be easy, but a difficult child in your group is probably going to be a difficult child everywhere and if you are able to reach this youngster by developing a warm and mutually respectful relationship with him or her, without sacrificing others in his or her group, you would probably be making a great difference in an individual's life.

Other forms of punishment, such as push-ups, laps or other physical exercises are considered counter-productive by conventional wisdom and are to be strictly avoided because while they may 'work' on the short-term, on the long-term they reinforce the 'wrong' values. Youngsters may begin to adopt a negative attitude toward exercise in general, while others may simply become resentful and turned off tennis. In isolated cases when a child's behavior is repeatedly unruly and timeouts are not working, the facilitator should inform the Director who will then talk to him personally and to his parents if necessary.

It is wise to walk a fine line with the tennis lovers between being too familiar when they will not listen to your direction and being too aloof, or distant or too strong

a disciplinarian when an atmosphere will prevail which is not nurturing. It is necessary to be kind, considerate, loving, compassionate, understanding and patient, while also being strong, sincere, innovative, alert and well organized. It is not always possible to be all these things all the time, so when a facilitator is feeling overwhelmed, it is absolutely necessary that he or she inform the Director so that help can be provided.

### *Competition*

The popular attitude towards competition is the single most destructive factor in our game today. It is one of the biggest reasons why many people, especially advanced players, stop playing the game. It is also, often, a source of tremendous pain and frustration. Most players, especially tournament level players, play under tremendous stress and pressure, which exists only because of their fundamental misconception of what competition is. Many individuals view the tennis court as a battleground on which they can prove their self-

worth to themselves and to the rest of the world. Unfortunately, this is not a healthy attitude. We must show our tennis lovers that playing tennis for fun is the best reason to play and it

*We must show our tennis lovers that playing tennis for fun is the best reason to play and it is our job as facilitators to help remove all the pressures that players create for themselves.*

is our job as facilitators to help remove all the pressures that players create for themselves by helping them understand that there are alternative ways to view competition and that these alternatives will not only make tennis more fun, but will also improve their overall performance.

We, as facilitators, have to be careful that we do not add to their pressures inadvertently by our own expectations for them. For some people, only the winning is fun, but this attitude will result in frustration and inevitable

disappointment for no one can win all the time. It is essential that the process be enjoyable, so that win or lose we have fun playing and competing. I understand that the prevailing attitude towards competition is reinforced throughout our society as a whole, but we must strive to impress upon tennis lovers from an early age that all we can do is to be totally into and focused on what we are doing and that whatever comes out of that is perfectly acceptable. We must help our players differentiate between that which they have control over and those things they have no control over. We have no control over winning or losing and we have no control over how well we play (no one wishes to play below their best, but it happens anyway!). Once that is understood, it becomes an easy task to focus only on those things the tennis lover can control. The only things over which we have any control are our effort and attitude, and we must stress this point over and over again to our players!

For players with high expectations, who engage in frequent negative self-talk in competition, it is key to remind them to avoid all judgment and instead simply observe. It is important for us, as their guides and role models, to do the same by avoiding words such as good and bad and the accompanying synonyms and instead increase awareness of what is actually taking place in front of us. In addition, we must help players understand that all result-oriented goals and expectations are futile and should be avoided, if they wish to reach their full potential, both as players and individuals.

Language is a key tool for facilitators and we must make sure that what we are saying on a constant basis is consistent with our actions so that there is no question of conflicting messages. This can only happen if we ourselves

are process oriented and can accept and bring these very same concepts into our lives. We must reward tennis lovers for their effort and not for the outcome. Don't worry, they will be reaping the 'rewards' of winning from all those around them; it is good for them to get a different message from us. The result should be down-played and the process, the effort, the joy of playing and competing should be emphasized. Also, giving drinks or other prizes for winning in order to motivate youngsters is a practice to be avoided. Yes, the short-term benefits are obvious and the long-term damage is not so obvious, but a reality all the same.

In addition, giving thought to the drills that we use is very important to ensure that they are reinforcing the message of 'competition with ourselves' based on reaching ones own individual potential rather than by comparing our skills to those of our partners, which is never a good barometer anyway because the skill level of our partners can vary quite arbitrarily. This does not mean that you cannot play traditional games that have a winner, but it is *how* we play these games that is important.

#### *Attending Tournaments*

I was at an ATP tour event watching a young man I was facilitating play the second round of qualifying. Due to unusual circumstances, my ward was ranked almost 600 spots below his 'partner'. When the match got under way, it soon became obvious that the higher-ranked player was going to win comfortably. However, this did not stop that young man's coach from clapping enthusiastically at every point won and from periodically punctuating a winner with a 'pump fist' and a loud exclamation of 'come on'. In addition, the player and coach repeatedly made eye-contact with each other throughout a match that he won 6-2; 6-0.

There are a couple of points I would like to illustrate from this example. First of all, I have never valued the cheer-leader role for a coach. A coach who is going to become excited about winning points, games and sets will, to the same degree, suffer when these things happen in the reverse. These emotional ups and downs are not healthy for the coach himself and, in addition, only encourage the player to suffer a similar emotional roller-coaster. For the player to be at his best he needs to be emotionally stable and centered and if the coach can also be that way, it will create an environment that makes it easier for the player to play from that place.

Secondly, the repeated eye-contact between player and coach is a sign of weakness and need. It is almost as if the player is looking to the coach for strength and support. While this may not seem to be such a 'bad' thing, ultimately the role of the facilitator is not to provide these things for his player, but to facilitate the player to find these things within himself.

However, the coach does not 'choose' his behavior—none of us do. Behavior stems from our awareness, our consciousness. If a coach is to remain calm, centered and peaceful, this behavior will have to be truly reflective of what he is feeling inside. This equanimity will only arise when he has come to terms with winning, losing, success, failure and a host of other situations that surface during competition. This feeling of balance and centeredness can only arise when we have come to terms with our ego by walking the inner path.

#### *Walking the Inner Path*

Beyond helping our wards deal with pressure and the negativity that surfaces from result-oriented thinking, we need to look within ourselves. How much of our ego is caught up in being a tennis facilitator? Do we feel 'proud'

when our 'tennis lover' wins? How do we feel if she or he loses? How much is what we feel about ourselves tied up with how good a tennis facilitator people think we are? And in what way do we measure how 'good' we are as a facilitator? In the absence of any objective criterion, are not the results of our tennis lovers an obvious barometer? But how accurate is that criterion? How 'good' a player becomes is obviously based on a number of factors, and surely athletic ability, desire, opportunity, hard work and determination to play are powerful components over which the facilitator has absolutely no control. So often I have seen the ego of the facilitator reflected in the performance of the tennis lover and this is a most unhealthy situation, not only for the facilitator, but also for the tennis lover, who is placed under unfair pressure because he is not now playing simply for his own pleasure, but also for the professional reputation of his facilitator. Obviously this is an unnecessary burden, one that will not enhance the possibility of peak performance. For myself, my estimation that my role in the development of a player is about ten per cent and the remaining 90 per cent is divided, not so equally between his parents and their ability to provide the opportunity and the player him or herself. By far the single most important variable is the individual himself. Consequently, if an individual becomes a player to whatever level, the 'praise' should be his.

We, as facilitators, need to observe ourselves and see how much of our ego is tied into the performance of our tennis lovers. If we cannot be completely serene in both victory and defeat, then our ego has become involved and we need to look into this deeply, not only for our own well being, but also for the well being of our players.

Hopefully, during the task of teaching our tennis lovers tennis, we ourselves will learn lessons in the art of



living, which will help us lead fulfilling lives. Whatever we do in life, if we can do it sincerely and to the very best of our ability, with insight and introspection, all the time being honest to ourselves as well as to the people around us, we will ensure personal and spiritual growth in our lives and this is all in addition to our weekly wage. What a great deal!

### **Teaching Myths**

The teaching industry has been in a sorry state of affairs for many years and hopefully it is on its way to becoming better informed and more professional in its approach to facilitating. However, regardless of what happens going forward, we need to rectify some of the misinformation that abounds and dispel the myths that the teaching industry has perpetuated, admittedly unwittingly, for many years.

#### *Myth #1: Closed Stance Forehands*

In about the summer of 1992 or '93, I attended a Tennis Teacher's Conference in New York City, where Dennis Van Der Meer, a highly respected tennis teacher, a pioneer and leader of the teaching industry and founder of the USPTR tennis teaching system, was giving the opening presentation entitled, 'What's new in tennis'. One of the things Dennis talked about was the open-stance forehand. I did not have the opportunity, after his presentation, to tell Dennis that I had video tapes of players in the 1940s and '50s playing with continental grips hitting open stance, not to mention more recent players who have the more extreme grips that necessitate an open stance. I do not mention this to embarrass Dennis in any way whatsoever, but to indicate how unaware the teaching industry as a whole is, or certainly was, and may still be. Subsequently,

open stance forehands and even backhands have become 'common knowledge', although I am amazed that so many coaches, especially those who were raised in the traditional 'turn to the side and step into the ball' learning environment, still have doubts and misconceptions about this stroke.

So how did this stroke that was never taught by anyone become so prevalent? It is a miracle that anyone ever hit open stance, so convinced was the teaching industry that you must turn sideways and step in to hit the ball. It is obvious that players of great talent fell into playing *instinctive*

*It is a miracle that any one ever hit open stance, so convinced was the teaching industry that you must turn sideways and step in to hit the ball.*

*tennis* and became so focused on the ball and the process of playing that although they intellectually 'knew' they had to hit the ball a certain way, they ended up hitting in a completely different way, without even realizing they were doing it. Amazingly, neither did their coaches!

The simple truth is that players 'discovered' this way to hit the ball because it is natural and need not be taught. Even now, I have done 'experiments' with young, beginning (no prior lessons!) players (seven to nine year olds), who are good athletes, and without ever telling them anything about their feet, I have seen them hit perfect open stance forehands on a consistent basis.

There is one primary circumstance under which I will mention feet to a tennis lover. It is when the player has it in his or her head that 'I must turn and step into the ball'. I have even had players tell me that they feel guilty when they hit open because they feel they had been too lazy to step into the ball. Consequently, to this type of player, a process of unlearning has to be facilitated. I try to free the individuals from the prison they are in by telling them, 'First see what it feels like to hit open, and

then let it go. Don't even think about feet, it's okay to hit open and it's okay to hit closed.' If the tennis lover is comfortable enough to relax into this, then he or she will hit primarily open almost immediately. For others, the conditioned response is harder to break down, and more time will have to be spent unlearning the wrong so that the body can do that which is natural, especially when movement is involved.

Actually the 'lazy' comment is interesting because the one time when most tennis professionals actually do hit a closed stance forehand is when the ball is a little short. They then reach in and hit the ball, as opposed to moving the entire body in and hitting their normal open stroke. So, the truth is that players hit closed stance groundstrokes when they are lazy and not the other way around.

It is also interesting to note that hitting open stance is not just to facilitate easier movement, which it undoubtedly does, but also to generate the maximum power. In other words, if a player had a choice to hit any way he or she wanted, and all the time in the world to prepare for the shot, an open stance forehand would generate more power than a closed stance would, with all other things being equal.

In addition, because the point of contact is later on the open stance, not only does it give you more time to play the ball, but also direction becomes more deceptive because it can be changed at the last moment. These are both factors that make open stance effective from both sides on the return of serve, especially.

Also, the tennis lover should not feel that what is good for the pros may not be suitable for beginners or intermediates. The fact is that hitting open stance actually makes eye-hand coordination easier. To test this idea, throw a tennis ball to a beginning player and ask them to try and catch it with one hand. Do they turn to the side and step

in? If we asked them to do that, it would render catching the ball more difficult, would it not? The fact is the beginner will find it easier to catch the ball if he faces the ball directly. Consequently, the open stance will benefit the beginner all the way through to the world-class player. It is important, however, that the facilitator make sure that the upper body rotates into the ball and that the tennis lover is not simply 'arming' the ball.

Finally, if you observe closely, even those players who hit closed stance will swing their back leg around and become totally open once the swing is finished. This happens automatically and need not be taught. My definition of an open stance forehand is when the right leg (for a right-handed player) pushes off the ground and the weight finishes off on the opposite leg, as opposed to 'stepping' into the ball.

In short, there are numerous advantages to the open stance forehand, which in a way 'force' the advanced player to hit in this way, regardless of what he is taught. In addition, while the open stance backhand is not as prevalent on the professional circuit, I think as better and better athletes come into the game of tennis, it will be seen more often.

*Myth #2: Stay Down When You Hit the Ball*

Power is generated ultimately through racket head speed and the different body parts are utilized only to enhance this. The legs, the hips, the abdomen, the shoulder, the arm and ultimately the wrist are all used in a synchronized movement to propel the racket head as fast as possible into the ball. How effective and coordinated these body parts are in working in unison will determine how quickly the racket head moves and ultimately how fast the ball travels. When a player stays down on the ball while hitting, he is, in effect, cutting himself off from the

waist and the power can now only come from above the waist. Obviously this will result in less racket head speed than if the entire body were used to throw the racket towards the ball.

Timing is essential in the lifting movement generated through the legs, and errors will result if the lifting is too soon. When many teaching professionals scream out, 'stay down', what they really mean is stay down a little longer (even if they don't realize it), but you must lift if you are to maximize the racket head speed and hit the most effective shot you can.

*Myth #3: Scratch Your Back on the Serve*

Vic Braden and Dr. Jack Brody, in their video on the serve, have made it clear for us all that the racket does not go down the back of the server, but actually if you had someone stand beside you, you would actually be 'scratching your friend's back'. My experience is that those students who have diligently followed the 'scratch your back' dictum have serves that are awkward, weak and without any rhythm or power.

*Myth #4: Snap Your Wrist on the Serve*

Snapping the wrist down onto the ball will not help your serve in any way. The wrist actually pronates on the swing as it does in the throwing motion. In addition, snapping encourages the player to be forceful with the wrist, which can cause pain and lead to injury over time. Pronation is a natural movement and requires almost a let-go mind set rather than a make-it-happen one.

*Myth #5: Punch Your Volleys*

Punching is not a good teaching cue for most players, especially club players who swing too much on the volley. Punching invariably leads to swinging, which undoubtedly creates power, but if you look at the teaching

progression in the earlier chapters you will see that power is way down the list. So, yes if you have good technique, a uniform swing, and you are consistent and can place the ball wherever you want, then power becomes relevant. Even then I prefer the teaching cue to be 'go to meet the ball' rather than 'punch'. Before that point, I think the tennis lover would be better served by having an image of catching or blocking the ball.

*Myth #6: Racket Back Quickly*

We have dealt with this at length under the heading Rhythm and Timing, in Chapter 2, p. 32, but I do think that the fundamentals warrant repeating here.

To take the racket back quickly is an extremely damaging habit to get in to. It destroys all rhythm and consequently makes timing extremely difficult. Personally, I feel Pete Sampras has suffered from this problem for much of his career. On his backhand, he takes the racket back far too quickly and waits there, instead of waiting to the side. This problem is accentuated on slow courts, when there is greater time and waiting is more of an issue. The problem is thus hidden on hard courts, when things move quickly and there is not much waiting time anyway. Both Serena and Venus Williams suffer from the same problem on both their groundstrokes.

Beginners too will have a difficult time making the transition from lessons to playing when taught incorrectly. I see many lessons given, where the tennis lover begins with the racket already back pointing to the back fence waiting for the ball to be fed. Not only is it harder to make contact with the ball, but there is so much power from such a long backswing that even a slight mishap will cause the ball to go cascading wide, making it almost impossible for two beginners to go out and hit with each other. It is far better to have the beginner get used to

bumping the ball first by having the racket begin at the side with no backswing. Watch the top players in the world, notice that even though the balls are being hit at such incredible speeds, there is still time to wait and notice where that waiting is taking place. Anyone who breaks this rule will be inconsistent and shank a number of balls.

For years tennis lovers have been encouraged to take the racket back first and then move to the ball. No

*For years tennis lovers have been encouraged to take the racket back first and then move to the ball. No advanced player does this.*

advanced player does this. When players move to the ball, their racket is to the side tracking the ball and the racket is taken back only when the full

swing is ready to be executed. This happens naturally if players are left to their own devices, unfortunately, some facilitators insist on forcing their players to get the racket back quickly.

*Myth #7: Point to the Ball when Hitting an Overhead*

This has been a popular teaching cue for a long time now and while cues can be helpful when not taken too literally, sometimes they can be counter-productive, especially if they have been around a long time. I see players of all levels, except the advanced with good overheads, waving the index finger of their non-dominant hand up in the air as they scurry around setting up for an overhead. The finger is nowhere near the ball and even if it was, it invariably makes it more difficult for the tennis lover to get into the correct position for the overhead. One common result of this is that the shoulders do not turn and the tennis lover invariably hits the ball facing the net, only with his arm. First of all, it is difficult to move well with one hand in the air. Secondly, the ball must be hit at

about 1 o'clock and so the arm should come across the body rather than point directly to the ball.

*Myth #8: Point to the On-Coming Ball When Hitting a Forehand*

Chris Evert has made numerous positive contributions to this sport, and she is continuing to do so, but the one not so beneficial contribution she and her facilitators gave to us was pointing to the ball with her left hand when hitting a forehand. I see coaches to this day teaching this to youngsters, especially beginners, and while it may initially help them to focus on the ball, as they improve, this very habit will impede progress and we all know how difficult it is to change habits.

It is better for the non-dominant hand to remain on the racket as it is drawn to the side and come across the body. This allows for a more pronounced shoulder turn, which produces a more efficient and ultimately more powerful stroke. There are many top players who illustrate this point very well, but Andre Agassi's forehand preparation in particular is recommended as an ideal to learn from. His non-hitting arm comes right across his body, which allows for tremendous upper body rotation, resulting in a great deal of power.

*Myth #9: Have the Thumb Behind the Racket while Hitting a Backhand*

In the old days many players used to hit the single-handed backhand with this grip, but it is not the most efficient way to hit the ball. Many proponents end up pushing the ball instead of driving through the ball with a full follow-through.



## 8. A Word for Parents

From a youngster's first tournament all the way up the ladder to the professional circuit, many adults struggle with the challenge of parenting and the responsibility of 'managing' a tennis phenomenon. Certainly, there are cases of parents who have developed supportive and loving relationships with their children throughout their junior careers and beyond, but unfortunately such cases are the exception, not the rule. I have come across many well-intentioned parents who readily admit that they do not know how to relate to their child's tennis or how to balance the roles between tennis manager and just a parent, but are eager to do the 'right' things for their children and this section is intended for them.

Parenting is an extremely difficult job at the best of times and with the added component of the extremely competitive world of sports, it becomes even more complex. Each parent wants to do what is best for his or her child, but what is best? There are no ready-made, easy to pick up techniques of child rearing and certainly we are not here to focus on the larger issues involved in the dynamics of parent-child relationships, except as they relate to our purposes. We will have to deal with, to some extent, the greater picture of what *is* helping your child and what of value, if anything, we can give to them?

### **What Do You Want for Your Child?**

Children come into this world through their parents and at the time of birth are completely helpless and dependent

on their parents for sustenance, safety and love. Obviously, parents feel a responsibility to nurture and protect their child. Unfortunately, it is the nature of this completely one-sided relationship that is the source of the problems that develop later in life. At the early stage of the child's life, the parent makes, not only decisions, but must also do just about everything for the child. In other words, the parent has complete control in this relationship and the child is dependent and usually in awe of the parent. Strangely enough, this relationship has some parallels with the old teacher-student paradigm and as is the case in the teacher-student paradigm, a shift must occur if a healthy and productive relationship is to develop. The most fundamental change that will allow this to happen is a shift from 'I know' to 'I don't know'. It is an ever so slight change, but one of monumental significance.

Obviously, I do not mean by, 'I don't know' that the parent should question whether or not the child should play in the middle of a crowded street with cars speeding up and down. But only that, 'I don't know' should be the shadow of all dealings the parent has with the child. Unquestionably as an infant, the child will be able to make very few decisions and certainly the child's curiosity about this beautiful world she has entered will at times place her in danger. Needless to say, the parent must take the necessary precautions to safeguard the child's physical safety. But even at the infant stage, the child, if watched carefully, will want to make decisions and when those decisions are not safety related, and whenever possible, the 'will' of the child should often take precedence over the 'will' of the parent. This is not easy because we all think that we, as adults, know more than

*It is important for a child to learn from committing 'mistakes'. Can real learning take place any other way?*

a young child, but do we? And even if we do, how important is it for a child to learn from committing 'mistakes'? Can real learning take place any other way? Can a child learn about the dangers of fire without, if not sticking her hand in the fire, at least by coming close enough to feel the heat?

As the child grows, he or she becomes more adept at expressing his or her will, which becomes a problem because the parent's will is often in conflict. This is true whether the child plays tennis or not. Obviously as the child grows, it will become increasingly difficult for parents to continue to impose their will, but it is distressing to see how many try and the resulting breakdown of their relationship is not beneficial for either party.

#### *Pushy Parent*

I have facilitated some aspiring and competitively successful juniors who were pushed a great deal by either one or both of their parents. The parents' desire for hard work and practice often exceeded that of the tennis lover and problems arose. This is true of players of all levels. I once heard an 8 or 9 year-old beginner tell her parent that if she could not do as she wished, she would not play tennis later. Amazingly, this youngster had picked up on the fact that her parents wanted her to play and was using that fact to manipulate them and get what she wanted. As strange as it sounds, this is often the case and the manipulation occurs from both parties. Parents will often offer rewards if the child does what they want and show dissatisfaction, anger or annoyance if she does not. In many circumstances one or both of the parents are more ambitious and driven than the tennis lover, and this parent will, as a result, become overly interested in the child's progress and development. And while this committed parent can become an integral reason for the child's

'success', it often comes at a heavy price, a price that not only includes the inevitable, at least short-term, failure of that relationship, but also other subsidiary psychological factors that can plague the youngster for years to come. This in turn places undue pressure on the tennis lover and the love for the game disappears.

Undoubtedly, most parents will respond that they want what's 'best' for their child. But what *is* best, and who gets to decide? No one would disagree with the big picture, which is that all parents want their children to be happy, but conflicts arise when we try and

*Most parents will say that they want what's 'best' for their child. But what is best, and who gets to decide?*

determine what happiness is. Many parents confuse happiness with success and become so obsessed with achieving success that happiness is sacrificed. At the beginning, at least, youngsters have a much purer idea of happiness. It either feels good or not, *right now!* However, in a very short while, many young players, influenced by the culture around them, realize that success brings approval, which they often interpret as love, while failure brings the opposite. There is little surprise then when they are willing to make great personal sacrifices and become single-minded in their pursuit of success. Unfortunately, the love they seek cannot be 'bought' in this way, but this realization can take many years to come. Meanwhile the struggle continues, even though it is not always possible to even identify this struggle because of the short-term gains that arise from excelling at a sport, especially in a small community.

### **Process vs Result**

Parents always think they know better because they have an intended result in mind and they guide their child

towards that goal. However, this intended goal is a reflection more of the parents' needs than the child's, even though at times the child can adopt the parents' needs or the values of society in general. This is where the problem lies in a nutshell. The child has a seed within it, as we all do, and the process of life is to nurture that seed to full maturation. No two individuals are alike, so no one can 'make' another grow. All we can do is provide love and support like a loving and devoted gardener and allow the seed to blossom naturally to its full potential.

For example, parents may encourage a child (sometimes subtly, sometimes not so) to go to an Ivy League college. The assumption is that this is a worthwhile goal to strive for. However, have we ever stopped to think what an Ivy League education guarantees a child? Do all Ivy League graduates have peace in their heart? Are they all contented? Do they all have loving relationships in their lives? Are they all loving, caring human beings? If the answer is no, then is it essential a child attend one? Could not attending a lesser college or even no college at all lead to an equally fulfilling life? Please do not misunderstand, I am not suggesting that going to an Ivy league College is necessarily, 'bad', or that attending college is undesirable, but that perhaps it does not have to be a goal that we put an inordinate amount of energy into. Certainly, these institutes will most likely guarantee a higher annual income, but is this the most important thing in life? For many youngsters who attend College, perhaps other options would be closer to their heart. In other words, perhaps it is not for everyone and maybe we need to entertain more options, which will be easier to do if we have an eye to the big picture. The big picture is that *the* goal is peace of mind; not winning, not success,

not wealth, not being knowledgeable, but simply having a warm and open heart and a quiet and open mind. The journey for real success in life seems to lie within us all and yet we are exhausting all our energy going without. Parents need to keep this bottom line in mind while dealing with their children.

*The goal is peace of mind; not winning, not success, not wealth, not being knowledgeable, but simply having a warm and open heart and a quiet and open mind.*

If the parents themselves are honest and look into their own lives and see how their lives have turned out, they will become aware that they really don't have all the answers, despite the expensive homes and fancy cars and all the other trimmings of wealth they may possess. On a psychological and spiritual level perhaps they have no more perceptive answers (more eloquent and sophisticated perhaps, but not any more penetrating) than the homeless person pushing a shopping cart down the streets of our inner cities or even their own adolescents for that matter. If one is able to recognize this, it will be easier to make the shift from obsessing about one's child's life to focusing on one's own inner journey. This is the shift every parent must make and ironically, making this shift will be the single most effective way to improve their relationship with their child.

The end result is that we spend the formative years and arguably the most productive years of our lives in the pursuit of material prosperity to the exclusion of the inner journey, which may be of much greater significance in the larger scheme of things. But what is it that motivates an individual to be interested in the Inner journey? Why is it that everyone seems to be more interested in the outer journey? Is there a way we can guide our child to pursue the type of understanding and 'education' that will reveal the greater mysteries of life and lead them to greater peace and contentment?

This is the starting point. If a parent can realize that they have no real answers and whatever answers they do have they cannot simply transmit to their wards, it will become much easier to become a facilitator in their child's life, and a much more rewarding relationship will ensue. This requires a great deal of letting go, and parents usually find this particularly difficult. Being a facilitator for your child is difficult because it avoids both extremes. It does not mean directing or controlling and it does not mean non-involvement or disinterest. Instead it can be a sharing of one's own experience, not with the purpose of manipulating through emotional blackmail, but an en-

*Encourage your child to explore fearlessly, with total freedom and with your full support.* couraging to explore fearlessly, with total freedom and full support from the single most powerful force in a child's

life—her parents. This exploration can only be embarked upon alone, but having loving support can be helpful for the individual in finding the courage within to face the unknown and walk into the darkness. The inevitable outcome will be a more loving relationship because an individual who walks the inner path will have a greater capacity to love.

### *Tennis Anyone?*

In the context of the previous section, I hope it becomes obvious that, as parents, we need to let go of the ambitions and goals that we have and allow our children to determine the intensity and nature of their involvement in sports. So many parents become blinded by the pursuit of success and this creates much misery for all concerned and leaves scars that the children will either have to live with for the rest of their lives or spend years trying to get beyond. And please consider, assume your child becomes successful; how will that affect the real quality of their

life? If we can see that the two factors are unrelated, the hunger and single-minded pursuit of ambition will naturally fall away.

So why encourage your child to play tennis at all? I feel that tennis can become an effective and enjoyable vehicle for self-exploration, through which one can learn deeper truths about oneself, life and the relationship between the two. These are truths and lessons that will not only last a lifetime, but will transform one's life beyond recognition and in a way that nothing else could. Tennis is a safe environment where your child can develop a passion and be placed in situations, through competition and the preparation for it, that they would not otherwise encounter until much later in their lives. Competition will expose them to an ugliness of the human psyche, an ugliness not only in others, but much more importantly, an ugliness within themselves. If they can face this ugliness head-on, they will emerge with an understanding through awareness, like the lotus flower arising from the surrounding dirt and squalor. Then they will have unlocked the door to peace and serenity in their lives. They will have discovered the light that will guide them for the rest of their days.

Admittedly, it is difficult for a parent to walk the fine line between healthy encouragement, providing opportunities and exposure, and being pushy and hungrier for success than the tennis lover. But it is a line that parents have to find if their child is to enjoy a centered and balanced adolescence and ultimately a serene and contented life.

In some cases the opposite is true and the single-minded drive, blind ambition and hunger for success is coming solely from the child. It is in these situations that it is up to the parents to bring some perspective to their child by helping him or her become more aware of who they are,



what they want, why they want it and how happy they are *right now* in the pursuit of something they think will bring them happiness somewhere in the future, *maybe!*

I understand that the really driven parent is in the minority and I do not wish to scare the vast majority of parents who think tennis would be a fun sport for their child to play into thinking that any type of encouragement is 'bad'. Youngsters need to be exposed to many sports, arts, music, etc., and then be allowed to choose what works best for them. They may make 'poor' choices in our perspective, but if you remain loving and supportive, the youngsters themselves may later change direction if it is truly a 'wrong' choice for the child. Either way, the sensitivity of right and wrong is a journey that must begin and end with the youngster, for the most part. If the youngster does make a 'wrong' choice, it may well be due to the dynamics of the parent-child relationship and a reaction to authority and the best thing a parent can do is to improve their relationship with their child by being less controlling and manipulative. Only then they will see that things seem to fall into place in a very natural way.

Ultimately, we need to keep in mind that it does not really matter what activity the child engages in. Anything can be a vehicle to inner growth and a true understanding of who one is. Some vehicles may be prettier than others, but all can take the occupant to the necessary destination and that is all that matters. The lessons are the same, no matter where you look. The key is simply to open ones eyes and live consciously!

### **Understanding Your Role**

Generally speaking, it has proven difficult for adults to play the dual role of tennis coach and parent; not impossible, but certainly there are very few examples of

this dual role being successful,<sup>1</sup> in the wider sense of that word. In trying to determine if this is something you can do, there are a few factors to be considered. The most important of which is whether you and your child have fun together on the court. This will become pretty obvious after a few attempts on the tennis court with your child. If the experience is a pleasant one *for both* concerned and no harsh words have been exchanged or ill feelings felt, then there is a possibility this might work.

One of the major pitfalls that parents should avoid is the temptation of taking the teacher role too seriously, especially at the beginning when the child is just testing the waters. If you start as a facilitator and follow the simple progressions outlined in the earlier chapters, you will have the tools to help your child. However, there are other factors that are considerably more important than knowing the methodology for facilitating a better tennis game.

To be loving towards your child at all times will create an environment where much more than a better tennis game can grow. But it is not easy to be loving at all times. Yes, it is easy to say that I love my child, but love is not a noun. It is a verb and it is a state of being. You are either loving or you are not. When love becomes a noun, people can be unkind to each, but it is all right because they 'love' each other, and love becomes a concept, an idea behind which we can hide. But love is not an idea. Yes, it has been considered an

*To be loving towards your child at all times will create an environment where much more than a better tennis game can grow.*

*The source of the love lies within us.*

<sup>1</sup> Noted sports psychologist, Jim Loehr, has commented that in all his years of practice he has seen only one successful parent-child coaching success story and that was between Monica Seles and her father.

ideal and still is for many people, but actually love is a state of being very much in the present.

Why is it so difficult to be consistently loving with the people we 'love'? If we say we love our child, the assumption is that there is an object out there that elicits love, but this is not true. Our 'love' is not about an object out there, but about what is going on right here within us. The source of the love lies within us. Consequently, our inability to be loving, whenever that occurs, is a function of our own lack of awareness and understanding of both ourselves and the world around us and never about what the 'other' does or says.

In short, if parents are going to attempt to teach their child, they need to be fairly well centered and at peace within themselves. If you find this difficult to gauge, a test would be to observe how you are in your dealings with your child on the court and even off the court. Do

*If parents are going to attempt to teach their child, they need to be fairly well centered and at peace within themselves.*

you get irritated or frustrated easily with yourself or her? Are you impatient? Do you have expectations from your child?

Also, ask yourself why you want to play tennis with your child? Is it truly for fun or is there a goal for him or her to become good and the resulting expectations that arise from that? It is not easy to answer such questions honestly and many people will fool themselves into thinking things that simply are not true. However, the acid test is simple: do you and your child have a good time on the court *all* the time? Again, please understand that having a good time is in the present. Fun and joy must be considered verbs. It is no use saying we had fun, if the process of playing included arguments and harsh words or even more subtle forms of negativity. The 'fun' cannot be the concept of parent and child bonding together, if the time spent together is not

pleasant. Young people are extremely astute and they can observe approval or disapproval in body language, in a look and in a host of other subtle ways. The parent must look to how he feels inside when his child 'fails' and assume for the most part that whatever he feels the youngster picks up.

*Young people are extremely astute and they can observe approval or disapproval in body language, in a look and in a host of other subtle ways.*

Some readers may be thinking that these are impossible standards that very few individuals could adhere to, but the fact remains that a parent-child relationship is an extremely complex dynamic. There are so many issues already involved that the standard must be even stricter for parents than it is for normal facilitators. If the standards cannot be met, the parent should focus on the more important role of being a parent and leave the tennis facilitating to another.

Quite apart from these crucial psychological factors, the parent must decide if he or she has the understanding and physical skills to become a tennis facilitator. The understanding can be obtained by anyone who has the aptitude and the desire to study and learn the game. The skills are a little more difficult to learn, they usually involve a lifelong passion for the game and cannot be learned in a few months. However, the lack of skills is not an insurmountable hurdle since hitting partners can be obtained. Consequently, if parents feel that they are very strong in the spiritual requirements of being an effective facilitator, but are a little weak in the skills department, I would urge them to go ahead and work with their child. Especially at the early stages of development when patience, good communication skills, developing a strong personal relationship and the ability to make things fun are far more essential than advanced playing skills or great knowledge of the game.

If you have come to the conclusion that you are not the right person to help your child have fun learning this game, it becomes your responsibility to find the person who can and your emphasis should shift immediately to finding the 'dream' team that will lovingly nurture your child's athletic potential as a tennis player and more importantly as a human being.

### **Creating a Team**

There are three major components of the team: the player, the facilitator and the parents. We need to clearly define the roles and responsibilities of each participant, but before that can be done, it is for the parents to put together the team by finding the 'right' facilitator.

#### *Finding a Professional Facilitator*

There are at least five components that comprise an effective and good tennis facilitator.

1. A sincere desire to teach your child. A commitment to being the best he or she can be by giving a 100% effort throughout the time together on the court.
2. Good communication skills that can make the learning process fun and simple and a personality that your child is comfortable with and enjoys.
3. An understanding of the technical skills that make for biomechanically sound stroke production, as well as a general, but astute understanding of the game.
4. The understanding of the methodology that allows learning to take place. In other words, the understanding that transforms an individual from a teacher to a facilitator.
5. The general being of the individual. Is this a human being you feel good about? Someone both you and your child can respect.

Let us examine each quality individually because some of these are easy to recognize while others are not. It is important that the parent not feel embarrassed or awkward about letting any teaching professional know that they are being evaluated. Parents have every right to take the time to watch, listen to and talk to any individual they are considering entrusting their child to.

It is fairly easy to see if the tennis instructor is sincere and committed to his or her job. However, a cursory observation for a few minutes could be misleading. Even the most insincere and uncommitted individual will be able to appear interested for a short period of time when they know they are being watched. It is important to observe over a period of time and especially, and if possible, in a very discreet way. Watching instructors work with children, especially beginners will reveal a great deal to you. Without even hearing the verbal exchange, just watch body language, eye contact and general interaction. It is much easier to 'coast' with younger kids because they are less demanding and therefore generally easier to keep contented.

A good personality is something almost every successful teaching professional has, but please do not be blinded to other factors because your facilitator is a 'nice' guy. Unfortunately, too many individuals are lacking in some of the other areas of expertise I have outlined above and because they are basically friendly, good human beings and effective and entertaining communicators, their other shortcomings are ignored. People take lessons for various reasons and some adults are quite happy just hitting balls with someone they like and getting a little exercise and a break from their stressful existence. Obviously, there is nothing wrong with this

and for these individuals there will be no dearth of folks to take 'lessons' from.

The technical understanding a facilitator possesses will be extremely difficult for most parents to gauge because usually they themselves know very little about the game. Parents can have played their entire lives and be competent players without fully understanding what it takes to be a good facilitator. However, there are ways, although none are foolproof, to increase your chances of getting a facilitator who knows. First of all, it is good to keep in mind that since the technical side of teaching tennis is very much a science, new information is constantly becoming available. It is essential that our prospective facilitator be on the cutting edge of whatever information is at our disposal. The parent should also try and assess if he is interested in and focused on learning more and more about the game. Engaging in conversation with the facilitator will give you a feel for what he does or does not know and how committed he is to continuing education.

Determining how much a facilitator knows about the methodology of teaching becomes easier after reading some of the early chapters in this book about how learning takes place. Even if the parent knows nothing about tennis, I feel, reading this book will place them in a position to make a wise choice in evaluating prospective facilitators and ultimately in helping them choose the right one for them.

Lastly, and certainly not because it is the least important, the parent has to find a facilitator that reflects his or her attitude and understanding of competition in particular and life in general. In actual fact, the facilitator need not reflect the parent's own view, since a parent could recognize that their own view is a reflection of the distorted and ultimately painful view of competition and life that was handed down to them. Certainly, parents can

aspire to a more spiritually uplifting influence on their children than the one they themselves enjoyed as children. Many parents struggle themselves with the view of competition outlined here and somehow feel that such a view would hamper their wards in the 'real' world and is therefore impractical. My comments

*Parents can aspire to a more spiritually uplifting influence on their children than the one they themselves enjoyed as children.*

to parents who voice such concerns is, take a good long look at the so-called 'real' world. People are generally unhappy, and the source of this unhappiness is themselves; so if by changing ones perception and nothing else, one can become more content with life, how is this not practical? What could be more practical than having peace in your heart and being content with both yourself and the world at large? We cannot always change the world; we may not like someone, but if we can accept that person for who she is, we will have saved ourselves from the pain and irritation we felt every time we came into contact with her. It is possible to have peace in your heart; the goal is to find this peace right here because it does not exist out there; we have no other choice.

*The goal is to find this peace right here because it does not exist out there; we have no other choice.*

#### *Chairman of the Board*

It is the parents who are ultimately in charge of the team. They pay the facilitator and are responsible for the well being of their child; consequently it is their job to put things into place. A major step in the puzzle is finding a facilitator. That being done it is time for all three parties to sit down and talk about each ones role and responsibilities. Obviously, this type of meeting is especially key for competitive players who wish to invest a great deal of time into their tennis.



*The Role of the Facilitator*

It is important that once a facilitator has been agreed upon, that he is given free rein to direct and facilitate the tennis lover to the best of his ability. This is not to mean

*Give the facilitator free rein to direct and facilitate the tennis lover to the best of his ability.* that the parent should not offer his input at times, but that in general, the facilitator is now in charge of all tennis-related

decisions not concerned with finances. Parents and facilitator have to agree on frequency of lessons and the tournament schedule must be constructed by the facilitator from the tennis perspective, but must also include input from the parents who will be financing and most probably investing the traveling time.

The parent should expect the facilitator to provide regular evaluations, monthly or quarterly, and these could be in writing or verbal. The greater your financial investment, the more feedback you are entitled to. The evaluations should include specifically what the tennis lover is working on presently, how last month's process-oriented goals fared and the plans for the coming month. Obviously, this involves some time commitment from the facilitator, especially, if he has many players he is facilitating. Regardless, I think it would be most beneficial for all concerned, including for the facilitator who would be forced to spend some time thinking about the long-term development of each individual he is working with. The evaluation need not be long and if the facilitator has been working sincerely with your child, then it should not take more than 15 minutes. In the absence of such a written evaluation, you as a parent should schedule to meet with the facilitator for 15 minutes, more if you have specific issues, and talk about your child's progress on a monthly basis. Do remember that the facilitator is busy; so do not involve him in unnecessarily long conversations.

Most parents could spend literally hours talking about their child, but this would not be appropriate. Parents need not and should not offer their own two cents worth on everything the facilitator is trying to do, but on the other hand they can and should ask for clarification on those areas of the facilitator's plans that are unclear to them. A balance has to be reached; it is natural for parents to want to know what is going on, but they have to understand that if they have not invested the time and effort to really learn this game, it will be difficult for them to completely understand the finer details. Most parents obtain some knowledge of this game, as their youngsters become more and more involved with the game, by reading the few tennis publications available or by listening to other parents and coaches during tournaments or by watching television and listening to the commentators. While it is true that all these sources provide some information, it can hardly be called a comprehensive education.

*Parents need not and should not offer their own two cents worth on everything the facilitator is trying to do.*

It is not that I am discouraging parents from learning the game; I certainly am not; but they must resist the temptation to push their newly acquired understanding on a regular basis on to someone they have already entrusted the job to. After quiet observation and as your understanding increases, if you feel that the individual you have chosen is not as competent as you originally thought or that he was good for a certain level, but is now unsuited for your child's particular needs, then make a change.

However, if you have found a facilitator that you are happy with, now is the time to leave him or her alone to do what they do best on the tennis court. As a parent, once you have found someone you like, I would highly

recommend that you back off and avoid all interference on tennis playing issues.

*Making a Change*

Unfortunately, because most parents do not conduct a comprehensive search at the beginning or perhaps, as we mentioned earlier, their understanding is initially limited, there may come a time when they are unhappy with the facilitator they had originally chosen. It may be difficult to find a facilitator with all the qualities I indicated. If that is impossible, focus on the qualities most necessary for your child's *immediate* needs and then, when the time is right, conduct another search. Obviously, for many reasons, it would be best to have one facilitator for the entire duration, but if that is not possible, then find someone who can start your tennis lover because it is extremely important to have the correct facilitator at the outset who can make it fun *and* lay a sound technical foundation in stroke production. The better the initial facilitator you have, the easier it will be later on as very few changes will be needed to be implemented. It will be harder and is more important to find a facilitator who can lay a solid technical foundation, than it will be later to find someone to help them compete.

But if the time comes that you truly believe that this person cannot help your child grow further, show appreciation and gratitude for the wonderful relationship you have had, but honestly explain that you feel it would be best for your child to move on. Hopefully, this can be done in a way that is productive and both parties can stay related, albeit in a different way, for many more years to come. As difficult as this juncture can be, the objective would be to expand the team and add someone else on, rather than end a fruitful association. Hopefully, the facilitator and the parents are in agreement about the

need for change and if that is the case, the original facilitator could be an invaluable asset in helping the parents find his replacement.

Parents should avoid the temptation to shop their child around to various facilitators in the mistaken understanding that more is better. This is especially true if the player has a regular facilitator. Facilitating a tennis lover is about building a relationship and it is important that the facilitator and the tennis lover develop a close relationship, one of trust, mutual respect and genuine affection. To expose a child to many different facilitators may be confusing. If you are unhappy with who you have, it is better to end the association and find someone else than to expose the tennis lover to numerous different people.

*The Role of the Parent in the Team*

So, a competent facilitator has been found that you are very happy with and you are leaving him or her alone to do their 'thing' on the tennis court. So what do you do now? Many, if not all, the parental problems that arise in sports surface because the parents do not understand their role or they are dissatisfied with the role as it is and instead try to encroach on the territory of the facilitator. The parental role at this stage is to provide support: financial, emotional and spiritual. It is to remain a parent and not lose perspective or sight of what is important and what is not.

*Many, if not all, the parental problems that arise in sports surface because the parents do not understand their role or they are dissatisfied with the role as it is and instead try to encroach on the territory of the facilitator.*

What is of vital importance is the young tennis lover's long-term emotional, physical and spiritual well being, factors that will ultimately determine how happy an individual he is. What is relatively irrelevant is who wins this

match, how your child plays, or what your child's ranking is. Do you get the picture?

As long as you, as a parent, are focused on the bigger picture, all will bode well for you and your family. The best way to stay thus focused is by stepping back a little from your child's tennis. Your child is playing tennis for his or her benefit. It is to be his or her experience, so let it be so. By becoming too involved in the tennis, parents invariably lose the perspective that can ultimately safeguard their young tennis lovers from the tormented childhood so many young competitors endure and ultimately survive, although not without scars. It is understandable that in the heat of battle young tennis lovers lose perspective and when this happens a great opportunity arises for learning invaluable lessons on life and living. But these opportunities can only be seized if there is someone detached enough from the happenings at the scene to recognize and point them out. Too often, this someone is not the facilitator, who himself gets lost in the battle when his or her ego becomes involved in the outcome of a particular match, tournament or the rankings game.

No, it is the parents who are ultimately responsible for making sure this perspective exists. If the facilitator provides the larger perspective, all well and good. Then all the parents need do is reinforce and support the facilitator. If the facilitator does not provide it, then it is the parents' role to step in and help both the facilitator and the tennis lover get the bigger picture. The parents can provide the detachment and perspective that is essential for the overall development of the team and the ultimate benefit of the child. Perhaps you are lucky and the facilitator you found remains calm regardless of what is happening around him and remains squarely focused on the long-term wholistic development of the tennis lover. However, you cannot depend on luck.

There is no immediate gratification or glory with this 'minimal' role assigned to the parent. Who will recognize and what praise will be forthcoming for rearing a child that is centered, balanced and happy both on the court and off? The fact is that there is more immediate gratification in having an offspring that is 'good' at something and the rewards that come from success are not only from others, but from deep within our own subconscious mind and so we put all our energy into making this happen. We feel better about ourselves when our child succeeds because we identify with our children. They become an extension of us and so their success is our success.

*We feel better about ourselves when our child succeeds because we identify with our children. They become an extension of us and so their success is our success.*

To recognize these things is the beginning of the journey to transcend them, so parents need only look into their own heart and watch their actions and reflect over them to discover the truth. Once the truth is discovered, action becomes transformed without further ado. Do you feel differently if your child wins or loses? And if so, why? In order to do justice to this type of question, it is important that the answer not come too rapidly, but that you stay with the question for a while. The immediate response will invariably be defensive and of no value to anyone. How about the car ride home? Are the planned activities the same whether the child wins or not? Is the atmosphere the same? Observe carefully before you respond. If you see a difference within yourself, you are on the way to helping yourself and ultimately your child.

#### *The Role of the Players*

At the beginning of the journey, most children seem to have a pure love for the game; but soon this develops, to

differing degrees for different individuals, into an obsessive desire for improvement and success. Very little is expected of the tennis lover as long as the investment into his or her tennis is limited, which it is at the outset: perhaps a clinic once a week in the winter and a little more in the summer time. However, as the child shows greater interest or some talent for the game, the investment becomes greater for the family, not only financially, but also in terms of time. Without the parent saying another word, this greater investment in time and money is bound to make the tennis lover feel tremendous pressure to succeed. Now it becomes difficult to play just for fun because there is so much more involved.

Growing up as a child, I think one of the reasons I felt no pressure of performance was because I was playing solely for myself. My parents made no investment in time, they never drove me to a tournament or to practice, I walked to practice (we never called it or saw it as practice, we just went to play!) and I took public transportation to the few tournaments I played beyond the school-based competitions. My parents made little investment financially either because equipment was minimal (wooden rackets lasted a few years and new models were not released each year), club dues where we played were relatively inexpensive and lessons were out of the question and not as common and readily available as is the case now. Also, my parents never watched me compete and only knew that I had played in a tournament if I came home with a trophy. This did not mean they did not love or care about me, and I did not take it as such. They were working class people trying to support a family of six on modest means. In retrospect, as I see tennis parents at tournaments, lessons, practices and everywhere else 'serious' junior tennis is being conducted, I am eternally grateful for my youth.

The tennis lover, despite the pressures involved, must be courageous enough to play for the right reasons and when it stops being fun, an alarm should sound signifying the need for a change. Either playing tennis has to stop or, preferably, a deep introspection and analysis must be undertaken as a team to decide how the expectations, desires and the resulting pressures and stress of competition have taken the fun out of the game. Unfortunately, in the competitive environment we live in, there are very few young tennis lovers who will be able to hold on to their pure love of the game after being exposed to the prevailing competitive atmosphere around them unless they have special parents or a special facilitator who can help them keep a proper perspective. The tennis lover, however, can help him or herself, by being totally honest all the time. Observe when it is fun and when it is not. How does practice feel? What about competition? What does winning and losing mean to you and how do they make you feel? What is success and failure and how do they make you feel? There are a host of emotions and questions that arise from competing and the tennis lover, if he or she is going to find a way out of this quagmire, must explore as honestly as possible and develop the type of relationship with their facilitator and parent where anything can be said and discussed openly.

In addition, the tennis lover's honesty must go beyond just words, it must be translated into action and this takes courage. Are you hitting balls because you have to practice? Even that word practice has an ugly connotation; practice for what? The use of the word lends itself to a result-oriented thinking pattern; now we are not hitting balls because of the intrinsic pleasure of it, but in order to practice for tournaments to be played somewhere in the future. When youngsters feel the pressures of competition no one knows where it comes from. This is where it



comes from! A result-oriented outlook on life, by definition, creates pressure for the tennis lover and serves little other purpose. It certainly does not help peak performance. Please, do not misunderstand me. There is nothing wrong with the word 'practice', just the attitude that may or may not be underlying it.

In other words, the tennis lover should hit balls when he or she really feels like it. Juniors, invariably, play too much. If you are going through the motions, then it is a waste of everybody's time. When parents ask me, 'How much should my child play?' I suggest looking at the individual. Each individual is unique and as long as the tennis lover can be on the court with enthusiasm and in a state of total alertness and involvement then that is fine, but the moment the bouncing on the toes goes or anger and frustration set in, it is time to cut down or take a break. Ultimately, it is up to the tennis lover to tell everyone concerned that he wants a break or wants to play less. I know this can be difficult and can be viewed by an aggressive coach or a pushy parent as a lack of commitment or dedication, but there is no other way. The courage is necessary to be honest and true to oneself regardless of the consequences.

### **The Tournament Scene**

Tournaments can be a source of tremendous pressure for young tennis lovers and this is usually the undoing of many parents. Working parents especially, very rarely get to see their wards practice, but come match time everyone is there in full force, expecting to reap the rewards of their 'investment'. Why is that? Why are parents only out in full force during matches and yet never come to watch their wards practice? What message does this convey to the youngsters? Is it necessary for parents always to be at

matches or tournaments? Why can't we just let the kids go and have fun?

Tennis is an expensive sport, and the parents of competitive juniors can expect to pay a sizeable amount of money for coaching, equipment, tournament travel and court-time (especially in those places where indoor fees are involved)

*Why are parents only out in full force during matches and yet never come to watch their wards practice?*

and it is 'normal' for families paying out these large fees to expect some 'results'. However, the definition of results is usually seen only in terms of winning and losing, which is to miss the point completely! Each child's parents are paying similar amounts and everyone cannot win. The parents have to see their investment, not in terms of rankings or results on the court, but in terms of money and time invested into their child for his or her social and spiritual development. Success on the court can simply be an added bonus or a curse, again depending on your attitude.

Certainly, some parents may say that there must be cheaper ways for the psychological, physical and spiritual development of their child and I think this is absolutely true. Team sports that can be played largely through schools and even supplemented by off-season local and regional programs will provide the same opportunities to learn life lessons at a fraction of the cost. If cost is a factor then perhaps those are the sports that parents should direct their child towards. However, if tennis is to be the sport of choice, the tournament scene presents minefields for parents to maneuver around, if they wish to make it a positive experience for their child. As a facilitator for many years working with competitive juniors, I have watched countless matches quietly from some corner, while parents have paced nervously by my side. After a short while, I quickly learned that I did not really wish to

watch matches sitting next to parents because every point lost brought anxiety and resulting negative comments and every point won, some measure of relief. I continue to be amazed how worked up parents become while their child played. The stories about fighting (both verbal and physical) between parents whose children are playing each other are numerous and unexaggerated. Just recently, in America, a father was convicted of manslaughter in the death of another parent during their children's hockey match. This is, perhaps, an extreme case, but we need to understand that anger and frustration are the problems. They can lead to dangerous things happening and we need to look into ourselves as parents and examine our relationship with our child and his or her activities. How does your child's successes and failures impact you and why?

As a facilitator, I was able to watch matches in a completely detached mode because my emphasis was always on the process. I was engrossed in watching my tennis lover play in order to learn what I could learn about him or her, so that we could work on those things in practice. For the most part, it was truly irrelevant to me if they won or lost, so focused was I on seeing something that would help me make them better. In addition, I did not become obsessed with improvement in the sense of getting upset if the present performance was not up to par, but instead focused on the obstacles that prevented peak performance from happening. It was really fascinating for me to see why players could not perform in matches the way they did in practice. As a player myself I also had first hand experience of this mysterious phenomenon. After a while, I think the psychological factors are far more important factors in competitive play than the technical ones. Certainly technique is important, but once a tennis lover reaches the higher echelons of

competition the technical shortcomings become minimal, although there is always some shot or combination to improve. But the psychological obstacles to competitive play are usually much neglected because they are more subtle and therefore much more difficult to diagnose and much more difficult to 'cure'.

*The psychological obstacles to competitive play are usually much neglected because they are more subtle and therefore much more difficult to diagnose and much more difficult to 'cure'.*

The parental role, therefore, on weekends during tournaments when they can make a great contribution to their child's progress and general well being, is to provide emotional support, encouragement and perspective. The idea is to make the tennis lover as relaxed as possible by diffusing the pressure that builds up in competitive situations. That is the one and only responsibility of the parent driving a child to a tournament, apart from making sure they arrive on time.

At the tournament, if you can digest all that has been said in this book, you will be able to watch your child play in detachment and without anxiety or tension and truly enjoy the occasion. If this is not your experience, then you need to look quietly into your heart and see why. There are very few parents, in my experience, who can calmly watch their child play and enjoy the competition and appreciate the tennis, just for its own sake.

Twice in my experience, I have had parents angrily approach me during a match their child was playing and say, 'I am so embarrassed, by this performance, why don't you take the child off the court.' Both times I was completely surprised and shocked by the intensity of emotion that underlined the words. For my part, I was seeing talented youngsters performing below their best, not because they were not trying, but because they were unable to deal with the pressure, nervousness and fear that they

were experiencing. It is interesting to note that on each occasion the competitors themselves were handling the sub-par performance much better than their respective parents. If one is embarrassed by a 'poor' performance, how must one feel during a 'good' performance? As a parent, a bell should be ringing in your ear, if you feel pride in your child too. Think about it, why should you feel proud about something another does? What is pride? And if pride is there, to whatever degree, then what is it that you feel when the child does not do well.

On another occasion, I went to watch another competitor play an outstanding match and lose 7-6 in the third set. It was probably the best tennis I had seen that particular individual play up to that point. When I went to say hi to the parents after the match, they looked as if someone had died. They also looked completely exhausted and more than a little disappointed about the loss and I can only imagine the emotional roller-coaster they had experienced in the past two or three hours. A few minutes later, the players emerged and the 'winner' looked ecstatic and the 'loser' mirrored his parents' glum look, even though there were numerous positives in the match. It seems unbelievable how an almost three hour experience is totally colored by the last two or three points. If we win the last few points the entire previous three hours is validated and the effort deemed worthwhile. However if the last few points are lost, then the opposite is true. How much sense does all this make? This is the ultimate in result-oriented thinking!

As a facilitator seeing all these things on an almost daily basis completely soured me to teaching advanced competitive players, simply because of the 'problem' parents presented. Of course, the parents needed help themselves and part of the job became the education of the parents, but some were more open to understanding than

others and it was always a less pleasant job than working with the children themselves.

Parents often say to me, 'My child puts so much pressure on her or himself, how can I help?' Invariably, I ask the parents to focus on themselves first. Can they sit through an entire match without much reaction regardless of what is happening in front of them? In this acid test, the parent must watch both a win and a loss and see how differently they feel. It is essential that the verbal message the parents communicate to the tennis lover is consistent with the nonverbal communication; youngsters are very perceptive. It is pointless, working on the tennis lover from the facilitator's viewpoint if the youngster is not receiving the same message at home.

I worked very closely with a young tennis lover from the age of about 9 to almost 15. My methodology, as you can imagine, is very process-oriented with a total lack of emphasis on results, rankings, etc. I know this is not a popular or normal way to look at life, but I continued working against the grain because I believed in what I was doing and because I thought I had a willing ear and the fact is that we had a largely wonderful relationship. However, towards the latter part of that five-year period, I began to realize that the tennis lover was not really buying into my view of competition. I also realized (or thought, at least) that this was due to the powerful influence wielded by her mother. It was at that point that I became less enthusiastic about facilitating that individual and ultimately decided to end the relationship (there were other factors at work too), even though that particular tennis lover had just recently returned from a National event where she placed fifth. How good a tennis lover is from a playing perspective is largely irrelevant to me. The relationship I have with the tennis lover and my evaluation of how open he or she is to this type of thinking is

of much greater importance. For the player too, it is important that they are with a facilitator whom they respect and like. The player needs to buy into the vision of the facilitator on different levels and if for any reason both are on different wavelengths, someone needs to have the courage to move on for the benefit of all concerned.

Just like facilitators, parents need to walk the path of self-discovery. All the members on the team need to work on themselves if something of value is to be created. The parents have a powerful influence on the tennis lover and they need to realize that often a change in their youngster will have to be preceded by a change in themselves. However, it is always easier to encourage change in others than it is to change ourselves!

## 9. Sing Your Song, Dance Your Dance

### **Learning the Art of *Not Doing* in Life and Tennis**

In life, from where does action originate? How do we determine what we do? What is the motivation behind the doing? Each one of us has to observe our doing and see what is behind it.

For me, often the doing arises from my desire to achieve or get something or become someone. My desire for gain, for progress, for improvement, for growth, my desire to somehow be more than I am. This desire presupposes that I am incomplete, imperfect or lacking in some manner the way I am. All ambition is inherent dissatisfaction with what is. If we were perfectly happy with what is, there would be no need for this continual struggle to become or gain something. So, our desires and ambitions are an obvious manifestation of our inherent unhappiness. There is an underlying assumption that the fulfillment of my desires will make me happy and bring peace into my life, but that peace never arrives because when one desire is achieved or gained, it is simply replaced by another one, ad infinitum.

*Not-doing* is not something that you can achieve because if we make it a goal, we have created another desire and the struggle endures. *Not-doing* arises all by itself when we see the futility of all doing, when we can accept ourselves exactly as we are, with the understanding that perfection is not an option. Not that we will



become perfect when we have a certain amount of money, or when we achieve a certain ranking in tennis, or when we have the partner of our dreams or the house or car of choice. No, but that as long as there is life, imperfection will be there. Life is constant movement. Movement presupposes growth and growth presupposes imperfection. The key is to accept and be comfortable with being imperfect. It is the belief<sup>1</sup> that perfection can be achieved that drives us to chase goals, hopes and dreams and makes us ambitious. In our society, ambition is considered a good thing and the desire for improvement is lauded as the highest character trait. In other words, we are creating unhappiness in our youth by encouraging ambition because the fuel of ambition is discontent.

The difficulty in accepting these facts arises when we assume that if *not-doing* is a sign of peace and contentment, then who wants to just sit around all day not doing anything? For most of us, that understanding of happiness is inconceivable and holds no attraction. However, the supposition that peace and contentment precludes all action is false. Doing can happen out of contentment, but it is a totally different kind of doing. There is a world of difference between the doing that emanates from one's ego to satiate personal appetites and the doing that arises out of no-desire.

The doing from ego is easily recognizable because the ego believes that what is being done is extremely important and has to be taken seriously. There will be an attachment to this doing and this will result in alternating

<sup>1</sup> 'What is belief, but a not knowing. If we know something, then there is no need to believe because we know. But when we don't know, we believe, consequently, all beliefs are by definition, lies.'—Osho

bouts of satisfaction and frustration with neither enduring too long. However, frustration will remain the foundation of this attachment because the satisfaction will pass quickly and the threat of frustration will never be too far away. There is no enduring peace in this type of doing. This is the doing that most of us are engaged in our entire lives and that is why lasting peace seems to be so unattainable in our lives. Is there another type of doing that is available to us, the source of which is not from our ego?

### **Relaxing in Life**

Relaxing sounds easy enough. However, in reality relaxing is an extremely difficult state of being to attain for any length of time. For a moment, think back to the times when you are most relaxed in your life. Many people enjoy activities, but that does not mean they are relaxed during them.

Perhaps we need to describe the state of relaxation I am referring to in all its depth. The human organism is often described as some combination of body, mind and spirit; the implication being that the three are equal parts of our whole with each one having its own separate domain. This is not my understanding. We are actually spirit or consciousness and body and mind is how that consciousness manifests while we are living on this planet in human form. Consequently, for us to be truly relaxed all the time we would need to be enlightened souls for whom stress would simply not exist because we could not create it.

The body seems to be at the lowest end of the spectrum because it can only experience peace and tranquility if the mind is calm. Similarly, our mind is a reflection of our consciousness. For most of us, our mind is

conditioned to differing degrees and the more unaware and unconsciously we live our lives, the more conditioned we will be. The more aware we are, the more consciously we will live our lives. In order to live consciously, we have to be present. When *we* are present, the mind is not because the mind can only function in the past or future. When the mind is not, all conditioning disappears because it is the mind that is conditioned, not *us*. We are not our mind. When we are not present, our minds fluctuate between isolated moments of tranquility and large periods of restlessness because that is the nature of the mind.

But, what is relaxation of the mind-body phenomenon and how is it to be experienced? The body is only relaxed when the mind is silent. As long as the mind is engrossed in achieving, attaining or becoming, there can be no peace because all these things are something that *may* occur in the future. That *may* is what causes the anxiety. The wanting something that is denied us is overt unhappiness, but the simple wanting or preference is enough to cause some anxiety and tension within us because the possibility of denial or failure exists.

For the rest of us, we have to be satisfied with the 'glimpses' that we are blessed with. Those are the isolated moments when we see that everything in this world is 'perfect in its imperfection' and there is nothing to do and nowhere to go. These realizations allow us to drop the mind and its forays into the past and future, thus freeing us to experience the present. Just this simple experience of the present moment as it unfolds before us is the ultimate state of being or of relaxation. So the state of relaxation arises, *all by itself*, when we are in the present moment. We can only fully be in the present when we are totally at peace with our surroundings and ourselves. As long as there is even an iota of simmering dissatisfaction,

our mind will remain active in order to obtain that which we believe is lacking to make us perfectly happy.

### **Relaxing in Tennis**

In learning technique how does this understanding of being relaxed apply? The principal of good technique, by which I mean movements that are bio-mechanically sound, is that they should be natural. In order for body movements to be natural and effective, the body must move efficiently in a manner that is effortless, smooth and flowing. For all this to occur, the body must be relaxed. If the body is relaxed, every movement will be biomechanically sound because the body will never choose to do an awkward movement.

The mind becomes active in the learning process when the tennis lover has a desire to improve or to win and frustration and a host of other negative emotions quickly follow. Perhaps the reader is thinking, what is the point in playing without desiring to win? And is it not natural to want to improve as quickly as possible? In order to improve quickly, must we not then try? Does not trying involve activity of the mind? The fact seems to be that any desire, including the desire to improve interferes with our ability to learn.

*A young man desiring to become an expert in the art of sword fighting approached a Zen master swordsman. The young man was enthusiastic, vibrant and extremely impatient. He asked the old master, 'How long will it take for me to master this art?' The old man replied that it could take five years or so. The young man was shocked, he said, 'But that is too long, what if I really try hard and listen well and work all day and night, how long will it take then?' 'Ah, replied the old man, in that case it will take 10 years!'*

I am not saying that being relaxed will automatically result in perfect technique. No, what I am saying is that being relaxed is an absolute necessity, if good technique is to be experienced. For those who need to, breaking down the stroke into a series of simple tasks will allow the tennis lover, if relaxed, to learn perfect technique with very little verbal instruction.

Often, the problem lies in the fact that we, as facilitators or teachers, head straight for the finish line, towards the end product, unaware that the shortest distance between two points may not always be a straight line. Perhaps it is in geometry, but not in life. To revel in the journey, to enjoy the process and explore it in a playful manner is to

*To revel in the journey, to enjoy the process and explore it in a playful manner is to allow oneself the time to develop feel through familiarity.*

allow oneself the time to develop feel through familiarity. My experience is that many individuals have a desire to go through the mind, oblivious of the fact that this is not the most

efficient learning methodology. They want to grasp the movements intellectually in the mistaken belief that this intellectual understanding is a prerequisite to doing. Doing happens best when thinking is not present, but allowing this state of being to arise takes tremendous trust and understanding.

### **Instinctive Tennis**

The sport of tennis provides us with a unique opportunity to experience the serene meditative state of being. Not happiness, because happiness is inevitably followed by and connected to unhappiness and this is the duality most of us are caught in. When we get what we want we are happy, and when we don't, we are unhappy and life

becomes an endless fluctuation between these two polar opposites, which in reality are not opposites at all, but part and parcel of one single phenomenon or two sides of a single coin. No, the meditative state, or what we in sports call the zone state, is not a fluctuation from one end of the spectrum to the other; it is a transcendence.

This transcendence can only happen when we take the ego out of the equation, when the dancer and the dance disappear and all that remains is the dancing or when the singer and the song disappear and all that remains is the singing. If we can, even for a single moment, experience this state of being when the dancer and singer have disappeared, all conflict and struggle will have

*If we can, even for a single moment, experience this state of being when the dancer and singer have disappeared, all conflict and struggle will have also disappeared.*

also disappeared. This is *Instinctive Tennis*. This will have to be an existential experience; it cannot be a discussion. I have been around sports and athletes my entire life and I cannot recall one single individual who has not had some glimpse of this state of being during play. Yet this continues to remain a largely elusive and mostly unknown and mysterious state of being. There is a substantial body of literature on how to hit the ball or the technical aspects of playing any sport, but very little deep understanding of what it takes to play in a relaxed and carefree mode where things happen by themselves and the doer disappears. I say this fully cogniscent of the numerous books written by sports psychologists who do not, in my understanding, go to the root of the issue. Their work is primarily superficial and despite some short-term gains, ultimately fails, because the psychological states that impede peak performance continue to return.

I think there is a reason why so few people talk about what it would take to be in the zone. Most people engage

in sporting endeavors as they do in all other activities, from other hobbies to their chosen vocation, for ego gratification, and the understanding that we could best succeed at these activities by essentially giving up all that we think we are, is, at best, a scary proposition. From birth we are encouraged to be individuals and to build up our ego, and despite the pain and the struggles, we do this to the best of our ability.

Now, the suggestion is that all we have built is of no value and we have to let it go. Intellectually it simply does not make sense, and that is why the zone state or the meditative state has to be experienced; it cannot be explained. We have to develop the tremendous trust needed to lose ourselves in the process of playing. This is extremely difficult, but the rewards are intrinsic and of great magnitude in that they will transform every aspect of our being and therefore nothing, no activity, no relationship, in our lives can remain unchanged.

*You can paint in two ways. You can paint to compete with other painters; you want to be the greatest painter in the world, you want to be a Picasso or a Van Gogh. Then your painting will be second-rate, because your mind is not interested in painting itself; it is interested in being first, the greatest painter in the world. You are not going deep into the art of painting. You are not enjoying it, you are only using it as a stepping-stone. You are on an ego trip. And the problem is: to be a real painter, the ego has to be put aside. Only then can God flow through you .... Only then can something of superb beauty be born. Ego cannot bring anything extraordinary into the world; the extraordinary comes only through egolessness. And so is the case with everybody.*

—Osho