

TACTICAL GOALS FOR DIFFERENT SKILL LEVELS: A STEP BY STEP PLAN

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INTRODUCTION

Some coaches seem to have forgotten the tactical side of the game. They think that tactics should be learned during matchplay and not in regular practice. This could be because they are good at explaining technical aspects (grips, shots, corrections) but they

do not know exactly what, how and when to explain the tactical concepts their players need to develop a proper game.

Below is a progressive plan to enable the coach to set tactical goals for different skill levels and an explanation on how to apply them on court.

STEPS OF TACTICAL DEVELOPMENT

Step 1: Beginners

The general goal at this stage is to develop the basic tactical concepts of the game. Some specific tactical goals that should be learned at this stage are:

A Consistency

This concept is a combination of control and security. Since this is the basic tactical goal at all stages, it should be learned as soon as possible. Once the player is able to hit the ball, the coach should begin to emphasize consistency drills (rallying between coach and student) where the student aims to pass the ball over the net 5, 10, 15, 20 times without missing.

B Height

This concept is used early by beginners to keep the opponent in the back court or to pass him when he is at the net. Students have to learn not only to play high balls but also low and waist height balls. Rallying between the coach and student is the best type of practice whereby the coach asks the player to hit one ball to his feet, one to his body and the last one over his head but into the court. Multiple combinations of this type can be done.

C Direction

This is a basic tactical idea that should be used at all stages. Players should learn to:

- * direct the ball to where they want (open court)
- * return the ball to the same spot and direct the ball to the opposite side
- * change directions (eg. one to the forehand side and the next one to the backhand side)
- * play to one side only (eg. four balls in a row to the backhand side)
- * play "counter-step" (one ball to the forehand and two balls in a row to the backhand).

Basket drills or rally drills with the coach are the best ways to practice basic direction skills with beginners.

D Depth

This ability is the last one in the first stage of tactical development. Players discover the importance of depth when it is better for them to keep their opponent in the back court or when they have to make him come into the net area. Basket drills or rally drills with the coach are the best ways to practice basic depth skills with beginners. The coach, positioned in the middle of the court, gets the player to hit the first ball to him, hit the second close to the net and hit the last one to the back court. Multiple variations can be done.

Step 2: Intermediate

The general tactical goal at this stage is to develop a series of basic tactical patterns for all shots. Some specific tactical goals that should be learned at this stage are:

A Power

As the player grows up he is able to hit more powerful shots (technical goal), but he has to know how to use this power in an appropriate way (tactical goal). The tactical uses of power are:

- To reduce time of opponent response
- * To attack
- * To make winning shots
- * To gain space of own court
- * To change the rhythm.

The coach should teach the player to:

- * Never hit the ball hard when he is in difficulty
- * Hit the ball hard only when the ball is above net level, or when he is in advantage in the score.

Basket drills, rallies with the coach or between players are the best ways to practice the tactical use of power.

B Spin

When the player is able to hit shots with spin (technical goal), he has to know how to use them in rallies and match play situations (tactical goal). The tactical uses of spin are, amongst others, the following:

- * control of power
- * change of rhythm
- * height and depth of the ball
- * variety, surprise, etc.

The coach should teach the player the proper use of spin:

- * high balls (topspin)
- * easy low balls (topspin)
- * difficult low balls (slice)
- * medium-high balls (flat).

Rallies with the coach and between players are the best ways to practice the tactical use of spin.

C Rhythm - pace

Rhythm is the ability to control the cadence of the rally and the match. The players have to know how to control the "tempo" of the rallies. The tactical uses of rhythm are, amongst others:

- * control of the rally
- * variety, surprise
- * reduce time of opponent reaction.

The coach should teach the player the correct use of rhythm:

- * to change the rhythm in long rallies
- * to maintain the rhythm against the players with all court game
- * to use the power, height and depth of the ball to change the rhythm.

Rallies with the coach and between players are the best ways to practice the tactical use of rhythm.

C Variety

When the player is able to use all the above basic tactical concepts, he has to combine them in an appropriate way. Variety is the ability to mix up all these concepts with a tactical goal. Make the player develop a style of play as complete as possible and without weaknesses. Rallies with the coach and between players are the best ways to practice the tactical use of variety (eg. by not hitting two similar shots in a row).

D Basic tactical patterns

At this stage of development, the coach has to teach a series of basic tactical patterns that are divided into patterns for shot use, patterns for court geometry and patterns for point play.

Shot used:

Serve: Serve slice open to the left box and to the centre of the right box, serve flat to the middle in both sides, serve top spin to the centre in the left box and open to the right box.

Forehand: Use it in 3/4 of the court and in all returns if possible.

Backhand: Play crosscourt to rally from the baseline and play down the line to approach the net and for winners.

Volleys: Play no more than 3 volleys in a row and always plays the winning volley to the open court.

Overhead: Direct the ball always to the weak side of the opponent.

Approach: Start with a down the line approach and direct the volley to the open court.

Return: Pass the ball over the net. Do not make any mistakes in the second serve return.

Court geometry:

Court coverage (angles theory), court zones (3 zones theory), tactical footwork, shot direction (play down the line to approach and crosscourt to rally), direct the ball safely back to where it comes from.

Point patterns:

Attack in the two first points of each game, when you are ahead, when you are down 0-40, 15-40, or in the first match ball.

Step 3: Advanced

The general tactical goal at this stage is to develop a personal style of play. Some specific tactical goals that should be learned at this stage are:

A Anticipation

This goal is basic in shots like return of serve, volley, mid-court game, passing-shots, etc. Coaches should teach the player to get as much information as possible from the opponent's movements and characteristics and from the game situation (score, etc). When the player is able to do this he has to use his experience and knowledge to analyse what his opponent is going to do, and then he has to react as quickly as he can. Anticipation is improved through match observation of basic tactical patterns, ball drills, court coverage drills, double practice matches, matchplay practice situations, etc.

B Percentage play

This tactical aspect is often applied on the serve, the approach and the net game, but it can also be used for baseline play, winning shots, types of errors (forced and unforced), etc. For proper percentage play the player should focus on: his own strong points, his opponent weaknesses and the match situation. Coaches should teach the player to think during change-overs and analyse between points what is happening in the match. The best way to practice percentage play is in matchplay practice situations in which the coach can interrupt between points and make comments during change-overs.

C Shot selection

This goal could be taught in early stages with the 3 court zones theory (red, yellow and green) and through basic tactical patterns (what to do in different given situations). Shot selection is the ability to choose one specific tool (shot, movement, etc.) according to player, opponent and situational characteristics. Coaches should ensure that players have a wide variety of possibilities in each situation (good technique) before starting with shot selection procedures. The process to learn this tactical goal is the following: observation, selection, post shot analysis and feedback. Shot selection is improved through match observation of basic tactical patterns and matchplay situations with continuous communication between coach and player.

D Match analysis

This issue could be partly introduced in the previous stage with basic tactical matchplans, point patterns in practice, and fundamentals of post-match evaluation. Match analysis is the ability to make plans in advance, to apply them on court and to obtain valuable conclusions. Coaches can use computers, scorecards, notes, video tapes or other procedures to explain what should be done. Players have to start their matches with a clear main tactical plan and several secondary alternatives. At the end of the match and after the analysis they have to keep in mind two or three positive conclusions that can help them to improve their game. Match analysis is improved through matchplay practice situations and matches observation.

E Personal style of play

At this stage of development the player should have a personal style of play based on his particular technical, physical, tactical and mental characteristics. The coach has to put together all the tactical knowledge of the player to define his style of play. The main styles of play are the following: aggressive baseliner, counterpunching baseliner, server and volleyer (net rusher), and all court player. The defensive style of play has practically disappeared. Personal style of play can be improved through matchplay practice situations in which the coach varies the game conditions: serve and volley, return and volley, baseline play, all court play, etc.

F Adaptation to different situations

This concept refers to the ability of adapting one's game to the opponent's and to the situational characteristics. Players should be able to adapt their game to opponents of all gamestyles and to situations that might vary from one moment to another: weather conditions (wind, rain, sun, lighting, etc.), officials decisions, audience reactions, unexpected situations, etc. These aspects can be improved through matchplay practice situations.

CONCLUSION

In our opinion, tactics should be taught in a progressive step by step system. This methodology will allow the coach to present new concepts and ideas that will improve the tactical awareness of the player in the different stages of his development.