

# THE TACTICAL APPROACH TO COACHING TENNIS

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Traditionally we have coached technique in isolation and during technical development practice we have not included tactical components of the game. There has also been a tendency to coach tactical aspects of the game without considering the techniques required when performing these tactics. In light of the importance of tactical development and the apparent inability of many technically perfect players to utilise effective tactical approaches during match play it is important to approach the coaching of tactics and technique in a new light.

The aim of the Tactical Approach to coaching tennis is to improve the overall game performance of the player combining tactical awareness and skill execution. The tactical approach promotes greater interest to learn tennis, more understanding of tennis game played, and improved ability to play in game situations.

## **SPECIFIC TO THE DEMANDS OF TENNIS**

While the ability to perform a skill effectively is critical to performance, appropriate decisions concerning what to do in the game situation are just as important. If we examine the process that the player goes through in match play the essence of the tactical approach becomes clear.

### **Perception - Decision - Action - Feedback**

First the player must read the situation (perception), decide the appropriate response to the situation (decision) and only then when these two vital components have been performed does the skill or technique need to be applied (action). Therefore in order to be successful in the match situation the player must first perceive the situation correctly and respond in the appropriate manner, the skill is simply a tool (albeit an essential tool) by which the previous two must be implemented. It has been shown that often the difference between the intermediate and advanced player is not the execution of skill



or technique but the actual application of those skills in the match situation which is determined by their knowledge and experience in the open skill environment (Thomas and Thomas, 1994). This knowledge and experience in the open skill environment is best developed in the game situation where tactics can be applied.

## **TENNIS PRACTICE SHOULD BE FUN**

It is also important that tennis be a fun and enjoyable game to play for players at all levels and that the coaching methods we use maintain intrinsic motivation for the game for as long as possible. It has been argued that the traditional technically based method of coaching tennis makes the tennis session uninteresting and detached from the game young players see on the television, that is so

exciting and enjoyable to watch. If however the coach can arrange the coaching session to involve tactical and technical components of the game with as little isolation as possible thereby increasing the game and fun experience of playing tennis this image of tennis as a dull and technically difficult sport will be banished.

## **UNDERSTANDING MEANS EMPOWERMENT AND INTEREST IN PRACTICE**

By coaching in the traditional manner through a technique-based system of improving isolated technical ability the coach is teaching the player how to perform skills before the player knows why he or she might want to use them. As a result we lose the contextual nature of the skill and tennis becomes a series of drills conforming to textbook technique and not the vibrant exciting game that the players wish to experience. It is the experience of the excitement, tension, drama ...etc that gives each of us the motivation to be involved in the game and it is the role of the coach to give players the opportunity to experience this. As a coach who has spent some time with

young beginners I recall the number of times in my own coaching sessions when the kids have asked, “When can we play a game?” If the coach can somehow tap this interest in the game situation and manipulate it to induce a skill execution learning effect then the players will have the motivation to learn and commit to the tasks and so increase their ability to learn.

### **TENNIS CAN BE TOO COMPLEX FOR BEGINNERS**

It is important to realise with the young player or beginner that many of the skills required to play tennis are complex and difficult to perform for the novice. In order for the coach to develop an environment for the beginner to be able to experience the aspects of tennis that make it so enjoyable (many of which are tactical) it may be necessary to adapt the game to the player. So one might: make the court smaller, the racket may need to be smaller/lighter for the young player, the ball may need to be bigger and slower than normal, the net might be made higher to reduce ball speeds used...the list could go on for ever (mini tennis is the ultimate example).

It might even be necessary to take away the racket completely and play a game of throw and catch with the emphasis is on

court tactics. The important concept is that every player can be introduced to tactical decision making as early and as often as possible and that through specific manipulations of the game situation (rather than isolated analyses) skill execution can be introduced and developed effectively.

### **CONCLUSION**

Tactical play is fun! If we can give players especially young players and beginners the opportunity to experience the excitement and joy of playing a game that allows them to use their brains to solve tactical problems on the court they will enjoy their tennis and learn the game more effectively. Through this, they will develop the skills necessary to effectively execute the solutions they have to the problem posed by the game situation.

### **REFERENCES**

Thomas, K.T., and Thomas, J.R. (1994). Developing Expertise in Sport: The relation of knowledge and performance. *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 25, 295-312.