

the easy five

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1. ONE GOAL OF THIS ARTICLE

It is often said that a tennis coach is only as good as their drills are. However, as it happens with all sayings, this is not completely true. In fact, from the experience of watching successful tennis coaches working with all levels of players including beginner, intermediate and professional players, we can provide some useful tips:

1. Not too many drills: Top level coaches do not seem to use an excessive number of drills. They stick to drills that they know how to do well and work very well for their players. Some of them only use a dozen drills (Alvarez, 1990), others not more than twenty.
2. Use of variations: These coaches tend to use the same drills with several variations in order to make them more attractive for their players and more realistic and close to the match play situations.
3. Use of drills players like the most: They use more frequently those drills that players love to do. Why? Because players perform at 100% when doing their favourites.
4. Use of drills in the correct order: Smart coaches know how to order their drills so that they work from a closed situation (repetition, far from match play situations) to a more open one (variation, close to match play situations, decision making).
5. Use a games based approach: These coaches plan their drills as if they were matches (i.e. they use scoring systems, play for points or prizes, etc.) in order to motivate their players.
6. The important thing is not what you do but rather how you do it: Successful coaches set high standards and focus themselves on the quality of the drill (i.e. high intensity level, no mistakes, correct decision making, good attitude of the player, etc.)

and do not accept anything less. The purpose of this paper is to present five drills that can be used for each one of the different match situations, namely: serve, return, baseline game, approaching or at the net, and passing the net player.

2. TWO ASPECTS TO BE WORKED ON EACH SESSION

We can work on thousands of aspects in each session (technique, tactics, physical conditioning, mental skills, etc.). However, if we consider the contents of a training session no matter the level of the players, we can easily agree that in order to cover all the demands of the players we have to work on two key aspects:

- a) Known skills: Skills or abilities already introduced by the coach and that may need further practice by the players. In case they do not master the skills properly in different situations (rally, match) we should work on the stabilisation of the movements (technique, footwork) or patterns (tactics), or in case they make mistakes we should work on the improvement of the movements (technique, footwork) or patterns (tactics).
- b) New skills: Skills or abilities that the coach wants to introduce to the players. Although the coach may decide to focus on new skills within a session, it is usually recommended to dedicate one part of the session to work on the basic fundamentals of the game (i.e. to repeat the basic strokes, movements and patterns of the five game situations).

3. THREE METHODOLOGIES WHEN DRILLING

When performing a drill the coach can choose from three different methodologies or procedures

depending on his goal. These are the following:

- a) Basket feeding: This is very good for working on repetitions, warming up, corrections and closed situations (no decision making).
- b) Coach feeding: This is good for a more realistic drill since the coach can control the pace and rhythm of the rally. However, it is almost impossible with top players. In these situations, the coach has to be in the volley or in one corner of the court.
- c) Players rally: This is the best one for working open skills (playing points, resembling tactical patterns, etc.). However, it can be also used for consistency (figure 8 drill) and speed and endurance (trios).

The most important thing is to combine all these three methodologies according to the coach criteria and goals for the session.

4. FOUR STEPS TO FOLLOW IN EACH DRILL

This traditional procedure is very important when doing any drill. The four steps to follow are the following:

- a) Explanation: Briefly describe the drill. It is recommended to refer to the tactical applications of the drill (i.e. why are we doing this, in which situations should we play like this and what can we use this for).
- b) Demonstration: Especially with beginners or large groups. When dealing with advanced players, it may be unnecessary. In these cases, the coach has to tell the players one or two ideas in which they have to focus on (i.e. no mistakes, quick footwork, high intensity, etc.).
- c) Practice: The two previous points should be dealt fairly fast. Try to

start hitting as soon as possible. Ensure high drill quality by providing the right intensity and rhythm to the drill. Understand that players, even the best ones, need time to warm up in the drill and that the best performance is achieved after several minutes. Intersperse work and rest periods to allow necessary recovery. Determine the best number of repetitions and series for each level of players.

- d) Feedback: Use effective questioning and positive feedback during the practice and the rest periods among series. Avoid saying the obvious (just long, hit late, etc.) and be aware of the player's reactions to your comments.

5. FIVE GAME SITUATIONS TO PRACTICE AND DRILLS AS AN EXAMPLE FOR EACH ONE

Below we present five drills to work on each of the game situations. These drills are taken from different coaches. We have called them: "The easy five".

- a) Serve: Service test (Tilmanis, 1988)

Player plays a match against himself only serving. Player has to serve first and second serves to both service boxes as if in a match. Coach assesses the power of the first server in order to be considered as such. Player wins a point if he enters first and second serves. If he misses the first serve, he has to enter the second. If he double faults, he loses the point.

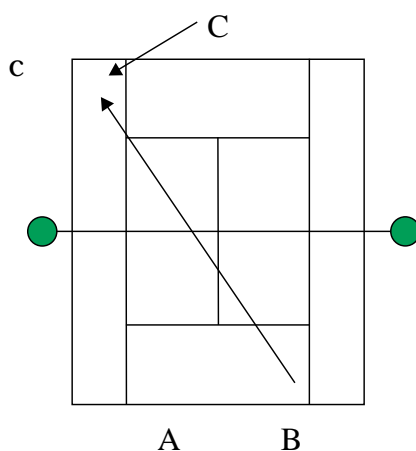
- b) Return: Offensive & Defensive
 Defensive return phase: Player A serves first serves and B returns. If player A hits an ace, he gets two points. If he double faults he loses one point. If he hits two first serves in a row he gets one point. If player B passes the return over the net gets one point. If he hits a winner return he gets two points. If he misses the return he loses one point.

Offensive return phase: Player A serves second serves and B returns.

If player A hits an ace, he gets three points. If he double faults he loses two points. If he hits in two second serves in a row he gets one point. If player B passes the return over the net he gets one point. If he hits a winner return he gets two points. If he misses the return he loses two points.

- c) Playing from the baseline: Express trio (Cascales, 1999)

This is a groundstroke drill from the baseline for three players. Players A and B on one side have to play cross court aiming to hit the ball inside the alley or very close to the singles side line. Player C has to run to hit back every single ball. No mistakes allowed. When player C seems to be tired according to the coach's criteria, the coach feeds an easy ball to the middle of the court and the player has to run and play a winner. Players rotate.



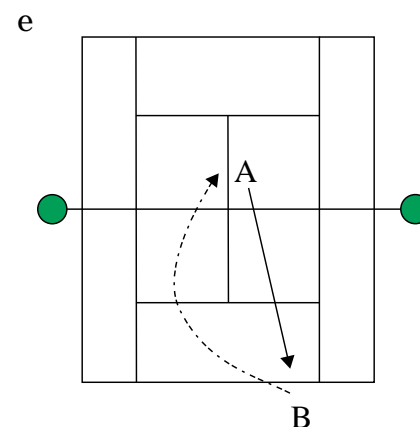
- d) Approaching or at the net: In and out drill (Cascales, 1999)

Player A stands in mid court, Player B feeds a mid court ball which bounces in the service box. Player A hits an approach shot to player B and comes in. Player B hits a groundstroke for A to volley. This sequence is repeated three times. When this is completed players play the point after the approach. Players rotate.

- e) Passing the net player: Smash and pass drill (Piles, 1999)

Player A is at the net and player B is on the baseline. Player B feeds a lob

to player A who has to smash to the deuce court. If he misses the smash, player B wins the point. If player B can not hit the smash back, A wins the point. If player B hits a lob back, player A has to hit the smash to the ad court. If player B can not hit the smash back, A wins the point. Player B can hit a lob or a smash and players play the point. Players play the best of 10 points and then rotate.



6. CONCLUSIONS

We have presented five basic drills which can be used for the different five game situations. Coaches should notice that these drills have to be adapted according to their players' level in order to get the most out of them.

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