

# Modern Tactics: An Introduction

By Miguel Crespo and Machar Reid (Tennis Development Department, ITF)

Coaches and players will agree that tactics play a predominant role in tennis at all levels and that the improvements made in one's strategic and tactical prowess are essential for optimal tennis player development.

At beginner and intermediate levels, new teaching methodologies (the so called games based approach or teaching for understanding) place a great emphasis on the importance of understanding the game (the strategic and tactical aspects) prior to actually hitting balls.

These new teaching methods better help the players to discover how the game is played. They focus on introducing basic tactical concepts that are used at all levels of match play and which, when learned serve to provide the foundation for a complete game style:

- **Game situations:** Serve, return of serve, playing from the baseline, approaching and playing at the net, and playing against the net player.
- **Phases of play:** Attacking, neutral, defending.

- **Tactical options:** Hitting the ball over the net and inside the court, moving the opponent, playing to the opponent's weaknesses, using your best weapon, etc.

- **Game styles:** All round player, aggressive baseliner, serve and volleyer, and counter puncher.

At the advanced level there are several aspects that differentiate the modern game, and the tactics used, from that of the past. Players are stronger, taller, fitter, and faster. Rackets, courtesy of continued technological advancement, are becoming increasingly efficient. More aggressive use of the body (and court) has led to more powerful strokes, which in turn has made the game faster and reduced the amount of time players have to make decisions and prepare for the next shot. All of these factors have had a significant impact on the way the modern game is played and the characteristics of advanced modern tactics can be best summarised as follows:

- **Power used as a tactical weapon:** Power is being increasingly referred

to as the name of the game. Cannon ball serves, attacking returns, killer forehands, winning approach shots, and drive volleys are common among today's game.

- **Faster decision making:** Players need to decide what to do with the ball in less and less time. The options available are determined by the knowledge and the skill of the player as well as the characteristics of the situation and the opponent.

- **Use of best shots:** Usually the serve and the forehand. Players generally base their game around these two strengths although the backhand is also being used very aggressively by a growing number of players.

- **Lack of specialist game styles:** Players compete on various surfaces and in various conditions year round. This obliges them to develop more of an "all round" game. Agassi, who has won all four Grand Slams, is perhaps the best and most prominent example of a player who has achieved this well. Pure specialists such as serve and volleyers are becoming less common (Sampras, Rusedski, Henman), while clay courters (Kurtzman, Corretja, Moya, Ferrero) are needing to quickly become accustomed to playing on faster courts.

In this issue of ITF Coaching & Sport Science Review we have asked some of the world's leading tennis coaches to commentate on the tactics of the modern professional game. Their views reflect how tennis is currently played and the principles they allude to should be used by coaches to best advance the development of their tennis players.

