

Tactical periodisation in tennis: An introduction

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ABSTRACT

The present article critically reviews the applications to tennis of both the traditional and the contemporary models of periodisation and introduces the concept of tactical periodisation taken from football. The definition and key elements of this new periodisation model are highlighted and adapted to tennis. The possibility of applying tactical periodisation to tennis is suggested.

Key words: Periodisation, tactics, planning

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INTRODUCTION

The importance and goals of periodisation in tennis have already been discussed in previous articles (for a review see Roetert, et al., 2005). The main factors that make it complicated to apply to tennis include: the lack of an official off season, the knock-out competition system, the roll on ranking system, and the unique nature of the game, constitute a serious challenge (Roetert & McEnroe, 2005).

Traditional models of periodisation (**simple** with 1-2 peaks by Matveiev, 1956; **alternating volumes** by Fidelius, 1971; **pendular structure** by Arosiev and Kalinin, 1971; **concentrated blocks** by Verkhoshanski, 1987) have tried to achieve the increase of performance based in adaptative processes around conditioning factors (power, speed, endurance) generally using track and field principles. These models are a consequence of the Western thinking paradigms based on rationalism and mechanism. They are based on the study and analysis of isolated facets of the game as well as of the player. They are also centred on a biological approach to athlete development.

Contemporary models (**Integrated methods** [training of all elements of the game (conditional, co-ordinative and cognitive) with an emphasis on technique and tactics] by Bondarchuck, 1988; **ATR** [Accumulation – load, transformation – realisation] by Issurin and Kaverin, 1985; **Structured or Micro-structured methods** [weekly periodisation, concentrated blocks, prolonged state of form] by Tschiene, 1985; Seirul.lo, 1987; Bompa, 1999) have presented sound alternatives to periodisation in game sports including tennis.



In fact, due to the influence of these mechanistic theories applied to motor learning, some tennis coaches have used and abused analytical and partial teaching and training methods. Technique has been mostly trained using basket feeding; conditioning has been generally developed using training systems taken from track and field; mentality has been usually covered by pre-and-post match coach talks; and tactics were mostly improved through practice matches or, just not purposely trained.

In recent years, systemic theories applied to tennis training (for a general overview see Crespo, 2010) have created a radical change in the periodisation models. Multi-dimensionality across physical conditioning, technique, psychology and tactics, and the interactivity between these areas of the game are the key concepts. There has been an evolution from fragmentation of types of session e.g. a technical session in isolation, to a synergy and transversality to consider both the whole and the parts of the game (Landinger, 2009).

Tactical periodisation will imply an evolution from the integrated methods by emphasising the tactical element of the game as it will be described below.

TACTICAL PERIODISATION

Definition

Taken from the work of professor Vitor Frade from Porto University (Gomes, 2008) and successfully applied by football manager Jose Mourinho (Porto, Chelsea, Internazionale, Real Madrid), the main principle of tactical periodisation states that all types of practices, teaching methodologies, and training systems should be dependant on the game style-organisation-structure or "game model" that the coach wants the player to adopt. Game style or "game model" can be described as the way or type of game you as a coach want the player to play. Tactics would be at the core of periodisation. It is considered as a "supra-dimension" of the game. Tennis is tactical because any stroke, movement or behaviour is the consequence of a decision taken in a given game situation.

It is crucial that the player has a certain game style. This game style has to be grounded on several solid principles and sub-principles that the player has to understand well and needs to interpret appropriately, no matter who he will play against. This is also labelled as "game organisation". Each player should have a game style that is well known and effectively applied (Mourinho cited by Oliveira et al., 2006). The coach has to use his own personal convictions and ideas about the game, his players' characteristics (strengths and weaknesses) qualities and preferences, and a complete analysis of the game features now and in the future. Examples of "game feature" include the development of modern tennis as a more physically demanding sport, as well as the emergence of the hard court as the most predominantly used surface for competition, among others. The aforementioned factors combined are essential in order to develop a flexible but solid game style for the player. This game style should not be immutable, but should be adapted daily to the evolution and progression of the player. The design of the periodisation process should be structured around the needs of the player.

Is the end goal of tactical periodisation to develop an automatic – robot – like type of player? The answer is no. In fact, it is the contrary. The crucial statement of tactical periodisation is to create a "non-mechanic mechanism" based on solid tactical concepts, in order to acquire an

efficient game style by “knowing-how” and by “knowing about know how”.

Tactical periodisation is a clear example of an integral, inter-connected or inter-related approach, in which all goals are centered around the tactical component of the game. It considers that the strategical-tactical organisation or structure of the game is more important than the physical condition of the player.

Key elements

The key elements of the tactical periodisation can be summarised as follows:

1. The game (tactics) as the origin of periodisation and a fundamental part of the practice. The tactics of the game define the way the coach should plan the training in all aspects: technical, tactical, physical and mental. The training sessions should be planned based on the tactical goals obtained from the analysis of the game style of the player. The game (the tactics) is the basis of the practice. Tactics should always be practised in all the drills. The “problems” to be solved during the training session should always be tactical. It is the logic of...training the game of tennis...starting from the game of tennis!

2. Interaction of all game factors. Due to the influence of systemic theories, all factors that affect the game are trained simultaneously. These factors should not and cannot be isolated since all should interact in order to achieve the maximum performance during the match. This is labelled as the “Principle of unyielding integrity of the game”. All factors are associated to each other and amongst themselves. There is no integration because all factors are already united. This is a “fractal” statement taken from chaos theory: In each one of the training tasks all components should be present in order to be related to the game.

3. High specificity. Technique, power, speed or endurance should not be trained in isolation or out of the context of the game. All the factors affecting game performance are developed using adapted games or situations by altering the rules, the space, the time, and the equipment to resemble the game. Analytic/isolated drills are discouraged. The contents that are practised every day should have an impact in the matches.

4. Importance of concentration. Football practices using this method are no longer than 90 minutes, which is the actual duration of a football match. Longer practices produce a loss of quality due to a reduction in concentration. Players need to fully identify themselves with a game style; they need to cognitively manage their effort. Concentration (on meaningful cues and throughout the match) should be practiced with drills that make players think and be focused. Drills of increasing complexity will challenge the players to adequately concentrate. Intensity is measured by concentration effort.

5. Intensity, dynamism and creativity. Practices should be highly intensive. The real-training-time is very high, almost with no “dead” times. Practice = 100% intensity <-> 90 minutes <-> 100% concentration. The game style of the player should allow variations and adaptations that the player needs to create and apply. The concept of intensity also changes. Instead of being a physical parameter, it becomes a cognitive one. It is related to the specificity of the game of the player. The training is constantly evolving because the tactics are variable and can always improve.

6. New concept of training volume, load and recovery. The volume is considered as a group of exercises performed at maximal intensity. The physical load should also be considered as a stressing load. This is where we can also include the concept of “emotional exhaustion”. There are no special peaks of volume in the training. The training load is very similar throughout the season. Professional players play the whole year round and the periodisation has to manage the balance between volume and intensity with slight oscillations between them. Recovery times are not only a need of the physical effort but of the mental one also. They should be varied and adapted to the specific training volume.

7. Physical training and the use of the gym. The physical component is generally over emphasised in the periodisation of games. In the past, the physical condition of the player was the pillar of the performance. Nowadays, it is not an issue of the player being physically well trained or not, they are all in very good shape. The key aspect is if the physical condition of the player is well adapted or not to his game style. The player has to be physically ready to cope with the type of physical effort that implies his game style. The speed, power or endurance should not be high but optimal. They need to be “functional” – adapted to the needs of the player and the game. In football, the gym and the machines are mostly used by the medical department in the rehabilitation of the players.

8. Adaptation, unpredictability and competition rhythm. The coach and the player should be aware that the game style of the player needs to be flexible and the periodisation of the game should adapt to the unpredictable events of competitive tennis play. The competition rhythm is a global issue in which all factors interlink. The game is always under construction!

9. No peaks but consistent level throughout the season. The key of periodisation is not to peak at different periods of the season, instead, the goal is to keep the player at his best competitive level throughout the season. There are no “special weeks”. There should be a window of acceptable performance in order to avoid excessive up and downs. Again, it is not just a physical peak but a consistent individual performance level. Things do not happen on the court just by chance!



CONCLUSION

Does tactical periodisation sound familiar to tennis coaches aware of the game-based approach to teaching methodology? It Certainly does. Most of the principles included above related to tactical periodisation have clear parallels with the ones of the GFU (games for understanding) (Crespo & Cooke, 1999).

Tactical periodisation is not a magic formula that will allow the player to win all matches, but a model that will help the coach better assist the player in the training and competition process using the game of tennis as the starting process (Tamarit, 2007).

Most tennis coaches simply do not use periodisation or follow their experience and instinct when training with top professional tennis players. These could be called models with no data on training control or load organisation. In order to periodise training and competition with the appropriate goals (the game style of the player), coaches should be aware of the characteristics of the game (level of play, calendar, resources, etc.) and the results of a SWOT analysis of their player (player profile, history, etc.). Tactical periodisation could be a possible alternative to help coaches develop sessions that are more specific and close to the player and game needs.

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