

# Tactics for elite level men's tennis - Part 1

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## ABSTRACT

*This article discusses some ideas on top level men's tennis tactics; it is a combination of the experience of the first author as the coach of David Ferrer and the theoretical contribution of the second author. It presents some of the main characteristics of top level modern tactics and discusses the need to adapt strategy when changing surfaces, as well as the importance of the correct planning of matches, both in general and when planning to play against the world's best players. Finally, it provides practical examples of the work done with David Ferrer.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The evolution of top level tennis has reached a consensus across the perceptions of players, coaches and amateurs, as well as the findings of sport science research (Cross & Pollard, 2009; 2011). Several characteristics define this evolution. On the one hand there is the **greater speed of the ball**. It is played much faster, there is less time to think, and the tennis player must anticipate the actions of his opponent or react to them very fast. The negative consequence of this is the increase in the injuries tennis players are subject to, due to the greater speed of the game.

On the other hand, it is worth mentioning that the great players have **technically improved their groundstrokes** a great deal. Both the forehand, as well as the backhand, have become almost equal. There are no "holes" in a player's stroke repertoire. When playing Djokovic, Nadal, Federer or Murray, to mention just a few examples, all these players are solid on both sides from the back, with relatively no weakness to exploit.

From a tactical perspective, when we talk about modern tactics (Crespo & Reid, 2002) we notice that top level players have a much **more defined playing pattern** than juniors or lower level professionals. What are the consequences of this? These are analysed below:

Top level players must learn to play in a **more automatic** way, they play practically "without thinking" since it is important to act and to react fast. This makes top level tennis **less creative**. There is less room for improvisation or to try new or high risk strokes.

An advantage of this is that when the playing pattern is more defined, it is a great help from the psychological point of view. If the player suffers from lack of confidence during phases in his/her game, during a match or during some time in the season, to re-adopt that defined playing pattern which he has mastered perfectly will **help him to restore that lost confidence**.

The following part of the article can be summarised by a formula that will define top level performance in tennis. It is suggested as follows:

Playing pattern + Leg speed + Mental speed = Top performance

If we analyze the game of the great players of today: Djokovic, Nadal, Federer, Murray, Tsonga, Ferrer, etc., we notice that they all have a clearly defined and individual playing pattern. They all have excellent leg speed on court, both to reach the ball and to get away from it. Finally, they are extremely fast from a mental point of view, since they know how to "read" matches appropriately and to make the right decisions under pressure. Therefore, we can conclude that the world ranking is fair since, in the long run, the best players are the ones in the top positions who hold the three aforementioned elements.

## PLAYING TACTICS AND SURFACES

Tactical work and preparation for the different playing surfaces has changed along the career of a player such as David Ferrer.

At the beginning of his professional career some aspects like **staying low** or playing flatter, were emphasized when preparing for the fast or grass court season. But now, not too many changes need to be made. The real objective is for the player to make certain **adjustments** to better adapt to the new surface (Over & O'Donoghue, 2008).

It has been noted that it is apparently more difficult to change from fast to clay courts than it is to change from clay to fast courts. When working on the transition from one surface to another one, in the case of David Ferrer, the exercises done are very similar. (Martínez, 2002).

## GENERAL MATCH PLANNING FOR TOP LEVEL TENNIS

Each player-coach team has its own personal method to prepare the matches. Some prefer to talk just before the match, or, in some cases, it is the player who starts the conversation, or it is the coach who sets the general outline for how to face the match.

As in the case of David Ferrer, the coach usually initiates the discussion, which usually takes place in an informal setting, the evening prior to the match. Several fundamental aspects are usually discussed during this conversation before the match:

**a. Reinforce what the player does well:** Remind him of his strong points and the things he has been doing well recently: from the tactical, technical, physical or mental point of view.

**b. Remind him to play "with the score":** For David, there are aspects like knowing how to be more cautious at "break" points, or when the score is 30 - 0 or 0 - 30.

**c. Emphasize some specific tactical aspects:** These may include details like, after a good service, be careful with the opponent's return to the backhand, avoid moving to the right so as not to hit an inside-



out under pressure and while in movement. In this case, it is better to hit a backhand.

**d. Emphasize some specific technical aspects:** Particularly during service, toss the ball up high and on the right side to allow the optimum and appropriate execution (Elliott, 2001).

**e. Emphasize some specific psychological aspects:** Following up on the example of the service, bear in mind how important it is not to hurry, not to "rush" too much to serve, but be calm and stick to the most convenient routines in order to perform a top quality service.

#### MATCH-SPECIFIC PLANNING FOR ELITE LEVEL TENNIS

This part will discuss some fundamental aspects when planning to play against players in the top 10. There are often differences with the procedure as mentioned above. The specific aspects are:

**a. Analyse the videos of the great champions:** It is important to study the game patterns of the great players. There are often relevant aspects like the direction of the serve depending on the service side, or the score, to try to anticipate the intention of the opponent.

**b. Plan a strategy... even if it may not work later:** There is a clear example of this in the quarter finals of the 2012 Australian Open. David Ferrer was playing Novak Djokovic. The initial strategy for the first set



was to pay attention to the sliced service to the forehand so as to avoid being taken out of the court. But, during the match, during the first set, Djokovic served to the backhand the majority of the time- catching David totally unaware. Then, in the second set, Djokovic changed his strategy altogether and started slicing his serve to the forehand. Here is an example of where great champions like Djokovic vary their strategy and tactics regularly, and therefore it is necessary to react in real time (Brody, 2003).

**c. Provide confidence when the player is playing against a top player:** A fundamental aspect of the specific tactical planning

in a tennis match against players in the heights of the top 10 is the importance of providing confidence. If the player has no confidence in his game, he will not believe in his/her game and success will be much more difficult.

**d. "Pay attention to the ball, not to the person hitting it":** A practical example applied with David Ferrer is this sentence that describes the need to pay attention to the ball and not the player who sent it. This way, the coach makes the player concentrate on what is relevant, i.e. the ball, and not on what could negatively affect him from the psychological point of view, i.e. the level of the player who has hit it.

#### CONCLUSIONS

One of the most important tasks for the coach of a top level player is to facilitate the player's work. An appropriate preparation for matches, both from a specific as well as from a more general point of view, when playing against great players, is key. Not only will it impact on the tactical aspect of the performance of the player, but also on the psychological component that is so vital in performance tennis at the highest level. Finally, it is hoped that this article has contributed to clear up some tactics related concepts in top level tennis.

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