

Tactics for elite level men's tennis - Part 2

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ABSTRACT

This article follows from part one within this issue and continues to discuss more topics on top level men's tennis tactics. Discussions relate to the experience of the primary author, as the coach of David Ferrer, and the theoretical contribution of the second author. In part two, the authors stress the importance of physical and psychological aspects to get a better tactical performance at the highest level, as well as the best tactics from junior to professional tennis and to top champions. The article provides practical examples of the work done with David Ferrer.

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EVOLUTION, PROGRESSION AND TACTICAL IMPROVEMENT FROM JUNIOR TO PROFESSIONAL

It is obvious that in comparison to previous years the game has seen a considerable evolution in tennis tactics both in juniors and at the highest level. David Ferrer is an example of a player who has improved many tactical aspects during his progression from junior to professional. The following paragraphs discuss the key principles for this tactical progression.

Ferrer has tactically progressed on a crucial aspect of his game: automation. What does this mean when it is applied to tactics? It is the capacity of the player to make appropriate decisions under time pressure in an immediate and involuntary fashion.

From the tennis coaching point of view, **automation** has been generally applied to learning the technical aspects of tennis (Schonborn, 2002) but, in this case, we are particularly interested in the process by which the tennis player can make almost automatic decisions, that is to say, the way in which tactical thinking becomes a tremendously efficient process.



It is a well-known concept that tactics are mainly characterized by its variability, thus, a tactic is never the same because all situations are different, since we never hit the same ball twice, in the same place and with the same intention. Therefore the tactical process: perception - decision - action - feedback is constantly different during a tennis match.

Although certain authors state that a tactic cannot be automated (Solá, 2005), in the case of professional tennis tactics, in top performance tennis, the rhythm is so fast that the player has no time for a decision making process to choose between different options (Crespo y Reid, 2002). Instead, the player has incorporated the right decision through

extended practise, in such a way that when facing that situation during a match, the tactical response is immediate and can, therefore, be called "automatic".

What are the advantages of tactical automation? There are probably many, but, it is worth mentioning how important it is to define the **tactical pattern** of the game of a tennis player accurately. Top level players have a more defined, clear, solid and consistent game pattern than lower level players.

This is so because they have managed to achieve a "tactical automation" or a more efficient decision making, they can react tactically with greater speed and efficiency than others, and as a consequence, their tactical options are well consolidated.

But apart from the purely tactical benefits, and as far as Ferrer is concerned, achieving great "tactical automation" has helped him to improve not only tactical, but also a key mental aspect: his **confidence**.

The following paragraphs will now describe the close relationship that, in the opinion of the authors, exists between tactical and mental aspects in tennis, particularly at top level.

TACTIC AND MIND

Just as we have seen above, tactics have a great impact on the mental component. When the player can automate his tactical decisions after having worked endlessly during training, the main consequence is that the player achieves confidence in his tactical patterns and how he plays.

What does having confidence in your own tactical patterns imply? First, that the player has a clear idea of what to do in each

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match situation: **clear ideas** provide a **tactically defined objective**, i.e.: "When the ball comes to this area, at this height and with this speed and spin, I have to play an open, deep, high forehand with top spin."

A clear objective provides **calmness and control** at a time of great time pressure. The mental dialogue is the following: "I have trained this situation many times before, and in worse conditions, (being more tired, a faster ball, a greater effort...) and I have made the right decision, therefore... I know what to do".

Those players who are ranked among the top 10 in the world, have faith and confidence in their game. They are mentally tough tennis players. They give 200% effort in each point. They are, we might say, **mentally consistent** (Gallwey, 2006).

In top level tennis, technique and tactics are very important but the aspect that really makes the difference has to do with mental skills. We even know that **better fitness has a great impact on tennis players to reach and maintain that mental consistency** mentioned above.

We can now state, and in order to finish this section, that there may be slight tactical differences among professional tennis players, but experience shows that the difference between an 300 ATP rated player and a top 10, as David Ferrer, cannot be summarized in just one single aspect, there are a number of factors that make a top 10 player perform at his best under great pressure and, therefore, much better than the rest of the lower ranked professional tennis players.

TACTICS, TALENT AND EASE TO LEARN

In general, talent is considered an necessary asset for top performance in tennis (Solanelas, 1999). But sometimes, we find that some players have "too much" talent.

In the case of tactics, those players who are too talented can find that their talent is an obstacle and not a benefit for their tactical development. During a game situation, under time pressure, when players have to make a decision, those who are too talented, have "too

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many" options to choose from. They can do so many things, they have the skill to hit so many different strokes, with so many variations and to so many areas on court that they find themselves unable to choose and decide on the most appropriate option.

With reference to ease of learning- some think that great champions are unable to learn new aspects of the game once they have reached the top of their game. This statement is not totally true. What really happens is just the opposite, players do learn and sometimes, they learn very fast. Great champions are tennis players who have the ability to continually learn and adapt their game as their career develops.

In the specific case of David Ferrer, his tactical development at the net is worth mentioning, particularly his volleys and the way he covers the court when at the net. Some years ago, David was not really good at the net and even though it was not the essence of his game, he decided to work on it consistently during specific sessions, so he consistently and quickly improved his game on this part of the court.

PERIODIZATION OF THE SEASON FOR A TOP LEVEL TENNIS PLAYER: TACTICAL ASPECTS

The periodization of the professional tennis player season varies considerably depending on whether the player is ranked among the top 10, the top 100 or even among those who are beginning to get ATP points. Amongst tactical or technical considerations, there are also financially important factors (Porta & Sanz, 2005).

In general, the first year in the ATP Tour can be a bit tough since neither the player nor the coach know exactly what tournaments or what level to play and which characteristics to choose. The second year in the circuit can also bring unique challenges, and is tough since the players want to continue progressing, defend points and maintain a good position in the rankings.

With reference to Ferrer, he tries to organise his calendar in order to travel 2 weeks in a row and then return home to train and recover. However, this is not always possible due to the way the American tour is organized early in the year- for example the combination of Buenos Aires, Acapulco, Indian Wells and Miami is a four week block. Whilst this is beyond his two week optimum competition cycle, the idea is never to play more than 6 tournament weeks in a row.

David Ferrer and Javier Piles, his coach, agree on the competition calendar. David Ferrer tries to repeat the calendar of the previous year if he did well. David always plays a tournament the week before the Australian Open and Roland Garros, although the rest of the players of his level would rather rest before a Grand Slam. On the other hand, and as far as possible, David prefers tournaments at sea level. Regarding surface change, which is very closely related to the tactical aspect of the game, this is an aspect that has some influence especially across grass, clay and hard court. However there are often times where little surface adaptation is necessary, for example on hard courts. Their experience has shown that nowadays the fast court surfaces are much more similar and therefore much less tactical adaptation is necessary.

CONCLUSIONS

In this second article on top level men's tennis tactics, we wanted to describe some ideas on the tactical evolution, progression and improvement from junior to professional tennis, stressing the importance of "automation" of the decision making processes as key aspects for the tactical efficiency in top level tennis. It also describes the relationship that exists between tactical and mental aspects in top performance, and the key role of confidence in top level tennis.



We have also stressed the need to help talented players to make the right decision so as to be tactically efficient. Finally, we have discussed some ideas on periodization for top level players presenting practical examples from David Ferrer's experience, which we expect, will be useful for all coaches working with elite players.

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