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SAM STOSUR



KEVIN ANDERSON



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## [EXPERT ADVICE]

# ARE YOU BEING SERVED?

Whether you've got a big serve or not, getting your tactics spot on is key. Here's how to do it

In June this year there was an impressive – and fairly unusual – YouTube clip doing the rounds among the tennis community. Australian Sam Stosur produced an entire game of aces during a grass court victory over American Christina McHale at the Aegon Classic. Known as one of the more effective servers, the former US Open champion demonstrated just that. It was the first time the WTA had captured such a feat on video in the women's game and the clip was quickly promoted as that day's 'Hot Shot' footage on leading sports websites.

"When I put myself in those positions to use my weapons and do the things that are going to win me matches, then I do well," Stosur explains when talking about what she's trying to achieve on serve. "The whole idea of what I want to do on court

stems from me. The serve is a big part of that. One, because it starts the point; two, because I've got a good serve that can do damage. I can win points just off that."

Players blessed with a powerful delivery are at a distinct advantage from the moment they step up to serve, but they will be the first to tell you that simply hoping to crack an ace every time you toss the ball up won't get you very far.

If you've got a big serve, it's important to exploit your biggest asset; if it isn't, then learn to make the most of what you've got and use the serve to set you up to be able to utilise your other strengths.

When talking gameplans, it's important to be clear about the difference between strategy and tactics. Coaches will often interchange these words, but the two are singular entities. A strategy

is your overall gameplan for a match, whereas tactics are the individual plays, or patterns of play, that happen during each point. Simply put, you may use a variety of tactics to implement your strategy.

For example, your strategy might be to use spin effectively to disrupt an opponent's rhythm, which could comprise a number of different tactics. You could hit slice serves into the body on the first serve and attack any weak returns by chipping and charging. You might vary the spin on the second serve with slice and topspin and use the slice backhand during rallies to change pace or keep the ball low.

A decision regarding overall strategy should be based on three factors: environment (such as surface and weather), the opponent (what are their weaknesses?) and your own strengths. If a strategy does not take all three elements into account, it will invariably run into difficulties.

"I guess my best serve probably is my kick serve, so I think that's kind of a bit null and void on the grass," admits Stosur. "One of my best weapons is kind of taken away in a sense when I'm playing on grass, so it makes me need to work on the other serves that I can hit, but they're not the ones I set out to use as much.

"We change a little bit each time, but at the end of the day the matches are about me. I know that I'm an aggressive

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player and I want to impose my game on my opponent.”

When considering specific tactics, you must be clear about your intention. Do you want to attack, stay neutral or defend? If you are serving, you should be aiming to attack or at the very least stay neutral. The serve should be used to dominate the point from the start and help implement your gameplan. Unlike when returning, you choose how you want to try and play out the point.

A good strategy, and subsequently tactic, should be varied to avoid predictability and should also be flexible. So, for example, if one of your tactics is to slice wide on the deuce side more frequently to open up the court, it may prove fruitless if your opponent has a very big forehand.

Instead of persevering with this particular tactic, perhaps look to see how else the slice could be used. If the player is very tall, for example, perhaps they move a little slower, therefore using the slice to the body might be a better option on the deuce court.

The flexibility of a strategy, and the tactics within it are key. Perhaps even more important than having a good gameplan is the ability to adapt on court.

“I will only hit a serve that I feel comfortable with, something I have practised over and over again in training,” says South Africa’s Kevin Anderson, who boasts one of the biggest serves in the men’s game.

“It starts with taking my time and not rushing so I feel like I am in control when I step up to the line to serve. From there it is about picking my spot on the first serve, being aggressive and hitting the target is key.

“On my second serve I have to trust myself and I will try to mix it up to keep my opponent on his toes so he doesn’t know what to expect. When it comes to choosing my tactics it just depends on what is going on when I am about to serve. I don’t have hundreds of options but I will always go with something I feel comfortable with.” ■

Based on information from ITF coaching resources.  
Edited by Merlin van de Braam & Miguel Crespo.

## SERVE UP A WINNING STRATEGY

READY?  
PLAY!

ACADEMY

### FIRST THINGS FIRST

- **TARGET THEIR WEAK SPOT**  
Hit to your opponent’s weaker side for the majority of serves, but don’t forget to serve into your opponent’s body
- **DON’T BUST A GUT**  
Don’t try to hit the ball too hard – 70-80% power is usually enough. This improves consistency and allows room to speed up the serve as a surprise tactic
- **CONSISTENCY IS KEY**  
Try to make 65-70% of your first serves. Top professionals rarely go above this percentage in competitive matches
- **MIX IT UP**  
With a big serve, consider moving into the net and volleying the return or moving around the ball to hit your best shot

### SECOND BEST

- **GET IT RIGHT**  
Aim for 90-100% consistency on second serves. A topspin serve is often the best type of serve as the higher ball trajectory gives better clearance
- **GO FOR THE BODY**  
Don’t forget to use the serve into your opponent’s body
- **SWING FAST**  
Keep up the racket head speed. If the ball drops short all the time your opponent will start to attack
- **GO LONG**  
It is better to hit the serve long than short or in the net

### MIX IT UP

- **HIGH FIVE**  
Vary your serve position and target to create uncertainty. Change one in five serves to keep your opponent on their toes
- **EXPLOIT THE COURT**  
A wide slice serve is very effective on a faster surface like grass because the ball skids away on the bounce. A topspin serve is very effective on slower surfaces like clay because it will kick up higher
- **GO WIDE**  
Angle the serve on big points against an opponent who doesn’t move well.

### → UTILISE THE SLIDER

Slice your serve wide on the deuce court and to the centre on the ad’ court

### → GIVE IT SOME KICK

Serving topspin out wide on the ad’ court can be very effective for taking the returner out of the court

### SERVE AND VOLLEY

#### → FOLLOW IT IN

Use serve and volley as a surprise tactic to catch your opponent off guard

#### → DON’T HANG AROUND

Move in quickly and split step as your opponent hits their return

#### → TAKE AWAY THE ANGLES

Serve to the centre or to the body to reduce the chance of your opponent using the angles to hit a pass

### PLAY TO YOUR STRENGTHS

#### → BACK IT UP

Look to attack with your strongest stroke after your serve

#### → PREPARE EARLY

After the serve, move inside the baseline and slightly off centre (slightly to the left for a right hander looking to use their forehand)

#### → GO IN FOR THE KILL

Aim to win points within three strokes as often as possible. A good serve followed up by an attacking first groundstroke should ideally be finished off with an easy put away

