

A healthy return

Stars like Novak Djokovic and Andy Murray have shown that a good return of serve can be a match winner

The return of serve is often neglected as an important element of a player's practice sessions. But in today's game the return can be as much of a weapon as the serve. The return of serve requires rapid movement forwards, early anticipation and quick decision making.

For a tennis player, approximately half of the points during a match start with a return of serve. Although the basic motion is very similar to regular groundstrokes, the playing scenario is completely different as the opponent, who is serving, has the opportunity to put more pressure on the receiver.

There are two basic types of returns – offensive and defensive. The main objective of the offensive return is to take time away and to put pressure on the server. It is usually used against second serves or weaker first serves. The main goal of the defensive return is to put the ball into play. It is usually used against very strong first serves or against wide second serves. When hitting a defensive return, the ball is often blocked back into play.



Heather Watson
The British No.1 used her ability to neutralise the serve to great effect against Serena Williams at Wimbledon

It is important to make a split-step forward as the server hits the ball

The stance and footwork are crucial for both types of return. The player should establish a solid ready position so that they can quickly respond to any type of serve and should be focused on the server's ball toss. It is important to make a split step forward as the server hits the ball and try to have their bodyweight moving forward at impact to use linear momentum in the shot. A common occurrence in today's top level tennis is for the player facing a second serve to take a step backwards in order to give time and space to attack the return.

When hitting an offensive return, the player should use the appropriate grip for each side. The backswing should be similar to that used to hit regular groundstrokes although it can be shorter depending on the speed of the ball. The bigger the serve, the shorter the backswing.

The forward swing for the offensive return is usually similar to the racket path of a topspin groundstroke. The impact zone is usually higher and further forward than when hitting regular topspin groundstrokes because of the higher bounce. As the player steps into the shot, they create power while maintaining dynamic balance – especially the head and upper body. The follow through for the offensive return is similar to that used for a topspin groundstroke.

When hitting a defensive return the forward swing is usually similar to a volley racket path (high to low) or straight groundstroke path (back to forward). The impact zone is usually further in front than when hitting regular volleys, however. The player should try to make contact with the ball using a compact swing and a firm grip to take the pace off the ball. If the player is fast enough they should try to use the appropriate grip for both sides but may need to shorten the backswing depending on the speed of the oncoming ball. The follow through should be relatively short. The more powerful the serve, the less a player will need to swing.

When facing a first serve the intention should be to give your opponent no 'free' points and make them play the next ball. If the opponent has a big serve then you may be required to block the return – shorten the backswing with good hip and shoulder rotation.

It is important to choose a target area too, the most common being your opponent's weakness. Variation is important too, to keep your opponent guessing. Vary the spin and speed, using topspin and flat returns when being offensive and slice and blocked



returns when under pressure. If the serve is weaker then move forwards and attack with pace or a 'chip and charge' tactic.

When returning a kick second serve, move early to get into position with the intention of attacking the second serve at every possible opportunity. One tactic to counter attack the second serve spin is to take the ball on the rise and at shoulder height to retain a dominating court position. A movement pattern to set up the forehand return would be to move forwards and towards the backhand side to set up an attacking forehand as the opponent serves. This will allow for the returner to come over the ball even though it bounces high and you can also set up the inside-out forehand or go down the line with a 'run-around' forehand.

When facing a slice serve it's important to move diagonally to cut off the angle and this will also naturally transfer your weight forward. When faced with this serve it is often recommended to hit a cross court return to allow for greater margin of error. To help anticipate this early, watch the ball toss so you can try to read the serve. 📌

By Abbie Probert and Miguel Crespo. Based on information from the ITF Advanced Coaches Manual.

Sweet spot
Wimbledon champion Novak Djokovic has used his return to help him win major titles on all surfaces