

LEARNING AND APPLYING FUNDAMENTAL TACTICAL PRINCIPLES

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INTRODUCTION

It is well known that tennis is a game of emergencies. No matter the skill level of the player there are a number of challenges and questions that have to be effectively addressed and solved in order to play the game.

For each one of these questions there is an answer. If we ask ourselves, how should I play? Technique will give you the answer. However, if the question is when? The answer is tactics. When the question is why? Strategy will provide the answer. Finally, when the question is who? The answer is mental / physical.

There is indeed a very important aspect that should not be forgotten. We have different questions and different answers, but the sport, the game, is just one, tennis. So, even though we divide tennis teaching and coaching in different aspects or contents (i.e. technique, tactics, conditioning, mental, competition, etc.), we should always remember that we need to teach it as a whole.

FUNDAMENTAL TACTICAL PRINCIPLES

In this presentation we will deal with a crucial topic when developing tennis players. We will try to reflect on how coaches can help players in their process of learning and applying fundamental tactical principles. In order to do this, it is necessary to establish some terms of reference that will contribute to the understanding and clarity of the reflection.

Tactical coaching relies in several fundamental tactical principles that are valid and can be applied to all levels of the game, from beginners to high performance. The first one is the 5 game situations: serve, return of serve, baseline game, approach & net game, and passing the net player. We can also identify 3 tactical intentions: to attack, to be neutral, and to defend. There are also 8 ball characteristics that can be identified: consistency, height, direction, depth, effect, rhythm, weight, and intensity. Finally, there is an almost infinite amount of point patterns which are shot combinations that are used during the points.

So, believe it or not, coaches should also help their players learn and apply tactics! As we all are aware, traditional coaching methodologies mostly used in the past, emphasised technique over other contents and generally organised their sessions around technical fundamentals (grips, stances, racquet paths, impacts, follow through, etc.). Tactics was left to the player, during the match or it was trained during practice matches.

TEACHING TACTICS THE NEW WAY

New training and methodological approaches favour several aspects as related to tactics. Tactics is given the importance it deserves, as it is central to the game. Besides, the importance of game understanding is prioritised. Players need to understand what tennis is all about, and then know what they need to overcome its challenges. In this context, the constraint-led approach is recommended. Also, tactics should be trained from a situational perspective, taking the needs of the game and the skills of the player. Of paramount importance is the fostering of the decision-making process in the player. In order to do this, the discovery and problem solving approach should be mostly used. Tactical training should also address the increasingly speed of the game. There is no time to think. Tactical patterns should be mastered by effective and meaningful repetition that will produce a sort of tactical “automatisation” that will ensure maximal effectiveness. Finally, tactics means adaptation to circumstances, so tactical variability and differentiation drills need to be introduced in the practices as soon as possible.

PRACTICAL PART: TACTICAL DRILLS

In this presentation a series of basic tactical patters will be shown with an emphasis on building the point around the game situations (i.e. 1st serve and weapon; defensive return against a hard serve and run; 1st serve and defend against a block return; block return against a hard serve and move in to attack; 2nd serve and run to defend; offensive return and move in to attack; baseline consistency rally; baseline height + depth “in and out” rally; baseline direction rally; and point play to improve “*tactical memory*”).

It is convenient that the tactical drills that work on the serve and return of serve situations are set up at the same time so that one (or more) player works on the serve and the other (s) on the return of serve. This will help to create a healthy competitive atmosphere within the group and will contribute to the achievement of the goal. On another hand, the baseline game situation can be practised at the same time in both ends of the court, and the approaching the net and net game situation should be practised at the same time than the passing the net player.

It is also recommended that the tactical training is conducted using live ball-rally methodologies since they will be closer to the real game situation. Tactics require decision making and this is naturally achieved by using open drills with rally situations. However, if this is not possible and the coach feels that a methodological regression should be made, these drills can also be broken down into smaller sequences of shots, even using the basket or with the coach feeding from the side.

When working with beginner and intermediate players, it is advisable that coaches start the tactical drills by ensuring that there is enough cooperation among the players. For instance, if there is a tactical drill on serve and return, the coach should ask the players to cooperate by hitting the serve and the return in. If this does not happen, the coach needs to change the

conditions and rules of the game in order to help the players achieve this. Once the cooperation is ensured, then the competition can start.

Tactical drills should always have conditions or constraints that will facilitate the achievement of the goal. This can be done by creating zones, scores, limitations on number of shots, movements, rallies, etc. There should not be any tactical drill without competition. And that is why players should start to compete from the start.

CONCLUSION

Tactical training should have a prominent space and time in the training programmes of players at all levels. Tactics should be presented to players in their first tennis lesson. In fact, the tactics has already started before the rally starts! That is why the coaches need to help players on this!

Coaches should use their experience and imagination in order to create a variety of drills and situations that will help their players learn and apply tactical fundamentals in an effective manner. By doing this, they will be able to make their players think and have fun at the same time while playing the best sport ever!

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