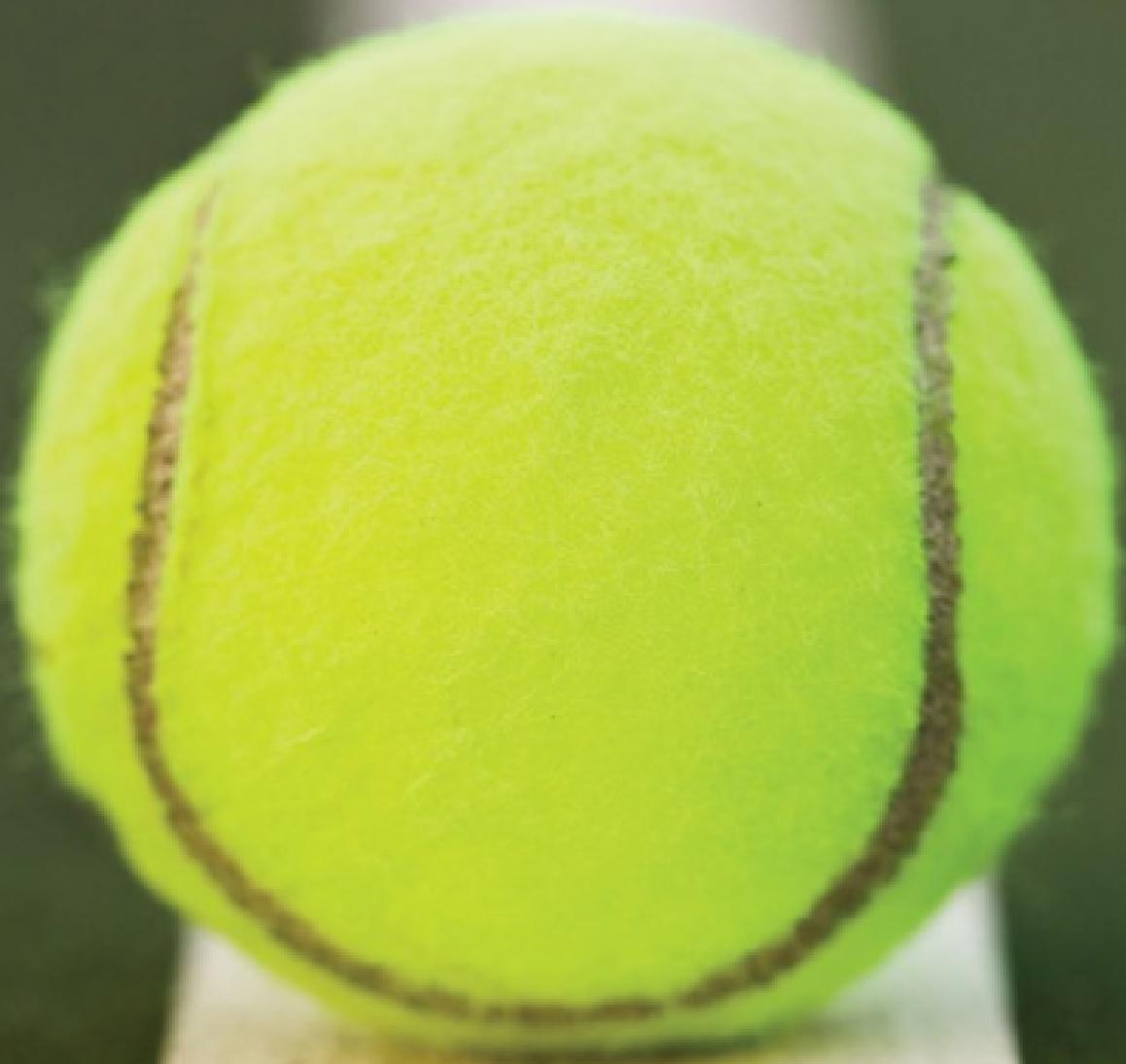


Instant tennis

Skills and techniques to improve your game



Infinite Ideas

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Instant tennis

Skills and techniques to improve your game

Infinite Ideas



infiniteideas
the web's favourite
self-help publisher

Introduction



This little book's aim is to help you develop key techniques that will improve your tennis. Think of it as your own pocket tennis coach. It will help you master your existing skills and develop new ones. Following its advice will develop your baseline power game as well as the subtlety of your drop shots. You'll lob with ease and pass when you please. You'll learn to serve with power or with heavy spin. You'll be a tennis force to be reckoned with all around the court and within months of reading it we guarantee you'll be challenging Mr Djokovic* for the number one spot.

Enjoy!

The Infinite Ideas boys and girls

* No, not Novak. Another one.

1

Keeping it simple works



If you watch a lot of pro tennis you'll marvel at the angles these guys produce on their approach shots. Sure if you can bang them hard into the corners with accuracy and power you've little to worry about. Most people can't but they still try. The result is unforced errors and lost games. Try being a little smarter. The approach shot down the middle of the court is one of the most intelligent plays in the game, yet few people use it. The reason why it works so well is simple geometry. If you approach down the middle and then rush the net, you force your opponent to find an angled shot to get past you. The closer you get to the net, the more difficult it is for her to find the angle to pass you and you're putting her under a lot of pressure. A slice shot is great to use here especially if you're hitting it deep and with a lot of spin. It will stay low and your opponent will probably hit it back to you at perfect volley height. Because your opponent is mid court you've got the whole court to aim at with that volley!

The killer forehand



Don't rely on getting power on your forehand by the use of power alone. Look at the top players. They rely on a very loose swing with relaxed arms. Let your arm go with the shot. To get the best out of your forehand you need to master balance. Keep some distance between your feet so you have a wide base of support. And you need to rotate properly. The shoulders should do much of the work on a good forehand. Your shoulders should first turn back, and then uncoil. Good rotation will prevent you from relying too much on your arms. Lots of folk hit their forehand from an open stance nowadays which is fine as long as your weight continues to go forward into the shot.

The knees have it



Power comes from the ground up. A lot of club players forget to use their legs when they hit a powerful shot; they just rely on their arms. But you do need to bend your knees and step into your shot. By bending your knees you keep the strings aligned with the flight path of the ball for longer, and this increases your likelihood of making a solid contact. This will give you more control and means you'll be able to place your shots better. Starting low allows you to hit with more power and gives you better balance because your centre of gravity is lower. As force is generated with help from the ground, bending your knees places your body in better position to produce trunk, hip, and shoulder rotation. Bending your knees helps you cover the court better because it puts your body in the optimum position to spring for the next ball.

Perfect practice



Most players practice by playing sets, which is ok. After all by doing this you're getting a work-out and playing a variety of shots. But the problem with this approach is that you concentrate on winning the sets rather than working on weaknesses in your game. Try this as an alternative to playing sets. Play points instead. The server has to win three points on the trot to win the game. If she loses a point before winning three in a row the other person gets to serve with the aim of winning three points herself. If you're playing this way it means you're concentrating on dominating the other player and thinking about your shots rather than the set. It's great fun and can go on for hours before a game's won.

Speeding it up



Try a session on the court using foam 'transitional' balls, the sort that tennis coaches use with kids. The theory a good one; because these balls travel slowly and cover less distance you're going to have to swing much faster to make them fly and you won't be worrying about hitting it out. This will increase the speed of your racquet head which is critical in generating power. When you've done this for a session and you return to using normal tennis balls you should find your ground strokes landing deeper and with a lot more pace.

Net results



Lots of players practice their volleying by simply playing easy above-the-net volleys. This is a mistake and doesn't represent that range of volleys you'll need to play in a real match situation. A clever opponent will do everything she can to make you play more complex shots. Next time you practice have your partner make you play a variety of volleys, hard and soft, low and high, at your body and away from it, and some tough lobs too. Try to send the ball back both deep and short and practice drop volleys and sharp-angled volleys as well. Once you become comfortable with the full range of replies needed from close to the net you'll win more points.

Don't slow down



A lot of club players make mistakes off the ground when they slow down their spin. This is often caused by nerves; they're in a tight match and they're worrying about unforced errors so they slow down their swings. The problem with this is that it causes loss of power and control. To make sure that you get the racquet through the ball with your normal swing speed aim for a safer landing spot for your shots, perhaps deep crosscourt or down the middle where there's more room for error. Then you can keep swinging out with confidence.

The open stance



The open stance is best used when you have next to no time to prepare for an oncoming ball. That's pretty often nowadays as everyone it seems tries to drive it like Rafa. This lets players load up on their hips and explode into the shot, producing forehand and backhand winners. Start with the backswing, which consists of rotating the shoulders and hips together to about 90 degrees to the right for right-handed players. You then need to shift your weight to the right foot for right-handed players. Concentrate on staying balanced throughout the swing, follow through and recovery. Now think shoulders and hips. After the backswing start the forward motion along the same path with speed and make contact with the ball as far out in front of the body as you can to provide control and power to the stroke. Try to keep the non-hitting hand pointing in the direction of the target as this will help with the height and depth on the ground strokes. And don't shift your weight too early or you're more likely to hit short.

The semi-open stance



This is pretty similar to the open stance position. It's often useful when you haven't much time to prepare for your next shot. The only real difference between open and semi-open is that you open up the step slightly more to the left (for a right-handed player) and load all your weight onto the outside hip (right). For a right-handed forehand drive begin the backswing by rotating the shoulders, hips and trunk at the same time. Step to the right with the right foot and shift the weight here too. Step into the court with your left foot; that's the key difference between semi-open and open stances. Your weight should stay on the outside foot until the stroke is completed fully. (Use opposite feet if you're left-handed).

The neutral stance



This position is recognised as the starting point for all other stances, so it is very important for beginners to master. It can be used for both forehand and backhand shots. It helps you to learn about shifting weight and rotation of the body. The neutral stance provides the best position to practice the follow through and recovery after shots, at least for easy returns. It allows you to shift your weight towards the direction of the shot and for that reason is best for hitting the one or two-handed backhand. The rotation of the hips, shoulders and trunk is the start of the backswing. You then must step out with the right foot and shift the weight there. Step forward with the left foot towards the net and shift the weight again onto the front foot before making the forward motion of the swing. Keep the weight on the front foot until the stroke has been completed through to the recovery. To finish the back foot (right) should be brought forward and around, helping to keep balance.

The closed stance



This position can be used on either the forehand or backhand shots but is best used when you're chasing down a ball on the run, or when you've been forced out wide. Your hips will close stopping any rotation and you'll need to take a couple of extra steps before rotating your shoulders or trunk. The problem with the closed stance is that your control is obviously limited as is your power and your recovery time. If you're right-handed step across with your left foot and this will bear much of the weight. It means a strong shot is dependent on power through just your arms.

Warming up your lower body



As in any sport or exercise you need to give yourself enough time prior to starting your game to properly warm up. If you don't you're liable to injure yourself as your muscles and ligaments won't be stretched prior to exertion. Start by simply jogging up and down on the spot, then sideways then forwards and backwards. Build up to a gentle jog around the court as many times as you're comfortable with. Now place your hands on your hips. Move your hips in a large circle. Keep your back straight and bend to the right and the left. Raise your arms above your head and then move them together to one side, down in front of your body and on up to the other side. Repeat, but in the opposite direction. Now widen your stance and bend forward from the waist. Reach forward between your legs and as far behind you as possible. Try to hold for five seconds. Finally think about your hamstrings. Cross your legs over so that the outside of your feet touch each other. Try to place your palms on the ground in front of you. Feel those hamstrings stretch.

Warming up your upper body



Allow yourself plenty of time prior to your actual match to stretch your upper body. Start by bending your head from side to side, backwards and forwards and from shoulder to shoulder. Don't go for the 360 degree rotation of the neck as this can be dangerous to the vertebrae. Now circle both arms forwards and backwards in arcs. Perform small circles by extending each arm level with your shoulder and tracing circles with your hands keeping the arms straight. Now cross your arms in front of your chest and swing each outwards and upwards to the sides. Finally place your arms behind you so that they meet halfway down your back. Push your arms gently and feel the muscles stretch.

Attracting your opposite



Here's a sure-fire winning tactic for beginners. Hitting a short ball at an experienced player is asking for trouble because you'll usually get it back with interest and lose the point. But beginners will often simply hit the ball right back at you. They then get stranded on the court in No Man's Land between the baseline and service line. When that happens simply hit the ball either side of her and a few feet deeper than she's standing. You will nearly always win the point as the result of drawing an inexperienced player into the centre of the court.

Height advantage



A lot of players find a hitting a backhand from above shoulder height a difficult shot to play as they cannot get much power in it. Practise hitting it high, with a lot of topspin, so that it kicks above your opponent's shoulders. What usually happens is that you'll get a weak floating ball back. You'll be able to hit a winning shot as a result, usually from the net if you've moved well enough in advance. There's another bonus with this shot; if you've hit it high your opponent will be looking up and to the side at the ball, so won't see you moving in for the volley. The point will be yours!

Mastering the slice serve



Also known as the slider serve this is a really effective service to master. It's great for controlled second services as you're not trying to knock the skin off the ball. You're aiming to have the racquet face brush around the side of the ball. This makes it spin and it takes the ball out wide which often means that the receiver has to run out of court to return the ball. To do this just remember that the ball needs to be thrown up in front of you. A little more to the right (left for left-handers) generates more spin. As you accelerate to hit the ball you're aiming to have the racquet face slide around the ball. As this happens you'll notice a different sound as the strings brush the ball and cause it to spin. The more spin you impart the further wide you can place the ball and the more swing it will have, forcing your opponent to play it from wide and giving you an open court to play at.

The power serve



The key to hitting it big is to transfer all the power you can create in your body into racquet head speed and hence into the ball. This you do through balance and timing. Start by mastering the smooth rhythm of the stroke, then build your speed up when you're confident of your core stroke. To get more power throw the ball further in front of you so you'll move your body weight forwards into the court. As you move your left arm up drive your left knee forward, making the hand and knee move together. Your legs will be slightly bent as your weight shifts forward. As the ball reaches the top of your toss, drive your legs up and forwards to the ball. This gives power from the legs into the shot and will also give you more height, allowing you to hit the ball harder at a steeper angle. Practice the toss, it's critical. Remember that to hit with power you must lose the spin on the ball, so the racquet face should hit the ball square on impact. Then, when you've mastered the powerful serve follow it up by running to the net. In the unlikely event your opponent returns your serve you can finish her off with a killer volley.

The 'kick' or top spin



This is a very effective second serve to master as it's a controlled shot that will bounce out to the (usually) weaker backhand of your opponent. The aim is to brush the racquet face on the back of the ball. It should loop high over the net and then dip down into the court. It should swing from right to left in the air (if you're right-handed) and is deceptive to your opponent. As it bounces the spin will bite into the court and it will kick high and to the right. Use a chopper grip for this shot. Bring the ball placement back slightly and to the left (right if you are left-handed), almost as if you were trying throw the ball and land it on your head. As you go to hit the ball arch your back rather more than you would usually, then hold your turn to the side a little longer and accelerate the racquet head up the back of the ball. Think of the path of your swing as being almost parallel to the baseline rather than forwards into the court. That way you'll make proper contact on the ball.

Be a volley dolly



The volley is possibly the hardest shot in tennis. You're close to the net and the ball is often on you in a second, so you need anticipation and good reflexes. But by being so far forward in the court you are putting a lot of pressure on your opponent to pass or lob you. Your positioning is crucial. Your racquet has to be in the correct position. Bring the racquet head slightly higher than you would for a normal ground stroke and move your elbows forward a little in front of the body. Move your head and hands towards the ball, forcing the racquet head out a little in front of you. Ideally you should feel your upper body go to the ball and your feet following. Don't swing the racquet at the ball, but punch it from in front of you using the wrist and forearm to bring the racquet head down on the ball. The racquet face should be slightly open. Do it correctly and the ball will take on back spin and go deep, putting your opponent under pressure. Don't worry if you get lobbed or passed a few times while you master the volley. When you learn to play it consistently you'll start to win points.

Backhanded compliments



The one-handed backhand for new players can be a difficult shot to master. It just seems somehow unnatural and often produces a weak flaccid shot. Try this. From the ready position, using your preferred grip, start your backswing as you turn your hips and shoulders. Moving towards the line of the ball shift your weight to your outside foot. As you move forward shift your weight onto your inside foot as you begin the forward swing. Try to meet the ball in front of you at about waist height. Bring your weight onto the front foot and hit through the ball. Use your whole body - legs, torso and body weight - to play the shot, not just your arms. Push up and forward with your legs as you hit for more power. Allow your momentum to take you into position for your next shot.

On the one hand, the forehand



Learn to play a powerful, consistent forehand and your game will improve immediately. Here's how. From the receiving position drive off from your legs trying to get to the ball as soon as possible. As you're pushing off try to point your hands towards the ball. Your shoulders and upper body will naturally rotate away from the ball. That way you store up energy to bring in to the shot. Now bring the racquet head back in an arc, using a circular movement as you lift it up. Bring it back then drop it lower as you accelerate forward. To generate real power you need to use virtually all muscle groups in sequence. Start with the legs, then the hips, your shoulders, arm and then your wrist. You're after fast racquet speed to hit the ball powerfully. The forward swing of the racquet should be from low to high and you should make contact with the ball near to waist height initially. Take it a little higher when you're more confident. Deep and powerful forehands will pressurize your opponents and win you more points!

Smash hits



The smash is a difficult shot for the amateur to make consistently. When you see the ball go up into the air you need to treat it as if you're about to serve, so turn sideways to it. At the same time grip your racquet as if for your service and raise it to chest height. Keeping your eye on the ball, adjust your position so that the flight of the ball is in line with your body and so that the ball comes down just in front of you. As you move you need to stay sideways on, so use side and cross over steps to adjust your position. Now when the lob is at its highest point get both hands going up together. The non-racquet hand should stretch up towards the ball. This helps balance. Take your racquet back behind you as if for your service, keep your head still and your eyes on the ball. As the ball reaches you throw the racquet head up to meet it as if serving. Don't try to slog it; the incoming ball will have plenty of pace on it so a cleanly struck shot will have more than enough power to win the point. It's all in the timing.

The perfect spot



You need to ensure that you can cover the court as well as possible, so unless you're intent on rushing the net (you brave thing) always try to return to the best position on the tennis court after you've played your stroke. Whenever possible aim to get back to a spot diagonally opposite your opponent and about three feet behind your baseline. From there you can cover the court, but you're also reducing your opponent's angles for his own shot. Also, your swift movement (you do move swiftly, don't you?) may distract your opponent and cause him to fluff his shot.

Aggressive top spinning



If you can master effective topspin shots you can play quite aggressive, pressuring tennis. The more topspin shots you hit the harder your opponent will find you to play. And because of the looping nature of the shot you can play with a greater margin of clearance over the net. Hitting topspin is more difficult than hitting flat, so there is more risk of mis-hitting. Also, if you generate less topspin than you intend you'll probably hit the ball long and out. But the risk is worth taking with a reasonable degree of topspin competence. A ball hit hard with topspin will gain speed as it bounces and arrive at your opponent's racquet faster. You can hit harder at a given height above the net than you could hit flat, and the speedy topspin ball is more likely to disturb your opponent's flow.

Early risers



Instead of meeting the ball as it drops try to move in on it and hit it as it comes up from its bounce. By getting to the ball several feet further forward you should be able to hit to sharper angles and get to the net more easily. Also your opponent will have less time to react to your shot. If you reduce your opponent's reaction time by 15 per cent it's like hitting the ball with 15 per cent more power but a lot less risk. Also you'll have less court to cover because you've cut off her angled shots rather sooner.

Serve and volley



This is a tough tactic to master but can be very useful in certain circumstances as not only will you hit winners if you're doing it well but you'll force your opponent into errors. If you find she's drifting back returns of your serve you're losing a lot of the initiative in your service games. A lot of players who can simply block decently hit serves back consistently can't even manage to hit passes or lobs on the return. Force her to try and she'll make errors and you'll win points. So if your volley is a proficient shot, use it. It'll pressure your opponent not to simply float the ball back at you as she'll assume you're going to fly at the net. She'll lose her comfort shot and will start to make mistakes.

Quick step, split-step



If you're playing an opponent who's zinging the ball all over the court try to get your feet in the split step position for each shot as your opponent begins his swing. This is a manoeuvre where you jump lightly an inch or two onto your toes as your opponent is about to play. Place your feet about shoulder width apart, and bend your knees slightly. This gets you off your heels and ready to move quickly to any position on the court. Use the split-step as your opponent starts to swing. If you time this properly you'll be on your way down from the jump just as you see the ball leaving your opponent's racquet. In mid-air you'll start to lean in the correct direction, and when you land you'll be on your way to meet the ball. The split-step gives you great flexibility around the court.

Practice that forehand



A good consistent forehand is key to tennis success at any level. You should practice as much as you possibly can. Try this: next time you're on court but not playing a game mark off about two thirds of the court. That's where you're playing from. Now get your partner to play into that space and return the ball using your forehand only. You'll have enough court to make it interesting and to replicate match conditions, but concentrating on hitting a variety of forehands will really help your ability and your confidence.

Betwixt and between



When you've had to move on court inside the baseline to take a shot there's every danger that you'll be caught in one of the worse spots on a tennis court, no man's land. Once you've played your shot you must either get back behind the baseline in preparation for the next shot or get into the net straight away. Being stranded between the baseline and the service line is a disaster. You're too far away from the net to volley properly and if the ball lands behind you can't play it with a groundstroke. So if you fancy your chances at the net and your opponent seems under pressure go forward. If you're clinically allergic to volleys get back quickly to the safety of the baseline. Don't get caught betwixt and between.

Improving the service



If you're finding it difficult to get your serves in because you're constantly netting the ball you're not hitting it at the right angle. Many amateurs hit down on the ball too much. You'd need to be about eight feet tall to be able to hit the ball in a downwards trajectory from the top of your swing and make the court. (If you are eight feet tall you don't need the rest of this tip.) Try serving from five or six feet behind the baseline. This will make you hit up more; it'll be the only way to get the ball in court. Try serving 20 or so times from this distance, then go back to the baseline and do it for real. The service box you're aiming for will seem bigger and you'll hit up and over the net much more effectively. Do this drill often enough and your service should be transformed.

Playing by different rules



Practice should be fun, and one way of making it so is to incorporate it into a game. So if you want to improve your game at the net make any winning volley you play count for two points. That way you'll be anxious to play as many volleys as possible. You could do the same for any outright winner, any winner that your opponent doesn't touch wins the game. That will make you try to be much more aggressive on court and of course your opponent will try even harder to retrieve your shot and avoid losing two points. So both of you will be trying harder. Finally, play a set where you can only win a game when you win three points in a row. That will help you focus on every point and stop the tendency many players have to get ahead in a game and then switch off. You'll develop the mind set where every point counts.

Playing by different serving rules



Practice should indeed make perfect but let's be honest, just doing constant drills can get rather boring. Try playing proper games but bend the rules a little to make you work harder on key shots. Agree with your partner that for one set only both of you can play two first serves. If neither first serve goes in then you still have your second serve. This will make you more confident at going for the big first serve. You can vary it in other ways too. If you hit an ace you win the game. Or if you double fault you lose the game. You can even try having just one serve per point. That will really make you focus on making sure you play the serve exactly as if you're playing a second service. Mixing it up in a game is fun and puts you under pressure to work on weaker shots.

Playing by different netting rules



The pros rarely lose points by hitting into the net. The same is not true of amateurs who tend to lose far too many points by hitting in to the net. You need to consider the net as your sworn enemy and avoid it all cost. One way of achieving this is to play games where you agree with your partner that any easy shot which lands in the net costs you the game. That will help you concentrate on keeping the ball in court. You need to be sensible with your partner; if the shot you're playing is a difficult one and you net it, then that can't count. If you play to these rules regularly then you'll learn to make your shots and consistently avoid hitting the net.

Doubling up; volleying



In doubles it's always a dilemma knowing which opponent to draw into the game. You need different tactics for different situations. If you're making an attacking volley aim to go past the opponent who is nearest to you. She'll have less time to react than her partner who is standing deeper. If you're playing a defensive volley the opposite applies. Aim it towards the opponent who is furthest away from you. You'll then have more time to get back in position ready for her return. The same goes if you're being brave and attempting a drop volley; playing it to the deeper opponent gives her less chance to return it, and if it is returned effectively you've two players front of court to pass or lob.

Doubles poaching



Poaching, where you take a ball that is destined for your doubles partner, is a risky business. For a start if you miss your shot you've got some groveling to do. Despite the risk of humiliation it can be a very effective tactic. Once you've done it a couple of times your opponents will be unsettled, worrying if you're going to pop up unexpectedly and take a shot they've aimed at your partner. This will make them play every shot with an eye on your movements and that's distracting. They'll miss more shots as a consequence. You can poach when the fancy takes you, or you and your partner can pre-plan it on a stroke-by-stroke basis. Many tennis games are won simply by unsettling the opposition and this is a great tactic to do just that.

Doubles ad breaks



In doubles the 'ad side' is the left side of the court of each player. It's called this because the advantage points following a deuce are always served from this side of the court. As a general rule always put your stronger partner on the ad side of the court. He'll be facing down or making serves on critical points and if he's the better player he's likely to have the confidence and the skill needed to see critical points out.

Feet on the ground



Tennis can be a brutal sport, especially on your legs, knees and ankles. After all, it's probably the only international sport that can be played on concrete. If you're playing with any degree of competency you're going to be putting a lot of stress on your feet and ankles as you make short running bursts, stop suddenly, leap, stretch and then hare off in the opposite direction. You need the correct equipment on your feet. Don't be tempted to wear running or all purpose training shoes. They're built with an absorbent thick heel for heel to toe impact. They're not going to support you through the sideways movements you'll make in a rally. Invest in a proper pair of tennis shoes. You don't need to spend a fortune. Even the cheapest pair will cushion and support you and lessen your chance of injury.

What a racquet



Manufacturing of tennis racquets is a colossal business now. It has to be to pay all those sporting superstars millions of bucks to endorse the brands. What should you look for when buying a racquet? Assuming you're just taking the game up, don't be tempted (even if you have the available bucks) by either a heavy shafted, light headed racquet or an extremely light, powerful racquet. The first is for experts, the second for people unlikely to generate much power themselves. There's nothing wrong with starting at around \$30 and buying an aluminum framed racquet. If you improve you can buy better, more advanced racquets. A graphite racquet would be your next weapon of choice and these start at around \$100. Our advice? If you're starting out in this great game don't be seduced by manufacturers' claims and gizmos. Go to a good sports shop, ask their advice and buy something that suits your ability and your pocket. If you do advance in the game then that's the time to investigate head and grip size, string tension, sweet spots and the like. And when you get to that stage you'll be spending serious money, so do your research. Your pro shop should help by lending you a variety of racquets to try and that way you will find one that suits your game.

Don't lob it short



It can be very frustrating when you're faced with a confident opponent at the net. You haven't the angle to pass him so you throw up a lob that sails over his head, but he gets back easily and hits a winner. What have you done wrong? Well, lots of players concentrate simply on clearing the opponent and the lobbed ball is often at its highest directly over the opponent's head. If that's the case it'll drop mid-court and be easily retrievable. Try instead to have the lobbed ball at its highest over the service line. That way you drive him back deeper and he'll be on the defensive, chasing to the back of the court just to make a shot.

Clay play



Playing on clay presents its own challenges, especially if you're coming to it from harder, faster surfaces. Put simply clay slows the ball down. So you need to up the number of first serves you get in as your second serve will probably be murdered by your opponent. Using a kick or slice serve will help with your accuracy so you don't always need to take a risk with a power serve. Next, try to get the ball behind your opponent in a rally. Avoid going for the open court unless you're confident of pulling out a winner. On clay go higher over the net with more topspin to increase ball speed. And finally when you're moving in for the killer volley, move on through the shot. You need to give as much power to the ball as possible because the clay surface is so slow. Your body weight behind the ball adds much needed power to your shot.

Sinking so low



Getting a low ball back in play can be a problem. Many amateurs net them as they don't position themselves or their racquet to make the play. There are some golden rules when faced with the daisy cutter. Get the racquet face under the ball and do this by making sure your knees are bent. The racquet face in turn needs to be half or fully open. To do this use a 'continental' or 'chopper' grip (imagine you're holding a axe). Finally as you're charging headlong towards the ball put the racquet out in front of your body. You'll then be forcing the ball upwards. The more low shots you get back, the more points you'll save. Obvious really, so practice!

Winning the toss



Tossing the ball properly is critical if you want a consistently strong serve. Essentially if the ball's in the wrong position when contact is made you're going to net or miss. There are some golden rules you should introduce into your game. Keep the throwing arm straight and don't flick your wrists. Hold the ball with your finger tips, not in the palm of your hand. As you're letting go of the ball try to imagine you're throwing it straight up a tube. It's essential that the ball's trajectory is straight up in the air. If you're unhappy about a throw don't make the shot but start again. If you find that your throw is fine in practice matches but you're having problems in real games then your problem is psychological. All you can do is practice your technique and, with the certainty that you can make the throw, put all doubts out of your mind when you're serving in a match.

Getting to grips: the forehand



There's a golden rule with the tennis grip. The racquet should feel like an extension of your arm. So at one level whatever feels right is the grip you should use, but it is a bit more complicated than that. For a forehand the usual grip for intermediate players is called the 'eastern' grip, but it's easier to remember as the 'hand shake' grip because it's like, well, shaking someone's hand. You should curl your fingers near the handle base so the thumb and forefinger form a V shape along the top right edge of the handle. Your palm will be behind handle. As you hit the forehand it should feel as if your hand is making the shot.

Getting to grips: the one-handed backhand



For a one-handed backhand, (left handed players please reverse these instructions) put the palm of your hand on top of the handle then make a quarter turn clockwise. Your thumb should go diagonally across the top of the grip with the thumb pad touching the flat part of the handle. Test this by putting your racquet under your left arm with just the handle showing. Now take hold of the grip with your right hand. You should be holding the racquet perfectly for a topspin backhand.

Getting to grips: the two-handed backhand



Two hands are used both by beginners for better control but also by more experienced players, including pros, for the extra power it brings. The downside is the loss of reach. The correct grip for this shot is to take the racquet in your right hand (for right-handed players) in the shake-hands forehand grip (the one that's like shaking someone's hand) then add the other hand with another shake-hands grip below it. Now move your right hand towards the top of your grip. Remember your hands should touch but not overlap.

Getting to grips: overheads and volleys



This grip is called the 'chopper' grip because you hold the racquet in the same way as you would a small axe. The head of the racquet will swing faster when you're playing serves or smashes so you'll get more speed and spin. To get the grip imagine the racquet frame is the axe head. So pick it up accordingly. Check that your thumb and forefinger are slightly to the left of the centre of the grip. That's all there is to it!

Another brick in the wall



Playing against a wall is a cheap, easy and accessible way to develop your game. But apply some discipline to it. For a start mark in chalk a net chord three feet from the ground (unless you're playing against a practice wall at a club). Mark a court out behind you if you can and play games with yourself. You have to make 20 consecutive forehand drives all from the imaginary base line. Put a target such as a square box on the wall and attempt to hit ball accurately at it with speed. Alternate your shots from forehand to backhand. Most importantly of all practice your weaker shots.

Spinning out of control



If you're under pressure you can go for the big shot but it's risky; you'll be off balance and possibly go long or into the net as a result. Mix up yours spins in your shots back to him. If you use more topspin than he's expecting then he'll get to the ball later and either hit long or net it because he's compensating for his lateness. Heavy backspin will tend to make the ball land deeper than he expects, which will also make him late or possibly early because the ball will have slowed down. You'll disrupt his flow by making use of a variety of spin shots and that will help put him, rather than you, on the back foot as he starts making errors.

The comfort of your home



You don't need to be with a coach or on court to develop your game. You can improve at home. Swingball is a great way to keep your arms toned and to get your swing in the groove. You can play against a wall. There are some great instructive products such as PracticeHit. But also if you want to be staring at the stars watch the pros. Try to work out what they do to hit those fabulous shots. Watch their body language after they've lost a set or a game-see the little techniques they use to get themselves through their problem periods. Time spent off court can be very productive indeed.

Varying the backswing



Don't just have one backswing stroke. If you do you'll have little versatility in terms of how you play against an opponent. If you're playing someone who is hitting the ball relatively gently at you try to use a long, full swing. The ball coming at you hasn't much zip on it, and the way for you to add power to the return is to generate good racquet speed through a long, full swing. Now, if you're facing someone who is striking the ball powerfully you need to add speed to the return. You do need better timing and to hit it solidly and a short, controlled backswing will achieve this. Short works best too when you've a low mid-court shot to deal with and you have no option other than to get the ball in play somehow. So variety is the spice of life where your backswing is concerned.

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First published in 2012 by

Infinite Ideas Limited

36 St Giles

Oxford

OX1 3LD

United Kingdom

www.infideas.com

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978–1–908189–89–9

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