

More Magical Moments

By Joe Dinoffer

All teachers have one thing in common. The longer we teach, the more humble we become. Why? Because experienced teachers are able to see glimmers of magic, the kind of small victories that inspire us to keep teaching. But along with experience also comes the question, "What can we have to do create those truly magical moments all the time, instead of sporadically."

This article will present the standard approach to teaching in a four-step process represented by the acronym "STIF" and also offer a shortcut to allow us to experience more and more of those magical moments.

Step One: The "S" in STIF stands for SPEAK

Normal instruction is verbal. We give the instruction and expect or students to follow and do what we say.

There are three problems with relying exclusively on verbal instructions.

First, the average adult in the United States has an attention span of only 42 words (15 seconds), which means that most of our instructions fall ineffectively on deaf inattentive ears.

Second, that most tennis teachers give far too many instructions at one time, a practice that leaves most students overwhelmed and paralyzed from being over-analyzed.

And, third, that many of these verbal instructions are given while students are moving to hit a ball. You see, motor activities are organized and executed from the right hemisphere of the brain. But, sequential thinking, i.e. receiving and following instructions, is processed in the left hemisphere. Although there are no conclusive studies showing that listening for and following instructions are difficult when a player is in the middle of executing that motor activity, we know from personal experience that this may just be a factor. Otherwise, why would we be giving the same instructions to the same students week after week and year after year (i.e. "watch the ball" or racquet back").

The conclusion? To expect a high rate of success from verbal instructions alone is probably about as realistic as waiting for snow to fall on the beaches of Waikiki. It just won't happen. Of course, some instructions must be initiated with words. What happens to these is explained in the next step.

Step Two: The "T" in STIF stands for TRANSLATE

Words are spoken and then received (hopefully) by the intended audience. But, what happens to these words and why do miscommunications occur? Think of it this way. You speak to me. Your words, like everyone else's, have a certain dialect or accent, and you speak at a certain pace. If I am accustomed to a different dialect or pace, I must first translate that message into a pace and pattern that I can readily understand. On the extreme, think of it like someone speaking a completely different language.

But, let's say that you're lucky. You speak to me in the exact accent, word selection, and pace that is perfect in harmony with mine. In that case it's just a straight translation, nothing like translating a foreign language, but a translation nonetheless. You see, your words are symbols. I still have to translate or convert them to have meaning.

Anyone who speaks a second language knows what I mean. If you are anything short of fluent, you are always having to translate what the other person is saying, in order to convert it into your own native language.

There's no way to skip this step. Someone speaks. The listener must translate what is being spoken and then create a single image or multiple images to give that translation meaning.

The next step discusses this process of creating images.

Step Three: The "I" in STIF stands for IMAGE

This step explains why there are so many success stories and studies extolling the power of visualization and imagery in sports and personal development.

I remember a visualization study conducted on the NBA Boston Celtics. The team was divided into two groups who would compete in a free throw contest. One group was taken through visualization exercises as their warm-up for the competition. The other group actually went on the court to warm up and shoot baskets. Can you guess who won? Right, the group that performed visualization.

Visualization and imagery are so essential to the way we all function that the idea of seeing something in your "mind's eye" is a common phrase. And, having a good imagination, which basically means being able to easily visualize and create images, is considered an excellent quality.

In tennis we use visualization in different ways. The three most prominent applications are:

1. The act of modeling or copying someone's strokes or style of play. Just recall how many thousands of players styled their forehands after Chris Evert or adapted John McEnroe's service stance when each was No. 1 in the world.
2. Visual aids are known to accelerate the learning process when teaching or practicing tennis. Whether its raising the height of the net to help someone visualize how high to hit groundstrokes to get them to land deeper in the court, or laying out target areas using ropes or court shapes to help them focus on placement and control, visualization tools accelerate improvement significantly, some clinical studies showing comparative improvement by as much as 200%.
3. Relaxation techniques have also used imagery techniques to help players stay calm and focused in tense situations such as tiebreakers. Sports psychologists have long recommended that players take deep breaths in between points and, to really relax, that they take short trips to the beach or the mountain, whatever image will take them to a more tranquil emotional and mental place.

Step Four: The "F" in STIF stands for FEEL

Visualization so strong that you may have to step back a second and think about this next sentence before reacting. In all sports, including tennis, all visualization must turn into feelings (a kinesthetic experience) in order to be firmly established as confident patterns, whether they be strokes or emotions. Let's take two of the situations discussed in the last section as examples:

1. Hitting higher over the net for more depth on groundstrokes - Picture yourself raising the height of a net by three feet in order to have a visual guide to hit above in order to increase depth on groundstrokes. It definitely works. But, what is really happening for this process to transition to regular play? You have to get a feel for what it's like to hit higher over the net and it is that feeling that must be tapped into whenever you need to hit the ball deeper.
2. Visualizing a calm and pleasant place like the beach to reduce tension - As Dr. Jim Loehr once said, "Emotions run the show." I mention this to confirm that, although the tension-diffusing process of taking a quick trip to the beach is a visualization exercise, the image must rest in calming your emotional state to work. In other words, the imagery must go to the next step; namely, it must become a feeling.

Does visualization and feeling work hand in hand. Yes and no. Visualization will always lead to feeling. But, on the other hand, feeling can be largely independent of

Imagery. Consider, for example, the various grips used to play tennis. They are felt more than visualized. This explains why devices that give players a quick feel for the grip (like our Grip Doctor or taping a players hand into position) work so quickly. The player jumps right to Step Four. Steps One, two and Three are virtually eliminated.

Another example is hitting spin. An advancing player can see topspin when it is hit, but more important is whether or not they can feel it. Yes, seeing the spin is important and helpful, but feeling it is essential. When that player sees the ball spinning, they are also able to feel the racquet brushing up the back of the ball. But, that

same player can also hit topspin from a ball on a batting "T" with his or her eyes closed. The player doesn't have to see the ball spinning to know it was hit with topspin. How? They felt the spin.

Conclusion: Is your teaching STIF?

After reading through these four steps of communications and skill development, you probably recognized that going through each of these stages can be a painfully slow, usually inefficient, and often ineffective process. How can this long journey that begins with each verbal instruction be circumvented or shortened for our students' benefit as well as our own? Actually, it's pretty easy. Just start off as much as possible with Step Three or Step Four. And, if you must give any verbal instructions, by all means keep your comments to under 42 words. In fact, try for less, especially with children, since 42 words is generally well past the attention span of the average child.

Follow these guidelines and you and your students will experience more magical moments than ever before.

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