

Top Drills

by Joe Dinoffer, USPTA, USPTR, ITA, USTWA

This article is a compendium of what all tennis coaches are looking for: New and creative drills! They are derived from literally hundreds of exercises which have been presented in workshops across the United States over the past couple of years. The criteria for a drill being selected for this article was simple: It had to be extremely simple and uncomplicated. Personally, I've always had trouble reading the drill pages in magazines with all of those X's, Y's, and arrows. Think about it. The best drills have unique and innovative concepts which can be conveyed quickly and easily to students without cumbersome rules. They need to be so much fun and so simple that students can use them on their own with their friends. One of the most satisfying experiences for a tennis coach is to run a drill for some students and then to see those same students practicing that same drill or game on their own later on.

The first sample of upcoming on-court action comes from Greg Patton, well-respected NCAA coach from Boise State who I was able to see conduct three presentations in 1996 alone; in Newport Beach, California; Santa Rosa, California; and in Park City, Utah. Among the many drills from Greg, the one we'll reveal now creates tremendous focus on winning the last point of each game. Here it is. Either singles or doubles are played and when one side reaches game point and doesn't win that point they go back to zero. For example, in a singles practice match if you are serving at 40/15 and lose that game point the score would then become love/30. What a simple yet fantastic way to simulate match pressure.

I like to call this next exercise "Stay Out of the River" and although incredibly simple, it is a powerful skill-builder and a lot of fun. I first saw it at a tennis teacher's conference in Munich, Germany. As you can see in the accompanying photo, the player has three dome cones and pretends they are stones in the river. The goal is to move from one side of the court to the other without getting wet, that is touching the court surface with either hands or feet. I even tried this far away from a normal tennis setting recently and three 10-year-old girls stayed focus with this one exercise for a full hour!

This next concept comes from interviews with two players from Sweden: Magnus Lundgren who now lives in Munich, Germany, and Ville Jansson, who lives in The Woodlands, Texas. We all know that the one thing we've heard a million times from some of the most respected and experienced coaches in the world, it's to stress the basics of tennis over and over again. An example is that mini-tennis is frequently viewed as an exercise conceived only for beginners. However, anyone who's seen the Swedish Davis Cup Team warming up has always seen players like Stefan Edberg drilling mini-tennis and exercises similar to mini-tennis for an hour or more in their warm-ups. In fact, even before using racquets at the beginning of practice, both Magnus and Ville explained to me how the Swedes will even play mini-tennis with their hands and feet - no racquets!

Now let's move to an old favorite of mine that was recently renamed by Greg Patton as the cross-eyed drill. With four players on a court, have players on one side of the net bounce and hit two balls crosscourt simultaneously. After that, anything goes. Quickly one of the two balls is missed and the point continues until the last ball is hit out or in the net. This is a great drill to increase ball awareness, teamwork, and reflexes. At the same time this two-ball drill extends the length of points allowing for less experienced players to hit more balls in a doubles situation.

This next exercise can be called "mini and maxi." It dramatically develops both focus and concentration while helping players gain a strong sense of momentum. Simply have two or four players playing points. Games track both mini and maxi points. A mini point is awarded for each point played, and a maxi point is awarded when one side wins three mini points in a row. The momentum in this drill rapid shifts from player to player, and games to five major points can easily take 15-20 minutes. A great variation for slightly mismatched players is to require the stronger player to win more mini points in a row to receive a maxi point. This will quickly level the playing field to challenge both sides.

Another interesting, yet incredibly simple exercise is to put both regular balls and different colored balls on a court and play either singles or doubles. If the standard yellow balls are used, the point is played with normal scoring. However, if the server puts a colored ball into play, the point scores triple. An option to the surprise factor of allowing the server to put into play a "wild card" ball without warning is to have the server announce their intent. In that case, colored balls are not needed. Just have the server say whether the point is worth one or three points before each point begins. A small warning. When I used this with my students, someone inevitably tried to manipulate the rules. They called out three points before their first serve, proceeded to miss their first serve, and then tried to change the point to a value of only one point before their second serve. The benefits of this drill include tremendous increases in focus, competitiveness, simulation of match pressure, and most importantly, fun!

Now let's share a little off-court tidbit from an interview with Rodney Harmon, tennis coach at the University of Miami, and former top 25 world-ranked player. We were talking about the importance of coiling and linkage for generating more power on groundstrokes and the serve. Rodney shared with me how he demonstrates this with his college players to get them to quickly see the benefits of coiling

and bending to generate more swing length and racquet head speed. He simply takes a rubber band and bends it around two or three fingers like we used to do when as children we would shoot rubber bands across a room. The longer the rubber band is stretched, the more power is built up which, when released, results in a forceful projectile flying across the room. When he shows this to his players and jokingly aims the coiled rubber band at them, they quickly see the benefits of increased rotation through coiling and work on it more enthusiastically themselves.

This next exercise is called "aerobic tennis" and comes from USPTR member Barbara Maitland of Massachusetts. All too often players think they have to go to the gym to work out. And, many people conclude that they don't have the time to both play tennis and work out in a gym. The result? Many of them quit playing tennis. With the Hip Hopper tennis ball pouches our players are starting with ten balls each. They are competing side by side to see which team can keep their balls in play longer. Each team has 20 balls to use up and the points can last 15-20 minutes. As compared to normal tennis when the ball can be in play as little as 15 minutes out of every hour, this exercise is incredible. What a work-out combined with the fun of playing tennis! In fact, what about the idea of promoting "Aerobic Tennis" as part of the clinics and events at your club or facility. It's a lot of fun as well as a great conditioning opportunity for players of all levels and ages!

To finish this article off, let's share an exercise from the 1996 USTA National Tennis Teacher's Conference by former world No. 1, Stan Smith. Stan had his players call out numbers from one to five representing the degrees of aggressive play that they plan to execute. For example, have players call out number five if they plan to hit an outright winner. Number one would mean they will just keep the ball in play. It also gives them instant feedback about when to hit an attacking shot. For example, if a player calls out number five and repeatedly misses the shot, then it becomes immediately clear that they should not play a number five on that particular type of ball. Therefore, improved shot selection as well as the ability to decisively pre-plan are the immediate benefits of this exercise. I tried experimenting with this exercise with my recreational level students, and although Stan recommended a one to five scale, when I simplified it to a one to three scale, my students really got excited!

In closing, if you have some games or drills of your own which you would like to share for a future article, please submit them to us by fax at 214-823-3082 or e-mail at info@oncourtoffcourt.com.

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Going for the Big Shot

by Joe Dinoffer, USPTA, USPTR, ITA, USTWA

Gone are the days when a steady rallyer from the baseline like former great Ken Rosewall can dominate tennis, if you could describe his playing style as "dominating." Great players today have "big" shots, hitting an apparently higher percentage of winners than in former decades. And this pattern is shaping the style of play that is effective today and will be effective tomorrow. It affects competitive juniors most, but also competitive and recreational adult play as well.

This creates a challenge for us as teaching professionals. Our students, aspiring to be "great players," are enthusiastic to hit these big shots, to walk in the shoes of Andre Agasse or Steffi Graf. It is up to us to not only teach them how to technically hit the big shots, but also how to develop the confidence to execute these same big shots in real match play. Five of these common big shots are:

1. winning angle volleys after approaching the net
2. overhead smashes
3. power groundstrokes with short high balls
4. attacking a second serve
5. high mid-court volleys

All of us feel comfortable teaching the techniques of these shots. But more is required. The major challenge lies in transitioning our students from success in repetition-style practice to success in a real match. An effective transition stage can be called "virtual reality" drilling. These are drills that students can utilize in a supervised yet pressure-packed competitive situation. They have to be able to feel the tingling pressure of the situation and still succeed to develop real match-play confidence. Without these transition drills, students who looked and felt great in a lesson with balls nicely fed to them come back to us with their heads down; "But I did so well in the lesson. Then, in the match I missed every overhead. I got so upset I became nervous on practically every shot for the whole match!" This story is an example of a player who is poorly prepared for match-play, not having properly gone through the transition from repetition drills to match play. Overheads are used in this story since they are such a good example of how a player's confidence can easily peak or plummet during a match. Successful competitors tell themselves, "Oh... great! Here comes a lob. Now I can win the point!" Tentative competitors say to themselves, "Oh... no! Another lob ..."

A major cause of match play pressure overwhelming a player into making mistakes and losing confidence is mental distraction. During casual play, distractions can include the weather, a tough day at school or work, an argument with a friend or spouse, or a dozen other "excuses." In match play, the primary distraction will often simply be the pressure to win. Picture champions like Pete Sampras, Chris Evert, Bjorn Borg. Their focus is always tremendous. Their distractions are few and far between.

An excellent focus aid to avoid match play distractions is drilling with a target. The typical target system used on a tennis court has always been a "bullseye target" such as a cone or racket cover. However, the ideal target system clearly defines specific court areas with ropes, cones, or balls placed in a pattern. To develop match play confidence, players must know without a doubt that if they hit the ball consistently in a specific area they will win. If they use high definition visual target areas with success in practice (both repetitive and "virtual reality" competitive drilling), they will have greater success focusing, and therefore executing winning shots in real match play. Because there is an affirmative behavior pattern in focusing on target areas and placement, the possibility of distraction is greatly reduced. One of our students in Dallas, Texas, said about target areas: "After a year using target areas, I see them on the court when they aren't even there! A great way to visualize hitting zones."

Target areas can be utilized for students to specifically develop focus during repetition drilling. These repetition drills can be with the pro or practice partner feeding, hitting with a partner, or against a ball machine. The shaded areas in the diagram are the target areas, and during the first phase of confidence-building the student grooves the proper technique plus realizes, "Yes! I really can hit this shot." Once they can hit with solid technique into a designated target area at least four out of five attempts or eight out of ten, they are ready for the match transition drills or "virtual reality." In his specialty course at the 1994 USPTA National Convention, Bill Tym said, "if a player can hit any shot ten times in a row, I tell them that they now own that shot."

These competitive drills have two phases: the first phase is to play with the target areas still set up on the court. The second phase is with competitive-style drills with the target areas removed. This second phase avoids any possible dependence upon having the targets physically present on the court. But be sure to make this transition during the same practice session to ensure strong visual carryover. The teaching pro will easily notice whether or not this transition is successful. When in doubt, ask the players how strong their visualization was of their target zones. If they have problems, identify whether the difficulties are technique related or strictly with the process of visualization. Then step backwards with the player to review that step in the process.

If their transition to virtual reality drilling without the target areas in place is successful, they are ready for a final reality check before stepping into a match. Ask the player to compare their emotional response to these virtual reality drills with their emotional response to pressure situations in match play. If the emotions were the same, they're ready. They know they succeeded in virtual reality realizing that when they play a real match it will be the same environment: both visually and emotionally. On the other hand, if their emotional comparison reveals differences, work with them to identify the specific emotions in each circumstance and line them up one by one until they consciously experience the same emotions in competitive practice and real match play. "Play as you practice, and practice as you play."

In this example we are describing the winning angle volley after approaching the net. The player who looks forward to getting close to the net to win the point will be the same player who steps in decisively to take charge on all short balls. The tentative volleyer will see a short ball and hesitate to come in to the net, knowing that hitting a volley can be risky business. The goal for our students is to

develop confidence with these critical "big shots," the real turning points in match play. They will eagerly see set-up balls as opportunities to win rather than be tentative for fear of missing.

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