

“Follow-Through” and other Lesson Myths

Just for the record, let me start by saying that every player requires a good follow-through. This article is not about saying there is no such thing as a follow-through but, that this critical tennis movement (and others) are used as inefficient teaching points by mistakenly connecting false results to them.

It is easy to see numerous teaching materials where the follow-through is said to give more power, better depth, more spin, and add height to the ball. It is even believed to control direction (if one follows-through in the direction they want to send the ball). In other words, the follow-through is touted as a key problem-solving element for players. Even in the 21st century, these misconceptions are still spread by coaches in lessons, tennis publications, and videos.

Ball Control & Problem-Solving

Ball control is the #1 way players solve problems on court. For example, if an opponent comes to the net (a problem since, they have a positioning advantage), you can solve the problem by controlling the ball's height (send a lob) and make them give up the net. If you need to make an opponent move, you can control the ball's direction and send it away from the opponent, etc. To successfully play tennis, players need to know what makes the ball do what they want.

Direct vs Indirect

The follow-through (and other movements) while helpful, don't directly determine what the ball does. Manipulating the ball is determined by what the racquet does to the ball at impact. The racquet's Path, Angle and Speed (called the P.A.S. Principles) are all determining factors for ball control. The characteristics of the ball the player receives also determines what a ball does however, for this article, we will limit our discussion to projection (rather than reception) elements.

The follow-through is simply a by-product, a **result**, of the PAS elements. For example, if one has a moderately low to high swing path and good speed, a 'traditional' follow-through will be the result (unless a player makes an additional effort to stop the racquet).

So, what's the harm in using something like the follow-through as a ball control teaching point? Imagine a typical lesson. The player wants to learn to hit the ball crosscourt. The coach tells her to line up her feet and shoulders in the direction she wants to hit, impact earlier, and follow-through in the direction of the shot. While it is true all of these elements are *helpful*, a student can do all of

them and still not have the appropriate racquet face angle at impact (the true determining factor of direction).

The result, a frustrated player who did what the coach said and still didn't have good results. For many players this is the reason they drop tennis (*"What an impossible game, I did what the coach said and it still doesn't work, this is too tough, I think I will try brain surgery"*).

Since these movements really don't control what the ball does, trying to use them to control the ball leads to dissatisfaction. What is so misleading is that, while it is true having the right PAS at impact will give you a follow-through, the reverse, (controlling the follow-through to somehow control the PAS), will not. The ball control problems players encounter on the court are only indirectly influenced by stroke movements.

A student should get more information about how to make the ball do what they want in a lesson than how their technique is supposed to look.

Here are some other 'coaching myths' out there and the real truth behind the techniques.

Other Myths	Truth
-Turn your hips for more power -Bend your knees on the serve for more power	One can do both those movements and not hit any harder. Racquet velocity is the true determining factor for power. If movements don't add up to more speed, no power results.
-Step into the ball for more power on volleys & groundstrokes	This is related to the point above. One can step into the ball and still not send it hard. Transferring one's weight is not a major contributor to racquet speed (although it helps). Using rotational force (called, angular momentum) is more effective for creating speed and top players use a combination of turning and transferring weight (angular & linear force).
-Use topspin to get more power	Adding spin <i>decreases</i> the forward velocity of the ball. The direction of the racquet speed is the important point. For example, a 50 mph flat swing will have more forward power than a 50 mph low to high swing. The resulting topspin will decrease the forward power of the ball.
-Bend your knees for more height	It is totally possible to fully bend one's knees and still hit the net. What a coach is really trying to say is, <i>"If you start your racquet below the level of the ball and rise through the impact, this will send the ball higher. Lowering your body will help to get the racquet lower than the impact"</i> . Great coach, so why do you think telling someone to, "bend your knees" will automatically do all that? The low to high racquet path through the impact is the determining factor for height.

-Stop to be balanced for your shot (groundstrokes and volleys)	Being balanced is a crucial aspect of any shot however, balanced and 'stopped' are not the same thing. Stopping will often 'put on the brakes' for all the movements required in a stroke. One can be in 'dynamic balance' and still have movement (just watch the pros groundstrokes & volleys).
-Take your racquet back (on groundstrokes)	This common misconception separates racquet from body movement and leads to overusing the arm inefficiently in the stroke. It is the body turn (especially the shoulder preparation) that prepares the racquet more than 'independent' arm movements. A coach should look for the body preparing correctly to set the racquet.
-Roll over the ball for topspin, under for underspin	Fortunately, this myth was put to rest a long time ago but it bears repeating. Spin results from the path of the racquet and the angle of the racquet being different (e.g. topspin results with a vertical racquet face and a low to high path). An impact is only milliseconds long, not enough time to 'roll' the ball. The racquet will often roll after a heavy spin shot, but only <i>as the result</i> of the racquet path and rotation of the forearm. The ball is long gone by the time the racquet rolls. Trying to roll the racquet will not produce the spin.

It is all too easy to fall into the trap of, 'indirect coaching'. It is a false connection between style and results (look a certain way to project the ball a certain way). Pro players reverse that. They project the ball where they want and that's why they look a certain way. This also accounts for the big variation in the styles of top players. They all get the physics of striking the ball right otherwise, it wouldn't go where they wanted. For example, Andy Roddick used to have a more 'classical' preparation on his serve. He basically went out one day and tried to find a way to hit it harder and came up with what is now called the 'abbreviated preparation'.

One can also see these style variations in the way top players prepare their body and racquet on forehand groundstrokes. They all prepare at the optimal time however, some prepare their racquet in a big loop, some prepare straight back, and some take it down-then-up.

So what does this mean for coaches and players?

Coaches need to coach technique based on **principles** rather than conforming people to the 'look' of a stroke. As long as the principles are adhered to, each individual will work out their own unique style. Coaches should only make changes when the principles are not working (not when a student doesn't look a certain way). The key principles that govern technical stroke development are the three "E"s:

- **Effective:** The technique must allow the player to make the ball go the direction, height, distance, speed and spin it should to perform the tactic the player selects
- **Efficient:** The technique must not stress the body or joints in a way that promotes injury
- **Economical:** The technique must not waste movement or energy)

Most coaches know about these principles, and will agree that technique should be individualized for the player however, the reality is, they coach everybody the same way and conform them to the same style. By using technical principles rather than technical myths, coaches can develop technically strong players within their individual styles.

Other ACECOACH.COM Resources:

There are a number of additional articles on www.acecoach.com that explore Ball Control. Go to the AcePlayer page (click on Ace Player at the top left of the home page) for articles on all the Ball Control principles.

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