



COACH to COACH

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TACTICS - THE SECRET TO GREAT TECHNIQUE

Technique is the favorite topic of most people involved in tennis. Players talk about it (just listen to any post match conversation), coaches talk about it, parents, TV commentators, the list goes on. The majority of lessons people take emphasize technique. Just look at tennis videos, magazines, and websites, and see what they talk about most? Technique seems to be the, 'big fixation'.

The reason is that tennis is a *complex* motor sport. The coordination, agility and balance required is challenging even for the best athlete. You could take an athletic phenom who has exceptional mental toughness (like Michael Jordan for example) and, if he had no previous tennis training, most club players would take him apart on the court. Their **technical** superiority would win the day.

Learning technique is a critical aspect of tennis. Any way to improve and speed up the process of learning technique would be invaluable for every player and coach. That process is now here.

A NEW WORLD ORDER

The Game-based approach (GBA) is a new trend in learning tennis that is gaining prominence world-wide. The premise for the GBA is simple: Tennis is a game. Every game needs to be *played* and playing is a *tactical* endeavor. In regards to technique, tennis is not figure skating. No judges are at the side saying, "*Your follow-through was much better than your opponent's, 15-0 for you!*"

Technique is second (behind tactics) *but not secondary*. Don't misread this! I am not saying technique is not important. It is critical for tennis success. However, if you really want to set the stage for meaningful **technical** stroke development, the key is **tactics** (no, this is not a typo).

Most players and coaches are unaware of the debate going on in coaching circles surrounding the GBA. Detractors mistakenly think that technique is mishandled or ignored in a GBA. That is only true if a GBA is applied incorrectly. If we understand what the current motor learning research is telling us, the Game-based approach is the **best and most effective** way to learn technique.

THE TWO BECOME ONE

For many, technique and tactics are two distinct and separate categories. Nothing could be further from the truth. In today's world of biomechanical analysis and high-speed digital imaging, the tactical/technical connection gets lost all too often. This false separation causes players to spend thousands of dollars on technical lessons that don't improve their play much at all. If you ask a group of players at any park or club, "How many of you lose to opponent's who are technically worse than you?", almost everyone will raise their hand. Everybody can tell you about the latest techniques but few know how to play well. This shouldn't be the case.

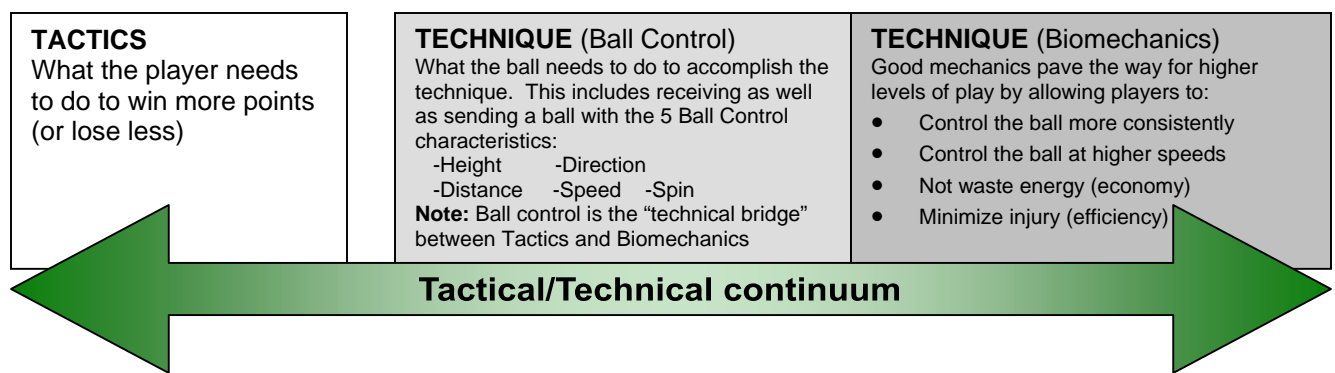
The tactical/technical connection is simple. **Technique is only a means to perform a tactic.** Technical skill by itself is useless in a game if it is not used in the right way, at the right time and in the right location. The fact is, without tactics, good technical strokes are simply an exercise in looking stylish. Imagine a soccer player who kicks the ball with impeccable skill. His shot on net beat the goalie easily. Although he kicked with great technique, his team was furious. Why, under pressure he put the ball in his own net. Good technique, wrong tactic. This may be an extreme example yet in tennis, players execute really bad ideas with nice strokes all the time.

Learning a stroke without a tactical intention is deficient. How many players have had a coach feed them baskets of balls to 'groove' a stroke and were unable to use it in a match? If the coach doesn't spend a lot of time integrating the skill into tactical play, the likelihood of the player using it in real matchplay is little to none.

The reason? The stroke was learned 'isolated' from reality. In real match play, every stroke requires decision-making. Tactics are about decision-making. It is the choice a player makes of what technique to use, when, where, and against who. No one can play well without tactics, and no tactics can be executed without some form of decision-making.

If a coach can grasp the critical point that there is a smooth connection between tactics and techniques, their coaching upgrades dramatically.

This is the tactical to technical continuum:



This continuum may seem complex at first but in my experience, having trained hundreds and hundreds of coaches, it is one of the most important concepts they need to master for advanced coaching (not coaching advanced players, but advanced coaching). The continuum works like this: First define the tactic the player needs to perform (e.g. A forehand crosscourt rally shot). Next, determine the key Ball Control characteristics needed for the tactic (e.g. the ball must be higher, with an arc trajectory and topspin, to the crosscourt corner).

With the tactic defined, the technique to control the ball is directly determined by what the racquet does to the ball at impact. These are called the P.A.S. Principles (Racquet path, angle, and speed). For our example, the racquet **path** would be low to high (approximately 40 degrees), the **angle** would be vertical with the strings facing towards the crosscourt corner, and the **speed** would be medium pace but accelerating through the impact for topspin. This aspect of technique is called “Effectiveness” (what the ball does), and is the bridge between tactics and biomechanics.

Finally, the mechanics needed to perform the shot consistently with economy and efficiency would be applied. The key point here is that the mechanics are used for a specific purpose. In our example, one technical element the player would be encouraged to perform is to rotate their hips and shoulders through the shot (link their arm and body together). This rotation would help the player to extend their racquet face towards the target for consistency, help the racquet **speed** by extending the range of motion and allowing more segments to contribute, and make the **path** easier to perform (not rotating would produce an ‘arm-only’ short action). The point is, technical instruction should be to control the ball, in order to perform a tactic (not just because a coach says to do it).

THE TACTIC DETERMINES WHAT TECHNIQUE IS ‘PROPER’

As an example, let’s look at world #1 Roger Federer. Look at his follow-through in the following three photos below. Remember, all are forehands, and in all of them he is in a baseline exchange. Which one is ‘proper’?



Photos courtesy of TennisOne.com

Let's explore the tactics behind the techniques. In photo #1, Roger's follow-through is down and around his left hip. This would be considered 'wrong' by many coaches. However, it is excellent technique when the tactic is a fast topspin shot that he intends to follow to the net. His follow-through was the natural result of his racquet accelerating upwards on the ball through impact with a full body rotation. Any other follow-through wouldn't have allowed his body and racquet to do what it needed to accomplish the tactic.

In photo #2, Roger performs a more 'classical' over-the-shoulder finish. This was the result of Roger hitting a deep penetrating crosscourt to neutralize his opponent in a rally. The speed and path required to make this shot took his racquet through this follow-through.

In the third photo, Roger's follow-through ends up circling the back of his head (what I call a 'Lasso' finish). Strange as it looks, this is a common shot for all pros. It is the result of an impact being on the side with a steep, low-to-high path (an 'out-front' impact would not allow the required vertical path), and a quick, face-the-opponent, recovery. The tactic is that the opponent has moved him to the side. To respond, he sends the ball with a high arcing topspin to the middle of the opponent's court. If he can get his opponent behind the baseline in the middle of the court, they have less angles and chance to hurt him. You will often see this technique to hit an arcing crosscourt as well.

These are not, 'one off' cases. Just watch any pro tennis match and you can see them all doing these shots. Are they all wrong? If so, they really should give those millions of dollars back! Obviously, they are all 'proper' (perfectly fit to the situation encountered).

Technically, it is not only the follow-through that varies when the tactic changes but the size of the preparation, speed and rhythm of the swing, racquet path, body rotation, impact point, and footwork as well. **These are not the expression of players 'styles' but the application of situation specific technique.**

LEARNING 'PROPER' TECHNIQUE

So which technique do you teach? Is there such a thing as a 'basic' one that every one should learn? When learning the game, it is best to start with the rally shots. This would be the groundstroke techniques that allow a consistent, neutral exchange. On the serve and volleys, the same principle applies (shots that allow a player to remain neutral are the best place to start).

However, having said that, even for a beginner, as soon as the situation changes, the technique must change as well. Every shot in tennis is like a move in chess. The player sees what's going on with the opponent, their location, and the ball received, decides what tactic to do, and applies situation specific technique. If the technique doesn't fit the situation, a poor shot will result. Trying to use the 'one size fits all' forehand you paid hundreds of dollars for won't work. No adaptation = no effectiveness.

After the *neutral* shots, it would be good to add *defensive* actions (to maintain consistency when challenged more). Then *attacking* actions could be added to increase pressure on opponents and finally *countering* actions to handle higher speed play.

No matter what technique is learned, it is important for coaches to keep the connection between their tactics, Ball Control, and mechanics. The greater the disconnect, the more disservice is done to the player learning the techniques.

CONCLUSION

For example, you see your opponent wide on his forehand side and he sends a mediocre rally ball crosscourt to your forehand. Which forehand technique do you apply? The sharp angled crosscourt topspin 'dip'? The looping arc deep topspin to the centre? Or, do you re-direct the ball with a drive down-the line? Every shot in tennis presents choices, and each one requires very different technique. Your selection is every bit as important as your form.

Is it obvious now why learning strokes in isolated repetition doesn't fully equip players to **play** successfully? Tennis was not created so players can follow-through! Technique is only a means to play (not an end in itself). To really improve technique, remember the key, **tactics!**

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If you would like to ask a question, give feedback, or want more information, contact us at:

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