

The Legend of Backhand Bob—The Rest of the Story . . .

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Backhand Bob showed up a few minutes early for his 9:00 a.m. lesson with young Joe Pro, with a glimmer of hope that, maybe, after today's lesson, Bob's results against his weekly rival, Herb the Hacker would finally change for the better. He had just purchased the latest racquet from the pro-shop, the MegaPro Super Smacker. It was the ultimate in power, control, spin and vibration dampening. And since his old racquet got wrapped around the net post on court #5 after another humiliating defeat against Herb, Bob was hoping that the Super Smacker would be the secret weapon to liberate him from the throes of defeat.

Fortunately for Bob, Joe was ready for him this time. Joe was anxious to practice some patterns with Bob that would take away Herb's strengths, protect Bob's weaknesses, and allow Bob to hit his stronger shot (the forehand) more often.

The lesson began with Joe and Bob rallying very gradually from the service lines and eventually progressing back to the baseline, while trying to keep one ball in play. This gave Bob a chance to get warmed up a little bit more and practice hitting in a more realistic setting. It also emphasized the importance of keeping the ball in play and allowing the strokes to get grooved.

Joe finished the cooperative hitting segment with serves and returns and even played out a few points. After a thorough warm up with Bob and creating a more realistic and match-like environment, Joe was ready to proceed with the guts of the lesson. Following is the progression that took place:

1. Joe served some balls to Bob from the ad court and instructed him to try and direct the returns down the line to a targeted area in the deuce court. (Bob was normally very defensive with his backhand, often landing his shots cross-court to Herb's crafty forehand, which launched the vicious cycle of frustration.)
2. After several serves, Bob was getting more of the returns in the designated area. Joe took a few moments to demonstrate that squaring his racquet more behind the ball and exaggerating the finish towards the target area would result in a more penetrating shot. *He recognized that a slight adjustment with Bob's grip would be helpful, but he wanted to*

stay on task with firming up a stronger tactical foundation first. Also, Joe recognized that Bob had been competing with this grip for 20 years and it would take some time adjusting to a change of this nature.

3. Joe instructed Bob to continue returning the serves to the deuce court and to play out each point. Some of the returns went in the intended direction and others did not. Bob recognized that when he hit to the deuce court, the ball often came back to his forehand and he felt more in control.
4. Joe and Bob continued to play out points, taking turns serving and returning. Joe realized that helping Bob get to the net would be another effective option to reduce Herb's ability to slice and dice Bob around the court. To encourage confidence with this tactic, Joe gave Bob an extra point for every time he came to the net.
5. Finally, Joe removed the targets that were used in segmenting the court and finished by playing a tiebreaker with Bob. (Joe even tried to recreate some of the shots that he saw Herb using.)

By the end of the lesson, Bob felt more empowered than ever. He understood how Herb took advantage of points and now he had some options to turn the tables in his favor. He would no longer be a helpless victim to the slop and chop action of Herb the Hacker.

At the same time, Joe was feeling very satisfied that he had given Bob the necessary tactical fundamentals to improve his quality of play. He looked forward to developing additional parts of Bob's game such as firming up the backhand technique under point situations, serving to weaknesses, pulling opponents out of position, and capitalizing on opportunities at the net.

As Bob and Joe gathered up the last few balls from the lesson, both of them were grinning from ear to ear. "I should charge another \$10-\$20 per hour for lessons as good as these," thought Joe. As Bob slipped his new racquet into a sparkly metallic cover, the only thing he could think was, "Herb is really in for it now. This Super Smacker is amazing!"

Joe Pro's New Recipe for Success:

1. Warm players up with cooperative hitting as opposed to feeding balls to them.
2. Evaluate students from match play and game like situations prior to breaking down any specific skills.
3. Consider all skills of the tennis equation when developing players: tactical, technical, physical, and mental.*
4. Finish with match play scenarios to cement the skills addressed in the practice/lesson.

Joe Pro's Old Recipe for Teaching:

1. Warm up students by feeding balls to them—creates dependency on coach and results in unrealistic playing environment.
2. Fail to observe students in realistic match situations and point scenarios (there is no substitute for match play and what it reveals).

3. Focus primarily on technique as a means to improve players—this is shortsighted since technique is just $\frac{1}{4}$ of the overall tennis equation.
4. Assume that the skills worked on automatically transfer into match conditions.

Resources: *Drilling for the Game Based Approach; 21st Century Tennis Coaching, Wayne Elderton, www.acecoach.com.
USTA Games Approach to Coaching Tennis video, Human Kinetics
ITF Doubles Tennis Tactics video, Louis Cayer, Human Kinetics