

# The Legend of Backhand Bob

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The following events are based on a true story. Some facts have been altered and embellished (to say the least) and names have been changed to protect the innocent and the reputation of those involved.

One Saturday morning many moons ago, at a tennis facility deep in the heart of America (well, maybe more like the gall bladder of America) a gentlemen named “Bob” showed up for a 9:00 o’clock lesson. That’s not the surprising part, there’s more. Bob explained to the pro that every week when he plays his brother-in-law “Herb” he ends up losing because Herb keeps picking on his backhand. Bob felt if he could improve his backhand, he would finally be able to beat this long-time nemesis and earn the respect of all the players in the “C” Men’s Tuesday night singles league.

Now the pro, we’ll call him “Joe,” was fresh out of college. He was up on the latest in biomechanics, had countless years of experience under his belt (he was 21), and plain and simple felt he knew everything there was to know about tennis. Joe immediately said to Bob, “Let’s take a look at that backhand—we’ll get it fixed in no time.”

Joe proudly wheeled out his Super Pro MegaCart, which he boasted could easily hold 500 tennis balls. After telling Bob to go stand on the baseline, Joe immediately began feeding balls to Bob’s backhand. Within seconds, Joe had already diagnosed the problem. He was very proud of himself. He even considered at that moment the idea of raising his lesson rates because someone with a perceptive eye such as his is hard to find.

Joe explained to Bob that his shoulder was opening up and creating inconsistency with his shot. That made sense to Bob and approximately 500 balls later, Bob’s backhand was looking sharp. He was controlling the shot, it felt good off his racquet, and Herb better watch out!

The next week, Bob showed up for another 9:00 o’clock lesson with Joe. “So how’d it go with Herb last week?” Joe asked. “I just don’t get it,” Bob responded. “My backhand felt so good after we worked on it but when I played Herb on Wednesday it just seemed to disappear.” “That’s odd,” said Joe. “Let’s take a look at it.” Joe wheeled out his SuperPro MegaCart and began feeding balls to Bob. “Yup, that’s what I thought. Your shoulder is opening up again. We

can fix that.” Five hundred balls later, Bob’s backhand was grooved and feeling good again. Both of them knew Herb was really in trouble this week.

Wednesday came and went, and once again, Bob lost to Herb. The good news is that Joe was able to see the match that week. Being the competitive young teaching pro that he was, Joe wanted to find out exactly what was happening during Bob’s weekly grudge match.

It turns out that Herb was a really tricky player. He was left-handed, the king of slice and dice, the boss of slop and chop, and knew how to get Bob rattled. Herb liked to control points with his forehand and Bob very rarely got the shot he wanted. “Wow,” Joe thought to himself. A whole new world of options came to mind after seeing Bob in real competition. Joe decided that the lesson next Saturday would be very different. He needed to be more perceptive to Bob’s all-around game including his style of play, shot selection, strengths and weaknesses, movement, fitness level, and mental attitude in match situations.

Once this light bulb was clicked on for Joe, he immediately scratched out the following plan for Saturday’s lesson:

- Instead of starting off the lesson with ball feeding, rally with Bob first and include all the strokes (start short court and progress to full court).
- Mix up the shots to Bob during the warm-up rallies (vary the height, placement, depth, spin, and pace) and evaluate strengths and weaknesses.
- Hit serves and returns to Bob and play out some points; Note the shot selection and style of play preferences. Identify Bob’s ability to move from side to side, up and back, as well as his general fitness capacity. Clue into Bob’s behavior during point play. Does he get frustrated or discouraged easily? Does he lose confidence in his shots after losing a point? How does he respond under simulated pressure points?

Once this more “holistic” assessment is complete, Joe can identify areas where the greatest improvement can occur. For instance, Joe recognized that Bob failed to hit his backhand down the line against Herb’s backhand, thus allowing left-handed Herb to control points with his forehand. Addressing the tactical issue of hitting down the line to Herb’s weakness would have the greatest impact for improving Bob’s chances of winning. It would result in more forehands for Bob and keep his weaker side more protected.

The challenge with Joe’s original approach to the lessons with Bob is that he made the assumption that cleaning up the backhand stroke by itself in isolation from tactics and match conditions would somehow carry over in Bob becoming a more effective tennis player—and against all styles of play, all court surfaces, and everything else. I know Joe thinks he’s good but nobody’s that good. It’s the difference between teaching people to be better ball hitters and teaching them how to become better tennis players.

Stroke technique is more effectively taught when done in the context of how it applies in match situations. If Joe had addressed the tactical needs up front as the basis for integrating some technical work on hitting the ball down the line (being sure to cement this under match like conditions), Bob’s results would have been much more productive. Proper ball feeding in the right context and the right amount can be quite effective for player improvement. But too much

ball feeding without any tactical connection can be more harmful than helpful. Also, since we are not able to see our students compete as much as we would like, it becomes critical to frame each lesson with match play and point scenarios at the beginning of a lesson to more accurately reveal areas needing to be addressed.

The moral of the story is in order to improve our effectiveness as coaches we need to evaluate players more holistically and not just reach for the quick technical fix. Technique represents  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the tennis equation along with tactics, fitness/movement, and mental toughness. If we work with players with all four of these antennas raised, we more appropriately equip them to become better tennis players overall when facing the real world of match play.

Be on the lookout for future articles featuring the adventures of Backhand Bob and Herb the Hacker.

Additional Resources: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Tennis Coaching, Wayne Elderton, [www.acecoach.com](http://www.acecoach.com).  
USTA Games Approach to Coaching Tennis video, Human Kinetics  
ITF Doubles Tennis Tactics video, Louis Cayer, Human Kinetics