

## OBSERVATION SKILLS in COACHING

### Tennis Uses “Global” Skills

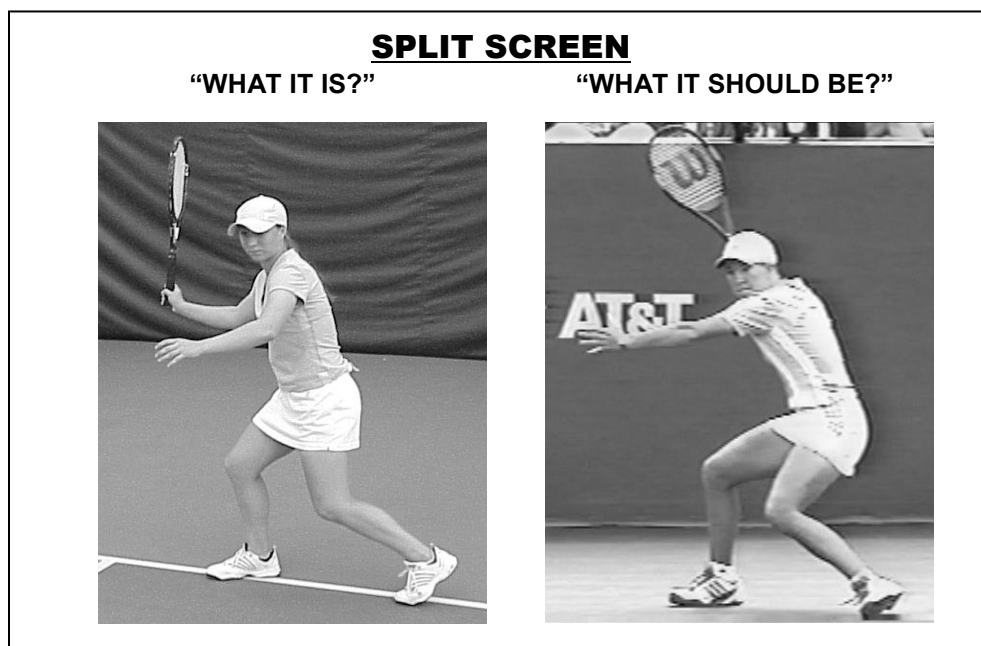
There are four basic categories of skills in tennis. These make up what are commonly referred to as ‘Global’ (Holistic) skills. These are also called “Performance Factors”. They include:

- Technical skills
- Tactical skills
- Physical skills
- Psychological skills

When a player plays the game, they use all of these skills therefore, an effective coach must observe and evaluate skills in all four categories. This article will focus specifically on *technical* observation since, that is the most common category coaches are tasked to deal with.

### The “Split Screen” Evaluation Process

There are two steps in an effective evaluation. First, the coach must see what really happened or, “what it is”. This is the *observation step*. Next, they must compare that observation to, “what it should be”. This is the *evaluation step*. This comparison is called a coach’s ‘Split Screen’.



Hennin-Hardenne photo courtesy of tennisonline.com

The quality of a coach’s Split Screen is a determining factor of their coaching level. Seeing the reality of what your player does, and comparing that to the observed reality of what a top player does in the same situation, is critical for successful coaching.

## The Observation Step

The observation step is foundational to the evaluation step. An improper or flawed observation will lead to a poor evaluation. Observation is one of the most significant skills a coach must master. Unfortunately, coaches rarely practice or improve their observation skills because they think observation, 'just comes naturally'. Does every coach watching a skill performance see the same things?

After doing coaching conferences and workshops around the world, Canadian Coaching consultant and former Head National Coach, Louis Cayer has found only 20% of any coaching group accurately sees what happens during a shot (Of course, we all think we would be in that 20%!)

Here is a little test. Look at the sentence in the box below, give yourself a full minute to scan it well. Then, answer the question, **how many letter "F's" are in this sentence?**

FINISHED FILES ARE THE RE-  
SULT OF YEARS OF SCIENTI-  
FIC STUDY COMBINED WITH  
THE EXPERIENCE OF YEARS...

Did you scrutinize it thoroughly? Give it one more attempt. The answer is, there are 6 letter "F's". Is that how many you got? If not, look again.

Observation is not as simple as it seems. There are many brain processes, pre-conceptions, and even beliefs that can interfere with observing. In the case of the test above, the typical person doesn't record the letter "F" when it is in the word, "of" because it registers the word as "ov". So what about observing tennis skills? An effective coach takes into account these challenges when observing. They must seek to be as objective as possible.

## Barriers to Objective Technical Observation

Many coaches are entrenched in a technical way of thinking called, "Model methodology". In this approach, technical skills are grouped into stroke models. These are idealized versions of the forehand, backhand, serve, volley, etc. For example, the footwork model from decades ago for the groundstrokes said, the 'proper' groundstroke had a linear weight transfer, always progressing from the back foot to the front foot.

The problem? The majority of situations in today's tennis include many types of steps: sideways, back, forward, on the spot rotations, etc. Athletic actions are required to successfully play the game, not robotic movements.

For observation purposes, these models are counter-productive. It is difficult to objectively observe when one has a very narrow definition of what is 'correct'. **In reality, the situation determines what technique is the most successful or correct.** By having these, 'one size fits all', models in mind, a coach prejudices their observation. In other words, if you don't believe a player should ever move backwards, when they do, it will not register in your mind (like the letter "f" in the word "of"). Or, you will immediately categorize it as 'wrong' and ignore it.

The goal of the observation step is to simply observe what occurs with no preconceived notions, beliefs, or judgments. Only then does a coach have the appropriate information to progress to the evaluation step.

### **Observation Framework**

Because there is so much going on in a shot, it is important to only look at one thing at a time. The trap most coaches fall into is, *“If you look at everything, you will see nothing”*. Research in observation shows that novice coaches actually see as many things as advanced coaches. The problem is, many of the things they record are not relevant to the performance of the skill. Advanced coaches zero in on the important components of the performance.

Observation is made easier if a systematic framework is used. An observation framework focuses your watching by asking questions about what is observed. Here are the recommended categories of observation and some suggested questions:

#### **1. Footwork**

- How does the player initiate movement to the shot? (e.g. drop-step, step out, etc.)
- How does the player get to the shot? (shuffle, run, etc.)
- What foot does the player push-off and which one do they land on during the shot? (right-right, left-left, right-left, left-right)
- How does the player recover (shuffle, cross-over, cross-run, etc.)

#### **2. Racquet P.A.S. (Path, Angle, Speed)**

- What is the racquet path through the shot? (level, low-to-high, high-to-low)
- What is the racquet angle through the shot? (vertical, closed, open, angled right, angled left, etc.)
- What is the racquet speed through the shot? (accelerating, maintaining speed, decelerating)

#### **3. Linkage (use of body segments)**

- Do they rotate or stay sideways?
- What does each segment do? (legs, hips, trunk, shoulders, elbow, wrist)

#### **4. Court Location**

- Where are they located up and back? (compared to baseline, serviceline, net)
- Where are they located laterally? (compared to sidelines and centre mark)

Once your observation skills improve, more categories will be included in your observation. You will be able to ‘multi-task’ observationally.

### **Observation Practise**

Video clip libraries like [www.tennisone.com](http://www.tennisone.com) are invaluable to study the reality of today’s modern game. Coaches can practice observing the clips at regular speed. They can then play the clips in slow motion or, freeze the action, to see if their observations were correct.

Every coach can benefit from training their observation skills.

We would like to acknowledge Louis Cayer for providing inspiration and source material  
If you would like to ask a question, give feedback, or want more information, contact us at:  
[www.acecoach.com](http://www.acecoach.com)