



# COACH to COACH

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*This article uses excerpts from Wayne Elderton's manual: "Situation Training: Drilling for the Game-based approach".*

## TO DRILL OR NOT TO DRILL ...

Many drills commonly used by coaches have little to do with a Game-based approach (GBA). Some proponents of GBA outright reject drilling as a tool coaches should use. Having used GBA for over 15 years (and having observed the pendulum sway back and forth from isolated basket feeding, to 'purist' GBA, to a balanced approach), I don't believe a coach using a GBA must throw all their drills away. The key is to expand their view and scope of drilling.

In my view, drilling is defined as: **"modifying a situation to get repetition on a selected skill"** (could be technical, psychological, etc). It is not confined to basket feeding. Drilling can also be cooperatively hitting 'live'-balls or realistic point play games. Drilling is critical in the process of learning tennis since many skills don't get sufficient repetition to improve in play situations. Basket feeding could have an important part to play in this process. For example, say a player needs to acquire a new feeling of 'carrying' the ball on a low backhand volley to keep the ball deep. Even a tightly controlled live-ball playing situation may only yield 2-5 repetitions per minute (even less with lower level players). This makes learning slower than necessary.

On the other hand, basket feeding may be a useful tool initially but things need to move on. If all a coach does is basket feed, the motor pattern is acquired but it will transfer little or not at all to real game play because the skill is isolated and not set into a realistic tactical, environment. In other words, the player will know 'how' to stroke but not getting repetition on *why* and *when* to use the skill will prevent students from using it successfully in match play.

In motor learning there is a rule: **"The transfer of learning between two situations is directly proportionate to the degree they are similar"**. This is why many drills are good for exercise, and general hitting, but do little to transform the way people play. And isn't the point of lessons for people to play better (not just do great things in practice)? Most drills are typically about strokes and don't connect to real tennis situations. Drills are more effective when they are about *situations* rather than strokes. By recreating a realistic tennis situation, the skills learned will transfer to match play more effectively.

By understanding what makes up a game, you can 'translate' your current drills into more relevant GBA drills. You can balance the tactical strengths of a GBA without losing the advantages of technical repetition. You can also create hundreds of drills using the same system.

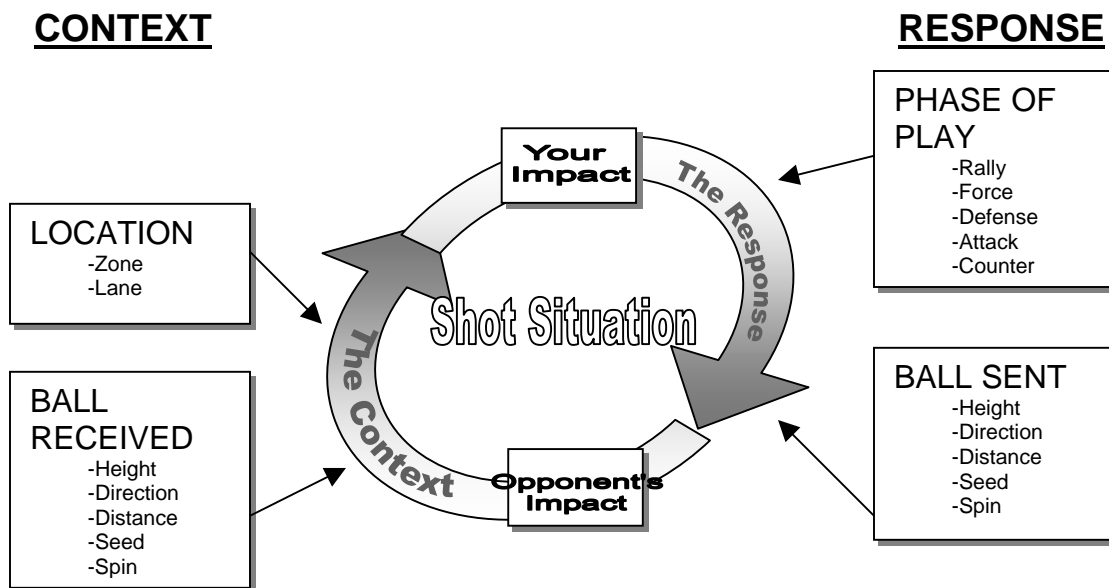
Two keys are required to make GBA relevant drills:

### Key #1: TRANSLATING DRILLS INTO SITUATION TRAINING

Whether playing chess or tennis, the foundation of *playing* any game is tactical. Tactics are the relationship between the player, an opponent(s), and the elements of the game (e.g. a ball, the court, etc). These all can be described in terms of '**situations**'. A situation brings together all the elements of tennis (tactics, decision-making, problem-solving, technique, psychology, etc).

To incorporate all the elements, they are placed in a framework called the '**Shot Situation**' which describes the cycle of events that happen during a shot from the player's impact to the opponent's, and back again. A situation is a tactical **context** that presents a challenge to the player and a **response** that deals with the challenge.

The context includes all the elements that happen in the situation when the player receives the ball (where they are in relation to the opponent and the characteristics of the ball received). The response includes all the elements required to answer the challenge (the Phase of Play and the characteristics of the ball sent). By making sure the drill you use includes appropriate *Shot Situation* elements, your drills become 'game relevant' and can fit into a GBA.



This process is also the basis for creating hundreds of drills. How many situations do your students need to master? Every competition they play will produce a number of situations they need to work on. This is a far more useful way to drill than going through countless general 'forehand' & 'backhand' drills.

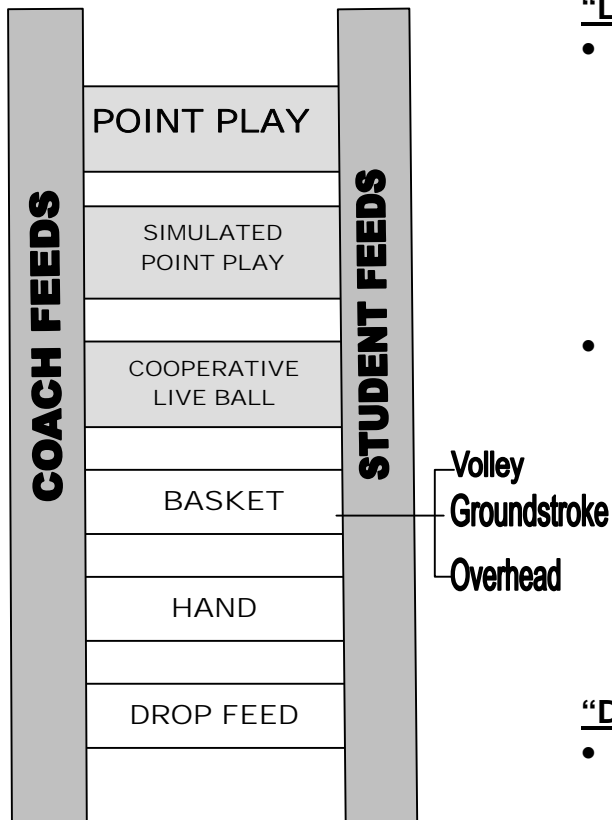
## Key #2: MAKING SITUATIONS MORE REALISTIC

One of the main challenges in learning any skill is making the transition from using it in practice to applying it in a game. Any drill can be used to move skills from practice to play provided you systematically move it up the 'Feeding Ladder'. Moving up the ladder progresses skills from less realistic (and therefore less transferable to match play) to more realistic.

### FEEDING LADDER

SIMPLIFIED VERSION

REALISTIC



UNREALISTIC

### 'FEEDING LADDER' DEFINITIONS:

#### POINT PLAY:

This is the most realistic situation. Playing out points helps integrate skills being learned.

#### "LIVE BALL" FEEDS:

- **Simulated Point Play:** Points are played out starting with a specific situation. For example, in a Rally Situation, the point could start with a feed into the backhand corner. Players can also play out points with various 'constraints' (e.g. play with only one serve, must serve & volley every point, no lobs allowed, etc.)
- **Cooperative Feed:** The ball fed to the student is in play (rather than from a basket). Feeder controls the ball cooperatively to consistently re-create specific situations or strokes. (E.g. two players practicing a crosscourt exchange, or, to practice a volley, the coach feeds a ball to a student at the baseline who hits to the volleyer at net. The student at net has received a "Live ball" feed.

#### "DEAD BALL" FEEDS:

- **Basket Feed:** The feeder sends balls to the student with their racquet from a basket.
- **Hand Feed:** The feeder tosses the ball with an underhand motion.
- **Drop-feed:** The feeder drops the ball, which is hit once it has bounced up.

### CONCLUSION

By translating drills into specific Shot Situations and moving the feeding used in the drills up the Feeding Ladder, your drills will be applicable in a GBA. More importantly, they will be more effective for helping students learn to play better tennis.