



COACH to COACH

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Coaching Game-based - Made Simple?

At a conference I was speaking at, some coaches approached me and said, “We really like the idea of coaching using a Game-based Approach (GBA) but, how do you actually do it?”

Excellent question. In this article, I will lay out *my version* of GBA coaching using a set of coaching tools I created. I call it “**Situation Training**” (ST). Keep in mind this is *one way* to coach using a GBA (not the only way). I have found however, that this particular package has helped many coaches to better understand GBA and to keep their coaching on track, and more effective. This article includes links to other full articles on these tools.

It is always a challenge when learning something new (like a new way of coaching). At the beginning, it tends to be uncomfortable and you have no confidence. Sometimes, you may even experience a phase of giving lessons that were poorer than the old way you used to coach. But, just like all your players who learn new things from you, that awkward phase is short, and the future ends up being much better than it would have been had you stayed with your old, comfortable way of doing things.

Many coaches fall into what I call, “The hypocrisy trap”. They expect their students to change (yet they will not) they demand that their students practice new things (yet they will not), they expect their students to be open and teachable (yet they will doggedly hold on to all their old coaching practices even if more effective ways are provided to them).

Learning new things (and applying them) takes courage and determination from our students to change their game, and from us as coaches to improve our coaching.

The package I put together goes like this: Situation training is as easy as 1, 2, 3:

1. **One Approach**
2. **Two Structural Elements**
3. **Three Tools**

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1. ONE APPROACH

This first point is to identify that you are using a **particular** methodology. For most coaches, they are unable to articulate the method by which they coach. They typically have an eclectic mix of a bunch of methods. This can work however, with a consistent methodology, a coach can maximize their coaching as all the 'pieces' they coach with are interconnected. This is the power of a *methodology* over a random bunch of *methods*.

In this structure, the 'One Approach' is the Game-based Approach or, as we call it in our Canadian Coaching education system, the '**Tactics-First Approach**'. This is in contrast to a 'Technique-first' approach which is the more traditional way of coaching.

Just to clarify, nowhere am I saying that the traditional approach can't work (it contributed to the development of many of the best players for the last number of decades), just that it fails to consider the question, '*Can we coach more effectively?*' Once you ask that question, you actually get the answer, '*Yes we can*'. ([Click here for article on the Tactics-First Approach](#))

One key way to increase coaching effectiveness is to coach tennis in harmony with the Open Skill nature of the sport ([Click here for video on Open Skills](#)). To be more effective, your coaching methodology should provide the '**what to do**' (tactics) before getting into the '**how to do it**' (technique). In this approach, we will coach 'situations' rather than strokes. Since tennis is a *game* to be played and won, the hook we hang everything on will be tactics. **Technique will be second (but never secondary)**.

“...with a consistent methodology, a coach can maximize their coaching as all the 'pieces' they coach with are interconnected.”

So, if it's about tactics, what Tactics do you pick?

There are a number of tactical systems you can use. When planning for lessons and annual programs at various levels, it unfortunately is complicated. All tactics however are grouped around 2 foundations:

Primary Tactical Foundations

- **Time**; Gaining, taking away or varying time
- **Space**: Covering or exploiting space

To start, and for simplicity, I would recommend a Tactical system based on:

1. The **Stages of a Point**
2. The **Location** on the court
3. The **Phase of Play**

5 STAGES OF A POINT

The 5 Points Stages describe the steps of how an 'idealized' point unfolds. Using this system helps players learn *point construction*.

- **Starting the Point**

The player begins the point from either the serve or return. When Serving, the goal is to be pro-active and take charge of the point. When Returning, the goal is to either neutralize stronger serves, or take charge of weaker ones. Serves and Returns are best trained together

- **Building the Point**

In this stage a player must maintain consistency but also maneuver their opponent into making an error or giving up the advantage.

- **Gaining Advantage**

In this stage the player must identify when they have an advantage and then capitalize on it. For example, this could be a shorter ball that sets up an approach shot. The idea is to increase the pressure on the opponent.

- **Finishing**

In this stage the player has the opportunity to outright win the point. For example, an overhead, or a put-away volley.

- **Staying in the Point**

This stage is the other side of the coin of both the **Advantage** and **Finish** Stages. Players must learn to defend when an opponent has an advantage or finishing opportunity. In addition to defending, this stage also includes countering (turning around an opponent's advantage). When countering, a player isn't playing it as safe as when defending. Countering includes all the passing shots against opponents at net. This stage is most often trained at the same time as the Advantage and Finish stages.

Note: Every point does not necessarily progress through all the stages (e.g. a Serve & Volley may go from Starting the Point, to Finishing, in two shots). However, all of them need to be trained to make a complete player.

“Using the Stages of a Point helps players learn *point construction*.”

LOCATION

If we split the court into a grid, we can map the various locations shots occur on the court (see Shot Cycle article linked later in this article for the specific diagram of the grid).

PHASES OF PLAY

We can identify key elements about the challenge a player has receiving the ball, and what they do to respond. These are the **5 Phases of Play**. (For a more detailed list, also see the Shot Cycle article linked later on in this article).

For GBA planning, a coach would then combine these three elements to make lesson topics. For example, *“in a Building Stage (**Stages**), we are going to learn how to receive balls in the deep BH corner of the court in a baseline rally (**Location**) and send back a neutralizing (**Phase**) deep topspin crosscourt”*. This creates a problem to solve and a response so people **learn to play**.

NOTE: Patterns: We can also start to group sequences of shots together to form patterns. For example, *“Serve wide and hit to the open court”* or, *“Return crosscourt deep and then hit a short angle to the opposite side”*.

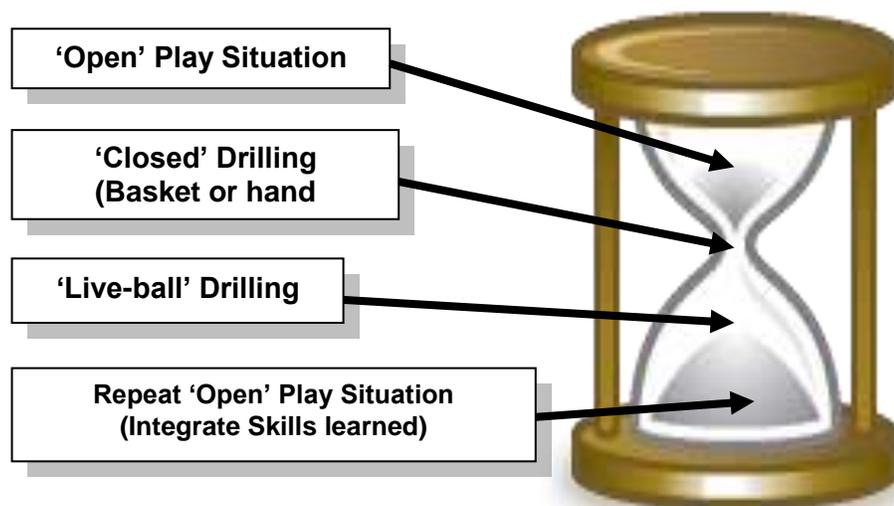
2. TWO STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS

These are:

- The ‘Hourglass’
- Situation Training (ST) Lesson Steps

THE HOURGLASS:

The hourglass simply means that training sessions follow a **Play/Practice/Play** format. This can be contrasted with the traditional approach where training sessions primarily consist of a large chunk of drilling. The session ends with some serves and then, possibly playing some points.



Using the Hourglass allows the coach to have players experience a tactical problem through guided play (e.g. winning a BH to BH groundstroke exchange when receiving high balls), and then apply a solution (for the most part, the solutions would be technical but, they could be psychological, or physical). They then get to integrate the solution into play.

On a more complex level, the Hourglass is a visual analogy regarding the amount of decision-making required: The beginning is more 'open' (more decision-making involved hence, the large upper part of the Hourglass). The next step is to 'close' the situation. This means less decision-making in the drilling phase as the coach specifies what is to be done and how to do it (Represented by the narrow part of the Hourglass). Finally, the situation is gradually 'opened' again (symbolized by the large lower part of the Hourglass).

Another variation of the Hourglass is to flip-flop back and forth from 'Open' to 'Closed' multiple times in a session. This is called '**Accordion**'. This is useful when training sessions are longer (e.g. summer all-day or half-day camp). It is also good for variety with younger players (U10). Every time a player gets to experience the open play, they see the direct connection to what they are practicing. There is a full article on the Hourglass if you would like more details. [\(Click here for an article on The Hourglass\)](#)

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ST LESSON STEPS:

The second structural element is a way of organizing the steps in a lesson. There are 6 key steps in how a ST lesson Unfolds. The Hourglass mentioned above is actually seen in Steps 4, 5 & 6:

- 1. Meet & Greet**
- 2. Skill Development**
- 3. Initial Play Situation**
- 4. Drilling**
- 5. Game integration**
- 6. Summary/Cool down**

Step #1: Meet & Greet:

Building rapport is always important as a good relationship with the coach drives learning to higher levels. Welcome players into the session.

Step #2: Skill Development:

This is a critical step in the ST process that is often left out or, mishandled. It has two parts:

- a) **Athletic Skill Development:** Activities that build athletic skills. Focus on the ABC'S of: Agility, Balance, Coordination, Speed. This also raises body temperature and puts the joints through their range of motion (dynamic flexibility).

- b) **Fundamental Volume Training (FVT):** What this looks like is an extended version of the typical warm-up you see before a tournament match. Players cooperatively hit some groundstrokes, volleys to groundstrokes, overheads to lobs, serves & returns, etc. The trap is to treat this as 'just a warm-up' (hitting balls with low intensity and low engagement with a, '*Who cares*' attitude). **It's NOT just a Warm-up!** In the overall session, this is an important step to reinforce essential habits like hitting with intention, focus, using athletic movement, recovering well between shots, etc. This is **critical** in a GBA because, GBA training tends to look at specific situations. Without this lesson step, all the 'general' skills required for success may not receive sufficient repetition to improve.

Step #3: Initial Play Situation:

In this step, the coach sets players in a game situation to experience a tactical problem to solve. For example, if the tactical issue is '*Controlling a rally when receiving a ball in the middle of the court*', they would play points starting with the coach feeding that middle ball. If the coach is clever, they will not start this step by telling players what the coach is looking for. It will be revealed at the end of this step.

Step #4: Drilling:

In this step, the coach provides volume (repetition) on the technical solution to the tactical problem identified in the initial play. This step may include multiple drills to piece together all that is needed to perform successfully (footwork, racquet work, bodywork). The rule however is, **only one** technical element can be the focus of an individual drill. If more elements are needed, do subsequent drills.

Step #5: Game Integration:

Here, the initial play situation is played again with the intention of trying to apply the elements learned in the drilling step. It is important for the coach to create an environment where the player is encouraged to try the new things.

Step #6: Summary/Cool-Down:

Every good lesson has a summary of what was learned and what 'homework' is required. This can be done while doing light cool-down activities (like a low-intensity mini-tennis rally).

This is obviously not the only way to unfold a lesson. However, these steps are designed to create the most advantages by systematically integrating open play, dead-ball drilling, live ball drilling, etc., all to maximize the power of Situation Training.

3. THREE TOOLS

The final piece is “Three Coaching Tools”:

1. **The Shot Cycle**
2. **The Feeding Ladder**
3. **Technique for Situations**

THE SHOT CYCLE:

The Shot Cycle is the foundational core of Situation Training. For most coaches, the main building block they use for coaching are **strokes**. This is a concept that has been ingrained for years, reinforced in all of the tennis world, and used by almost every player. We teach, plan and talk about the skills of tennis in terms of forehands, backhands, serves, volleys, etc. The challenge is, as a coaching tool, strokes have many deficiencies.

It is much more effective to talk in terms of **‘shots’** or, more accurately the ‘Shot Cycle’. There is a whole sequence of skills and movements that occur when a player hits a ‘shot’. It includes sizing up the situation, adjusting to receive the ball, the actual stroke (tactically and technically) and the recovery. When a coach replaces the building block of strokes with “shots”, the whole world of Game-based coaching, tactical planning and situational learning opens up.

For example, using strokes for planning narrows the coach to the typical, ‘Lesson #1: The Forehand’, ‘Lesson #2: The Backhand’, etc. At the next level, the same sequence is followed. I remember the struggle I had as a young assistant coach planning topics for our, ‘Workshop of the week’. I got to about 25 topics and hit the wall. In contrast, using situations easily gives you a plethora of topics. For example, just when located on the Backhand side of the court hitting groundstrokes we could plan topics like: (for a right-hander)

- How to outlast an Opponent by maintaining a crosscourt exchange
- How to receiving high balls to the corner
- How to make an opponent run by taking take advantage of a weaker ball and re-directing it down-the-line
- How to pull an opponent off the court by creating an angle, etc.
- How to challenge your opponent’s BH by running run around your BH and hit an inside out FH

- How to challenge an opponent by changing the rhythm of a rally by mixing spins

And, all those would only be *some* of the topics for one side of groundstrokes.

Using “Shot Cycles” helps players learn to be problem-solvers and better decision-makers since it connects tactics with techniques (E.g. “When you receive a shot like this, we will learn how to respond like that.”).

It helps coaches help players learn the entire cycle from identifying the ball received, to the stroke, to the appropriate recovery. Without this tool, coaches often end up teaching tennis like it was Golf (they teach only the ‘hit part’). This makes their lessons far less applicable to the student’s real-life play. To get extra information and further details on the Shot Cycle as a key coaching tool, please refer to the acecoach.com article. ([For a full article on the Shot Cycle, click here](#))

“The Shot Cycle is the foundational core of Situation Training.”

THE FEEDING LADDER:

‘Feeding’ is a coaching term that means, ‘delivering a ball to a player’. The main goal of feeding is to increase the quantity of repetition a player gets on a specific skill so they can accelerate their improvement.

One doesn’t have to observe much coaching before one sees a number of different ways the ball is delivered to players for practice:

- Players drop ball to themselves
- Coaches hand feed to players
- Coaches send balls to players with their racquets
- Players send the ball cooperatively to each other

There are even debates out there about which way is the ‘best’? My answer will be simple, **all of them!** Every type of feeding is simply a tool to be used by a coach to accomplish the goals of repetition and balancing realism. A coach uses different feeding options to accomplish different things. For example, if you wanted to increase repetition, but are not so concerned with realism of the reception, and you wanted to get close to the players for accurate observation of technique and intimate feedback, you would choose Hand feeding (e.g. the “Spanish’ style seen so much on the internet). If, on the other hand, you wanted to be free to roam, wanted players to experience some reception challenges, and wanted more realistic shots, you would pick cooperative live-ball feeding (see definition in ‘Feeding Ladder’ article below.).

If you needed to re-create a very specific situation and wanted to challenge the reception, you would pick racquet feeding. All types of feeding should be mastered so a coach can apply the tool to make the most effective environment for the skill to be improved.

“Every type of feeding is simply a tool to be used by a coach to accomplish the goals of repetition and balancing realism.”

The Feeding Ladder provides a framework so a coach can identify all the different types of feeding possible and where the feeding falls along the continuum of more ‘realistic’ verses higher number of quality repetitions.

The ability to use different types of feeding is especially important in a Game-based Approach. Many skills happen infrequently (e.g. A low, wide, stretch volley on the BH side). To get better at that specific shot, a coach needs to be able to re-create the situation so the players can attempt the appropriate response. They also need to be able to evolve the feeding so the skill is practiced in more and more realistic environments, thereby allowing better integration into real match play. ([For a full article on the Feeding Ladder click here.](#))

TECHNIQUE FOR SITUATIONS:

As we mentioned earlier, technique is second (behind, and in function of, tactics) but ***not secondary***. Effective and efficient technique is ***critical*** for long-term success in tennis. The challenge for most coaches trying to switch to a Game-based Approach is that the technical framework they use is not compatible to situational coaching.

Most coaches use a ‘model’ approach to teach technique. The most effective movements are combined into an idealized model for each stroke. This methodology is all that is seen on the internet (e.g. the ‘model’ of the Federer Forehand). Coaching education systems in many countries use the same model system. Key points in the strokes are identified (with photos and videos). The goal is to teach players to re-create and mimic this model.

This system does work and is very helpful but, it is deficient for Situation Training because, the model does not fit many, many situations. So it leaves the coach with no tools to help players technically with the shots they encounter when they play. For example, think about the standard ‘Forehand’. For most coaches a typical stroke model will pop into their heads (Take the racquet back like this, swing like this, finish like that, etc.).

Is this what players should be taught? Don't the key technical elements of that model change if they are hitting a running wide FH crosscourt angle, an inside-out shoulder-height attacking FH, a defensive FH while backing up? The list could contain many more examples where the 'model' is a poor fit and actually an *incorrect* version of the technique required. A large percentage of shots even starter players hit end up being exceptions to the model. When the exceptions become the rule, then what is the use of the stroke model?

“The challenge for most coaches trying to switch to a Game-based Approach is that the technical framework they use is not compatible to situational coaching.”

A technical system based on stroke models doesn't work for Situation Training however, a technical system based on **principles** within the Cycle of a Shot works well. When a principle-based/Shot Cycle technical system is used, the principles can be universal for all situations but the specific technique for each situation is also available.

For example, the principle of 'Timing' applies to every situation. However, when it comes to timing, the appropriate location of the Impact point in relation to a player's body depends on the situation. The technical system would include the principle and the rules for adaptation (e.g. receiving lower shots requires Impact Points to be closer and more beside the body. Higher receptions require Impact Points further and more 'out-front').

The scope of this article doesn't allow us to cover the technical system in detail however, the key technical principles fall under two large categories:

- **Ball Control** (a players' technical '*effectiveness*' in making the ball do what they need it to)
- **Fundamentals** (a players' technical '*efficiency*' to move in such a way to set-up effectiveness and minimize energy waste & injury):

BALL CONTROL:

Ball Control Characteristics: Ways the ball can be manipulated to perform a tactic.

- **Direction:** To send the ball crosscourt, Down-the-line, or through the middle
- **Trajectory:** The various ways the ball flies through the air to perform a tactic (E.G. Arc, Drive, Loop/Lob, Dip, Drop). Trajectory can be further sub-divided into Height, Distance and Spin.
- **Speed:** How fast the ball flies along its intended trajectory.

FUNDAMENTALS:

Racquetwork:

- **Preparation:** This includes all the actions and technical elements required to receive the ball well including the grip, take-back and position of the racquet appropriate for the shot.
- **Timing:** A centred shot in an ideal relationship to your body for the shot you intend to hit. ([for a full video on timing click here](#))
- **P.A.S. Principles:** The correct recipe of the Path, Angle and Speed of the racquet allows a player to control the Height, Direction, Distance, Speed and Spin of the ball.
([For a one page article on the P.A.S. Principles, click here](#))
- **Feeling:** Having the most effective overall feeling for the intended shot (E.G. a 'Touch', 'Catch', 'Hit', 'Punch', 'Jab', etc.). The shot's 'Feeling' includes all the set-up, and hitting actions.
([For a full video series on Feelings, click here](#))

Bodywork:

- **Balance:** Creating an appropriate line of gravity
- **Linkage:** Using the appropriate body segments in the right order to create the appropriate momentum

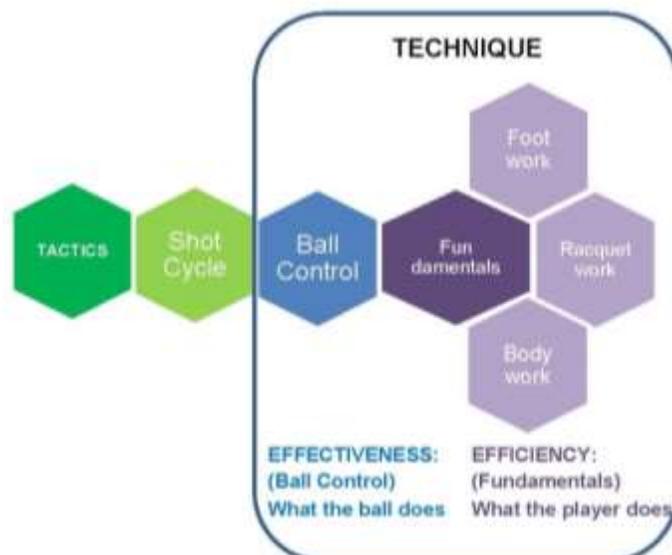
Footwork:

The Cycle of movements required to be in the appropriate location at the right time to perform the shot and recover.

([For a full article on Footwork for Situation Training, click here](#))

Tactical/Technical Connection

The following diagram depicts that there is a smooth connection between tactics and technique since, all technique exists only a means to execute a tactic.



Here is how the connection flows:

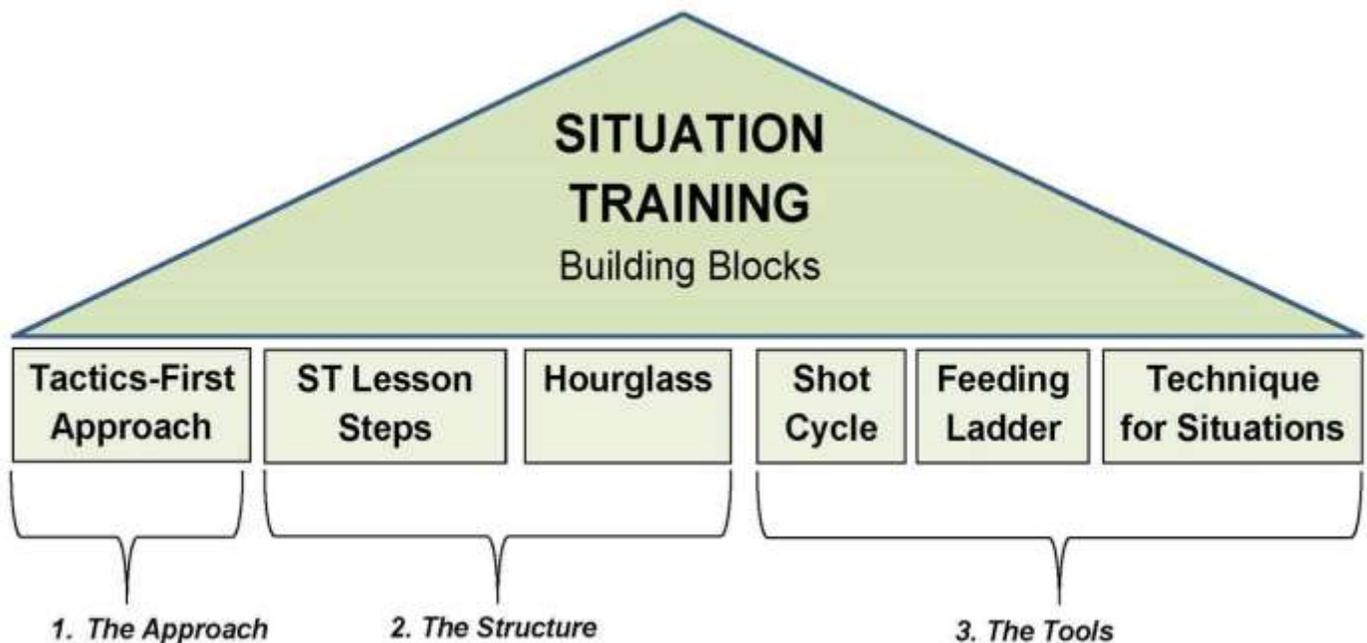
To win, we need **Tactics** which occur in a situation (**Shot Cycle**) which requires the ball to be controlled (**Ball Control**) by applying **Technical Fundamentals**. So, any technique that a player learns (e.g. swing low to high) is to control the ball, in a specific situation to perform a tactic. Technique is *not* to 'look a certain way' as if, that is what the game of tennis is about.

“There is a smooth connection between tactics and technique since, all technique exists only a means to execute a tactic.”

CONCLUSION

GBA is a more sophisticated approach than just teaching players the 'ideal' stroke and sending them on their way. Therefore, it is more difficult to coach however, coaches should choose what is better for their students rather what is easier for them. Hopefully, this article provides some practical tools that can help coaches along their GBA coaching journey.

Here is a diagram that summarizes all the building blocks for Situation Training in a Game-Based Approach:



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