

LEARNING TENNIS AS AN OPEN SKILL – DECISION-FIRST SITUATION TRAINING

Since tennis is a “Perceptual motor skill”, every shot is based on what the player sees (perception) and the decisions they make as a result of that perception. For example, a player sees the ball is coming higher and deeper so they decide to back up and take the ball at waist level (rather than risk taking it early or, impacting at higher more difficult height).

This process repeats on every shot. The ‘perfect form’ is not effective unless it is adapted to the situation. Tennis requires ‘Open’ skills (adapted to the situation) as opposed to ‘closed’ (movements with no need to adapt) like in Gymnastics, diving, etc.

The common way to train tennis is to do all the technical work first, and then work out the decisions later (or not at all). The misconception often perpetuated is that it is some kind of skill people are born with. This article will suggest a radical new alternative approach.

Since decision-making is so important in tennis, coaches should consider prioritizing decision training in a situational context. In other words, rather than using strokes (the Forehand, the Backhand, etc.) as the main units of planning for programs, lessons and drills, situation training becomes the process and the decisions required become the main skill trained with all others flowing from there.

This fits in well with a Game-based approach to coaching, as everything flows from tactics. Although there are technical decisions in tennis (grip, swing size, etc.), decision-making is synonymous with tactical training. One cannot train tactics and ignore decision-making as there is no such thing as a tactic without a decision. The definition of tactics is the choices a player makes during the point to send the ball in certain ways to win more points (or lose less).



“Federer has an uncanny ability to make the right shot and the right time. A decision-making genius”. But can it be trained?

*Photograph courtesy of
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Phases of Play

This is one of the most useful tactical decision-making tools. A 'phase' is the relationship between the difficulty of the ball received and the risk taken to send it back. By making a good decision, the player will not over-risk and give away errors. On the other hand, the player will challenge the opponent as much as the situation allows. The challenge can be through the speed of the ball (hitting harder), the placement, or the time (e.g. taking the ball early).

There are 5 Phases of Play listed from the most difficult ball received to the easiest to take advantage of:

- **Defend:** This is a shot that is very challenging to receive. To avoid errors and keep the ball in play, a low-risk shot is returned (e.g. a lob).
- **Counter:** This is when a challenging shot is received but rather than just getting it in play, the idea is to 'turn the tables' and try to gain advantage.
- **Rally:** This is a 'neutral exchange'. When receiving a medium challenge shot, a player should send a medium risk shot back to neutralize the opponent and not allow them to take charge. Training this neutral phase is critical to master baseline exchanges and construct points well.
- **Force:** This is a shot that has a medium to slightly weaker challenge. The idea is not to put the ball away but gain the advantage by taking slightly more risk to challenge the opponent.
- **Attack:** This is when a weaker, higher, or shorter ball is received and more risk is taken to respond. The goal is to outright win the point with power or placement.

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Phase Based Programs

Using the Phases, coaches can plan lesson programs based on decision-making. For example, here is a possible development path that is decision-based and tactically driven (based on the North American rating system). You will notice quite a contrast between the practical relevance of this program compared to the typical 'Stroke' program (e.g. Lesson # 1: The Forehand):

1.0-1.5 Starter Players: “Rally Program”: Learn to maintain neutral exchanges and send neutral balls in all three stroke families (Groundstrokes, volleys, serves).

Strategy = *“Keep the Ball in Play”* (Rally Phase)

2.0 – 2.5 Players: “Reception Program”: Learn to defend and stay in the point when receiving more challenging groundstrokes and volleys.

Strategy = *“Keep the Ball in Play”* (Defense Phase).

3.0 – 3.5 Players: “Intention Program”: Learn to send the ball with increased power, placement, or spin to challenge the opponent more.

Strategy = *“Move the Opponent Around” & “Take the Net”*. (Forcing Phase)

4.0+ Players: “Tactical Program”: Learn to identify and shift through different phases of play in a point.

Strategy = *“Use your Strength”/“Play Opponent’s weakness”* (Phase Transitions)

It is important to note that, although these programs are planned tactically, it is critical to train excellent technique (with appropriate quality repetition) to ensure players can execute the shots required.

In planning other programs, Phases can be the theme for one or a number of training sessions (e.g. Attack program: Learning to be effective in a number of attack situations from different parts of the court).

This also works well when dealing with individual players. A coach could observe (or the information can be gained through the player reporting themselves) that they are having a challenge transitioning from one phase to another in specific situations.

For example, a player may be very good at rallying from the baseline and defending but, when the opportunity to switch to a more aggressive shot occurs, they don’t capitalize. Typically, the coach would spend time training the attacking shot (which the player can already execute). Both player and coach are mystified because it doesn’t happen in a match. The answer is often that what is needed is the decision training process.

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Cue Words

Decision-making is a cognitive process. It occurs in a player's mind. Getting a player to call the cues that trigger appropriate decisions provides a tool to train clear and well timed decisions, and gives the coach insight into the player's mind.

For example, training moving from a rally to gaining advantage through forcing could be done by having the player call "Force" or "Now" when they identify the opportunity to add power or placement.

The Cue Word tells the coach if the decision was clear and committed (e.g. a player not being able to say the word may mean the decision is fuzzy). It also tells the coach how early decision are being made. Training the time of a decision is vital to improve it.



*Photograph courtesy of
Wikimedia commons*

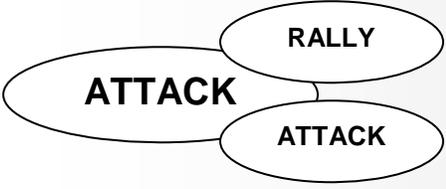
Cue words allow a coach to enter a player's mental decision-making process.

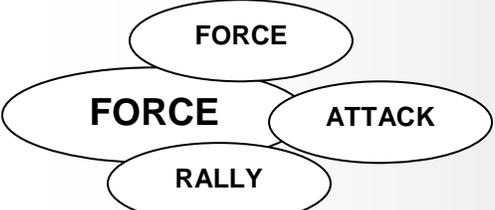
Mapping Key Phase Decisions

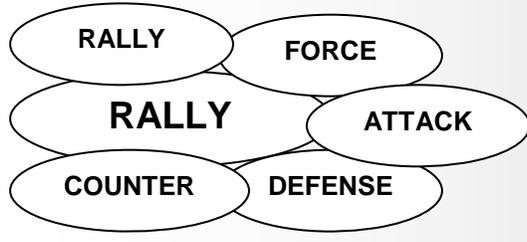
The diagram below shows each of the 5 Phases and the key decisions that flow from them. It is possible that any phase can connect to any other (e.g. a player can make a great defensive shot and then have the opportunity to attack) however, only the most common ones are shown. Choosing between two options is easier than 3 or 4, so training works best if the key decisions are grouped into 'decision pairs'.

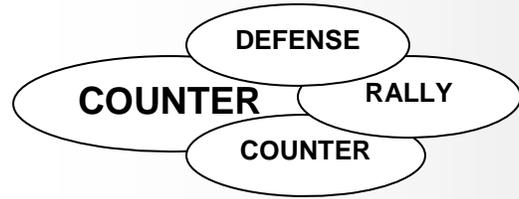
All of the options are built around either maintaining the Phase you are in or, transitioning to another Phase. It is easiest to make the characteristics of the ball received (e.g. its height, direction, distance, speed, or spin) the basis for the decision.

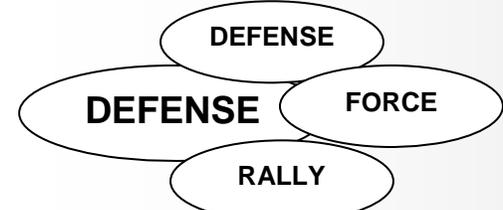
Decision "Pair"

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attack with power or precision • Attack and then attack again • Attack or if opponent hits a neutralizing shot, re-construct a rally
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Force with power or precision • Force and then force again • Force or step it up to an attack • Force but if the opponent hits a neutralizing shot, re-construct a rally
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remain in a neutral rally • Notch up the rally to a force when receiving a slightly weaker shot • Transition to attack to capitalize on a weak ball • Stay in the rally by defending when the opponent attacks • Turn the tables on an opponent by countering when they force off your weaker rally ball
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counter or play safer with defense • Counter or gain advantage with a force • Counter and then remain in a neutral rally to re-construct the point
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defend with precision or height • Defend and defend again • Defend, and if the opponent is neutralized, re-construct the rally
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Decision-first training steps

During these sessions, the coach would identify which decisions (based on Phases) are the critical ones to learn. Then, a quick and quality decision would be trained first. Once the player can make the decision, the specific shots of the decision could be improved. technically. This is a reversal of the typical, strokes first, tactics later approach taken in standard coaching.

Here is a sample lesson process using the example of the decision to rally or, notch it up to a force if the appropriate ball is received:

STEP 1: Identify Specific Situation to be trained (Phases)

Example: During a neutral crosscourt rally, a ball is received that has two possibilities:

1. Remain in the **neutral rally** (Crosscourt)
2. Notch up the shot to a **force** (Down-the-line)

STEP 2: Train Decision-making

Example: Based on the characteristics of the ball received, train the two decisions (use Cue Words).

1. "Rally"
2. "Force"

STEP 3: Train Technique

(Train the key technical adaptations required to successfully perform the two shots)

Example: For each of these options, the racquet path will change.

1. "Arc" (Add spin and height to arc the ball with a faster low-to-high motion)
2. "Level" (Level out the racquet path to 'drive' the ball more through the open court)

Note: Other key technical elements can be explored as well (e.g. body work, footwork, etc.)

STEP 4: Integrate into Point Play

Start points by randomly feeding the two options. The point is automatically lost if the player doesn't correctly perform the appropriate technique and tactic for the shot.

Conclusion

Since every successful player is competent at decision-making, training decisions first will ensure a competent player is created (not just a stroker). Doing the process well also ensures appropriate and relevant technique is trained. Coaches are encouraged to experiment with this unique process.

**If you would like to ask a question, give feedback, or want more information, contact us at:
www.acecoach.com**