

Moving Around the Court: Ready Position and Split Step

To hit the ball well a player must maximize their positioning. Tennis is a movement sport. Nearly every stroke in tennis is influenced by footwork. To get the ball over the net one more time, you have to be ready to move quickly and in any direction.

Ready Position

The best position when the opponent strokes the ball is one that allows a player to go anywhere. The 'Ready Position' is a neutral stance (facing the opponent) that helps a player to be balanced and 'on alert' for any contingency. The stance also includes a neutral racquet position typically favoring the backhand (all shots at the body are best covered with the backhand). The racquet is held at the throat with the non-dominant hand so it can be pulled or pushed quickly into position.

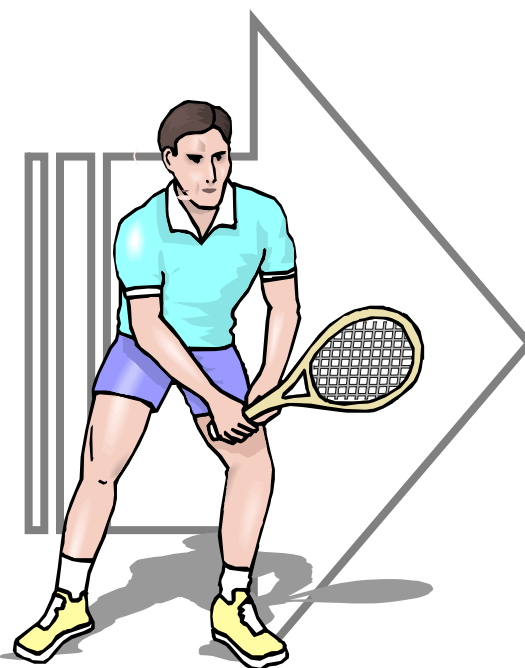
The feet are approximately shoulder width apart and the knees are flexed for a quick spring to any direction. In match play, this 'static' position is only seen during the return of serve. Even then, the player should keep their feet in constant motion by bouncing on their toes. More common in match play is a 'dynamic' ready position where the player simply gets balanced between shots. With the dynamic ready position, the feet will be more than shoulder width apart.

Split-Step

When a player is on the move it is difficult to change direction. The 'Split Step' is key to a 'dynamic' Ready Position when on the move. To prime a reaction to an opponent's shot, the player pauses their movement by hopping onto both feet. This move 'coils' their knees to store energy in the legs for a quick spring to any direction.

During the 'hop' both feet do not touch the ground at the same time. For example, if a right-handed player is reacting to their backhand, the left foot touches down a split second before the right so the right foot can push the player to the shot (see illustration). This "selective" Split Step is most commonly seen when players are approaching the net just before a volley, or when returning serve. However, top players Split Step before every shot.

Use the bounce of your shot on the opponent's side to trigger your Split Step. **When to Split-Step is as important as where.** With this timing the step will be performed just before the opponent impacts allowing you to 'pounce' on their shot.



**"Selective" Split Step
to move to the backhand
(the right foot touches the
ground just after the left to
push towards the backhand)**

~~Court~~ Home-work

Beginner: Players rally serviceline to serviceline (Mini-Tennis). Call out the cue word "Split" when the shot bounces on your partner's side and Split Step between each shot. After 10 successful rallies (a rally only counts if each player calls the cue), progress to rally at $\frac{3}{4}$ Court and then baseline to baseline.

Intermediate: 'Selective' Split Step Practice: The player starts just behind the serviceline. The partner at the opposite baseline drops the ball from head height (so it bounces before they hit it) and sends it either to the right or left of the player. The player times their Split Step to begin when the partner's ball bounces. They then either take-off right or left to volley the ball. Start with only forehands first, then only backhands, then forehand and backhands alternating, and finally forehands or backhands in random order.