

The Power Game

There is no denying that today's top international tennis is a game of athleticism and power. Using the methodology and techniques of the past is obviously insufficient to propel talented developing players into the 21st century. The modern game requires modern teaching.

THE POWER PHILOSOPHY

There is a good reason why top players in the modern game use power, winning! If finesse had a major advantage over power, there would be more finesse than power players. It takes twice the smarts and skill to beat a power player with non-power techniques. Even players who have the gamestyle of 'Baseline Retriever' hit the ball hard nowadays, with good reason.

What About Consistency?

There are some fallacies floating around that coaches still buy into. For years I believed things like, "*You will be inconsistent if you hit hard*", "*You will get more injuries*", or the completely illogical, "*You must learn to be consistent first before you learn to hit hard*" (one will never become consistent at hitting hard if they only practise hitting slower).

Now don't assume this article promotes mindless blasting of the ball (although some of today's players *did* start out like that). **The goal of this article is to sensitize coaches to developing mechanics that allow a player to efficiently create maximum power.** Coaches must still teach high percentage tennis ('ripping' a power drop shot is probably not a good idea). However, high percentage tennis in the modern game means, *hitting the most powerful shot the percentages will allow*, not just picking the safest.

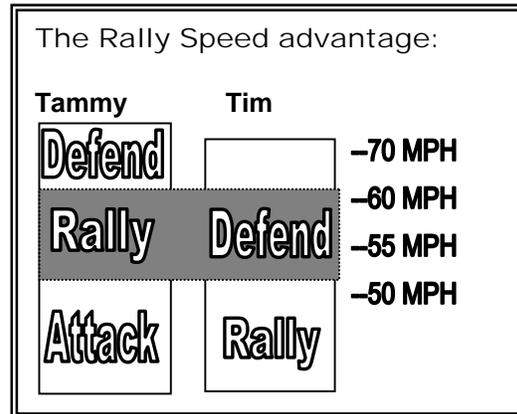
False ideas about power come from misconceptions regarding power. **In the modern game, power and precision are not separate ends of a continuum but rather two sides of the same coin.** Learning to hit with maximum power gives some distinct advantages.



1. The Confidence advantage: By learning to "let it go" on strokes, players avoid getting dragged into the, "please go in", fear-of-missing, type of play. They train themselves to go for the shot and not let anxiety rule. A player trained in power tennis minimizes fear and maximizes confidence. This has an added bonus of possibly intimidating many opponents.

2. The Rally Speed advantage:

Rally Speed is the tempo at which a player can consistently exchange the ball. In my experience, a player with a higher Rally Speed will beat one with a lower Rally Speed over 80% of the time. If "Tammy" has a higher Rally Speed on her shots than "Tim", she will dominate. For example, let's say Tammy's maximum rally speed is 60 mph and Tim's is 50 mph. That means anything above 50 mph takes Tim out of his comfort zone. If Tammy is rallying comfortably and in control at 55 mph, Tim is not in a rally phase, he's defending! Tim will be under constant pressure to keep from giving up a weaker ball to Tammy. His normal rally speed will produce attackable balls for Tammy who can handle a much higher pace. To hurt Tammy, Tim will have to hit far above his comfortable limit, which will most likely produce a wild error.



3. The Disguise advantage: If a player has not been trained for maximum power, they have to produce a whole different motor pattern than their regular shot to hit hard. A smart opponent easily reads this obvious change. In most cases, the shot will be wild as well. On the other hand, a player who has a motor pattern that allows for maximum power can easily turn it into something else (a precision shot, extra spin, a touch shot, etc.). In other words, from a power preparation, a player can do anything.

3. The Consistency advantage: Yes, you heard it right! When talking about consistency, coaches must always keep in mind that *competition* is the context. At all the higher levels, just getting the ball back isn't good enough. Opponents will take the opportunity to finish the point. Proper power generation promotes "*competitive*" consistency. In competition the consistency must come from the arc of the ball, not by slowing it down and giving the opponent the advantage. Players trained for maximum power can speed the racquet across the ball for more spin to produce a safer ball trajectory (arc).

4. The Efficiency/Economy advantage: It is rare for a player to go though a match and not try to hit hard. Even "consistent" players at the higher levels must generate tremendous racquet speed to produce the spin they need for consistency. A player trained in a motor pattern that allows for maximum power

must use their body efficiently. No one piece can be overused. The whole body must contribute. Players not trained in this manor overuse certain segments (arms, wrist, shoulder, etc). This leads to more injuries. Being less efficient, non-power trained players also must waste energy to generate pace. This means the potential of the over-used muscles being too tired to hit the required pace later in the match.

MAJOR CONCEPTS FOR POWER TRAINING:

"You never hit too hard, just wrong"

It is a misconception to think players miss because they hit too hard. Pro players hit all the shots harder than we do. And they go in! Balls go out because players hit it incorrectly not because they were hit too hard.

"If it doesn't add-up to racquet speed, it adds to nothing"

The determining factor in producing power in tennis is **racquet speed** (technically, it is racquet velocity, which is speed with a directional orientation). It is a common trap to get caught up in the movements for power and not use them to increase racquet speed. The player must be made aware of this concept, otherwise they may jump, thrust, turn, and still hit the ball slowly. It is also a common trap for a player to think power equals strength and tense their muscles during the movement. Muscle tension decreases racquet speed and coordination. Timing and power suffer as a result.

"Motor Patterns to make strokes, not strokes to make motor patterns"

To use the body in the most natural way possible, have players learn motor patterns. A motor pattern is a series of synchronized movements. Getting a player to mimic the pieces and movement steps in a stroke will not produce coordination and quality of movement. Teaching a player motor patterns (or transferring previously learned patterns) will keep the whole pattern intact. Teaching a player a pattern of movement in pieces (e.g. Take the racquet back, now step, now stroke, etc.) will force them to break it down into parts in their mind. The result will be a jerky movement with less coordination as the player thinks through each step. For example, a good throwing pattern can be transferred into an exceptional serve. It is more effective to keep the whole throwing pattern intact and correct and modify the faults, than to 'chain' together the pieces ('down together, up together, toss, etc.)

"Weight to Coordinate"

The biggest issue in power training is coordination. Timing is critical. Many segments must all combine in a smooth and efficient sequence to generate racquet speed. To develop coordinated motor patterns for maximum force, have players go through the patterns with weights or resistance (medicine balls, weighted racquets, foam balls, etc.) To move the weight, the player will learn to engage as many body segments as possible, in correct order.

Power Conclusion

A player trained with the mechanics to produce maximum power will have many advantages over players who are not. Being able to hit with maximum power doesn't mean a player must choose to do it every shot. Hitting with maximum power is a vital key to competing successfully at higher levels.

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