

# Essential Tennis Skills

A Guide For Parent-Coaches By Tom Allsopp

## Introduction

This comprehensive guide is an invaluable resource for parents embarking on the journey of tennis alongside their young players. Serving as the cornerstone of our collaborative efforts, it offers clear insights to complement your video analysis program and the exclusive member content. With this guide, and my one-on-one guidance, I'll help you to navigate through the complex world of tennis, ensuring effective progress and skill development for your player.

Recognizing the vital role parents play in shaping their child's tennis journey, this guide is meticulously crafted to empower you to make a significant impact on both their on-court performance and overall development. Understanding the desire and necessity for many parents to take a hands-on approach to their player's development, this resource delves into the intricacies of your child's tennis journey. It provides practical insights and strategies on how you can actively support their growth, whether it's refining their technique, fostering mental resilience, or nurturing their passion for the sport.

Whether you choose to take on the role of a full-time coach or provide assistance between formal lessons, this guide equips you with the knowledge and tools to work effectively alongside your child, fostering a collaborative and supportive environment for their tennis journey.

If you're eager to help your player develop more skills on the practice court and achieve greater success in matchplay, this guide is for you. It focuses on the essential skills

crucial for on-court success and provides actionable strategies for you to create an optimal training environment for their skill development. From coaching methods to purposeful practice exercises, this guide enables you to create an environment conducive to developing essential tennis skills.

## **Open vs Closed Skill Training**

It's essential to recognize that tennis is an open-skill sport, requiring players to constantly adapt both mentally and physically to unpredictable and ever-changing situations. In contrast, closed-skill sports offer a relatively predictable and unchanging environment for executing specific pre-planned actions. For instance, golf represents a closed-skill sport, where the ball is stationary, allowing players time to plan their next shot. The aim here isn't to compare the difficulty of developing tennis or golf skills but to emphasize the importance of developing tennis skills that align with the sport's unique demands. This guide will enable you to develop tennis players capable of executing the right shot at the right time in open and complex situations.

## **The Essential Skills**

The methodology outlined in this guide focuses on the five essential skills: Attitude, Anticipation, Decision Making, Technique, and Evaluation. These skills form the foundation of skill development, equipping players with the necessary tools to navigate the unique challenges of tennis.

Before delving deeper into each essential skill, this brief summary will highlight the connection and importance that each skill has to one another, and the game in general. A player's ability to train effectively or to perform to the best of their ability requires the

appropriate **attitude** towards the task. Execution of shots will be significantly influenced by their ability to **anticipate** their opponent's next move and track the incoming ball, as their sending skills cannot surpass their receiving skills. In the same vein, their technique cannot be detached from their **decision-making** skills, as their decisions directly impact their **technique** and execution. Their ability to **evaluate** their performance and learn from each shot and experience will allow them to problem solve in matchplay and shape how they train moving forward. Let's take a more thorough look into each essential skill and how to effectively develop them.

## Attitude

Attitude is fundamental to achieving success as it lays the foundation for developing other essential skills. Your player's training sessions are shaped by their motivation and determination to refine specific skills, with each shot influenced by their mental approach. Their attitude toward individual shots and the game overall significantly impacts their performance during training sessions and in competition. While individual goals may vary, this guide will focus on cultivating the optimal mindset for purposeful practice, winning tennis matches, and enjoying the process.

- **Discuss their goals** - Exploring and discussing specific goals with your player can serve as a potent motivational factor. What are their aspirations? Are they looking to defeat a particular opponent, secure a spot on a team, win their next tournament, or get into a specific college? Combine long-term goals with short-term objectives, and identify what they're eager to work on during each training session.
- **Involve them in the session structure** - Begin each session by asking your player what they would like to work on. By involving them in their development and

allowing them to structure the session, you can enhance their motivation.

Throughout the session, encourage their input through questions such as:

- Do you want to hit more backhands?
- What shot do you want to work on next?
- Would you like to hit some volleys?
- How do you want me to feed these balls? Higher? Faster?

Once you've established this collaborative relationship it is easy to suggest things to work on and guide the session in a particular direction.

- **Build Rapport** - Concentrate on fostering strong personal connections with your player where you work with them, not on them. Encourage open dialogue and create a comfortable environment where they feel at ease discussing both tennis-related and non-tennis topics. By building rapport, your players will be more inclined to share their thoughts and concerns, enabling you to provide the guidance they are seeking.
  
- **Develop their communication skills** - When working with professional tennis players, communication tends to be more reactive due to their advanced ability to analyze their game. Instead of solely giving instructions, coaches will tend to listen to the player's insights and react accordingly. However, young players and beginners may struggle with articulating and analyzing their game effectively, or will be reluctant to open up to parents. In such cases, it's essential to focus on developing their self-analysis skills rather than just telling them what to do and how to do it. Here are a few examples of questions you could ask:
  - What's your ideal contact point on your forehand?
  - Do you prefer serving down the T or out wide?
  - Have you noticed any improvements by making that adjustment?
  - How often do you intend to slice in your next match?

Questions like these will encourage players to evaluate their game and express their thoughts and observations. As they develop their communication skills and

your relationship grows, you can ask more open-ended questions to facilitate more thoughtful responses. These responses will help you determine the most effective ways to support their development and tailor your coaching approach to their individual needs.

- **Value their opinion** - Every player possesses unique observations and opinions about their game that hold genuine value and significance. Their thoughts may not align with your own views, but they provide valuable insights that can help you better understand how to help them. It is common for coaches to believe they have all the answers and therefore overlook the importance of seeking players' input. Instead, they tend to dictate what players should do and how they should do it. While this approach may achieve results, relying solely on a command-style coaching method can inadvertently discourage players from actively engaging in their own learning process. This can hinder their motivation and prevent the development of essential problem-solving skills needed for matchplay.
- **Make sure they enjoy the process** - Enjoyment is an essential element for excelling in any discipline that demands dedication and creativity. While there may be occasional instances where individuals reach the pinnacle of a sport without apparent passion for the game, the majority of players who lack enjoyment often struggle to put in the necessary effort. As a result, they may either fail to reach their full potential or quit altogether, missing out on the numerous benefits that this great game has to offer.
- **Establish your role as parent coach** - Clarify the specific roles you'll be taking in your child's tennis development. Are you the main coach, assistant coach, manager, transportation provider, physical trainer, hitting partner, or match analyst? The more clarity you can provide the more your player will know what to expect from you and will be more accepting of your advice. Children often

struggle with their parents' expertise credibility. By understanding your role as a coach, you can work together effectively, and build a stronger relationship both on and off court.

## **Purposeful Practice**

The upcoming section delves into purposeful practice methods, which are integral to fostering the right attitude in both players and coaches. It emphasizes the importance of approaching each practice with a clear goal in mind, aiming to derive maximum benefit from the session. The exercises and games outlined are tailored to players who are motivated to hone specific skills and execute them in competition. Depending on the skill level of both player and coach, and the quality of the rallies and points you are able to achieve, incorporating hitting partners could be a valuable option. A playing partner can significantly elevate the effectiveness of these exercises, creating a purposeful practice environment conducive to skill development.

- **Make training a rehearsal for competition** - If the goal is to win more matches, practice sessions should be tailored to help players develop skills and deal with the demands of matchplay. To provide an analogy, imagine being a theatrical performer. Performers learn their lines, rehearse on stage, and attempt to deliver a flawless performance in front of an audience. Similarly, players will need to acquire skills, rehearse these skills in a semi-realistic environment, with the goal of executing these skills in competition. Here are some exercises to help players develop skills and practice them purposefully:
  - **Feed with serves** - Each rally can start with a serve feed rather than an underarm feed. Players can bypass the standard pre-serve ball bouncing, or the need to serve into the box; the serve can simply initiate the rally with a practice partner or coach. Players can progress to starting the rally with

a cross-court serve focusing more on getting it in the box. Consider the serve and return skills that your player would develop from consistently beginning each rally with a serve feed, and how these skills would prepare them for matchplay.

- **Start rallies and points with a specific shot** - Begin rallies or points with a specific shot tailored to the skill they want to refine. With a practice partner players can have an agreement that the initial feed will be a wide ball, moonball, short ball, or a volley moving in from the baseline. Starting the rally or point in this way develops the skill to execute an important shot within a realistic matchplay scenario. Help players to create games with you or their practice partner that target the shots they aspire to master.
- **Alternate points with serves and feeds** - Players can alternate between starting one point with a serve and the next point with an underhand feed. This blend of playing serve points and baseline points is ideal for players looking to hone their groundstrokes or increase the intensity of their session, while making sure they play realistic points with serve and return. Both points can contribute to the score, adding a fun and competitive element to their training.
- **Utilize different levels of competitiveness** - Players often experience heightened tension when executing shots under pressure, which can lead to dramatic changes in technique and execution. To help them manage this pressure effectively during actual matches, it's essential to integrate a range of competitive scenarios into their training sessions. For example, players can participate in point play without scorekeeping, where the winner of each point serves the next one. This creates a low level of competitiveness, allowing players to focus on their form or specific skills more easily. Introducing tiebreak games can intensify the competitive

environment, while playing a full set further intensifies the challenge, providing invaluable experience for competitive situations. Integrating short, pressure-free practice intervals throughout the session, even in between games, can alleviate tension and enable players to experience the desired stroke with less pressure. Restart the games and see how pressure alters performance.

- **Respect practice partners** - Players should understand the value of being a desirable practice partner. Engaging with stronger opponents presents opportunities for growth and skill development. However, better players may not want to train with someone who doesn't put forth effort or isn't enjoyable to be around. Therefore, it's essential for players to bring a positive attitude, strong work ethic, and enthusiasm to these practice sessions. Being a desirable practice partner not only enhances the overall training experience but also fosters valuable relationships and opportunities for improvement. As a parent seeking greater involvement, it's essential to be aware of when players prefer that you don't participate in practice sessions, particularly when it comes to offering unsolicited advice. Being a nuisance during practice sessions can often deter practice partners from wanting to train with your player. Letting two friends train independently can be an enjoyable experience, akin to going to the mall together, but far more purposeful.
- **Improve disposition with rational and positive thinking** - Understanding and altering a player's temperament and disposition can be complex, but there's a straightforward yet effective strategy I like to use. Encourage players to approach their play rationally rather than emotionally. Allowing emotions like self-criticism to dominate can impede objective evaluation, hindering accurate assessments of their performance, their opponent's game, and strategies that could lead to success. Negativity can disrupt crucial factors such as work rate, focus, and decision-making, ultimately leading to poor shot selection and diminished



performance. To counteract this, it's beneficial for all players to consciously identify the positives in their play. Whether it's after each game, a change of ends, or during a 5-minute practice period, encourage players to highlight and draw on some positives to foster a positive mindset.

When searching for a coach, it's essential to recognize that they vary in personality and teaching styles. Some may employ a "command" approach, focusing on motivation and hard work, while others adopt a "cooperative" approach, emphasizing thoughtfulness and collaboration. Your priority should be to find a coach who brings out the best in your player. A good fit is characterized by a comfortable environment where your player feels at ease discussing their game and sharing their thoughts with the coach.

## Anticipation

Timing shots with coordinated movements requires the skill to anticipate where the ball will be, and when. The dynamic and open nature of the sport requires continuous anticipation of the speed, height, depth, trajectory, and spin of the incoming ball. It is important to acknowledge that players cannot be any better at hitting the ball than they are at anticipating it. Therefore, it is essential to develop both their sending and receiving skills in harmony, using each skill to enhance the development of the other.

- **Develop sending and receiving skills in harmony** - While using feeds in a closed and isolated setting can aid in developing the technique for a specific shot, most technical adjustments should not rely solely on isolated feeds. Instead, refining and executing technical adjustments within a cooperative rally enhances a player's ability to synchronize both sending and receiving skills. Continuously

refining advanced techniques in isolation may hinder the development of less noticeable but crucial anticipation skills necessary for well-coordinated movements. In the technique chapter, I will discuss how to simplify technical adjustments so that players can seamlessly integrate them into their game, thereby improving multiple essential skills simultaneously.

- **Develop skill-appropriate technique to enhance anticipation** - A player's strokes must be effective in open situations and when facing various incoming balls. Trying to master advanced techniques beyond their ability to track the ball can actually hinder their ability to rally and play points effectively. This can impede the development of receiving skills, which are essential for refining sending skills. It's crucial to employ techniques that match the player's current skill level and physical capabilities, as this facilitates quality rallies and helps develop anticipation, ultimately enhancing sending skills. I will explore this topic further in the technique chapter.
- **Simplify and use open situations** - The challenge of controlling the tennis ball with the desired coordination chain often prompts coaches to heavily rely on closed basket feeding, aiming to ensure players execute shots in the "correct" manner. However, this approach compromises the quality of their overall skill development. It's more beneficial to focus on helping players achieve simple and fundamentally sound mechanics to control the ball effectively, rather than closing off the situation to develop more complex skills prematurely. By using simple movements they can begin to master the open nature of tennis, handling a greater variety of speeds and spins, accelerating their development of essential skills as they evolve their technique.
- **Enhance skills on the practice wall** - Training on a practice wall is a great way for players to develop their sending and receiving skills in harmony. The wall demands that a player's receiving skills be on par with their sending skills. Using

softer balls (orange and green dot) can provide more time to anticipate and track the next ball, allowing them to focus slightly more on technique, and executing larger and more aggressive swings.

- **Respect anticipation at every level** - Anticipation skills are often more pronounced in beginners, where struggles like swinging and missing highlight their difficulties in tracking the ball. However, these skills are equally crucial for advanced players, although they may not be as obvious. Advanced players might slightly mistime their shots, making it challenging to identify the cause of the error. While technical issues or footwork are often blamed for errors, anticipation errors are frequently overlooked. To illustrate the importance of anticipation, envision a junior player facing shots from someone like Carlos Alcaraz. Despite being able to execute technically sound forehands from basket-fed balls, their forehand would break down against a player of Alcaraz's caliber. Predicting the speed, spin, and bounce of Alcaraz's shots would make it extremely difficult to execute coordinated movements effectively. In this scenario, it would be easier to see technical errors, but it would unveil anticipation deficiencies to a trained eye. Regardless of the player's level, anticipation is a skill that requires attention and respect. Develop technique to withstand the challenges of tracking the ball.
- **Anticipate the incoming ball** - The ability to anticipate the speed, depth, angle, height, and spin of the incoming ball not only facilitates a more coordinated and well-timed shot but also expands the range of shot options available. Regardless of the player's level, the following exercises will serve to improve anticipation:

#### **Pre-strike**

- Before you or their opponent hits the ball, ask them to call out whether their opponent is in a **Defensive, Neutral, or Offensive** position. Alternatively, use the simple code words **Red, Yellow, or Green**.

### **Post-strike**

- After the ball has been hit, ask them to call out the appropriate words as early as possible:
- The ball was hit with **Topspin, Slice, or Flat**.
- It was hit to their **Forehand** or **Backhand** side.
- It is going to land **Short, Middle** or **Deep**.
- It was hit **Slow, Medium, or Fast**.

Be cautious of coaches who overly focus on honing technique solely through closed basket feeding scenarios. While refining technique is important, it is equally crucial to apply those skills into rallies where players can naturally develop anticipation and make real-time technical adjustments. Seek a coach who can facilitate controlled rallies while providing a precisely fed first ball, rather than just paying for a ball feeder who gives technical advice.

### **Decision Making**

Developing good decision-making skills should be given equal importance alongside developing shot-making skills. Decision making is a crucial skill that directly shapes technique and influences the outcome of each shot. Training in closed situations via basket feeding or on ball machines will limit the requirement to make split-second decisions. While training in closed situations can help isolate and improve technique, it is crucial to incorporate decision-making scenarios into player's training to allow them to develop the skill to play the right shot at the right moment in matchplay.

- **Highlight the skill of decision making** - Becoming a better decision-maker is an acquirable skill that can be developed within players through deliberate practice. Making players aware that decision-making is a learnable skill and encouraging them to take pride in making good decisions is the first step. This will help players develop the ability to play the right shot at the right time during both practice and competition. This transcends players from being a ball hitter to becoming an effective and strategic tennis player.
- **Avoid idealistic shot selections** - A common error that players make is to constantly attempt shots based on how they wish they could play, rather than playing the right shot for their ability and the situation. Parents often encourage this style of play with the misconception that shots hit with over-aggression will eventually become effective with a little more practice. This usually never materializes because the skill of decision making continues to get overlooked, even as the player becomes more competent at striking the ball.
- **Encourage the race car driver mindset** - Consider the skill of a race car driver—they must possess the ability to calculate the optimal speed at which they can drive without crashing. Above all else, the decisions they make will dictate their success, and poor decisions could be catastrophic. Missing tennis shots doesn't have the same consequences, especially in practice sessions. However, tennis players need to make similar decisions, calculating the best shot they can play without making too many errors. It is important to consider that you'll never find a great race car driver who hasn't crashed a lot of cars, as they are always pushing the boundaries, straddling the line between success and failure. Likewise, mistakes are inevitable when players are pushing themselves to develop their game. However, challenge players to value the skill of decision making, accurately gauging how aggressive they can be with each shot.

- **Gather information for better decisions** - The ability for players to gather and retain information about their game, their opponent's game, previous points, and external conditions, allows them to make more calculated decisions. These are just some examples of questions to ask and information they can gather to help them make better decisions:

- How many first serves did you make in that game?
- Where are you missing your backhand - long, wide, net?
- How does your opponent cope with high balls, slices, running etc?
- What patterns of play are working for you?
- What is your opponent's favorite shot?
- Which way is the wind blowing?

This list could be never-ending. Encourage players to gather as much relevant information as possible. Being conscious of developing and executing this skill allows players to be more present and aware, leading to better decision making and greater success in competition, especially against unfamiliar opponents.

- **Discuss their shot selection** - Drawing players' attention to their decision-making is an incredibly valuable exercise. However, whether you're prompting them to gather information or questioning their choice of shot, it's essential that the conversation remains inquisitive and genuine, rather than accusatory. Constantly asking questions following a painful miss could create unnecessary friction between you and your player. Therefore I recommend using a strategy where you frequently ask questions such as "do you think that was the right shot choice?" after the player missed a shot but demonstrated good decision making. This strengthens the bond between player and parent-coach and promotes an open dialogue regarding decision making in the future.
- **Improve technique with decision making** - You cannot separate technique from decision making. Each movement will be a result of the player's strategic intention. A player wanting to get the ball back into play from a defensive position

will use a completely different technique than if they make the decision to attack. Coordinated movements are more likely to be executed when the shot choice is appropriate for the situation. Furthermore, when players strive to play the right shot at the right time, they will naturally make precise micro technical adjustments with their body and racket. This heightened awareness and adaptability allows them to execute shots with finesse and accuracy. In contrast, when the focus is solely on swing mechanics without considering decision making, the necessary adjustments and the intuitive feel for the shot may not be adequately developed or executed.

- **Incorporate decision making into new skills** - Once players have developed a new skill or practiced a particular stroke, it is important to adapt it into more open-skill situations and matchplay. For instance, after working on a player's backhand up-the-line, they will need to develop the awareness to identify the opportune moments to utilize this shot, as well as when to opt for a higher-percentage cross-court backhand. This shot selection and execution can be done through basket feeding. However, a more effective exercise would be to use a more open situation, engaging in a backhand rally cross-court, with the option to go up-the-line when they recognize the appropriate opening. With a practice partner, points can be worth two for going up-the-line and winning the point. Similarly, if a player is developing slice backhand they can be fed a variety of balls where they must decide when to employ a slice or topspin. Rallying while making these choices will further test their anticipation, decision making and execution of this shot. These exercises not only reinforce shot proficiency but also nurture the strategic thinking and decision-making abilities, preparing players for the complexities of matchplay.
- **Develop strategy and tactics** - Understanding strategy and tactics is crucial for players to excel in matchplay. Strategy refers to a player's overall approach to playing a point or match, while tactics are the specific tools and techniques used

to execute that strategy. A player's strategy should aim to put their opponent in compromising positions where they struggle to control their next shot effectively. Here are some examples of tactics that players can employ to execute their strategy:

1. **Consistency/Patience** - Emphasize minimizing errors and forcing opponents to work harder to earn points.
  2. **Direction** - Target the opponent's weaker side or exploit open spaces with well-placed down-the-line or cross-court shots.
  3. **Depth** - Push opponents back by hitting deep balls. Employ short slices or drop shots to draw them forward or disrupt their rhythm.
  4. **Height** - Vary shot trajectories by mixing low and high balls, utilizing slices and topspin to disrupt opponents' timing.
  5. **Spin** - Mix up spin types, including slice, flat, and topspin, to keep opponents guessing and make their adjustments more challenging.
  6. **Power** - Alter the pace of play by incorporating slower and faster balls to unsettle opponents.
  7. **Court positioning** - Use movement and positioning to make it more challenging for opponents to hit effective shots.
  8. **Time** - Implement strategic shots and court positioning to create more time or limit opponents' reaction time.
  9. **Disguise** - Maintain balance to prevent opponents from reading body positions and anticipating shot placement. Advanced players can occasionally use deceptive body movements to mislead opponents.
- **Encourage specific tactics** - Players should be mindful of playing strategically and try to execute specific tactics within rallies or point play. Create a practice scenario where players are encouraged or incentivized with additional points for executing a specific pre-discussed tactic. Developing the ability to execute



specific tactics will increase a player's ability to problem solve and beat specific opponents, even when they're not at their best.

- **Develop discipline** - Developing the ability to make good decisions throughout a match requires discipline and focus. This can be challenging for many players if they fail to practice this skill for long periods in training. By encouraging players to focus on this skill throughout their training sessions they can develop the mental discipline needed to consistently make good decisions in matchplay.
- **Use specific patterns** - Establishing simple patterns of play can help facilitate good decision-making. Personally, as a player I have many tools in my toolkit. I enjoy hitting dropshots and a variety of spins. This makes good decision making more challenging. Simple patterns, for instance, hitting backhands cross-court until an easier forehand presents itself, reduces the likelihood that poor decisions will be made. Many players will benefit from simplistic and repeatable patterns of play.
- **Encourage player decision making** - Encourage players to take an active role in their training by allowing them to make decisions about what they want to work on and the type of balls they want to be fed. Would they prefer faster balls, wider ones, or higher ones? This approach ties back to the motivational elements of coaching we discussed in the attitude section. By empowering players to make decisions about their training, you instill a sense of ownership and motivation in their own development journey.

Be cautious when working with coaches who solely prioritize developing technique in isolation, overlooking opportunities for players to engage in shots within a rally, point, or realistic drill. While a coaching approach centered on closed situations, heavily reliant on feeding, may not be inherently wrong, it restricts the number of decisions

and adjustments a player must make. This often creates a gap between the type of tennis your player practices and the skills they need to execute in competitive situations.

## **Technique**

At its core, technique is simply coordination and timing. Sound technique requires a well-timed and appropriate coordination chain aligned with the appropriate strategic intentions. Understanding that technique is not the goal, but rather a means to achieve the strategic goal, helps to provide the necessary context for helping players to make appropriate and practical technical adjustments. If a coach prioritizes style over function, they run the risk of developing strokes that may not be suitable for the players skill level, and won't bring them success in competitive situations.

## **Incremental Technical Adjustments**

Regardless of the player's current skill level or long-term objectives, prioritizing incremental adjustments is the most efficient and effective method for developing a player's technique, and overall game. Skipping these gradual adjustments and solely focusing on teaching idealistic form, rather than practical technique to achieve immediate goals, can hinder rather than accelerate player development. Moreover, it complicates the process of identifying what technical adjustments to make if the adjustments aren't governed by immediate progress. It's challenging to find another activity where such a learning approach would be recommended. Whether we're guiding someone to become a mathematician or a professional swimmer, we consistently

provide them with the necessary skills, tools, and challenges that align with their stage of development and physical limitations, adjusting and evolving their skills as needed.

- **Balance success and technical development** - Striving for technical improvement shouldn't come at the cost of immediate success. While it's vital to make adjustments for long-term growth, maintaining a high level of confidence and performance in the present is equally crucial. Achieving success in the moment can open doors to greater opportunities, such as advancing further in tournaments, playing on a specific team, or becoming a more sought-after hitting partner. These achievements not only bring satisfaction but also contribute to the development of essential skills.
- **Develop skill appropriate technique** - Simplicity in technique doesn't mean poor technique, and complexity doesn't automatically equal good technique. Beginners or juniors can achieve technically sound strokes but they will be more simplistic than the technique of professionals. Rushing into advanced stroke mechanics before mastering fundamentals that are appropriate for the age, level, or physical limitations of the player often results in the development of bad habits and less effective strokes. For instance, juniors may not be strong enough to execute the "ATP style forehand" where shoulder strength is central to the mechanics of the stroke. Instead, opting for a forehand swing that capitalizes on momentum, gravity, and coordinated movements can be more suitable. This approach allows the stroke to evolve and improve as players develop greater skill and strength.
- **Evolve their coordination chain** - Progressing from basic to advanced movements is a gradual process, unique to each individual's skill level. More skilled players will advance to sophisticated techniques more rapidly. This evolution is akin to the action of wielding an axe to chop a tree. A beginner would employ a simple motion to strike with accuracy. As their timing and familiarity

with the motion improve, they will involve more of their body, enabling them to move the axe faster and over a greater distance. Understanding the correct technique for each tennis stroke can be challenging for both players and coaches. This difficulty often leads to coaches teaching players to imitate the ideal strokes of professional players rather than evolving strokes naturally.

- **Find the balance between style and substance** - I appreciate that most players would like to look more stylish as they hit balls, and most parents would like to watch a more graceful stroke. However, working towards a more aesthetically pleasing stroke will not necessarily improve their ability to play better tennis. For example, all else being equal, a two-handed backhand volley is inferior to a one-handed backhand volley in terms of both appearance and versatility. However, if the player is more competent controlling the ball with two hands, and therefore has the confidence and desire to volley more frequently, the benefits of using two hands can outweigh any drawbacks. Additionally, players will always look more stylish when they can execute the essential skills and have the coordination and feel to control the ball effectively. It's worth noting that players can always transition to a one-handed backhand once they've gained more confidence and skills.

## **Skill Based Technical Adjustments**

Understanding the appropriate technical adjustments to make becomes clearer when the adjustments are designed to help players improve at a specific skill or task. Without this context or purpose, striving for perfect swing mechanics becomes a futile effort, riddled with obstacles and confusion. Below are some tasks that will immediately develop a player's skills and naturally shape their technique. By implementing these simple methods, you can minimize the risk of regression and ensure your coaching efforts yield positive results.

- **Make adjustments to hit targets** - Encouraging players to aim for specific targets, whether using cones or court boundaries, is an excellent way to refine their ball control skills. This exercise allows players to develop their skills independently, with minimal coaching intervention. If a player consistently makes the same error, you can intervene to offer advice and help them achieve the task more effectively. However, simply encouraging players to aim higher, lower, left, or right often yields sufficient results. By doing so, players not only improve their ball control but also naturally adjust their technique. For instance, prioritizing avoiding the net often results in a low-to-high swing, which is easier and more effective than explicitly instructing them to adjust their swing to avoid the net.
- **Utilize different spins** - Mastering ball manipulation is essential for becoming an effective tennis player. While challenging players to incorporate varying amounts of topspin and backspin, technical adjustments aren't always necessary. However, developing this skill will naturally shape technical elements such as swing path. Try basket feeding while encouraging players to experiment with different spins. This will ensure skill development and a productive time on the court. If they struggle, offer advice to help them improve the task immediately. You'll find that too much technical advice hinders their ability to spin the ball effectively, so focus on contact rather than swing mechanics. Adding targets can promote execution of the desired spin. A cone close to the net can encourage more backspin to hit a drop-shot. A cone in the corner of the service box can encourage more topspin to create an angle.
- **Change the pace** - Varying the pace of the balls you feed or hit is a valuable method for enhancing tennis skills. This approach challenges players to utilize their anticipation skills to adapt to the changing pace and to time shots effectively. Moreover, it prompts adjustments in their technique based on the amount of time available to play shots and their strategic intention.

- **Find the ideal contact point and spacing** - Establishing a strong relationship between body, racket, and ball is crucial for all tennis players. Players should aim for a comfortable position where they can control their body and the ball. However, it's essential not to let personal preferences dictate the advice given, as each player will feel comfortable hitting from different positions, especially on forehand groundstrokes where contact points vary dramatically.
- **Promote coordinated movements not positions** - Encouraging players to prioritize and evaluate their coordination and balance after each shot is an effective strategy for enhancing their technique and overall performance. Assessing balance and coordination is a skill that players of all levels can easily execute and benefit from. Their self-evaluation of these skills will inspire them to perform at a higher level. This method is superior to focusing on hitting specific positions during strokes, such as the "pat the dog" position on forehands or the "back scratch" position on serves. By encouraging players to use smooth, relaxed, rhythmic, balanced, and coordinated movements, players can refine their technique and avoid developing bad habits.
- **Focus on footwork, movement & balance** - Incorporating drills that involve moving your player around the court while feeding or hitting balls can be a valuable exercise. Emphasize efficiency of movement and encourage players to incorporate split-steps, side-steps, balanced shots, and efficient recovery, allowing them to enhance their skills to reach and recover from each shot effectively.
- **Build on Success** - Capitalize on their successes by patiently waiting for those moments when they hit well-executed shots. Instead of focusing on correcting errors, highlight what they did well and encourage them to learn from these positive moments.

## Advanced Methods To Make Adjustments

The following methods may present a slightly higher complexity for coaches to implement, potentially resulting in short-term regression for players. However, these four methods are specifically designed to facilitate technical adjustments more effortlessly and effectively than standard coaching methods. If you don't have the expertise to teach technique, ask a qualified coach to assist while you implement other teaching methods highlighted throughout the guide.

- **Relationships between shots** - Utilizing one shot to master another is a relatively simple yet highly effective method to help players develop technique and acquire new skills. Many shots and movements are related— some brothers, some distant cousins. Slices and volleys, serves and overheads, footwork patterns for volleys and returns, are a few examples of shots/skills that are similar in nature. Using one shot to assist players in executing others facilitates skill development without the need for overly complex adjustments.
- **Actions to shape technique** - Players can explore a range of actions such as pushing, pulling, swinging, throwing, guiding , or blocking. These actions should align with the appropriate strategy, such as using a block for a volley or a throw for a serve. Encouraging players to focus on different actions can quickly refine technique, making it a more effective exercise than solely discussing angles and body positions. Embrace the variety of actions corresponding to specific shots and strategies, and encourage players to observe how each action impacts their coordination and ball control.
- **Familiar athletic movements** - The coordination chain required for tennis strokes are not unique, and often share similarities with other athletic movements. For example, throwing a ball can help players to understand the mechanics of a serve. Skimming a stone or throwing a ball side-arm can provide insights into the

coordination chain for a “modern” forehand. Throwing a medicine ball can help players to understand how to utilize your entire body to hit a two-handed backhand. Throwing a frisbee can highlight the coordinated sequence for a slice or single-handed backhand. Promote athletic movements to develop biomechanically sound strokes.

- **Use the “2-minute rule”** - When helping players to make technical adjustments, adhere to my “2-minute rule.” If you had just two minutes to enhance a player's proficiency in executing a specific task, what advice would you offer? This guideline ensures that your advice is simple, concise, and effective. If your guidance takes longer than two minutes to benefit the player, reassess whether it is overly complex.

Be cautious of coaches who have a one-size-fits-all approach to developing technique, as they may end up working on your player rather than collaborating with them. While understanding ideal strokes is important, a great coach works with players to find unique ways to enhance their game. Remember, each player's journey to success is distinct, and a coach who acknowledges and nurtures individuality will help them reach their full potential.

## **Experimental Technical Adjustments**

Although I never want you to sacrifice a player's ability to play their best tennis by making complex adjustments for the future. It is important for a player's development that they are able to experiment with different skills and techniques as part of their training, even if the outcome is uncertain. These methods are typically best implemented by full-time coaches who can provide guidance and support throughout the process.



Each time a player attempts to execute a new skill and challenge their body to perform unfamiliar movements, they are actively participating in a form of physical education. Experimenting with various movements, swings, and grips can broaden their skill set and uncover new techniques to incorporate permanently into their game.

Before experimenting with skills and techniques that may result in short-term regression, it's crucial to establish a solid relationship between coach and player. When approaching these situations, I adjust my vocabulary to foster a supportive environment. For example, I might ask, "Can we try something? I'd like to see what happens if we make this adjustment." This approach encourages the player to experiment without fear of failure and without feeling pressured to drastically alter their technique. When coaching your own children, you may not feel the need for this level of negotiation, as the relationship is already established on a different level. However, I suggest this same thoughtful approach as it changes the player's mindset, making them far more willing to let go and try new things.

- **Encourage good mistakes** - Encouraging players to experiment with shots and skills and not be afraid of missing can be highly beneficial when trying to transform their technique or develop new skills. By removing the fear of failure, players are more likely to try new approaches and make adjustments without feeling discouraged by initial errors. You may even encourage a miss to have the player focus on a particular swing thought for a short period of time. Alternatively, using an exercise such as serving into the fence rather than towards the box will remove the desire to judge and analyze the outcome. This mindset shift fosters a more positive learning environment where players can freely explore different techniques and discover new skills. As they attempt to execute shots, consider evaluating the outcome based on the intention behind the shot rather than results. Praise misses that were made with good intentions.

- **Approach adjustments as a “new tool”** - Introducing new skills as additional tools rather than replacements for current strokes is a key coaching strategy. This approach ensures that players maintain confidence in their existing abilities while expanding their shot repertoire. For example, transitioning from an eastern backhand grip to a continental grip for slice groundstrokes, volleys, or serves can be facilitated by practicing extreme spins such as drop shots or slice serves. Challenging players to achieve these tasks and showing them the technical adjustments, such as grip changes, to succeed at the task can be viewed as adding a new tool to their skill set rather than replacing their current technique. Once they become comfortable using the new grip, they can gradually incorporate it into their game permanently. Many adjustments can be made using this coaching strategy.
- **Allow adjustments to be their choice** - I can confidently say that I've never imposed a technical change on a player's game that I knew would take a long time to come to fruition. I avoid embarking on six-month projects with the expectation of mastering something at the end. Instead, I focus on making gradual and manageable adjustments that can be integrated into the player's game more smoothly and effectively. While it doesn't occur often, if a player expresses a desire to make a significant change, such as switching from a semi-western grip to an eastern grip or transitioning from a two-handed backhand to a one-handed backhand, I will discuss the pros and cons of their decision. If it's what they want, I will fully support them, utilizing my expertise to assist them in making the transition as smooth and effective as possible. If a coach were to make this decision on behalf of the player, it would not only be unfair to the player but also overlook the importance of the player's confidence and near-term competency.
- **Consult other coaches** - Collaborating with other coaches is invaluable, especially when addressing technical adjustments that may pose challenges for

both the player and coach. I frequently consult with other coaches in my network because there are always different approaches to making adjustments, and hearing diverse perspectives is beneficial. Seeking input from other coaches becomes particularly crucial if you lack formal tennis coaching training or have limited experience. Additionally, don't overlook the importance of directly consulting the player you're working with. Their insights and feedback can offer valuable perspectives on their own development journey.

Exercise caution when hiring coaches who make complex technical adjustments for success in the future. Coaches are unable to predict the outcome of complex adjustments, and the cost-benefit of these adjustments are rarely worth it when everything is taken into consideration.

## Footwork and Movement Adjustments

Footwork and movement is essential for meeting the demands of an open-skill sport like tennis. Unlike activities such as skateboarding or surfing, where balance is predominantly static, tennis requires dynamic balance for most shots. Simple adjustments in this area can significantly enhance a player's coordination. Below, I've outlined the three exercises that will help players of all ages and levels to instantly improve their game.

- **Focus on strike zone and ball control** - Moving their feet to strike the ball in the ideal strike zone is a simple yet highly advantageous skill to focus on. When aiming for optimal ball control, hitting the ball from a balanced and preferred position significantly contributes to achieving this objective. It's crucial to understand that players may sometimes be unfairly criticized as lazy due to

perceived deficiencies in their footwork. However, this overlooks the vital role of anticipation when attempting to get into the right place at the right time.

- **Develop open and closed stance groundstrokes** - The ability to execute groundstrokes from either leg (open and closed stance) allows players to adjust to different shots. The player's level, preferences, grips, and strategic approach will determine the most suitable stance for each specific shot. However, mastering both open and closed stance groundstrokes is beneficial for players at all levels. Developing this skill will enhance their coordination and adaptability, giving them a broader range of shot options.
- **Make the end of your shot the beginning of their recovery** - By making the end of their groundstroke the beginning of their recovery, you not only improve the coordination of their stroke but also enhance their ability to efficiently return to the appropriate position for the next shot.

Beware of coaches who are too structured in the footwork patterns they insist you use for groundstrokes. For example, some coaches only teach closed stance forehands under the guise of being "old school." In tennis, being able to move around the court and hit off either leg is crucial. Look for coaches who support a versatile approach to footwork, helping players to develop a well-rounded skill set that adapts to the game's unpredictability.

## **Basket Feeding**

It is important that a player's primary method of learning is not based on basket feeding. This closed training method used to develop strokes can inadvertently foster a "ball hitter" skill set rather than developing the essential skills to cultivate well-rounded tennis

players capable of playing the right shot at the right moment within matchplay situations.

Training methods centered around feeding balls in a controlled environment allows players to refine skills without the distractions and need to execute other essential skills. Developing repeatable stroke mechanics and specific footwork patterns can be easier within closed situations, providing clear benefits to this method of learning. Additionally, the ability to use fast-paced feeding can promote the cultivation of an intense workout and improved work ethic. However, to perform well in the dynamic and unpredictable nature of real competition, it is important to complement this training practice with more open-skill learning that demands the execution of anticipation, decision-making, and technical adaptability. Here are some key considerations to ensure that basket feeding is used as an intervention tool, and effectively integrated into your players' overall development plan.

- **Value each shot** - Be careful that the lack of consequences for missed shots within a ball feeding situation doesn't result in careless practice. The skill based technical adjustments discussed in the previous chapter will help you to use ball feeding more purposefully.
- **Develop practical technique** - While developing technique in a basket feeding or ball machine setting, it is crucial to never lose sight of the stroke needing to work when it is reintroduced back into a rally. Without the requirement to anticipate the incoming ball and make split-second decisions, coaches often make the error of developing impractical strokes that are difficult for players to execute in pointplay when other essential skills are required.
- **Use less feeding with beginners** - Contrary to the belief held by some coaches, it is beginners who stand to gain the most from participating in rallies, instead of relying heavily on basket feeding or ball machine training. Experiencing the ball

being hit back and forth is particularly advantageous for beginners looking to develop all of the essential skills required to play the game successfully. As previously emphasized, a player's sending skills are inherently governed by their receiving skills. To enable players to reach a level where they can engage in effective rallies and point play, it is crucial to prioritize actual rally practice.

- **Use realistic basket feeding with elite players** - While beginners usually require a wide range of skill development, elite players often utilize coaching sessions to refine specific skills. In such cases, basket feeding can prove beneficial. Nevertheless, I still advocate for these scenarios to encompass a multifaceted and deliberate approach. For instance, if a player wants to work on high backhands, a coach can direct that precise shot from across the net instead of using hand feeding. This allows players to work on their high backhand in isolation, while the realistic feed necessitates anticipation and well-timed movements. If you are able to return their ball they gain the valuable experience of observing the cause-and-effect of their shot, immersing themselves in a matchplay mindset.
- **Understand your role as a feeder or coach** - If your skill level limits you to feeding when working with players, you can still provide great value by implementing the tips provided throughout this guide. However, it's crucial for your player's development that they are able to train in a more open environment. Arrange for hitting partners or coaches who can facilitate this type of training to ensure a well-round development of their essential skills.
- **Find a coach not a ball feeder** - Having a coach provide a consistent feed offers some value. However, a great coach should offer far more than basket feeding and technical tips. Look for a coach who can develop your players' strokes while also incorporating other essential skills into each session. A great coach goes beyond feeding and refining strokes; they create game-like scenarios that

enhance decision-making skills and adaptability to dynamic situations. For example, when working on volleys, find a coach who can create situations where a player transitions to the net, makes strategic positioning decisions, and executes a variety of realistic volleys. If you are spending time working with your player, primarily feeding balls, consider seeking a coach who can offer more comprehensive training.

- **Avoid hand feeding** - Hand feeding is only useful when working on specific skills, such as developing footwork patterns, generating racket speed from slow-paced balls, or briefly highlighting a technical adjustment. It can also be valuable when working with young children. However, relying heavily on hand feeding for skill development can be ineffective and restrictive in terms of the range of skills a player can develop. When the balls are fed from unnatural angles it becomes even more worthless. Opting for feeding with a racket from across the net provides a more realistic incoming ball, fostering anticipation, decision-making, and technical adjustments.
- **Find dynamic group sessions** - The traditional group lesson format, where players take turns hitting multiple shots before stepping back in line, is often inefficient and not the best use of time. Rather than waiting in line, a more productive approach would involve feeding the initial ball and having players rally or play points. The initial hitter can focus on honing a specific skill from the feed, while the receiver gets to develop numerous essential skills by trying to return it. Find a coach who is able to create dynamic group sessions instead of closed-skill ones.
- **Utilize practice walls** - Consider utilizing the practice wall for a one-on-one approach with your player in a more open setting than feeding balls. Developing groundstrokes on a practice wall offers numerous benefits compared to ball machine training or hand-fed balls. While it allows for the development of rhythm,

particularly in groundstrokes, the wall also requires strategic and technical adjustments to adapt to each shot. Although it may be more challenging, practicing against a wall effectively prepares players for the dynamic demands of competition.

Look for a coach who utilizes basket feeding as an intervention rather than relying solely on it to develop tennis players. The appropriate amount of basket feeding in a coaching session will depend on various factors, including the player's level and their training habits outside of lessons. As a general guideline, ensure that no more than 25% of your player's training involves basket feeding scenarios.

## Evaluation

Another essential skill in your players' development is their ability to learn from their experiences and make the necessary adjustments moving forward. Problem-solving skills are essential for success beyond the practice court and are shaped by the player's ability to accurately evaluate their performance. Below are some methods to help you improve their evaluation skills on both the practice court and in competition.

- **Evaluate how the Essential Skills affect performance** - As you and your player evaluate their ability to control the ball and win points, it is essential to consider how the essential skill ingredients are influencing performance. Merely attributing the difficulty in controlling the tennis ball to stroke mechanics can result in misdiagnosis and a failure to identify the adjustments to make. For example, shots could be missed for the following reasons:

**Attitude** - A lack of focus, low energy levels, or negative self-talk..



**Anticipation** - Failure to anticipate and track the spin, speed, height, depth, direction, and bounce of the ball, resulting in being out of position.

**Decision Making** - Making poor strategic decisions.

**Technique** - Using an inappropriately swing for the specific shot they were faced with.

**Evaluation** - Not being aware of where balls were being missed, and failing to make the necessary adjustments.

Gaining a deeper understanding of the actual reasons behind misses or a subpar performance enables both player and coach to focus these specific areas during practice sessions, and allows players to make better problem-solving adjustments.

- **Allow players to evaluate their game** - Encouraging players to evaluate their own performance before providing your input is crucial for developing their evaluation skills and enhancing their overall game. Regardless of whether you feel as though you need their input, involving them in this process helps develop their ability to analyze their game and problem-solve more effectively. Moreover, it serves as a motivational tool, empowering players to take ownership of their own game.
  
- **Gather information and evaluate performance** - When players are able to gather information objectively, and evaluate their performance without being influenced by emotions, it enables them to make better decisions moving forward. In practice sessions you can ask players questions such as:
  - Where on the racket did the ball hit?
  - Did you play that shot open or closed stance?
  - Where did you miss the last 3 backhands?
  - Where did you direct each serve in that game?
  - How many first serves did you make?

- Where did I/your opponent hit each serve?
- What were you most happy with in that game?

Gathering information and accurately analyzing performance is a skill that players can develop during practice sessions. This process provides them with a deeper understanding of their game, enhances decision-making skills, and fosters the ability to problem-solve effectively.

- **Gather information accurately not emotionally** - To gather information accurately, players need to stay present and attentive on the court. While it's normal for players to make general statements about their performance, overly negative ones can hinder their ability to gather information effectively and impact their overall performance. Maintaining a positive attitude enables players to evaluate more effectively, while accurate evaluation can also improve their attitude. Developing this skill supports efficient problem-solving during competition and precise post-match performance assessment.
- **Develop problem solving skills** - To cultivate effective problem-solving skills necessary for success in competition, players can engage in various games with handicap scoring systems or specific restrictions during practice sessions. For instance, implementing rules like having only one serve or restricting backhand shots to slices presents players with challenges to overcome. Alternatively, try structuring games that reward extra points for things such as unreturned volleys, or take away points for unforced errors. These games are usually more valuable with a practice partner.
- **Test, identify, train** - Testing skills in competition is essential for identifying areas that need improvement. Training becomes more purposeful when both the player and coach have a clear understanding of which aspects of their game require attention. However, excessive time spent competing instead of practicing can impede skill development. Conversely, dedicating too much time to training may

hinder the ability to assess their game effectively. Striking the right balance between matchplay and training is crucial for evaluating performance and developing their game.

- **Use video analysis** - Recording and reviewing their gameplay on camera offers players a chance to assess their performance from a fresh perspective. Whether they're analyzing their strokes or reviewing match footage, this tool can provide valuable insights. However, it's important to be mindful not to turn this exercise into a chore, especially if the player is hesitant to revisit a recent loss. Flexibility and sensitivity to the player's preferences are essential when incorporating video analysis into their training regimen.

Exercise caution when working with coaches who offer analysis and advice without ever considering the thoughts and opinions of the player or parent. Look for a coach who values your perspective and is open to hearing your thoughts. They will be more likely to provide personalized solutions that can effectively improve their game.

## Final Thoughts

I trust you found the Essential Tennis Skills guide to be a helpful resource and an enjoyable read. I am confident that this guide will revolutionize your coaching sessions and enhance your player's performance in matches. Moving forward, my aim is to delve deeper into the concepts and insights shared in the guide through exclusive videos tailored for my video analysis subscribers. Stay tuned for more valuable content!

