

Understanding the Practical Application of Tactical Styles in the Men's Game

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Optimal tactical efficiency is defined as the ability to successfully hit your targets under pressure. In tactics and strategy, there are certain decision-making priorities. These priorities, in order of importance, include:

- Use your own strengths
- Exploit your opponent's weaknesses
- Consistently apply your own game style
- Increase your percentage of forcing shots while reducing unforced errors
- Adjust to the match momentum situation

The following game styles can be developed and reinforced by understanding the skills needed and applying specific drills and games. The five most common game styles include:

I. DEFENSIVE PLAYER OR COUNTER PUNCHER

A) Definition: This player plays behind the baseline 90% of the time, is willing to allow the opponent to come to the net and is prepared to hit many balls each point. Such an athlete is typically non-confrontational by nature, but at the same time, is very tough.

B) Skills Needed

- 1) Ability to hit offensive passing shots
- 2) Defensive and offensive lobs
- 3) Ability to neutralise an offensive shot
- 4) Effective return of serve
- 5) Lateral speed
- 6) Ability hit groundstrokes with depth and spin
- 7) Drop shots

C) Drills and Games

- 1) "Grinder's Paradise" for groundstroke consistency. Each game is played to 21. You must hit 21 consecutive balls in play with your partner. Each must be hit with topspin. If you make an unforced error, you start back at 0 and your partner continues from the same score at which the error was made. The first player to reach 21 consecutive balls wins the game. Six games win the set.

2) "Wide Ball Neutralise" for neutralising shots and recovery. Two players – partner feeds a wide, topspin ball. Baseline runner neutralises the feed by hitting high and deep up the middle. Play to 11 each side.

II. OFFENSIVE BASELINER

A) Definition: The offensive baseliner positions himself on the baseline and will predominantly hit forcing groundstrokes and look to put away any short balls. This player will take more risks, but will attack with more delayed pressure.

B) Skills Needed

- 1) Heavy topspin groundstrokes
- 2) Ability to take the ball early
- 3) Inside-out forehand
- 4) Offensive lobs
- 5) Quick movement from a defensive to a neutral position on the baseline.
- 6) Aggressive first serve
- 7) Drop shots

C) Drills and Games

- 1) "Crocodile River" for forcing groundstrokes. Player is not allowed to step outside the baseline. Put a ball in play, and play the point out with your partner. Play to 11 points. The player feeding the ball in each game has no restrictions.
- 2) "Forced-Unforced 5-5" for hitting forcing shots and putting away short balls. Both players start at 5-all. You win a point for an opponent's forced error or a winner. You lose a point for an unforced error. The goal is to get to 10 points.

III. ALL-COURT PLAYER

A) Definition: This is a player who can successfully execute defensive groundstrokes, offensive groundstrokes, approach shots, volleys, and serve and volley. It is the best style to develop and requires the greatest number of skills, and is normally played by the most efficient athletes.

B) Skills Needed

- 1) Defensive groundstrokes
- 2) Offensive groundstrokes
- 3) Defensive and Offensive lobs
- 4) Slice backhand
- 5) Transition shots
- 6) Low volleys
- 7) Smashes
- 8) Movement at the net
- 9) Aggressive returns

10) Serve and volley

C) Drills and Games

1) "Plus-Minus" for transition shots. Both players start at the baseline. One player feeds a short ball, the other attacks and they play the point out. Both players start at zero. If the attacking player wins the point with a drop volley, or an overhead, they get 2 points. Any other point won gets one point. If the defensive player (player who feeds the ball) wins the point with an offensive lob, they get 2 points. All other points are worth one point. You lose a point for an unforced error. You lose two points for an unsuccessful attempt at a drop volley, overhead or offensive lob. The goal is to get to Plus 5 before Minus 5.

2) "Scramble Singles" for all court recovery. The entire singles and doubles courts are considered "in". One player feeds a ball, and you play the point out. Play until 11. No winners can be hit in the first game, but in the second game, winners count.

IV. ATTACKING PLAYER

A) Definition: This player is between an All Court player and a pure serve and volleyer. They will attack with delayed pressure. This player's goal is to get to the net as much as possible, but without coming in in extremely high risk situations.

B) Skills Needed

- 1) Serve and volley
- 2) Approach shots
- 3) First volleys
- 4) Smashes
- 5) Inside-out forehand
- 6) Aggressive returns, especially second serve

C) Drills and Games

1) "Dropshot Scramble" for up and back movement. Play this game on half the court. Both players start on the service line. One player feeds a ball that bounces in the service box. As soon as the ball is fed, he turns around, runs back and touches the baseline. In the meantime, his partner hits a dropshot off the feed and they now play the point out. Play to 7, and then switch roles.

2) "Side Out" for focusing on serve management. Play to 11 points. One player serving until they lose the point. When you lose the point, your opponent now becomes the server. You can only score points when you are serving.

V. PURE SERVE AND VOLLEYER

A) Definition: This player will come to the net on every first serve, and many second serves. He will also attack second serve returns. This player is a net rusher.

B) Skills Needed

- 1) Effective first serve and volley
- 2) Good slice and kick serve
- 3) First volley
- 4) Drop volley
- 5) Smash
- 6) Movement at the net
- 7) Attacking second serve return
- 8) Excellent forward movement

C) Drills and Games

- 1) "Net dictator" for net offensive skills. One player on the baseline, another at the net. Place a basket of balls at the net. The net player feeds him the ball and they play the point out. If the net player wins the point, repeat. You can only win points at the net. Play to 11. The net player's feed should be tough.
- 2) "7-11" for serving and volleying skills. The server starts down 7-0. You get 2 serves per point, and you play to 11. The server must serve and volley on both serves.

In addition to demonstrating the game styles through defining skills needed and specific drills, it is important to generate a database of statistical information for each style.