

The 7 Stroke Fundamentals That Allow You to Challenge Your Opponents With Superior Court Positioning

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INTRODUCTION:

Re-read that title again...

How do we challenge our opponents in tennis?

You can run around all day retrieving your opponent's shots hoping they will eventually miss.

You can stand back on the baseline and try to blast away attempting to hit winners or at least force them into errors.

Or, you can do what I do and what I think you'll find as more fun, more effective, and in the end, will help you to become a better tennis player.

I believe that your tennis shots should be tools that enable you to move to a better court position.

In other words, I try to challenge my opponents by where I am on the court *when they have to execute their shot*.

I'm talking about challenging your opponents by you being in the right place on the tennis court at the right time.

Do you have to be able to hit a winner now and then? Of course you do. There is no way you can always have perfect court positioning and you just might have to try to win the point with a winner, *but the key is to force your opponent to "go for a winner" more often than you have to*.

And you do that by where you are on the court when they have to execute their next shot.

And it's simple geometry. The closer you are to your opponent when they make their shot, the more you force them to try to hit the ball past you.

If you are always back on the baseline, you can still somewhat force your opponent to hit winners if you are always in the right place when they play their shot, but they won't feel the pressure to have to hit a winner.

And that's the key. Players with good geometric "up at net", closer to their opponent court positioning, force their opponents to have to go for a winner.

And of course, when you force an opponent to go for a winner, guess what, from time to time they are actually going to hit a winner.

But you know what, I'd much rather lose a point forcing a winner from my opponent knowing that in reality, an opponent only has so many winners they can hit in any given match.

Every time I force a winner from my opponent, I feel as if they now have one less available winner for that match.

I have never felt that my opponent might get a little confidence boost by hitting a winner, but when they see me moving in to challenge them again on the very next point, well, that little confidence gets sucked out really fast.

Lots of players cannot handle losing points by putting themselves in a position on the court where they risk getting passed by their opponent.

I'm the opposite. I can't stand to make an unforced error and simply give away a point.

So blah, blah, blah... that brings to me my point on stroke mechanic fundamentals and how I want you to think about the shots you play, and why pure simple stroke fundamentals make you more efficient being able to move to a better and more challenging position on the court.

Think of your strokes simply as tools that allow you to move from one place to another on the court.

This report is focused on the 7 common elements of stroke production that allow you to maintain and gain superior court positions.

The Absolute "Must Have Element" of Court Positioning - Shot "Spacing"

This is the ultimate key to good court positioning. If you are inconsistent with this, you'll drive yourself nuts trying to challenge with court positioning.

You must always have available your ability to "move through" your shot. Not run out of control, but move through your current shot in a way so you can arrive at that next court position *before or just as* your opponent gets to hit their shot.

You don't always have to move through each and every shot because you may have already arrived at the best possible court position at the time of your next shot, but you always want to be available to move to a better position on the court if you wanted to *as you play this shot*.

And the key to moving through your shot if you wanted to is your alignment to the path of your opponent's incoming shot and where you want to move to next.

I call it "spacing". It's the distance you want to be away from the ball at the time you make contact.

If you're too close or too far away at the time of contact, you can't move efficiently to your next desired court position.

You may be aligned properly, but if your timing with your swing to the ball is too early or too late, you'll be off balance and again you won't be able to move efficiently through your shot.

Depending on the direction where your next ideal court positioning is going to be, your spacing to the path of the incoming ball may be slightly different.

For example, if you're about to play a forehand approach shot, if you want to move to forward and a bit to your right as you play your approach shot, your spacing is going to be slightly different than if you want to move forward and to your left.

I can't tell you specifically what those differences are for you, I know what they are for me, but you'll have to practice and tinker and develop a feel for precisely what your ideal spacing distances are for you.

Not a big deal, just get out there and do it, The more mistakes you make, the sooner you get to learn what's right for you.

The 7 Stroke Fundamentals Necessary to Move to the Next Court Position

There are 7 basic fundamentals for creating "spacing" that will not only allow you to move through your shot if you wanted to but will also allow you to be much more consistent with your shot making skills.

Remember, your shots are tools that allow you to move on the court, so you don't have to develop the biggest forehand ever played to be able to win points.

If you can master these 7 fundamentals, believe me, you'll have shots, that when needed, you'll be able to hit balls past an opponent, that's right, a winner...

OK, let's start with fundamental #1...

Stroke Fundamental #1 – Anticipation

If you knew where your opponent is going to play their next shot, wouldn't you have a huge advantage?

Absolutely.

One of the biggest problems with good spacing is not knowing or not being aware until the very last moment where your opponent's shot is going.

On any shot that my opponent is about to hit (unless they have a really easy put away opportunity), there really is only a couple of possible shots that they can play.

And the more they are not on balance and/or are running wide or short for your shot, the fewer shot possibilities they have.

So, my point here is for you start thinking about anticipation of where your opponent's shot is going to be played so you can "align" yourself to the path of that incoming shot as soon as possible.

Even if you know where their shot is going, if you don't "space" yourself properly to that ball, you've got to improvise and that may not be a good thing.

So, anticipation can be looked at as a way to determine your probable spacing needs.

The best way to practice anticipation is to be more aware of your opponents' shots in specific situations and start to categorize those situations for future reference.

Different opponents may have variations in those situations, but you can also create subcategories for specific opponents.

I have some opponents that for whatever reason just never ever lob in situations where most other players do. That will help me anticipate where I should be on the court for their next shot so I can prepare early for my spacing needs.

Stroke Fundamental #2 – Split Step

In theory, we split step, meaning we split our feet apart to help bend our knees in a manner that will allow us to react to the numerous directions of our opponents' possible shots either before, during, or after the opponent's shot.

There is not a specific "timing" rule for a split step that works each and every time your opponent lines up to make contact with their shot.

Sometimes we have to split prior to, sometimes during, and sometimes after their shot.

In general, when we must split step depends on how close you are to your opponent when they make contact with the ball (how close are you to the net and the location of your opponent on their side of the net) and what shots have you anticipated can realistically be hit by your opponent.

There is NOT a specific split step timing rule. There are hundreds of variables and to try to tell you that must always split at a specific time in relation to when your opponent is going to hit their shot won't help you.

If I know exactly where my opponent's next shot is going, the only reason I might split step would be to help slow me down as I'm moving to my next court position so I'm not bringing too much body weight speed against my next shot.

So, my general rule of thumb for split stepping is this: I split earlier (prior to contact by my opponent) the closer I am to the net and the closer my opponent is to the net than if I am further away from my opponent.

So, if I am back on the baseline as is my opponent, I might even split step after they make contact.

You'll want to practice and tinker with the timing.

Stroke Fundamental #3 – Reaction to Your Opponent's Shot Direction

Coming out of your split step on balance is crucial to be able to maintain good visual contact with the tennis ball.

If you're off balance, rushing to get to the incoming ball, reaching too early with your hands, etc., you'll lose clear visual contact and most likely only see parts of the flight of the ball in an area, not a clear focus on the ball itself.

I know that if I am "seeing the ball well" that my confidence soars because I then know I am on balance, under control of my movement, not worried about looking at my opponent, and will wait for the right moment to execute my shot to help take me to my next desired court position.

Practice making a visual lock on the tennis ball just prior to when your opponent makes contact. And then be sure that you clearly "find" the ball's path so you can "space" yourself properly.

Stroke Fundamental #4 – Allow Your Instincts to Determine Your Shot Selection

I always try to allow my natural instincts to be in control of my shot selection.

If I have too many choices, I'll never commit to one of them and that's a recipe for an unforced error.

Practice being aware of what is your natural first instinct for your shot selection.

Your shot selection is going to involve direction, spin, pace, and depth. Sometimes your natural instinct will tell you a specific shot selection based on how you're coming out of your split step. Balance, court position, etc.

Go with it even though there may be a clear opening to hit a winner. Just because you have an open court to hit into doesn't mean that you can necessarily execute that shot because of other factors.

Trust that your instincts will be the right shot choice.

One of the things that I know I do is to positively visualize the shot I want to play just prior to executing it. It's never a guarantee, but I'd much rather see myself playing a successful shot rather than missing it.

We can get tentative at times, especially when we perceive that this is a really crucial point to win, and the more tentative you become, the less you visualize a successful shot.

A successful shot to me is not seeing me hit a winner, because I can hit the greatest shot ever, and if my opponent has anticipated my shot, they will likely be there waiting for it.

Have I failed?

Of course not, but frequently we visualize hitting a winner, and when we don't actually end the point, we tend to consider that shot a failure even though you may have hit the exact shot your instincts told you to play.

So, visualize the shot you want to hit and make sure it's not based on winning the point.

Remember, you can never control your opponent's ability to anticipate all of the time, so focus on your natural instinct's shot selection and always assume you'll be playing another shot. Always....

Stroke Fundamental #5 – Allow Your Swing's Contact Point to Happen at the Proper Moment in Time

My biggest challenge in tennis is to “hurry up to wait”, meaning, I want to prepare so early with my proper spacing that I feel I can literally “wait” for the right moment in time to play my shot on balance.

I don’t mean wait in the sense that you are standing on the court literally waiting for the incoming ball, but waiting as to when will be the right moment to start my swing so I can make contact with the ball at the ideal distance away from.

We often make the mistake of “rushing” our contact either because we are ready so early or we are so eager to get the ball back to our opponent’s side of the court.

You should be able to identify where the ideal contact point is for each of your shots.

Once you know where that ideal contact is, your focus is on aligning yourself to the path of the incoming ball in such a way that you could “wait” for the proper moment in time to swing and make contact.

Unfortunately, we can become too eager and rush that contact point’s timing.

Practice what I call “receiving” the ball at the right time.

Stroke Fundamental #6 – Allow Your Swing to Finish Based on Your Balance and Not on Needing to Get the Ball to Its Target Too Soon

This is such an important element of executing any tennis shot, and that is, allowing your swing’s finish to happen at the right time.

Way too often we rush or force the finish and create unforced errors. You should be able to know exactly where the ideal swing finish position is for each shot.

Federer just amazes me with his ability to allow his swing to finish naturally without being concerned about where he is on the court and where his opponent is on the court. He has no problem leaving his vision directly at the contact point as his swing finishes without being rushed.

Stroke Fundamental #7 – Do It All Over Again, Shot After Shot

Too many players don’t feel comfortable “staying in the point”.

Their first couple of shots adhere to our Fundamentals 1- 6, but soon after that 2nd shot, it seems that we can start to rush and force the point’s outcome by reaching too early with our hands and/or by coming out of split step with our head too far in front of the rest of us, sort of falling.

One of the keys to being a consistent shot maker is to stay true to these stroke fundamentals throughout the point no matter how long it takes or how many shots you have to play.

Practice the feeling of each of your shots being within a process starting with Fundamental #1 all the way through to Fundamental #6.

Always being ready to start the process over again no matter how much you think you may have hit a shot that won't be returned.

CONCLUSION:

Challenging your opponent with consistently good court positioning will win you more points than if you are forced to hit outright winners.

As we said in the beginning, I want to force my opponent to have to hit more winners past me rather than me having to hit winners past him/her/them.

It really is that simple.

Don't worry about having to learn to hit every shot dead perfect. You'll never ever get there.

I know players who believe that if they learn to hit all of their shots "more perfect" that they will play better.

Wrong. The reality is that you're going to hit 1 shot out of 10 shots absolutely and completely clean as your mind envisioned it just prior to executing your shot. The other 90% of your shot execution is somewhere between correct and a complete "shank"...

Players who focus on being perfect shot makers are disappointed when they slightly mis-hit a shot.

I slightly mis-hit shots now and then only to look up and see that the shot I did hit was maybe not what I'd intended, but hey, it's a tough shot for my opponent, and I'm certainly not going to criticize myself for not hitting it perfectly.

Become a court position master. Observe, study, ask questions, be open to change.

Good court positioning can be good "defensive" court locations where you are geometrically located to defend offensive opportunities by your opponent, as well as you being in good "offensive" court locations where you force your opponent to hit a winner.

The key to being to achieve good court positions is your ability to consistently "space" away from the path of the incoming ball.

Practice the 7 Fundamentals described above and you'll be able to visit more areas of the court, have more fun on the court, and probably win a ton more matches...!

Good luck out there and keep moving forward!

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