UNDERSTANDING THE GAME OF TENNIS

The following information was shared with me by my friend and founder of the Universal Tennis Rating, Dave Howell, decades ago. The concept has served me well with my teaching, coaching, and playing. I have found it to be very helpful in understanding the game of **TENNIS** at all levels. I have used this concept in coaching junior players, college players, All-Americans, professional players, along with novice players. The information you are about to read will make the game more objective and it is very important to be open minded while trying to introduce the information into your game or coaching.   **– Darryl Cummings**

I. POINT PLAYING

The game of **TENNIS** is very difficult to understand at times. We have all seen players who hit the ball far superior than their opponent and lose to an unorthodox player or someone who looks great that could not play their way out of a "paper bag". A "player" is someone who understands the game and knows what they can and cannot do with the ball. The higher level player is aware of what their opponent can and cannot do with the ball. **TENNIS** is like an athletic chess game, a player has to know where and when to attempt a certain shot. A drop shot might be a great shot if the opponent is slow as a turtle or it might be a silly shot if the opponent is fast as lighting. There are many variables in playing the game of **TENNIS** just as there are many ways you can put someone in check mate while playing the game of chess.

Understanding how points come to an end is the first step in understanding a **TENNIS** match. By far the most significant concept in most **TENNIS** matches is the unforced error factor. An unforced error is simply a shot which a player should be able to play into the court, it makes no difference if the error is made while you are under attack or if you are right on top of the net with a wide open court in front of you. If you miss the court and you were able to hit into the court, it is an unforced error.

Winners, Forced Errors, and Fluky Winners make up the rest of what happens in **TENNIS**. A winner is a shot on which the opposing player has no play. The player simply cannot get their racquet on the ball. On a forced error, the opponent can get their racquet on the ball but is simply placed in such a difficult position that they cannot play the ball back into the court.

Fluky Winners occur on net cord shots or bad bounces or mishits\; these are never intentional. It is important to understand the difference between intentional winners and resultant winners.

The *philosophy* about improving match play performance is to first try to reduce the unforced errors which simply results in gifts to the opponent (unearned points); secondly, if the opponent is going to win, it should be because of their superior ability to perform their skills. In other words, they earn points by forcing the opponent into errors or hitting winners. Thirdly, once a player can do the first two they must develop their own ability to earn points through proper use and execution of offensive tactics.

2. TACTICAL SITUATIONS

In discussing tactical situations, it is tempting to get into very involved details. I will try to avoid this as much as possible. The definitions which follow should be thought of more as guidelines than as rules.

A. Defense: The basic elements of defense are:

    1. Balance
    2. Direction of weight transfer
    3. Height of the ball
    4. Location on or off court
    5. Location of the opponent

1.   Balance: If a player is off balance, they are on defense.

2.   Direction of weight transfer: If a player's weight is going in any direction, other than towards the

net, they are on defense.

3.   Height of the ball: If the ball is extremely low or uncomfortably high, the player is on defense.

4.   Location on or off the court: A player can be on defense anywhere on the court if they are confronted with any of the above conditions. In addition, if a player is pushed very deep towards the back fence or screen, if they are pushed wide off the court, or if they are pulled in close to the net, the player can be placed on defense.

A combination of any of these above elements makes for severe defensive situation.

B. Neutral: In a neutral situation neither player has offensive advantage nor is either player on defense. Two players who are trading shots a comfortable distance behind the baseline are in a neutral situation.

C. Maneuver: Maneuvering is the first offensive step. When a player hits a maneuver shot successfully, they put the opponent on defense. A typical maneuver shot takes place from just inside the baseline. Usually, the first maneuver shot (M) is a cross court (XC) shot near the sideline, a down the line (DL) shot also near the line, or a drop shot (DS). The (M) shot seldom wins the point outright. It is very important for the offensive player to follow up properly with their next shot.

While the (M) shot can usually be played back or defended by the opponent, a series of these maneuvering shots (M1, M2, M3) usually results in winning the point. However, do remember that this is only a guideline.

The offensive player should also be cautioned to be aware when the defending player has succeeded in playing a neutralizing shot. When this happens, it is time to return to neutral.

D. Attacking: Attacking means hitting a shot and following it to the concluding area of the court (at the net). Aside from coming to the net, the attacking player should also attempt to play a shot which adds at least one other element of defense to his opponent's situation. (Balance, Weight Transfer, Height of the ball)

E. Concluding: Concluding means putting the ball away: hitting a winner intentionally. This normally occurs at the net. In addition, the player needs to have ideal conditions relative to his position and the ball. (Balance, Weight Transfer, Height of Ball)

3. TACTICAL ZONES

The guidelines for tactical zones are based on where the ball is received by the player.

Defense-deep behind the baseline
Neutral-close to the base line area
Maneuver-3/4 area
Attack-1/2 court area
Conclude-inside the service line

Remember these are guidelines. A player can conclude from a neutral area and a player can be defensive in the concluding area. Example: player can be in a concluding zone, but the ball can be in the blind spot

4. DIRECTION OF TACTICAL SITUATION

The guidelines of tactical situations are:
Defense-just try to get ball back over the net
Neutral-make the ball bounce and go over the baseline
Maneuver-make the ball bounce and go over a sideline
Attack-make the ball bounce and go over the baseline
Conclude-make the bounce and go over a sideline

Every player should have a tactical intent before hitting the ball. The higher level player can plan more tactical hits in advance. For example: Hit two strong neutral shots and then hit a drop shot. The two strong neutral shots backs the opponent up, thus producing a short ball where the player can hit a drop shot.

When a player makes an unforced error the intent must be known. If the player was trying to conclude from a neutral situation such as: attempting to hit an off balance forehand from 10 feet behind the baseline for a winner. The player overplaying the tactic needs to correct the tactical intent.

If a player was asked after making an error "what was your intent" and the player replied "I do not know" then this would be like not having a goal. In the movie The Wizard of Oz, Dorothy asked the scarecrow "What road should I take?" The scarecrow asked "Where do you want to go?" Dorothy answered "I do not know". The scarecrow replied" It does not really matter then".

If a player does not have an intent with the ball, then the effectiveness of the shot cannot be evaluated.

5. DEFENSIVE SITUATIONS

<u>Blind spot-</u>if the ball lands at near the feet of the player

<u>High ball-</u>if the ball has to be contacted high above the shoulder provided it is not an overhead

<u>Short ball-</u>if the ball is short and the player has to scoop it up

<u>Left plane-</u>draw a line between the player and the left net post if the ball lands outside of this line then it would hurt the player. If it lands outside of the line with enough pace then it would be a winner.

<u>Right plane-</u>draw a line between the player and the right net post if the ball lands outside of this line then it would hurt the player. If it lands outside of the line with enough pace then it would be a winner.

6. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A DODO, THE BOZO, AND THE CHOKER

Every player at one time or another is a Dodo. Basically, a player becomes a Dodo when their shot selection does not conform to the situation.

Going from Dodo to Bozo is simply a matter of degree. Usually the Bozo player simply exaggerates their overplaying, when this occurs, it is usually obvious to everyone watching. Not everyone can spot a Dodo all the time. Sometimes a Dodo looks like a good player who is simply trying to "mix it up a little". On good days they often get away with it, on "bad days" they cannot understand what is wrong and they usually go bozo.

While the bozo usually overplays, the choker under plays.

8. MATCH CHARTING

Charting can be achieved by taking notes during a match or it can be a form of calculation that a player does during a match. A player seem to do this by instincts.

<u>CASE STUDIES</u>
<u>CASE:</u> There was a player that made 12 unforced backhand passing shots during one set. The shots were missed wide. The opposing player only volleyed 4 times, 3 times the player missed the volley and the fourth time the player was lobed over and the point went back to neutral.

<u>SOLUTION:</u> The player was going for too much on the passing shots. Why try to pass someone if they are ineffective with volleying.

CASE: Your opponent goes Bozo after 5 neutral hits.

SOLUTION: Let your opponent go Bozo. Often if you make your opponent hit some neutral balls they tend to freak out and then start grab bagging. This is not true for all players, however you need to recognize it when this occurs. Sometimes this will occur when the opponent is tired or frustrated.

1. How did the point end?
   Winner = W(+)
   Forced Error = FE(+)
   Fluky Winner = FLW (+)
   Unforced Error = U (-)

2. Games: The outcome of every game is the sum of (+) and (-) points for each player.

3. Set: Each set can be evaluated in terms of (+) and (-) for each player.

4. Matches: The same as above

5. (+) and (-) should be evaluated according to tactical situations.

6. The basic tactical situations are:
   Defense: D
   Neutral: N Neither player has an advantage
   Maneuver: M Making other player move
   Attack: A Approaching the net behind the ball
   Conclude: C Hitting a winner

7. Serve = s1 and return of serve = RS need to be evaluated.

8. The development of a **TENNIS** player is accomplished through playing and training. Training should be based on evaluation of playing. A prudent training program should take into account the counts and changes of tactical situations.

9. Taking lessons and doing drills is not playing **TENNIS**.

10. Counts:
    Defense = D1 D2 D3
    Neutral = N1 N2 N3
    Maneuver = M1 M2 M3
    Attack = A1 (possible A2)
    Conclude = C1 (possible C2)

11. Changes: A player must recognize and adapt to any change in the tactical situation. Special emphasis needs to be placed on the transition to defense from any other tactical situation.

12. The basic game plan:

    A. If you can reduce your errors you force the opponent to hit winners.

    B. If you can defend and neutralize then how can the opponent hurt you?

    C. Can you hurt the opponent?

    D. Do you need to hurt the opponent?

    E. Should you let the opponent initiate play?

13. Understanding the score: If the objective is to reduce errors, and the score is 40-0 for you, give the opponent the chance to make the error. If the opponent makes the error you have won the game with no errors. Use the same strategy for 40-15. At 40-30, do not pass up the opportunity to play to win the point.

14. The player who controls activity regardless of score will succeed in the end.

15. The player who does not allow attitude to have a negative effect on the match will be able to evaluate play based on tactics.