

The Feeding Ladder

Coaches need many tools to help players learn & improve. **FEEDING** is a critical coaching tool to provide players with repetition of skills.

THE KEY GOAL

One of the key goals of practice (drilling) is to provide **quality repetition** of skills. If players only played tennis, they would improve however, specific skills may not get the attention they need. Many skills that need practice would only randomly occur as play unfolds. For example, an overhead smash is an important skill but, just playing a tennis match would only provide a handful of overhead practice opportunities (if at all).

“Feeding” is the term used to deliver a ball to a player for practice. There are two main categories of feeding:

“**Dead-ball**” feeding means delivering balls to a player (from a basket, etc.). This type of feeding provides plenty of repetition but it comes with the possibility of producing ‘brainless strokers’. Players know how to stroke but not how to *play* because they learn **how** to perform technique without knowing **what** they should do with it.

“**Live-ball**” feeding is more realistic. The definition of a “Live-ball” feed is that the hitter sees the player who is feeding them receive the shot. For example, when two players are in a Cross-court rally drill with each other, they see each other receive the ball so this would be a typical ‘Live-ball’ drill. These types of drills have the advantage of being more realistic however, may not provide specific repetition.

A BALANCING ACT

So which is it, the realistic Live-ball drilling, or basket feeding? The answer is obviously ‘yes’! A good coach needs to be able to access every tool at their disposal. As long as they are first asking the question, “*What does the player need to learn?*” rather than the question, “*What drill will I do?*” they are on the right track.

The fact is, a coach can have the best of both worlds if they are systematic about how they apply drilling. It is not so much the type of drilling that makes learning less effective but the **application** of the drilling. Both Live-ball and Dead-ball drills can be applied poorly as well as applied effectively. **The truth is, an effective coach will use all types of feeding.**

To help this process, I have systemized the types of drills coaches can use into a structure called, “The Feeding Ladder”.

To understand and apply the Feeding ladder, it is important not to judge the types of feeding. It is not always ‘better’ to practice with players hitting with each other as opposed to basket

feeding. The realism of Live-ball is not automatically 'better' than Dead-ball. These are all just tools available to the coach to apply depending on the player's needs.

How the ladder works is that feeding can progress along a continuum from less realistic situations to ones that mirror match play. The vertical 'posts' of the ladder represent who feeds. Coaches can feed or, players can feed/hit with each other. Each 'rung' of the ladder represents the different types of feeds possible.

FEEDING TYPES

As mentioned previously, there are two general categories that feeding falls under:

- **"Dead-ball"** feeds refer to a ball sent immediately from the feeder.
- **"Live-ball"** feeds are where the hitter sees the opponent receive their shot. The ball is already 'in-play' when they practice the shot.

Live-ball Feeds:

Open Match Play: Playing matches (tournament or practice) is the ultimate gauge of effectiveness. This includes point play during training sessions. It is important to monitor performance during play.

Constrained Match Play: Playing points with imposed limitations (e.g. Must come to net on all balls that land shorter than the service line. No lobs allowed. One serve only, etc.)

Live-ball Single Shot: The player hits to the feeder who then sends them the ball (e.g. player hits an approach shot and feeder sends passing shot for player to volley. The point may or may not be played out).

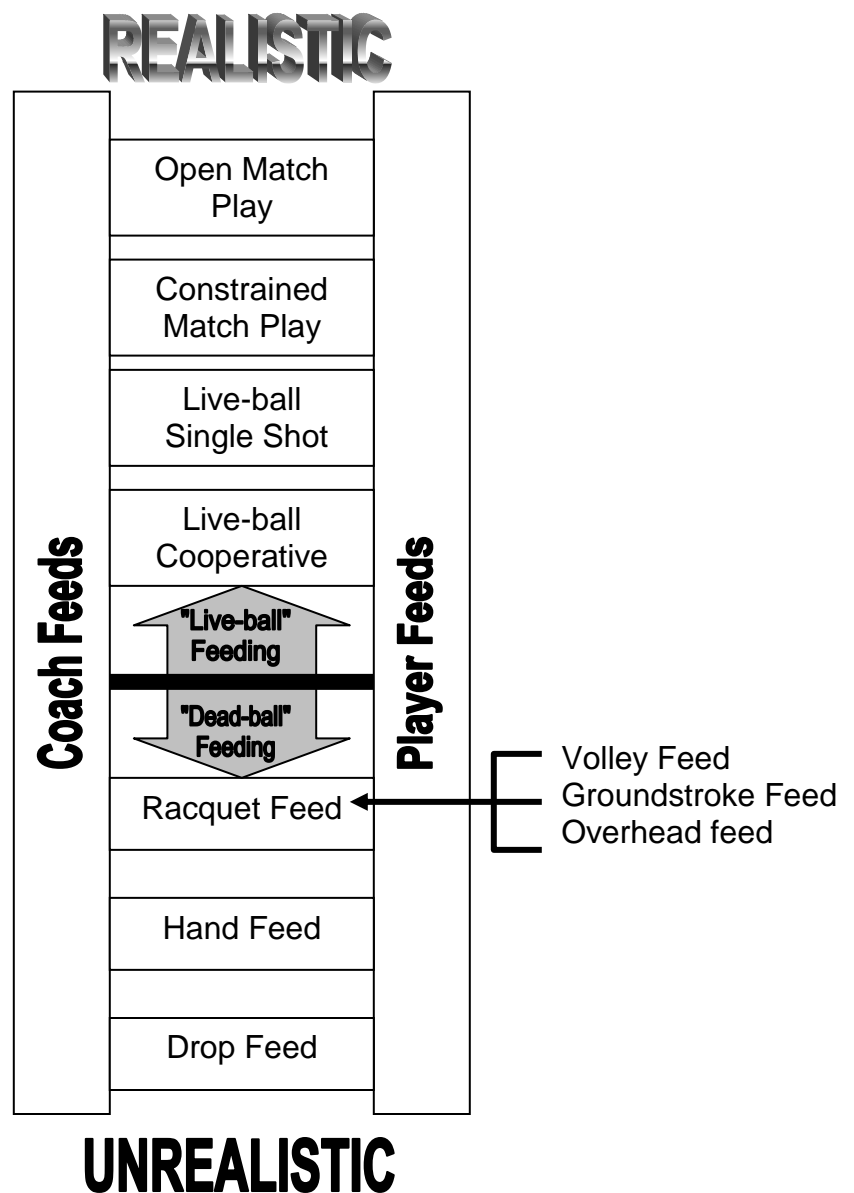
Live-ball Cooperative: Players hit continuously with each other (e.g. two players maintaining a crosscourt rally).

Dead-ball Drills:

Racquet Feed: The ball is sent with the feeders' racquet. Can be a volley feed, groundstroke feed, or overhead feed (e.g. serving to a player).

Hand Feed: The feeder sends the ball to the player using their hand (can be underhand throw or overhead).

Drop Feed: The feeder drops the ball to the player (players can also drop the ball to themselves).



Drills are classified by the type of feed sent to the skill requiring repetition. For example, for volleys, the coach can basket feed to a player at net. This is a Dead-ball drill. However, if the player sends the ball back to the coach, and then has to volley the coach's passing shot, that's a Live-ball volley drill.

Even 'hybrid' drills can be useful. For example, a coach can feed in a specific shot (Dead-ball) and have the players play out the point (Live-ball Match Play). Strictly speaking, this drill would still be considered a Dead-ball drill as the shot practiced receives the Dead-ball feed it is sometimes called a 'Semi-dead' drill.

ADVANTAGES OF FEEDING TYPES

Each type of feed has advantages and disadvantages. A coach can tailor how the player receives the ball to create relevant learning that connects to the player's needs. A general guideline is that technical work is easier accomplished on the 'Dead-ball' end of the ladder while tactical work is done on the 'Live-ball' end.

Dead-ball feeding has the following advantages:

- Situations can be controlled by the coach so the player receives a very specific shot. E.g. a wide, low backhand volley. Shots received infrequently in match play can get additional repetition.
- The height, distance, direction, speed, spin and frequency of the ball the player receives can be controlled by the coach. This allows a coach to adjust shots to the player's level (or different levels of players in the same group). It also allows the coach to control the intensity of the drill (for fitness, mental stamina, etc.)

Live-ball feeding has the following advantages:

- Recreates match play.
- Players can read the 'whole' cycle of the shot including all elements required to anticipate and receive the ball. **This is especially important when players learn to rally.**
- They can see the effect of their shot and how it affects the shot they will get back. E.g. they can see if they do a strong shot, the opponent may make a weak reply that can be taken advantage of.
- They can time and adapt their recovery to the needs of the situation, etc.

“An effective coach will use all types of feeding.”

USING THE LADDER

The best method is to use the ladder to harness the advantages of **both** the Live-ball and Dead-ball drill types:

1. **Tactical Context:** First, decide what tactic a player needs to perform (e.g. Attack the opponent's BH with our strength).
2. **Identify the Skill to be Practiced:** Next, determine the skill that needs repetition (e.g. the Inside-out shoulder height attacking forehand). Without a specific goal, drills are not as effective as they can be.

3. **Dead Ball Drilling:** The skill is trained in 1 or more Dead-ball drills to get maximum repetition (and build a motor pattern as quickly as possible). The dead ball drills can focus on different parts of the skill (i.e. footwork, racquet work, body work)
4. **Live-ball Cooperative Drilling:** The coach then moves up the ladder to integrate the skill into a more realistic match play situation starting with a cooperative Live-ball version of the drill (e.g. the coach stands beside the attacker and feeds a ball to the partner who sends a weak/high shot in the middle of the court. The attacker hits their inside out shot. If the partner can hit a defensive high/weak middle shot back, they can even cooperate and keep the sequence going.
5. **Live-ball Competitive Play:** Finally, the Live-ball drill is played but the attacker and partner play out the point. Constraints can be used to ensure the skill just practiced is used (e.g. The partner on the other side is only allowed to defend).

Some exceptions to these steps is when players are learning to rally, it is more effective to switch steps 3 and 4. Start Live-ball cooperative and move down the ladder to Dead-ball only if a specific skill needs work. Another exception is when analyzing players. Start Live-ball match play (to see what they really do in play rather than in a drill). Move to the other types of drilling as required. This works great when emphasizing tactics.

At any point in the process, the coach can go back down the ladder if they feel a skill requires focused attention and repetition. However, the skill must always be brought back up the ladder so player know how to apply it is match play.

AN EXAMPLE OF USING THE APPROPRIATE TOOLS FOR THE JOB

I remember years ago watching a practice with Pete Sampras and his then coach, Paul Annacone. I was struck by how Paul was addressing Pete's recovery after the serve. Pete would serve and then Paul (who was standing in front of him and off to the side) would then hand feed a ball to challenge Pete's recovery. The hand feed allowed him to quickly put the ball in the right position and allow Paul to get, 'up close and personal' with his feedback. Who says hand feeding is only a tool to be used for starter players?

CONCLUSION

Every coaches ultimate mission is to help players to learn to play. Both tactics (where and when to hit a shot) and technical skills (how to hit it) are required to play successfully. Many skills required for successful match play don't occur very frequently. Dead-ball drills speed the learning process by allowing maximum repetition of specific skills in order to solidify motor patterns and work on particulars. But it can't be left there! Live-ball drills that re-create realistic situations are also needed to get skills 'game-ready' and fully integrated.

The Feeding Ladder is a systematic way to organize drilling to achieve the mission.