

TECHNIQUE FOR SITUATION TRAINING – BALL CONTROL

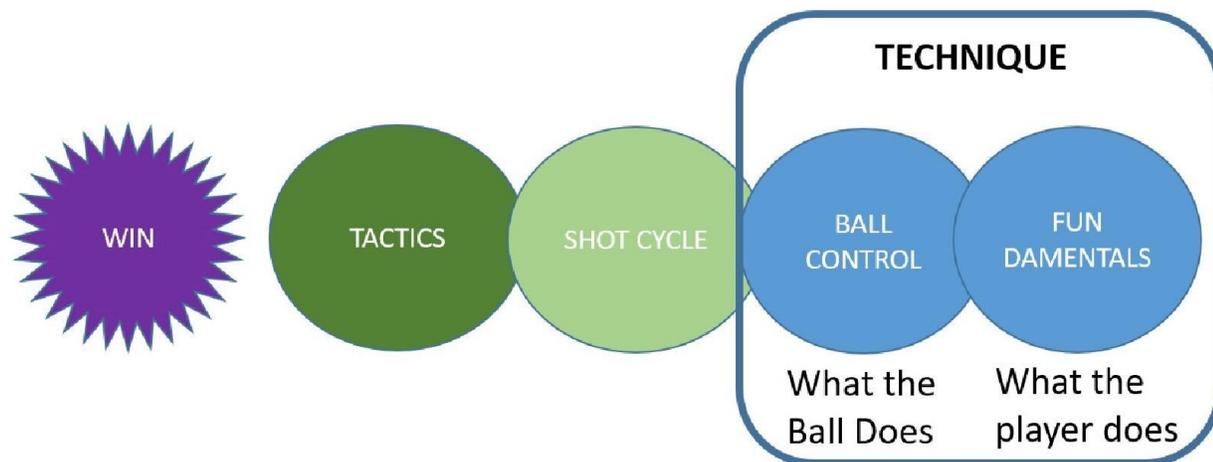
If we boil tennis down to the irreducible minimum, it's all about receiving and sending the little round yellow fuzzy thing. Therefore, it follows that to coach tennis well, it is important to be very masterful at helping players become proficient at dealing with the ball. The module we have in our coaching education for this is called 'Ball Control.' It contains the following elements:

- Connection to the Tactical/Technical Continuum
- Ball Control Characteristics
- Coaching the Ball
- Ball Control & session planning

Let's look at all the elements and how they are used as practical tools to develop players.

BALL CONTROL IN CONTEXT

For context, let's look at what I consider one of the most critical diagrams in our Canadian Coaching methodology.



The Tactical/Technical continuum depicts the direct connection between tactics and technique. All too often, technical instruction is about perfecting isolated movements that are disconnected from the reality of play. The truth is, **technique only exists to make the ball do what it is supposed to in order to accomplish a tactic.** Without that connection, tennis coaching becomes like teaching gymnastics moves. Unfortunately, in tennis, having pristine form does not directly gain points.

So, Ball Control becomes the critical bridge between the technique players learn and the tactics they need to play the game successfully. It is interesting to note that many coaching systems worldwide don't have this bridge. They have technique and tactics, but the connections between the two are 'fuzzy.'

For example, they will attempt to control the ball through the mechanics of form. This leads to potential coaching misconceptions that are unhelpful to players. For instance, *‘Follow-through to make the ball go deeper’* (one can follow-through and hit short, deep, and everything in between).

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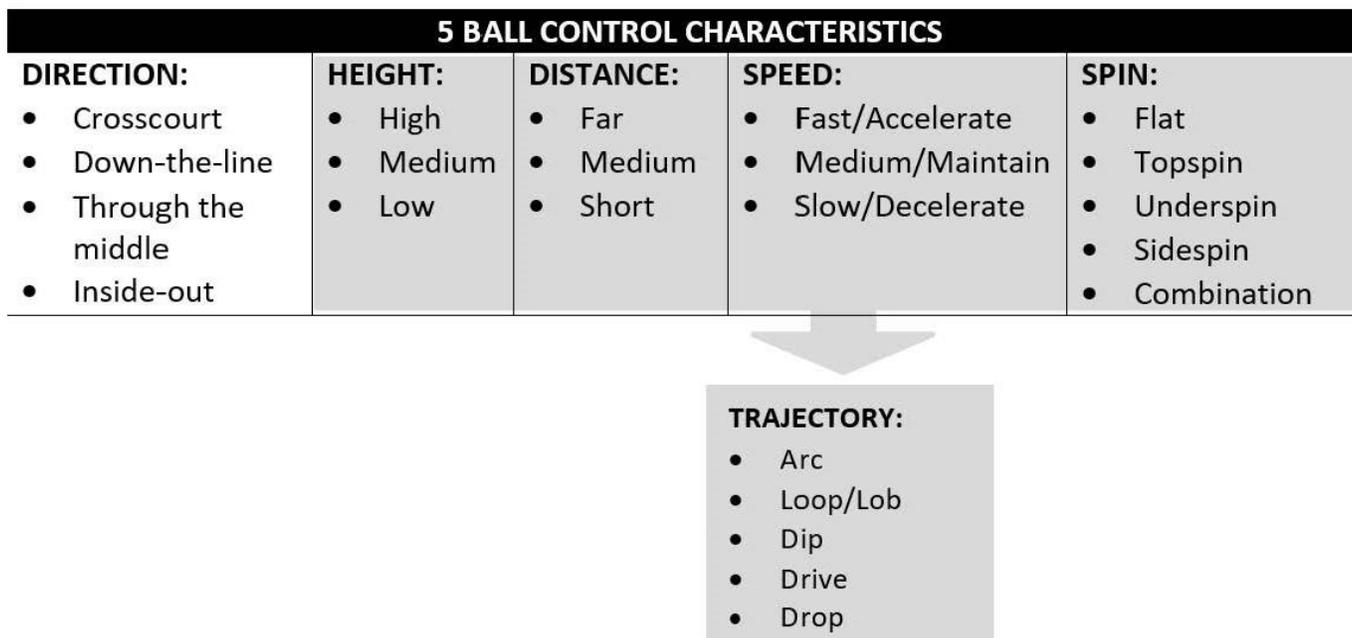
BALL CONTROL CHARACTERISTICS

It is essential that a player have what we call **‘Effectiveness.’** In other words, they are *effective* at getting the ball to do what is required to accomplish the tactic.

The core of effectiveness is the Ball Control Characteristics. There are only five ways to manipulate the ball in tennis:

- Height
- Direction
- Distance
- Speed
- Spin

All five characteristics are present in every shot in tennis. They describe the physics of what the ball is doing in flight. We can simplify the list by making it into two: **Direction** and **Trajectory**.



Trajectory

Direction is fairly self-explanatory, but a helpful tool when coaching ball control is for players to visualize the ball's flight through the air. This is called the ball's 'trajectory' and can be any combination of Height, Distance, Speed & Spin. I have seen this cleverly referred to as 'Arc-ology.'

Ball control is simplified if only two elements are dealt with initially rather than five. Then, a coach only needs to drill down into the specifics of the trajectories (Height, Distance, Speed or Spin) if required. The five basic trajectories are listed above. For example, a coaching instruction could be to send a Forehand 'dip' (Trajectory) down-the-line to the opponent's Backhand (Direction) to pass them at net.

Tennis is a game of reception *then* projection. A player must learn to receive variations of the Ball Control Characteristics as well as send them. The quality of the reception will directly affect the quality of the projection. Therefore, mastery of tennis means mastery of both receiving and sending of both Direction and Trajectory.

COACHING THE BALL

By understanding the Tactical/Technical Continuum, a coach can help a player be significantly more successful at playing by applying a process called '**Coaching the ball.**' This gives a coach many tools to help players improve play without having to perform 'major surgery on their strokes. Players (especially adults) who report being unhappy with tennis coaching list a coach completely reconstructing their form as a main reason. Effectiveness is rooted in physics and not a coach's interpretation of 'proper form.'

To coach the ball, the Ball Control Characteristics are paired with the P.A.S. Principles which stand for Path Angle and Speed of the racquet. ([Click here for an additional article on the P.A.S. Principles](#)). With this package, the coach can directly connect tactics and technique.

- The process begins with identifying the tactic required (e.g. hit the ball to the open court to move the opponent).
- Next, the appropriate Ball Control Characteristics are identified. Every shot in tennis has all five characteristics; however, only a few will need to be emphasized depending on the tactic. For example, in the tactic above, the critical Ball Control Characteristic is *Direction*).
- Then, the coach makes it clear to the player what the ball should do by associating it to a specific measurement. This measurement solidifies the players' intention and defines success. Each Ball Control Characteristic has some easily used measures that a coach can apply (see table below).

This measurement defines a task to achieve and a problem to solve. This is not an unfamiliar process to most coaches (every coach I know has, at some point, put down a target on the court for direction or distance). Studies even show a 300% increase in success when this is done. What is less familiar is using this process on *every* shot for the main Ball Control Characteristic required. It astounds most coaches how much technique is cleaned up simply by defining specifically what the ball needs to do.

- Finally, (and only if required), the P.A.S. Principles that directly determine the Ball Control Characteristics are applied. Every shot in tennis is a recipe of the appropriate P.A.S. Principles. These are the physics of what makes the ball do what it needs to for the tactic. For example, in the above tactic, direction was the key Ball Control Characteristic which is primarily controlled by the P.A.S. Principle of *angle* (timing the angle of the racquet face to look towards the target at impact).

BALL CONTROL CHARACTERISTIC - MEASURES		
Ball Control Characteristic	Measure -Receiving	Measure - Sending
HEIGHT	Level compared to body ball is received: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knee-level • Waist level • Chest-level • Shoulder -level 	Height of ball over the net: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Racquet 'windows') (e.g. hit the ball through a window 3 racquets over the net) • Rope strung over the net
DIRECTION	Markers on the court showing the area the ball is received	Markers defining target (best target is a larger are for success and a smaller target within that for focus)
DISTANCE	Markers on the court showing the area the ball is received	Markers defining target area
SPEED	Scale the speed of the oncoming ball <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fast • Medium • Slow 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scale the speed of the ball sent e.g. ball is sent: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Fast ○ Medium ○ Slow • Distance between 1st and 2nd bounce (e.g. Power serve: hit the court and hit the wall before the 2nd bounce) (Drop shot = bounce 3 times before the service line)
SPIN	Definition of spin received: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flat • Topspin • Underspin • Sidespin 	Characteristic of the 1 st bounce in relation to the second: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topspin = height over net and distance of landing point • Sidespin (e.g. serve slice: where ball lands on 1st bounce and landing point on second to show the 'curve' of the ball) • Underspin = height of bounce

So, without jumping in right away to change a player's grip, body rotations, swing shape, set-up, etc., the player can win more points by just understanding how to problem-solve using the Ball Control Characteristics and P.A.S. Principles (which are far less complicated than the barrage of mechanics thrown at players by many coaches). This is *'Coaching the ball.'*

“Coaching the Ball provides many tools to help players improve without having to perform ‘major surgery’ on their technique.”

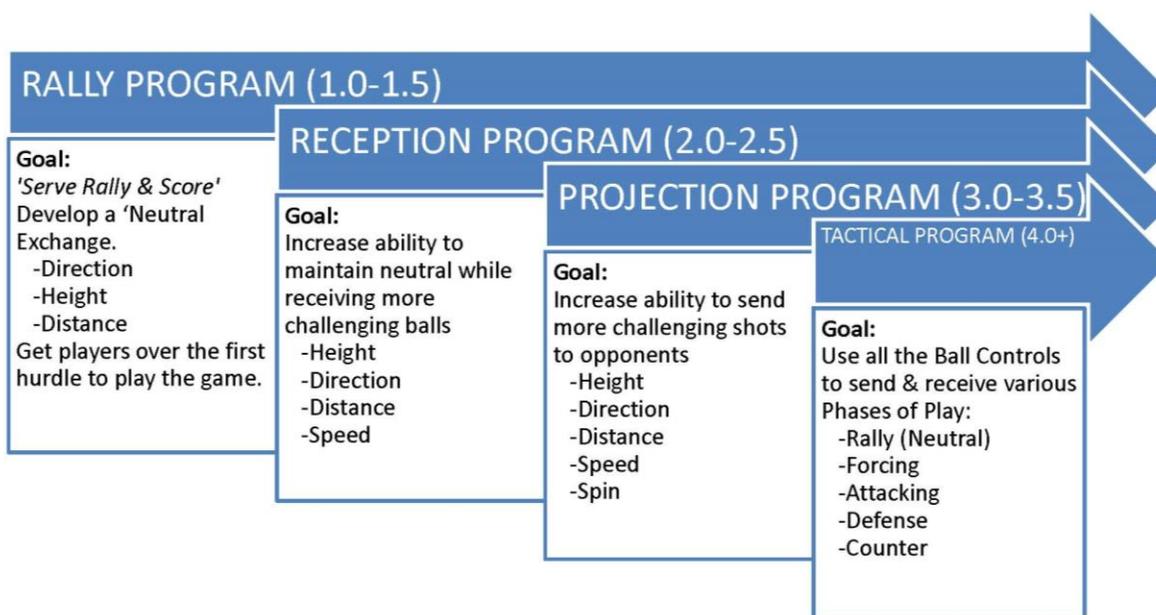
At this point, let me be crystal clear that effective & efficient technique is *essential* for successful tennis. However, I differentiate between 'form' (which to me is the way an idealized stroke is supposed to *look*) and technique (which has to do with the physics of the ball and biomechanics of the body). In my experience as a coaching educator who has seen and assessed thousands of coaches, the ones who coach through 'form' are less effective than the ones who connect tactics and technique.

All the technical elements listed above are important. However, they are the last on the list in the development order. It is only when they can't consistently make the P.A.S., control the ball, and achieve the tactic that the other elements need to be dealt with. For example, with our direction tactic, the player may not have been able to consistently create the appropriate angle because their set-up doesn't allow them to.

For long-term development (especially with juniors), biomechanics do need more emphasis. For recreational players who only play a couple of times per week and never actually practice, changing grips and such is an unnecessary approach that potentially ruins their tennis more than helps.

LONG-TERM PLANNING

The Ball Control Characteristics can be used to help players develop and even for long-term planning. The diagram below shows a map of a long-term development process based on the acquisition of ball control skills (Using the levels of the Play Tennis Canada Rating System or, NTRP as it is known in the US.)



Most coaches can unleash their creativity with the topic and themes for training sessions by using the Ball Control Characteristics. How many sessions could you create by using receiving of each characteristic in various situations and sending each one? Think of how refreshing it would be not to have the ancient 'Stroke of the Week' workshops but 'Ball Control of the Week' workshops? Not to mention how practical and usable it would be for the players.

CONCLUSION

The concept of *Coaching the Ball* using the Ball Control Characteristics and P.A.S. Principles provide a coach with an entire toolbox of practical, relevant and easy to learn tools that actually help players be more successful in the situations they encounter at their levels of play. It can avoid the 'information constipation and over-technicalized coaching that all too often dominates the sport.