

TACTICAL PHASES OF PLAY (Giving the NOD to tactics)

Tactics are one of the **4 Performance Factors** that are critical in player development.

- Psychological
- Physical
- Tactical
- Technical

When dealing with tactics, coaches need to understand a few essential concepts:

STRATEGY VS. TACTICS

'Strategy' and 'tactics' often get confused by coaches. Strategy is a planning process done **prior to performance**. Strategy is your overall game plan which could include elements from all 4 performance factors (psychological, physical, tactical, technical).

Tactics occur **during performance** and require decision-making. Tactics are the specific actions you take to implement your strategy in situations (which may require adaptation).

We can define tactics as:

'The intention, decisions and actions of players to gain advantage over an opponent.'

PROBLEM-SOLVING

Tennis is a 'game sport.' All games require problem-solving. This includes the problems opponents throw at you and the ones you create for them. In games (whether chess, hockey or tennis), problems are mainly expressed through tactics (e.g., solving the problem of dealing with an opponent's powerful serve. Solving the problem of picking on an opponent's weakness, etc.).

“Strategy requires thought, tactics require observation.”

Max Euwe-World Chess Champion

Tactics are situational and require quick and effective decision-making to select the best solution to the problems they encounter during play.

The core *tactical decision* in every situation is whether you are in Neutral, Offence, or Defence (N.O.D.). These are called the '**Phases of Play.**'

Phases of Play are what I call '**Micro-tactics**' as they happen within the cycle of an individual shot. ([for an article on the Shot Cycle, click here](#))

PHASES OF PLAY: DEFINITION

A Phase of Play is the *relationship* between the perceived difficulty of the ball received and the risk adopted in sending it.

- **NEUTRAL:** A player is in a neutral situation when they perceive a moderate reception challenge and choose to respond with modest risk. In tennis, it is perfectly fine not to have the advantage as long as the opponent doesn't either. Players must ride a knife-edge balance between over- and under-risking to be effective in a neutral situation.

Players are often less than effective in neutral situations because they don't understand that there are two '*shades*' of neutral that occur:

- **Equalize (Shade down):** For example, in a rally, the opponent may have a *slight* advantage. They are not attacking, but their shot has created a layer of challenge. Here, the player must recognize the challenge and not over-risk to bring it back to equal.
- **Pressure (Shade up):** For example, in a rally, the player receives a *slightly* less challenging ball but not enough to attack. This provides an opportunity to incrementally 'notch it up' and do a little more with the shot (e.g. place it more accurately).
- **OFFENCE:** A player is in an offence situation when they perceive less of a reception challenge and accept more risk to send the ball. It is also important to recognize an opponent is in trouble to anticipate a less challenging shot is coming. Players can gain advantage in three ways:
 - **Power:** Sending the ball with more power will challenge an opponent's timing and get it to its destination faster.
 - **Precision:** Sending the ball with more accuracy will challenge an opponent's timing by making them move (e.g. an angled volley or drop-shot)
 - **Time:** Decreasing the time between your impact and your opponents will challenge their timing by pressuring their preparation.

Becoming better offensively is a major emphasis when moving from U12 to older divisions.

Players will often be aware of what they want the ball to do, but, to increase the effectiveness of their offence, they should also understand the effect they need to produce on an opponent. Players can:

- Challenge an opponent by controlling **direction**:
 - 'Jam' the opponent (hit at their body to 'handcuff' them)
 - Stretch the opponent to the FH or BH sides
- Challenge an opponent by controlling **height**:
 - Make the opponent impact high (above shoulders)
 - Make the opponent impact low (below knee-level)
- Challenge an opponent by controlling **speed**:
 - Take away time so they rush or miss-hit their stroke
 - Drive the ball through an open court space
- Challenge an opponent by controlling **distance**:
 - Make the opponent stretch forward
 - Push the opponent back

Or any combination of the above.

- **DEFENCE**: A player is in a defence situation when they perceive a very challenging reception and choose a lower-risk projection. Defence has three aspects:
 - **Stay-in**: This is when a player is just looking to survive and make their opponent hit one more ball. The ball received is so challenging; they can only get it back.
 - **Neutralize**: This is when the ball received is challenging, but the player can be more purposeful in their response. The goal is to get the situation back to neutral so the opponent would have to over-risk to continue attacking.
 - **Counter**: This is when a player 'turns the tables' on the opponent, and the momentary disadvantage is turned into an advantage. For example, using an opponent's power to provide pace (like on a return of serve) or taking an accurate shot and placing a shot back (e.g., returning an opponent's drop shot with your own drop shot).
Note: The higher the level of play, the more countering becomes a dominant phase.

When coaches help their players select the appropriate Phase of Play, they expand **the library of situations their players can successfully handle**. They learn to *play* the game (in contrast to just learning how to stroke).

THE 'TROUBLE' CONCEPT

The most effective way I have come across to express N.O.D. decision-making is by using Judy Murray's 'Trouble' language. I find it especially good for kids as it makes a simple and understandable package to help build awareness of how players should truly play the chess game that is tennis:

- Neutral = '**Avoid Trouble**'
- Offence = '**Make Trouble**'
- Defense = '**Escape Trouble**'

PHASE OF PLAY TRAINING

To develop players who 'play smart' and are tactically proficient, including N.O.D. training in every session is essential. Here is a 20-minute video on the tactical-technical section of a training session. It includes an example of how to apply these concepts with 7 & 8-year-old Green Ball players.

<https://youtu.be/woz25coBMgQ>

N.O.D. DRILLS USING THE 'TROUBLE' CONCEPT:

Using the Trouble concept, coaches can create drills that train each phase and the interaction between the phases.

Trouble call Drill:

Players need to build awareness of the decisions they make. They must always have the *intention* on **every** shot to **do something** to the opponent. The idea is to minimize shots hit back into the court without affecting the opponent.

In this drill, two players start at the baseline and play regular points. The server plays two points (one from the Deuce side and one from the Ad side). Then switch servers. Before hitting any shot (except serve), players must call out loud if they will:

- Escape trouble with a defensive shot (Call the cue word '*Escape*')
- Make trouble with an offensive shot (Call the cue word '*Make*')
- Avoid trouble with a neutral shot (Call the cue word '*Avoid*')

The coach can stop play and deduct a point if the player doesn't call their decision out loud or if they call an incorrect decision.

Addition: To help build awareness even more, the coach can call 'freeze' right after a player makes their decision. When the coach calls 'freeze,' all players must stop where they are. The coach can then highlight the shot's effectiveness (or ineffectiveness). The coach should wait for opportune times to call 'freeze.' The coach should ask the players why the shot will work or not work. Help them to become problem-solvers.

Make Trouble/Get out of Trouble Drill:

With four players, three start at the baseline on one end of the court (The 'Defenders'), and one starts at the other (The 'Trouble-maker'). Coach feeds a less challenging ball to the 'Trouble-maker,' landing just behind the service line at medium pace and height. The 'Trouble-maker' attempts to gain advantage and win the point since the ball the coach feeds gives them the opportunity to take the offensive.

The point is played out, and the following can result:

- If the 'Defender' wins the point, they trade and become the 'Trouble-maker.'
- If the 'Trouble-maker' wins the point on their first or next shot, they remain the 'Trouble-maker.'
- If the 'Trouble-maker' wins the point on any shot *after* their first two shots, the same two players replay the point. If the point lasts multiple shots again, the 'Defender' trades and becomes the 'Trouble-maker' (The consequence for the 'Trouble-maker' failing to successfully win the point twice in a row even though they started with the advantage).

Alternative: This drill can switch emphasis by having the coach feed the first shot to the 'Defender.' The feed must put them at a disadvantage. In this version, the following scoring/switching occurs:

- If the 'Defender' wins the point, they trade and become the 'Trouble-maker.'
- If the 'Trouble-maker' wins the point, they remain the 'Trouble-maker.' (If the 'Trouble-maker' stays up for three points in a row, switch them with a 'Defender').

The coach is consistently making comments/observations about how players can be more effective in the situations they find themselves in. Good questions go a long way to develop awareness and help players learn (e.g. *'That shot didn't do anything to your opponent, what could you have done differently to make more trouble for them?'*)

CONCLUSION

When a coach helps players to make better decisions regarding the N.O.D. Phases of Play, they become smarter players. Rather than spending all their time on stroke development, learning to play smart turns them into problem-solvers. They will be able to figure out how to beat a variety of opponents (sometimes, even if opponents have superior technical skills). Coaches should include N.O.D. in every training session.