

## VISION & MISSION STATEMENTS FOR PLAYERS—PART 4

### 'PLAYS SMART'

Nearly every company and organization has a vision and mission statement. In our programs at NVTC, we have harnessed the power of vision & mission statements to direct our player development. I have created a performance player vision statement and targeted mission statements to help our coaches and players get on the same page about where we are going and how to get there.

This vision statement is my version of some original work by top international coach Louis Cayer:

**"A Performer who is an Athlete that Plays Smart with Functional Shots."**

On our integrated player diagram to the right, we see when we use the term 'player,' we are referring to both the *tactical* and *technical* factors. There is a direct connection between tactics and technique, which harmonize in a package called tactical-technical development.

However, this article will separate the tactical component to make the concepts easier to deal with. **'Playing smart' means successfully applying tactics.**



### STRATEGY VERSUS TACTICS

First, let's clarify some terminology. 'Strategy' and 'tactics' often get confused by coaches. Strategy is a planning process done **prior to performance**. Tactics occur **during performance** and require decision-making.

Strategy is your overall game plan, which could include elements from all 4 performance factors (psychological, physical, tactical, technical). Tactics are situational and require quick and effective decision-making to select the best solution to the problems encountered during play. They require adaptation.

We can define tactics as:

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

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*“Strategy requires thought, tactics require observation.”*

Max Euwe – World Chess Champion

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## TACTICS-FIRST APPROACH

Tennis is an 'open skill' ([for a more detailed article on open skills, click here](#)) and a *game* sport. Therefore, it is more effective to adopt a Tactics-first approach since it will elevate problem-solving and decision-making to their rightful position. I am by no means saying technique is not critical. In a tactics-first approach, technique is second, but never secondary.

Tactics-first is a way to apply a Game-based approach. My version of GBA is all about situation training. The goal isn't to teach how to perform the perfect stroke but to **expand the library of situations players can successfully handle** by learning to recognize what is happening and respond effectively (tactically and technically). ([Click here for a detailed article on Tactics-First](#))

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*“Technique is second, but never secondary.”*

Tim Hopper-Physical Education Professor, University of Victoria

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## TACTICAL FRAMEWORK

Who doesn't want to coach a player to be smart? When watching a match (especially with junior players), one of the first questions I ask is, *“Are these players **playing** tennis, or are they just stroking balls?”* The junior game is, unfortunately, rampant with players just hitting. However, developing tactics requires a systematic development framework. The framework starts with an overall tactical development mission:



**‘PLAYS SMART’ DEVELOPMENT MISSION (Tactical)**

*“Solve problems by managing space & Time to establish your timing and break your opponent’s timing.”*

This mission defines what tennis is all about. Let's explore each element of the mission:

## SOLVE PROBLEMS

The first words of the tactical mission is 'solve problems.' 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 expressed in terms of tactics.

After a player's excellent decision to solve a problem, it is always interesting to hear a TV commentator say, "You can't teach that!" However, the fact is, it can be taught if one knows how. Decision-making is critical and, for the most part, under-taught in tennis.

## MANAGING SPACE & TIME

The next phrase in the mission is 'by managing space & time.' Tactics in game sports are all about space (the field, court, rink, etc.) and time.

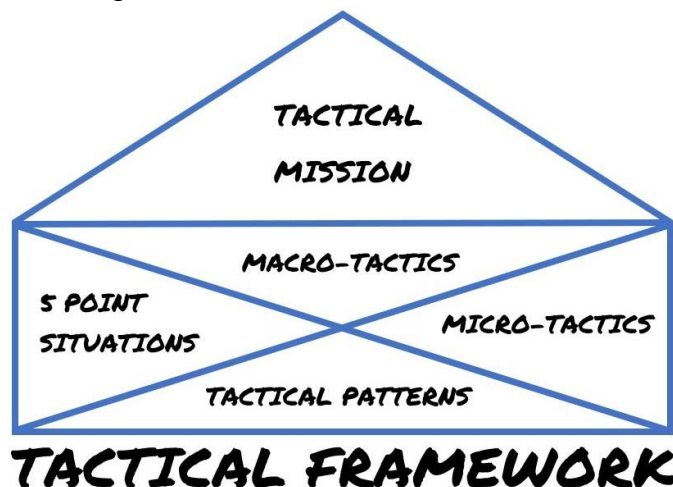
Regarding space, tennis has geometry! The court rectangle is a constant with only repeatable angles and options available. Players need to learn to cover their space, open up space, exploit space, control space, etc.

Regarding time, players can control the speed and trajectory of the ball to gain time, take away time or vary the time to mix things up and create uncertainty in an opponent.

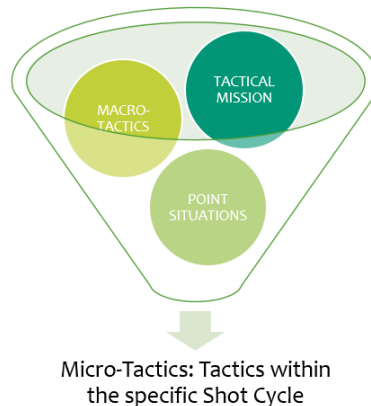
## GENERAL TO SPECIFIC

Cultivating a smart player requires *intentional* and *systematic* development. To do that, coaches need a functional framework to do annual, seasonal and sessional planning. Most coaches have an organized *technical* system but no tactical system to speak of. Typically, tactics float around in a coach's head, disconnected from everything else. This leads to developing 'stokers' rather than actual *players*.

Here is the scaffolding coaches can use to build their 'tactical house':



From the overall Tactical Mission, the framework narrows until it distills down to the tactics that occur in a specific situation.



## MACRO-TACTICS

The three *primary* Macro-Tactics are the over-arching tactical categories that are the means to control space and time:

- **Consistency:**  
Using space & time to outlast opponents and optimize the chances to keep the ball in play. Consistency is a factor in all tactics.
- **Point Control:**  
Managing space & time (Court & Ball) to influence a positive outcome of a point.
- **Player Traits:**  
Controlling space & time to maximize your strengths and minimize weaknesses and/or neutralize the opponent's strengths and exploit weaknesses.

Two additional tactical categories are labelled '**Secondary Macro-Tactics**' because the first three are more critical to master in the development process. One doesn't need to consider these two until the others have been solidified (which only happens with elite players).

- **Environment:**  
Handling and exploiting weather (wind, heat, humidity etc.), elevation and court surfaces.
- **Score:**  
Maximizing effectiveness in different scoring situations in games sets & matches. For example, when starting a game, deuce, game point, etc. When holding or breaking serve, when down a set, in a tie-breaker, etc.). When momentum in a match is equal, when you have momentum, when momentum is against you, etc.

## Development Order

The three primary Macro-Tactics are in a general development order. Players don't need to master a category before moving to the next. However, they need to be proficient *enough*. Each one lays a foundation for the next.



Once a Macro-Tactic is learned, it is not disregarded but continues through the other categories. For example, just because a 'Player Trait' tactic could be 'Maximize your Strengths' doesn't mean consistency is ignored.

## 5 POINT SITUATIONS

The next level down from the general Macro-Tactics are the **5 Point Situations**. These provide categories to group Macro-Tactics. They are a more specific designation of tactics grouped around common situations that occur within a point. These are helpful when creating tactical themes for program planning and analyzing matches.



### Serving:

Initiating the point with a 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> serve.

### Returning:

Initiating the point with a return of serve

**Both Back:** Situations in a point that occur when both players are at or near the baseline.

### Approaching & At Net:

Situations that occur within a point when a player approaches the net and when at the net.

### Passing:

Situations within a point when an opponent is approaching or at net.

## MICRO-TACTICS

The 5 Point Situations can be distilled down even further to tactics that occur in specific shot situations. This level of tactics I have labelled 'Micro-Tactics.'

### Shots vs Strokes

To better understand Micro-Tactics, coaches need to view the basic building block of tennis as 'shots' rather than 'strokes.' Thinking and teaching tennis as 'strokes' tends to trap coaches (and their players) into prioritizing only the mechanics of the hit, which is incomplete.

A 'shot' consists of the whole cycle of events from the opponent's impact to the player's impact. It defines the situation, everything the player does to receive the ball, and everything a player does to send the ball. This includes the tactic based on the situation.

This is why I label them as '**Shot Cycles**' ('Shots' for short), which define all the elements of a specific situation and a response.

[\(For a detailed article on Shot Cycles, click here\)](#)

**Micro-Tactics** happen within a Shot Cycle and are players' core tactical decisions regarding whether they are in Neutral, Offence, or Defence (N.O.D.). These are called the '**Phases of Play.**'

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

For example, defence is defence because a player perceives a challenging reception and chooses to send the ball with less risk. Offence is offence because a player perceives a less-challenging reception and accepts more risk to send it.

Successfully learning to make effective Phase of Play decisions is the primary way a player can play smart. Therefore, N.O.D. should be included in **every** training session.

[\(For a more detailed article on the Phases of Play and how to train them, click here\)](#)

## TACTICAL PATTERNS

When a player chains together a series of Shots, that is a 'Pattern' with each individual Shot Cycle being a link in the chain. Advancing a tactic in a series of shots will be more successful than resting everything on a single shot.

For example, if a player has the tactic of '*moving the opponent side to side,*' they would string together cross courts, down-the-lines and inside-outs/inside-ins to keep the ball moving from corner to corner.

An easy way to group patterns is using the 5 Point Situations (e.g. Serving patterns, Both Back Patterns, etc.).

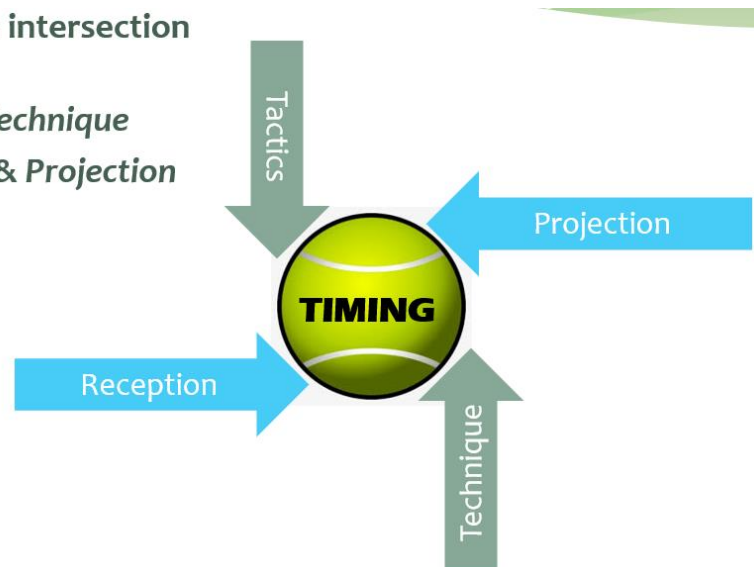
## ESTABLISH/BREAK TIMING

The final piece of the mission says, '*Establish your timing and break an opponent's timing.*' This is where tactics smoothly transition into technique.

[\(For a detailed article on the Tactical-Technical connection, click here\)](#)

Timing is the intersection between:

- Tactics & Technique
- Reception & Projection



Tennis is an 'impact sport.' The four milliseconds the ball is on the string makes or breaks every shot. Therefore, tennis tactics are simply ways to *receive* the ball for effective timing and *project* the ball to mess up an opponent's timing.

Timing becomes the centre of the universe of tennis. It is the point at which tactics and technique intersect.

Coaches must be mindful of this reality and ensure timing is a priority in their technical development.

## CONCLUSION

Empowering players to 'play smart' requires intentional and systematic tactical training. Coaches need a tactical framework starting with the Tactical mission and refining down to the specific Micro-Tactics of N.O.D. decisions in each specific situation. N.O.D. should be included in every training session. The framework helps to create practical annual, seasonal, and sessional plans, all based on a Tactics-First approach. Players who play smart are able to figure out how to beat a variety of opponents (sometimes, even if the opponents have superior skills).

Flowing from tactical to technical at the intersection of timing, the next article in the series will be Part 5, where we look at the "**Functional Shots**" characteristic.

This article was inspired by the work of Louis Cayer.  
If you would like to ask a question, give feedback, or want more information, contact us at:  
[acecoach.com](http://acecoach.com)