



## SITUATION TRAINING: BOTH-BACK SITUATIONS

Situation Training (ST) is a practical application of the international coaching trend called the Game-based approach. It allows players to learn the tactics and techniques required for successful play in real-life situations.

ST is about learning tennis **situationally**. It logically integrates tactics and technique. It helps coaches evolve from being 'stroke coaches' to 'game coaches.' In contrast to 'stroke-coaching,' ST is about helping players learn to expand the library of situations they can handle during play.

In defining situations, ST uses two elements:

- **'The 5 Point Situations'**: These are the general situations that occur during a point and include Serve, Return, Both-Back, Approaching & at Net and Passing.
- **'The Shot Cycle'**: The elements that occur during a single shot situation ('Shot' for short) (See acecoach.com article: 'The Shot Cycle: Foundation of Situation Training' for a more detailed treatment of the concept <https://acecoach.com/the-shot-cycle/>)

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This article will delve into the tactical categories and specific shots for the **Both-Back** Point Situation. The goal is to identify the most common shot situations that allow players to dominate baseline play.

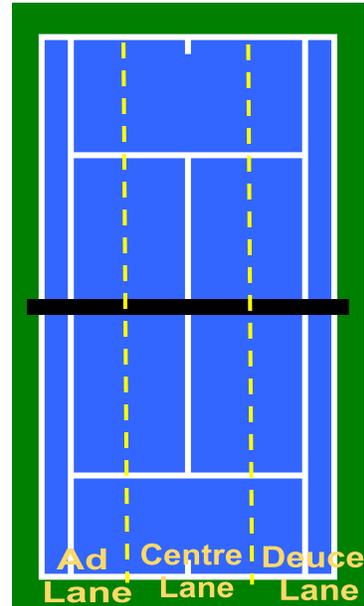
Because of the nature of tennis (the majority of points are won through errors), attempting to hit winners from the baseline will result in more lost points than winning points. In a baseline exchange, 60-80% of all points are lost due to errors. Baseline play is best used to build opportunities to gain advantage. Just like two boxers sparring, a tennis player needs to set things up before they unleash a knock-out punch (hit a winner).

## BOTH-BACK TACTICAL PACKAGES

To indicate the location of the action, we will split the court into 3 lateral 'Lanes' (Deuce Lane, Centre Lane, Ad Lane). We will not cover all possible shots but a basic package that all players need to master.

For Both-Back situations, 3 basic tactical 'packages' need to be trained. Each has several specific shots attached to them:

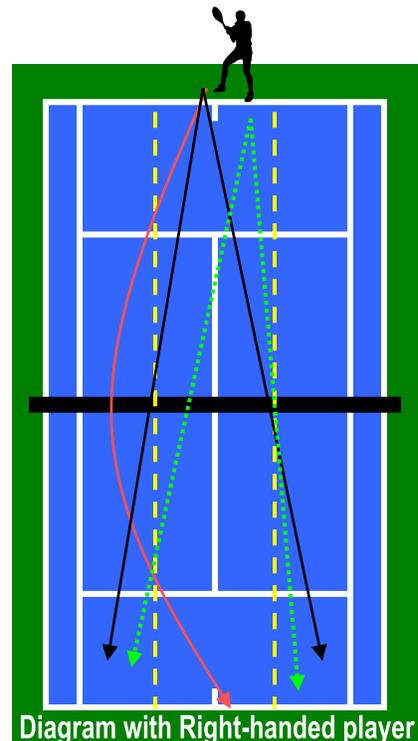
1. Control the Centre Lane
2. Control the Crosscourt (Deuce & Ad exchanges)
3. Re-Direct/Receiving a Re-Direct



### 1. CONTROL THE CENTRE LANE:

Once players progress past the starter level, they need more strategies than simply keeping the ball in play. At many levels, baseline exchanges tend to gravitate to the centre. If players learn to gain advantage *from* the centre, it can open the door to effective play by utilizing the court's space. Controlling the Centre Lane is about using the geometry of the court to create or minimize angles. The shots to master from the Centre Lane include :

- **Drive to the Sides:** Players can hit into the side lanes from the centre to get opponents on the move or pick on a weak side. Players need to be able to receive balls in the Centre Lane and use both forehands and backhands to direct it to either side lane.
- **'Run-Around' Forehand:** Players can 'run around' their backhand and use their forehand to hit inside-out (a crosscourt forehand from the backhand side) or 'inside-in' (down-the-line forehand from the backhand side). This effective tactic matches a strong forehand to an opponent's possibly weaker backhand.
- **'Pinning Shot to the Centre':** Hitting to the sides is not the only effective tactic. Sending a higher arc deep to the Centre pins an opponent, minimizing the angles they can create. Players must be able to use both FH & BH for this shot.



## 2. CONTROL THE CROSSCOURT (Sometimes called 'Dominate the Diagonal'):

A crosscourt exchange is one of the most common tactics seen in tennis. Gaining advantage in a crosscourt rally will set up many opportunities to dominate. Shots to master from the side Lanes include:

- **Crosscourt 'Pin':** An arced crosscourt shot can take your opponent to the side of the court (opening the rest of the space). A good 'pinning' shot has topspin and height to push the opponent behind their baseline and to the side.

- **Strong Crosscourt Drive:** A crosscourt shot has the most available court space. This means there is less risk when hitting a power shot. The entire court is open if a weak response comes from the opponent.

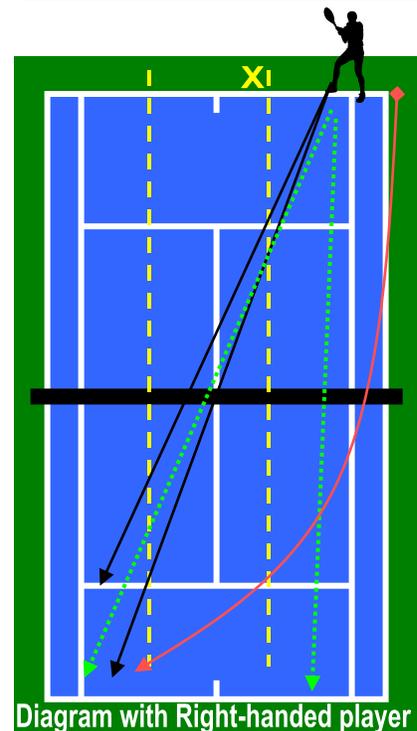
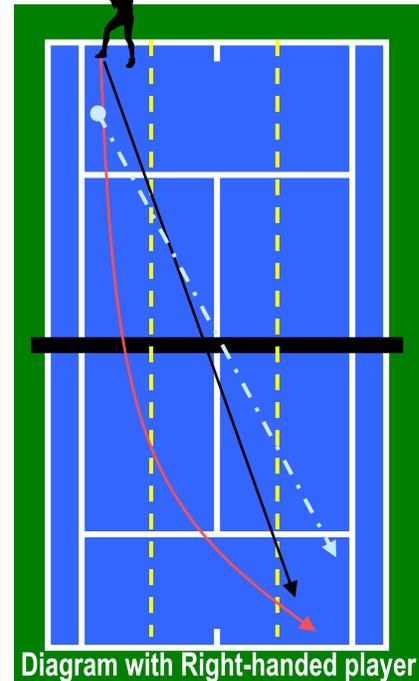
- **Angled Crosscourt:** If the shot received is a little weaker, or the player is outside the singles sideline, the ball can be placed with more angle. A 'dipping' angle takes the opponent off the court.

- **Run-Around FH:** Players can still use their FH from a side Lane. They can play both 'Inside-out' and inside-in. **However, only choose this if the shot can create advantage; otherwise, the player is out of position.**

- **Slice BH:** Changing to an underspin shot can mix things up by keeping the ball low or altering the speed to challenge an opponent's timing. There are two key slices to use:

- A deep 'floating' defensive slice used to push the opponent back and gain time.
- A short, low 'two-bouncer' (Bounces a second time before it crosses the baseline) that draws opponents in and is low enough to make them hit up. This is especially effective against two-handed BH players.

- **'Re-establish' shot:** When players are pushed out to the far sides, they need to gain time to recover court position. A high, topspin 'loop' deep into a crosscourt corner will neutralize an opponent and allow a player to re-establish the rally. It also has the advantage of reducing the distance to an ideal recovery location ('X'). ([Click here for an article that explains recovery](#))



### 3. RE-DIRECT/RECEIVING A RE-DIRECT:

The final tactical package includes two situations:

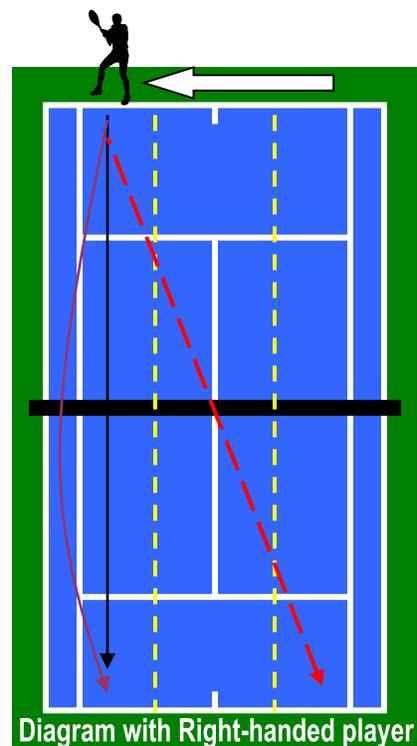
- From a crosscourt exchange, re-directing the ball Down-the-line (DTL)
- Responding to an opponent who takes your crosscourt and re-directs it Down-the-line

Receiving and sending re-directs requires good decision-making to maintain consistency but capture the advantage. When re-directing DTL, it is wise not to go for a risky winner but to look to challenge the opponent to force a weak response. A DTL is more hazardous than a crosscourt as there is less court space to hit into, and if the opponent reaches the ball, they can do damage by getting the player on the run with a solid crosscourt.

Receiving a ball that has been re-directed DTL will often get the player on the run. The goal is to maintain neutral or play a more defensive shot to re-establish the rally.

The shots to master from both Deuce and Ad lanes when receiving and sending re-directs include:

- **Re-direct with a Down-the-line Loop:** An opponent can place the player in trouble by putting them into a corner with a solid crosscourt. However, a player can turn the tables by gaining time with a high arcing shot Down-the-line. This may also force the opponent to impact the ball above their comfort zone, making it difficult to make a solid crosscourt.
- **Re-direct with a Down-the-line Drive:** If the crosscourt received is a little weaker and the court space is open, the player needs to direct the ball through the open court. This would force the opponent to run the width of the court.
- **Receive a DTL Re-direct and return a DTL:** The Down-the-line drive can also respond to an opponent's down-the-line (a 'line to line' pattern). This is a good option if the player wants to lure the opponent back into their preferred diagonal.
- **Re-Directing a down-the-line back crosscourt:** When *receiving* a down-the-line, players must master getting the opponent on the run with a crosscourt response. It is critical not to drift the ball into the centre but take advantage of the opponent being on the opposite side of the court.



## TACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

To dominate in Both-Back situations, it is a good tactic to identify if a player has an advantage from a specific diagonal (E.g. the player is winning more points when in an Ad Lane crosscourt exchange). They then combine crosscourts, re-directs and centre shots to consistently get into the diagonal that provides more advantage.

For example, going after an opponent's backhand (an Ad Lane exchange) is one of tennis's most common (and effective) tactics for right-handers. Players must learn to receive the ball when opponents send it to their backhand, turn the tables around, and gain advantage by provoking the opponent's backhand.

## PATTERNS

'Patterns' are a sequence of shots chained together to gain more advantage than any single shot could produce. For Both-Back play, patterns are important as taking too much risk will produce errors; therefore, opponents may need to be maneuvered out of position to make a winning shot 'high percentage.'

To achieve these patterns, players may need to use shots from all 3 Both-Back packages:

- **Side to side:** Moving an opponent from one side of the court to the other makes each subsequent shot more challenging.
- **Wong foot:** Moving an opponent side to side but going back to the same side, hitting 'behind' them to 'wrong-foot' them.
- **'X' Pattern:** Sending a ball shorter (e.g. the 'Two=bounce' slice or 'Dipping' angle) to the side and then sending the next ball deep to the other side. This gets the player angling back as well as running wide.

## TACTICAL-TECHNICAL INTEGRATION

In ST, tactics come first, but technique is critical for the successful execution of any tactic. Knowing exactly what tactic to use but not having the technical ability to perform it wins no points. Once the shot situation is identified, the next step is to learn the actions required to execute it effectively. Every situation requires functional technique to fit the situation. For two detailed articles on Functional Technique, click these links:

[Functional Technique Part A](#)

[Functional Technique Part B](#)

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*"The goal is not to 'look better' but to 'learn better'."*

Robert Bjork – UCLA Professor of Psychology & Learning expert

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## PRACTICING

Remember, tactics and techniques are relative to level. To pressure an opponent at the 3.0 level means a different quality of shot than a pro. Playing with clear tactical intention is critical. Then, the technical training comes into play. This type of practice is far more relevant and practical than just repeating the standard forehands & backhands.

Players can practice situationally with a partner. Start the drill with a shot that re-creates the situation they want to improve. Make the appropriate decision to respond to the shot and play out the point.

If a player can't perform the shot, they need to get some 'quality reps' of the *specific* skill required (from a coach, partner, or even a ball machine).

Training the tactics and technical actions of these 3 Both-Back tactical packages will yield very noticeable results. Players will get better at what happens during a tennis match. Situation Training equips players for the realities of tennis far more than any isolated stroke training could ever do.