



SITUATION TRAINING: CORE ELEMENTS

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

'Traditional' coaching used a technical 'Closed skill' methodology ([for a detailed article on open vs closed skill coaching, click here](#)). In this approach, coaches taught all their students an idealized 'model' of each stroke (e.g. 'The Forehand', 'The volley' etc.). They were basically 'stroke coaches'.

Even the tools used to plan and structure lessons were the technical stroke models (e.g. Lesson #1: The Forehand, Lesson # 2: The Backhand, etc.). Stroke models make poor planning tools since they ignore critical tactical elements.

In a 'stroke-model' approach, players are first taught strokes. Sometime later (if at all), they are introduced to tactics. The glitch in this process is that, in any game sport, **technique is only a means to execute a tactic**. Tactics (*what* you are supposed to do) must always come before technique (*how* you are supposed to do it). Tactics include critical elements for successful gameplay like decision-making, problem-solving, anticipation, etc.

My version of GBA is what I call "**Situation Training**" (ST). Learning tennis is more effective when it becomes about *situations* rather than strokes. In contrast to 'stroke-coaching,' ST is about expanding the library of situations players can handle during play. Situation Training integrates tactical and technical learning.

"In contrast to 'stroke-coaching' Situation Training is about expanding the library of situations players they can handle during play."

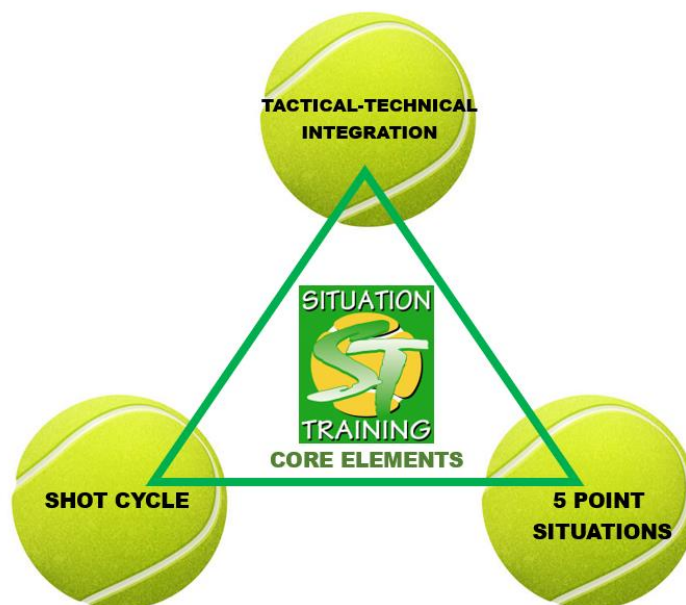
Too many players complain about losing to technically inferior opponents. The reason is few are taught to *play* the game. That is why so many players like doubles lessons. Coaches seem to 'get it' when teaching doubles. They prioritize strategy and positioning, decision-making and movement. If they did the same for singles, they would succeed even more.

In learning (whether business, music, medicine or tennis), the rule is:

“The transfer of learning between any two situations is directly proportionate to the degree they are similar”.

In other words, skills will transfer poorly from training or drills if practice does not re-create a realistic gameplay environment. This is the pitfall of many basket-feeding drills. As a result, some proponents of GBA outright reject basket drilling. However, even basket-feeding drills can be effective tools in the Situation Training system.

Three key elements are the core of the Situation Training system. Two are structural elements, and one is an essential concept.



ESSENTIAL CONCEPT: TACTICAL-TECHNICAL INTEGRATION

Whether playing chess or tennis, the foundation of *playing* any game is tactical. Tactics are ways to win the game. Tactics emphasize the relationship between the player, opponents, and the elements of the game (e.g. a ball, the court, space, time, etc).

Situation Training adopts a ***Tactics-First*** approach. [\(for a more detailed article on Tactics-First, click here\)](#) It helps coaches evolve from being ‘stroke coaches’ to Situation Training. Using situations as building blocks brings together all the elements of tennis (tactics, decision-making, problem-solving, technique, psychology, etc).

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.

But technique is not about an idealized model of good 'form' to be copied. Playing tennis requires technical adaptation.

For example, even when looking at 'The Forehand,' there are rallying, attacking, defending, and countering actions. Players at every level encounter these Phases of Play, so they must learn them all. Players are often taught a 'one size fits all' stroke that doesn't work in all the situations encountered in matches.

Once the shot situation is identified in ST, 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](#)

"Technique is second, but never secondary."

Tim Hopper PhD-Physical Education Professor University of Victoria, Canada

ST becomes an alternative method for developing technique. It provides technical principles (not models) to use and successfully integrates tactics and technique so they are not taught in isolated silos.

The integration of tactics and technique is one of the most important concepts in the Canadian Coaching Certification system. ([For a detailed article on Tactical-Technical integration, click here.](#))

The concept is that technical feedback must be able to be traced to a tactic. Technique only exists as a way to perform tactics. For example, a model-based coach may provide the technical feedback to 'Follow-through' on a FH groundstroke. It is an 'isolated' technical instruction, not particularly connected to winning more points.

In contrast, a coach using ST would first identify the tactic, e.g. *'Place the ball deeper to push an opponent back in a rally.'* To do that, the ball must travel a greater distance (Ball Control). Distance can come through increasing the height, adding speed or manipulating spin. In this case, the coach chooses height (to provide a better arc). The racquetwork fundamental that makes that happen would be increasing the low-to-high path of the racquet through impact. The feedback then becomes, *'Swing more from low-to-high as you hit the ball to get more arc on the ball and send it deeper.'*

Any technical instruction should be about making the ball do what is required to implement a tactic. This is called Tactical/Technical coaching. To be clear, a player could have a large follow-through (which is simply a way to look better) and not affect the distance at all.

THE 5 POINT SITUATIONS

The ST system includes a 'big picture' tactical category. '**The 5 Point Situations**' describe the general situations (relationship to opponent and court) players could be in during any point.

- **Serving:**
Every point in tennis begins with the serve (either 1st serve or 2nd serve).
- **Returning:**
Unless there is a double fault, every point includes a return of serve.
- **Both Back:**
This is where the players are located on or near the baseline.
- **Approaching & at Net:**
This situation includes the player moving forward and everything they can do at net.
- **Passing:**
This is the contrasting corollary to the 'Approaching & at Net' Situation where the player is trying to pass or lob.

Note: Every point obviously may not include all of the situations (e.g. a Serve & Volley pattern may skip the Both Back Situation). However, they all need to be trained to develop a complete player. In every one of the 5 Point Situations, players can perform Neutral, Offensive or Defensive shots (except serving).

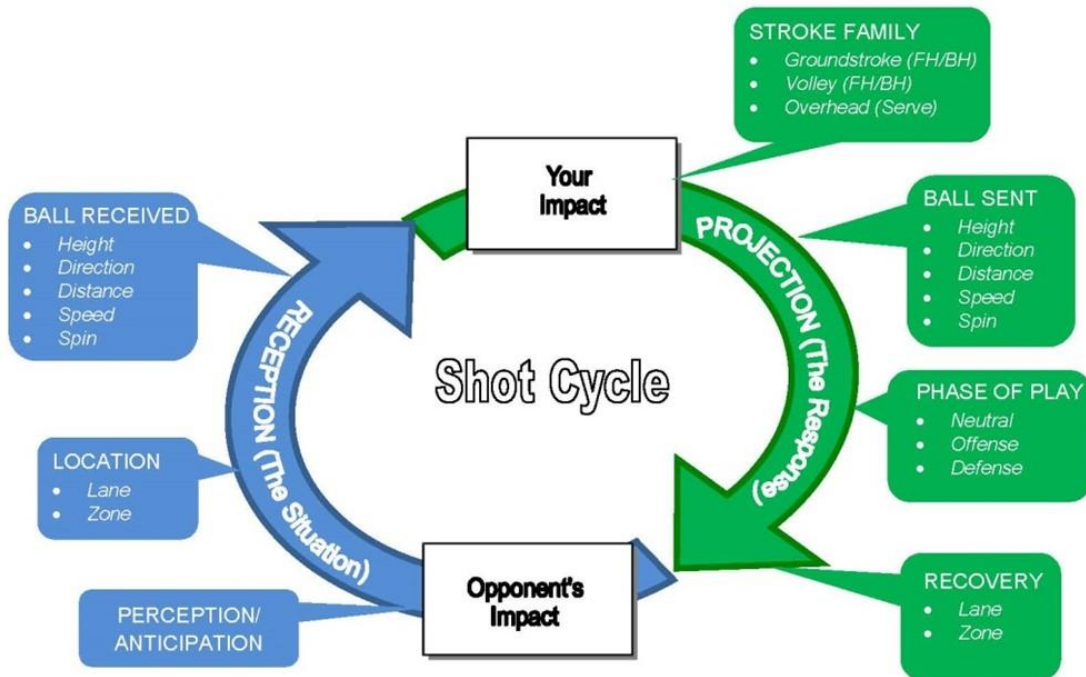
Each of the 5 Point Situations has a package of Shots attached to them that will be covered in subsequent articles.

THE SHOT CYCLE

The next element of Situation Training is to define the situation more narrowly. For more specific training, coaches can use the '**Shot Cycle**,' which describes the cycle of events during an individual shot, from the player's impact to the opponent's and back again.

This framework gives coaches a critical tool to systematically organize training tactically, allowing:

- **Training session design:** ('Coach, I would like to work on this situation that happened to me at the tournament.')
- **Unit planning:** ('This month we will cover these situations.')
- **Drill creation:** ('Our next drill will be about what to do in this situation.')



The Shot Cycle includes two main 'halves.' A tactical **situation** that presents a problem & challenge to the player and a **response** that problem-solves the challenge. [For a detailed article on the Shot Cycle, click here.](#)

Training becomes 'game relevant' by using the appropriate Shot Cycle elements. Players can be fully equipped to play the game successfully through training the process of a shot:

- Identify the situation you are in (tactical awareness)
- Know what you want to do (tactical intention)
- Select the most effective response (Problem-solving, decision-making)
- Perform the best shot for the situation (Functional efficient and effective technique)
- Recover to the best spot for the next shot

BUILDING SELF-SUFFICIENT PLAYERS

The coach can either set up the situation and let the player try to solve it (with guidance) or guide students into selecting a response before the drill begins and jump right into training it. Learning is enhanced when players participate in creating their solutions. If the player has a sense of solving the problem

independently, they will become better problem-solvers. If the coach gives them solutions, it short-circuits the player's ability to become a self-sufficient player. To train appropriately, the drill must re-create the Situation. To reproduce the situation successfully, feeding becomes critical for repetition (whether basket or live ball feeding from a partner).

'EVOLVING' DRILLS

It is worth mentioning that this process is also the basis for creating hundreds of drills. How many situations do your players need to master? Every competition played will produce situations they need to work on. This is a far more useful way to practice than going through countless general 'forehand' & 'backhand' drills.

Coaches can also adapt the elements of the drills they currently use to increase their effectiveness and realism. For example, a coach could take a single file line drill with players hitting crosscourt forehands and evolve the following elements:

- The position of the feeder (re-create the opponent's location) and the characteristics of the ball fed to recreate a specific situation
- The starting location of the hitter and their recovery after the shot (start in a realistic position based on 'the shot before' the one being trained)
- Determine the key decisions required in the situation
- Determine the appropriate Phase of Play for the hitter (Neutral, Offense, Defense?)
- Measure the characteristics of the ball sent required to successfully perform the tactic (did the ball have sufficient direction, distance, height, speed and spin to be effective?)
- Position opponents to re-create a competitive environment (after the feed, have an opponent ready to continue the point)

These are just some changes that would make the drill practical and more transferable to match play.

CONCLUSION

The core elements of Situation Training include ***Tactical-Technical Integration***, ***The 5 Point Situations*** and ***The Shot Cycle***. Acecoach.com provides multiple resources for each of these system elements.

Using ST, coaches can ensure their training and planning is directly connected to playing the game. More importantly, they will be more effective at helping students learn to play better tennis.