



SITUATION TRAINING: RETURN 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: 'Situation Training–Core Elements' for an introduction to these concepts) <https://acecoach.com/situation-training-basic-elements/>

“In contrast to ‘stroke-coaching’, ST is about helping players learn to expand the library of situations they can handle during play.”

This article will explore the **Return Point Situation's** tactical categories and specific shots. The goal is to identify the most common shot situations that allow players to dominate when initiating the point with a return.

GOLDEN 4

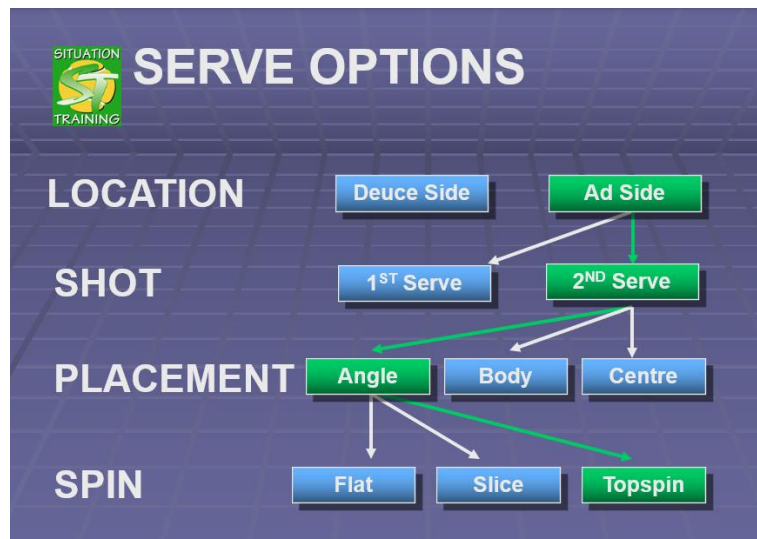
The 'Golden 4' is what I call the first four shots of a point (the serve, the return, the 1st shot after the serve and the 1st shot after the return). Analysis of game statistics reveals that over 70% of points end within the first four shots of a point.

Every top coach I know agrees that the return is woefully under-trained. The return is obviously one of the most common situations encountered in a situation training system since it is part of the Golden 4. Barring an ace or double fault, it happens *every* point.

The return is challenging since one can have a clear idea of what they want to do tactically; however, the strength of the serve can flip the choice to an emergency response.

The article on serve situations taught us that serve has 36 delivery options. ([Click here for the Serve situation article](#)).

Since serving from the Ad or Deuce side or if it is a 1st or 2nd serve is pre-set for the returner before the shot, that leaves 9 'unknown' options to contend with (e.g. will the serve be a slice into the body, or a flat serve down the centre? Etc.).



BREAKING SERVE TACTICS

The end goal of return strategy is to break serve. Several pieces go into an effective breaking serve strategy.

- Generally, returners should be looking to neutralize 1st serves (or, at minimum, defensively just put the serve back in play) and to gain advantage on 2nd serves. Of course, any serve can create exceptions to this guideline depending on how challenging it is.
- Returns from the Ad side are especially important to train as more game-winning/losing points will occur on that side.
- It is more effective to break serve by seeing the return +1 combination as the foundation rather than relying on just the return.
- With the server typically having the advantage, the vital statistic becomes the percentage of 2nd serve points won. Arguably, at higher levels, the 2nd serve return is the critical hinge matches swing on as 2nd serves provide the most opportunity to take points. For most recreational players, match success is more a matter of **'holding return'** than holding serve.

RETURN LOCATION

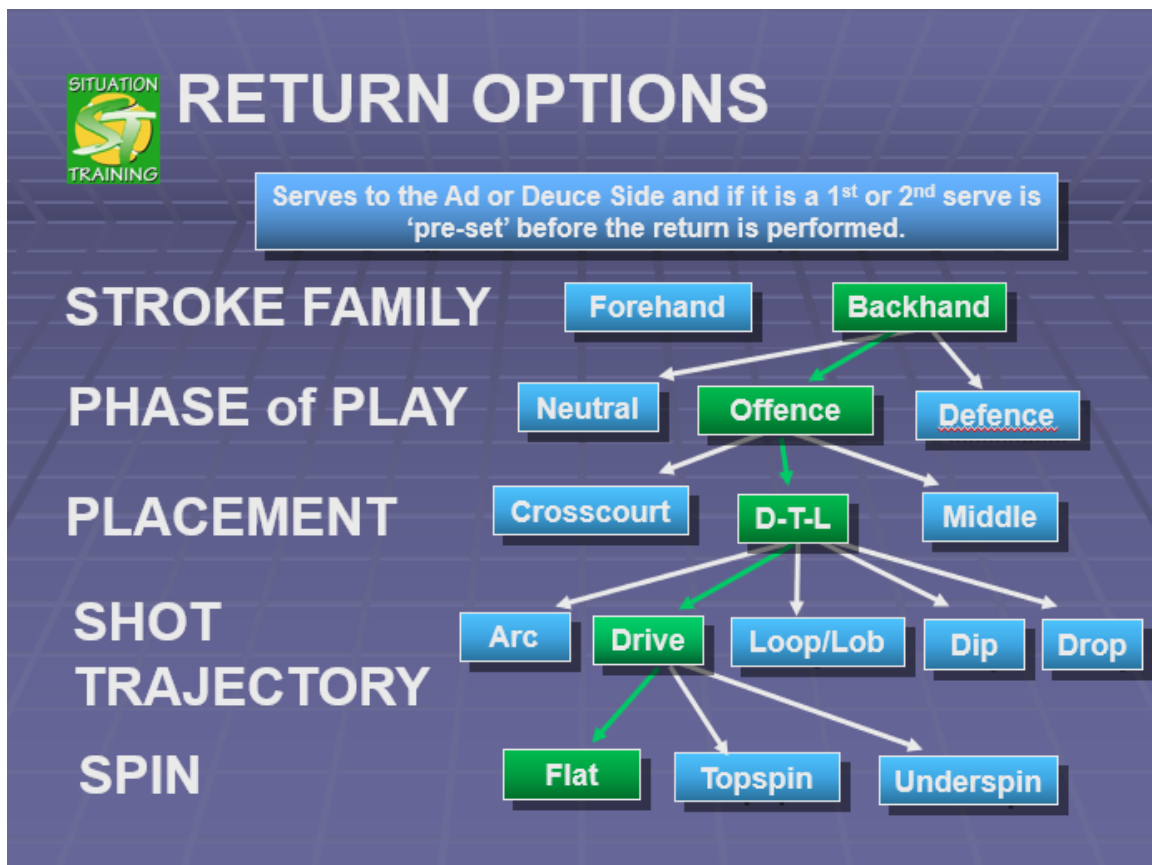
For the most part, returners are at the mercy of the serve. However, the one thing they are entirely in control of is **their location**. This can be a tactic in itself.

There are three ways a returner can use their location to impact the server:

1. They can choose a location to **'Bait'** the server to serve to the opening. For example, the returner can stand more over to the BH side to entice the server to hit to the FH or the returner can stand well back to give themselves more time to execute the return and entice the server to hit something other than a power serve.
2. They can choose a location to **'Challenge'** and pressure the server. For example, a returner can locate inside the baseline to take the serve early and pressure the server.
3. To optimize return geometry, they can **'Protect'** and take a standard return location.

RETURNING TACTICAL OPTIONS

There are multiple options available on the return. The following diagram maps out various options that can be traced down the 'tree'. For example (in Green), the shot traced is a backhand/on offence/ hit down-the-line/ with a flat drive.



As you can see on the tree, the first decision is to receive the serve on the FH or BH side. This sets the stage for all the following decisions. This also includes if a player wants to 'run around' their BH to use their FH.

Although not the first, the most essential decision is next on the tree, selecting the appropriate **Phase of Play**. A Phase of Play is ***'The relationship between the interpretation of the difficulty of the ball received and the risk of the shot sent'***. ([For a detailed article on Phases of Play, click here](#)).

The three primary Phases concerning the return include:

- **Neutral:** Deciding the serve presents a moderate reception difficulty and choosing a medium risk shot to respond with.
- **Offence:** Deciding the serve presents a less-challenging reception, and choosing slightly more risk to respond.
- **Defence:** Deciding the serve presents a difficult reception, and choosing less risk to respond.

Selecting an unsuitable Phase is the root cause of many lost points.

Once the Phase is set, the next decision down the tree is the intended placement of the shot.

- Crosscourt
- Down-The-Line
- Down the middle

After the placement, the intended trajectory of the shot must also be selected, which includes:

- 'Arc' (A deeper ball with 1-2 meter net clearance used in rallies, etc.)
- 'Drive' (A more level, powerful shot)
- 'Loop/Lob' (A higher exaggerated arc)
- 'Dip' (A short arc used for angles, etc.)
- 'Drop' (A short 'touch' shot)

Finally, the intended spin for the tactic to better control the trajectory and bounce of the ball is selected:

- 'Flat'
- 'Topspin'
- 'Underspin'.

“The 2nd serve return is the critical hinge matches swing on as 2nd serves provide the most opportunity to take points. For most recreational players, match success is more a matter of ‘holding return’ than holding serve.”

RETURNING TACTICAL PACKAGES

We can combine options to create useful return 'Tactical Packages'. These include some of the most common return responses (But not every possibility). They are wrapped around the Phase of Play decisions.

1. OFFENSIVE RETURNS

Offensive returns are more common off 2nd serves but can be performed off any serve considered 'weaker'. Once a weaker serve is identified, the returner must look to move inside the baseline to better their potential angles and take time away from the server. Using the offensive return as a set-up for the next shot (Return +1) is more effective than attempting an overly aggressive winner.

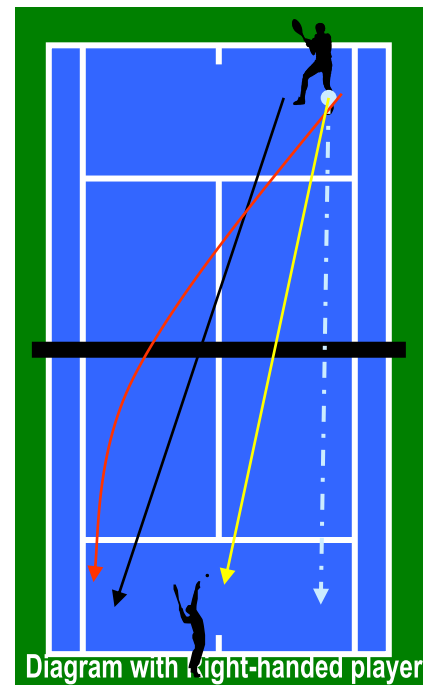
- **Crosscourt 'Dip'**: An angled crosscourt with topspin can take the server off the court to open up the space.

An effective variation is a low underspin shot that bounces twice before the baseline. This can pull an opponent into the court and stays low to make them 'hit up' to set up an offensive shot. This is also an effective approach shot (often called a 'Chip & Charge' play).

- **Run-around Forehand 'Drive'**: If the serve is weaker, it will provide time to run around the shot and use the FH. An effective play on the Ad side (for a right-hander) is to hit a FH 'Inside-out' and follow it to the net. On the Deuce side, the FH can be used to drive down the middle.

- **Down-The-Middle 'Drive'**: Used on the FH or BH, sending the ball aggressively through the centre minimizes the potential angles of the server's 1st shot. It also challenges their recovery and timing as the ball comes back at them quickly. A ball sent down the middle will most often come back up the middle, setting up the next shot (E.g. a FH attack).

- **Down-the-Line 'Drive'**: A serve re-directed D-T-L using mild topspin or a flat shot can get the server on the run. Typically, it will produce a response down the centre or a crosscourt. Underspin can also be used to make an effective approach shot. However, returners must remember that hitting D-T-L is a risky and 'low percentage' option if the serve takes the returner outside the sideline.



2. DEFENSIVE/NEUTRAL RETURNS

Stronger serves challenge timing, so selecting the appropriate Phase of Play is critical. Trying to do too much (over-risking) will lead to too many 'free' points. However, not doing enough sets the server up to dominate on their next shot. These options can provide a balanced solution to the problem:

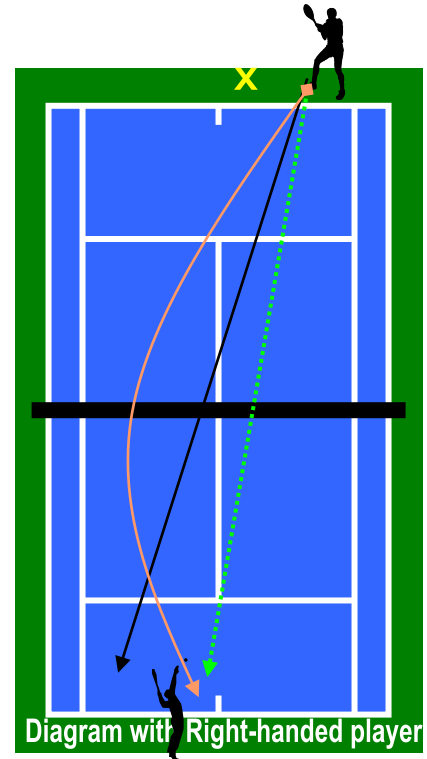
- **'Defensive' 'Arc' Down-the-Middle:** Sending the return deep and down the middle will minimize the server's potential attack angles. Hard serves can be 'blocked' with underspin. Otherwise, a compact topspin action works well.

- **'Neutralizing' Slice Crosscourt:** Underspin shots are effective for receiving shots that challenge timing as they can be performed successfully from less-than-ideal impact points. This contrasts topspin shots, which require a more precise impact point in relation to the body. Slice is also good for responding to high-bouncing topspin serves.

A deep crosscourt slice has multiple advantages:

- Crosscourt placement provides the most court space to hit into (diagonally across the rectangle of the court).
- Sending the ball crosscourt is easier to time as it returns the ball from the angle it came from.
- Placed deep, the shot will push the opponent back, minimizing attack options and fly longer, gaining time.
- A crosscourt shot minimizes the distance to an ideal recovery position (Yellow 'X'). ([Click here for an article that explains recovery](#))
- Balls returned deep crosscourt may lure the server into a crosscourt exchange.

- **'Counter' Down-the-Middle:** The returner can 'turn the tables' on the server by using a 'counter' action to send the ball back at the server utilizing the pace of the serve. This will reduce the server's angles for their next shot and possibly even challenge them if it gets back to them quickly.



“Underspin shots are an effective for receiving shots that challenge timing as they can be performed successfully from less than ideal impact points.”

PRACTICING

It works well to practice both serving and returning at the same time. For example, train to serve a slice ball wide and to return wide slice serves.

Because of all the reception as well as projection options possible, it is important in practice to prioritize the following:

- **‘Reading’** (Perception of the ball received) to make the best (and quickest) decision for a tactical response. Perception can be trained to be earlier and even lead to anticipation.
- **Adapting** the shot technically to respond in the most effective way.

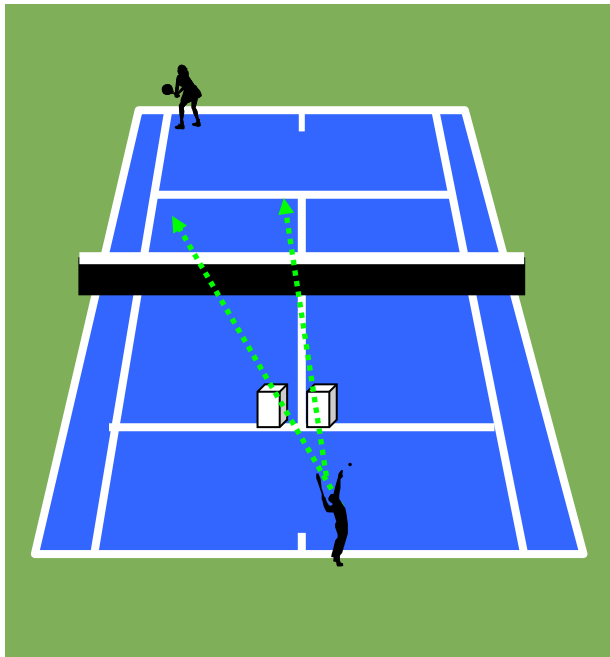
Perception (‘Reading’) practice:

Quickly identifying the height, direction, distance, speed and spin of the ball received is a critical return skill. For example, the earlier the returner can decide if the ball will be taken on their FH or BH, the more time gained to make the appropriate shot.

FH/BH identification drill:

The partner (or coach) is serving. Place baskets just in front of the service line on the server’s side of the court. The baskets should be visually easy to differentiate (e.g., cones with different colours should be put in the baskets). The baskets are placed along the flight path of an angled serve wide or a serve down the centre.

The returner attempts to see if the serve will go over the ‘FH’ basket (in which case they immediately call out *‘Forehand’* and make their shoulder turn) or *‘Backhand’*.



The goal is to read the serve at the beginning of the flight path and quickly see which basket the serve will travel over. This will allow the player to predict if the serve will be on the FH or BH.

Where the baskets are placed can be adjusted for the player’s skill. For lesser-skilled players, the baskets can be placed near the net. As the player gets better at identifying the direction of the serve, the baskets can be moved back toward the server.

Technical Adapting Practice:

Along with 'reading', technically adapting the shot is essential. When the serve comes wider, 'jams' you, or comes harder, a standard groundstroke technique cannot cope.

Adapting Drill:

This is a progression to learn a '**Counter**' technique. 'Counter' is a subset of the Defense Phase of Play. The goal is to use an opponent's power and 'turn the tables'.

Note: During return practice, it is critical to be in the appropriate location in an athletic ready position and to time the split step when the opponent hits the ball.

Step 1: The coach hand feeds from in front of the player and tosses them an oversized ball (An oversized tennis ball used for display and to get players' autographs works best). The player returns the ball to the coach. Do FH first, then BH, and then send random FH or BH.

The player will see that they cannot swing at the ball and make it go to the coach (their racquet will 'lose the collision' with the ball). They must start at the impact point, feel the ball touch the racquet and 'push' the ball to the coach.

Step 2: With the player in return position and location, The coach sends a regular tennis ball with a light serve (from the service line on the other side of the net from the returner). The player must 'stop' the ball at the impact point, and then after the ball has bounced off the strings, swing long and hard forward (after the impact). They then merge the two motions (build the feeling of the 'Counter' action). A short backswing to prioritize centring the ball and a forceful follow-through.

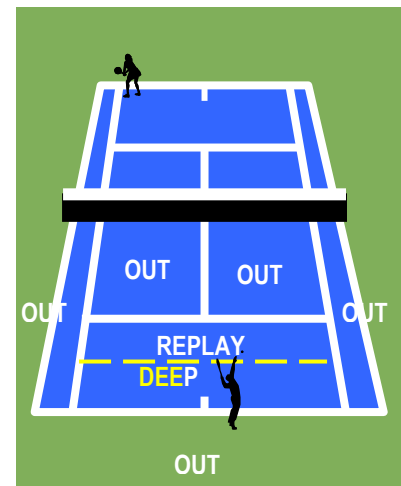
Step 3: With the player in return location and position, the coach (or practice partner) serves hard to the player. The player gains 1 point if they feel the 'Counter' feeling (confirmed by the coach). Play to 10.

Deep Return Placement Drill:

Play only two shots (serve & return). The server has a 1st and 2nd serve. Double faults count as a point for the returner. If the returner hits out (see diagram), the point goes to the server.

Markers are placed halfway between the service line and baseline. Returner can gain a point by hitting into the deep area. Returns in the 'Replay' area get a replay of the point. A 2nd return into the replay area gains a point for the server.

Variation: Play out the point if the returner hits into the deep area. The returner gets a point, and so does the winner of the point. Play to 11.



RETURN TO INITIATE A PATTERN

Since the Golden 4 includes both the return and the 1st shot after the return, it is essential to train the combination together. This combination is a means to set up a pattern. This includes the patterns in the tactical package of the **'Both back'** situations ([click here for the 'Both back' detailed article](#)):

- Moving an opponent side-to-side pattern
- Hitting behind the opponent 'Wrong foot' pattern
- Moving an opponent up & back as well as side to side 'X Pattern'

The combination also sets up patterns from the **'Approaching & at Net'** situations of play if the returner is following their return to the net ([click here for the Approaching & at Net detailed article](#)):

- Return Approach down-the-line
- Return Approach crosscourt
- Return Approach down the middle

“It works well to practice both serving and returning at the same time. For example, train to serve a slice ball wide and to return a wide slice serve.”

CONCLUSION

Returning is an under-trained skill that can be improved to gain many points, especially since 70% of all points end within the first four shots. The end goal of returning is to put tactical packages together to break serve (or hold return as a recreational player). The key to training returns is **'reading'** and **adapting**. Training the tactical options gives players the tools to perform under the pressure of the serve.