



SITUATION TRAINING: SERVE 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/>

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This article will explore the tactical categories and specific shots for the **Serve** Point Situation. The goal is to identify the most common shot situations that allow players to dominate when initiating the point.

It can be argued that the serve is the most important shot of any point. Unlike every other shot in the game, the serve is 'self-paced'. The player sets themselves up for the shot, allowing a greater potential to be in charge of a point from the first hit.

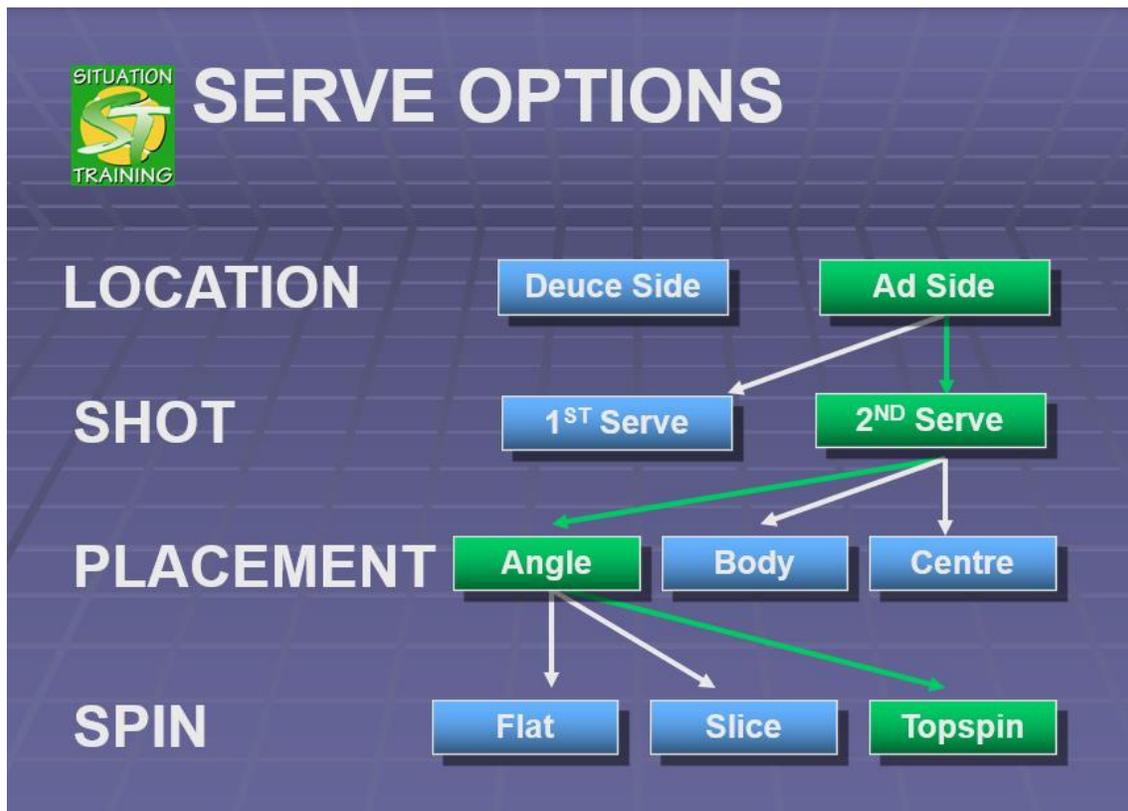
SERVE AS OPEN SKILL

As we have seen in previous articles, tennis uses open skills. (see [acecoach.com](https://acecoach.com/article: 'Tennis as an Open Skill') article: 'Tennis as an Open Skill') <https://acecoach.com/learning-tennis-as-an-open-skill/>

There is often a misconception that, although all the other shots in tennis are open skills, the serve is a 'closed skill' (the implication being it should be taught as such). The fact is that 'open' and 'closed' are at two ends of a continuum. Skills can be fully open, partially open, partially closed or fully closed.

Although not fully open, the serve has a 'closed' reception (to hit the self-fed toss) but has multiple projection options. These options create different situations. Players need to learn the various serve situations as opposed to just learning 'the serve'.

Here is a 'Tactical shot tree' showing the various serve situations:



A specific serve situation can be traced by following a sequence of options on the tree. In this case, (in Green) an Ad Side/2nd Serve/Angled/with topspin.

Rather than one 'closed skill serve', there are 36 serve situations that could be traced down the tree. Players need to develop all of them eventually. Each one has specific effective and efficient technical elements that must be adapted to the situation as they differ from the other possibilities.

Viewing the serve as a closed skill is a problematic development perspective even though it has the good intention of creating optimal biomechanical efficiency. This leads to debates about the mechanics of the serve. Experts will often disagree on the details. For example, should the serve be hit with a 'pinpoint' stance or a 'platform' stance? Should the racquet take-back be 'Classic', 'Staggered' or 'Abbreviated'?

- [\(for an acecoach.com video on these options, click here for part 1\)](#)
- [Part 2. Click here](#)

*“In my opinion, it is not about developing ‘the serve’ but, developing **servicing**. The true goal of the serve is **tactical**.”*

Wayne Elderton – Coaching Educator

THE TRUE GOAL OF SERVING?

Is optimal biomechanical efficiency the true goal of the serve? In closed skill development, everyone looks the same. There are perfect versions of skills in gymnastics, diving, etc. Players are judged on their conformity to 'perfection'. However, it is interesting to note that what we *actually observe* in professional players (whose livelihood depends on getting the job done) are all sorts of variations. Have so many of them just 'missed the point' (for sure, some have poor serves) or are coaches the ones who have missed the point?

If there are all the multiple options (on the serve options tree) with their associated technical adaptations, is optimal power generation the primary goal?

Layered onto the serve options are also the Phases of Play (Neutral, Offence, Defence). Although defence is not a phase used in serving, various offence and neutral options are required to assemble a successful tactical package.

In my opinion, it is not about developing 'the serve' but developing **servicing**. The true goal of the serve is **tactical**. Players need to be able to produce the options in variable combinations to win points. Adaptation (in contrast to biomechanical efficiency) is essential. And, players need to do it in ways that fit their style while also mixing it up in unpredictable combinations to create uncertainty in the returner.

Servicing is situational. For example, ad-side serves are important since more game-winning or losing points occur. 1st Serves often allow slightly more 'risk' since a miss will not cost a point. 2nd serves need to, at minimum, neutralize an opponent. The placements set up the geometry of the possible returns. The spins create challenging trajectories for opponents. These are all *tactical* concepts.

Don't misunderstand my point. The priority of optimal biomechanics is important, but secondary. The mechanics only need to be 'good enough'. There should not be any glaring inefficiency, so the power generation is insufficient and no actions that can lead to injury. This is why I believe we observe all the differences in pro serves.

The serve, like all the other shots in tennis, needs to achieve the tactical mission of tennis:

The player is looking to break their opponent's timing with their serve. This prevents opponents from hitting strong shots back, which may give them the advantage. This will cause different 'effects' on the opponent. The serve can:

- Stretch them (right or left) or move them
- 'Jam' them
- Make them hit above their comfort zone (e.g. a 'Kick' serve)
- Make them hit late (a flat, power serve)



PRACTICING

Isolated Serve Practice:

Since the serve is a complex action, it is helpful to sometimes work on the serve in isolation (not connected to the next shot). However, it is important always to have specific serves in mind (do not practice a general 'serve'). Target areas are essential, and having scoring to provide some pressure is valuable.

It is also more effective to switch up the targets rather than hitting to one repeatedly. For example, serve in 1st and 2nd serve combinations. Or, if working on 2nd serves, switch from ad to deuce side each attempt. This is called 'variable practice' and yields better long-term results than repeatedly serving to the same target. As mentioned, the player's ability to adapt must be the training priority.

At first, the player can aim for the ABC target areas in the service box.

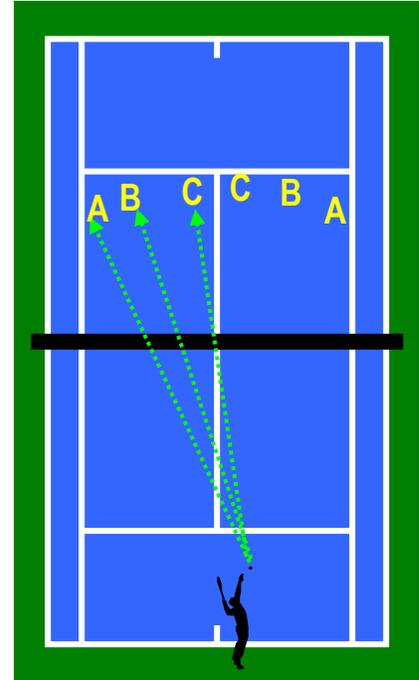
The ABC's of Serve Placement:

I am unsure if he coined the term, but I like the terminology I have seen from top US coach Ken Dehart. He talks about the 'ABC's' of serve placement:

- **A=Angle:** A wide serve that stretches the player to the side and possibly moves them off the court.
- **B=Body:** A serve that 'jams' the player, making it challenging to take a good swing at the ball and limiting their return options (e.g. it is far more difficult to return to the corners or make angles).

This placement is also 'safe' for developing players as it gives the largest margin for error. It is not as 'risky' as the other placements.

- **C=Centre:** A serve that stretches the opponent and pulls them to the middle of the court, limiting their angles.



Once players can competently hit the target areas (50-70% success), targets should be switched to produce the 'effect' on the opponent. For example:

- **Angle serve:** The serve must take the returner outside the singles sideline to gain a point (doubles sideline for higher-level players).
- **Body serve:** For a body serve, the returner can stand 'frozen' in the return location and only serves at their body that 'jam' them gain a point.
- **Centre serve:** Place markers 1 & ½ racquets distance to the right and left of the centre mark. If the ball goes through that area, the returner is not allowed to touch it. This gains the server a point.

Here is a video example of a practice activity for the 1st serve from the acecoach.com youtube channel. ([click here](#))

SERVING TACTICAL PACKAGES

Even if it is not an ace or service winner, the serve sets up the subsequent shots of the point. Statistics demonstrate that over 75% of all points end within the first four shots (in our programs, we call this the 'Golden 4'). Serving development must also include a recovery and a plan for the next shot.

The serve then becomes part of a combination (like a 'combination' of punches in boxing). These combinations are commonly called 'patterns'. All of the 5 Point Situations are useful for grouping patterns.

Serve development must progress from isolated practice to practicing serve patterns where the player must perform the serve and the follow-up shot. The 'Tactical packages' are wrapped around the patterns of play:

1. SERVE & COME-IN

Note: Use the shots listed in the pproaching & at Net tactical packages ([for the Approaching & at Net article, click here](#))

- **Serve & volley** (initiating the point with serves that will set up a 1st volley)
- **Serve & approach on the first shot** (initiating the point with serves that will produce a shorter return)

2. SERVE & STAY BACK

Note: Use the shots listed in the Both Back tactical packages ([for the Both Back article, click here](#))

- **Serve & control the centre** (initiating the point with a body or centre serve that produces more returns back up the middle)
- **Serve & control the crosscourt** (initiating the point with wide or centre serves that produce more crosscourt returns)
- **Serve & redirect** (initiating the point with wide serves that produce more crosscourt returns)

CONCLUSION

To increase the effectiveness of serve development, the serve can be trained as an open skill and based on tactics. The serve is the critical foundation to employ tactics so the player is in charge right from the first hit.