SITUATION TRAINING: APPROACHING & AT NET SITUATIONS -Part 2

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 general situations occurring 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 is part 2 of exploring the **Approach & at Net Point Situation**. This article will highlight the *at Net* element of the situation. To view Part 1 on Approaching, click here.

Except for doubles (where a player is located at net before the point begins), all net play flows from approaching situations. The quality of the approach shot directly impacts the quality of the volley.

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NET PLAY - TACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

It is critical to keep in mind that *'Tennis is a game of reception **then** projection'*. If a player does not receive the ball well, it adversely affects how they send it.

This is especially true of net play. For example, compared to a groundstroke or serve, a volley is a far less complicated action. However, if it is so 'simple', why do so many players struggle with volleying? Part of the reason is the higher reception challenge. The ball often comes quicker, higher, lower and wider than typical groundstrokes. *Adaptability* is essential for successful net play.

Being at net provides multiple tactical advantages:

Space Advantages:
- More angles are available to make opponents move/hit away from them.
- The opponents' space is cut off.

Time Advantages:
- Taking the ball earlier takes time away from an opponent, making their reception more challenging.
- Depending on the height of the ball, net players can hit the ball with more of a downward angle (e.g. a high volley or overhead), allowing for more power shots. This also can take an opponent's time away since a faster ball will get to them quicker.

COURT LOCATIONS

Volleys and overheads are typically received in the Net and Mid Court Zones. Occasionally, shots can be received from the ¾ Court Zone.

Note: We have covered various volley options that are Approach shots in part 1. In this part, we will look at shots following the approach.

As mentioned in Part 1, some tactical systems mistakenly attach the Phase of Play (Neutral, Offence, Defence)

SITUATION TRAINING **TACTICAL MAP**

This is a *Tactical Map* for defining the locations of player and opponent

Net Zone
Mid Court Zone
¾ Court Zone
Baseline Zone
Ad Lane
Centre Lane
Deuce Lane

to the court location. They designate 'Attacking zones' & 'Defensive zones', etc. In reality, all three Phases of Play can happen during net play.

NET-PLAY - TACTICAL OPTIONS

The Net-play options 'tree' below outlines the main possibilities. For example, following the green elements down the tree, we see a volley from the Centre Lane at mid-court. It is a flat, defensive 'block' sent down-the-line.

Here are all the elements that define a specific shot:

Stroke Family: For Net-play, the three main stroke families are *volleys* (hitting the ball before it bounces), *½ Volleys* (Taking a shot off the bounce) and *overheads* (Taking the ball over the head). It is also important to define if it is a forehand or backhand.

Location: Where the volley originates from on the court (refer to the court map).

Phase of Play: The difficulty of the ball received will be determined by the player, who will decide on the appropriate action: neutral, offensive, or defensive. For a full article on Phases of Play, click here.

Feeling: The player decides the type of action most appropriate to perform their intended tactic. Is the action needed to take off speed? (e.g. a drop-shot) To maintain speed? (e.g. a 'catch & carry' volley) Or to add speed? (e.g. a 'Punch or drive/swing volley). For an article on Kinesthetic Feelings, click here.

Placement: Where the ball is placed creates an effect on the opponent.

Spin: The rotation of the ball chosen to execute the intended tactic best.
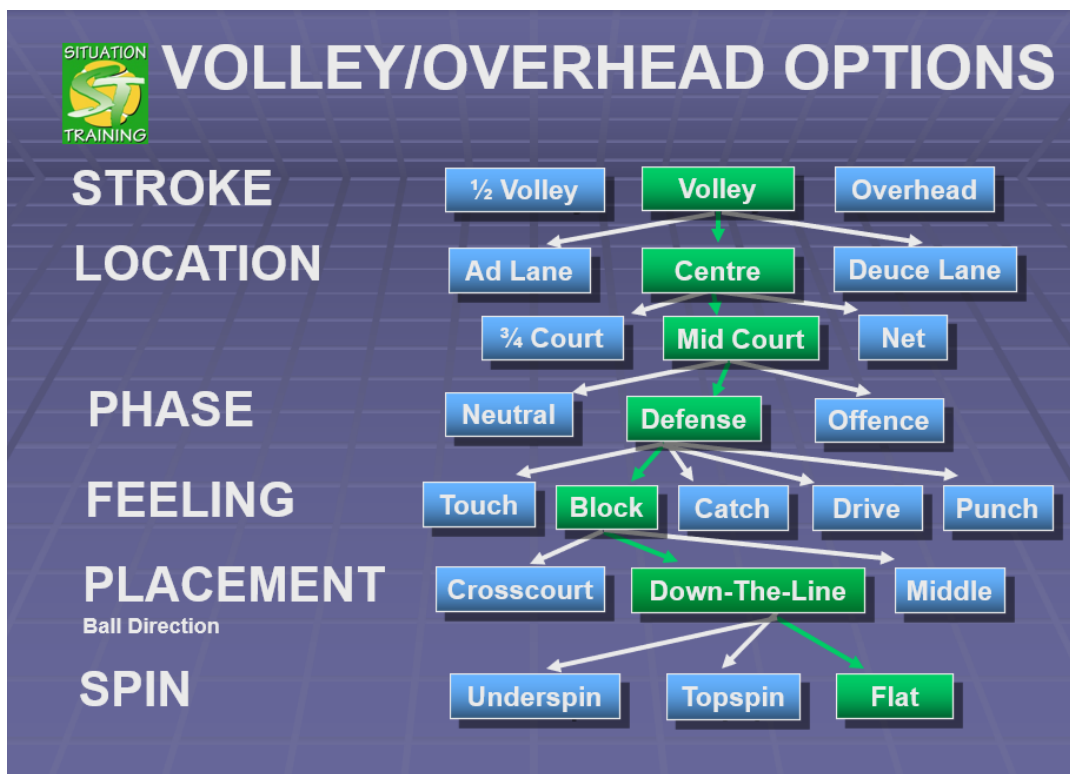
NET-PLAY - TACTICAL PACKAGES

We can combine options to create useful Net-play **'Tactical Packages'**. These include some of the most common volley & overhead options players should have in their 'toolbox' (But not every possibility). Each Tactical Package is wrapped around the 3 Phases of Play:

1. OFFENSIVE SHOTS

These are options for when the reception is not as challenging, and the player can gain the advantage with **_power_** (hitting with more pace to challenge the opponent's timing) or **_precision_** (hitting with more accuracy to move an opponent or hit away from them).

- **Power 'Punch' Volley:** Players can send balls with more power when receiving shots above the height of the net and when closer to the net. A shoulder-level impact works best. This shot can be hit deep, but if the ball received is higher, an angle is the preferred option. It is important to maintain a compact action and not 'over-swing', which makes timing difficult.

- **Precision 'Touch' Drop-volley (or ½ volley):** When the ball is received below the net, it is more effective to use accuracy rather than power. A touch shot is done by absorbing the power of the ball and directing it into an open space. An angle is typically the best placement to make the opponent run maximum distance. However, if the player must reach too far forward to take the ball in the air, it is more effective to let it bounce and execute a ½ volley.

Diagram with Right-handed player
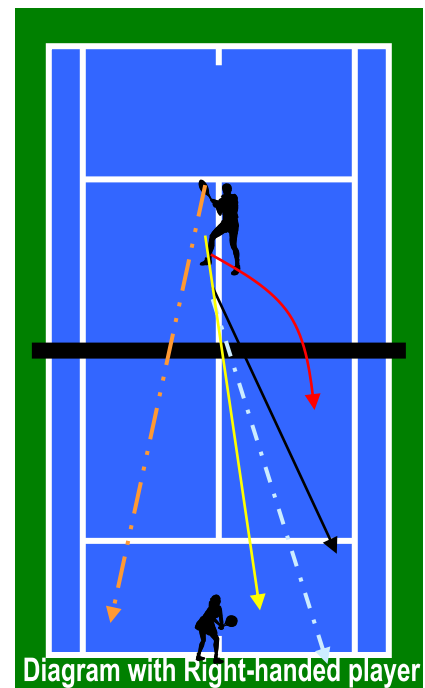
- **Power 'Swing/Drive' volley:** This is an effective option when receiving a shot with a higher trajectory that is arcing (but not a lob). It is a compact groundstroke action and allows for more power. Crosscourt or inside-out provides more court space to hit into.

- **Precision 'Catch & Carry' volley:** This volley is to accurately place the ball to the open court. Typically, the shot is a follow-up from a down-the-line approach and is placed crosscourt. It is often used as a 1st volley from further back, which is not high enough to add power without risk.

- **Overhead 'Smash':** This is the response to an opponent's lob. An overhead action allows for more power. Even so, it is important to balance the risk and not 'over-hit', trying for too much power and making the timing too challenging. It is most effective to place the ball into the open court.

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2. NEUTRAL SHOTS

These are options for when the reception is somewhat challenging and the goal is to prevent the opponent from having an advantage. For example, if the net player is further back and the ball is received net level or below.

- **'Catch' ('Catch & Carry') Volley** is a more controlled volley. An effective option is to place it deep to keep the opponent back. The speed of the ball received is maintained. It works well as a 'less-risky' 1st volley option to set up a 2nd volley. It can work at low, medium and high reception heights.

- **'Neutral' Overhead:** If the opponent's lob is well over the player's head, the player may have to notch down the power of the shot and opt for simply placing it. Using slice can also effectively control the trajectory of the shot (e.g., on a 2nd serve).

Diagram with Right-handed player
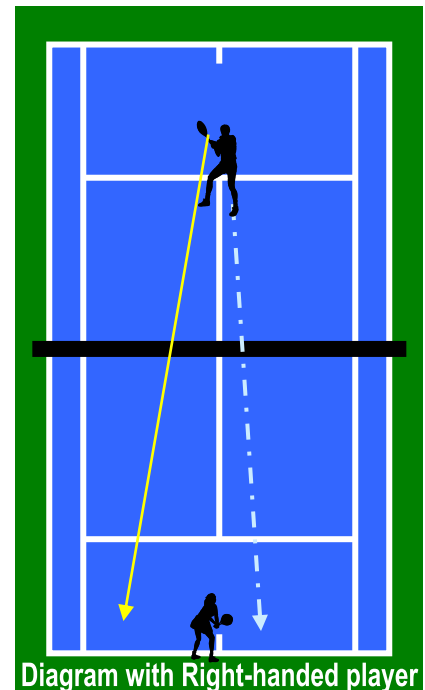
3. DEFENSIVE SHOTS

These are options for when the reception is very challenging, and the player is trying to neutralize the opponent or survive the shot. Defensive shots can sometimes be converted to a 'Counter' which 'turns the tables' on the opponent.

- **'Block' Volley:** This is for receiving power. The racquet is presented to the ball like a wall. With slight racquet motion, the timing is simpler. This is an effective response for the ball hit hard right at the player. If the player can re-direct the shot, it can become a 'counter' and even gain a point.

- **'Block/Stab' volley:** A' stab' volley is an effective option when the player must reach far to the side. It is similar to the 'block' in that the racquet has slight motion during the shot. The simpler timing allows the player to control the angle of the racquet to direct the shot.

- **'Catch' Lob volley:** An effective option when the opponent is also at net is to lob it over their head with a compact volley action. For example, the player hits a drop shot and follows it to the net. The opponent attempts to pass, and the player uses a lob volley.

Diagram with Right-handed player

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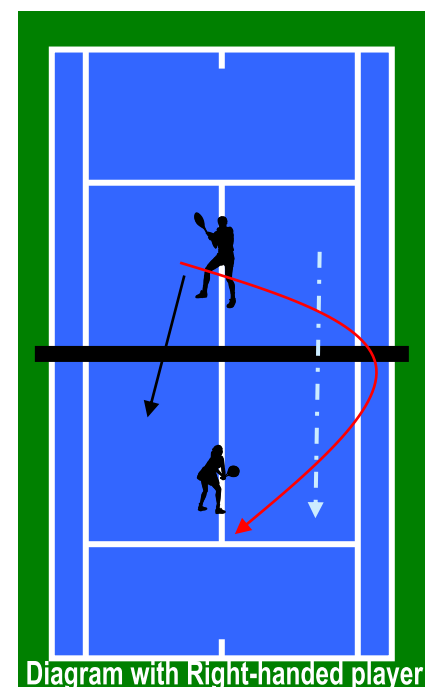
PRACTICING

It is most effective to train the approach coupled with the volley. When training volleys, a player only starts already at the net when playing doubles. Otherwise, their volley always flows from the approach and is based on the approach they make and from where.

Since net play requires quick adaptation, training decision-making is critical. As mentioned earlier, it is not the execution of the simple volley action that is the most challenging aspect of volleys; it is the split-second decision of *when* to perform *which* type of volley. Training all three Phases of Play and the accompanying decisions from net and mid-court locations is essential. Ideally, training all 3 Phases of Play from a specific location would be the most effective way to organize a session.

'Demystifying Court Coverage

To enhance players' confidence at the net, they need to believe they can get to every ball. Even a split-second hesitation due to lack of confidence can cost the point.

A practical process to gain confidence is called 'Demystifying court coverage'. Training this can be done in 3 steps:

1. Place the player at net (based on the situation being trained).
2. The player is shown the areas of the court that are 'low percentage' options for the opponent (Shaded areas) (Use markers for clarity).
3. A small area is marked off around the player (Triangle). If the player gets their body out of the area before the ball crosses the net, they can get to any shot. (The area is usually much smaller than they think).
4. The coach feeds balls, and the player must 'explode out of their area when they recognize where the ball is going. The message from the coach is, *'You can easily cover your opponent's shot by quickly getting out of this small area.'*
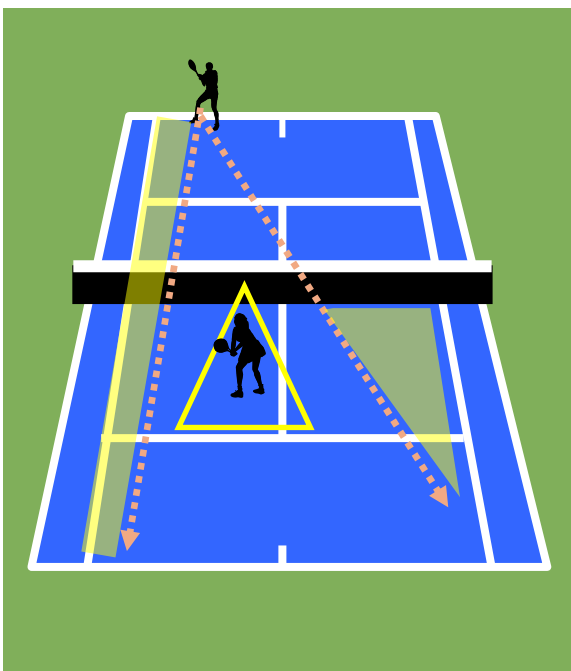
Note: Even to get a deep lob, the player needs only to 'beat the ball' by getting back past the service line before the ball.

Net-Play Champion:
Both players begin at the baseline. The coach starts by sending a 'friendly' shot into a service box of Player B (not a 'Drop-shot'). Player B says, 'Game-on!', approaches the net, and plays out the point. Whichever player wins is the 'Net-Play Champion' and gets to receive the next approach shot. The Net-Play Champion can only receive 3 points in a row. Then, they have to feed.

Depending on the level of the players, the game can be played as two separate games on each half-court width or on the full court.

Variation: The players can start the point with a feed for themselves.
To focus on volleys, play the game with no lobs allowed.
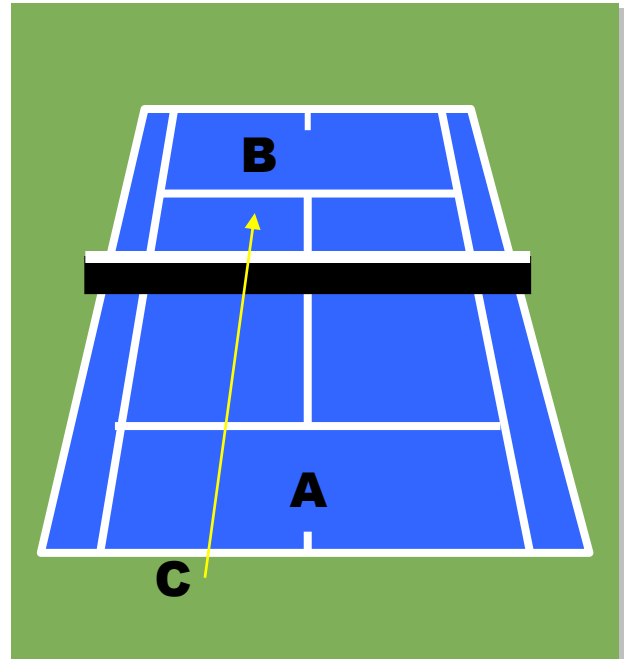
Cat & Mouse:
This is an excellent game for exposure to quick decision-making at net. It is especially good for doubles. All four players start at the service line. Players take turns being the 'server' by sending a 'friendly' underhand shot crosscourt into the opponent's service box. The game is then played on the full doubles court.

Encourage players to move in when they see a shot above the net and be a 'Cat' (hit harder and with more angles). For shots below the net, they must be a 'Mouse' and hit shots with more clever placement (e.g., at the opponent's feet). Players who see opponents too close to the net can lob over their heads (The 'Bird' gets away from the cat).
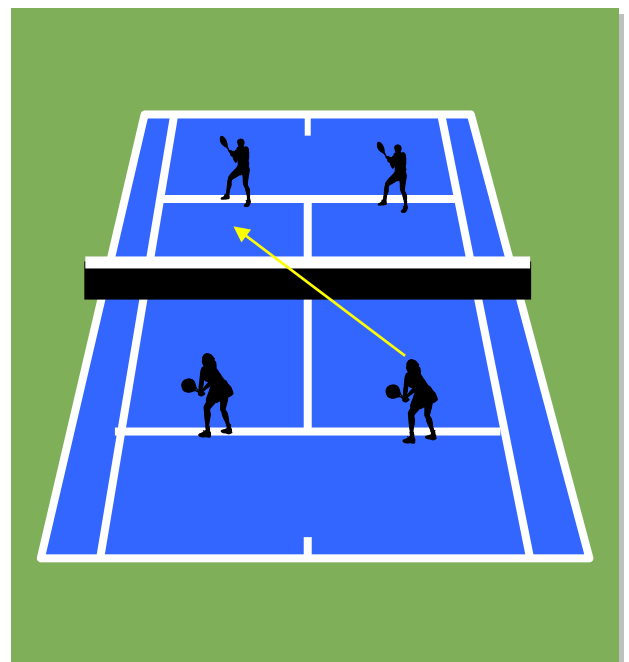
Variation: Players can play singles on one half-court width.

SPLIT STEP/RECOVERY

Typically, a player will never hit more than two volleys in a row. An exchange of 3 or more is rare. Hitting more than one volley means recovering between shots is essential. Recovery after a volley includes quickly regaining balance with a dynamic Split-Step in an athletic posture. This will allow a player to be ready to explode in any direction (including moving back for an overhead). A good recovery becomes the start of the reception of the next shot.

CONCLUSION

There are multiple tactical advantages of coming to the net. However, handling the reception challenge must be trained with a priority on decision-making. All three Phases of Play must be trained to develop an effective net player. Net play flows from approach shots, and training both together is most effective.