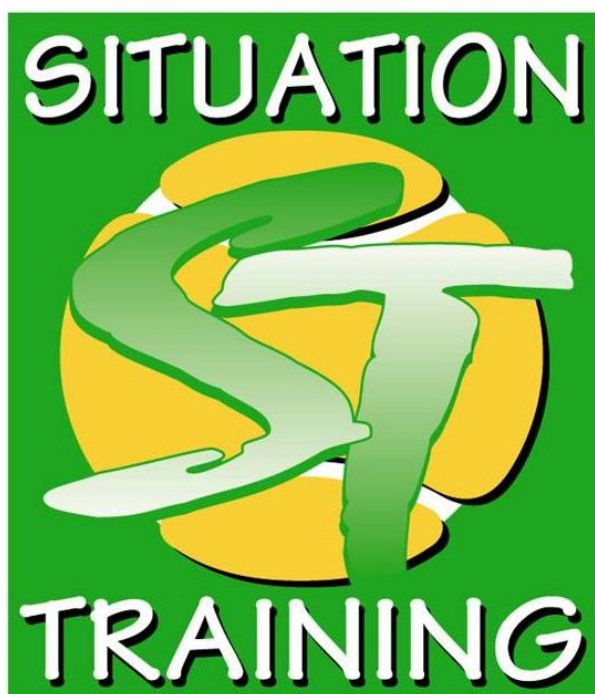


Coaching Education Resource

## PRIVATE LESSONS 'CANADIAN STYLE'

### Player-centred private sessions using Situation Training v5



#### COURSE OUTCOMES:

Participants will learn a practical framework and tactical-technical tools to implement 'Player-Centred' private sessions using a Situation Training approach allowing them to deliver effective, individualized sessions.

Themes include:

- Designing a 'Tailor-made' private session
- Integrating tactics and technique for more successful play
- Empowering decision-making
- Technical coaching that helps player solve problems they encounter on court

FACILITATOR:  
WAYNE ELDERTON

- Tennis Director – North Vancouver Tennis Centre
- PTR International Master Professional
- For 30 years he was the Head Course Facilitator for Tennis Canada Coaching Certification – British Columbia

Wayne is one of only 3 coaches in Canada who have both Coach 4 and Club Professional 3 Certification levels. He is also certified as an Elite Professional with the USPTA.

Wayne is acknowledged as one of Canada's leading development coaches and coaching educators. He has won numerous awards including the Canadian Tennis Professionals Association's 'Course Facilitator of the year' award and 'Club Professional of the year' award.

He is a national expert on the Game-based approach and other modern coaching methodologies. He is a major contributor to the Canadian coaching certification system's educational materials and curriculums.



## INTRODUCTION

Private tennis lessons occur regularly in every country in the world. It is a staple of most players' tennis experience. The typical adult lesson goes something like this:

- The coach greets the student and asks, 'What do you want to work on?' (sometimes, this step doesn't happen as the coach may feel their 'expertise' means they will tell the student what they need.)
- The coach then hits a few balls with the student (to warm up and analyze any glaring stroke deficiencies). They then view what the student said they wanted to work on (or what the coach determined). It could be through basket feeding some groundstrokes or volleys or, with the student hitting some serves. (this step is sometimes done live).
- The coach then launches into the technical changes the student needs to make to improve their 'form' for the identified stroke. (e.g., things like following through in a certain way, turning the hips more, having a specific swing shape, etc.)
- The lesson ends with the coach and student playing some points (this step may also not occur).

Does that scenario sound familiar? I have seen it play out thousands of times as a coaching certification coach-developer. It is not particularly 'wrong' but far less effective than it could be.

## PLAYER-CENTRED

An alternative process is to implement a **player-centred** session.

*Imagine if a lesson was an article of clothing like a suit. One could take a 'generic' suit off the shelf from a department store, which would work fine. However, one could get a suit that is 'tailor-made'. Where you are precisely measured, and everything is adjusted to fit your needs. Wouldn't that be a better option? (especially if the price were the same).*

The first step in changing from generic to tailored lessons is to change our language. Firstly, I will not call the lesson recipients 'students.' That implies a top-down process with a 'teacher' dictating and 'pushing' information into the student. Instead, I will call them a 'player'. This embodies the idea that what they are learning is directly related to their playing the game of tennis. I would also prefer not to call it a 'lesson' (although that is the prevalent term) since that also implies a top-down approach.

---

*"Move from a 'Sage on the stage' to a 'Guide on the side'".*

Alison King – Doctor of Education-California State University

---

Instead, I will call it a 'session', which is a term that provides more of a sense of cooperation. *Generic lessons* are **imposed onto a student** by the coach. *Tailored sessions* are **drawn from the player** in collaboration with the coach.

## TRANSFORMATION & LEARNING

In multiple surveys done, when players complain about what they dislike most about private lessons, these responses regularly show up:

- 'The coach tried to re-shape me into their image.'
- 'The lesson made me worse' or, 'They performed *major surgery* and ruined all my strokes.'

If someone is paying for a session, it should be of some immediate benefit, and if they don't fully 'buy-in' to any changes, no real transformation or learning will occur.

Remember the profound quote:

---

*"I don't remember anything I was taught, only what I learned."*

Patrick White – Nobel winning Australian author

---

To affect real transformation & learning, we need to understand the nature of the game of tennis. Motor learning classifies tennis as an 'open skill' sport. Open skills require a player to adapt technique to their situation. This is in contrast to teaching tennis like a 'closed skill' sport (like one would teach gymnastics, diving, etc.)

To run a tailored session and learn tennis as an open skill, we will apply **Situation Training (ST)**.

## SITUATION TRAINING-TRANSFER OF LEARNING

Using ST will enhance transformation by maximizing what is learned to directly apply to how a player performs in matches. In motor learning, there is an important principle that reads:

**"The transfer of learning from one situation to another is directly proportionate to the degree they are identical."**

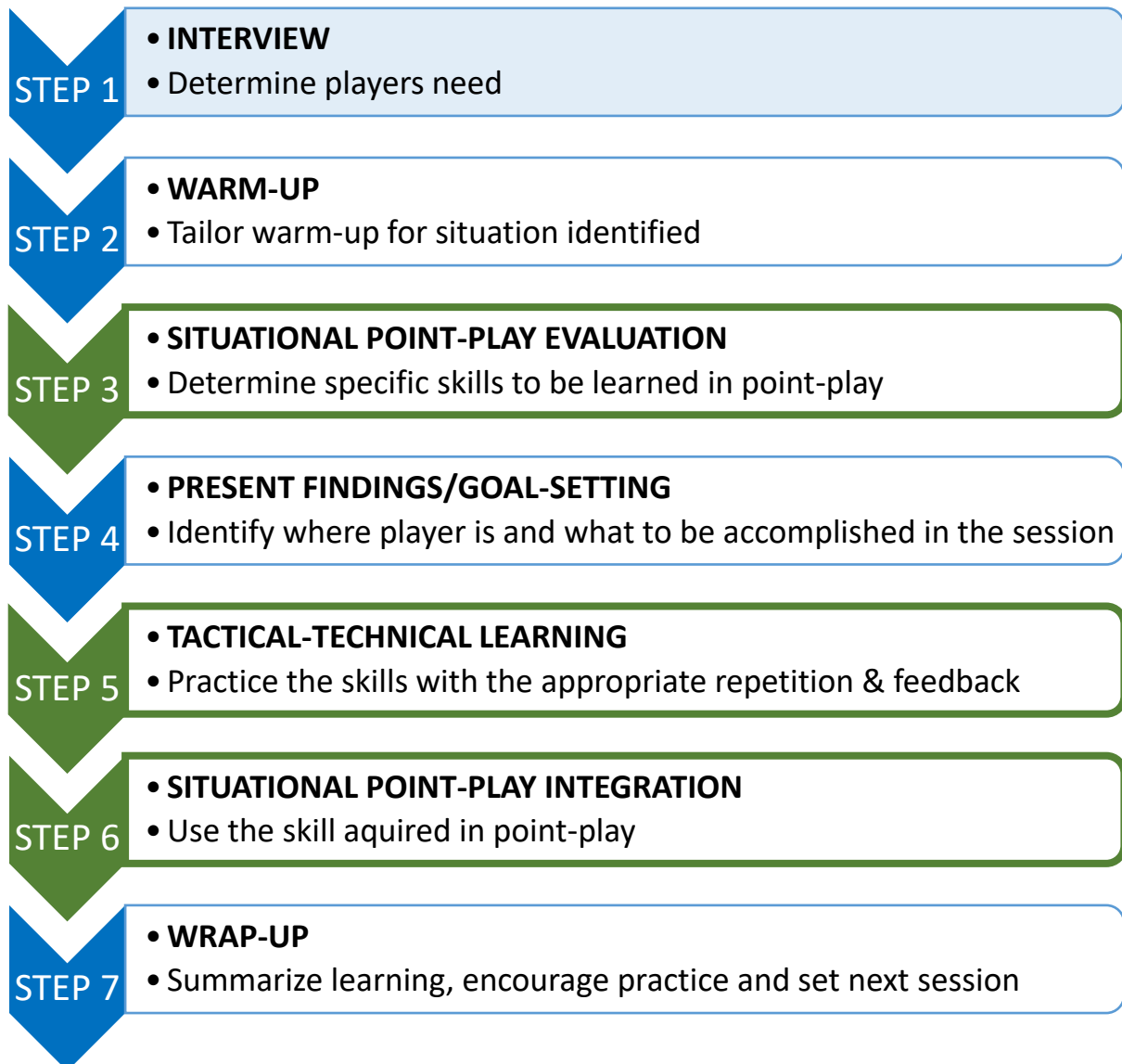
In practical terms, players who take a lesson that works on their stroke form will often not be able to actually use it when they play. For one thing, they will not know critical application details like when the right time and the wrong time to use the skill. How is the skill adapted when the situation varies, etc? Tailored sessions help in the practical application of any technique used.

There are 7 steps in a **tailored private session**:

## TAILORED PRIVATE SESSION STEPS:

To apply ST, sessions will follow a Play/Practice/Play format (sections colour-coded in green):

### DIAGRAM #1: STEPS OF A SESSION



Each step is designed so a coach can collaboratively work **with** (not at) a player to help them learn what they need to play more successfully. Let's look at each one in detail:

## STEP 1: INTERVIEW

**This is the most critical step of the entire process.** Getting this step right sets the stage for the whole session and beyond. The coach must *'take the measurements for the suit'* by asking some essential questions. Questions 1 & 2 would only apply to a new player the coach is working with. For returning players, questions 3 & 4 would apply:

1. ***'What level would you say you are at/How long have you played?'***: It is most effective if a player knows their level based on some rating system (e.g. NTRP, UTR, WTN, etc.). Of course, once a player hits a ball, the coach will quickly see what level they are actually at; however, their answer will tell the coach what level they will need to send the ball to the player initially. For example, what kind of ball (power, spin, etc.) would a coach send to a player who answers, *'I am a 2.0 NTRP player'* compared to a 4.5?
2. ***'How many times do you play a week on average?'***: This question will give the coach a sense of how much practice a player will get. That, in turn, tells the coach the ***degree of change*** that will be realistic. For example, switching a player from a 'frypan' to a continental grip on their serve would be a disaster if they only play (and never practice) 1-2 times per week. What a coach suggests for improvement will be governed by how much they will practice. *Getting a player to change should not be as much about what is 'correct' in the coach's mind as much as what can be realistically implemented.*
3. ***'Do you play more doubles or singles, and what do you want this session to apply to?'***: It is a shame that so many players who primarily (or only) play doubles have had singles lessons imposed on them. The doubles or singles designation sets critical aspects of the session. For example, if a player performs skills from the middle of the court or, from the side? Where they send balls to? Where they receive balls on the court? Etc.
4. ***'What are you looking to accomplish in this session? Describe to me a situation when this happened when you played.'***: This question will shift the entire process from probably being about 'stroke form' to far more effective ***Situation Training***. The coach can follow up with questions to clarify, like, *'Where were you, and where was your opponent?' 'What kind of ball did you receive?' 'What shot did you want to make?'* This critical question identifies the specific situation that will be improved (See the Shot Cycle description in the Situational Point-Play section below). For a doubles-oriented session, follow-up questions would include: Which position were they in (Server, Server's partner, Returner, Returner's partner)? If they were on the deuce or Ad side? When the situation occurred, were they both up, one up-one back, etc.?

**NOTE:** This information can also come from a coach observing match-play. The coach would then use questions to clarify what they observed. For example, *'You mentioned you had trouble with playing that left-hander when they were serving. I noticed that the wide serve on the Ad side gave you the most difficulty. Is that correct?'*

## STEP 2: WARM-UP

After the interview, the coach can warm the player up by hitting some balls with them. Starting with Mini-tennis at the service line is always a good idea to ease into activity. However, some players may need a good rationale for not starting at the baseline (like the pros do).

The warm-up can also be tailored to what the session will be about. For example, if the situation identified was all about volleys, the coach may opt to go from mini-tennis right into a groundstroke to volley warm-up. However, a 5-minute 'tournament warm-up' routine may be performed if full points are to be played in the session.

## STEP 3: SITUATIONAL POINT-PLAY EVALUATION

The interview identified which situation to work on. It is essential to see the situation as it occurs in actual Point-play. In other words, do not feed balls to analyze but play points. The coach must use their skills to ensure the situation occurs. For example, if a player said the situation they wanted to improve was to handle high balls to the backhand in a rally, the coach must send those balls while they are playing points.

**Confirm the Situation:** During the evaluation, it is critical for the coach to confirm the situation. To do this, when the coach sees it happen, they must stop after the point and ask, *'Was that the situation we were talking about?'* The player will either **confirm** or **clarify** (e.g. *'No, the balls I had more trouble with had more topspin.'* Etc.). This will keep the session on the right track.

**Situation Translation:** A player may not understand what is even meant by the word 'Situation'; however, it must be clear in the coach's mind. It is like a patient/doctor interaction. For appropriate treatment, the plain language of the patient (*'My elbow hurts.'*), must be translated into medical language in the doctor's mind for accuracy (*'Medial epicondylitis'*) and fed back to the patient in terms they can understand (*'You have 'tennis elbow''*). To translate the situation into ST language, the coach must understand the definition of a situation in more technical terms.

## THE SHOT CYCLE

Strokes (E.g. Forehand, Backhand, Serve, Volley, etc.) are the most common basic building blocks of coaching. However, when coaching situationally, they are not a helpful tool since technique must vary for the situation. For example, does a Crosscourt topspin rally 'forehand' use the same technique as a level down the line drive 'forehand'? Or, a defensive loop 'forehand' when backing up? Or, a shoulder height attacking 'forehand' from  $\frac{3}{4}$  court? Or, a 'forehand' when receiving a shot high and wide? If so much technical variation is required for all these shots, then it is not helpful to talk about 'forehands' as much as specifying *'Which forehand?'*

Coaches need a more useful building block for ST. That building block is the **'Shot Cycle,'** which defines the specific situation a player is in during a single shot. **We should talk about tennis in terms of 'shots,' not 'strokes.'** The Shot Cycle is essential to define the situation so the appropriate technique can be adapted. Here is an insightful quote:

*"Every shot is different, every single shot. No ball arrives the same as another, no shot is identical."*

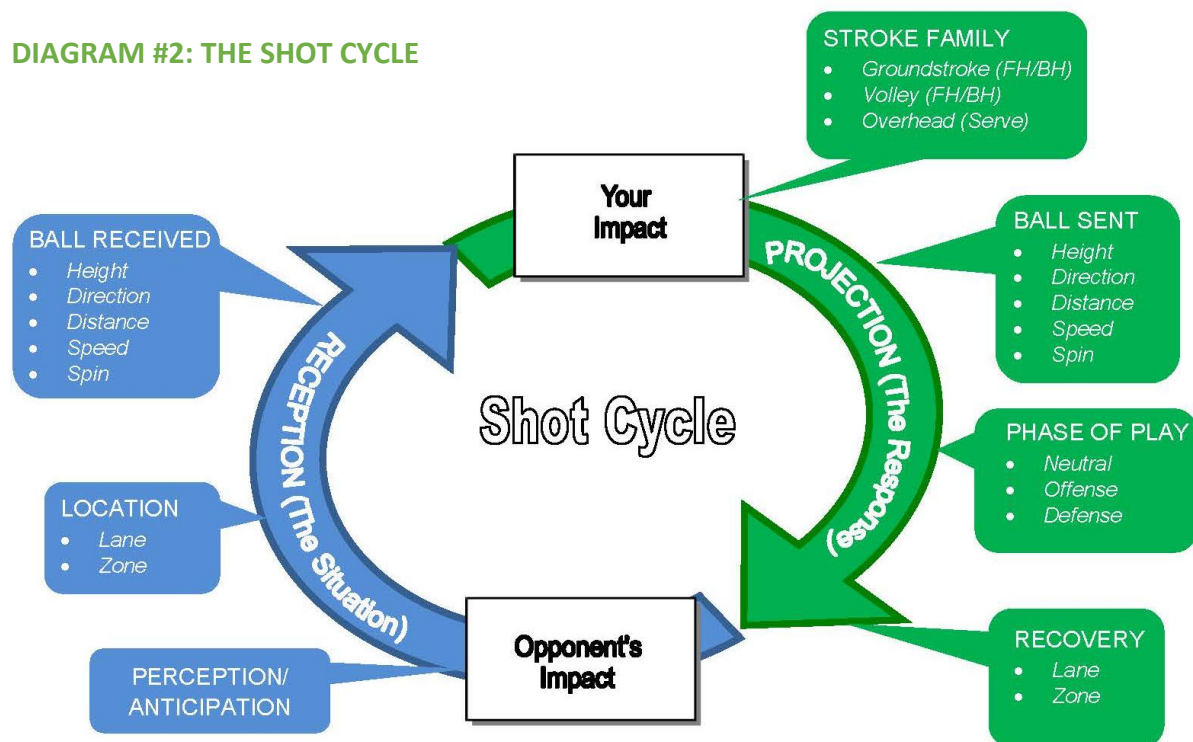
Rafa Nadal-2011 autobiography

The Shot Cycle is comprised of two halves:

- The first is the situation you are in that presents a problem. This is the 'reception' half of the cycle.
- The next half of the cycle is your response to solve the problem (Projection). The cycle isn't finished until it is completed with a recovery for the next shot.

This is how situations need to be defined.

**DIAGRAM #2: THE SHOT CYCLE**



See the resources section for a detailed article on the Shot Cycle

The interview nails down as many pieces of the Shot Cycle as possible. Then, the coach can do a more accurate and realistic Situational Point-Play evaluation.



In Situational Point-Play, actual tennis points are played. However, some situations may infrequently occur during regular point play. Keep in mind the most important principle when running Situational Point Play:



**DIAGRAM #3: SITUATIONAL POINT-PLAY RULE**

Coaches can start points in any of the following 5 Point Situations to target specific **situations**.

**DIAGRAM #4: POINT SITUATIONS**



Serving



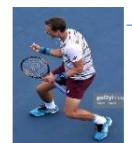
Returning



Both Back



Approaching &  
at Net



Passing

For Doubles, points can be played with players in the following formations:

- **One-up/One-back**
- **Both-back**
- **Both-up**

#### COMMON TOPIC EXAMPLES

(Can be applied in both singles and doubles situations)

##### Both Back:

- Solve the problem of how to receive a ball wide/high in the corner and maintain a neutral rally

##### Serve:

- Solve the problem of how to send a 2<sup>nd</sup> serve to the BH to neutralize the opponent.

##### Return:

- Solve the problem of how to take advantage of a short 2<sup>nd</sup> serve and send it to the corner to move the opponent.

##### Approaching & at Net:

- Solve the problem of how to receive a shorter/weaker ball and take advantage with a Down-the-line approach shot to set up a volley.

##### Passing:

- Solve the problem of how to receive a challenging approach shot and lob it over the opponent's head.



#### STEP 4: PRESENT FINDINGS/GOAL-SETTING

After the Point-Play analysis, the coach presents their findings/observations to the player and engages in a quick goal-setting exercise.

For example (singles): Coach talking: *'You wanted to work on approaching on short balls. As we played, I noticed your approach shot only put me in trouble 25% of the time. What do you think of making a goal to increase that to over 50% by aiming for the side more?'*

Players are much more open to change when they feel the coach has accurately individualized and diagnosed their issues, and change is mapped out together.

#### STEP 5: TACTICAL-TECHNICAL LEARNING

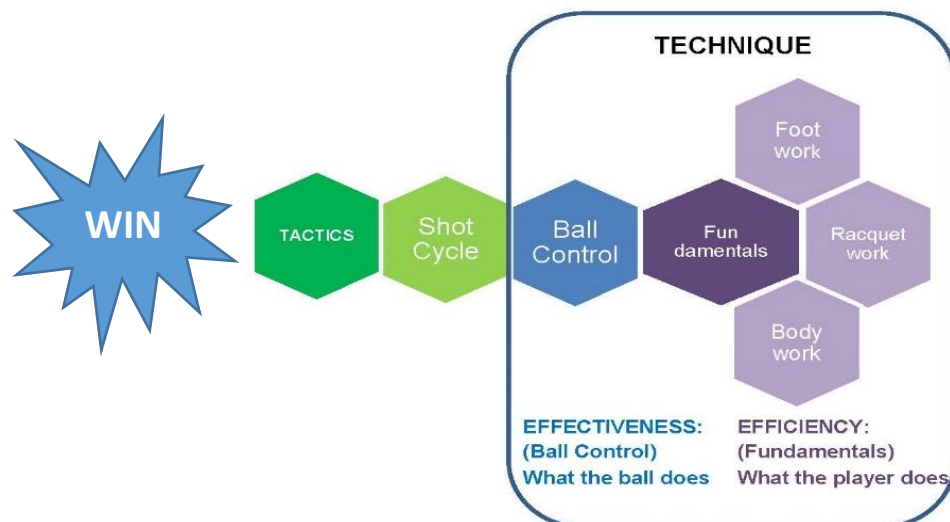
This step is where new skills are acquired and practiced with appropriate repetition and feedback. All technique should be connected to tactics. Therefore, ST uses a tactics-first approach.

The following diagram is one of the most essential diagrams in the Canadian Coaching Education system. It shows the intimate link of tactics and technique (called 'Tactical-Technical' coaching).

The diagram is a *story* that flows from *tactics to technique* and back again, showing that technical coaching must have a connection to tactics. The story from the tactical end of the continuum flows like this (see diagram below):

- The goal of playing any game (including tennis) is to **win**
- To win, effective **tactics** are required
- Tactics and technique occur in various situations (**Shot Cycle**)
- To perform tactics in these situations, the ball must be controlled *effectively* (**Ball Control**)
- Finally, controlling the ball requires the execution of *efficient* **Technical Fundamentals**

**DIAGRAM #5: TACTICAL-TECHNICAL CONNECTION**



## TACTICS-FIRST

Regarding tactics, most coaches don't have a framework to help them systematically deal with tactics; however, winning games are all about tactics (whether hockey, chess, or tennis).

There are two key concepts to understand to help Situation Training:

1. The first is an overall 'Tactical Mission' that prioritizes your tactics.
2. The second is the basic core tactics most commonly employed in tennis.



DIAGRAM #6: TACTICAL MISSION

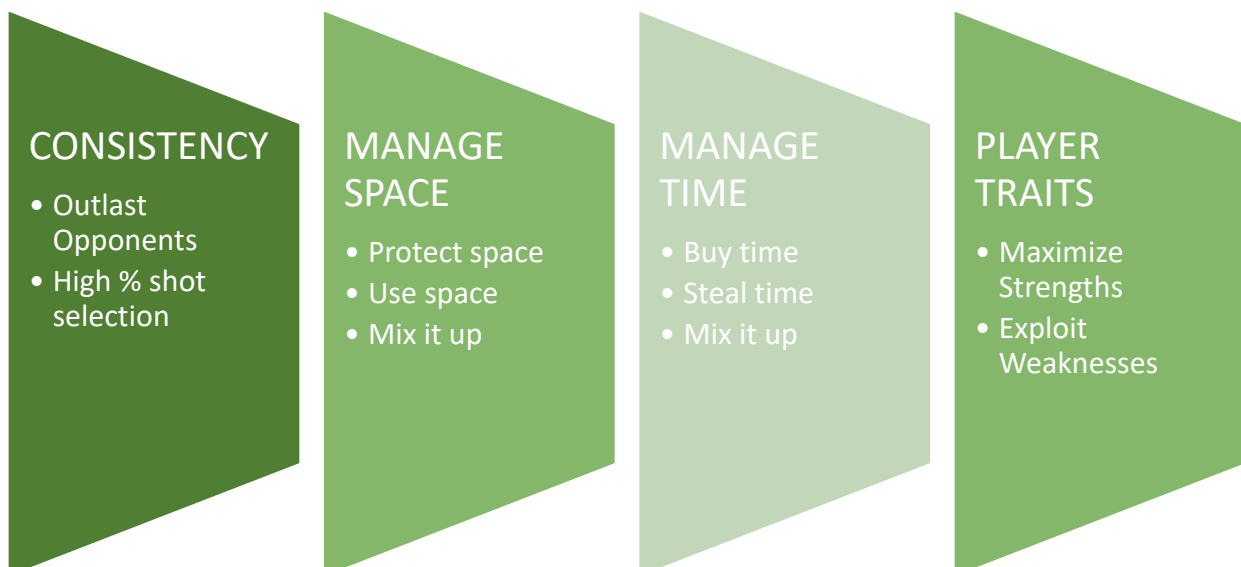


DIAGRAM #7: CORE TACTICS

## TACTICAL DECISION-MAKING

Winning any game is about tactics. However, the foundation of employing tactics is decision-making. Executing the correct technique is of no use if a player does not select **when** to apply the appropriate technique.

To adapt technique to a situation, decision-making is required. This becomes one of the primary skills in tennis. Even a starter player has to make multiple decisions on every shot. There is no escaping decision-making so coaches need to pay more attention to developing decision-making skills and incorporating it into all training. Up to 40-60% of all errors have decision-making causes.

## DECISION-MAKING TRAINING TOOLS

One of the biggest challenges in training decision-making is that the entire process happens in the players' head. Do coaches have to become mind-readers to train it? The trick is to use two essential tools.

- **Cue Words:** A Cue word is associated with the key characteristic of the ball received. There are 5 Characteristics of the ball received (Height, Direction, Distance, Speed, Spin). For example, is the ball received 'high' or 'low'? 'Fast' or 'slow'? 'Right' or 'left'? (could be 'Forehand' or 'Backhand') 'Short' or 'deep'?, etc.

The Cue word is called out as early as a player recognizes the characteristic. By hearing when the player calls the word and its quality (e.g. was the call tentative or confident?), the coach has a tool to see the quality of the decision and its timing. The job then becomes to help the player call the Cue earlier and with commitment.

- **Command Words:** A Command word emphasizes a tactical or technical element of the shot. For example, a player may call out '*Line*' (hit the ball Down-the-line) or '*Cross*' (hit the ball crosscourt). The command could emphasize a key technical component critical for executing the shot. For example, the words '*Block*' could be used to receive a hard volley and '*Touch*' to receive a soft one and perform a drop-shot. Rather than being called as early as possible, Command words are called at the time of execution. The coach then sees if the quality of the execution matches the quality of the word.

The typical process is to use Cue Words first and then the Command words if the player needs to focus on specific elements they are struggling with. They then go back to the Cues to keep it all early. However, these are just tools, so the coach and player can work out what works best for them.

## DECISION-MAKING TRAINING PROCESS

Once the decision is trained to an acceptable level, the next step is to improve the technique associated with each shot. The challenge for players is typically not the technique for an individual shot, but when they switch shots, they don't change the technique so technical elements 'mush' together.

For example, when switching from a power technique to a more 'touch' technique, they may hit the touch technique too hard (rather than absorbing the power of the ball) and a 'pop-up' could result. Or, the complete opposite could happen where they switch from a 'touch' shot to a power shot. If a player's body and decision-making get confused about that, the result would be a power shot with no power. Often, when players execute poor-quality shot-making, decision-making is a significant factor.

A progression can be used to solidify the technique associated with each decision. For example, here is a process for a Ball-based decision when receiving a low volley (below net height) and a high volley (shoulder height). The tactical objective is offence to gain advantage.

**(a) Train the Decision-Pair:** The coach can now take out the ball basket and make some hand or racquet-feeding repetition drills to solidify the decision required for the shot. During the drills, Cue words are used to train the decision. The goal is to have the decision be quick and accurate. Our example situation could be a volley received high where the cue 'High' would be called and a low volley where the cue 'Low' is called.

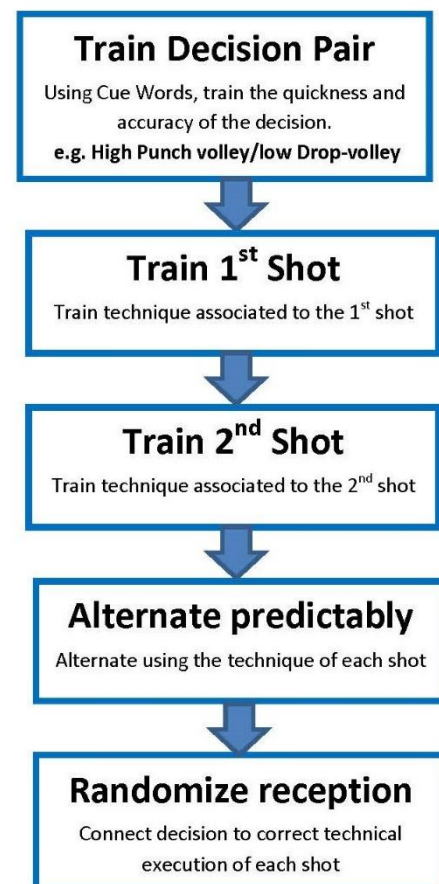
**(b) Train the first shot:** Create a repetition drill to train the high volley. In this example, the coach has the player call the Command word '*Punch*' and focuses on the technique to perform the shot successfully. This could include feedback like speeding up the racquet, timing the shot to impact the ball more 'out front' and keeping the swing compact.

**(c) Train the second shot:** Create a repetition drill for the low volley using the Command '*Touch*'. Technical feedback could include impacting the ball a little further back to help to absorb and catch the ball for a drop volley, etc.

**d) Alternate predictably:** The coach now feeds one high, then one low, to get used to passing back and forth from deciding which technique is appropriate. The player continues to call out the Command words, getting used to switching from one shot to the next with the adapted technique for each one.

**(e) Mix randomly:** Now, balls are fed randomly. The coach can hear the quality of the decision through the Command words and can reinforce a correct and quick decision. The coach checks the decision by hearing the right choice of the Command word at the same time as the ball crosses the net. Finally, add other shots into the mix, like overheads and approach shots.

## DECISION-FIRST TRAINING PROCESS



**DIAGRAM #8: DECISION-MAKING PROCESS**

## BALL CONTROL: THE FORGOTTEN TECHNIQUE

To perform any tactic, a player must control the ball appropriately.

### TWO-FOLD DEFINITION OF TECHNIQUE

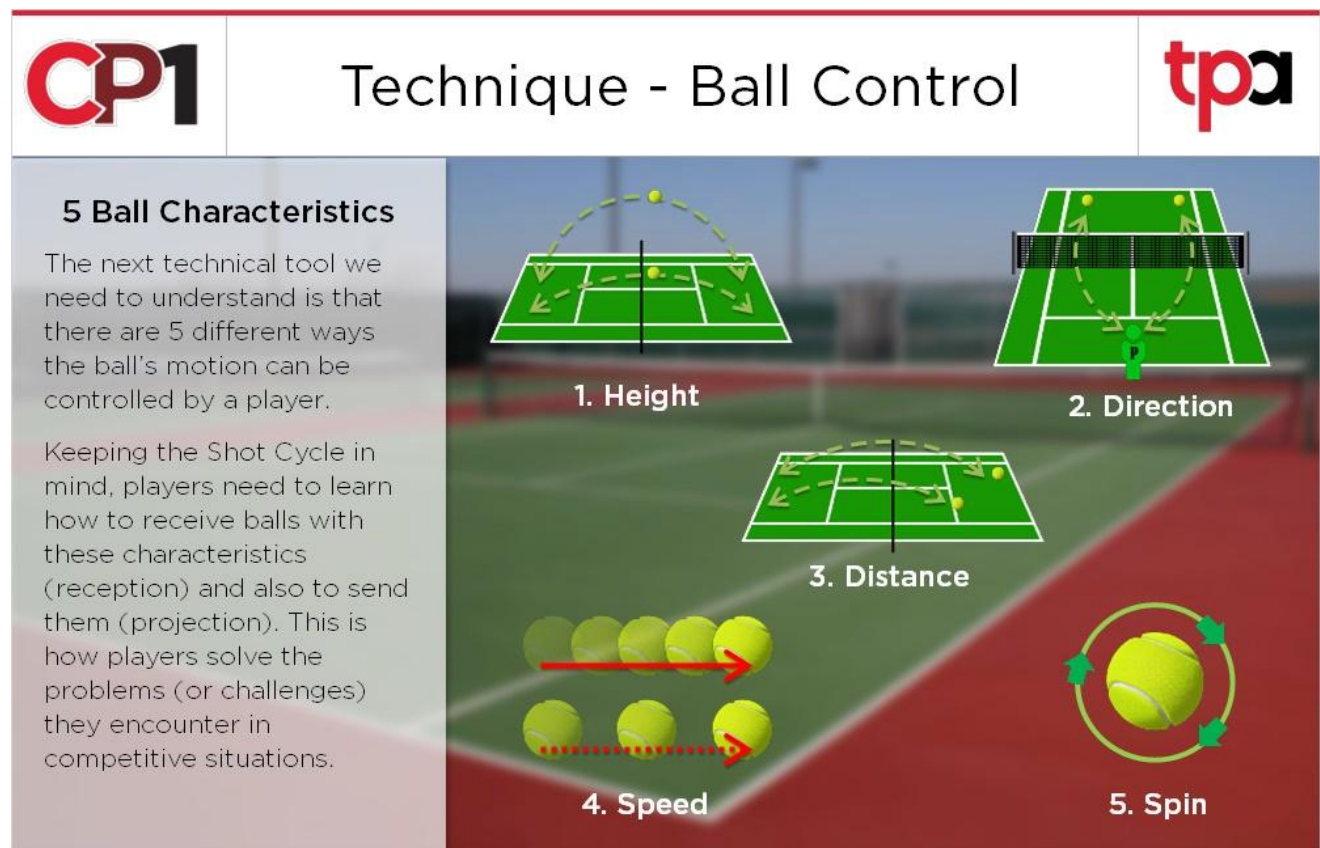
**What the Ball Does  
(Ball Control)**



**What the Player Does  
(Mechanics)**



**DIAGRAM #9: TWO-FOLD DEFINITION OF TECHNIQUE**



**DIAGRAM #10: 5 BALL CONTROL CHARACTERISTICS**



## P.A.S. PRINCIPLES

The correct 'recipe' of the P.A.S. Principles creates every ball control needed to perform a tactic.

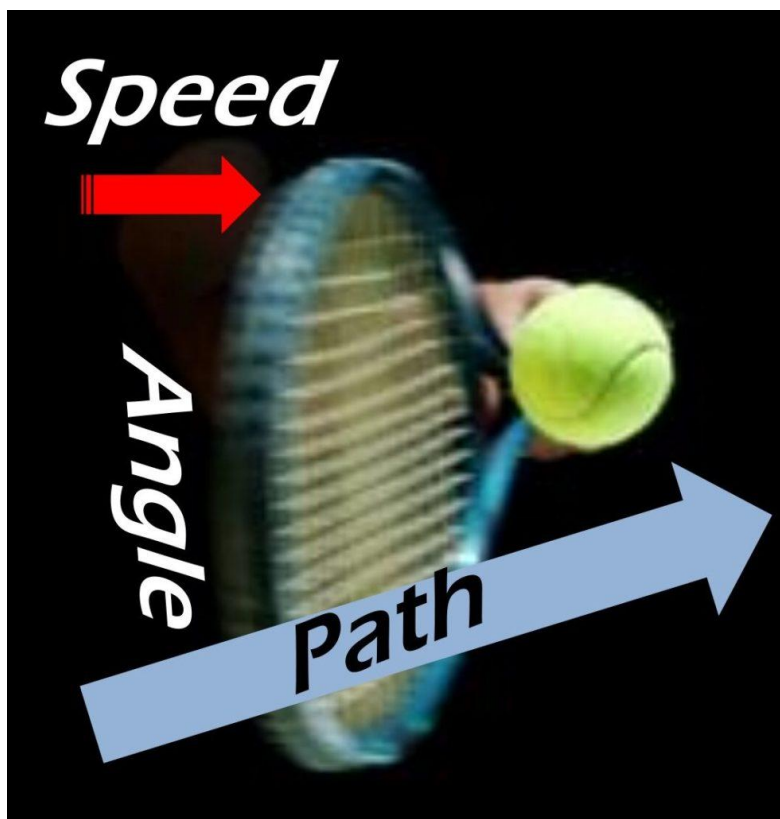


DIAGRAM #11: P.A.S. PRINCIPLES

## PAS PRINCIPLES

### PATH

- Vertical
  - Level
  - Low to High
  - High to Low
- Horizontal
  - Circular
  - Hitting Zone

### ANGLE

- Vertical
  - Open
  - Straight
  - Closed
- Horizontal
  - Back
  - Outside
  - Inside

### SPEED

- Velocity
  - Maintain
  - Accelerate
  - Decelerate
- Rhythm
  - Fast-Fast
  - Slow-Slow
  - Fast-Slow
  - Slow-Fast

DIAGRAM #12: P.A.S. ELEMENTS

The **last** element to include is any biomechanical fundamentals. Now that the tactic is clear, the situation is well defined, and the ball-control is identified, the specific technique needed can be worked on, which include:

- **Racquetwork** for the shot
- **Footwork** for the shot
- **Bodywork** for the shot

#### STEP 6: SITUATIONAL POINT-PLAY INTEGRATION

The session should end on a high note by replaying the original play situation to provide an opportunity to integrate the skills learned. The coach can give ‘bonus points’ for using the skill when competing in points.

#### STEP 7: WRAP-UP

The session concludes with the coach covering some critical issues:

- A summary of what was learned in the session (This is best done in a ‘Quiz’ format with the player being asked what they found are the key ‘takeaways’ that will help them most).
- A tentative ‘practice plan’ where the coach asks if the player will have an opportunity to practice.
- Make a schedule to follow up with the next session. For example, the coach could say, *‘Today, we learned about your approach shot. How about next time we follow up with the volleys you could use after you have set yourself up? Does next week at the same time work for you?’*

As the old business adage goes, *‘The best business is repeat business.’* Retention is good for your business, and the player will benefit from continued development.

#### WHAT IF THE PLAYER DOESN’T KNOW WHAT TO WORK ON?

Sometimes, the player doesn’t have any specific situation in mind. They may give answers in the interview like:

- *‘Do whatever you would like. You’re the coach.’*
- *‘I want to work on everything.’*

When getting answers like that, the coach discontinues the interview and simply says, *‘Sounds good, let’s play a few points, and I will see what we can do to improve your game.’* They then do a ‘tournament style’ warm-up, taking some groundstrokes, volleys & serves and play some points (e.g., a tie-breaker) and look to see what the player needs to improve their **match-play performance** (not just their strokes). Remember, if the player wants a doubles-oriented session, points can be played half-court or crosscourt.



## RESOURCES

All of these concepts are covered in detail on my website, **acecoach.com**

Here are a few of the relevant articles that can add more information to this course by exploring many of the concepts presented in detail:

- **Learning Tennis as an Open Skill** <https://acecoach.com/learning-tennis-as-an-open-skill/>  
Video: <https://youtu.be/eo4nT6-9klI>
- **The Tactical-Technical Continuum** <https://acecoach.com/tactical-technical-continuum/>
- **The Shot Cycle: Foundation of Situation Training** <https://acecoach.com/the-shot-cycle/>
- **Technique for Situation Training: Ball Control** <https://acecoach.com/technique-for-situation-training-ball-control/>
- **Technique for Situation Training: P.A.S. Principles** <https://acecoach.com/p-a-s-principles/>
- **Timing is Everything** <https://acecoach.com/timing-is-everything/>  
Video: <https://youtu.be/wqlqPVyAAMs>

I encourage you to explore the website. All the articles are free.

Best wishes for your journey to coaching using Situation Training.

*Wayne Elderton*

