

2008 WIAA Coaches School

Teaching Tennis Technique

It's important to keep things simple. Too much information too soon can be overwhelming and frustrate the student.

The basic components of each shot should be demonstrated and broken down into the following categories:

1. Grip
2. Stance
3. Footwork
4. Backswing
5. Point of Contact
6. Follow-through
7. Toss

Grip:

Progress will come faster with less complicated grips. Every shot in tennis except the forehand should incorporate the continental grip. Forehands should start with the eastern grip.

Serves and overheads, volleys and backhands should all be hit with a continental grip. Two-handed backhands are easier to learn for most beginners, and the dominant hand should be in the continental grip with the non-dominant hand using an eastern forehand grip.

With beginners, it will be helpful to start in the continental grip and develop a feel for the racquet by bouncing the ball up, down, and "bumping" the ball back and forth with a partner.

Give students visual clues to remember proper grips, such as sliding the "V" between the thumb and index finger along the frame to find the continental grip, or sliding palm of hand down string bed to find eastern forehand grip.

Making players comfortable with the continental grip early will build the foundation for more advanced technique in the future.

Stance:

Be sure to include the “ready position” in any discussion or demonstration of a stroke. This should include feet pointing toward the net, racquet head above the wrist with non-dominant hand holding throat of racquet, and feet shoulder-width apart, knees slightly bent, and weight on the balls of the feet. Return to ready-position after each shot.

Most beginners will benefit from hitting from a closed stance. This will mean standing sideways in the court, facing one sideline or the other. This will be true for all groundstrokes, volleys and overheads.

For the serving stance, have players position their feet with forward foot turned 45 degrees to the baseline, and back foot running parallel to the baseline.

Footwork:

Simply put, this is the movement of the feet between the ready position and the stance for each stroke. Emphasize stepping forward on all shots but the serve.

At the beginning level, this will usually only include a pivot on the back foot and a cross step with the forward foot. Make sure the cross step will get the player turned sideways to the court. This applies only to groundstrokes and volleys.

Also include footwork to the recovery position, and a split-step into the ready position.

As players advance in skill, focus may be placed on footwork skill such as running to the balls and shuffling back to ready position with slide-steps and cross-over steps.

Backswing:

The easiest backswing to learn will be straight back, racquet pointing to the back fence. Make sure the racquet is taken back below the level of the contact point. Some players will be able to learn a loop backswing just as easily, so don't be afraid to experiment.

For the two-handed backhand, both hands should be on the grip for the entire swing.

For volleys, don't use a big backswing. Keep the racquet in front of the body and emphasize the forward “punch.”

On the serve, a stationary backswing is sometimes preferable. That means starting with the racquet resting on the shoulder of the playing arm. If the student is capable of using a full backswing on the serve, it should be similar to a throwing motion. You can have students simply throw balls over the net to practice the serving backswing.

Point of Contact:

For groundstrokes, locate a contact point between the knees and waist, and in front of the body. Most groundstrokes should be hit just ahead of the forward foot, with the exception of the one-handed topspin backhand, which is hit further in front of the body.

The contact point for volleys will be higher, and closer to the body. Have students practice proper volley technique by catching balls thrown by the instructor. Make sure the hands are out in front, and the catch is made up high. When practicing volleys, don't allow students to drop the racquet head below the wrist, bend the knees instead.

Follow-through:

Try to encourage your players to swing low to high from the beginning. It's easier to learn topspin right away than to try to teach it after poor habits develop. The backswing should have the racquet head below the ball for groundstrokes, and the follow-through is low to high finishing across the opposite shoulder. Elbows should be bent, and racquet should be behind the back.

Limit the follow-through on the volley. It should have very little of either a backswing or a follow-through. Emphasize the "punch", or if necessary, a "high-five" motion.

Follow-through for serves and overheads should be across the body, finishing on the opposite side as the racquet hand.

Toss:

To practice the toss, have students stand close to a wall or court fence. Have them practice throwing ball so it skims the wall or fence. Keep the toss out in front, and on the same side of the body as the playing hand.

You can also have them practice the toss and catching the ball without lowering the toss hand. Another method to develop the toss is to place the player's racquet on the ground, with the head of the racquet in front of the body and off to the racquet hand side, trying to toss the ball at proper height and making the ball land on the strings.

Putting it all Together:

All of this might be too much information to digest in a short amount of time, so keeping things simple and concentrating on only the most important elements is usually a good way to start.

Grip, stance, backswing, contact point, and follow-through are all that are required for a successful stroke. Taking these to the most basic elements will make things easier for the student to understand.

Be certain to demonstrate each element you are teaching. You may even want to demonstrate each element individually and then incorporate them into a demonstration of the entire stroke.

Having your students imitate your demonstration without the ball can reduce the pressure to perform, and facilitate the learning process. This “shadow-stroking” technique can be extremely valuable and a low pressure way for your students to become comfortable with the elements of the stroke.

Once the stroke has been demonstrated and imitated, it’s time for repetition. Having your students drop and hit the ball is a good way to get multiple repetitions in a short amount of time. Be sure to closely watch the stance and contact point during the “drop-hits” to ensure good technique.

When your students become comfortable with the drop hit repetitions, begin to toss feeds underhand, feed from a short distance, and finally feed from across the court. These progressions make the progress easier, and can help to limit frustration.

Drop hits will only work with groundstrokes, so be prepared to feed the volleys and overheads. Again, start with an underhand toss, and lead up to a full court feed.

Run drills and play games putting an emphasis on correct technique. This will make the learning process more enjoyable for your students, and allow them to push themselves to improve, as well as making them comfortable using correct technique in a competitive situation.

Be supportive, and insist on proper technique. Encourage your students to ask questions, and push themselves to improve.