

TENNIS FUTURE LAB · MONOGRAPH



Game Management — SPACE principles for level 5.0

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CHAPTER 1

Chapter 1 — Why the better player still loses

In every club there is someone like that. He warmed up well, his forehand was solid, the ball went deep and heavy. Watching him fight, people guessed he would win. Then the match started, and he lost to someone whose shot was worse in every way. It's not about losing to luck. Lost three sets, and lost the same way.

People often explain with pleasant sentences: today is not in form, the

opponent is lucky, the field is a bit fast. But if you watch enough of these matches, you'll see an incredibly repetitive pattern. People who play well win a lot of impressive points and lose a lot of mediocre points. Bad players win impressively few points but award almost no points. And tennis is measured by points, not by impressions.

Distance is not about the shot

At level 4.5, players have enough sets of shots to play a great match. Forehand goes in, backhand doesn't fall, serve goes over the net. What's missing is not one more shot. What's missing is what determines which shot to use, when, where to aim, and for what purpose.

The gap between 4.5 and 5.0 is not a technical gap. It is the decision gap. A 5.0 player doesn't hit the ball twice as well as you; He chooses more correctly than you many times in one match. Each time he chooses correctly, he retains a little bit of probability. Adding up a few dozen times like that in two hours, it became a win.

I call the totality of those decisions game management. It includes what you think before you throw the ball, what you see when your opponent takes stance, what you choose when you're losing momentum, and what you correct after the point is over. There's nothing mysterious, and nothing is free. It can be learned, but it must be learned systematically.

Three layers of game management

This system runs on three floors at the same time. The first level is technique: can you do that movement or not. The second layer is strategy: should you do that move in this situation or not. The third layer is psychological: can you do what you decided while your heart was beating fast?

The most common mistake 5.0 players make is living too long on the first floor. They spend all practice making their forehand a little more perfect,

when what's killing them is the second floor. They practice the shot without ever asking why they are standing in that position to hit it, and what the plan is after that shot.

These three layers do not replace each other. A correct decision with a bad shot is still a loss. But a good shot in a wrong decision is also a loss, and this kind of loss hurts more, because you feel like you did everything right.

SPACE — five-step loop

This book uses a single framework for every situation on the field, and I call it SPACE. It is not a periodic spirit formula. It is five questions you ask yourself, in the correct order, for each point.

Scan — scan. Before deciding anything, you look. Where does the opponent stand, which direction does he lean, and how does he hold the racket? What is the score? What trajectory is the ball coming at and how much time do you have left? Scanning is the most overlooked part, as it does not create the feeling of playing well.

Plan — determined. From what you just scanned, you choose an intention for this point. Not three intentions. One. Where to hit to achieve what? The intention can be very small: keep the ball deep in the backhand and wait for the ball to be short. But it must exist before you hit.

Act — do. This is the technical part, and it only takes up a small part of the loop. Choose your shot, choose your spin, choose your rhythm, execute.

Check — check. As soon as the ball leaves the racket, you read the result. Did the ball move according to intention? How the opponent reacts, quickly or slowly, with what shot. This information determines the final step.

Edit — edit. You update. Is the old idea still correct? Should I change it?

What should I change? Then the loop returns to Scan for the next point.

It's worth noting that of these five steps, only one involves polishing. The remaining four steps are look, think and fix. That's exactly the ratio of top tennis, and also exactly the ratio that the majority of players reverse their movement.

Probabilistic thinking replaces outcome thinking

There is a mindset shift greater than any technique in this book, and it happens here. That is removing the question “can I hit this shot” and replacing it with “is this shot the best choice among the options I have”.

The first question asks about your abilities. The second question asks about the probability of the whole situation, in which your probability is just one variable. Players at level 4.5 often hit very difficult shots, occasionally. 5.0 players regularly hit the shots just right, and almost always at the right time. The difference in scores between these two is much greater than the difference in technique.

Probabilistic thinking has an unpleasant consequence: it makes you look less impressive. You will leave out shots that the audience wants to see. You will hit the ball into the middle of the field in a situation where everyone thinks you should hit the corner. And you will win more.

Player and leader

This book is written for two people. The first is the 5.0 athlete who wants a system instead of a bunch of disparate experiences. The second person is that person's coach.

If you're a coach, your duties go beyond correcting movements. You are the one who builds the thinking framework for your students. That requires you to say not just what to do, but why, and why in this particular situation and not another. A good coach at this level doesn't say “play cross-court.”

He said: with the opponent standing in that position, with this score, hitting cross-court has a higher expected value than hitting along the line, for three reasons.

That difference creates an athlete who can think for himself, not one who waits for orders. And that is the real goal of the whole book.

The road ahead

The first three chapters lay the foundation: this chapter is philosophy, the next chapter is probabilistic thinking, then how to read opponents. The next four chapters build the architecture of a point, from serve to the clause return of serve. The following five chapters go into each stroke and footwork. The next five chapters are about what happens under pressure: psychology, fitness, scores, adaptation, tournaments. The last three chapters are devoted to doubles, advanced strategies and long-term roadmaps.

You can read it straight, and you should read it straight the first time. But this book is designed to return. Each chapter can stand on its own, and each chapter ends with something you can take to the field at your next practice session.

One last thing. No shot in tennis is random at this level. If you hold the racket and hit the ball without knowing why you chose that shot, your opponent, if he is a true 5.0, is knowing for you. This book is for you to stop fighting for others.

CHAPTER 2

Chapter 2 — Probabilistic thinking

Score 30-30. The ball arrived in the middle of the field, waist high, a bit slow. This is the type of ball that every player dreams of. There are two options. One: hit into a tight corner, win points immediately if you go in, lose points if you go a few inches out. Two: hit deep into the middle of the field, almost certainly in, and continue to build points.

Player 4.5 chooses one. Player 5.0 chooses two. It's not because he couldn't hit the first shot. But because he did a calculation in his head, and that calculation had nothing to do with which shot was prettier.

Expected value, not beauty

Every shot you make has an expected value. It is equal to the probability of success multiplied by the value of the outcome of success, minus the probability of failure multiplied by the cost of failure. You don't need to calculate it in numbers. You just need to remember that there are three variables, and most players only look at one: the value of success.

That's why the tight angle shot at 30-30 is so attractive. The reward was clearly visible: a winner, a "whoa" from the seats. The price is more obscure, because it only appears later, in the form of a point where you have to start over from the beginning with a worse attitude.

Good players do not have superhuman computational abilities. They just have the habit of looking at all three variables, including the third variable that no one wants to see.

The best shot and the most correct shot

This is the most important distinction in this chapter, and also the one that is most misunderstood. The best shot is the one you hit best. The best shot is the one that has the highest probability of providing an advantage in that particular situation. These two usually don't overlap, and when they don't, the best shot always wins in the long run.

At the point, the rule is simple: play the shot with the highest success rate, not your best shot. This sounds obvious, but pay attention to what you actually do at the next breakpoint. Most players, under pressure, choose the best shot, because they want to finish the point before it finishes them.

Another way to say it: at important points, make them smaller. Don't make it bigger. The ball entered the field, deep, into the opponent's uncomfortable area. Let your opponent do the difficult thing first.

Margin of safety is a decision

When you hit the ball a foot above the net and half a meter deeper than baseline, you are buying something very expensive: forgiveness. When you drop the ball lower and aim close to the line, you're selling that stability to buy something else: pressure on your opponent.

There is no absolutely correct choice. But there is one rule: this trade should only be done when you already have an advantage. When you are in neutral, buy stability. Once you have your opponent out of bounds, sell it and take the pressure.

Movement players do the opposite. They play safely when they have an advantage, then miss the opportunity, and play risky when they are in a neutral position, then give away points.

Allocate risk according to ratio

The score is not just a number. It is information about how much risk you should take in your destination. At 40-0, a loss is almost priceless. At 0-40, a losing point costs a lot. Same shot, same location, but completely different expected value.

This leads to a consequence that few 5.0 players exploit enough: when you're ahead in the game, you can buy cheap risk. It's time to try a new shot, try a new card, try a serve you haven't used all match. Not to perform, but to buy information and to plant a worry in the opponent's mind for the next game.

Conversely, when you're behind, narrow your vocabulary down to the three shots you trust the most. Not because you are weak, but because this is not the time to experiment.

Two types of errors, and which one you have control over

There are errors due to being forced by the opponent, and there are errors caused by your own creation. The books record both as “errors,” but they are two fundamentally different things. Forced errors are the cost of playing with better players. Self-made errors are the cost of poor decision-making.

At the 5.0 level, most of the points you lose are self-made errors, and the majority of self-made errors come from two sources: choosing a shot that is too difficult in an unnecessary situation, and choosing a position that makes the next shot more difficult than necessary. Both were decision errors, not technical errors.

Therefore, one of the most useful questions after each match is not “how many shots did I miss” but “how many of my mistakes were the kind I could have avoided making.” The answer is often unpleasant, and that's why it's useful.

How to practice this thinking?

Probabilistic thinking doesn't come from reading about it. It comes from practicing it in gentle conditions. The simplest way: play practice sets that can only be won by the ball entering the court, not by a winner. You'll find yourself confused in the first few games, and then you'll see options pop up that you didn't see before.

Second way: after each point, ask yourself a single question. Was that last shot the best choice I had? It's not whether that shot goes in or not. Is it the best choice? Just ask, no need to answer right away. After a few weeks, that question will run through your mind while the ball is in flight.

That's where game management comes in. Not when you learn an extra shot, but when you start to see options where before there was only one.

CHAPTER 3

Chapter 3 — Reading your opponents

The ten minutes of pre-match warm-up are the most informative ten minutes of the entire match, and almost no one uses it to gather information. People use it to warm up their muscles, to check the ball, to talk to the person on the other side of the net in meaningless sentences. Then when the referee called on the field, the two still didn't know anything about each other.

Player 5.0 knows that during those ten minutes, the opponent is introducing himself. The first forehand indicates grip. The first Serve says what they believe in. The way they move to the center of the court after each shot shows where and when they were taught. No need to ask any questions.

Two types of information

There's the information you have before you step on the field, and the information you gain while you're playing. The first type comes from videos, from people who have met them, from results of previous matches. The second type comes from yourself, in the first four games, when you are still figuring out what shape this match will take.

These two types complement each other but do not replace each other. Pre-match information is often wrong, because people play differently against different opponents, and play differently on different days. The information in the match was correct, but it came late. Good players use the first type to hypothesize, and use the second type to verify.

A common mistake is to believe the initial hypothesis for too long. You hear that your opponent's backhand is weak, so they hit their backhand throughout the first set, when in reality today their backhand is very strong

and their forehand is failing. The first ten minutes show you that. You just don't look.

Seven things to see in ten minutes

No need to look at twenty things. Seven is enough, and these seven things can be observed during startup without anyone noticing.

Grip and standing position. Grip the racket with Continental, Eastern, Semi-Western or Western style. This tells us whether they like the ball high or low, and whether they create spin or hit it flat. A Semi-Western player will be uncomfortable with low, short, non-bouncing balls. An Eastern player will be comfortable with the ball flat at hip level and struggle with the ball bouncing high over the shoulder.

Backhand. One hand or two hands. Can you slice the ball, or just hit topspin. Two-handed backhands are usually stronger with high balls, but slower with wide balls. The one-handed backhand is often good on low balls and slices, but shows weakness on shoulder-high balls.

Serve. Flat, topspin or cut. Where do they mainly aim, the T or out of bounds. And most importantly: how big is the gap between serve one and serve two. The big gap means they don't trust the second serve, and that's where you attack.

How to move. Do they return to the center of the field or stop after hitting. Are they better at running to the right or better to the left? Are they lazy to take small corrective steps before hitting? This last detail is more important than appearance: the person who does not adjust his steps will miss the shot when the ball comes close to him.

Net play. Are they comfortable moving forward, or do they only move up when they have to? Volley Which side is weaker? Is the blow on the head solid, or do they let the ball bounce before hitting it?

Psychological reaction. When they lose a point in the warm-up, how do they react? Do you talk to yourself? What do you say? Do you look towards your loved ones? This is the data you will use in set three.

Tactical trends. They like to prolong the series or end it early. They play mainly cross-field or like to change direction early. A person who likes long shots will be annoyed when you cut them short and change the rhythm constantly.

Serve speaks the truth

Of the seven above, serve is the most reliable, because it's the only shot the player makes under complete control. There is no opponent influencing, no unexpected ball, no positional pressure. When a person can only choose one shot to express themselves, they choose serve.

So read serve like a signature. The person who has a solid serve two and dares to hit hard on the second serve is someone who has been properly trained. The person who has a very strong first serve but serves the second ball only to put the ball in is the person who has never been faulted by anyone at that point. And the person who changes serve two times after each failure is the person who is losing direction.

The backhand is weak in several ways

Everyone knows how to hit the backhand. But “weak backhand” is not a single thing. There are at least four different types, and each requires a different exploit. Playing the wrong way will slow you down.

The first type: the backhand does not have enough power. They got the ball in, but it was short and light. The way to exploit it is to hit it and then move forward, because you know the return will be short.

The second type: the backhand cannot tolerate high balls. They hit well at hip level but failed when the ball bounced over their shoulders. The way to

exploit it is to topspin high into the backhand, especially when they are close to baseline.

Third type: backhand cannot tolerate low and fast balls. They need time to bring the racket down. The way to exploit it is to cut the ball low, deep, into the backhand, then wait for the return to come up high.

Fourth type: backhand cannot move. Their shots are fine when the ball hits the right spot, but fail when they have to step forward or reach out. The way to exploit it is to hit the backhand but place the ball away from them, forcing them to touch the ball while on the move.

These four styles require four different bait strikes. And you only know what type they are by trying them out in the first four games.

The signs are not technical

At this level, the opponent's psychology is a separate battlefield, and it has signals that can be read. Slumping shoulders and bowed head after a loss is a sign that loss of confidence is coming, not has arrived. Walking between the points unusually quickly is a sign of wanting to escape pressure, and people wanting to escape pressure will choose riskier shots. Tossing the ball longer than usual before serve is a sign of tension, and nervous people often serve shorter.

Changing routine is the most serious sign. When a person suddenly changes the order of serving, changes the pace of their walk, or changes the place where they place their towel, they are losing direction and trying to find an anchor. That's when you increase the pressure, not when you love them.

The first four games when there was no information

Most movement tournaments don't let you know in advance who your opponents are. In that case, the first four games are not about winning. They are crawl times, and you should play in a way that allows for the most crawls.

That means: play a lot of cross-court, keep the series long enough to see, and run four trials. The first lesson is high spin ball to the backhand, see how they handle the high ball. The second lesson is to cut the ball low into the backhand, see how they handle the low ball. The third lesson is a short ball to see how they move forward and handle the net play shot. The fourth exercise is a net play to see the quality of their passing shots.

These four cards cost about sixteen points, or four games. The price is that you could lose one of those four games. The advantage is that from the fifth game onwards, you know exactly where to hit.

Take notes and make adjustments mid-set

You don't need a notebook. You need three lines in the phone, or three fingers. Line one: where do they serve the ball when the point matters. Line two: Which of their shots missed the most today? Line three: which of my plays is working.

The break between sets is a prime time to use those three lines. But talk to yourself, or to your students, in sentences that can be implemented immediately. "Hit better" doesn't work. Neither is "more focused." As for "their second serve is short, cuts to the backhand and net play on the first shot" is workable, and you can test whether it works in the next three points.

That's the whole purpose of reading opponents. Not to make you feel smart. But so you have a specific sentence to say to yourself at minute ninety.

CHAPTER 4

Chapter 4 — Architecture of a Point

A tennis point is not a series of consecutive shots. It has shape. It has an opening, a middle and an ending. And at the 5.0 level, good players don't hit each shot and see what happens; They build points like a worker building a house, knowing in advance where is the foundation and where is the roof.

This sounds abstract until you watch two people of the same level play together and realize one is always in a comfortable position and the other is always in a defensive position. The first person does not hit harder. She's just setting up points, and the other person is reacting to the points.

Three phases of one point

Every point has an opening phase, a development phase, and an ending phase. In the opening phase, the serve or return of serve shot decides who holds the tempo. In the development phase, the two sides exchange positions and times. In the ending phase, one side has enough advantage to finish, or one side makes a mistake because they have run out of options.

Most players only have a plan for the first phase. They know where they will serve the ball, or where they will return the ball. But when the ball comes back, they switch to reflex mode and let the development play out on its own. That's when the advantage is lost.

Good players have a plan for all three phases, but that plan is very short. Not a ten-shot scenario. It's usually just: open with this shot, develop by hitting this area, and finish when the short ball appears.

Four steps to building an attack point

When you're proactive, having a four-step structure is more reliable than anything else. I call it AOFPP: attack, extend, coerce, profit.

Attack is to create pressure from the first shot, with serve or return of serve. Not pressure by speed, but by putting the opponent in a situation they don't want to be in.

Extend is to pull them out of the central position. Hit out of bounds, hit the legs, hit where they left off. The goal is not to score points immediately but to create space on the field.

Force is to force them to hit a weak defensive shot from that disadvantageous position. This is the most overlooked step. The player sees a gap and hits it immediately, while the opponent still has enough time to reach it. You have to wait for the weak return, not guess it.

Profit is the end in the gap that the previous three steps created. This time the shot doesn't need to be perfect. It just needs to get on the field, because the opponent is in the wrong place.

These four steps are not necessarily in four strokes. Sometimes it only takes two. But the order is important: if you jump from attack to gain, you're hitting a winner from neutral, and that's the most common way to award points at level 5.0.

Choose your shot in two positions

There is a simple way to make quick decisions without remembering too much: look at two positions, yours and your opponent's. The combination of these two positions determines almost all correct choices.

When you are inside the court and your opponent is out of bounds, the correct choice is to play into space, and prioritize diagonal shots because the diagonal line is longer and the net is lower in the middle. When you

are out of bounds and your opponent is in the middle, the correct choice is to hit the ball high and deep to the furthest end, to buy time to return. When both are in the middle, the correct choice is to play deep on one side and wait.

When both are in the field, this is the most difficult situation and also the one where 5.0 players usually lose. There was no obvious choice, so they chose their best shot. The correct choice here is usually to hit the opponent's feet, because the low ball forces them to open their racket and not be able to attack.

Third hit

In modern tennis, the server's third shot is the most important shot of the point. The first shot is serve, the second shot is return of serve, the third shot is the first shot you can choose completely yourself. If serve fails to gain an immediate advantage, this is your last chance to regain the initiative before the point falls to your opponent.

It is worth mentioning that most movement players do not have a plan for a third shot. They serve the ball, then look to see where the ball returns, then think. Player 5.0 decides on the third shot before tossing the ball. That's the whole difference, and it's free.

Serve plus one

Because the third shot is so important, people build fixed pairs of serves, called serves plus one: serve and the shot immediately after it, designed together. The four most reliable pairs at level 5.0 are as follows.

Serve the ball out of bounds in the right box, then hit a cross-court forehand into the space. The opponent is pulled out, returns the ball short, and you attack the area they just vacated.

Serve the ball into the T in the left box, then hit a backhand down the line.

Serve pulls them right, and the cross hits right where they left off.

Serve topspin, then advance net play. The ball bounces high and nasty, the return is weak, and you're already in the front half of the court.

Serve the ball flat to the body, then hit it into the open corner. Serve hits people so they don't have time to open the racket, and the opening angle is the reward.

These four pairs do not need to be memorized. You need to choose one, practice it two hundred times, and then use it in a real match. One pair of skilled players is worth more than ten pairs with little knowledge.

Dead ball

A dead ball is a short, slow, unpressured ball that falls in the middle of the field. This is a golden opportunity, and also where 5.0 players miss the most. Not because they can't fight, but because they don't realize it in time, or realize it but hesitate.

There is a rule: when the dead ball appears, commit in the first half a second, and commit with the shot you believe most, not the best shot. Deadball doesn't require perfection, it requires finality. A solid shot into the wide corner wins the point. A perfect shot after hesitation is not.

The rhythm of the point

In addition to position and force, there is another variable that is rarely taught: cadence. Good players know when to increase their tempo, when to decrease it, and when to change spin so the ball feels different even when flying at the same speed.

Increase the tempo to finish the point or to push the opponent into a defensive position. Reduce the rhythm to buy time and to break the rhythm of the excited person. Changing the spin makes the ball bounce differently without their hands having time to adjust.

These three tools are much cheaper than hitting harder. And they are more effective, because opponents can get used to the speed, but have difficulty getting used to the change.

Long point and short point

Not every point should be constructed in the same mold. There are opponents for whom a short score, under four shots, is the best option, because they are strong in the long series and weak when it comes to dealing with the first shot. There are opponents where the long point is your strategy, because you know you are more durable and know they will fail first.

This must be decided before the game, not during play. And it has to be reviewed after the first four games, when you have real data.

Point architecture is the foundational skill of everything else in this book. From the next chapter, we will apply it to each specific shot, starting with the most important shot: serve.

CHAPTER 5

Chapter 5 — Serve as a system

Serve is the only shot in tennis that you have complete control over. No one touches the ball before you, no one throws you off balance, no unexpected trajectory to react to. You have the ball in your hands, you have time, you have position. That's why serve is the biggest advantage in this discipline, and why it deserves more serious practice than anything else.

But most players practice serve like practicing a movement, not like building a system. They find ways to hit harder, then boast of aces in practice, where there is no score and no one returns the ball. During the match, that serve becomes a lucky shot.

The four dimensions must be controlled at the same time

A good serve at level 5.0 is controlled along four dimensions, and these four dimensions must be thought of together, not in turn.

The first dimension is speed. The second dimension is the falling point. The third dimension is spin. The fourth dimension is associative: this serve goes with which shot next.

Movement players only control the first dimension. They hit hard, and the drop is the result of hitting hard. 5.0 players do the opposite: they choose the drop point first, then choose the spin appropriate to that drop point, then decide how much speed is needed. Speed becomes the last variable, not the first.

This way of thinking has an immediate practical consequence: if you don't know where you want the ball to land, you can't choose serve at all. And if you can't choose, you'll play your most familiar shot, every time, all match.

Nine-cell map

Divide the service box into nine zones: three horizontally, including close to the center line, into the body, and out of bounds; three according to depth, including short, medium and deep. These nine regions are not equivalent.

The deep zone out of bounds is the most valuable zone at level 5.0, as it pulls the opponent out of the field and opens up a large amount of space for the next shot. The deep area is the most annoying area, because it does not allow the opponent to stretch their arms and does not allow them to use the entire boundary to return the ball. The area close to the center line is the rhythm zone, because it takes away the opponent's best return angle.

Three short zones are rarely used in real play, but are very useful as a change of pace. A well-timed short serve causes the opponent to step forward, and the player who has to step forward cannot attack.

It is important that you select the zone before tossing the ball. You don't have to hit and see where the ball falls. Select, then type, then check to see if it's correct.

The second serve is the measuring stick

What separates a 5.0 player from a 4.5 player isn't the aces on serve one. That's quality serve two.

Serve one is the shot you hit when you have nothing to lose. Serve two is the shot you play when you've lost once and can't lose again. It reveals exactly what you believe. The person who has serve two points to put the ball in will play each service game with an underlying fear, and that fear will carry over to the forehand on the third shot.

The goal at level 5.0 is very specific: serve two must be an intentional

shot, not an escape shot. That means it has to have a drop, it has to have spin, and it has to force the opponent to return the ball from an uncomfortable position. If your serve two just puts the ball in the middle of the box, you are giving your opponent the easiest shot of the game.

Serve topspin

Serve topspin, or kick serve, is the shot worth investing in for 5.0 players, because it solves many problems at the same time. The ball passes through the net high, so the margin of safety is large. The ball bounces high and spins sideways, so the opponent has to hit from shoulder level up, and for most players, that is the most uncomfortable area of the backhand.

It is especially useful in five situations. First, do serve two, because it's safest while still applying pressure. Second, do serve one on the backhand to set up the third shot. Third, when the opponent stands too close to baseline to return the ball early, because the ball will bounce over their head. Fourth, when there is a headwind, because the flat shot is difficult to control and the spin shot remains stable. Fifth, when you are tired, because it creates pressure without much force.

It is worth mentioning that the topspin shot does not need to be hit hard. It needs to be right. Beginners often try to hit hard and lose both spin and drop. Practice it at seventy percent force until the drop stabilizes, then increase.

Serve cut

Serve cutting creates a different kind of pressure. The ball goes low, cuts to the side, and pulls the opponent out of the field horizontally. It is especially effective when targeting a forehand from the right box, because the ball cuts out forcing the opponent to reach, and a forehand that is reached cannot be attacked.

The most memorable pair at this level is cutting out of bounds on the right box, then hitting the forehand into space. This is one of the simplest and most effective pairs in tennis, and it remains effective at all levels.

Serve the ball according to the score

The score determines serve's reasonable risk, and this is where the 5.0 player can create a free advantage.

At 40-0 or 40-15, use the serve you use least. Not to perform, but to buy information and plant a worry in the opponent's mind for the next game. If they have to prepare for a serve they haven't seen yet, they will stand back more, and your familiar serve is suddenly more effective.

At 30-30 or 40-30, use the serve you believe the most, in the area you believe the most. This is not the time to try.

At 0-30 or 15-40, minimize risk and increase spin. You need the ball to come in, and you need the next point to start with a return, not a double fault.

Read your opponent's serve

This skill pays dividends right in battle. There are four trustworthy signals, in order from most to least trustworthy.

Tossing the ball is the strongest signal. For right-handers, tossing the ball to the right is usually a cut shot, tossing the ball high and deviating to the left is usually a topspin shot, and tossing the ball straight and slightly forward is a flat shot. This is not an absolute rule, but true for most players.

Shoulders are the second signal. A heavily tilted shoulder is topspin, a flat shoulder is flat.

Foot posture is the third signal, and it often reveals direction. People who

stand too open often hit out of bounds.

History is the fourth signal, and more reliable than the other three if you can remember it. Most players have a fixed serve on the right and a fixed serve on the left, and they repeat it under pressure. If you remember that lesson, you know in advance where the ball will go at the important point.

Exercise

Serve only improves through purposeful practice, and with purpose means with measure. The following five exercises are enough to build a level 5.0 serve in about three months.

The first lesson is serving the ball into the zone. Place four targets in four zones, deliver twenty balls into each zone, record the entry rate. The target is over sixty percent for each region. This lesson teaches the falling point.

The second lesson is serving under pressure. You stand at 30-40 and must serve three consecutive numbers. If double fault, start again from the beginning. This lesson teaches that serve must be able to live in valuable conditions.

The third exercise is serve plus one. Deliver a set pair, then make a set third shot. Fifteen times for each pair. This lesson teaches that serve is not a stroke but the first stroke of a sequence.

The fourth exercise is to serve topspin continuously. Thirty consecutive balls go into the left box, count the odds. The target is over eighty percent. This lesson teaches the stability of serve two.

The fifth lesson is a battle simulation. Play real service games, not rallies, and have someone record every drop, every spin, and every result. Review later. This lesson teaches that facts are different from feelings.

If you only have time for one lesson, choose the fourth. Serve two stability

changes the entire way you play every service game, and it's the cheapest on this list.

CHAPTER 6

Chapter 6 — Owl return of serve

The return of serve shot is the most difficult shot in tennis. You must react to an object flying at a speed you don't choose, from a direction you can only guess, in less time than any other shot in the game. There is no other shot where you start at such a disadvantage.

But there's something that 5.0 players understand and 4.5 players don't: a time disadvantage is not the same as a strategic disadvantage. You have no control over incoming serve. You have complete control over what you do with it.

Neutralize first, attack later

The first and most important rule of the return of serve is: you are never as active as the server, but that doesn't mean you have to be passive. A good return is one that restores balance, not one that wins the point immediately.

This is where most players move wrong. They divide returns into two types: safe returns and point returns. But there is a third type that is the most important: returning the ball to get into balance. A return deep into the middle of the court, not fast, not dangerous, but deep enough that the server cannot advance, is a successful return. It doesn't appear on the scoreboard as a good point. It just makes the next point playable.

Only when serve arrives weak, or when you have read it, do you move to attack. Otherwise, be neutral.

Standing position

Where to stand when returning the ball is the first strategic decision, and it is often determined by habit, not by thought. Stand too close to baseline and you'll lack time with the fast serve. Standing too far away invites a short serve, and at the same time gives the server time to advance to net play.

The balance depends on three things: your opponent's speed serve one, the spin serve two, and the shot you intend to return. With serve topspin bouncing high, you need to stand further back so the ball falls into your comfort zone. With the low-cut serve, you need to stand closer so you don't have to reach down.

Something worth trying at level 5.0 is intentional position changes. Stand closer at one point to take time from the server, then step back at the next point. This change doesn't require any new technique, but it does create a question in the opponent's mind that wasn't there before.

Separation step and reading time

The split step is the most important movement technique of the return, and it is often practiced at the wrong time. The split step is not something to do once the ball has arrived. It is a movement done just as the server's racket begins to rise, so that your body is in a spring state at the exact moment the ball leaves the racket.

If the split step is too early, you've already dropped and are flat when the ball arrives. If it's too late, you're in the air and can't step. Both lead to the same result: one step late, and at this level one step is one hit.

The sequence of a good return has six parts, and the order is more important than the speed. Ready position, focus on the front half of the foot. Read direction from the toss and stance. The split step is right when the ball leaves the racket. The first step towards the ball, this step decides

everything else. Bring the racket back early, right on the move. Then the contact point is in front of the body, with the racket firm.

The fourth part is the most overlooked part. Players usually bring their racket back when they have reached the ball, while good players bring their racket back while running towards it. This difference saves about three-tenths of a second, and three-tenths of a second is the entire margin of safety of a return.

Four types of bounces

At level 5.0, you need at least four types of returns and know when to use which one. Four types are enough.

The first type is blocking the ball. The racket is almost stationary, the ball moves at its own speed. Use when serve is too fast to swing, or when you just need to get the ball deep into the field. This is the most consistent and most overlooked return.

The second type is silhouette cutting. The racket is open, the ball goes low and slow. Use when you want to break the rhythm, or when you want to advance net play immediately after the return. A slice is also the best return to a server and then advances.

The third type is swinging the ball. This is a full return, with topspin, used when serve comes at a height and speed that allows you to attack. This is the return of the ball for people with good technical background.

The fourth type is returning the ball net play. Not a swing but a strategic choice: return the ball and then move forward immediately. It's effective against serve two weak, and it's a return that makes the server think.

Return the ball according to the server's weakness

The best return is one that is planned based on the server's weaknesses, not one that is random. Before each match, you need to know two things: whether the server advances net play or not, and where their first shot after the weak serve is.

If they don't advance, return the ball deep into the middle and start the series. You are in the balance, and you can play your game.

If they advance, return the ball low to their feet. This is the most annoying return for an advancing player, because the low ball forces them to play volley from below, and volley from below is impossible to attack.

If they have a strong forehand and weak backhand, return the ball to the backhand, even if it means returning diagonally. If they have a strong backhand, do the opposite. It sounds obvious, but most players return the ball to the direction it came from, not the direction they wanted.

Return the ball according to the score

Like serve, the return must adjust to the score, and at the break point this adjustment is most important.

When you have a breakpoint, don't change anything. This is where movement players make the biggest mistake: they want to end the point with a good return, and they fail. Return the ball the same way you've been returning it all game, and put the server under pressure to do the hard thing.

When you are at 0-40 on your opponent's service game, increase the risk. You have nothing to lose in this game, and one offensive return can completely change the mood of the game.

Return the ball in doubles

The return in doubles is a strategically different shot, because there are three people on the court, not two, and the third person is standing right in front of you. You cannot return the ball like a single, because a normal cross-court return can be interrupted by someone standing at the net.

Four basic options. Cross-court returns are the safest, because the ball goes farthest from the person standing on the net. Paying down the line past someone standing at the net is high risk but high reward, used when you see them moving to cut the ball clearly. Returning to the person standing at the net is a confusing shot, because they have to make a split-second decision. And bounce the ball over their heads when they stand too close to the net.

The most important thing in doubles is not to return the ball well, but to return the ball so that the person standing at the net has to stand still. A low, diagonal return that goes over the net will make them lose confidence in the following points.

Exercises and measurements

Returns cannot be improved simply by hitting a series of balls. It needs its own exercise, because its conditions are very different from those of a regular ball series.

The first lesson is to return the ball with a goal. The person serving the ball is real, the person returning the ball focuses on the drop point. Add one point if it enters the target area, minus one point if it is broken or short. Thirty balls on each side.

The second lesson is returning the ball under pressure. The server is at 30-40, the returner must return cross-court deep eighty percent of the time. Twenty times, calculate the success rate.

The third lesson is to return the ball according to the prescribed lesson. The person serving the ball announces in advance where it will serve, and the person returning the ball must return it to the intended target. This exercise teaches early reaction and shot recognition, two skills that are more valuable than swing speed.

The fourth lesson is cutting the ball net play. Only applies to serve two. The returner cuts the ball and advances every time, then plays the point at the net.

Regarding measurement, don't measure by the rate of ball entering the field. That ratio is useful, but it doesn't tell you whether you're winning points or not. Measure it by the percentage of points you win on your second returns, and by the percentage of your returns that put you in an active position. Those two numbers are what changed the outcome of the match.

CHAPTER 7

Chapter 7 — Playing cards in a series of balls

5.0 players don't hit every ball. They play cards. A lesson is a series of deliberate strokes, repeated enough to become reflexive, and chosen according to the situation. The person with five skillful tricks beats the person with twenty good shots but no tricks.

This explains a familiar phenomenon: two people at the same level, one always feels like he is being cornered. It's not that the other person hits harder. The other person is playing a card that the first person has not yet recognized.

Three types of cards

All cards fall into one of three categories, and which one is used depends on the situation, not on preference.

The attack is intended to force the opponent to make a mistake or open up an opportunity to finish. Neutral cards aim to take a better position without risking it. Defensive cards aim to bring the situation back to balance and buy time.

The most common mistake 5.0 players make is using attacking cards in a neutral situation. They have a good forehand, so they use it all the time, even when they are in a bad position. As a result, they create losing points without the opponent having to do anything.

Cross-court cards

Cross-court is the foundation of tennis, and it is a foundation for geometric reasons, not because of habit. The ball passes diagonally across the lowest part of the net, over the longest distance. Those are two of the three factors that create the largest margin of safety in this subject.

This article is most effective in two cases. First, when you have a good forehand and your opponent has a weaker backhand, because you are hitting their forehand cross against their backhand. Second, when you need to build step by step to open a shot down the line, because cross-court is the cheapest way to pull the opponent out of position.

There is an important variation: playing cross-court does not mean playing on the same spot. It means keeping the diagonal direction but changing the depth, spin and cadence. Hit three balls deep, then one short. Hit three spins, then one flat. The opponent will get used to the direction, but not to the change.

Along the line is a penalty shot

The sideline shot is the most decisive attack in tennis, and also the riskiest. The ball passes higher over the net, over a shorter distance, with a much smaller margin of safety. That's why it has to be a penalty shot, not a pick shot.

The penalty shot means you only play along the line when your opponent has been dragged off the field, or when they are in a weak position and cannot reach you. If you hit the touchline while they're still in the middle of the field, you're not punishing anyone; you're just giving them an easy shot because the ball goes right where they're standing.

The most common mistake is hitting along the line too early in the series. The player feels the ball arrives beautifully, feels confident, and changes direction. But the downfield shot is only effective when it is the result of three previous crosscourt shots, not when it is the second shot of the series.

Forehand reverse cross

For right-handers, this exercise involves stepping around to the left to hit the opponent's forehand into the backhand. The ball goes diagonally, from your left half of the court to their left, and the angle created is very annoying because it forces the opponent to hit the backhand from out of bounds.

This is the signature hand of many 5.0 players, and the reason is very practical: it allows you to use your strongest shot on your opponent's weakest shot, over and over again. No hand has a higher advantage rate than that in movement tennis.

To build this article, you need three steps. Keep the series neutral with a diagonal backhand, hitting it deep enough to keep your opponent from attacking. When the ball comes fast enough and low enough, step around to the left with your right foot. Then play a cross forehand to their backhand.

The second step is the decisive step and also the most laborious step. If you step around but the ball comes too high or too fast, you will hit your forehand from a bad position, and that shot is much worse than a normal backhand. This exercise is only worth using when the ball comes to the right conditions.

Change direction

Changing direction is the most powerful surprise skill in tennis, and it is also the most abused skill. The opponent is waiting for the ball to cross, you hit along the line. The opponent is waiting for the ball along the sideline, you hit diagonally. The surprise has real value.

But timing is everything. Changing direction too soon, when you haven't established your position, is just a risky shot with no reward. Changing direction too late, when the opponent has read the intention, the surprise

is gone. The right time is when the opponent has started to move in the direction of the old ball.

There is a readable sign: when the opponent starts to step prematurely on one side, they are committed. That's when the change of direction is most valuable, because you're not just hitting the ball somewhere else, you're hitting the ball where they just left it.

Short ball

Short ball is the card with the highest advantage rate in movement tennis, because it appears frequently and most players do not handle it well. There are four steps, and the first step is the decisive step.

Recognize that the ball is short as soon as the opponent makes contact, not when the ball has passed the net. This is a reading skill, and it saves about half a second, which is the entire difference between a good net play and a rushed net play.

Step forward immediately, in short steps, not one long step. Long steps make you lose your balance right when you need to hit.

Hit the shot net play with intention: along the border or narrowly across the court. Don't hit the middle, because hitting the middle gives your opponent the opportunity to hit you from a comfortable position.

Then choose: net play, or stop and step aside to wait for the blow to pass. This choice depends on the quality of your net play shot. net play shot deep into the corner and up. The short net play shot to the middle stays.

The most classic move at level 5.0 is: short ball, net play down the line, forward, then ending with volley or overhead smash. Four steps, and it still works fifty years later because it's geometrically correct.

From defense to attack

Switching from defense to offense is the most refined skill in this chapter, and it's one that 5.0 players often mess up because of impatience. When on the defensive, the goal is not to attack immediately. The goal is to survive and wait for an opportunity.

The principle is very simple and very difficult to do: when you play, you buy time. When neutral, set up position. When attacked, finished. Do not jump from defense to attack in one shot. That's a recipe for self-made error.

A ball that's high, deep, with lots of spin, into the middle of the court, not a cowardly shot. It's a shot that buys you time to get back into position, and during that time, your opponent has to deal with a difficult ball. This shot wins more points than the winner you intended to hit from the defensive position.

Five lessons are enough

You don't need twenty cards. Five skilled cards are enough to play at any level 5.0, as long as you know when to use which card.

Cross-court post to build. Post along the sidelines to punish. Reverse cross forehand to exploit weak backhand. Short ball to switch from playing behind the line to playing at the net. And post the ball high and deep to defend when losing position.

These five cards cover almost all situations in a real match. The other thing is to practice them to the point where you don't have to think, so that when the pressure comes, you make the right choice without wasting time.

Watch the video again

You cannot recognize your own cards while playing. This is not advice but a limitation of perception: during play, you only see the ball and a very small part of the field. Only when you watch it again will you see what you're actually playing.

When reviewing, look for four things. Which cards do you actually use, not which cards you think you use? Which cards bring points? Which article brings nothing? And which cards your opponents use to destroy you, because those are the cards you need to learn how to counter.

Fifteen minutes of video is worth about two hours of regular practice, because it gives you information the practice court never gives: what you look like from the other side of the net.

CHAPTER 8

Chapter 8 — Battlefield on the grid

The net is what best separates a well-rounded 5.0 player from one who only hits well from baseline. It's not because volley is more difficult than the forehand. But because net play is a commitment: you give up space behind you in exchange for time, and if that commitment is made at the right time, it shortens every match point.

At level 5.0, someone who doesn't know net play can still win matches against someone who also doesn't know net play. But they will lose consistently to the knower, because the knower has an extra way to finish the point that they don't have.

When should you go up?

Net play is not always a good decision, and this is where players move in opposite directions. People who are afraid of the net never go up, even when there is a clear short ball. He likes to net up after every shot, including shots from baseline, and gets hit over and over again.

There are four situations where net play is correct. When you've just hit a shot deep into the corner and your opponent is out of bounds. When your opponent has just returned a short shot and you have entered the court. When you have just served topspin and the return is weak. And when the opponent is so tired that their passing shots no longer have enough depth.

Outside of those four situations, stay behind. Not because you lack courage, but because net play from a neutral position is a bad trade: you trade the entire backfield for an opportunity that your opponent can deny with a high ball.

Owl net play decides everything

The net play shot is the shot that determines the success or failure of the entire ball phase on the net. A poor net play shot leaves you easily overtaken. A good net play makes your first volley a shot from strong position.

There are four principles, and they often conflict with instinct.

Prioritize along the sidelines rather than across the field. It sounds counterintuitive to what you learned about safe margins, but the reason is clear: if you net play and hit cross-court, the ball goes towards where your opponent is standing, and they have the entire margin to hit past you. If you play down the line, you force them to play past you from a much narrower angle.

Depth is more important than angle. A net play deep into the middle of the court is better than a short net play into the corner. Short shots give your opponent time and give them a comfortable shot. The worm took both.

Swirl is better than flat. Spinning balls have a larger margin of safety and bounce higher, making it more difficult to hit the opponent's body. A flat ball goes fast but is low, and a low ball is the easiest ball to hit over the body.

And after hitting, take a split step and stop. This is the most overlooked part. The player plays net play and then continues running, and reaches the net in a moving position, unable to change direction for the first volley.

Volley is a punch, not a swing

Volley is not a miniature forehand. It is a different movement in nature: the racket travels a short distance, the wrists are firm, and the ball is caught in front of the body. volley beginners often swing the racket like a forehand, and the result is that the ball goes long, or goes into the net, or both.

Three mechanical elements are needed before talking about tactics. First, the racket starts higher than the ball and goes down a bit, not from back to front. Second, keep your wrists firm, not loose. Third, the point of contact is in front, and you must see your racket touching the ball.

Once the mechanics are stable, the new tactics make sense. And volley's strategy is simple: hit the gap, prioritize hitting deep, and don't try to finish with volley first. The first Volley is the putt. The second shot is the final shot.

Bump on the head

The overhead smash is the shot that ends the point when the opponent hits the ball high. And this is where a 5.0 player can be exploited throughout the match if their smash is unreliable: the opponent will hit the ball repeatedly, not to win the point, but to try.

Four elements of a good smash. Follow the ball early with your eyes, as soon as it leaves your opponent's racket, not when it has reached the top. Move sideways in small steps to get the ball into the right position above your head, instead of jogging backward. Put the racket in preparation position early. Then accelerate past the ball and aim for space.

It's worth emphasizing: the smash doesn't require much force. It needs a drop point. One hit in the corner, seventy percent force, wins the point. A full-force smash into the middle of the field is not possible, because the opponent still has a chance.

Where to stand on the net

Once at the net, position determines more than the shot. If you stand too close to the net, the ball will fly over your head. If you stand too far away, a low shadow will pass over you.

A reasonable distance is about two to two and a half meters from the net,

and the horizontal position should be in the middle of the corner where the opponent can hit, not in the middle of the court. This is a subtle but important difference: the middle of the field and the middle of the corner are not one point.

After each volley, return to that position. Don't stand still. The focus is always forward, and always ready to step away.

When opponent net play

When your opponent net play, you have four options, and choosing the correct one of these four is a complete tactical skill.

The over body shot is the default choice, and it's most effective when you hit low over the far side. The high ball is an option to buy time and to punish someone who stands too close to the net. The body shot is a confusing choice, and it's much more effective than it's supposed to be. The small drop shot is an option when the opponent is very far away from the net and you are already inside the court.

A common mistake is to choose an over-the-top shot every time. If you always hit people, your opponent just needs to stand in the right place. If you have a high ball and a shot to the body, they have to prepare for three possibilities instead of one.

The ball is like a weapon

The high ball is not the shot of a quitter. At level 5.0, a good loft shot is a sophisticated tactical shot, as it attacks the very weak point of net play: the space behind.

A good loft shot has three characteristics. It's high enough that opponents can't reach it. It's deep enough that they can't hit the smash from the infield. And it is played on the side that is not available, usually the backhand side if that person has a weak backhand smash.

The topspin high ball is even better than the flat high ball, because the spin ball drops faster at the end of its flight, allowing you to hit it higher over your opponent's head and still enter the court.

Sell volley

The volley semi occurs when the ball comes right at your feet and you must hit it as soon as it hits the court. No time to prepare, no time to choose. This is a rescue shot, and its sole purpose is to get the ball back into the field, deep, and out of the situation.

It is important not to try to attack with a short volley. That's the fastest way to make mistakes. Take the ball high, deep, to the middle. Then return to your position and wait for a better opportunity. The sell volley saves a point; it doesn't win by one point.

Exercise

Four exercises are enough to build a net play at level 5.0.

The first song is the song moving forward. A person standing at baseline serves the ball, the practitioner hits net play, moves forward, hits volley first, then hits an overhead shot. Twenty times. This exercise connects three skills into a chain, and the new chain is what you use in battle.

The second exercise is the cutting exercise. In a doubles situation, the person standing at the net practices when to move and cut the ball. Thirty times, record the success rate. This lesson teaches timing, something that cannot be learned by hitting the ball.

The third card is the passing card. One person is at baseline, one person is at the grid. The person in baseline must pass the player in three ways: diagonal, down the line and high ball, in random order. This lesson teaches both sides at the same time.

The fourth hand is a melee at the net. Two people are on the net, lightly

hitting the ball back and forth, whoever gets to ten points first wins. This exercise builds ball feel, drop and reflexes, and it's the most fun exercise on the list.

The net is a weapon, not a risk. When you get up at the right time, hit the net play correctly, place the volley correctly, and smash the ball with confidence, you've got the trinity of a play that most opponents at this level have no answer for.

CHAPTER 9

Chapter 9 — Psychology under pressure

At level 5.0, two people entering the field usually have almost equivalent technique and almost equal physical strength. The match is therefore not decided by which shot is better, but by who maintains the decisive quality when the points start to count.

That's good news and bad news. The bad news is that you can't win by playing better. The good news is that competitive mentality is a skill, not a personality, and skills can be learned.

Pressure is a condition, not an obstacle

The wrong question is how not to feel pressured. No one competing at this level doesn't feel the pressure, and those who seem the calmest are often feeling it the most. The right question is how to still play well while feeling pressured.

This sounds like a pun, but it changes behavior. If the goal is to eliminate pressure, you will consider every fast heartbeat a failure, and you will begin to avoid situations that cause it, that is, avoiding important points, that is, playing not to lose. If the goal is to play well under pressure, you can start where you are.

Rituals between points

Point-to-point etiquette is the most powerful psychological tool in tennis, and it's powerful because it's incredibly simple. It's a fixed sequence of actions you take between every point, constant, both when you're winning and when you're losing.

A sufficient ritual has four parts. Turn away from the net and walk backwards baseline. Exhale a breath longer than the inhale. Adjust the

racket strings or wipe your hands, in one fixed motion. Then turn around, look at where you will serve or return the ball, and choose a plan for the destination.

The value of the ritual does not lie in the movements. What it does is it gives you a structured period of time where you don't have to think about the last point. The last point is finished. Ritual is the door that closes it.

It is important that the protocol is the same at every score. If you change the ritual at the breakpoint, you are telling yourself that this point is different, and that is the message that creates choking.

Twenty seconds after a point loss

The point lost at breakpoint or set point is the point with the greatest psychological value in the match. And what determines the next three to five points is not the shot you missed. It's what you do in the next twenty seconds.

Bad reactions have a familiar list: shaking your head, banging your racket, saying negative things to yourself, looking up at the sky, looking at the audience. Each of these actions has the same effect: it extends the previous point into the next.

Good responses also have a list, and it's shorter. Accept quickly, in about two seconds, not two minutes. Do the ritual. Choose a specific intention for your destination. Then play.

It is worth mentioning that the ability to recover quickly after a loss is a skill that can be practiced, and the way to practice it is not on the playing field. The practice is that during practice, when you miss a shot, perform the ritual immediately and play the next point as if it were nothing. Do it two hundred times. Then in the game, you will have that reflex.

Choking

Choking is the psychological phenomenon of collapsing under pressure, and its mechanism is very specific: you start thinking about how to execute the movement instead of thinking about where the ball will go. Automatic skills are replaced by conscious skills, and conscious skills are slower, clumsier, and more fragile.

The deeper cause is a perception gap: you think this situation is more important than it actually is. And this is where a truism of the rules of competition comes in handy: each point is worth exactly one point. Breakpoint and 0-0 are the same in terms of scoring. You don't win a match by winning a crucial point; you win by winning more points.

If you find yourself starting to think about the movement, shift your attention to the goal. Not “how to swing the racket”, but “where the ball will land”. A specific target, in a specific area, large enough to hit. This is the only way to regain control from the conscious part that is interfering too deeply.

Psychological momentum

Psychological momentum in tennis is a psychological reality, not a physical reality. Nothing in the rules of the game changes when a player wins three points in a row. What changes is the feeling of both people, and the feeling changes the decision.

When you have momentum, the rule is not to break it. Play a little more firmly, not more recklessly. Serve the ball at a slightly faster rhythm, within the limits of the rules. Stick with what's working, even when you start to feel like trying something new. The urge to try something new while you're winning is one of the most common ways to lose momentum.

When you are losing momentum, the rule is to disrupt your opponent's rhythm. Use the towel a little longer. Toss the ball more times before

serving. Change your cards. Not to delay, but to insert a period of time between two points that the opponent does not expect. Momentum is a continuum; you only need to interrupt it once.

Emotions are not the enemy

Excitement, frustration, anxiety, and anger are all normal reactions of a person who is trying. The problem is not having emotions. The point is to let your emotions choose your shots for you.

A useful distinction: emotions are allowed to be present, but not allowed to have a seat in the decision room. You can feel angry and still choose the shot with the highest success rate. Those two things are not mutually exclusive, and a good player is one who can separate them.

While winning

The psychology of winning also needs management, and it is more overlooked than the psychology of losing. After winning the first set, the 5.0 player tends to relax, and the opponent tends to speed up. The result is comebacks where the winner of the first set doesn't understand why they lost.

The principle is simple: the match is not over until the last point is over, and the process cannot be changed by the score. Maintain the same ritual, maintain the same level of concentration, maintain the same preparation for each point. Not because you need to try harder, but because you need to keep what's working.

When you lose a match

Losing is an inevitable part of this sport, and how you handle a loss determines your rate of progress more than how you handle a win. But only if you review it properly.

Four questions, and should be answered in writing within twenty-four

hours. Is my strategy suitable for this opponent? The points I lost were mainly due to technique or decisions. How my psychology affects important points. And what would I do differently if I played it again?

What should be avoided is turning these four questions into four accusations. The goal is to learn, not to behave yourself. You don't need to feel bad to see what you need to fix.

Practice outside

The competitive mentality is not developed just by competing. There are four yard jobs that have real value, and they don't require much.

Visualize ten minutes a day. Not dreaming about winning, but specifically visualizing a difficult situation and how you would handle it: you are at breakpoint, you choose serve topspin on your backhand, you see the ball go, you see the return, you see yourself hitting the third shot. Visualization with details is valuable; General visualization does not.

Breathe for five minutes every morning, focusing only on your breathing. This is not to relax, but to practice the ability to return to the present after being distracted. That's exactly the skill you need between two points.

Prepare mentally fifteen minutes before the match: review the plan, review two key situations, and choose an idea for the first point.

And take notes after the match, but take notes about psychology, not just tactics. What do you feel about 4-4. What do you think after losing the break? What do you do twenty seconds after your biggest loss. Those three lines are worth more than a page of statistics.

Psychology is a skill, not a personality. Practice it like practicing your forehand: systematically, with purpose, and with measure. People who can do that at level 5.0 will win matches that people who only practice technique cannot win.

CHAPTER 10

Chapter 10 — Doubles

Doubles at level 5.0 is a different subject. The field is smaller but there are four people, the net dominates, and every decision has to take into account another person standing next to you. Good singles players often lose doubles matches to couples who are weaker in individual technique but understand how to play together.

That's not a paradox. That's because doubles has its own set of variables, and that set of variables is largely absent from singles.

Not singles plus one person

Doubles is not two singles matches taking place at the same time. It is a team sport with its own dynamics, and the three things that create that momentum are formation, positioning and communication.

This has an immediate practical consequence: the best shot in singles is often not the best shot in doubles. A strong cross-court forehand in singles is a weapon. In doubles, it is usually a shot to the exact spot where the person standing at the net is waiting.

Who keeps which part?

The principle of division of responsibility in doubles is very simple and very often violated: the person standing on the net is responsible for the vertical line, the person at baseline is responsible for the diagonal line.

The reason is geometry. The person on the net is closer to the touchline, so they have time to reach it. People in baseline live further away, so they have to take care of a larger yard.

When both players chase the same ball, it is an almost certain loss, because the remaining court is empty. And when both think the other will

take it, that's also a losing point. The convention must be clear before the ball arrives, not while it is in flight.

Signals and communication

Communication between two people in a couple is not polite. It is tactical, and it can be measured in points.

Before each point, the couple needs to agree on three things, and they need to agree with signals, not words, because the opponent can also hear. Will you cut the ball or stand still? You will stand at formation usually or formation the letter I. And where will serve go.

The simplest signal is the hands behind your back signal. Fist means standing still. Open hand means cutting the ball. One finger means pretending to cut the ball. Three signals are enough, and they must be kept secret by giving them behind your back.

What's more important than the signal is consistency. If you signal to cut the ball and don't cut it, the person next to you will lose confidence in the signal, and the couple will lose their strongest tactical tool.

Cut the ball

Slicing is the movement of a person standing on the net moving horizontally to catch the opponent's diagonal return. This is the game-changing shot of a double point, as it turns an opponent's safe return into a lost point.

But cutting the ball is only effective when done at the right time. If you move too early, your opponent sees it and changes direction. If it's too late, you won't make it on time. The right moment is when the returner has already started swinging the racket and can no longer change his mind.

There is an important rule involved: after cutting the ball, the person who just cut must continue to move to the other side, and the other person

must change to the side that was just vacated. If you don't change, you've just created a big gap right where your opponent will hit.

Return the ball in doubles

The return in doubles must take into account three people on the court, not two. The person standing at the net on the opponent's side is always a threat, and every return shot passes through their reach.

The default choice is deep cross pay. It travels farthest from the person on the net, over the lowest part of the net, and over the longest distance. This is the return with the highest success rate, and in doubles, success rate is more important than beauty.

Paying along the line should only be used when you clearly see the person on the net moving to cut the ball. At that time, the line along the border was the one they had just vacated. Returning to the person standing at the net is a confusing option, and it's much more effective than it's supposed to be. High ball is an option when they stand too close to the net.

High ball in doubles

The bouncy ball is much more important in doubles than in singles, simply because there are two people standing at the net instead of one, so there is more space behind to hit.

The ball shot topspin over the slicing player's head is one of the shots with the highest percentage advantage at level 5.0. The setup is very specific: wait for the person on the net to lean diagonally, then hit the ball high and spin past the spot they just left. The other person has to run from the other side of the field, and often can't make it in time.

The server in doubles

In doubles, serve is more than just a starting shot. It is a tool to enable the person standing next to you to cut the ball, and for yourself to advance net play.

Therefore, the best serve in doubles is often not the strongest shot. It is a shot with a falling point that causes the return to go diagonally, that is, into the cutting range of the person standing next to you. A serve out of bounds does that. A serve in the middle does not.

After serving, the server steps forward and steps in the middle of the court, while the person standing next to him gets ready to cut the ball. Both teams try to capture the net, and the team that gets there first and stands firmer usually wins the series.

Change formation mid-game

Changing formation mid-game is a powerful tactical tool, and it's used far less than it's worth. If your opponent is returning the ball too well down the line, try formation the I, with the person at the net standing in the middle, crouching low. If you're getting too many high balls, bring both of you down to baseline and play from below.

It is important that changes are announced in advance, and that they are implemented together. One person switching formation without the other changing is the fastest way to lose three points in a row.

Mixed doubles

Mixed doubles adds another layer of complexity, and that layer is often mishandled in both ways: either ignoring it, or turning it into a psychological issue.

The strategy is actually very simple: the opponent will target the weaker player, and in most pairs it is the woman, not because of poor technique

but because the speed and power of the serve is usually lower. The response is not to hide, but to reduce the level of exploitation: the woman needs to have serve and a good enough return to not create an obvious weakness, and the man needs to slice more aggressively to finish the point quickly.

What you shouldn't do is let a man cover the yard. A pair in which one person runs every ball will lose to a pair in which both keep their share, because the doubles court is too wide for one person to cover it all.

Important point

At break point or set point, doubles need to communicate more clearly than usual, and need to be shorter than usual. A sentence, not a lecture.

“Give it to the T, I'll cut it.” “Both retreat, attack deep.” “The ball went over the head of the person on the right.” Three sentences like that, stating the point first, are enough. No need for analysis, no need for lengthy encouragement. The important point is when the fewest words and the most clarity are needed.

The four pillars of doubles at level 5.0 are net possession, effective communication, strategic cutting, and counter-attacking high balls. None of these pillars is a hit. It's all about decisions.

CHAPTER 11

Chapter 11 — Stamina and recovery

Fitness in tennis is not the ability to run for a long time. It is the ability to maintain the same quality of decisions and technical quality from start to finish, even when the match is over two hours long and it has long been hot.

This is a highly consequential distinction, because it means that the best runner on the field is not necessarily the most durable person in the game. The most durable person is the one who manages energy best.

How does tennis consume energy?

Tennis is an intermittent sport. Each point lasts about five to ten seconds at high intensity, then you have about twenty to twenty-five seconds of rest. This cycle repeats hundreds of times in a match.

Three energy systems are involved, and each system takes on a different part. The phosphocreatine system provides energy for short, vigorous efforts, such as first steps and jumps. The glycolytic system takes care of the long points. And the aerobic system is responsible for the rest between points, which means it determines how quickly you recover.

This explains a familiar phenomenon: many players are not out of breath in one point, but out of breath throughout the whole match. Their problem is not in the first or second generation. It is in the third system, the system that determines what percentage you recover between two points.

Twenty seconds between points

The twenty seconds between points is the most important recovery time in a match, and it's almost universally misused. Players often stand still, or worse, slow down and stop, or worst, use that time to think about the point

they just lost.

Three correct things, in order. Walk, slowly but continuously, because walking helps reduce heart rate faster than standing still. Breathe deeply and slowly, especially exhaling longer than inhaling. And turn your attention to the next point, not the last one.

The third task is the most difficult and also the most valuable, because it restores both physical and mental health at the same time.

Ninety seconds of field change

The exchange break is ninety seconds, and this is the most valuable time in the entire match. It's long enough to change something, and short enough to not give you a chance to think too much.

One procedure suffices: sit down. Drink water, and drink electrolytes if the match is long. Wipe your face and neck with a wet towel if it's hot. Then spend the last thirty seconds deciding on just one thing that needs to change in the next two games.

One thing, not five. Players often leave their seats with a list, and the list is not actionable. A specific thing is executable, and can be tested after two games.

When tired: simplify

When tired, the first decision is not to try harder. The first decision was to simplify the match. Don't try complicated cards, don't take risky shots, don't change direction just for the sake of changing.

Three rules when tired: play for a high success rate, prioritize depth over drops, and prioritize patience over attack. It sounds like playing not to lose, and it is. When tired, the goal is to bring the match to a state where the opponent has to do the difficult thing first.

There are four signs of fatigue that you can spot for yourself before anyone else does. The ball went into the net more than usual. Depth reduced. You reach the ball half a step slower. And the number of missed serves increased. When you see two of these four signs, switch to a frugal game plan immediately, don't wait until you see all four.

The right kind of physical strength

Fitness for tennis is not about running a marathon. A person who runs twenty kilometers may be out of breath in the third set, because tennis does not require continuous endurance but rather the ability to repeat short efforts.

Five qualities to practice. The ability to run short sprints, from five to fifteen meters, as that is the distance of nearly every stroke in tennis. Ability to quickly change direction to either side. Upper body strength, for serve and smash. Mid-body stability, for every shot. And a good enough aerobic base to recover quickly between points.

It is worth noting that the first four qualities are all short exercises, not long exercises. Thirty minutes, three times a week, is enough to make a noticeable difference within two months.

Eat and drink

Eating strategies in tennis directly affect decision-making ability, not just strength. This is something few movement players know, and it explains many bad third sets.

Two to three hours before the game, a starch-based meal. During the match, drink electrolyte water every time you change courts, and eat a banana or a gel pack if the match lasts more than an hour and a half. After the match, within thirty minutes, eat protein and starch to recover.

The biggest taboo is going into the third set on an empty stomach. When

blood sugar drops, the first thing lost is not strength but the ability to make the right choices. And at level 5.0, choosing wrong means losing.

Trauma room

An injury can disrupt your training and competition plans for months, so injury prevention is a strategic priority, not a sideline.

The three most common injuries at this level and how to prevent them. Elbow pain, often from holding the racket too tightly and from mistimed one-handed backhands; The way to prevent this is to exercise your wrist and check your grip strength. Shoulder pain, often coming from the delivery mechanics; The way to prevent it is to increase the strength of the shoulder rotator muscle group and review the serving technique. Knee pain, often coming from an imbalance between the front and back thigh muscles; The way to prevent this is to balance the two muscle groups and check the legs.

Recover off the field

Your ability to withstand a training load is determined by what you do off the field, not on the field.

Sleep is an absolute priority, and for athletes, eight hours is the minimum, not the ideal. Cold therapy, in the form of cold baths or ice baths, after heavy training sessions. Stretch fifteen to twenty minutes after your workout session. Foam roll daily, and get a professional massage once or twice a month. And eat within thirty minutes of finishing your workout session.

None of the items on this list require expensive equipment. They only require regularity, and regularity is the hardest thing.

Long battle

Matches longer than two hours require a unique strategy, both physically and mentally, and that strategy starts with breaking down.

Don't think about the whole match. Think about the current game. This is not a motivational statement; it's a cognitive management technique, because a long bout is an amount of work that no one can fully visualize while tired.

And read the competition. If you see that they are more tired than you, shorten the point and increase the tempo, because they need time to recover and you should not give it to them. If you're more tired than they are, extend the series, hit the ball high and deep, and let them work. In both cases, what you are doing is not hitting the ball better. You're changing the match type to fit the resources you have.

It's hot

Competing in the heat is a unique challenge, and it's often handled by trying harder, when the right way is to do less.

Shorten the points by attacking earlier, as long shots in the heat are a cost you don't need to pay. Use wet wipes and electrolyte drinks at every change of pitch. Serve faster, don't toss the ball too many times. And choose low-risk shots, because errors made when you're tired are the most expensive errors.

Smart fitness is a combination of three things: physical fitness, energy management, and tactical adjustments when tired. The person with less physical strength but good management will beat the person with better physical strength but poor management. This is one of the truest statements in this book, and it is good news for most of us.

CHAPTER 12

Chapter 12 — Legs

If I had to pick one skill that separates a 5.0 player from a 4.5 player, I wouldn't choose the forehand. I will choose the legs. Not because it's prettier, but because it's what determines whether every other skill can be used or not.

Every shot starts with the feet. If you're not in the right position to make contact with the ball, your best technique is useless. And the opposite is also true: a person with good footwork but average technique will hit more consistently than a person with good technique but always arrives at the ball half a step late.

What is a good set of feet?

There is a common misconception: good legs mean running a lot. Incorrect. Good footwork means being in the right place, at the right time, with the least amount of effort. The person who runs the most on the field is usually the person who is compensating for poor footwork.

Three signs of good footwork. The contact point is always in front of the body. The body is balanced at the moment of contact. And power is transmitted from the feet to the racket, instead of just from the hands.

The third sign is the least noticed and also the most important. When you hit the ball with just your hands, the ball moves but your body is not involved, and the shot becomes unstable under pressure. As the force travels from the legs through the hips through the shoulders, the stroke becomes lighter and more durable.

Separation step

The split step is a small two-legged jump, and it is the beginning of every movement in tennis. Its use is not to create momentum, but to release the spirit nervous system so that the body can react in any direction.

Timing is everything. The split step must fall at the moment the opponent makes contact with the ball, not when the ball has passed the net. If it's too early, you'll finish landing and have to stand and wait, losing your spring state. If it's too late, you're in the air when the ball has already gone, and you land in a slow position.

How to practice this moment without a ball. Stand in front of someone hitting the ball, and just practice stepping, not hitting. Do it thirty times. The body will learn the rhythm, and that rhythm will carry over into the game without thinking.

First step

The first step is the most important step in the entire movement sequence, and it is also the step most practiced wrongly. The first step should be a diagonal step, not a side step.

The reason is very practical: diagonal steps cover almost twice the distance of horizontal steps with the same number of steps. In a sport where time is the scarcest resource, it makes the difference between a comfortable shot and a right shot.

Side stepping should only be used when you are close to the ball and only need to make a slight adjustment. For all balls that need to be moved, step diagonally first.

When practicing, practice the direction of the first step, not the speed of the following steps. Players often practice running fast, while their problem is the first step in the wrong direction or in the wrong style.

Open posture and neutral posture

There are two true postures, and they serve two different purposes.

Open position is the position of the front leg turned out, often used in the ball series from baseline. It allows for rotation, generates more power from the hips, and allows for a quicker recovery since you don't have to step back.

Neutral position is the position with both feet parallel to the net, used for net play and volley shots. It allows you to move forward immediately after hitting, which the open position does not allow.

A common mistake is to use the same stance for every shot. Users who take an open stance all the time will slow down when net play. Someone who uses a neutral stance at all times will lack power in the series.

Recovery location

After each shot, you must recover. But where to return is the important question, and the answer is not in the middle of the field.

The correct recovery position is the center of where the ball is likely to go next, not the geometric center of the field. If you have just played cross-court, your opponent has two options: cross or down the line, and the probability is in favor of cross. So you heal more towards the diagonal, not towards the middle.

The recovery speed depends on the quality of your shot. The ball is deep and heavy giving you plenty of leeway. Short and light balls do not, and in that case the better option is often to advance net play rather than trying to return.

Wide shadow

When you have to run out of bounds to hit, the technique changes and you need to know what you are changing. The posture changes to open. Power comes from turning instead of stepping forward. And the default goal is to play cross-court, because that's the safest line from that position.

The running forehand is one of the most beautiful shots in tennis, and it's also one of the most abused. You should only hit when all three conditions are true: contact is still good even while running, you are not overextended, and the shot actually finishes the point. If one of the three is missing, play cross-court and continue playing.

When tired

It's normal for the legs to deteriorate when tired, and it degrades in a fairly predictable order: the split step disappears first, then the diagonal step, then the return step. You will start hitting the ball in a stationary position.

The thing to do is not to try to run more. What needs to be done is to adjust expectations and simplify the shot: choose a less risky target, accept more neutral cross shots, and use a deep high ball to buy recovery time.

There is a very useful way to practice: put leg exercises at the end of the workout, when you are tired. Those are the conditions you'll encounter in battle, and practicing in those conditions is more valuable than practicing when you're still fit.

Exercise

The vacuum set is improved by polishing alone. Need separate exercises, and the following four exercises are enough.

Spider: run from the middle of the field to six positions, touch the mark,

return. Calculate the time, and compare with yourself two weeks ago. This article builds the ability to change direction.

Figure eight exercise: move in a figure eight around two landmarks, simulating the movement in a series of balls. This song builds a sense of angle and rhythm.

Off-ball: ten minutes a day, moving and hitting the ball mentally for every shot: forehand, backhand, net play, volley. This article builds a motion model without a yard.

Ladder exercise: use a flexible ladder with in, out, horizontal and diagonal steps, fifteen minutes three times a week. This article builds the step frequency, which determines the adjustment speed.

Watch the video again

You can't see your feet while you're playing. This is a cognitive limitation, not a lack of effort. Only when you watch it again will you see what you're really doing.

Four things to check out in the video. Time of separation: before, right, or after the opponent makes contact with the ball. Type of first step: diagonal or horizontal. Return path: straightest or circular. And the posture at the point of contact: relaxed or hurried.

These four questions often reveal a single systematic error, and correcting one systematic error is more valuable than correcting ten individual shots. That's why the footwork is worth investing more time in than any other shot at level 5.0.

CHAPTER 13

Chapter 13 — Cut the ball and cut it into small pieces

At level 5.0, the opponent handles the ball topspin from baseline very well. They have hit thousands of balls like that, and their bodies know what to do before they can think. That's why the two shots in this chapter have unusually high values: they're not stronger, they're different.

Cutting and cutting the ball creates a type of ball that opponents have not yet practiced. The ball bounces lower, slower, follows a different trajectory. And when a person has to switch to another type of ball, they have to think. It is the moment of thinking that is where the error appears.

Why are these two shots important?

There is a clear strategic reason. A 5.0 player can hit twenty cross-court topspin shots in a row without failing, because it's a movement pattern they've repeated countless times. But if the twenty-first shot is a low cut shot, they have to open the racket, lower their center of gravity, and adjust their timing. Four things at once, in one fell swoop.

That's the entire value of these two shots. They don't need to win points directly. They need to break the automaticity.

Backhand cutting: technique

The racket face is open, the racket goes from high to low, brushes over the bottom of the ball, and ends forward and slightly up. Four factors, and any wrong factor will result in a shot that is different from the intended one.

If the racket surface is closed, the ball will go into the net or fly. If the racket goes sideways instead of from high down, the ball will be flat and

lose its change-of-rhythm effect. If you brush the ball too little, it will float and become an easy ball to hit. If the end is too short, the ball will be short and invite the opponent to attack.

It is worth mentioning that cutting the ball is not a defensive shot. It can be an offensive shot, a neutral shot, or a net play shot, depending on the depth and speed. A low, deep slice to the backhand is an attack, as it forces the opponent to play from below and not be able to attack.

Small cut: technical

The chop is the most delicate shot in this chapter, and it is delicate for a very specific reason: the preparation must be identical to the preparation of the chop. If your opponent reads your intentions before you make contact, the drop shot becomes an easy ball to hit.

After preparing like cutting the ball, the difference is that the racket does not rub over the ball but leaves the racket surface dead under the ball, absorbing force instead of creating force. The ball passes over the net and lands short, usually within about one to two meters behind the net.

This is not a shot that requires dexterous hand skills. It requires timing and concealment. The player who is good at making small bets is not the one with the most skillful hands, but the one who chooses at the right time.

When using, discard into small pieces

The best construction for a small drop is to create contrast in depth. Hit a few deep, heavy, spinning balls, causing your opponent to retreat baseline. Then when a short ball comes, drop it small.

It's the contrast that creates the effect, not the drop itself. If you drop small in a series of balls and your opponent is standing in the field, they only need a few steps to come. If they are behind baseline and have just

retreated, the distance is fifteen meters instead of four.

Three other situations are also worth using. When the opponent tends to retreat deeply after each blow. When the opponent is tired and does not want to run. And when the opponent has a weak volley, because the small drop forces them to net play.

When your opponent ignores you

When your opponent folds, you have three options and only a few seconds to choose. Choosing the right one depends on your opponent's position, not your preference.

If your opponent is still on baseline after folding, discard again. This is the cruelest and most effective option, because they just ran forward, and now have to run again.

If your opponent has advanced with a small shot, hit the ball deep over their head. You're on the field, and that's when the high ball has the most value.

If you get to the ball early enough and your opponent is already in the middle of the field, hit at a tight angle. This is the hardest option and should only be used if you actually make it in time.

Hide your intentions

Shading and cutting are useless if read first, and this is the most important skill of the entire chapter. Four principles of concealment.

The racquet action must be the same for both the defensive cut, the net play cut, and the small drop shot. If three shots have three different movements, the opponent just needs to look to know.

Posture and body language must be neutral until ball contact. Don't lean too early, don't change speed suddenly.

Vary speed and spin in the same preparation, keeping your opponent guessing.

And don't notice the owl with your eyes. This is the most common mistake: the player looks at the spot he intends to drop before playing, and the opponent reads it. Look at the same spot as every other shot.

Change the quality of balls in a series of balls

The most powerful way to use these two shots is not to use them individually, but to combine them into a series of continuous changes in shadow quality. Opponents can get used to a change. It is difficult for them to get used to constant change.

An effective sequence at level 5.0 consists of four steps: topspin deep cross-court, then cut low cross-court, then small when the short ball arrives, then topspin high to the backhand as they run up. Four different balls in a series of balls, and each change means the opponent has to adjust.

This does not require a new shot. It requires you to remember that you have four glosses, and to use them intentionally instead of repeating the same one.

Skip small in doubles

Going small in doubles is more complicated, because there are two opponents who can come up. But it's still effective in one specific situation: when both opponents are deep, and you drop into the lane between the two of them.

There is a more subtle but very effective sequence: drop small, let the opponent run forward in desperation, then the ball floats over their head. At that time, the person standing next to you has half the field empty. This is one of the best shots in doubles, and it only requires two shots you

already have.

Exercise

Four exercises are enough for these two strokes to become real tools.

Steady slice drill: fifty consecutive cross-court backhand slices, aiming for consistent depth and low bounce. This article builds credibility.

Correct small drop: small drop into a target area about one meter away from the net, from the center of the field. The goal is seventy percent into the zone. This article builds a sense of power.

Concealed hand: an opponent doesn't know if you're going to cut deep or leave small, and has to guess until you make contact with the ball. This article builds uniformity in the preparation movements.

Reaction: the opponent randomly drops the ball, you have to run and return the ball. This lesson builds early reading ability and running speed.

Slicing and dropping at level 5.0 are not show shots. They are strategic tools to change the quality of the ball, create chances, and disrupt an opponent's rhythm. The person who has them in their weapon set has more ways to win than the person who only has one.

CHAPTER 14

Chapter 14 — Score management

Tennis is the only sport where you can win a match despite losing more points than your opponent. Not rare. Not an exception. That happens often, and it happens because the scoring method of this subject has a very unique structure.

Points do not add up linearly. They cluster into games, games cluster into sets, and sets decide matches. Therefore, a score at 40-0 and a score at 30-40 have the same value on the electronic board but are completely different in actual value. Understanding this is understanding half of score management.

Order of value of points

Scores can be ranked in four levels. Normal points, which include the majority of points in a match, where a loss just makes the score a little harder. Point game, where one point decides who wins the game. Break point, where one point decides who wins the opponent's service game. And set points, where one point decides the entire set.

The level of importance increases in that order, but there's something few people realize: the cost of playing too risky also increases in that order. In common sense, a risky bet is a sound investment. At break point, it's a big bet.

The 5.0 player who is good at score management is not the player who is better at important points. They are normal players at key points, while their opponents play differently.

Breakpoint from both sides

Breakpoint is the most important point in tennis, and it requires two different approaches depending on which side you are on.

When you have a breakpoint, you are in an advantageous position, and this is the easiest time to make mistakes because you want to finish. Principle: play aggressively but smartly, not recklessly. Return the ball the same way you have returned it all game. Let the person serving the ball do the difficult thing.

When your opponent has a breakpoint, you are on the defensive. Principle: serve with a high success rate, hit deep cross-court, and wait for the opportunity. Not waiting passively, but waiting for a short ball or an opponent's shot to enter an area where you can attack.

There is a number worth thinking about. At the professional level, the average breakpoint utilization rate is only about thirty-five to forty percent. That means sixty percent of breakpoints are saved. That said, the server has the advantage at breakpoint, and the returner needs to play at a high success rate to improve that number, not play recklessly to try to finish.

Important games

In a set, not all games have the same value. At level 5.0, mid-set games are often decisive games, because that's when one side starts to consider ending the set, and that's when the pressure comes on.

The approach to those games differs from other games in three ways. Be more mentally prepared, not more stressed. Tactics are more conservative, not more risky. And pay more attention to detail, especially details about stance and first shot selection.

This is not the time to try a new shot. The new shot should be tried at 40-0, when the cost of a failure is low.

Serve at 5-5 and 6-5

There is a very clear psychological difference between serving at 5-5 and serving at 6-5, and it often ruins sets in which players have played well.

At 5-5, the score is neutral, and the majority of players serve normally. At 6-5, you're serving to win the set, and most players are starting to stretch. They serve slower, more safely, and make mistakes that they don't make at 5-5.

The way to handle it is very specific: simulate that the score is 0-0. Same ritual, same tactics, same pace. No change at all. If you change the way you play because of the score, the results will almost always be worse, because you are replacing a proven routine with one that has never been practiced.

Tie-break

Tie-break is the highest-pressure game in tennis, and it's special for a structural reason: there's no buffer of deuce. A double fault at tie-break costs the same as a double fault at match point. Every point is equally important.

Three rules for tie-breaks. Maintain the same serving ritual, do not change the rhythm. Play for a high success rate, especially on your first two serve points. And remember that in tie-breaks, one small break is enough, so don't try to win three points at once.

It's worth mentioning that the tie-break is where the server's win rate drops, since each person only serves two points at a time. For people with good serve, it's bad news. For someone with a good return, it's an opportunity.

Read the match from the score

Scores don't just reflect results. It reveals the status of both people, if you know how to read.

Leading 3-0 at the beginning of the set can mean one person is technically superior, or is psychologically superior. These two causes require two different treatments, and you differentiate by seeing whether the points that follow balance out.

Continuous deuce in a game means two players are evenly matched, and the game will be decided by the highest pressure points. That's when you need to play with a high success rate, not when you need to play better.

Losing the first set 0-6 or 1-6 is a sign that you need to adjust your strategy before the second set, not a sign that you need to try harder. If you lose six games in a row, there is something tactically wrong, and trying harder will only make it more obvious.

And a notable sign: if your opponent used to lead 4-0 and is now 4-4, the one who is stretching is not you. The person who is stressed is the person who has just lost four games in a row. That's the time to increase the pressure, not the time to pity them.

When you are losing continuously

Every player experiences losing streaks, and how you handle that streak determines whether or not the set survives. There are five steps, and the order is important.

Stop and breathe. Just realize that you're in a streak, instead of continuing to play in that state.

Evaluate the cause. Is it tactical, technical, or psychological. These three causes require three different treatments, and choosing the wrong cause is the best way to make the chain longer.

Choose a specific change. One, not five. Change the position where the ball is returned, or change the drop point serve, or change the card. Something that can be tested in two games.

Reset your mentality. Every new game is a new game. You don't carry the score of the previous game with you, and you shouldn't carry the emotions of it with you either.

Simplify. Play shots with a high success rate, without taking risks. The goal now is not to win three games in a row, but to win one point, then another point.

Win the match, you don't need to win every point

Not every point is worth fighting so hard for. Knowing when to accept a loss gracefully to save energy for the next point is a form of wisdom, not a form of giving up.

Case in point: you're at 40-0, pulled out of bounds, and no shot can win the point from that position. Don't try the strange spirit shot. Hit a high, deep loft ball, return to position, and play the next point with a new mindset.

You just saved some energy, some risk, and some emotion. At 40-0, that's a very good trade.

The converse is also true: there are points worth fighting to the end, and they are often points where a winning point changes the structure of the entire set. At 0-40 on your serving game, fight hard. At 40-0, manage energy.

Tennis is a subject that has both mathematics and psychology. Understanding the value of each point, adjusting your strategy according to the score, and remaining calm in the decisive moments is the difference between a good player and a truly formidable player.

CHAPTER 15

Chapter 15 — Adapting in battle

Every plan has a lifespan. At level 5.0, your opponent is good enough to find a way to counter your plan, usually within a set. From that moment on, the match was no longer a contest between two sets of techniques but a contest between two abilities to adapt.

Tactical flexibility is not a talent. It is a skill, and it can be practiced like any other skill. This chapter is about how to practice it, and how to use it in the shortest amount of time.

When do you need to change?

Changing tactics too soon is just as bad as not changing at all, because you'll never know if the original plan worked or not. There should be clear signals before making changes.

There are four reliable signals. You lose three points in a row with the same opponent's hand. Your same shot fails more than twice in the same situations. You feel like you're being controlled during the series without knowing why. And you see your opponent anticipating your shot, shown by them moving before you make contact with the ball.

The fourth signal is the strongest and also the most difficult to detect, as it requires you to look at your opponent instead of the ball. But when you see it, you already have enough information to make a change.

Order changed

When deciding to change, there is a correct order, and it goes from the cheapest change to the most expensive change. Swapping in the wrong order is the most common way to make things worse.

Step one: change standing position. This is the cheapest and often most

effective change. Step back half a meter when returning the ball. Stand closer when serving. Move to the side when the opponent tends to hit one side. No new techniques needed, no practice required.

Step two: change the drop point. Same shot, aimed somewhere else. Change from diagonal to along the touchline, from deep to short, from outside the touchline to inside the body.

Step three: change rhythm and spin. Same shot, same drop, but faster or slower, more spin or flatter.

Step four: change shots. Use a different shot to handle the same situation, for example cutting the ball instead of topspin.

Step five: change the point structure. Change the entire hand, for example from playing after baseline to net play.

Most players jump straight to step four or five, because those are the changes that look drastic and satisfying. But steps one and two solve most of the problem, and they don't require you to learn anything new mid-game.

The opponent spins heavily

Opponents who hit topspin heavily from baseline are a common type of player at level 5.0, and they cause discomfort because the ball bounces high and deep, forcing you to hit from shoulder level up.

Four ways to cope. Cut the ball low to force them to hit the ball low, because that's an area they don't like. Advance net play after the cut, to force them to play through the body instead of hitting the series. Play the ball higher and deeper than them, pushing them back baseline. And suddenly hit flat, because heavy spinners often lose their rhythm when the ball comes in flat and fast.

What you shouldn't do is try to spin harder than them. You're playing their

game, and they're playing it better than you.

Opponent net play

The net play opponent after every serve is the type of player that needs a completely different approach, because you have less time and less space.

Four options. Return the ball over their head as they advance, especially if their smash is unreliable. Return the ball low to their feet, because volley cannot attack from below. Return along the sideline to the corridor they just vacated when moving to the middle. And short cross returns to pull them out of the way forward.

General rule: when your opponent net play, your goal is not to outplay them. The goal is to force them to play a difficult volley. A difficult Volley will make the next shot easy for you.

The opponent plays high ball

The type of player who hits the ball high, slow, deep continuously from baseline is annoying to a lot of people, because they take away the tempo and don't let you hit the ball at a comfortable height.

Four ways. Step into the court and hit the ball before it bounces too high, this is the most effective way. Attack hard on short balls, as this type of player will give short balls if you are patient enough. Net play after a neutral shot, because they don't have good passing shots. And hit it flat, fast, to change the rhythm they don't like.

What should be avoided is getting into a soccer competition with them. They've been playing that style longer than you, and they're going to win that competition.

Weather and pitch

External conditions are not the context. They are tactical variables.

When there is wind, hit the ball lower and with more spin, as flat balls are pushed harder by the wind. When it's sunny, choose a side where you don't have to look up at the sky, and use glasses or a hat. When it's hot, shorten the point.

The pitch changes every decision. On clay, the series is longer, requires more patience, lobs are more effective, and net play is more difficult. On hard courts, the game is more balanced, flat serves are more effective, and net play is possible. On grass, the net dominates, cutting is extremely effective, and the series is much shorter. Indoors, everything is faster, and you need to attack from the first shot.

If you only play one type of court, know that your opponents may be familiar with another type, and that's an advantage you can exploit.

When you have a minor injury

Minor injuries during the match, such as a rolled ankle or sore arm, require immediate tactical adjustment, and that adjustment must be honest. Trying to play like it's nothing is the fastest way to turn a minor injury into a serious one.

If your legs hurt, stand closer to the center of the court, reduce your wide runs, and serve more cautiously so you don't have to move much after the serve. If your hands are sore, reduce the force, rely on the drop and spin, and net play to finish the point quickly. If your midsection is sore, avoid explosive movements, shorten your movements, and use more volley.

It's important to tell yourself the truth about your condition, to choose a strategy that suits the body you have, not the body you want to have.

The role of the coach in ninety seconds

In tournaments that allow coaching, the change-of-court interval is ninety seconds, and the manner in which that ninety seconds is communicated determines whether or not an adjustment is made.

Four principles. One clear adjustment, not five. So specific that it can be checked, for example "serve the ball out of bounds in the left box every 30-40", not "hit better". A short keyword associated with the action, for players to remember while playing. And a little encouragement comes along, because adjustments without confidence are not made.

A common mistake coaches make is giving too much information in ninety seconds. Players will remember one thing. If you give the year, they will remember none of it.

Build flexibility

Tactical flexibility is built outside of the game, not in it. Four ways.

Practice many exercises, not just your favorites. People who only practice one exercise will only have one answer. Situational exercises, in which the coach sets specific situations and requires a specific way of handling them. Review the game to identify times when you should have made a change and didn't. And watch professional matches, but watch to pay attention to how they change, not pay attention to the beautiful shots.

Last, and most important: accept that changing tactics is a normal part of the game, not a sign that your original plan was wrong. Good players are not the ones who have the right plan. They are people with many plans, and know when to use which one.

CHAPTER 16

Chapter 16 — Forehand

For most 5.0 players, the forehand is the main offensive weapon. It's also the shot they invest the most time in, and sometimes the only shot they truly believe.

But believing in a shot and using it at the right time are two different things. This chapter is not about making your forehand stronger. It's about turning the forehand into a tool with multiple modes, so you can choose the right mode for the situation instead of using the same stroke for every situation.

Standard at level 5.0

A forehand at level 5.0 requires four qualities, none of which is strength.

The first is that topspin is stable with depth. Second is the ability to flatten the ball when you need to attack. Third are two angle variations: back diagonal and same diagonal. Fourth is enough speed to force the opponent to defend.

It is worth noting that there is no requirement to play well. A forehand that looks normal but meets the above four conditions will win more points than a beautiful forehand that only has speed. At this level, trustworthiness and flexibility are more important than appearance.

Grip

There is no best grip. There is a grip that suits your playing style, and there is a grip that suits the amount of time you have.

The Semi-Western Grip is the most popular grip at level 5.0, as it balances spin generation with low ball handling ability. It allows you to hit heavy spin but still hit flat when needed. Grip Eastern gives a more

natural flat ball and is suitable for people who like to hit straight, but it is difficult to create spin and difficult to handle high balls. Grip Western creates very heavy spin but has difficulty with low and short balls.

If you've been playing for ten years with the same grip, don't change it. Switching costs outweigh the benefits, and at this level, familiarity is more valuable than optimization. Develop the grip you have as best as possible, instead of looking for someone else's grip.

Prepare racket

Getting the racket back early is the biggest difference between a 5.0 player and a 4.5 player, and it's a difference in timing, not amplitude.

Player 4.5 brings the racket out after the ball has passed the net. Player 5.0 brings the racket back after the ball has just left the opponent's racket. The interval between these two moments is about half a second, and half a second is the entire difference between a comfortable shot and a right shot.

This doesn't require you to be faster. It requires you to decide sooner. And earlier decisions are only possible if you read your opponent's shot beforehand, i.e. if you are in the scanning and planning loop instead of just reacting.

Contact points and force chains

A good contact point is in the front of the body, in the area from waist level to slightly above, with the arms slightly bent. This is the area where the body has the most power and the most control.

The power in the forehand comes from a chain, and this chain must go in the right order: push from the feet, rotate the hips, rotate the shoulders, accelerate the arms, let the racket head lag, then make contact. Each link must follow the previous link, there must be no jumping around.

When players hit the ball with just their hands, they are skipping the first four links. The ball still goes, but that shot requires more effort and is less consistent under pressure. That's why underhand hitters often play well in practice and fall flat in the game.

The lagged racket head is the most misunderstood link. It is not an active movement, but is the result of accelerating the arm while the racket is still behind. If you try to do it, you'll ruin the beat.

Reverse cross forehand

This is the typical shot of a 5.0 player. You step around to the left with your right foot, then hit a cross forehand into your opponent's backhand. The result is that you use your strongest shot on their weakest shot, from an awkward angle.

The sequence of movements has five parts. Realize the ball coming to the left early. Step around with your right foot. Move into an open position. Contact the ball in front. And the ending is high.

Timing is the deciding factor. Stepping around too late means you have to swing quickly, and a rushed forehand from a bad position is much worse than a normal backhand. Actual rule: if the ball comes fast and deep, play backhand. If the ball is slower and within reach, step around it.

Forehand crossed together

This shot also starts with a step around, but the ball goes down the sideline into the opponent's forehand. The risk is higher because the path is shorter and the net is higher, but the reward is big because the opponent doesn't wait for it.

The value of this shot lies in its surprise, and surprise only exists if you don't use it too often. If you cross the same three times in a set, it becomes part of your opponent's plan. If you hit it once after having hit the

back cross ten times, it's a shot they can't predict.

Flat owl

The flat forehand is a finishing shot: little spin, lots of speed, low trajectory. Use when you have a short ball, good position, and need a winner.

It is also the riskiest shot in this chapter, because the edge over the net is much smaller than the spin shot. Use only when the contact point is perfect and the position is ideal. Do not hit flat when you are in a hurry, when you are off balance, or when the ball comes in too high.

A useful rule of thumb: if you have to ask yourself whether you should hit flat, the answer is no. A true flat shot is a shot you don't need to think about, because the situation is so clear.

Forehand while running

When you have to run out of bounds to hit your forehand, the technique changes. Always use an open position. Use rotational force instead of stepping force. Aim cross-court because it's a bigger target, especially if you're already stretched out.

The running forehand is one of the most beautiful shots in tennis, and it should only be played when you are in a comfortable running position, not when fully extended. The difference between those two situations is very small while in play, and very large on the scoreboard.

Stable under pressure

Forehands fail under pressure not because of poor technique. It fails for three psychological reasons, and all three have specific solutions.

The first reason is that the goal is too greedy. Keep your aim simple: aim diagonally, not at an angle. The second reason is that attention is shifted

to the outcome instead of the touchpoint. Let's focus on a single word: forward. The third reason is that the body is tense, and the way to handle it is to exhale before hitting.

And one more important rule than all three: don't change technique mid-match. Stability is more valuable than adjustment. If your forehand is broken in set two, don't fix it. Let's fix the target and fix the selection.

Exercise

Five exercises, and they should be done under pressure, because that's the conditioning you need.

Reverse cross: the ball carrier brings the ball to the left, you step around and play a reverse cross. Twenty times, aiming for a steady depth and direction.

The move to flat: start with topspin, then switch to hitting flat on the short ball. Fifteen conversions. This lesson teaches you to switch modes, something many players cannot do because they only have one mode.

Diagonal then vertical: three swirling crosses, then one vertical to finish. Fifteen chains. This lesson teaches point structure using your forehand.

Hand under pressure: you are at 30-40 and have to hit a forehand at the target. Twenty times, record the success rate.

Running exercise: take the ball away, you run and hit your forehand, gradually increasing the difficulty. This lesson teaches technique under adverse conditions, which are real match conditions.

Forehand at level 5.0 requires confidence, flexibility and attack ability. The four modes, including reverse cross, forward cross, flat and run, must all be under control. And the only way to ensure that shot works when it really matters is to practice it under pressure.

CHAPTER 17

Chapter 17 — Backhand

The backhand is the most common weakness at level 5.0. This is almost a rule of the sport: most players are right-handed, so most players hit their forehand more, so their backhand is worse. Your opponents know that, and they will play on it.

The good news is that the backhand at level 5.0 doesn't need to be a weapon. It just doesn't become an obvious target. That's a much lower standard, and it's completely attainable.

One hand or two hands

There is no better backhand in absolute terms. There's the shot that's right for your body, and there's the shot that you've been committed to for years.

The two-handed backhand is stronger on the high ball and more stable in the long series, because the two hands allow you to block the ball with both sides. The one-handed backhand has a longer reach, is nicer on low balls, and allows for a more natural slice, but is weaker on shoulder-high balls.

If you've been playing a style for years, develop it to the best level possible. Transitioning at level 5.0 is a two-year investment with uncertain results. Spend those two years working on making your current backhand no longer a weakness, and you'll have better results.

High shadow: most common weakness

If there is a single shot that costs 5.0 players the most points, it is the high ball to the backhand. Your opponent knows this, so they hit topspin there, and you find yourself having to hit from shoulder level up when your body

isn't designed for that.

There are four ways to handle it, and the correct one depends on your backhand style.

With a two-handed backhand, contact the ball high, use your non-dominant hand to block, and push through the ball. This is the real advantage of the two-handed backhand, and it deserves its own practice.

With a one-handed backhand, hit the ball early before it bounces too high, or use slice. Chopping is the most practical answer to the high ball, as it doesn't require you to apply power from an awkward position.

The third way is footwork: moving to bring the ball to a comfortable height instead of accepting the incoming ball's height. Step back to let the ball fall, or move forward to hit before the ball bounces high.

The fourth way is to change the grip for the high ball, specifically using the Semi-Western grip with a two-handed backhand. This is a small change but has a noticeable effect for some players.

Backhand cut

Backhand cutting at level 5.0 should be used as a tactical tool, not a way to survive. This is an important distinction, because players often only use cutting when cornered, and thus cutting becomes a sign of weakness.

A deep, low cut to the opponent's backhand is an attacking shot. It forces opponents to fight from the bottom up, and it takes away their rhythm. A low slice to the feet of an advancing player net play is one of the most effective shots in tennis.

So, use cutting in two more situations, not just when pushed: when you want to change rhythm, and when you want to advance net play. Cut the ball then net play is one of the most classic and reliable plays at this level.

Cross court is the main shot

The cross-court backhand is the dominant shot in the series, because it has the greatest margin of safety: the longest diagonal and the lowest part of the net. This is the shot you will make more than any other shot in the game, so it deserves to be practiced more than any other shot.

What needs to be controlled in this shot are three variables: spin, speed and depth. A good 5.0 player can keep one variable the same and change the other two, creating a difference that the opponent cannot read. The weaker player changes all three at the same time, and as a result loses control.

The heavily spinning crosscourt shot into the opponent's backhand is the foundation shot of most rallies at this level. The flat crosscourt shot is faster but riskier. Choose according to situation, not preference.

Along the border

The backhand down the line is the most difficult but also the most rewarding shot from baseline. The ball goes over the higher part of the net into a smaller target, so the margin of safety is much smaller than with a diagonal shot.

Four elements of a good downfield shot. Prepare your racket early. Neutral posture. Contact in front. And push through the ball with forward momentum.

This shot is most effective after a series of cross-court balls, when the opponent is already leaning towards the diagonal. That's when they're committed, and that's when the shot down the line has the most value.

Backhand net play

The backhand net play needs more credibility than strength, as it is the putt that gets you going. Three options, in order of stability.

Cutting the ball low along the sideline is the most stable option, as the ball's low bounce makes it harder to hit the opponent's body. Playing cross-court is the second option, less stable but still safe. And hitting along the sidelines is the third option, only used when your technique allows.

For most 5.0 players, cutting low down the line is the best net play backhand shot. It's not pretty, but it gets you net play with a nasty ball, and that's what this shot is for.

Under pressure

The backhand fails under pressure for three reasons, and all three can be handled. It uses less natural rotation than the forehand, so it requires more technique to stabilize. It is exercised less under stressful conditions. And it's usually the weaker side, so it gets more of the ball in the most difficult moments.

The practice is very specific: create pressure during the training session. Set the practitioner at breakpoint and ask to hit a deep cross-court backhand seventy percent of the time. Record, and improve against yourself. This is the only way for the backhand to learn that pressure is not a reason to fail.

Psychology with the backhand

Many players have a negative attitude towards the backhand, and that attitude itself becomes part of the problem. When you believe your backhand is weak, you will play it defensively, and defensively it is weak.

The way to change is not to convince yourself that it is strong. The way to

change is to redefine: my backhand is a developing skill, not a permanent weakness. Then set a specific and measurable goal: this month I will increase my backhand accuracy down the line from forty percent to fifty-five percent.

Specific goals can be improved. A general attitude does not.

Exercise

Five lessons, and the first one is the most important.

Cross-court stabilization: fifty consecutive cross-court backhands, the ball must fall over the service line and inside the court. Count the longest chain. This article builds the foundation.

Downline: from the middle of the court, backhand down the line at the target, gradually increasing difficulty by starting from a wider position.

High ball: put the ball at shoulder height into the backhand, practice controlling direction. This is a direct exercise for the most common weakness.

Hand net play: short ball to the left, cuts ball net play down the line, advances, hits volley. This lesson connects three skills into a series.

Pressure lesson: at 30-40, hit a cross-court backhand under pressure. Twenty times, record the success rate.

A backhand at level 5.0 doesn't need to be spectacular. It needs to be believable, it needs to be deep, and it needs to be flexible enough to not become an obvious goal. Cutting the ball, crossing the field and net play should all be good enough. The shot along the line is a reward when given the opportunity. It's a standard that's completely within reach, and it changes a lot of games.

CHAPTER 18

Chapter 18 — Match day and tournament

Competing in tournaments is a completely different environment than training. Not only because of the pressure, but because everything around the match also becomes part of the result: changing match times, strange fields, strange balls, spectators, referees, and sometimes three matches in one day.

The best players in the tournament are not the ones with the best technique. They are the ones who manage all non-technical things.

Prepare weekly

Preparation for a tournament starts before the tournament, not the morning of the competition. And it has a logical order.

About two weeks before the race, identify one or two specific areas for improvement, not five. A week before the race, reduce training volume and increase quality: fewer sessions, shorter, but with clear goals. Two days before the tournament, do light training, practice serving and returning, and don't try anything new. And the day before the race, take a break, check your equipment, and review your plan.

The most important thing to avoid is the last week of heavy training to feel secure. That is the most common way to enter the tournament with a tired body and an unready mind.

Warm up before the match

Warming up before a match is a ritual, and it should be done the same every time, because familiarity has a psychological effect in itself.

Four parts, in order. Fifteen to twenty minutes of physical warm-up: light running, dynamic stretching, leg exercises. Ten to fifteen minutes of

warm-up with the ball: hit from baseline, series of balls, ball net play. Five to ten minutes of play: practice serving and returning, because those are the two shots that determine most of the score. And two to three minutes of psychological preparation: breathe, visualize, review the plan.

The last part is often skipped because people think they don't have time. But those two minutes are the two minutes with the highest percentage advantage in the entire warm-up.

Spy on opponents

When you know in advance who your opponents are, scouting is a good investment. Four sources of information, in order of value.

Video is the best source if available, and these days there often is. Watch two or three games, but don't watch for entertainment; look to find two things: which of their shots are stable, and which of their shots are wobbly. Talking to someone who has played against them is a second source, and is often more useful than video because it gives you an idea of what it was like to play against them. Watching their warm-ups is the third source, and it's the most overlooked: ten minutes of warm-ups reveal a lot. And note down their first few serves, as the first shots often reveal the trend.

Many matches in one day

Movement tournaments usually have two or three matches in a day, and management between matches is as important as playing the matches.

Four things, and the second is the hardest. Physical recovery between matches: eat, stretch, and lighten up. Reset your mentality: completely forget the previous match before starting the next match, whether you have just won or lost. Adjust tactics: new opponents mean new plans, don't reuse old plans. And assess your fitness honestly: if there's a real risk of injury, don't play through it.

The last point is the hardest because it requires you to be honest with yourself while trying to compete. A minor injury gets two weeks off. A minor injury being played through can take six months.

Worried before the big match

Being nervous before a big match is a good thing, if it is managed properly. Adrenaline improves reaction time and concentration, as long as it doesn't cross a threshold that causes your hands to stiffen.

Four techniques that really work. Progressive muscle relaxation: tense a muscle group for five seconds and then release, moving from the feet up to the face. Four-seven-eight breathing: inhale for four seconds, hold for seven seconds, exhale for eight seconds, repeat four times. A prepared, short and specific self-statement, not a speech. And a focus word, your own, to return to when your mind wanders.

When the referee makes a wrong call

Bad calls and questionable decisions are part of this sport, and your response should be strategic, not emotional.

Four principles. Ignore your opponent's wrong calls, because anger consumes your energy, not theirs. Only object when you are sure, and when there is technology to support it. Stay calm, because calm players win more, this is not a statement but a recurring observation. And enter the next point with a completely clear mind.

It's worth mentioning that bad calls often do more harm than they're worth, because we react to a sense of injustice, not to a score.

Tools management

Equipment issues in tournaments must be handled as part of the plan, not as an incident.

Bring at least three identical rackets with the same strings. Re-string forty-eight hours before the match, as the new string needs time to stabilize. Wear shoes that have been tested during the match, do not bring new shoes into the tournament. And bring enough accessories: racket handle, anti-vibration, towel, sunscreen, energy food.

These are small things, but a broken string in the third set without a spare racket is a loss that has nothing to do with tennis.

Recover after battle

Post-match recovery is more important than people often think, especially when there are multiple matches in a few days.

Five steps. Relax for ten to fifteen minutes with light exercise, do not stop suddenly. Eat protein and starch within thirty minutes. Apply cold compresses to painful areas. Stretch your whole body for twenty minutes. And a brief review, then turned it off completely.

The last step is the most important psychologically. Watch briefly to learn one thing, then close. Taking the game home and thinking about it all night won't help you play better tomorrow.

Learn from the tournament

Every tournament is a learning opportunity, but only with structured review. Five questions, answered within two days after the tournament.

Which plays work and which don't? How well has your physical strength been maintained over many matches? How is your mentality at important points? Are there any problems with equipment or logistics? And three specific things you will improve before the next tournament.

Three things, not ten. Three specific things can be done; ten general things are not.

Build competition experience

Competitive experience accumulates, and it accumulates faster in players who compete frequently. Two principles.

Play at least one tournament every four to six weeks to stay competitive. And mix up the levels: play some tournaments where you're the weaker player to learn, and some tournaments where you're the stronger player to learn how to win. These two types build two different skills, and people who only play one type will lack half.

Success in the tournament is a combination of good planning, physical readiness, mental fortitude and logistical management. Every factor contributes, and overlooking one factor can ruin a tournament where your technique is absolutely worthy of winning.

CHAPTER 19

Chapter 19 — Advanced tactics

What is in this chapter does not replace the foundation. They are located on the platform. If your serve is not yet stable and your footwork is not adequate, these strategies will not save you. But once the foundations are in place, they are what separates a good player from a player that no one wants to see in the next round.

Everything below is legal. There are no tricks in this chapter. There are just ways to use information and pace better than the competition.

Fool

Cheating in tennis is not cheating. It is the art of concealing intentions, and it is legal at every level. Its purpose is not to confuse opponents, but to cause them to commit prematurely and commit incorrectly.

There are three levels of deception. The lowest level is to maintain the same preparation for many different types of balls, as discussed in the chapter on cutting and dropping balls. The second level is changing the direction of gaze: look one way and hit the other. The third level is to change the tempo of the movement: prepare slowly and then accelerate suddenly, or vice versa.

The third level is the strongest and also the most difficult, as it requires you to control your own rhythm under pressure. But when it does, it creates a surprise that the opponent cannot read from the stance.

Extremely narrow angle

Extremely tight angles are short cross-court shots and back cross shots have very large angles. These are the most spectacular and hardest shots at level 5.0, and they have a very clear condition of use.

They are only effective when the opponent is already in the wrong position. If you hit an extremely tight angle at someone standing in the middle of the court, you've just hit a high-risk, low-reward shot. If you hit it to someone who has just been pulled out of bounds, it is a finishing shot.

So think of the ultra-tight angle as the last step in a series, not the first step. And remember that this shot requires very good contact, so it is not suitable for reaching situations.

Legal match

There is a level of competition beyond technique, and it is legal. It's how you present yourself on the field and how you influence your opponent's psychological state, not with words but with behavior.

Five things, and all are within the law. Win the first game with confidence, because the first game sets the tone for the entire match. Reset quickly after a mistake, so your opponent doesn't see any signs of collapse. Keep body language positive and direct, not to pretend but to not give away information to your opponent. Use enough time between points, as tempo is part of the game. And celebrate in a controlled manner after big points, enough for opponents to see, not enough to give them an excuse.

What should be avoided is any behavior that is intentionally intended to cause discomfort. Not just because it's not right, but because it consumes your attention on something other than the ball.

Break the opponent's rhythm

Once your opponent has gotten into the groove and is controlling the series of balls, you need to break the rhythm. This is one of the most valuable skills in this chapter, as it turns a set that's drifting out of hand into a replayable set.

Five ways, and they should be used in order from low risk to high risk.

Sharp change of pace: a very slow high ball followed by a series of fast balls. Hit the ball early, to take away their time. Net play after a neutral shot, forcing them to play through. Change spin: slice after a series of balls topspin. And change direction: along the touchline after three crosses.

The first two methods are the cheapest because they do not require a new shot. Let's start there.

Play in the wind

Wind is the most complicated condition in tennis, and the advantage goes to those who adapt better. It's important to understand the physics of it, because intuition is often wrong.

When hitting against the wind, the ball is slowed down by the wind and falls sooner. That means you can hit harder and flatter and still get the ball into the court. Many players do the opposite, hit lighter, and miss out on a free advantage.

When hitting downwind, the ball flies farther. Increase spin to get the ball down the court, and reduce power. Hitting flat downwind is the fastest way to make the ball go long.

When the wind is cross, aim for the windward side, letting the wind push the ball back into the court. And remember that when playing against the wind, net play is easier, but when playing downwind, the risk of the ball flying over your head is much higher.

The second serve is like a weapon

Serve two is often used as a defensive shot. At higher levels, it is used as a weapon, and that changes the way the opponent must prepare.

Three ways to use it. Serve the second ball topspin to the opponent's weak point and then move forward immediately, creating an attack. Serve

the second ball to the body to make them unable to stretch their arms, then move forward, shortening the point. And change the speed and landing point of the second serve so your opponent can't wait and attack.

It's important for your opponent to know that your serve two is not a gift. Once they know that, they have to prepare for two possibilities instead of one, and every additional preparation is a little more hesitant.

Force your opponent to make mistakes

At level 5.0, more points are won by opponents' errors than by winners. This is not bad news. It's a strategy, and it's worth using intentionally.

Four ways to fix errors. Hit the deep ball repeatedly to keep your opponent on the defensive, because errors will come. Create a wide angle to force them to contact the ball in an uncomfortable position. Change the quality of the ball to make them lose their rhythm. And increase the pressure at important points, because pressure creates psychological errors.

This requires a patience that many 5.0 players don't have. They want to end the point, and while they want to end it, they give away the point.

The ball attacks

The attacking topspin highball is one of the best shots at level 5.0, and it's beautiful because it's an attack disguised as a defense.

How to do it: pretend you're going to hit a shot over your body, then swing your racket up hard and let the ball go high, deep, and spin. The ball falls at the end of the court and bounces away, causing the opponent to run back.

It's effective in three situations: when your opponent is waiting for a pass, when the person at the net is standing too close, and when you need to get the ball past someone who's reaching up. In all three, surprise is the main ingredient.

Change serve systematically

Changing serve systematically is an advanced weapon, and it works on the principle of creating an expectation and then breaking it.

Two very specific examples. Serve the ball out of bounds three times in a row to set expectations, then serve into the body, where your opponent's swing is tight because they've prepared for the ball to be wide. Or serve spin three times, then serve flat at the same speed, so that the different bounce is surprising.

The thing to remember is that change must be intentional and orderly. Random change creates no expectations, and if there are no expectations there is nothing to disrupt.

Master the transition phase

The transition is the moment you go from baseline net play, or from defense to attack. This is where many series are decided, and where many players lose points without understanding why.

Four elements. Recognize the transition early, which means recognizing your opponent's short ball or weak shot before the ball goes over the net. Make a quality transition shot, with depth or angle. Split step before contact with the ball on the next shot. And hit volley with a purpose, not just to put the ball in the court.

The third factor is the most overlooked. Players run net play and hit volley first while still moving, and that volley is never the shot they want.

The strategies in this chapter take time to develop, and they should not be practiced all at once. Pick one, practice it for a month, then move on to the next one. That's the only way to make them a part of the gameplay instead of a list of things you know about.

CHAPTER 20

Chapter 20 — The leader and the path to elite

This book begins with an observation: the person who hits better does not win. It ends with another question: if game management is a skill, who teaches it, and how.

This chapter is for two people. The first person is a coach working with an athlete who already knows how to play. The second person is the athlete himself, who must lead himself most of the time.

Coach someone who already knows how to play

Coaching a 5.0 player is a fundamentally different job than teaching a newbie. The newbie has nothing to protect. 5.0 players have egos, experience, and opinions about their game, most of which are correct.

Therefore, the role of the coach at this level is not to re-teach the basics. The role is to point out blind spots, optimize strengths, and develop tactical sophistication. Those are four roles at the same time: teacher, strategist, psychologist, and companion.

The most important thing to avoid is the attitude of correcting errors. A 5.0 player doesn't need someone to tell them they're doing it wrong. They need someone to point out something they haven't seen yet.

Initial review

When accepting a new student at this level, begin with observation, not with comments. Five steps, in order.

Watch one or two full matches, and don't say anything while watching. Review the video with them, but let them evaluate it for themselves first. Talk about goals, history, and what they think they need. Assess physical condition, including injury history. And create a tactical profile: strengths,

weaknesses, and the plays they are using.

The second step is the most important and also the most difficult. Letting players judge for themselves first means you know what they see and what they don't. The gap between those two is where you need to work.

Design training sessions

A training session for a 5.0 player has structure, and that structure is different from a traditional technique session.

Ten percent boot. Twenty percent is skill development, and this should be for weaknesses, not strengths. Forty percent combat and tactical exercises, this is the biggest part and rightly so. Twenty percent of competitions have specific goals. And ten percent relax and watch it again.

The ideal duration is between one and a half to two hours. Longer training sessions have a diminishing advantage, unless it is a preparation session for a specific event.

What's notable about this structure is that the competition portion is twenty percent, not fifty. Players often want to fight, but fighting doesn't teach as much as targeted exercise. And the review at the end is the first to be cut when time is up, while it is the part that turns a practice session into a lesson.

How to respond

Feedback for a 5.0 player has five principles, and the first principle is the one most violated.

Ask before correcting: "How do you feel about that result?" This question does two things: it tells you whether they recognize the problem themselves, and it puts them in a proactive position instead of a reactive one.

Positive, specific, improving structured feedback: “Touchpoints were good, now adjust goals.” One thing at a time, don't take five things. Use videos to show instead of talking. And respect their knowledge, because they have been playing for many years and they know many things about themselves that you don't know.

Design exercises

Exercises for this level must have five qualities, and without one quality the exercise is just polishing.

Like a match: simulates real situations, not mechanical ball delivery. There is pressure: there are scores, there are time limits, there are consequences if you fail. Measurable: there are percentages, there are series, there are times, there are things to track. Gradual: start easy and increase difficulty step by step. And there is a purpose: each exercise has a specific tactical goal.

The third quality is the most overlooked. If you can't measure an exercise, you don't know if it will improve or not, and if you don't know, there's no reason to do it again.

When students resist change

5.0 players often resist changing something they've been doing for years. This is not bigotry. That's a reasonable reaction from someone who has invested years in a skill and has gotten results with it.

Five ways to handle it. Explain the reason fully, because they need to understand the reason, not just take orders. Provide evidence, either with comparison videos or with data. Change step by step, not overhaul the entire thing. Give them a choice: present the options and let them decide, because it's their decision they will make. And be patient, because change at this level is slower but more durable.

Gap from 5.0 to elite

Level 5.0 is a high level in tennis movement. But the gap from there to higher levels is a real gap, and it's not just a technical gap.

That gap lies in three places. Stamina and recovery where the difference can be twenty percent. Tactics and adaptability, where the difference can be thirty percent. And decision consistency under pressure, where variance is greatest and most difficult to measure.

This means that if you want to go the extra mile, most of the work isn't about getting a better polish. It lies in maintaining decisive quality when tired, when behind, and when points matter.

Practice with purpose

Deliberate practice differs from regular practice in five ways, and this difference explains why two people who practice the same number of hours make very different progress.

Have a specific goal for each session, not just “go to the gym”. Have a built-in feedback loop: videos, metrics, or coach observations. Work at the edge of possibility: not too easy, not impossible. Complete focus: no phones, no polishing for fun. And there is a review after each session: what worked, what needs to be changed.

A 5.0 player who uses deliberate practice improves many times faster than someone who spends the same number of hours on the field but practices without focus. This is one of the most practical findings in this entire book, because it means that time is not the deciding factor. The new way to use time is.

Twelve-month roadmap

A roadmap specific enough to implement, divided by quarter.

The first three months: address your biggest tactical weaknesses, build your physical base, and establish your psychological protocol. Compete in club tournaments, in a comfortable environment.

The next three months: develop your signature moves, expand your tactical versatility, and start competing in regional tournaments.

The next three months: compete in higher tournaments with a weaker position, to learn. This is the most unpleasant and most valuable stage.

Last three months: aim for a specific ranking goal, and refine what's already there instead of adding something new.

Intersperse throughout the year: mix up the tournament levels, because playing with stronger people teaches you different things than playing with people of equal standing.

Prioritize the technique with the highest advantage

If you only have time to improve five things next year, these are the five things, ranked by advantage.

Quality serve two is the most advantageous improvement for most 5.0 players, as it affects each service game and the psychological state of the entire game. The stability depth of the return of serve shot comes second, as it determines where you start the point. The accuracy of the net play shot ranked third. The reliability of overhead smashes ranks fourth, as a weak smash causes the opponent to hit the ball high for the entire match. And if your backhand is a glaring weakness, bring it up to neutral, nothing more.

Support ecosystem

Developing to a high level requires an ecosystem, not just a coach. Six ingredients, and not everyone needs them all at once.

A coach, as a strategic advisor, not just a ball carrier. Two to three people play together regularly, at an equal or higher level. A fitness expert understands the demands of tennis. A psychologist, perhaps an expert or a coach with that skill. A person who periodically analyzes videos. And a deliberately selected schedule.

The most important component on this list for most movement players is the second component. You can't improve alone, and you can't improve if you only fight weaker people.

Measurement

If you don't measure, you don't know where you're going. Five groups of data are sufficient.

Match statistics: serve-in ratio, return-in ratio, and winner-to-error ratio. Exercise performance: accuracy and improvement over time. Physical milestones: check every quarter. Tournament results: ranking and head-to-head results. And compare video each quarter, side by side, for key shots.

The last number is the most convincing, because it shows you what memory doesn't show you: how much you've changed.

The mindset of a top person

The last thing, and the most important thing in the whole book.

Top players don't have more talent. They are more intentional. They train more intentionally, play more strategically, recover more systematically, and develop more comprehensively. All of these things can be learned.

And here's what I want you to take away from the last page: the question is not whether you can get to the next level. The question is whether you are willing to do what it takes to get there.

Game management, in the end, is about one thing and one thing only: making the best decisions possible, with the information you have, in the time you are allowed. Not every decision will be right. But the system in this book will help you make better decisions, more consistently, and under pressure better.

That's all it takes to win more. And that's all this book wants to give you.

CHAPTER 21

Appendix — Terminology

This book uses some English terms because that is how coaches and athletes actually speak to each other on the field. This appendix collects them together, with a brief understanding and how to use them in the book.

Game Management — SPACE principles for level 5.0

Pham Duc Hai

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