

## FEDERER AND THE 4 PLAYING PHASES

*"In singles the main error of many players is the lack of knowledge when to defend and when to attack"*

Bill Tilden. Superstar of the sport in the 1920's.

During every tennis point, a player will make an instantaneous decision to hit one of four types of shot:-

- Defensive
- Neutralising
- Creating / Building or
- Attacking.

The games greatest player Roger Federer has developed a mastery over all four phases which allows him to win tournaments on all surfaces, beat all types of players and be regarded as one of the most "watch able" tennis stars ever. Let's look at his strengths in each phase, and some drills which can improve you; or your students skills in each phase.

### Defensive Phase

*"Everybody makes a big deal how big Federer's offence is, but he's even better defensively...defensively he can get himself out of difficult situations with ease."*

Andy Roddick 2007

Defensive shots are used when you are in trouble during a point – pulled wide, off balance and rushed. Handling defence requires excellent movement skills, composure and a deep enough return to prevent your opponent from hitting a winning shot. Panicking and going for an "all or nothing" winner when in trouble should be avoided in a developing player.

There are two types of defensive specialist:- the Lleyton Hewitt type, tenaciously get to every ball and getting it back into play. Federer falls into another category as he can actually turn the point when in a defensive position, hitting instinctive half volley's and behind the body backhand flick returns very deep. He then recovers quickly – gains an aggressive court position and counter attacks.

#### **Defensive Drills - 80% Feeds Drill**

##### **Instruction:**

Play a coach fed drill – with the coach stretching their players to the point they only reach 80% of the feeds. This may include wide, drop shot or lob feeds; all designed to put the players under pressure.

**Progression 1** would involve a basket drill in which student's practice returning the ball as deep as possible, preventing their opponent from winning the point on the next ball.

**Progression 2** would be a live ball drill in which the students play out the point after the feed. The defensive player would have to make a deep return and then work at recovering into court – preventing an easy open court winner for their opponent.

## Neutralising Phase

While more offensive type shots make the highlight reel – neutralising shots are the most common and important phase of a point. Neutralising shots are played in response to a quality shot of your opponent – your aim is to prevent your opponent gaining control of the point while hitting with enough pressure to force them into a weaker shot. Most commonly on the pro tour this would involve a high intensity cross court rally. Hitting with just the right balance of aggression; while minimising risk are characteristics of good neutralising shots.

Federer will often employ the slice backhand during these "cat-and-mouse" exchanges from the back of the court. These shots are safe for him while they bounce low and out of his opponent's ideal hitting zone, setting up a weaker return. He will also slice his backhand returns deep down the middle to neutralise any advantage his opponent may have gained from their serve. Federer's cross court, outside spin forehand is also an example of a neutralising shot. It will frequently draw a weak shot from his opponent and push them into a poor court position, allowing him to attack or force an error.

### Neutralising Drills - $\frac{3}{4}$ Cross Court Drill

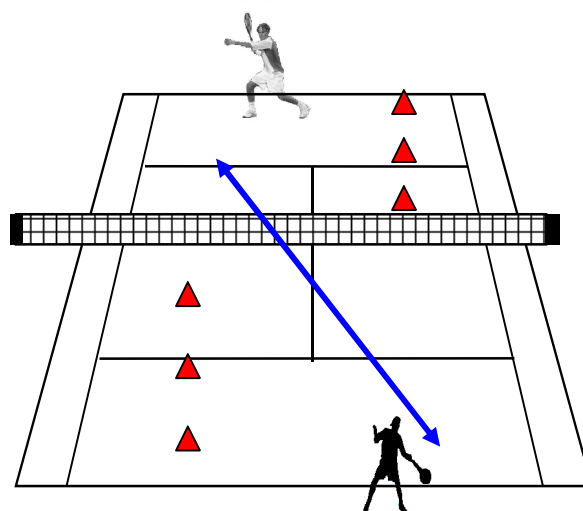
#### Instruction

Set up the court as illustrated. The markers should be placed 1.5 metres (approximately 2 racquet lengths) inside the side lines creating a forehand cross court hitting zone.

Start the rally with an underhand feed and during the point only forehands are allowed to be played.

To win the point, the players have to manipulate the spin, speed, height, angle and depth of their shots. Keeping the opponent off balance and out of position should be the priority with the aim to force errors by hitting shots that the opponent can't handle.

Progress the drill by placing the cones to set up a backhand court rally using cross court backhand and inside out forehand.



## Building / Creating Phase

The building or creating phase of a point arrives when you have forced your opponent to play a weaker return, a little slower or a little shorter. It is an opportunity to:-

- change the direction of the ball,
- hit with a sharper angle,
- approach the net, or
- hit with power and depth at your opponents weakness'.

Players should also adopt a building attitude on their first serve, aiming to put their opponent under pressure and draw an easy return or force an error.

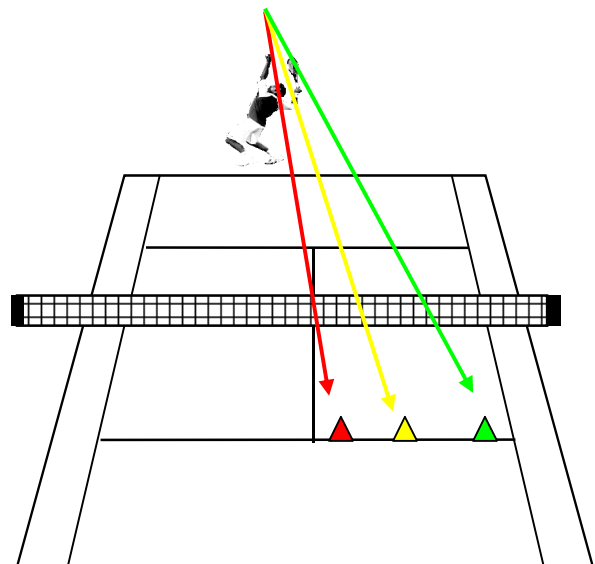
This phase is perhaps Federer's greatest strength – his ability to mix up his shots and strategies can be devastating to his opponents. Equally important is Federer's aggressive court position. During a rally he will be prowling the baseline – and he is ready to step forwards and make a more forceful shot. This separates him from many pro players who operate mainly from well behind the baseline, and are therefore less prepared to play a creative shot.

### Creating Drills – Service Disguise

While not the fastest server in the world, Federer consistently has the most effective serve. By mixing spin, placement and speed he is constantly pressuring his opponent.

#### Instruction:

- Place cones in the service box representing:-
  - Wide
  - Tee
  - Body Serve
- The server goes through their rituals, ball toss and backswing.
- Just as the ball toss reaches its highest point – the coach calls "Wide", "Tee" or "Body."
- The aim is to hide the placement of the serve until the very last second.



### Attacking Phase

The attacking phase or put away shot should be played with the intent of finishing the point and with a "go for it" attitude. Care needs to be taken with the selection of an attacking shot, especially in developing players; these shots can lead to frustrating errors. Successful attacking shots are built on "weapons" – the most common in the modern game is the big forehand.

Federer's main weapon of choice is the inside-out forehand from the backhand court generated using a fierce rotation of his torso – a shot that he creates extra power and angle from. He can go down the line also, creating extra doubt in the mind of his opponent as they try to counter this shot.

While the forehand is his most spectacular shot, his comfort at the net sets him apart from many of his peers in the attacking phase. He has perfect volleying technique, check how his chin rests against his right shoulder at contact point to ensure his eyes stay fixed on the ball. He is especially adept at short stop volleys, which give his opponents no chance at making a passing shot.



Federer prepares to launch a big off forehand

### Attacking Drills – Overhead Game

For the developing player the most likely attacking shot they will see is the overhead.

#### Instruction.

Set up the court with one player at the net, the other at the baseline. The coach will feed a variety of lobs to the net player while the baseline player will attempt to retrieve each smash and play out the point.

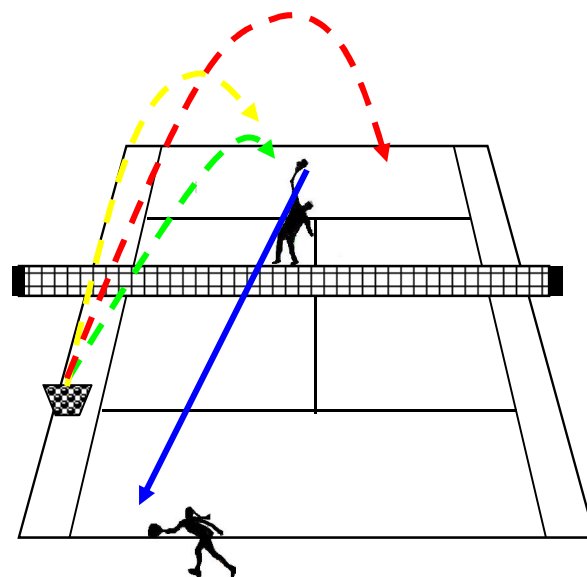
The coaches **1<sup>st</sup> feed** should be a low and short lob allowing the net player an easy put away. These “slam dunk” smashes should not be taken for granted and need to be practised.

The baseline player will also gain valuable experience anticipating and scrambling to retrieve these smashes.

The **2<sup>nd</sup> feed** should be deeper, forcing the smashing player to move backwards and reach upwards to make the shot.

The **final coach lob** should be high and deep into the backhand court – possibly forcing the net player to make a backhand overhead – or at the least demonstrate some fast footwork to get to the forehand smash position.

Best 2 out of 3 wins the point, play 1<sup>st</sup> to 7 and then rotate players.



### Putting it Together

The key to Federer’s enduring success has been his ability to put these four phases together. As a young player on the tour he was prone to putting in some very inconsistent performances – he had all the strokes – but it wasn’t until he learnt to play “the right shot at the right time” that his career flourished.

This “putting it together” is commonly called shot selection – correctly choosing when to defend, neutralise, build or attack. Only through good coaching, appropriate drilling and tournament experience will a developing player learn to play the right shot at the right time. It took the great Roger Federer many years to master this side of his game – and generally takes far longer than mastering the technical execution of each tennis stroke. It will take patience and determination for the coach and player to “put it together” and maximise a players potential.

By Rufus Keown

To find out more about the four playing phases read the great new e-book “Tennis – Player Development”. It deals in detail with the four playing phases and includes over 60 drills to help you improve each phase and consequently your game. Click the picture to read excerpt’s from the e-book.

