

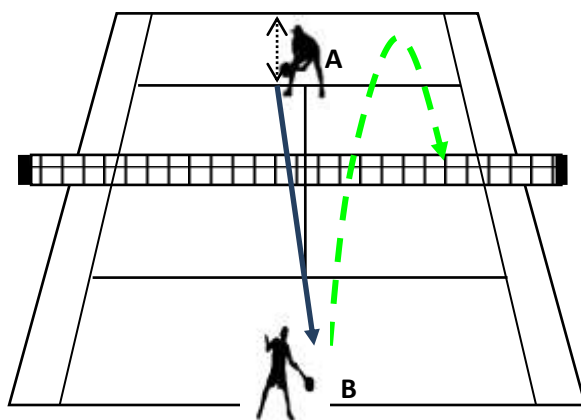
## Learning from the 2009 French Open Final

Roger Federer continues to grow his legend by winning his first French Open and 14<sup>th</sup> career Grand Slam. By equalling Pete Sampras' record and winning slams on all surfaces Federer supporters can mount a strong argument the Swiss master is the best of all time. The tournament was turned on its head by the biggest upset in memory when journeyman Robin Soderling defeated the greatest clay court player and four time defending French champion Rafael Nadal. Once his nemesis was eliminated Federer must have realised history was calling – but he still had to battle through several tough matches to face the white hot Soderling in the final.

Going into the match Federer held a 9 – 0 record against Soderling, most recently a straight sets hammering at the Madrid Masters just two weeks earlier. Soderling, however was playing tennis he had never produced in his steady but unspectacular career. Although considered more a fast, indoor court specialist the Swede defeated clay specialists Ferrer, Davydenko, Gonzalez and Nadal. With Federer in his 5<sup>th</sup> straight French final most predicted that he would win easily, although those who saw Soderling play during the tournament gave the outsider a chance.

The first set was over before the nervous Swede could blink. In blustery conditions Soderling's high ball toss and relatively flat serve was ineffective, with only 54% 1<sup>st</sup> serves in. During the tournament Soderling had pounded the serve which allowed him to maintain an aggressive court position and then hammer his forehand and backhand. Now Federer pushed him back time and time again breaking three times to take the set 6 – 1.

A most interesting factor in the first set was Federer's superb use of the drop shot off both forehand and backhand. Recently added to his arsenal he executed the shot to perfection time after time. Clay court specialists will tell you the drop shot is a crucial tactic on clay to break up the long grinding rallies. It is the most delicate of shots requiring perfect touch using a continental grip, and also disguise – changing grip only at the very last moment. A great drill to help young developing players learn the drop shot is "Drop Shot Scramble."

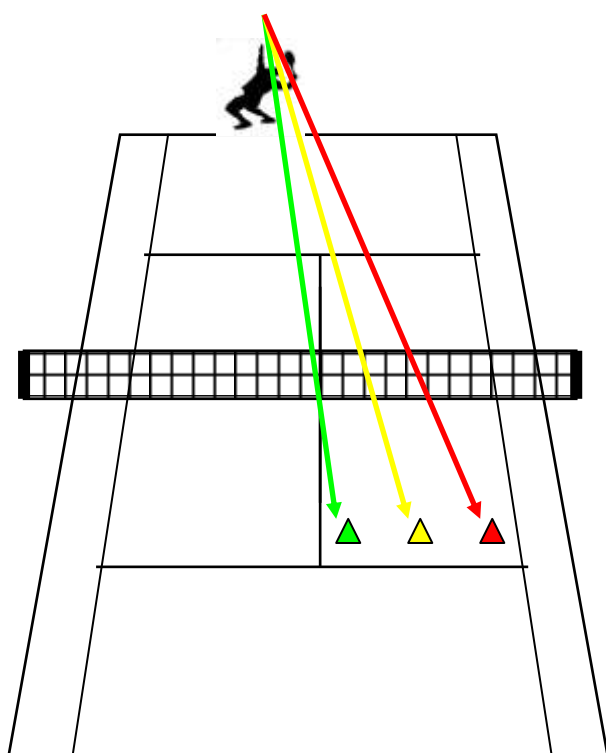


### "Drop Shot Scramble"

- Player A starts at the Service line with Player B at the opposite baseline.
- A feeds to B and then scrambles back to touch the baseline, before recovering to play out the point.
- B plays A's feed with a drop shot, attempting to bounce the ball twice before their opponent can reach the ball – or drag them out of position to set up an easy passing shot or lob.

As the second set started Soderling began to find his form. He was greatly aided by the disgraceful intruder who confronted Federer early in the set. Dressed in Spanish colours the man appeared to unsettle Federer somewhat [understandably] and Soderling was able to build into the match, raising his first serve percentage to 62% and producing some big forehands which had characterised his run to the final. Federer could not break serve and the second set went to a tie breaker.

In the tie breaker Federer went to his serve – acing Soderling four times to take a 2 set lead. Federer’s serving in the first two sets certainly was “Sampras” like, hitting corners at will especially on big points. A 75% 1<sup>st</sup> serve percentage in the first two sets meant Soderling wasn’t able generate a single break point and wasn’t able pressure Federer’s serve. The skill of producing serves that hit different corners with apparently the same ball toss and motion can be practised with the “Sampras Serve Drill.”



#### “Sampras Serve Drill”

- 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.
- Good return of serve player’s are able to read the ball toss and other cues and anticipate where the serve is going – if mastered this drill can give the advantage back to the server.

After being blown away in the 2<sup>nd</sup> set tie breaker Soderling’s resistance was broken and he lost serve at the start of the third. As well as the frequent drop shots Federer showed his tactical mastery by constantly attacking into the Soderling forehand, constantly wrong footing his opponent. To read more about Federer’s superb tactical understanding read the eight articles of [“The Federer File”](#) which detail the fine skills on the Swiss.

Almost inevitably nerves began to set in as Federer closed on victory. His first serve percentage dropped, for the first time in the match Soderlingg generated break points late in the 3<sup>rd</sup> set. But Federer prevailed, showing his usual emotion as he sunk to his knees after match point, a winner after four previous final losses at the French. With questions about his ability to match Nadal, a lean [by his standards] start to the year, and several family and personal developments this was a most satisfying victory that will rank amongst his greatest.

By Rufus Keown.