

The Federer File

Regular readers will know that one of this author’s favourite subjects is Roger Federer. The Swiss master seems sure to pass Pete Sampras’ record of 14 career slams within two years and become the men’s games greatest player.

His peers are in awe of his abilities – and gracious tributes from players like Andre Agassi, James Blake, Jonas Bjorkman and Andy Roddick are frequent. His class on and off the court have meant he is a favourite with both media and fans.

The Master Class – with Roger Federer

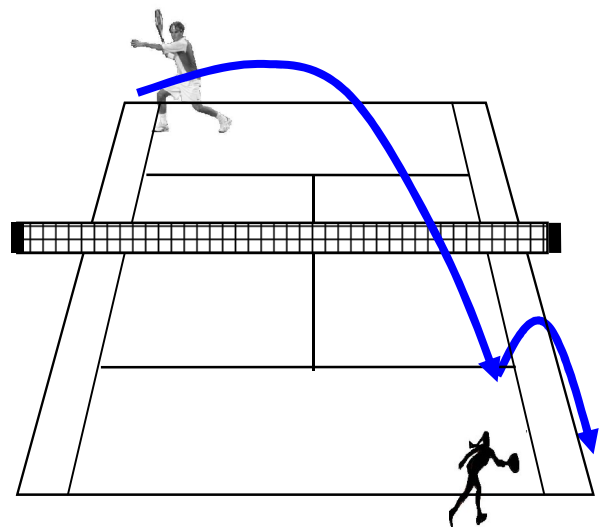
“The Master Class” is the first article in a series that will explore Federer’s game and what coaches and players can apply to their playing and teaching.

Set up with a cross court forehand

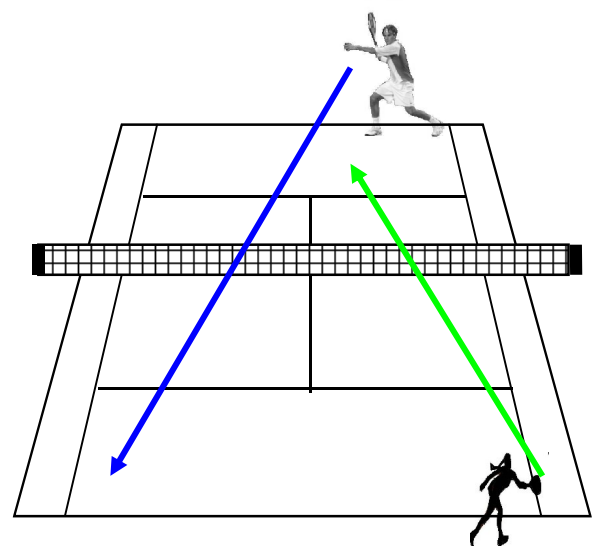
While many people marvel at the “inside out” Federer forehand – it is his cross court forehand that opens up the point and allows him to dictate. The secret to the effectiveness of the shot is “outside spin.”

Outside spin is a combination of top and side spin from the forehand side which makes the ball kick viciously away from your opponent. Execute this shot by hitting the outside section of the ball while you hit with topspin. It builds on the percentage concept of “running the ball away” from your opponent.

Mastering this shot pulls the opponent out of court and then sets up his inside out forehand which he often uses to finish the point. The other option for his opponent is a risky “all or nothing” winning shot. In either case the odds are stacked in Federer’s favour. It is an example of a high percentage shot creating big pay off’s. The cross court has lots of spin, high net clearance and isn’t necessarily close to the lines – but it sets up many winning opportunities.



Set up with the cross court...



...dominate with the weapon.

Master the slice backhand

The secret to Federer's slice backhand is its range. He will defend out wide with a deep, slow, drifting slice; he can neutralise the return of serve with a chip deep down the middle; or he will create an attacking opportunity with a biting slice which skids low off the court.

The use of the slice stands out clearly in two big matches where Federer used it to “unbalance” his opponents:-

- 🔗 In the 2006 Wimbledon final Federer had his revenge over Rafael Nadal (who had beaten him at the French a month earlier). At crucial times Federer hit the low biting slice to Nadals forehand. With his extreme western grip Nadal was unable to handle the shot and dumped it in the net twice while serving for the 2nd set and a further two more times in the 2nd set tie breaker.
- 🔗 At the 2007 Australian Open semi finals Federer hit the low biting slice to Andy Roddick forehand. Capitalising on Roddick's poor approach shots the Swiss passed and lobbed the American at will to record an easy straight sets win.

Teaching the slice to young developing players can be challenging – mainly due to grip changes and the predominance of double handed back hand's in young players. The shot is crucial to developing an all round game and will also help players become more confident with their net play as a slice backhand is a great approach shot and helps master the continental grips needed for good net play.

Serve Effectively

One area of Federer's game which appears less eye catching than others is the serve. The glamorous statistics of fastest serve and most aces are not Federer's strength. What Federer does is serve effectively, on first and second delivery (won 90% 1st and 60% 2nd serve in 2006).

Disguise and variety characterise the Federer serve and allows him to compete effectively on all surfaces.

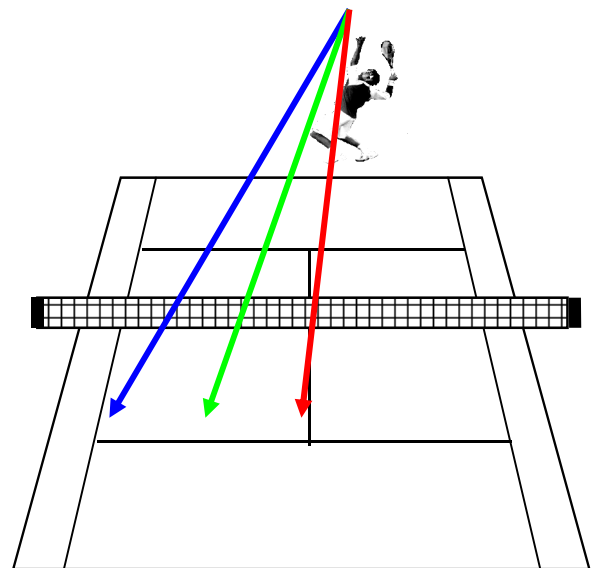
Federer is able to serve:-

- 🔗 kick out wide,
- 🔗 fast down at the body and
- 🔗 slice down the tee

off virtually the same ball toss to ensure disguise.

His relaxed and fluid motion is the key to success. His action is easily repeatable and he can serve with variety and pin point placement on both serves without committing many double faults.

James Blake is one player who concedes he seems always off balance and out of position against the Federer serve, even though he doesn't serve at the ballistic speeds achieved by Andy Roddick and others.



Plan for your Opponent

Andy Roddick told readers in a recent interview that one of the big improvements Jimmy Connors had made to his game was focusing on what he (Andy) does well. Roddick felt that he may have been too concerned about the other guy during his form slump, many athletes work well this way – not complicating their style or tactics. Federer on the other hand is the master of dissecting his opponent’s game.

Consider briefly his tactics for the following rivals:-

- ♣ Andy Roddick – Hit low, biting slices to the forehand service box. This forces Roddick to either approach to the net or scramble back to cover his backhand – both situations he is very uncomfortable with. Those who saw the 2007 Australian Open semi final will attest to the effectiveness of this tactic.
- ♣ James Blake – Vary your attack, frequently hitting behind your opponent. Super fast Blake has been left flat footed and bemused against Federer; against other opponents he burns around the court retrieving all but the best passing shots.

It is the perfect execution of each plan that makes Federer so outstanding, but all players and coaches can learn that most players have a “key” or combination which will unlock their game and put you on the path to victory.

Change Tactics

Due to Federer’s mastery of the all court game, he can adjust his tactics during and between matches to suit the circumstances. He did this most notably during the 2004 Wimbledon Final against Andy Roddick. After Roddick had taken the first set and was competing strongly in the second set, Federer increased his attack on the net (including serve and volley) and finally overwhelmed Roodick in four sets.

Between the 2006 French Open and Wimbledon Final’s he also “tweaked” his game in matches against Rafael Nadal. After committing many errors on the topspin backhand in the French, Federer played more slice backhands at Wimbledon. The court surface helped, but the change resulted in a four set win. This ability is so unique in the modern game where, especially in the girls (Mauresmo, Heninn and Hingis excepted), players concentrate only on baseline attack with few alternatives.

Summary

While only very few players have the genius or the skill of Federer – coaches and players can still mimic some of the strokes and strategies that underpin his game.

Let’s review the main points of this article:-

- ♣ Set up with the cross court forehand (outside spin)
- ♣ Master the slice backhand
- ♣ Serve Effectively (variety and disguise)
- ♣ Formulate a game plan
- ♣ Change tactics (when losing).

Improving all these concepts are within reach of even the modest competition level player can achieve. Improve these areas in training sessions and watch your students games flourish.

By Rufus Keown