



# WOMEN'S TENNIS TACTICS

2006 EUROPEAN COACHES' SYMPOSIUM

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## AIMS

- To study *specific* tactics and patterns of today's top female players
- Compare and contrast with the men's game – tactically and technically
- How will this influence our coaching next week?

## 1<sup>st</sup> Serve Tactics

- 1<sup>st</sup> serve no longer just a way to start the point
- Opportunity for the first point of attack
- Seen as the first shot in a winning pattern of play

## Improvements in 1<sup>st</sup> Serve

Wimbledon 1992 - 2006

Player	Wimbledon '92	Player	Wimbledon '06
De Swardt	108 mph	Mauresmo	120 mph
Capriati	107 mph	Williams (V)	120 mph
Seles	107 mph	Mattek	120 mph
Graf	106 mph	Perry	120 mph
Basuki	106 mph	Sprem	119 mph
Navratilova	104 mph	Savchuk	119 mph
Shriver	101 mph	Bremond	117 mph
Tauziat	99 mph	Clijsters	117 mph
Appelmans	97 mph	Ivanovic	117 mph
Sabatini	97 mph	Henin-Hardenne	116 mph

## Serve & Groundstroke Attack

- The most popular 1<sup>st</sup> serve tactic
- 1<sup>st</sup> serve and 'big' forehand:
  - movement into space: crosscourt/down line
  - movement out of space: inside out / inside in
- 1<sup>st</sup> serve and early backhand:
  - backhand hit from inside baseline
  - time pressure applied

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## Serve & Groundstroke Attack

So what did we see..?

- Lots of effective wide serving from the *deuce* court (for right-handers)
- *Fewer* wide serves from the advantage court
- A wide range of second shots
- Players using this tactic at U14 level
- Players using this tactic on a range of surfaces

## Serve & Maintain Control

- No pre-planned 2<sup>nd</sup> shot but a pre-planned *mentality*
- Applies particularly to juniors with less power
- Server simply continues to build pressure through quality hitting
- Eventually an opportunity arises (space, short ball, opponent error, etc.)

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## Serve & Maintain Control

So what did we see..?

- Longer rallies but with the *same* tactical intent
- Opponent never allowed to return to a neutral position
- Lots of 'stingers' vs. 'winners' being hit
- Used against the deeper return
- 'serve and see what happens' is not a tactic!

## Other 1<sup>st</sup> Serve Tactics

- Serve and drive volley (same effect as a pressuring groundstroke)
- Serve and ‘sneak’ volley (instinctive decision *after* hitting 1<sup>st</sup> serve)
- Serve and volley (Mauresmo winning Wimbledon – exception or trend?)

## Other 1<sup>st</sup> Serve Tactics

*“I felt tactically I played very well today, and also throughout the tournament, because my game is different from what the other girls are playing on grass.”*

- Amelie Mauresmo, 2006 Wimbledon Champion

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Serve Tactics

*“It’s gonna be a kind of drop shot for her.”*

Elena Dementieva vs. Serena Williams, Miami 2004.  
(19 out of 20 second serve points lost!)

- Still a potential area of weakness
- 2006: women won 41% second serve points  
men won 47% second serve points
- Returner favourite to win point
- ‘Contain the Enemy’ is the first priority

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Serve Tactics

- Use *accuracy* as a weapon
- Use *variety of direction* as a weapon
- Aim to move ball out of returner’s hitting zone
- Encourage *courage* when serving

Drill: 2 points for return winner vs. 1 point  
double fault

## Returning Tactics

- *Crucial* to return well in women's game
- Perhaps the most neglected shot?
- Average shots per rally (Maes, 2005):

	Women	Men
French Open	4.4	5.3

Serve & Return = 45% of women's tennis!

Do we spend 45% of our time on serve and return?

## 1<sup>st</sup> Return

- Priority to neutralise the threat of the 1<sup>st</sup> serve!

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## 1<sup>st</sup> Return

So what did we see..?

- Lots of deep *middle* returns:
  - high % target and reduces angles available
- Forehand *and* backhand inside-out returns:
  - no change of ball direction and high % target
- Defence turning into attack very quickly (x2 ball combinations)
- Also, blocked return:
  - as a tactical choice or played under extreme pressure

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Return

- Excellent opportunity to dominate an opponent!

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## 2<sup>nd</sup> Return

So what did we see..?

- A variety of aggressive shots played from inside the baseline
- Strong physical and psychological messages sent
- Players assuming 1<sup>st</sup> serve mentality and tactics
- Often hit to server's *forehand* side – bigger grip change needed

## So what?

- Female players becoming faster, stronger, and playing at a higher 'tempo' than ever before
- Women learning to dictate point at earliest opportunity
- 1<sup>st</sup> strike mentality: 'Actor' vs. 'Reactor'

## Tactical Trends

- 3 traditional game styles moving closer together:  
Baseline Player – All Court Player – Serve & Volley Player
- Extreme ends almost extinct?
- Fewer specialists today
- Less *variety* of tactics
- This is a key difference between women's game and men's game

## Physical Differences: Women vs. Men

- Height: women 10-12cm shorter
- Weight: women 10kg lighter
- Body Fat % women 20-25% vs. men 10-15%
- VO2 max women 10-25% lower
- Muscle Mass women 23kg vs. men 35kg
- Upper Body women = *54% of male strength*
- Lower Body women = *68% of male strength*

## Tac/Tec Differences: Women vs. Men

- Men play with stronger reliance on the serve  
(higher % of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> serve points are won)
- More serving power, more *variety* of spin (esp. topspin)
- More approaches to the net
  
- Women play with stronger reliance on the return  
(more breaks of serve in women's matches)
- Less variety of spin (more slice than topspin)
- Less approaches to the net – lob used more as weapon

## Development Differences: Women vs. Men

- Women mature earlier than men
- 14 year old junior vs. senior player = a threat!
- 'Development window' closes earlier
- Less time to develop variety within game style?
- Higher expectation to compete at earlier age

## Some serve & return ideas

On court...

## Tactical Conclusions

- Make the serve and return more fun!
- Use tactical serving targets to teach technique – remember Frank!
- Think of the serve and return as the *start* of a pattern of play vs. start of a rally
- Use patterns that include her best 2<sup>nd</sup> shot
- Encourage baseline control whenever possible

## Tac/Tec Differences: Women vs. Men

- Women hitting the ball flatter and earlier
- Using pace of oncoming ball from up the court
- Using shorter, simpler swings to coordinate
- Prefer backhand to forehand?
  
- Men playing from further behind baseline
- Using heavier spin and using more of the court
- Often prefer forehand to backhand
- Use more tactical variety as a result

## Tac/Tec Differences: Women vs. Men

Average length of rally:

French Open 2005 (Carl Maes)

MEN

WOMEN

5.3

4.4

Slovenia ETA (2) U16 2006 (Iain Bates)

BOYS

GIRLS

5.8

4.2

### Influence of Court Surface: Women vs. Men

- Men tend to show stronger preferences for certain court surfaces
- More diverse range of shots = tactical variety
- Different game styles suited to different surfaces
- Between 1995 – 2006:

Only two French Open champions won a Grand Slam on another surface

*(Agassi and Kafelnikov)*

### Influence of Court Surface: Women vs. Men

- Fewer 'specialists' in women's game who excel only on one surface
  - Top players dictate the opponent *and* the court!
  - Game style and tactics remain basically the same
- Between 1995 – 2006:

*Six* French open champions won a Grand Slam on another surface

*(Graf, Sanchez-Vicario, Pierce, Capriati, S. Williams, Henin-Hardenne)*

## Court Surface: Women past & present

Singles Winners	1998	2005
Australian	Hingis	S. Williams
French	Sanchez-Vicario	Henin-Hardenne
Wimbledon	Novotna	V. Williams
US	Davenport	Clijsters

## Influence of Court Surface: Women vs. Men

*“Clay isn’t necessarily my strongest surface, but I just continue to play my game, and I think it holds up well whether I’m playing on hard courts, grass or clay.”*

- Alicia Molik

## WTA Top 10 Players

	1991	2006	+/-
Average Age	22 yrs	20 yrs 9 mths	- 1 yr 3 mths
Height	173.8 cm	177.2 cm	+ 3.4 cm
Serving Speed	103.2 mph	118.5 mph	+ 15.3 mph
Prize Money	\$841,197	\$1,622,403	+ \$781,206

## Playing from the Baseline

- At any given moment what do we see?  
Build / Attack / Defence
- Fewer 'neutral' moments today
- Game being played at a higher 'tempo' from the baseline
- Women hitting harder and earlier vs. men hitting more spin from deeper positions
- 'Building shots' create opportunities to attack...



## Building from the Baseline

*Consistency/Accuracy/Variety:*

- 10-25% points won as winners, 75% + errors
- 'Stinger' vs. 'Winner' mentality: 60:40, 70:30, 80:20.....
- Less qualities (pace, spin, variety), more accuracy needed
- Backhand cross-court = most common rally pattern?
- Ability to change direction is vital
- Big targets on switch since directional pressure applied
- How much variety is used?...

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## Building from the Baseline

*"I don't like big slicers. Like Conchita Martinez, I don't really like playing against her. She has a tricky game: lobs, slices, drop shots. Sometimes it's really difficult"*

- Anastasia Myskina

- Is variety the past or the future?
- Less variety today
- Henin-Hardenne backhand: defensive slice, approach slice, drop shot, short angle slice & topspin, passing shot, lob, aggressive drive, etc.
- 'Art of Coaching' is to decide how much variety is required...how long are you willing to spend on it? (Bayli)

## Attacking from the Baseline

- Players hitting hard, flat, and early
- Using shoulder high attack & drive volley
- Applying time pressure
- Using pace of oncoming ball
- Allows for accuracy and easier access to net
- Sending messages of aggressive intent

## Defending from the Baseline

- Defence must neutralise *immediately*
- x2 defensive shots in a row usually loses point
- Players must *accept* the need to defend:  
(‘dull defence vs. mighty miss’)
- Women using high and *low* recovery shots
- Counter-puncher becoming more common in response to the power player? (*Hingis, Myskina?*)
- Receiving skills often overlooked in favour of sending?

## When Playing at the Net

“Women are more effective at the net than men”

- O'Donoghue and Ingram, 2001

## When Playing at the Net

- Women choose net play much more carefully!
  - Traditional approaches have changed:  
serve/volley, chip/charge, approach shot harder due to strength of return and pass
  - Drive volley – link between baseline and net
  - Groundstroke technique with big targets
  - Sneak volley: short angle vs. deep angle
  - Smash: big targets and more practice!
- (dvd)

## When Opponent is at the Net

- Use the 'two ball pass'
- Pass down the middle (especially early on)
- Lob (especially over forehand side)
- Movement *up* the court to short angle
- Use the 'double bluff'

Tactical Development:

## Key Stages of Tactical Development

- Technical, physical, and mental skills all develop at varying rates and at different times
- Tactical development planned for the *long term*
- Do you have a 'vision' of player in 5/10years?
- Girls mature quicker than boys:  
early specialisation vs. medium/late specialisation?
- 4 Key stages as follows:

## Stage One (Fundamentals)

- 5 – 9 years old
- Coordination, movement, and reception skills
- Vital to let her *play the game* (mini tennis)
- Play mostly in first 3 game situations
- Tactical emphasis: ball over and in, move opponent around, recover to good positions
- Some net play situations towards end of stage
- Understanding game, rules, competition also

## Stage Two

- 9 – 12 years old
- Begin to build points with *sequence* of shots
- Recognise strengths and build stroke technique
- Tactical emphasis: Variety of serves (placement & pace), recognise 1st serve as chance to attack, neutralise with 1<sup>st</sup> return (high & deep), attack a weak serve, use variety from baseline, defend with height, win with consistency, use drive volley, finish some points at net, use lob as main weapon, play as a doubles *team*

## Stage Three

- 13 – 16 years old
- Start competing with senior players
- Expected to play in all 5 game situations
- Tactical emphasis: Variety of serves (direction, pace, spin), attacking patterns with 1<sup>st</sup> serve, change flight path and direction on return, attacking patterns with 2<sup>nd</sup> return, build/attack/defend from baseline, different tactics for different opponents, approach net with sneak, use intercept volley in doubles, use two-ball pass, play with strength on the run

## Stage Four

- 16 years +
- Well-defined game style
- Comfortable playing on different court surfaces
- Taking responsibility and problem-solving
- Using patterns that maximise strengths and minimise weaknesses
- Players ranked between 100-75 WTA are ranked 500 at 16yrs old

*“I like to win by myself and if I lose I like to take responsibility that I’m the one that lost”*

*- Tatiana Golovin*

## Tactical Conclusions

- Keep tactics simple
- Do one or two things *really* well
- Ability to execute game style against anyone, anywhere, and on any surface
- Game style = Technique + Physical + *Psychological*