

“Where Tennis Goes...”

Learning from the past, looking into the Future



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The last two to three decades, tennis, like every other sport, has gone through quite a few changes because of the greater athleticism of the players.

Is there a clear trend over those decades through the evolution of the game styles of the top players? What is the link between the technical/tactical aspect of the game and the manifest physical improvement of the players? Where is tennis going from here? What is the profile of the next number one?

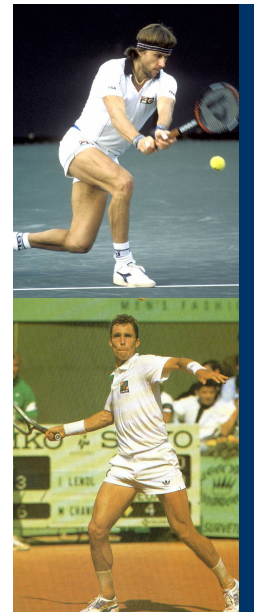
Key words: game evolution, player development, game style

HOW IT WAS : THE END OF THE WOODEN RACKET ERA

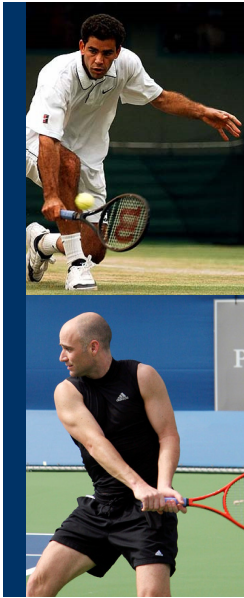
In the early eighties there was still a lot of variety in terms of game styles. Matches were won based on improved endurance and great consistency from the baseline. Even at the highest level players could win relying on one excellent shot. Another popular and efficient game style was the serve-and-volley style. The classic tactic was serving wide, coming in, getting the first volley in the open court and finishing the point with the second volley. Different game styles were also being used on all different court surfaces.

Clay and grass were the dominant surfaces on the tour, illustrated by the fact that the US open changed from grass to clay and from clay to hard court and the Australian Open moved from grass to hard court only in 1988.

Gradually players started to hit the ball harder, trying to dominate from the centre, pushing the opponents into making errors. The open stance became widespread especially on the forehand side. Endurance training was necessary to cope with longer rallies and more powerful hitting. There were more players coming on the tour using two handed backhand instead of one handed. The topspin backhand was mastered by the majority of players, enabling them to defend better by keeping the opponent behind the baseline. All players moved to using midsize graphite rackets which immediately pushed the power and control to a different level.



BIGGER BOYS AND FASTER BALLS

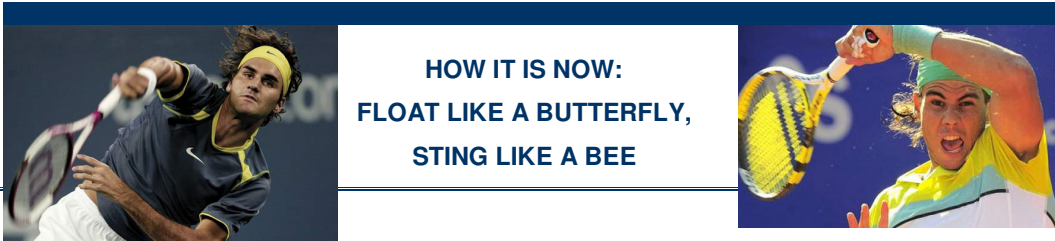


Players were getting bigger, the first serve and the first shot after the serve were developed as real weapons. More attacking players were looking for opportunities to finish the point when they could set up comfortably for their big forehand. Rallies were shorter, therefore more aces, more winners.

Other players were trying to take time away from the opponent by hitting the ball on the rise, playing closer to the baseline and in the court when possible. Grips were changing because players were going for heavier spin shots and were taking the ball on at shoulder height.

They were starting to use their two handed backhand to hurt the opponent, hitting winners.

Players were really getting into the habit of doing more gym work, focussing on injury rehab and gaining strength.



At the start of the millennium there have been some adjustments across the different court surfaces in order to align the playing speed. Changing ball sizes and slowing down the indoor and grass courts have definitely reduced the difference in playing speed between the different surfaces. The introduction of polyester strings allowed the players to hit even harder without losing their control. The improved “grip” on the ball creates even more spin when needed.

The current game is played by good to great athletes who have little technical deficiencies. Players are now striking with great accuracy and power from both wings, covering more court and hitting way harder from well behind the baseline. Players have developed a Contact Comfort Zone (CCZ) which results in attacking shots from all over the court.

More players understand the relevance of specific training blocks throughout the year to prepare physically for the next competition period.

THE NEXT STEP...

What is there to improve? How can we work with our juniors now to prepare them better for the pro game in 5 to 10 years time? How can we maximise the effectiveness of the training sessions? Will we ever witness again a great rivalry in the future creating icons in sport?

