Every Shot Counts:

Rallying Around Traditional Practice Strategies

By Claire M. Mowling and Brent Heidorn

TENNIS is a sport that promotes physical activity for a lifetime. Individuals of practically all ages can benefit from recreational and/or competitive play. Although playing tennis provides many wellness opportunities, learning to play the game and playing consistently can be a challenge, regardless of one's age (for the purpose of this article, the authors recommend content applicable to upper-elementary students through adults). Tennis is an easily accessible sport for most individuals as there are many public (and private) courts available. However, it takes time and consistent practice to become a confident and/or proficient player, which typically leads to more enjoyment of the sport. A traditional physical education curriculum often provides very little time each year (or throughout a program) to teach tennis basics to individuals. Certainly, developing the skills and strategies to become skillful through a physical education program alone is nearly impossible.

Most physical educators and coaches recognize the importance of promoting lifelong physical activity. Research continuously reports the overwhelming benefits of leading a physically active and healthy lifestyle (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008). It is imperative that teaching strategies and practices are adopted that encourage physical activity for student learners after they have left traditional K–12 physical education programs or other after school programs. The skills and strategies these participants learn within a physical education program and/or after school athletic program must provide them with the basics for success as they continue to participate in the activity for many years to come (Mowling & Heidorn, 2009).

A variety of different teaching and practice strategies are available for regular use and must ensure that the appropriate method to enhance learning is chosen. Traditionally, tennis is introduced to the learner one shot at a time (e.g., the forehand first). Because rallying successfully is vital to the game, it becomes necessary to teach all shots. This can be achieved by focusing on similar components of each skill (i.e., contact point, follow-through, preparation, and footwork) and allowing all shots to be practiced during every class or session. The order in which the skill cues are introduced is also significant to student success for rallying. For example, the forehand is usually introduced with cues such as preparation, contact, and follow-through (the order in which the cues take place for a traditional shot). However, this is not logical when teaching all strokes inclusively. Students can experience immediate success by focusing on the contact point first, knowing that if the racquet is in the correct place to contact the ball, one can successfully maintain a rally. The progression recommended by the authors (contact point, follow-through, preparation, and adjusting steps) has been previously adopted by the Professional Tennis Registry (http://www.ptrtennis.org).

Quality practice opportunities intended for the learner are necessary for their development as players or participants of sport. Questions often arise when one considers how to deliver skillful practice. Common methods most readily available include whole practice, part practice (progressive part or continuous part practice), or whole–part–whole practice. These concepts are similar to those described by Rink (2010) related to skill demonstrations. Generally, certain sport skills lend themselves to certain strategies. Description of some recommended methods follow.

Whole Practice

Whole practice often involves delivering the skill or game in its entirety. Teaching the whole skill is used so that the learner can appreciate the entire movement and understand the execution of the skill (Hansen, Tremblay, & Elliott, 2005). This approach is sometimes difficult when teaching skills such as the serve because of the complexity of the motion. The whole-practice method is also used to help students grasp the basic concepts of playing a singles match in tennis. One issue that may arise with a whole-practice approach is that a full-court singles match may limit success due to a lack of skill development or understanding of the game.

Part Practice

A parts approach is traditionally structured in two different ways, including progressive part practice or continuous part practice (Robinson, 2010). Progressive part practice means isolating each separate part of a skill (Coker, 2006). For example, when practicing the tennis volley, the contact point, follow-through, and body position could each be isolated parts. However, continuous part practice may be more widely used in tennis when coaching beginners. This form of practice involves isolating different parts of the skills (e.g., forehand) and then building upon those skills (Robinson). For example, teaching the forehand may involve the contact point, then the contact point and follow-through, and then the preparation, contact point, and follow-through. A typical lesson using continuous part practice for beginners can also focus solely on the forehand (or other specific skill). Each lesson then isolates the specific skill(s) but continually builds upon the earlier components.

Whole–Part–Whole Practice

Whole–part–whole practice is when the whole skill is practiced first (e.g., the entire serve), each step is then broken down (i.e., stance, preparation, ball toss, scratch the back, contact point, and follow-through), and then the whole skill is practiced again (i.e., the entire serve) to see if learning has occurred (Robinson, 2010). With this method, students are able to practice the entire skill before concentrating on individual aspects of that skill. As students consistently focus on the specific components of the entire skill, they will eventually be more prepared to successfully perform the whole skill. This process can continue with each practice session as students improve their performance or have specific needs.

Other areas of practice strategies should also be considered. These include variability of practice, blocked, random, and serial practice, transfer of training practice, and freezing (Robinson, 2010). McMorris and Hale (2006) state that "variability of practice is vital because otherwise we cannot develop schemas and hence build up generalized motor programs" (p. 101). *Blocked practice* specifically focuses on a skill in complete isolation (e.g.,

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only hitting cross-court backhands; Wilde, Magnuson, & Shea, 2005). *Serial practice* repeats a pattern (e.g., backhand cross-court, backhand down the line, backhand approach). Research shows that *random and serial practice* tend to produce better results compared with blocked practice (McMorris & Hale, 2006). Random practice takes on a more authentic approach, where different shots are practiced in a nonsequential order (e.g., the order of the shots played in a rally would be different every time; Wilde et al., 2006). *Transfer of training practice* is particularly important in tennis when considering intratask transfer and the similarities between skills. For example, the most common skills in tennis (i.e., forehand, backhand, volley, and serve) each have a contact point, follow-through, and preparation phase. In addition, those skills require the player to adjust his/her steps (footwork). *Freezing* and *unfreezing* at different stages in the shot-making process encourages the player to become more aware of possible errors that are preventing skill improvement (Robinson, 2010). For example, when teaching the forehand, the physical educator and/or coach should instruct and confirm that the student(s) prepare for the stroke with the racquet back and down, correctly, before other concepts are introduced (e.g., topspin, power, etc.). Teaching and practicing strategies such as logical order, whole practice, part practice (progressive part or continuous part practice), whole–part–whole practice, variability of practice, blocked, random, and serial practice, transfer of training practice, and freezing should be considered throughout the teaching process. Effective use of the methods for teaching several strategies in a lesson can lead to having a more complete and enhanced learning experience.

The authors have spent many years teaching tennis in a variety of different situations. Recent concerns related to teaching a university beginners' tennis course have alluded to how one can assist students in considering themselves "tennis players." Certainly, one ultimate goal could be that the students begin to feel confident and enthusiastic about the sport, so they continue playing regularly once the course is finished. Many teachers and coaches have followed a common recipe such as: a) teach the basics, and b) teach students to play tennis one shot at a time. In most situations, the forehand is the first shot to be learned (or taught). The most critical aspects of how to hit a successful forehand are taught (i.e., continuous part practice) first and all of the drills or activities are centered on the forehand (i.e., blocked practice). Many instructors simply tell students things like, "Don't worry if the ball goes to your backhand as we will work on that in the next lesson." However, most individuals who register for a beginners' tennis course want to be able to play the game almost immediately (i.e., whole practice), to be able to go to the tennis courts and play with their friends, and to be successful. These individuals desire to be able to consistently rally the ball over the net, which is arguably the most important and meaningful skill performed in the sport.

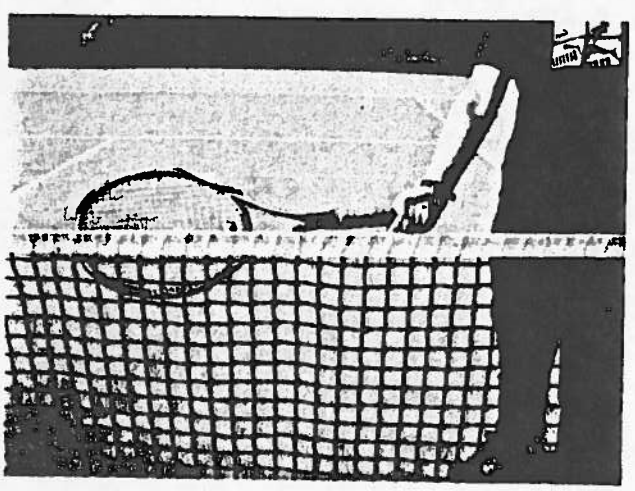

Figure 1. Contact Point

The authors believe that teaching tennis one shot at a time does not allow individuals to achieve maximum success. Research documents that one's rate of success is important when trying to foster intrinsic motivation (Mowling, Eiler, Brock, & Rudisill, 2004). Therefore, one solution to creating a learning environment where students feel confident playing the game of tennis is to teach all of the main shots with consistent repetition (i.e., distributed practice) together. This strategy is more effective than teaching skills in isolation before moving on (i.e., massed practice; Rink, 2010). Therefore, the purpose of this article is to identify how teachers can move away from teaching a single shot such as the forehand and move toward a common skill cue (e.g., contact point). Recognizing that the art of rallying is central to an individual's tennis success, the following four lesson concepts presented (contact point, follow-through, preparation, and adjusting steps) describe how specific skill cues can be the center of a lesson, while teaching (and learning) the forehand, backhand, serve, and volley together. The activities can easily be implemented into an average class of 25 to 30 students. The focus is on rallying, and this can occur with very limited space. For example, the United States Tennis Association (USTA) supports an activity that has beginners rallying with a piece of paper as their tennis court (USTA, 2012). Ideally, each student should have a racquet and a ball. Upper-elementary and middle school students can use the developmentally appropriate equipment for Quickstart (http://www.usta.com). Full-sized tennis courts or gym space can also be broken down to make smaller courts that heighten the overall success rate.

Lesson A: Contact Point

The point of contact in tennis is very important to the overall success of all shots (forehand, backhand, serve, and volley). It is important that teachers and coaches aim to teach students to contact the ball out in front of their bodies. Achieving the correct contact point early in the skill development process ensures that players can more effectively return a solid ball across the net and continue the rally. Three different activities for teaching the contact point are described.

Sample Activity 1: Contact the net

The activity begins by having players position themselves approximately one foot from the net. Teachers/coaches should have players practicing the contact point without the ball (freezing).

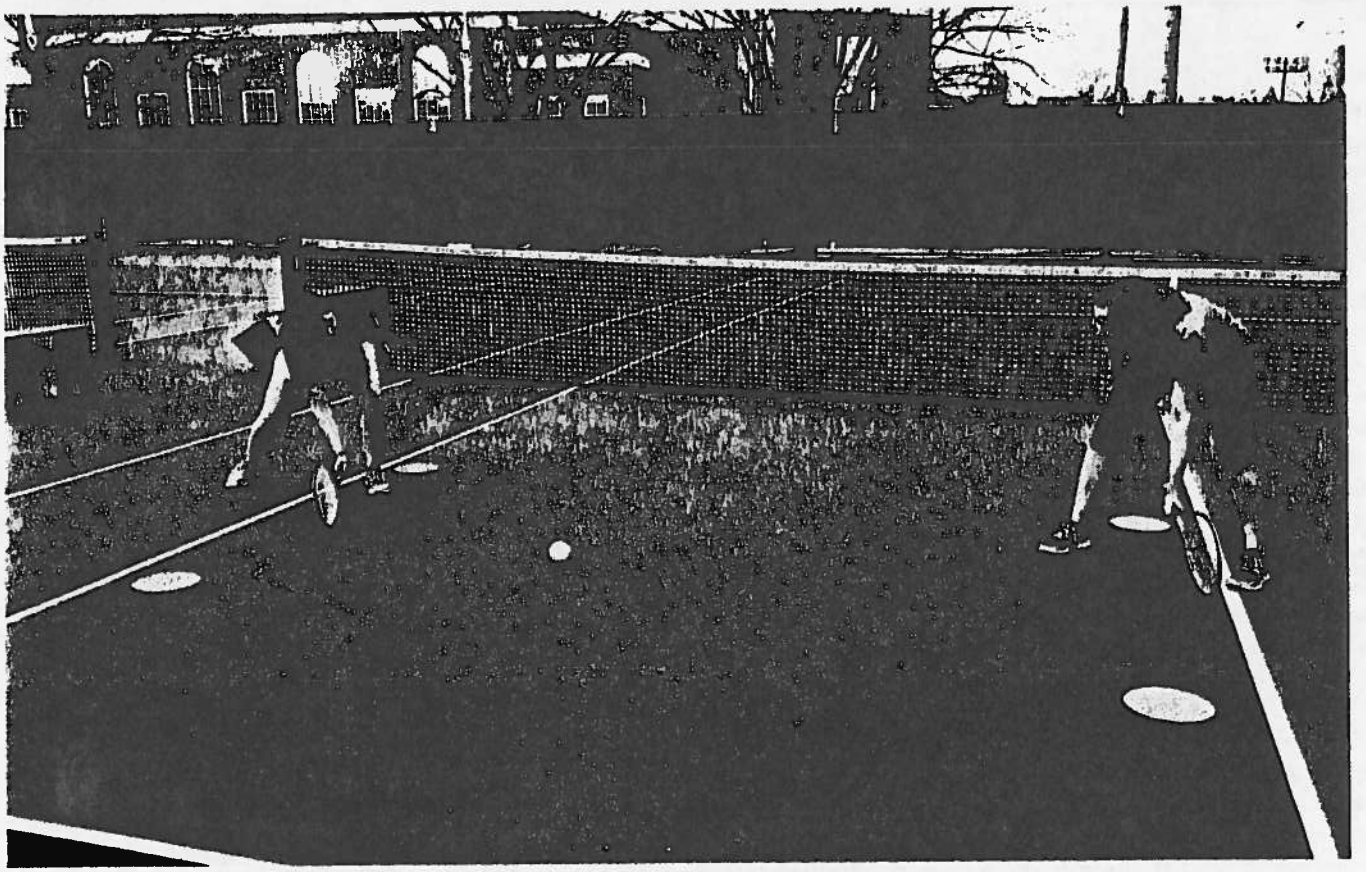

Figure 2. Floor-Tennis Rallying

The net is used as a guide to demonstrate the feeling of hitting the ball in front. Figure 1 demonstrates this activity using the forehand. Extensions (skill progressions) of this activity can focus on beginning in the ready position and returning to the ready position after every contact point has been achieved. With the ultimate goal being a continuous rally, players can try different combinations of strokes (i.e., backhand, volley) as if to simulate the unpredictability of a rally (random and serial practice).

Sample Activity 2: Floor-tennis rallying

The activity begins by having players work in pairs to rally the ball back and forth with their partner. Players should strive to maintain the longest rally possible. Initially, players can begin by playing floor tennis (see Figure 2). Cones can be moved farther apart on the court to force more player movement, or they can be-moved closer together to focus on accuracy. To further benefit from the activity, extensions should progress to playing alley singles and mini-tennis (straight and cross-court shots). Alley singles involve one player starting behind the doubles line and one player starting behind the singles line. The rally then occurs inside the alley. Mini-tennis is played over the net inside the service-box area. To encourage even more skill development, players should continue to help one another by giving their partner constructive feedback about their contact point. If a partner (or pair of students) is not accomplishing the task at an appropriate level, or if the skill is too difficult, returning to Sample Activity 1 (Contact the Net) is recommended. This will help the player(s) "rediscover" how the correct contact point feels before continuing on with Sample Activity 2 (Floor-Tennis Rallying).

As students consistently focus on the specific components of the entire skill, they will eventually be more prepared to successfully perform the whole skill.

Lesson B: Follow-Through

Once a good contact point has been established, the proper follow-through can be added to each stroke. Teachers should spend time in the warm-up for the lesson reviewing the contact point before moving on to the next component, the follow-through (continuous part practice). The follow-through is very important in controlling the ball, and it is sometimes difficult for beginners to consistently perform this aspect of the skill after each shot. From the contact point, the racquet should come all

Figure 3. Serve Follow-Through

Figure 4. Backhand Preparation

the way through to the point where the end of the racquet takes a photo across the net or the player figuratively kisses his/her bicep for the forehand and two-handed backhand. For the serve, the racquet goes across the body into the opposite pocket taking a photo at the end of the follow-through (see Figure 3). Sample cue words teachers can use and have students repeat might include "photo" or "kiss the bicep." Two different activities for teaching the follow-through are described here.

Sample Activity 1: Underwater rallying

This activity begins with two students standing on opposite sides of the net and rallying the ball using just the service boxes. Both players imagine they are "under water" or "in a tank of syrup." Every stroke should be performed in slow motion with the focus being on the follow-through. After the ball is struck, the players must slowly complete the perfect follow-through. Teachers should continually remind the students that where the ball ends up after it is struck is not central to the activity. The focus is on the follow-through. If players find it difficult to sustain a rally, they can modify the activity by having the coach or another player toss the ball to each participant and provide specific feedback when necessary. Players can focus on performing a variety of different shots in this activity (forehand, backhand, and volley).

Lesson C: Preparation

When hitting forehands, backhands, serves, and volleys, the preparation phase of each shot is different. However, it is still possible to teach this phase for all shots together as part of a lesson. Because the serve is how each point in tennis begins, and it is the only shot in the game that is a closed skill (the player has complete control over it, and it remains the same every time), it is often beneficial to begin practice activities with the serve. Some instructors encourage beginners to focus on the "scratch your back" aspect of the serve instead of the full swing. When hitting groundstrokes (forehand and backhand) the key is to focus on "getting the racquet back and down." This creates the low-to-high motion that often results in putting topspin on the ball (or a "rainbow" effect) as the ball travels from the racquet over the net (see Figure 4). Because the volley has very little backswing, some instructors use teaching cues by having players imagine that a glass wall is behind them. If the player takes a backswing, the imaginary glass will be smashed. One activity for teaching proper preparation is described here.

Sample Activity 1: Cone capture

Teachers often use targets to incorporate hitting with accuracy. A series of small cones can be placed around the service boxes. The activity begins by having players rally from inside the mini-tennis area (service boxes) (see Figure 5). Players can begin by serving, focusing on cues such as "scratch your back," "high five," and "in your pocket" (continuous part practice). After the serve begins the rally, the opposite player must use the preparation phase while hitting the forehand and backhand to get the ball up and over the net in a rainbow pattern. After the initial return, volleys are also incorporated when the ball is short and players are encouraged to move forward. If a player is able to hit a cone with the ball, he/she collects the cone and moves on to another rally. The goal is

to try to capture as many cones as possible. Students are likely to adjust their technique to focus on hitting the cones and hitting away from the preparation phase. Therefore, teachers must hold students accountable for correct preparation. This can be achieved by having a rule that if a player fails to correctly prepare for the shot three times, then he/she automatically loses a cone. Both players should enforce the rule.

Lesson D: Footwork

Adjusting one's steps is necessary to the overall success of every shot and will ultimately have a significant impact on one's ability to effectively rally. If the feet are not in the correct place prior to and when making contact with the ball, then the other aspects of the skill (contact point, follow-through, and preparation) also tend to break down or are performed poorly. Students will often subconsciously work on moving their feet throughout each lesson as they make continuous adjustments to hit the ball. However, it is important that teachers provide ample practice time for footwork (and specific instruction) in conjunction with the swing for each shot. One activity for teaching proper footwork is described here.

Sample Activity 1: Identify footwork errors

This activity incorporates a combination of all shots that have been learned and that may be used in a rally. The activity begins with players rallying with a partner, trying to record the highest number of consecutive hits possible. The players will attempt to

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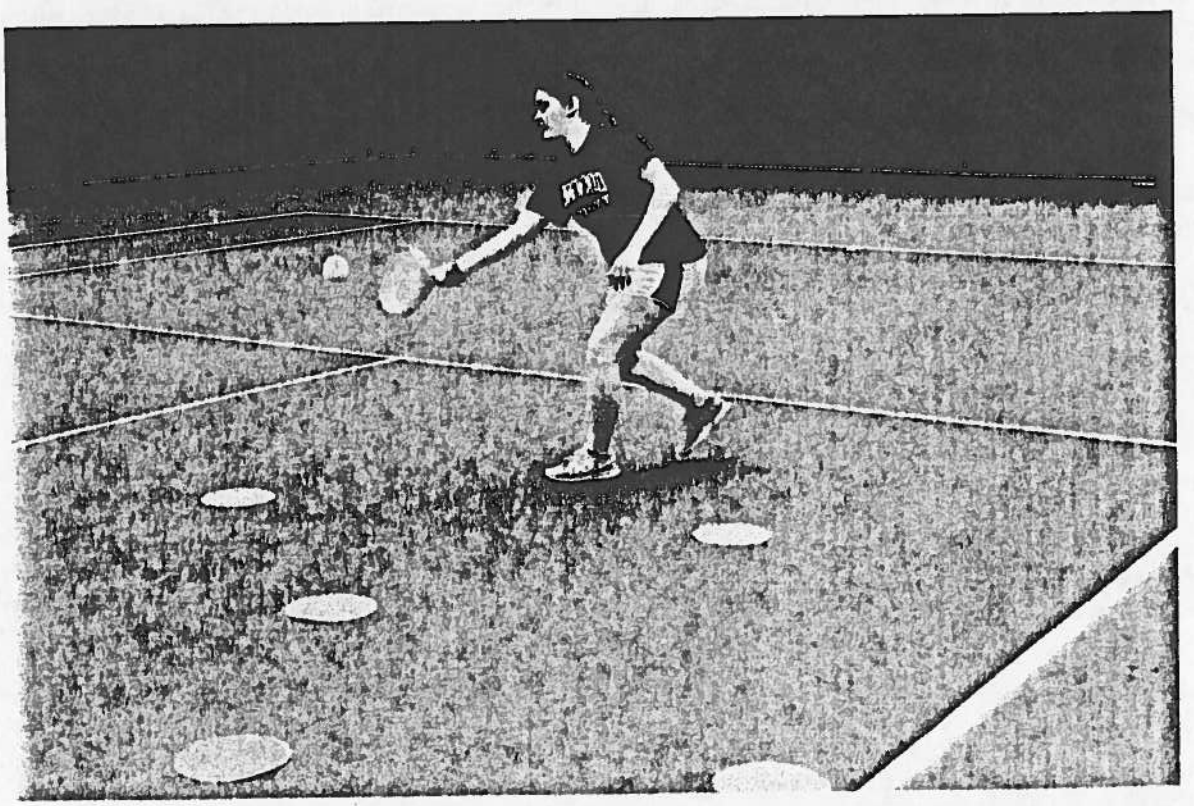

Figure 5. Cone Capture/Preparation

Figure 6. Open-Stance Forehand

move each other around the service-box area using the proper shot selection and fundamentals. The players will be asked to identify when they feel as though their feet are not in the correct position to strike the ball (see Figure 6). Either the player striking the ball or the partner can call "error" at any time in the rally. If possible, the players should remain in their current positions at the time the question is posed and should identify the specific error committed (e.g., weight is on back foot). A discussion between players should ensue regarding how to correct the error. Providing opportunities for students to engage in self-identification should help them develop a greater understanding of adjusting their steps and improving their footwork before and during each shot.

Conclusion

Contact point, follow-through, preparation, and footwork are very basic teaching cues that illustrate how the game of tennis can be taught in its entirety, further promoting and strengthening the idea of rallying, as this is the key ingredient to success. Additional concepts of the entire game of tennis can also be taught in a physical education or afterschool setting. For example, teachers may also want to focus on such things as direction, power, spin, court coverage, fitness, positioning, accuracy, or depth. Tennis has traditionally been taught to beginners with the "one shot at a time" approach. Arguably, the ultimate goal in instruction-type settings is to teach individuals how to rally effectively. Therefore, it makes sense to provide students with all necessary tools to be able to successfully rally without creating undue stress in a full-game situation. This approach ensures that players are enjoying successful opportunities and can continuously rally from the beginning.

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