

the action method in tennis

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For a long time, teaching tennis consisted of making pupils copy the best players' movements (in general when executing winning shots) or accomplish certain exercises.

One only has to observe a tennis match to realise that it is possible to execute flawless movements and still miss the ball or strike it with the racket frame. **Factors other than movements must therefore be taken into account.** Moreover, exercises must be cleverly conceived and organised in order to be efficient.

Noticing that simplifying the teaching of tennis excessively did not yield very good results, a group of teachers, all members of the Association Suisse des Professeurs de Tennis (Swiss Association of Tennis Instructors) have tried to develop more efficient teaching methods.

It should be noted that Switzerland is in a particularly favourable position for this type of research. It is a country in which three of the national languages make it possible to exchange and have access to information from France, Germany and Italy, nations which have all 'produced' great players and where teaching is well structured. Switzerland has also been privileged to welcome many tennis teachers who came to seek shelter following political upheavals. It has especially benefited from the experience of excellent Czech teachers who brought with them teaching methods which rank among the best in the world.

One of the first observations made was that it was essential to have a good understanding of how actions take place in tennis before making assumptions on ways of teaching it well.

In 1974, the Swiss Association of Tennis Instructors published its first book which was followed by a second manual in the year 2000. In these books, a certain number of observations, remarks and assumptions are put forward and developed. These can be summarised as follows:

- If one analyses human activities closely, one notes that human beings rarely execute movements as an ultimate goal. More often than not, these movements are a means of 'doing something', **accomplishing actions**, executing a task, solving a problem, changing a given situation into a desired situation. In other words, they are a means of **achieving an intention or responding to a motivation**. Actions are rarely isolated, they are almost always grouped into activities. Activities have a more complex feature: in tennis, shots are grouped into rallies, games, friendly or competition matches.
- In order to act, every human being has the ability to **perceive, move, memorise and combine these various abilities**.
- **Depending on his motivations and plans, the acting individual collects information** on a given situation using his sensory organs (visual, auditory, tactile, proprioceptive, etc.). He then **processes this information** in the peripheral and central nervous system, which leads to the creation of representations of the situation and to the conception of tactical plans. In turn, these trigger **technical movements** performed by the psychomotor system in order to achieve the plans or intentions. The **result**

obtained is subject to further **observation and assessment processes**, similar to those that have just been mentioned. These data are **memorised** by the individual. This can be defined as the foundation and the condition of the **learning process**.

- In tennis, this means **perceiving cues** (opponent's movements, sound of the ball at impact, initial flight of the ball, etc.), **interpreting / evaluating these cues** to determine a tactical intention (being cautious, taking risks, etc.) and **accomplishing**



this intention by executing the appropriate technical movements in order to achieve the desired results. The results obtained are then observed and assessed; in other words, they are compared to those that were desired. **Each action produces experiences which are memorised.** With the accumulation and joining of all the different experiences, behaviours usually become more

productive: progress is made and the player gets closer to the goals. That is when there is **learning**.

- It is important to stress the fundamental unity that exists between body and mind and therefore between perception and motor skills and physical and psychic abilities. Any **perception** of a given situation triggers **psychic and motor reactions** (for example emotions). A frightening situation can prompt an individual to run away or simply cause his face to become pale, which means that the muscles which regulate the functioning of the blood vessels have entered into action to modify the diameter of the vessels.
- **In tennis, every situation is different from the next and presents a high level of uncertainty** (there is no such thing as two similar shots). This means that in order to obtain good results in tennis situations, one needs to accomplish a lot of actions and **enjoy many diversified experiences**. Previous personal experiences in similar activities, such as ball sports (football, volleyball, table tennis, squash, mini-tennis, etc.) facilitate the learning process. **But the most efficient experiences are of course those made with tennis balls and rackets.**
- The number of actions to execute should be excessively high for individuals with little experience and who act more at random than with a target in mind, if they are wanting to reach and return balls with sufficient control in order to enjoy playing. **However, the learning process is facilitated and the number of experiences greatly reduced if the learner can benefit from the experience of a qualified person who can help him with his advice or remarks and who cleverly organises the series of actions to be accomplished.** (See below).
- Every activity has an **internal logic** which determines orders of importance and priorities. Thus, it

seems reasonable to **consider tactical intentions in priority before choosing the technical executions** (see further down for the definition of those terms). You must decide what you want to do before asking yourself how to do it.

- **The learning of an activity obeys a certain progression.** In the course of the evolution of an individual, **new abilities and possibilities emerge** progressively and it is essential to take these into account in the learning. Children creep and crawl on all fours before they can walk and run. Similarly, very young or unskilled tennis players can only reach the ball at first, then send it (and later on return it) by guiding it in one, and then in different directions, at a moderate pace and with a safety margin, before their tennis skills develop and allow them to repeatedly try and achieve risky shots with different sorts of pace, placement and spin.
- **Acting is intending to reach a goal.** But some goals can only be achieved after certain periods of time and the accomplishment of programmes of actions more or less complex. This is the reason why it is useful to make a distinction between strategic, tactical and technical goals. **Strategic goals** relate to the targets that one wants to reach more or less in the long term, **tactical goals** to what one wishes to accomplish 'here and now' (on the tennis court) in order to realise one's intentions and **technical goals** to the psychomotor means (shots) to be implemented. For instance, a beginner should set himself as a **strategic goal to collect information** (e.g. finding appropriate equipment and a qualified teacher) and **play with the intention to learn.** To that end, he must adopt a '**co-operative**' game tactic consisting of getting on well with a partner in order to extend rallies and accumulate a great number of

experiences. He must set himself a **technical goal to start executing easy shots** with high trajectories, late impact points and short backswings. On the other hand, advanced players must **train strategically** in order to win. They must **practise, even in training sessions, putting their opponents on the defensive.** To that end, they must **learn and perfect technical movements (shots) which are efficient in competition situations.** These movements must therefore be numerous, diverse and often risky and include highly contrasted types of grips, swings and footworks.

- **Strategy, tactics and technique are closely linked together** in every human action and this is also true in tennis. However, the teacher can **attract the attention** of his pupils on one of these notions rather than on others. We are of the opinion that in tennis **the attention of beginners must be primarily focused on tactical/strategic factors** and that **advanced players should above all get information on technique and fitness issues.** Beginners do not know themselves very well and are often not sure what must be done. The psychomotor knowledge acquired in everyday life enables them to execute the easy technical



activities proposed to them almost every time. On the other hand, advanced players know what they should do and why they should do it, but often lack the physical qualities or the knowledge of certain technical details to achieve