What are You Really Doing to Your Player if You are Feeding from the Net?

photo Peggy Edwards

by Stan Oley

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Do your students lose to players that you feel are technically inferior? Do you constantly hear yourself saying, "Move your feet"? Do you take a special interest in the fact that you feel your players are very slow? (Some coaches hire fitness coaches just to increase their player's speed on the court, but still see few results). Do you feel as though your players play well in lessons but cannot put it together in a match?

There are simple solutions to these issues, however your player may never receive the solution during a lesson. Before we get to the solutions, it is important to understand two things: how one learns a motor skill such as a tennis stroke, and the decisions that occur in a motor skill sport such as tennis.

First, there is the motor skill of the tennis stroke; how it is currently taught and how it should be taught. Historically, tennis technique has been taught by an instructor standing at the net feeding a simple ball to the player at the opposing baseline, offering verbal instruction and some rough demonstration. Whether the player is working on their rally ball, passing shot, inside-out ball, etc., the feed is always the same. This traditional lesson has not changed much in 30 years.

Although many players may claim to be either a visual, kinesthetic, or an auditory learners, it is important to realize that when a player is learning a motor skill, such as a tennis stroke, s/he will learn through visualization first. Many times the player is confused by all of the verbalizing from the instructor. If you want proof, tell someone how to do a jumping jack as opposed to showing them. The verbalization not only is much slower, but will result in a very robotic and unnatural looking movement. Once the player has seen the stroke properly demonstrated, it is important s/he try the skill. Once the player has attempted the stroke, it is important to get their feedback of how it felt. How it felt, or the kinesthetic of the skill, is extremely important to skill acquisition. Only when the player has the kinesthetic of the stroke, can s/he accept verbal cues and corrections in a much easier manner.

Equally important to learning a motor skill, such as a tennis stroke, is the decision making or cognitive aspect of the stroke. Sports like tennis, baseball and football are considered decision making sports, as opposed to non-decision making sports such as diving, darts and bowling. Players in the decision making sports are balancing their technique while adapting to a constantly changing environment, where in non-decision making sports are trying to just master a certain technique. It is very important to understand how differently the two kinds of sports should be taught. If a player is always being fed the same simple ball into their strike zone, then the cognitive aspect, or decision making aspect, of the player's skill will be deficient, resulting in poor ball recognition skills. Ball recognition is the player's ability to judge the incoming ball in flight so that s/he is able to make appropriate decisions regarding the stroke, such as strike zone, racquet path and follow through. This deficiency in the cognitive aspect of the skill from receiving a simple feed in the lesson results in players feeling that they play much better in the lesson than in matches. They are right! It is because the cognitive aspect of the stroke is not being stimulated. If the player cannot judge the ball in flight, then they will not get the ball in their strike zone, hence their technique of any stroke will be inadequate.

Lack of ball recognition skills is also why a technically inferior player may beat another player consistently, because they have sound decision making skills and execute the right shot when necessary. You will see a lot of teaching pros, playing with their non-dominant hand, beat technically superior players, because they hit the right shots at the right time and know when to play offense or defense.

As stated above, most tennis lessons involve the instructor standing at the net feeding a simple groundstroke to the player at the baseline, or the instructor standing at the baseline feeding a simple volley to the player at the net. This type of feeding only allows the player to practice a one dimensional stroke, resulting in a one dimensional player. Obviously, the ball in this type of lesson is nothing like what the player will receive in a match. It is clear how a player can get frustrated with tennis when they are taught in a non-decision way in the lesson and then are expected to make decisions in a match.

Why do instructors feed from the net? First, most tennis instructors did not receive a degree in teaching motor skill sports. Next, the average instructor's skill level is NTRP 4.0-4.5. It would be physically exhausting to feed correctly all day, and impossible to feed the appropriate ball and coach as well. Also, people do not accept change easily. I have seen countless instructors attend my seminars over the past 16 years who agree it is the correct way only to return to their club the next day and resume feeding from the net. Another reason pros feed from the net is because they are not confident that their player is ready or good enough to move onto another shot. With the ability to demonstrate while standing on the same side of the court as your student, you will be able to have your player hitting new shots in 20-40 balls that may never occur if teaching on the opposite side of the net.

Most players are convinced by their instructor that they need to master just one groundstroke technique, because that is what is solely emphasized in the lessons. Low to High! They are taught to send the ball with exhaustive criticism to their technique, but rarely are players taught how to receive different kinds of balls. You cannot play the game of tennis with just one groundstroke. It would be like playing 18 holes of golf with just your driver! Most professional players may have more than 20 different forehands alone, requiring different backswings and paths through the ball. Even a club level player must have nine to10 different forehands ranging from inside-out, on the rise, slice, etc., to survive a competitive match. It is the cognitive skill here again that is important to be able

to decide which forehand to use and when. This part of the skill is reliant solely on the recognition skills of the player, because the player's technique will only be as good as their ability to get the ball in their strike zone. At the professional level, these decisions are being made sometimes before their opponent even strikes the ball. At the club level, decisions have to be made at least before your opponent's ball passes over the net. Currently, about 80% of club level players make their decisions when the ball is ready to bounce in front of them. Why is this? Again, when the instructor is feeding from the net, they are eliminating the recognition aspect for the player, because the ball is fed at the very place from which the player's decision should be made.

What would solve this problem? First, both beginning and advance level players need more demonstration of the motor skill of the stroke in the lesson, however when the instructor is trapped at the net feeding, this is not possible. The use of a ball machine or another instructor feeding is the only way to solve this demonstration issue, with the use of the ball machine being the most obvious economic solution. The ball machine allows the instructor to feed many different kinds of balls to the player, while the instructor properly demonstrates a particular stroke. The fact that ball characteristics, such as the speed, spin, height, depth and direction, can now be "game simulated" from the ball machine, it will also accelerate the player's cognitive skill learning. Teaching this skill more visually and adding the cognitive aspect of ball recognition allows the player to learn to receive more balls in their strike zone, hence dramatically improving their technique of a particular shot. If the cognitive aspect of the skill is continually stimulated, you will find that the improvement of the player's recognition skills will result in them getting to the ball much faster as well. Remember, you could be the physically faster player in a match, however if you do not recognize the incoming ball soon enough, you will get a very late start to the ball and appear slow on the court. One reason players, such as Federer, have such great technique and execution is because they recognize the incoming ball so early in flight, affording them much more time to set up and hit the appropriate shot.

Teaching with the ball machine also allows the teaching professional to create an infinite amount of drills, because of the ability to create ball characteristics that they are not capable of feeding consistently or find too exhausting. Just a few examples: playing a moonball on the rise, on descent, out of the air, or as a slice. Also, you can teach them to play a slice off of a slice or maybe an inside-out forehand off of a

heavy topspin ball. Another example would be to teach a half-volley or passing shots off of different styles of approach shots.

Given these facts, why do only about 10% of today's instructors embrace the use of ball machines in lessons? Disturbingly enough, when I have asked pros this question, the #1 answer is, "You really have to have a program set for the player. That is a lot of extra work." Almost always when I have heard this, I found a ball machine sitting in the shed and the pro out feeding from the net.

We have discussed the feed in a lesson; now let's discuss the "live ball" play in a lesson. Some coaches think that rallying with their student will give them positive influence from hitting a live ball from a professional. However, the cognitive aspect of the skill is damaged, again because in most cases, the player is trying to hit back to the instructor during the lesson, and then tries to flip the switch and hit away from the opponent in a match. These are two completely different learning environments. Also, instructors feel their player's rally groundstroke skills are enhanced when the instructor is at the net volleying and the player is pounding groundstrokes at them. In reality, tomorrow you will want your player to pass the opponent, not hit to them when the opponent is at the net. To add insult to injury, if the player were truly working on their rally ball while they were crushing those groundstrokes at the instructor playing the net, the player was probably keeping the ball low and short at the instructor's feet. Good luck having your player hit those high and deep groundstrokes tomorrow in a match.

I would say 90% of all club level to elite players would not be able to distinguish between a high and low approach shot in which the high approach should be played in the upper level strike zone with a horizontal follow through. The ball should be hit with much more speed than that of the rally ball. The target area is large. The low approach shot should be hit to a depth and placement target area in a number of ways including slice. The fact that a passing shot racquet path is more directly through, rather than that of a rally ball, and that you may have many different backswings on your groundstrokes due to incoming ball characteristics, are just a few examples that today's club players do not grasp because of improper feeding during a lesson.

The next time you wheel your teaching cart up to the net and begin feeding, just think about what you are really doing to your player!