

Introduction

Part I: Designing a program focused on tactics

Louis Cayer (Tennis Canada)

3.1 Before you begin

The primary *goal* of any program that focuses on tactics is to help players win more points (and eventually, more games, sets and matches) by improving their ability to make **quality tactical decisions** when they play. In a tactics-focused program, the coach selects specific playing *situations* of relevance, and trains players to execute *responses* which have a high probability of success. This is the starting point for training the *patterns of play* (shot sequences) that commonly occur during tennis points.

Tactics-focused programs for *high performance* players are, of necessity, long term in nature. Here the coach must work to train a comprehensive set of patterns of play relevant to the player's *gamestyle*¹. By contrast, tactics-focused programs for *recreational* players should generally be short term in nature. Here the goal is to help students achieve immediate success in winning more points. This is highly motivating for players, even if they tell you they only like to play "for fun". At the Coach 1 level, you'll be working primarily with recreational players and, hence, you'll be designing short term programs.

¹ The term *gamestyle* refers to how a player *prefers* to win points. Is a player more of a *net rusher* or a *baseliner*? In today's game, baseliners can further be subdivided into those who prefer to win their points by using *power*, *placement* or *consistency*. Gamestyles are the subject of Section 3.2 (2) below. Additional information is provided in Chapter 9, Section 9.3.

How does one set up a short term program focused on tactics? What is the process? In general, you should start with a specific **tactical theme**, and then build on it. In planning the content of the program, remember to continually ask yourself these two important questions:

"Am I choosing:

- the playing **situations** *that occur most frequently for my students?"* (These are the ones that will have the biggest impact on their development.)
- the tactical **responses** *that are most likely to bring my students immediate success?"* (When there are several good tactical responses for a situation, you should always train the easiest ones first.)

These are key factors in motivating students to continue taking lessons.

Below are two frameworks that you may find useful in designing a tactics-focused program. One of the frameworks is for singles training. The other is for doubles training. The frameworks should help you select a well-focused and useful set of situations & tactical responses as the content for your program. We begin with singles.

3.2 Designing a tactics-based *singles* program

In selecting an appropriate set of situations & tactical responses for a singles training program, the following organizing factors can be very useful:

- broad tactical themes
- player gamestyles
- the 5 game situations
- phases of play

The first two items will help you zero in on the **tactical themes** that will be the subject of the lesson plan. The last two will help you generate the **patterns of play** associated with those themes. We'll now look at each item in turn, and provide an example of how it can be applied.

1. Broad tactical themes

In programs for recreational players, there are 3 broad tactical themes that have proven to be very useful:

- being steadier when starting the point or rallying
- winning more points when attacking easy balls
- giving away fewer points when in difficulty or faced with using a weak stroke

These are easy themes to "sell" to students, and they can keep you busy for a long time. All you need to do is come to an agreement with your student(s) on which of the themes is of the most interest and/or most important to work on.

Whichever theme is chosen, working on it will help your players win more points. This will increase their motivation to take more lessons, and in all likelihood will bring you additional students.

EXAMPLE: Being steadier when rallying

Using this theme, as lessons progress you can set up increasingly challenging tasks for your student(s). For example, you can demand ever greater consistency (longer rallies), or you can gradually increase the difficulty of the balls they are receiving. Here is an example of a progression in which the tasks become ever more challenging.

- "Let's practice rallying down the middle of the court (as in a warm-up), but let's try to keep the ball in play for 10 consecutive shots."
- "Now let's work on maintaining a crosscourt backhand rally. That's a very important skill to acquire, and one you'll find very useful."
- "Now let's work on maintaining that rally when receiving a high-bouncing, deep ball to your backhand."
- "Today, let's practice moving our opponent around during a rally. When you can force your opponents to run, it's more difficult for them, and there's a higher chance they'll make an error. And if you can keep them on the run, you'll also start to tire them out."

As the task becomes more challenging, so too does the corresponding technique. This is why a coach's feedback during a lesson must often switch back and forth between tactics and technique. It should become clear to the student that it is "tactics that drive technique", i.e., that technique is simply a tool to help players execute tactics more efficiently and effectively, and therefore win more points.

Note that when delivering a program whose focus is tactics, any technical feedback should be limited to simple tips to help players execute the tactics more effectively. You should not attempt to perform surgery on a player's strokes in a tactical program.

2. Player gamestyles

Another way of organizing a tactics-focused program is to think in terms of "gamestyles". When we talk about a player's gamestyle, we are talking about how that player *prefers* to construct and win points. In today's game, there are a number of commonly recognized gamestyles. You'll often hear their characteristics described in post-match comments made by the losers of tennis matches:

Post-match comment	Gamestyle
He placed the ball so well. He had me running everywhere.	Baseliner: placer
She hit the ball so hard. I just couldn't handle it.	Baseliner: power hitter
He got all my shots back into play. That guy just doesn't miss!	Baseliner: retriever / counter-puncher
He was always coming to the net and was very tough to pass.	Net rusher
She can do pretty much anything out there!	All-court player

Gamestyles are somewhat of a generalization as most players like to "cross the boundaries" occasionally. They are, however, a good generalization as most players prefer to take control of points in a specific way.

Thinking in terms of gamestyle can be very useful in designing training programs with a tactical focus, especially for stronger recreational players and stronger juniors in a high performance program. When you concentrate on a particular gamestyle, you automatically limit the number of tactical patterns you need to deal with. This helps add focus to the program. Below are two examples of how gamestyles can be used in program design.

a) Helping players develop a gamestyle

Helping a player develop a specific gamestyle is important as it limits the number of tactical themes and associated patterns of play that need to be trained. When a player adopts a gamestyle, it helps improve their focus when playing points. It also helps to automate their decision making processes, and that is especially important as the speed of the game increases.

A program designed around gamestyles can either (1) focus on training players in a pre-selected gamestyle or (2) provide players with an opportunity to experiment with a variety of gamestyles. The latter can be useful in helping players discover the gamestyle that best suits them.

b) Training players to play against different gamestyles

A program of this nature would show players how to play against opponents with various gamestyles².

EXAMPLES: (1) Playing against a baseline retriever. Here you could have students focus on becoming steadier, or hitting into the corners on easy balls. (2) Playing against baseline power hitter. Here you could have students focus on being steadier, and staying in the point by occasionally hitting lobs when receiving difficult balls, or by positioning themselves further back behind the baseline.

² Chapter 9, Section 9.3 contains additional information on this topic.

When designing a program around gamestyles, you'll need to know the tactical themes associated with each. The example below should give you a good idea of how this type of program planning works.

EXAMPLE:

Gamestyle: Baseline: placer

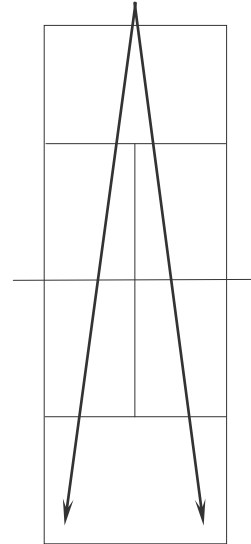
This is what most recreational players should practice before they experiment with the power game.

Associated strategy: Moving the opponent around

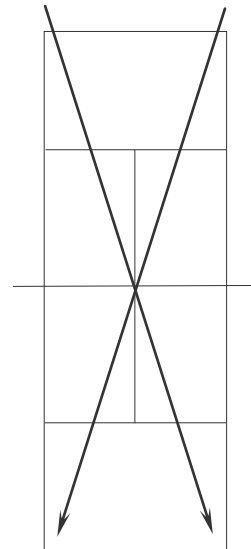
Associated tactical themes:

As mentioned earlier, you should start with the game situations that occur most frequently, and with the responses that are easiest to learn and mostly likely to bring the player immediate success. For example, you might decide to work on the following themes:

- a) Taking control of the point from the middle
- On receiving a ball up the middle, the player takes control by hitting to either sideline.
 - Receiving a ball up the middle is common at the 2.0–4.0 level.
 - Setting up for and controlling this shot is relatively easy as the player doesn't need to move very far.
 - A forehand groundstroke is the most reliable option for most players.

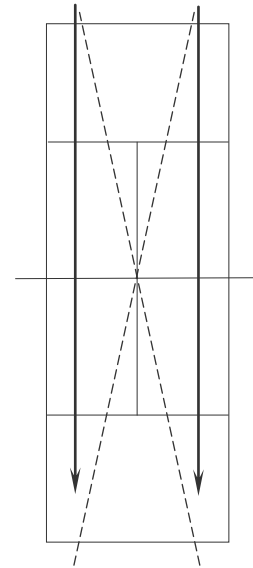


- b) Grooving a great crosscourt exchange
- A well-angled crosscourt groundstroke forces the opponent wide to the sideline. The shorter recovery associated with a crosscourt shot also makes it easier for the player to quickly get ready for the next shot.
 - It is easiest to start with the forehand.
 - You can have players begin by standing near the back corners until they groove the shot. Then you increase the difficulty by having them move to the ball and recover properly on each shot.
 - Note that at this point there is no decision making required (players have only one option).



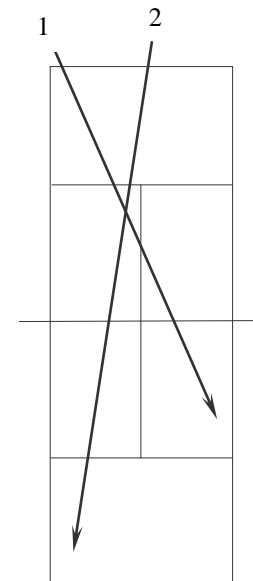
c) Changing direction by returning a crosscourt ball down-the-line

- After a series of crosscourt exchanges, this forces the opponent to move in a different direction.
- Changing the direction of the ball is more difficult, but it can be very effective.
- When training this shot, it is easiest to start with the forehand.
- There is an element of decision making here. On more difficult balls, changing the direction can be too risky. The player must learn to make that call based on the speed, depth, etc. of the oncoming ball.



d) Using the X-pattern against a player who stands far back behind the baseline

- One initiates the X-pattern by hitting a short angle to the sideline, and then hitting the next ball deep to the opposite side of the court.
- This pattern creates a difficult shot for the opponent, who is now forced to run diagonally backwards to retrieve the second ball.



e) Other tactical themes associated with "moving the opponent around" include the dropshot-lob combination, the wrong-footing shot (hitting behind an opponent on the run) ... and so on.

3. The 5 game situations

Once you've decided on the tactical themes you're going to work with (as per subsection 1 or 2 above), you can expand on them by considering how they can actually be applied in a tennis point. This will lead you to the specific *patterns of play* (sequences of shots) that you can train in your program. One way of doing this is to go through each of the 5 game situations, and see if and how a tactical theme can be applied. The 5 game situations are:

- serving
- returning serve
- both players back
- approaching (or at) the net
- opponent approaching (or at) the net

EXAMPLE:

Under *Player gamestyles* (subsection 2 above) we developed a set of tactical themes associated with the strategy of "moving the opponent around". One of these themes was "changing direction by returning a crosscourt ball down-the-line". Let's assume we've decided to start with the forehand because it is easier (and players will experience earlier success).

Our tactical theme is now:

Using the forehand to return a slower or shorter crosscourt ball down-the-line.

This particular theme has application in all five game situations. (This is not true for all tactical themes.) The following table lists some of the common patterns of play that emerge.

Note: The examples below assume that you're working with a right-handed player.

Game situation	Ball received (a slower or shorter crosscourt ball hit from the deuce side of the court)	Ball to be sent (using the forehand)
Serving	Crosscourt return	Down-the-line drive
Returning serve	Wide 2nd serve	Down-the-line return
Both players back	Crosscourt groundstroke	Down-the-line groundstroke
Approaching/at net	Crosscourt passing shot Short angle crosscourt	Down-the-line volley Down-the-line approach shot
Opponent approaching/at net	Crosscourt approach shot	Down-the-line passing shot

Training each of the above patterns of play better prepares a player for the diversity of opportunities to use a tactic in live gameplay.

Remember that when training a selected pattern, you should always progress from from *closed* to *open*, and from *easy* to *difficult*. In other words, you should move increasingly in the direction of realistic gameplay.

When looking through a list of possible patterns (such as those in the above table), be sure to start with those that occur most frequently in the student's gameplay. Also, you should frequently select patterns involving the serve and the return-of-serve. All too often, these are ignored or undertrained, and players who don't practice them will have trouble getting into the point.

4. Phases of play

A second way of expanding upon a tactical theme is to consider how it applies to the various *phases of play* in a tennis point. When playing a point, a player should be in one of four phases of play:

- rallying
- attacking
- defending
- counterattacking

When planning a program you should consider all of these. (Rallying and defending are important at all levels of play; attacking and counterattacking become increasingly important as a player's skill level increases.)

When training your players, you can either concentrate on one phase of play at a time, or you can mix them and thereby also work on training the players' decision making (e.g., Should the player rally or attack? defend or counterattack?)

As you'll recall from your previous *Tennis Instructor* certification course, you can use the three colours of a traffic light — green, yellow and red — to help players recognize the difficulty of a situation and select the appropriate phase of play:

- Yellow: rally
- Green: attack
- Red: defend or counterattack

a) Rally

A player should be in the rally phase when receiving a "middle of the road" (yellow) ball. In training patterns of play associated with this phase, you can use a three-stage progression, starting with *steadiness*, then working on *depth*, and finally working on the *tempo* of an exchange (i.e., gradually increasing the speed of the ball).

b) Attack

The player should be in the attack phase when receiving an easy (green) ball. A player can attack in one of several ways: by placing the ball, driving the ball, or by coming to the net.

- ***Placing the ball:*** Good placement can put an opponent on the run. Possibilities include:
 - changing the direction of the ball
 - exploiting the full *width* of the court with well-angled crosscourts, and with down-the-line shots that land reasonably close to the sidelines
 - exploiting the full *length* of the court by mixing deep shots, angled shots, drop shots and lobs
- ***Driving the ball:***
 - hitting faster than one's regular tempo when receiving an easy ball between waist and shoulder height
- ***Coming to the net:***
 - hitting an approach shot when receiving a shorter ball

c) Defend or counterattack

When receiving a difficult (red) ball, the player has the choice of either playing it back safely (defending) or taking more risk with an aggressive return (counterattacking). Some examples follow.

- ***Wide ball:*** Here the player needs to develop the ability to hit a lob (defend) or hit a crosscourt drive on the run (counterattack).
- ***Fast ball:*** Here the player needs good hand-eye coordination in order to either block the ball back (defend) or hit a more aggressive return (counterattack).
- ***Opponent approaching the net:*** Here the player must be able to hit either a lob (defend) or a passing shot (counterattack).

3.3 Designing a tactics-based *doubles* program

Designing a doubles program is a little different than designing a singles program (see the previous section). In doubles, you can plan the content of a program by first listing the objectives to be achieved *in order of priority*. Once you've done this, you can design your program based on that list. In all likelihood, there will be many things you'll want to work on and, therefore, no shortage of lesson themes.

In doubles training, remember to consider *everyone's* role — server, receiver, server's partner and receiver's partner — AND each team's positioning and movement during a point. This will lead you to develop many different lessons.

Initial evaluation of a doubles team

The following checklist should be useful when doing the initial evaluation of a team's play, and determining the training priorities. When you see problems, you should generally address the topics near the top of the list before you tackle those further down.

- a) The basic positioning at the start of a point
- b) The role of the server and receiver
- c) The role of the server's partner
- d) The role of the receiver's partner
- e) The initial movement of the server's and receiver's partners after a crosscourt return-of-serve
- f) The server's second shot: volley, approach shot, or baseline groundstroke. (You can adjust this to suit a player's personal preferences and/or level of play.)
- g) The receiver's second shot: passing shot, lob, baseline rally or approach shot
- h) The server's partner's ability to poach
- i) Positioning and movement when both players are at the net:
 - basic positioning
 - lateral movement
 - up & back movement

For a brief review of the responsibilities of each player in doubles, you may refer back to the *Tennis Instructor Manual* from your previous certification course (Chapter 14: Strategy and Tactics).

Other possible approaches to doubles program design

Always bear in mind that the primary goal in all tactical training is to help players win more points (or give away fewer points) by training them to make *better tactical decisions* in selected gameplay situations. Any work on technique should be kept to a minimum, and confined to an occasional quick tip — one of relevance to the execution of the tactic being trained.

In designing a training program for doubles, you can use a variety of approaches. For example, you could choose a **tactical theme** to be developed over a period of time (e.g., 4 weeks). For example, you might choose "taking control of the net". Under that theme you could work on **topics** such as: the serve & volley, the serve & drive (with the server coming into the net), the receiver coming into the net when returning the 2nd serve, lobbing the net player and coming in, and so on).

You can also use some of the ideas presented above in section 3.2 on designing a program for singles. For example, when first evaluating a team, you could focus on how the team wins (and loses) points, and plan your program around that. Or you could work to develop a "team gamestyle" (e.g., both players to the net at the 4.0 level of play; one player up / one back at the 2.5 level).

When designing your program, be sure to consider the amount of time required to cover each topic properly. Your treatment of each topic should follow the same process, namely: introduce the topic and ensure that the players understand why it is important for them; train the associated tactic(s) using a series of progressions that move from *closed* to *open*, increasingly becoming more gamelike and realistic. On average, most topics will require two lessons to provide players with the necessary volume of balls, and to build their confidence to the point that they can successfully execute the tactic in a gameplay situation.

For more information on doubles tactics, refer to the *Tennis Instructor Manual* from your previous certification program (Chapter 14: Strategy and Tactics).

3.4 Worksheet for tactical lesson planning

The worksheet on the following page should be useful in planning lessons for either singles or doubles.

Regardless of whether you're dealing with singles or doubles, each lesson in the training program should focus on a specific *situation* (the "tactical context") and on a specific *response* to that situation (the "tactical objective").

- **Situation** (*tactical context*): Describes the position and movement of the opponent(s), and the nature of the ball they've just hit.
- **Response** (*tactical objective*): Describes where your player(s) will move to

intercept the oncoming ball, the type of shot to be hit, and the recovery position.

With respect to structuring each lesson, you may refer back to the material in Chapter 3 of the *Tennis Instructor Manual* from your previous certification course. In that manual you may also wish to review the six organisational elements³ in setting up a drill (Chapters 7 through 12).

³ The six *organisational elements* for a drill are : goal, feeding, projection, organisation of people, movement patterns, and rotation.

Worksheet for Tactical Lesson Planning

Situation (tactical context)

Opponent

(mark movement / recovery on court diagram)

Phase of play: _____

Oncoming ball

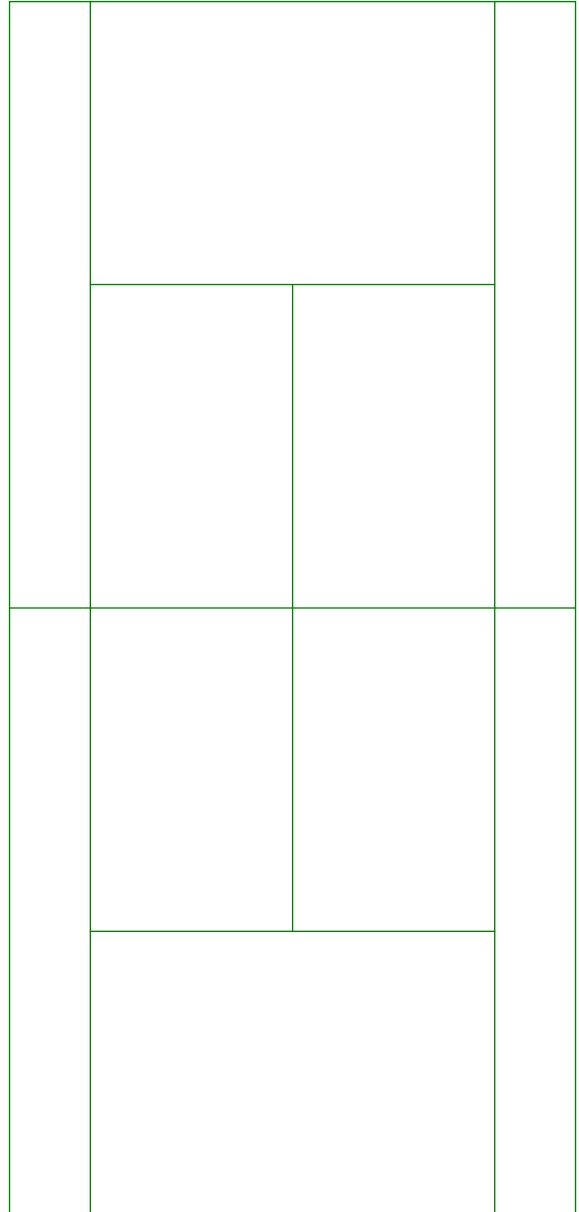
(mark path & landing point on court diagram)

Height: _____

Speed: _____

Spin: _____

Opponent



Response (tactical objective)

Student

(mark movement / recovery on court diagram)

Phase of play: _____

Stroke: _____

Ball to be sent

(mark path & landing point on court diagram)

Height: _____

Speed: _____

Spin: _____

Phase of Play <i>Select one of:</i>	Zone <i>Select one of:</i>	Focus <i>Select one of:</i>	Ball received <i>Specify:</i>	Ball sent <i>Specify:</i>
Rally	Backcourt	Consistency	Direction	Direction
Attack	3/4-court	Precision	Height	Height
Defend	Mid-court	Power	Speed	Speed
Counterattack	Net	On the rise	Spin	Spin
			Distance	Distance

Summary

"Am I choosing:

- the playing **situations** *that occur most frequently for my students?"* (These are the ones that will have the biggest impact on their development.)
- the tactical **responses** *that are most likely to bring my students immediate success?"* (When there are several good tactical responses for a situation, you should always train the easiest ones first.)

Finally, in every lesson you deliver, remember to communicate your "love of the game" through your **enthusiasm** for your students!