Surviving TV Tennis Disease

The U.S. Open series is in full swing and in a couple of weeks, the best tennis players on the planet will descend on the Billie Jean King National Tennis Center to contest the last Grand Slam event of the year.

At the same time, millions of tennis fans will gather around their television sets to watch in awe as the best in the business do their thing. Two weeks later, after witnessing brilliant shot-making and gravity defying athleticism, these same people will head to the court infected with a severe case of what I call “TV Tennis Disease” otherwise known as “play like the pros syndrome.”

A student of mine, Patrick is a classic example of this. A true tennis-fanatic Pat has a lifetime subscription to virtually every tennis publication, online and off, and spends the majority of his free time glued to the Tennis Channel.

Pat loves the game and dreams of playing like his TV heroes. Twice a week he comes to my lesson court, shifts his grip over a few inches ("Because that's how Rafa holds it") and fires away.

As ball after ball hits his frame, the back fence or bottom of the net, Pat squeezes his grip a bit tighter and keeps swinging away. Sure, now and then he does manage to hit a world-class (“just like Rafa”) shot and when he does he feels great! Sadly, this ever so occasional brush with greatness is just enough to keep Pat flailing away, oblivious to the 30-40 errors that sandwich his "great" shots.

When I suggest to Pat that his approach may not be the best, he smiles and says, "C’mon Greg, this is how the pros do it. My Rafa forehand is unbelievable... when it goes in and they can't touch my new Andy Roddick serve... when it goes in." The phrase “when it goes in” appears at the end of every description of Pat’s game.

Patrick’s TV Tennis disease has blinded him to the fact that he's lost in the first round of his club championships the last four years and hasn't won a league match since Pete Sampras was # 1 in the world. Like the addicted gambler, Pat is convinced that he doesn’t have a problem and that tennis greatness is the next big swing away.

TV Tennis disease infects millions of players with its symptoms usually worsening right around Grand Slam events. We see the pros play and we figure that, since they’re the best in the world, **their way** must be **the way**. Right?

Those of you that have read my articles or books know that my answer to that question is a resounding “wrong.” I am not a huge proponent of the “play like the pros” approach to tennis.

Touring professionals are exceptionally gifted athletes who have spent thousands of hours hitting millions of balls to fully develop the very special and rare talent that God has given them. As a result, they are able to successfully, and brilliantly, execute the “modern” game. Most who reside in the world of recreational tennis cannot.

Richard B. Meyers in his fabulous and funny book, Tennis For Humans” agrees:

***“All of us would like to play like the “big boys and girls” on television-serving blistering aces, driving backhand winnners down the line, executing exquisite drop shots with a surgeon’s touch. But, realistically regular humans are never going to be able to do these things as consistently as the pros……………….Most likely you don’t have the talent, the coaching, the practice time, or the desire to devote that much time to your tennis………..you are going to have to get better by using your head, by beating your opponents with combinations of ordinary shots instead of those highlight-film wonders from the tube.”***

Now, I’m not saying that we shouldn’t watch the pros and learn from them. Though they are among the world’s most gifted athletes, have spent countless hours honing their skills and play a game that is, in many ways, very different than that which we mere mortals toil with, we can learn from them: if we know what to look for.

As you settle in to watch Nadal, Federer, Sharapova and the rest contest this year’s U.S Open, pay attention to, and try to emulate, these three things and I guarantee your game will improve immediately and dramatically!

**1. Quick Feet**

Tennis legend Stefan Edberg once said that “everyone can hit the ball but getting to it and getting to the right place at the right time is really what tennis is all about.” Edberg’s right.

As you watch the pros play, pay particular attention to their feet. Aside from the fact that their feet are almost always in motion, you'll notice that, every time, just before their opponent makes contact with the ball, they take a split-step. You should as well.

Time the hop so that you are in the air as the ball is struck. As you come down, and have determined which way the ball is traveling, touch down first with your outside foot (the foot furthest away from the oncoming ball). Then, with an explosive push, turn your body towards the ball and begin moving.

As you move closer to the ball, shift your footwork focus from “getting there” to “positioning yourself properly” to swing your racket. This is done by taking shorter and more frequent steps. As you watch the pros, you’ll notice that they average 10-12 steps between each shot they hit.

Finally, watch how quickly the pros recover. As soon as they’ve completed their stroke, they focus immediately shifts towards moving back towards the center of the court. Here are three methods of recovery footwork the pros use that can help you as well.

**1. The Side Shuffle Method**. If you watch Roger Federer recover after hitting a forehand you’ll see that he’ll step his left foot back towards the center of the court and then shuffle his right foot sideways. He’ll continue in this manner until her recovers back to where he wants to be. If he’s recovering after hitting a backhand, he’ll do the reverse: step his right foot back towards the center of the court and then shuffle his left. Again, continuing until he reaches his destination. Also notice how Federer, when doing the side shuffle movement, is always facing the net with his eyes focused on the ball and his opponent.

**2. The Crossover Step Method**. When the pros find themselves in a situation when they need to recover faster, they’ll often use crossover steps. These are done by, first turning your body in the direction you want to move, and then taking two or three crossover steps followed by side shuffle steps as described above. Again, be sure to keep your eyes focused on the ball and our opponent as you recover. Pay particular attention to Rafael Nadal. He’s a master of the crossover step.

**3.** **The Sprint Method**. Your opponent has pulled you out wide on the deuce side of the court. You’ve returned their shot however they now have 9/10 of the court to hit to and end the point. What do you do? In this situation, you simply have to anticipate that they’re going to hit to the open court, turn your body and run as fast as you can. This is called the sprint method of recovery.

Sprinting is the last resort method of recovery for a couple of reasons. Once you’ve turned and are sprinting to the ball, it makes positioning yourself properly much more awkward than if you were moving laterally. Plus, as you’re running, you lose sight of your opponent. Nevertheless, desperate times call for desperate measures. When forced to sprint, your initial challenge will be getting to the ball. Once you do, then, you can worry about hitting it.

**2. Fast Racket**

One of the most common errors I see among recreational players is late racket preparation. While watching the U.S. Open, try to catch a match involving either of the Williams sisters. As you do, pay particular attention to how quickly they prepare their rackets for their groundstrokes. You’ll notice the moment their opponent strikes the ball, it looks as if their racket has been shot out of a cannon.

The next time you step onto the court, give yourself a goal of having your racket in position before your opponent’s shot crosses the net. Initially, it may feel a bit awkward to get your racket moving this quickly. My students will sometimes say that, "it messes up my timing." It does not "mess up" your timing, it changes it.

Believe me, you’ll be able to adjust your timing, and when you do, you’ll find that you’re going to have far more time to execute your shots. There is no such thing as "too soon" in racket preparation.

Whether you use a semi-loop, full loop or bring your racket straight back, get it prepared as soon as you can and you’ll always be able to take a good swing at the ball.

**3. Fit Body**

Professional tennis players come in all shapes and sizes and play the game with a wide variety of styles. However, one thing that they all have in common is fitness. Today’s game is characterized by long, physically demanding points and the pros know that their beautiful strokes are useless if they cant get into position or are too tired to execute them.

Fitness is a huge part of their overall training and, though you may not be playing five sets in the blazing sun, you’re going to find that, as you move up the level ladder, being fit can be just as big a weapon as an 130 m.p.h serve.

TennisOne has a fabulous section of fitness-oriented articles that will improve your game. Read through them and begin to put together a program that focuses on these key areas:

1. Endurance

2. Agility

3. Flexibility & Strength

Improving your fitness does not have to be high tech or ridiculously expensive. Here are a few of my favorite exercises for each area.

Endurance

A tennis match consists of anywhere between 300 to 500 short sprints. To prepare for that, you need something for your heart that will simulate these short bursts of speed. Jogging is fine, though you may find it hard on your joints, particularly if you’re on the older side of 30. Swimming and biking are also great.

Be sure that, with whichever activity you choose, you mix in short sprints. For example, jog for one minute and then sprint for 10 seconds before resuming your jog, bike for one minute, and then sprint for 15 seconds. Swim one lap slowly and sprint the next. This mirrors the work that your heart has to do on the tennis court.

Agility

To this day, I have not found a better agility exercise than jumping rope. It’s a great cardiovascular workout and also strengthens your muscles. You can jump rope virtually anywhere, and a plastic beaded rope costs as little as a three dollars. If your knees are a little tender, like mine, stay off hard surfaces and jump on a cushioned or carpeted floor.

Begin slowly and start off jumping using both feet. Move the rope with your wrists, jump only 3-4 inches off the ground and land on the balls of your feet. Here is a simple jump-rope program to get you started.

Both feet: 10 times

Right foot: 10 times

Left foot: 10 times

Alternating feet: 10 times

Slowly increase your numbers as your technique and fitness improve.

Flexibility & Strength

Several years ago, I was given a gift of a one-hour private yoga lesson from one of my students. The weightlifter in me said that yoga was for "wimps," but I was able to push that ignoramus aside and give it a shot. Sixty minutes later, my thoughts on fitness changed forever. Yoga workouts have significantly improved my balance, strength and flexibility plus I’m more relaxed, better able to focus and suffer far fewer injuries.

Yoga, like tennis, can be practiced at any age, from 4 to 104, and today there are more than 15 million people doing it in the United States alone! It’s inexpensive, can be done anywhere and by anyone. Maria Sharapova, Serena Williams and John McEnroe are among those who have climbed onto the yoga mat as part of their training program.

I’ve found that Ashtanga yoga provides the most complete combination of strength, flexibility and stamina. You can find further information on the various disciplines of Yoga at www.yoga.com.

As always, be sure to consult your physician before beginning any new form of exercise.

Quick Feet, fast racket, fit body. Keep these in mind as you enjoy the U.S. Open. Incorporate them into your game and, before you know it, you will have something in common with the best players in the world …..winning!