

## **INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this article is to make coaches aware of tactical training for players under 13 years old. It is aimed at group training, not private coaching. The main points covered include:

Tactical planning for technical development  
Tactical planning: diversification before specialisation  
Tactical training: developing patterns of play  
Tactical training: decision-making  
Other considerations.

### **1. TACTICAL PLANNING FOR TECHNICAL DEVELOPMENT**

At this stage, we often view the training of technique as the main priority with playing points or games coming second. In actual fact technical training should be introduced as a means to an end - to succeed tactically.

The coach should design his annual plan around the competencies that he would like his juniors to have at the end of the year ie. the game situations and the patterns of play he would like them to have mastered in several months from now.

Eg. Groundstrokes: the coach may want his athletes to develop over the year the tactical ability to move the opponent around. This could demand the development of the following patterns and the corresponding technical shots:

- a. Take control of the point from the middle of the court
- b. Grooving great diagonals (crosscourt)
- c. When to get out of the diagonals i.e. changing direction for a down-the-line shot
- d. To open up the court with an angled shot
- e. Drop-shot followed by a lob or passing shot
- f. The x pattern .....

In order to develop these patterns, technical aspects will need to be introduced. However this technique must be seen as a tool to play the tactic more effectively.

So the tactical objective should first be chosen eg. taking control of the point from the middle of the court by moving the opponent side to side. To develop this pattern, an important technique will be the use of the forehand using disguise to enable the players to hit effectively crosscourt or inside out. At the beginning, it is acceptable for the coach to groove the forehand technique with some basket feeding, but players should move on to cooperation drills amongst themselves as soon as possible. Live feeding is superior to basket feeding. Therefore we could do live feed ball by doing 2 on 1 drills where the 2 players hit to the middle and the player hits to the corners.

Various types of drills are possible but by the end of the technical acquisition the coach should finish up with playing situations involving the serve and return.

**a) Specific playing situation:** On the deuce side, player A serves wide, player B returns to the middle. Player A then plays an inside out forehand into the open court. Many variations of this scenario are possible as long as Player B returns to the middle of the court to initiate the tactical objective.

**b) Real playing situation:** The coach observes to see if the skills learned are implemented in a game situation ie. to check that the server is looking to control the point by hitting an attacking shot whenever the receiver returns to the middle of the court.

## 2. TACTICAL TRAINING: DIVERSIFICATION BEFORE SPECIALISATION

There are times where it is possible to help individual players to specialise a specific game style. But for group club programs a coach may gear the year long program to patterns of play based around the 3 major methods of putting pressure on the opponent:

- a. Moving opponent around
- b. Using the big forehand
- c. Coming to the net

Indicated below are patterns for each of the above categories to show the various options. The youngster experiments tactically and technically with these options and may decide he prefers some options more than others. If we only select one option or game style, we may force the youngster into a game style that doesn't fit his psychological and physiological profile.

Ideas on annual planning for singles tactics for under 13 groups: Before developing a specific game style, the juniors should be exposed to different options. Outlined below are patterns grouped around 3 major themes corresponding to 3 different game styles. We should also remember that patterns can be developed from any of the 5 basic singles game situations ie. serving, returning, rallying from the baseline, approaching the net or passing. Each of these 5 basic situations should be trained in order to prepare the player tactically and to address the different strokes associated with each situation.

	<b>MOVING OPPONENT AROUND</b>	<b>USING THE BIG FOREHAND</b>	<b>COMING TO THE NET</b>
1	Serving wide	Serve: position; recovery	Serve-volley
2	Return away from the middle	Return: running around backhand	Serve and look to come in
3	Taking control from the middle by hitting corner to corner	Return position and recovery	Return «chip and charge»
4	Grooving the diagonals	Imposing forehand tempo	Return «drive and charge»

5	Changing direction	Running around the backhand	Approach shot
6	X pattern	Moonball – drive	Attack followed to the net
7	Drop-shot and lob	Getting into the forehand diagonal	Sneak in after drop-shot or ....
8	Open court volley	Modifying position	Intercepting moonball
9	Wrong-footing shot	Opening up the court	Fake to come in

Once you have your options you can decide to combine them in different ways according to your coaching style. You can use all those associated with one game style or you can combine the options as soon as possible eg. from 3/4 court you can make the player either place the ball, drive the ball or come to the net.

### 3. TACTICAL TRAINING: DEVELOPING PATTERNS OF PLAY

Tactical training is required to develop the mental side of the game - decision-making, anticipation and percentage tennis, point construction with patterns, etc. ... The focus should be at all times to develop game styles, to present tactics for surfaces, environment, score, types of opponents, etc. ...

But at some stage we should develop on court for any of the above options, some patterns to implement the tactical information. What is a pattern?

Developing patterns is more than just presenting a task. We need to be able to know how the point was constructed to set-up a particular situation and what pattern follows this situation in order to know what to work on both tactically and technically.

In an open-skill process of perception - decision – execution, it is very important to develop patterns in order to make decision-making automatic so that the player is able to perceive the situation and execute the appropriate shot quickly. In a game where speed increases, the need for patterns also increases. We should note that technique not only needs to be automatic but also decision-making. This is why the elopment of a specific game style with its corespondent patterns is so important.

**Patterns:** They are used to develop automatic or conscious decision-making for tactical point construction. There are various types of patterns that can be developed:

**One shot selection:** ie. always return a wide serve crosscourt.

**Shot before the shot to be trained:** ie. before (set up: moon-ball) for the actual shot (big forehand).

**Shot after the shot to be trained** shot (big forehand) with the shot after (coming in to volley).

**Combination of shots:** X pattern; drop-shot/ lob.

**Adapting the tactical concept to patterns for all 5 game situations if possible:** i.e. If we want to use a big forehand, how will we construct the point to use this shot effectively from each of the 5 game situations: serving, returning, approaching the net, passing and rallying from baseline.

#### **4. TACTICAL TRAINING: DECISION-MAKING**

Tennis requires a lot of decision-making:

**Before the tournament, before the match or before the point:** Considerations include: environment; opponent's game style; my game style; the score. Some of these decisions are made automatically and others have to be considered as play is unfolding.

**During the point:** The players need to have been exposed to some decision-making situations beforehand because the coach might say from his chair, «Look to come in more», but what will the player be «looking» for or «Use your forehand more» but how will the player do this, etc. The coach has to help the player to recognise what to look for.

**Training decision-making during pattern development:** This helps to develop the skill of making decisions under pressure when required as we know that most of our patterns will be automatic. It can accelerate the learning curve and avoid no decisions, late decisions, wrong decisions, etc..

**Notes:** Elements to consider when training decision-making during the point.

**5 ball control (when receiving)** Eg. How you play a backhand approach shot may be determined by the type of ball you receive. If you are hitting the ball from a position close to sideline, you may choose to go down-the-line but if you are hitting the ball from the middle of the court, you may choose to go crosscourt.

**5 ball control (when sending):** Eg. If you feel your drop shot is great, you might try to sneak in 3/4 court but if you miss-played the drop shot, you might retreat a bit more behind the baseline.

**Opponent movement or position:** When opponent is stretching you, sneak in.

**Personal movement or position:** When I create a good forward momentum on the 2nd serve return, I should follow it into the net.

#### **5. OTHER CONSIDERATIONS IN TRAINING SINGLES TACTICS**

Even when working on other aspects of the players' development, you can establish a link with tactics.

**Technical:**

When learning a new stroke, introduce tactics in the very beginning by showing what happens before, during and after the stroke in a game situation so that the player quickly understands the point construction. For example when teaching a one handed slice backhand, you may start with a self-drop ball at mid-court but as soon as the student gets the feel of the shot set up a game situation to illustrate that playing a slice approach makes it easier to volley or smash the following shot.

**Anticipation:**

It is important to coach anticipation for two reasons: 1) it is a must for advanced tennis and 2) it helps to develop the sense of disguise and variations when playing.

**Physical:**

Tactics also involves being tougher, faster, stronger than the opponents in order to reflect that tennis is a sport of combat and we have to be able to outlast and outperform our opponents

**Psychological:**

Develop the proper psychological attitude related to tactics. Dominate; take control; pressure, courage etc.