

# FIRST STRIKE

Point



# situations build mental strength

## Is there a problem with the way our players practice?

Several different factors have contributed to the lack of American juniors among the elite on the international tennis scene during recent years. Interest in other sports along with financial and logistical concerns have altered the competitive landscape making it more difficult for the United States to develop top players. Several prominent college coaches have suggested that many American juniors do far too much stroke drilling in practice and do not play enough sets. This observation provides a crucial first step toward addressing this area in

which there are serious flaws: the way our juniors practice.

From the field of motor learning we know that there are four basic ways to organize practice. The first is called **blocked practice**, and consists of completing all of the practice of one skill before moving on to practice another skill. This would be similar to having a coach feed a number of forehands to be hit cross court before hitting a number of backhands cross court. The same could be said for partner-oriented hitting drills. The players generally perform at a relatively high level of success and comfort, but don't really have to think or problem solve.

The second type of practice is called **serial practice**, and consists of performing skills in a specific sequence. An example of this would be the well-known and often-used crosscourt-down-the-line drill in which the performer hits one backhand followed by one forehand, etc. This is a little more difficult than blocked practice, but still not very challenging to the brain.

The third, and most challenging, way to organize practice is called **random practice**. This type of practice allows the feeder or hitting partner to hit the ball anywhere on the court in no particular order.

The fourth type of practice is **variable practice**, and consists of a random practice of a similar set of skills, such as different forehands or backhands.

The research in motor learning suggests that beginners should start off using blocked practice to prevent an overload of the information processing system, but as quickly as possible move to serial and then to random practice. This will force the student to think and use his problem-solving abilities. The thinking and problem solving may make practice look more difficult and awkward at first, but in the end what the player is striving toward is the ability to perform at a high level in competition. This is the ultimate positive effect of practicing randomly.

Apparently, a number of facilities in the United States heavily utilize the blocked practice structure and many of the American players entering the college ranks look mechanically proficient, while the international players know how to win. It is our contention that this is largely due to the fact that they practice in a mentally challenging, problem-solving environment.

This article will make a connection between motor learning theory and the way it has been applied to develop a system of player development

*continued next page*



*Facing page – Strike first with the first serve.  
Left – Build the point with a slice backhand groundstroke.  
Above – Play defense.*



*Prepare to finish the point.*

for the University of Texas women's tennis program as conceived by its head coach, Jeff Moore.

Developing a tennis player involves work in three "spheres" of training:

1. **Emotional** (behavior between points)
2. **Mental** (problem solving during points)
3. **Physical** (technique and fitness)

The vast majority of junior players that enter the program at the University of Texas and attend on-site camps in the summer have received training that overemphasizes the physical aspects of tennis. They have hit a zillion balls and done two-on-one drills to exhaustion. The result is that they are very effective during practice under these circumstances, but lack the ability to put shots together during competition. Watch the juniors at the U.S. Open and you will quickly see that Americans who "look" fabulous are outnumbered by international players who win. International players are learning how to "play the game" from a very young age, while Americans obsess on technique. By the time they reach college, many American players are burned out because the learning curve has been flat for years. It is a challenge at Texas to resuscitate them by structuring relevance into their workouts.

How does one address these concerns? The first step is to commit to the concept of designing drills that create a positive transfer of learning from practice to competition. Tennis is an open-skill sport, meaning that players must contend with an ever-changing, unpredictable environment. Unlike a carefully choreographed practice, match play forces a player to constantly react to an opponent's shot selection by solving problems and executing an effective response. The repetition of this process throughout the course of a match creates **mental** stress and fatigue. To adequately prepare for matches, players must be challenged mentally as well as physically in practice. Leaving a workout grooved and comfortable breeds a sense of false confidence. Anne Smith, an 11-time Grand Slam doubles champion who is currently a doctoral student

at the University of Texas, once said that she rarely played a match in which her strokes felt "perfect," so why do players practice with that expectation?

How does a coach simulate a mentally stressful, problem-solving environment in practice? The answer is to prioritize working on point situations. At Texas, the practices are organized to work on patterns in five tactical areas. These five areas form the anatomy of a point:

1. **First strike:** first serve and return of second serve
2. **Point building:** point building groundstrokes
3. **Capitalizing:**
  - a. capitalizing groundstrokes
  - b. midcourt approach shots
  - c. midcourt approach volleys
4. **Finishing:** forecourt volleys and overhands
5. **Defense:**
  - a. first serve return
  - b. second serve
  - c. defense vs. baseline
  - d. defense vs. net rusher

The focus of our drills is on *where* as opposed to *how* to hit the

ball. Blocked, stroke isolation drills are used to lead into random point situations. For instance, players may begin practice by hitting serves at targets. However, they use this drill to lead into a **first strike** drill in which they practice using their first serve in point situations against a receiver. The randomization inherent in point situations forces the player to confront the following three-step process for every shot: (1) Where am I? (2) What is coming at me? (3) How do I respond? Constant repetitions of this problem-solving process challenges players to exercise their minds. Emphasis on quick, optimal decision making prepares them for the reality of match play. Even the way we communicate as coaches is crucial. Texas team practices rarely involve conversation about such things as serves, forehands or backhands. Instead, they are taught within the context of **first strike** and **point building**.

There is an urgent need in this country to shift the focus of training from an obsession with mindless, never-ending repetitions to one of quality and variability.

*see Practice, Page 30*



*Capitalize on a three-quarter court.*

## Leagues

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scores 8 points. Record each win as 1 point for the team. All players are encouraged to go to the net and shake hands at this time to conclude the end of the match.

Parents can volunteer to head neighborhood Jungle Team Tennis Leagues. The rules can be adjusted to fit the age and skill level of the group. This program should be free of charge, or offered at a minimum cost to cover T-shirts and some food expenses, to the community until numbers justify creating a formal league. USPTA professionals can serve as consultants and contacts for future skill development through lessons and clinics.

Good luck with your Jungle Team Tennis!

*I am happy to share this with you in hopes of getting feedback both in value and how it might be adjusted to fit the needs of a specific community. Please feel free to send all modifications and ideas for improving Jungle Team Tennis to Dan Bonfigli, USPTA, Tennis Director at Racquet's Edge, 4 Gauthier Drive, Essex Junction, Vt. 05452. Call (802) 879-7734, ext.128, fax (802) 879-5794 or e-mail kbbonfigl@pop.k12.vt.us.*



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## Practice

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Until this happens America may continue to produce players who can function well in a choreographed practice, but falter in competitive situations. Too many American juniors strive to leave practice feeling comfortable about their game and yet how many times do they leave a match with the same feeling? Emphasis on the physical aspects of tennis have enabled our players to hit the ball harder and to achieve higher levels of conditioning. Using simple, research-based motor learning principles, American coaches must now learn to design practices that prepare players for the uncomfortable mental challenges of match play. Adding this key ingredient to the mix will help us develop complete players. ♣



USPTA Master Professional Michael Kernodle, Ph.D., is an assistant professor at Appalachian State University where he teaches motor learning, motor development and teaching methods. Kernodle is the motor learning chairman of the Intercollegiate Tennis Association's national Sport Science Committee. He is also USPTA's National Seminar Contest chairman.

Jeff Moore is the women's head tennis coach for the University of Texas. His win-loss record over 17 years at Texas is 379-105. His teams were the 1995 and 1993 NCAA Champions, and were the Big 12 Conference Champions in 1997, 1998 and 1999. Moore is No. 4 on the ITA all-time wins list for Division I coaches and was named the 1999 Tri-Big 12 Coach of the Year.








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