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What Do You Do When Nothing Else Works?

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Has this ever happened to you? In your position as a coach, you have been trying to teach one or more of your players a particular stroke or footwork pattern, or even a refinement of a stroke — but no matter what you do, they just cannot seem to grasp the skill. You have provided the appropriate type of feedback using the most effective frequency technique with the appropriate level of precision. You are being as positive as possible by sandwiching any criticism between two positive remarks, and you have attempted to make effective use of associating something they have already learned with what you are teaching in the present. In fact, you are performing at a very high level as a coach without achieving the desired results. Is there anything left to try? The answer is yes! If you are working with a player who just cannot seem to grasp the skill or a player who is having great difficulty changing an already existing motor program, you might wish to resort to the use of teaching strategies that physically regulate the learners' movement patterns. These strategies are called guidance techniques and can be used in coordination and in addition to explanations and demonstrations. These techniques can be divided into two subcategories: (1) Active Guidance (2) Physical barriers.

Active guidance involves the coach physically manipulating the student through the appropriate movement pattern. This could be something as simple as guiding the student through the correct followthrough for the forehand groundstroke, or grasping the student's hand while on the racquet to prevent an overly large followthrough on the volley. The coach may wish to move the hips and shoulders through the appropriate range of motion for a particular stroke or physically guide the student through the appropriate timing for the release of the tennis ball for the serve in coordination with the movement of the racquet arm. There are many other possible examples of active guidance and I am sure that many of you are creative and will be able to come up with your own techniques. The general idea is that you are, in a sense, either overriding an already existing motor program that limits the student's ability to produce the new movement; or you are helping the student reach beyond a certain point in the production of a difficult movement pattern for them.

The second type of guidance involves the use of physical barriers to restrict the player to the appropriate movement pattern. As with the use of active guidance, the secret is for the coach to be creative and come up with barriers that are effective for their particular situation. A simple example would be to have the player stand with their back to a wall to prevent too large a backswing on the volley. You may also find it necessary to set up specific barriers to work on footwork patterns. I was requested to look at a player whose practice time was limited due to consistent pain in her shoulder, which was obviously due to a very strange backswing on the serve. The first part of the backswing looked like the classic pendulum backswing taught by many instructors; but as the racquet passed by the hip still pointing down to the ground, she would sweep it behind her back and towards the front of her body before returning the racquet to complete the normal service motion. This awkward swing placed an enormous amount of stress on her rotator cuff muscle group, causing the pain. Unfortunately, she had been using this motion for many years and had developed a motor program which seemed impossible to break. However, by using several ball hoppers as barriers to restrict her swing, we were able to eliminate the extra motion, reduce and eventually eliminate the pain and add a great deal more power to her serve. ***We also gradually reduced the use of the physical barrier until it was no longer needed.*** The reason I have highlighted this statement is that it accentuates a very important principle that must be adhered to when using guidance techniques. The coach must be careful that the student does not become dependent upon the guidance, and therefore should not use this strategy for a long period of time — and should gradually fade or discontinue the utilization of these techniques.

One sign of a good coach is the ability to adapt to unusual situations by creatively using information available to them to help their players through difficult circumstances. The effective use of guidance techniques could be an area that some of you may find to be a positive tool in your effort to *guide* your players through a difficult learning curve.