

Improve Your Tennis in One–Fifth of A Second!

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By Steve Smith

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How would you like to start playing vastly better tennis ... today?

There's a particular "magic" moment in tennis—one that lasts a mere fifth of a second. If you have (or can develop) the discipline to fully exploit that moment, you may astonish yourself and your opponents with your new–found scoring ability.

The moment I'm talking about is the last 1/5th of a second before your racquet strikes the ball. The discipline I'm referring to is that of keeping your eye entirely on the ball for that super–critical moment.

We've all been told many times that we should keep our eye on the ball in tennis. But how many of us really know what that means? How many of us really practice it?

Keeping your eye on the ball doesn't mean watching it until it is a split second from hitting your racket, and then glancing away to look at your opponent. It means watching it until it has hit your strings and begun its rebound.

This is not a new secret. Bill Tilden, perhaps the greatest player who ever lived, wrote about it more than 80 years ago and tried to drive its importance into the heads of his readers. Early on in his classic book, "The Art of Lawn Tennis," he cited statistics "to show you how vital it is that the eye must be kept on the ball UNTIL THE MOMENT OF STRIKING IT" (his emphasis).

"About 85 per cent of points in tennis are errors, and the remainder earned points. As the standard of play rises the percentage of errors drops until, in the average high–class tournament match, 60 per cent are errors and 40 per cent aces. ... Fully 80 percent of all errors are caused by taking the eye from the ball in the last one–fifth of a second of its flight."

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Wow. Sobering statistics, to be sure. But exciting ones, too, because what Tilden is telling us is that it's within our power, right now, to eliminate the majority of our errors! And reducing the errors we make is the surest way to starve our opponent of points and extend his opportunity to give up points to us.

Tilden was a great tennis observer as well as a player. He studied and wrote about all of the top players of his day, and observed and advised many a tennis beginner. We can trust him when he says that the greatest fault committed by novices (and by many more experienced players) is trying to watch too much besides the ball.

Tilden compared the human eye to a camera, noting that neither is capable of clearly focusing on a moving object and its background at the same time. "Now the tennis ball is your moving object while the court, gallery, net, and your opponent constitute your background." Therefore, ignore the background and rather "concentrate solely on focusing the eye firmly on the ball, and watching it until the moment of impact with your racquet face."

Shouldn't you at least take a peek at your opponent, maybe out of the corner of your eye? No: "You are not trying to hit him. You strive to miss him. Therefore, since you must watch what you strive to hit and not follow what you only wish to miss, keep your eye on the ball, and let your opponent take care of himself."

Tilden provided a chart in "The Art of Lawn Tennis," a very simple one, but one that I hope you will commit to memory. It looked something like this:

A--1--2--3--4--B

Imagine a ball passing from point A to point B, with you as the receiving player at B. According to Tilden, it can be taken as a scientific fact that if you keep your eye on the ball throughout its flight, your chance of making a good return is five times as great as it would be if you took your eye off the ball at point 4 (4/5ths of a second of its flight). Furthermore, your chance is ten times as great as it would be if your removed your eye from the ball at point 3 (3/5ths of a second of its flight).

Tilden wrote: "The average player follows the ball to 4, and then he takes a last look at his opponent to see where he is, and by so doing increases his chance of error five times. ... Remembering the 85 percent errors in tennis, I again ask you if it is worth while to take the risk?"

Keeping your eye on the ball is a good practice not just because you make fewer errors, but also because it strengthens the other parts of your game through developing the habit of concentration. As Tilden humorously explained, "It tends to hold [your] attention so outside occurrences will not distract. Movements in the gallery are not seen, and stray dogs, that seem to particularly enjoy sleeping in the middle of a tennis court during a hard match, are not seen on their way to their sleeping quarters."

So there you have it - one-fifth of a second that can make all the difference in your tennis game. It can truly be the magic moment for you, IF you cultivate the discipline to keep your eye on the ball not just occasionally or even most of the time, but during every single shot.

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P.S: Bill Tilden's "The Art of Lawn Tennis" is in the public domain, which means you can find it and read it online for free. I highly recommend that you do so. Although his references to events and personalities are of course dated, his playing advice is timeless.

© Copyright 2004 by Steve Smith. Steve Smith is a writer who lives near Chapel Hill, North Carolina. His Web site, Tops 4 Tennis (

), includes the complete text of "The Art of

Lawn Tennis" by Bill Tilden, plus other articles and links for tennis players and fans.

Tennis Humor – The Gift Of Making People Laugh At The Game Of Tennis

By Glenn Sheiner

To those of us who love to play the game of tennis, it is the competition, the athletic challenge and the potential for artistic shot making that usually gets us going emotionally. There's little time for tennis humor as we focus on ripping that next shot for a winner.

But take a step back or just start watching some tennis matches at your club and you'll begin to see the humorous situations that abound in our game. Of course, just like mother–in–law jokes are a staple of marriage humor, dysfunctional tennis dynamics are the source of most tennis humor. And tennis humor in the form of tennis jokes or tennis cartoons on mugs, tshirts, mousepads, or greeting cards make great tennis gifts.

So, without further adieu here are a number of tennis dynamics that lend themselves to humor:

1. The married mixed doubles team. Need I say more? This classic dynamic has caused guffaws at the best of times and divorces at the worst. And for those still in dating mode — tread very carefully!
2. The poseurs — look great in their new tennis clothes which they claim they received as tennis gifts from a well known–touring pro, carry at least 3 of the latest hi–tech rackets, and are the epitome of style until they have to hit that first ball. Of course, if truly desperate, they will feign injury while opening up a new can of balls to avoid public display of their atrocious strokes.
3. The emotional player versus the " classic tennis dinker". Nothing can drive a tennis player more quickly to the asylum than having to play a talented retriever who gets everything back with no pace. Sit back, have a drink, and start betting pools on the number of times you're going to see a racket tossed in frustration.
4. The obsessive tennis nut — can't be standing in a line anywhere without starting to practice his or her swing – without a racket of course. Observers often inquire if they're watching some new martial art.
5. The interfering tennis parent — can't play, never studied the game except for having watched an

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instructional video or two, but feels free to walk on the court and correct former Wimbledon champ who is instructing his or her child. Just watching the tennis pro try not to explode at this preposterous chutzpah is priceless.

Of course, there are many more of these funny tennis dynamics which I'll address in a later article. So for now, keep your eyes open at the club and you may be very entertained by the gift of tennis humor happening right in front of your eyes.

Glenn Sheiner M.D. is the author of the world's top selling tennis cartoon book **THE WACKY WORLD OF TENNIS**. Treat yourself to a laugh and split step over to

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