

# THE **TEN** COMMANDMENTS OF TENNIS

We have borrowed a religiously oriented concept to present this month's column for people who wish to compete better in this wonderful game of ours. Sports psychology has provided great insights to the nature of tennis competition. Although, there are still some common problems that are seen when we observe beginning and intermediate level players. Remarkably, some of these problems emerge in advanced players' games, as well.

So, this month, we are dedicating our column to identifying ten of the most important aspects of competing in tennis. More often than not, players will need to be reminded of these principles.

Frankly, you should write down these concepts and carry them in your tennis bag and should have no hesitancy to drag this sheet out and review these 10 "commandments."

If you have recurring difficulties in your game, or believe that you are playing below your potential, we suggest that one or more of these "commandments" come to play.

## **1** SEE THE BALL!!!

In cricket, there is an old saying: "You can't hit what you don't see." Well, this is equally true in tennis. During points, the most important place to focus is on the ball. If we really did just this during every point, our ability to win points would go up. We would find ourselves anticipating shots better. Our shot preparation would be better. And, our line calls would be more definitive. In practice, warm-ups and matches, the first goal is to "get your eyes on the ball." This requires practice and self-discipline. Humans have limited attention spans. It is easy to deviate from really focusing on the ball. Don't be surprised if you have to remind yourself frequently to bring your attention on the ball and its spin/movement.

Whenever your game breaks down, this is your very first "solution." It frequently is the only solution that you need.



## 2

### STAY IN THE "PRESENT"

How many times have you been tossing up a ball to serve and think about the possibility of double faulting? Our guess is that it occurs more often than not, and that the outcome is a double fault.

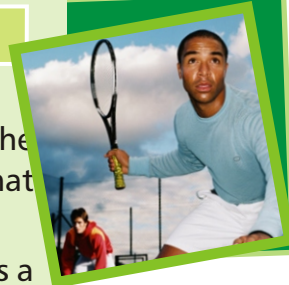
How many times have you thought about winning or losing during a match? This is a natural thing to do. But, once you start thinking about winning or losing, you are on a slippery slope to defeat. If you are up 5-0 and are serving for the set or down 0-5 and receiving, it is very tough to avoid these kinds of thoughts.

In order to win, you need to avoid thinking about winning or losing. But, doing this is not easy. The mind can only think of one thing at a time. Giving the mind other things to think about during the match will help avoid falling into the win/loss trap.

Keep your eyes within the court during a match to avoid any distractions. Fix your strings in between points. Setup for each serve and return of serve in exactly the same manners each time!

Recognize that one point has absolutely nothing to do with the next point. Let your winners and errors go! You cannot change the past. The best way to influence the future is to focus on the present.

When the win/loss thoughts enter your mind (and they will) dismiss them in anyway that you can. Count to 10. Say a prayer. Sing a song. Count the number of main strings on your racquet. If one technique doesn't seem to be working, try something different. Do whatever it takes to avoid thinking about winning or losing.



## 3

### LEARN HOW TO RELAX

Simply put, the body performs at its best when it is in a relaxed state. It is completely normal to be nervous at the beginning of a match. In fact, it probably cannot be entirely avoided. For whatever reason, you are nervous, tight and feeling uncomfortable. This is all normal.

What true champions have learned is how to guide their bodies into a more relaxed state. Deep and slow breathing can help. Closing your eyes and thinking of something pleasant can help.

Once the body begins to relax the mind will follow. The key is to get the body started.

Imagine that every match you could relax 50% more than you usually do. How much more enjoyable would the game of tennis be? Guess what. Win or lose, if you are enjoying yourself, the "ride" is worth it.



## 4 NEVER CHEAT

The game of tennis is a sport that relies upon the "Code." Honesty in line calls, scores etc. is the basis of this code. Cheating does nothing to help your game. You never know how good a player you can become, if you cheat.



On the flip side, if your opponent cheats, it is an indication of weakness. Now, everyone makes bad calls honestly. Let's face it. Seeing the ball and lines clearly can be tough. Honest mistakes will happen. Forgive your opponent, if she/he makes what you think is a wrong call. Yes, there are times when you will lose a match because the opponent cheated. This is frustrating to say the least. But, realize that the match was stolen...it wasn't won. Renew your vow to yourself to be honest in your calls. This is the best that can be taken from such a situation.

Remember, if in doubt; give the call to your opponent. It is the right thing to do!!!

## 5 THE TIME TO THINK IS DURING CHANGEOVERS

Humans by their very nature are evaluative creatures. We are constantly evaluating ourselves, the world and the people around us. Why would it be any different when we play tennis?



"You can't think and play tennis at the same time."

During games, shut off your evaluative side. Simply initiate, respond and execute.

The time to figure out what is going on and what needs to be done is during game changeovers. Don't even allow yourself to be too thoughtful in between points.

If you find yourself wandering into an evaluative thought mode during a game, you should literally say to yourself: "Not to worry. I'll figure it out when there is a changeover."

This is why you should not engage in any conversation with your opponent during the changeovers. You should use the changeovers for three things: to hydrate your body, to let your body recover, and if necessary, to evaluate what is happening and what you need to do.

## 6 KEEP YOUR SHOTS LANDING DEEP

If your balls continually land deep in your opponent's court, you will find that he/she is very unlikely to be able to hit winners. Most games are determined by which player makes the fewest errors...not the most winners. These two principles apply to every level of the game.

Now, there are two ways to get the ball to land deep. Hit it hard and low to the net...or hit it with less pace but much higher over the net. Guess what. There are no style points in tennis.

The percentage play is to hit higher not harder. In addition to decreasing the likelihood of an error, this approach fatigues you less. It is a win/win situation.

Now, if you are going for a winner or you are really a skilled player, go for your shots. But, we would suggest that most of the people reading this column would greatly benefit from hitting higher not harder.



## 7 GET YOUR FIRST SERVE IN AT ALL COSTS

Your chances of winning a point go up significantly if you get your first serve in. It is that important!

So, do whatever is necessary to get that first serve to go into the box every time. It means hitting with less pace or hitting with more spin...so be it.

Weak first serves invite the opponent to step in and put the return away. But, if your first serve is in and lands deep in the box, the likelihood of your opponent winning the point goes down. It is just that simple.

Make your opponent hit every first serve, and you will rarely be giving away "free" or "cheap" points.

## 8 DON'T TRY TO WIN POINTS OFF THE RETURN OF SERVE

Not many of us are blessed with the Andre Agassi's return of serve. The purpose of return of serve should be to put the ball in play. If you look at the pros, they rarely attempt to hit more than 10% of their returns as winners. Remember, these are the professionals.

Too many players attempt to win the point off the return. The overall success of this strategy is not good.



**9**

## HIT MOST OF YOUR SHOTS CROSSCOURT

Hitting crosscourt is playing percentage tennis. The net is lower in the center by 6 inches. Hitting crosscourt makes your opponent's winners less likely to occur. Hitting crosscourt means you hit on a diagonal which is longer than when you hit a shot down the line. This means that you have a wider margin for error.



**10**

## DRIFT BACK TO THE CENTER OF THE COURT AFTER EACH GROUNDSTROKE AND FOLLOW THE PATH OF THE BALL AFTER EACH VOLLEY

How to position yourself after each shot is really not a complicated matter. After each groundstroke, drift (don't run) back to the center of the baseline. In moving this way, you are in the best possible position to cover any of your opponent's replies.



When at the net volleying, follow the path of your volley. If you hit your volley to your right, move to your right to cover a most likely reply. If you hit your volley left, move left. If you hit your volley in the center of your opponent's court, your best position is to be near the center of the net.

Being in proper position is truly as simple as these guidelines suggest.

So, these are our ten commandments of tennis. Try each of them out.