

TRAIN SMARTER:

5 BAD HABITS THAT NEGATIVELY AFFECT SPEED IN TENNIS

by David Mayo, CSCS

Unless you are born with some amazing genetics, you typically won't be able to cover a tennis court effectively if you have any of the habits mentioned in this article. The good news is that if you take the time to remedy these problems, you could very easily improve court speed and reach balls you'd normally have no chance of getting to.

1. Jumping

This is probably the bad habit that most people have. The problem here is that people watch tennis pros on television and believe they are jumping when they are hitting the ball. I can assure you that they are not. Jumping is a conscious activity, what you see on television is not a jump, it is a reaction of the body to explosive rotational activity. Plant your feet and perform a back swing of any stroke. Now, explosively perform the stroke as fast as possible with as little delay between the back swing and the swing itself. If you do this properly, your feet will lift off the ground, but you are not consciously jumping. Now, why is jumping a big deal? Well, it's quite simple, if your feet aren't on the ground, you can only go in the direction your leg drove you in to before you left the ground. So, if you are jumping to the left and the ball goes to the right,

there is nothing you can do if your feet are in the air. Many people jump around 6 inches off the ground when performing a split step. This is unnecessary, the purpose of a split step is to quickly unload your body weight from your legs and then drive in the intended direction. This can be achieved by dropping your hips quickly, with the bonus of your feet staying in close proximity to the ground so that you can react to your opponents' shot more quickly. If you are charging the net and perform a split step, you want to split step after your stride. This may resemble a jump, but in actuality you are just continuing your forward momentum and bringing your feet together.

2. Bad Stance

This is a killer, and more often than not the main reason why people get caught flat-footed. We've all watched the pros, hunched over at the waist, shoulders way out in front of their hips swinging back and forth. What normal people fail to realize is that they don't have the reflexes of a professional tennis player. If you watch that same pro closely, you will see him or her get into the proper stance as soon as the opponent begins to toss the ball for the serve. A proper stance consists of shoulders, over hips, over toes,

with the hips and knees bent and weight distributed on the balls of the feet, with the feet shoulder-width or more apart. [Fig. 1] This stance allows you to react in either direction and puts you in a good position to drive off of either leg to get to the ball. You can stagger your feet slightly, but too much stagger will put you at a disadvantage on one side.

3. Using a Crossover Step

I have no idea why people do this, but a good number of people will cross their feet while playing. [Fig.2] Going back to the stance, the wider your base is on the ground, the more stable you are. Crossing your feet not only reduces your base, but it gives your legs an opportunity to tangle with each other. One of the essential concepts of moving quickly is that it is only possible if you can maintain balance throughout. Rather than doing a crossover step, similar to the way a baseball player turns to steal a base, do an open step.[Fig.3] An open step is merely driving off the opposite leg, opening up the other leg in the direction you are going with the hips, and turning in that direction without crossing your legs. It is a simple and effective way to get from point A to point B. The main difference between the two is that the initial move in a crossover step commits you in that direction, the only

way to turn and go in the other direction is to turn your back to the play because your hips are closed to the play – a very bad idea. An open step gives you some room for error, even though you are making a powerful drive in one direction, your hips are still open, allowing you to change back to the other direction if you anticipated incorrectly. Having said that, there may be an opportunity where a crossover step is necessary. If a sharp angle is hit to the backhand side, crossing over may be the quickest option to react to the ball. Regardless, doing it when it is unnecessary only increases the chance of an off balance shot and will slow you down.



FIG.1: PROPER STANCE



FIG.2: CROSSOVER STEP



FIG.3: OPEN STEP

4. Small first steps

There is an idea that the pros actually take more steps to get to the ball than the average player, and that is true. What most people took from that was that you should take small steps when moving during a point, but this is actually false. The fastest people on the court take huge, powerful first steps to get them closer to the ball quickly so that they can make small adjustment steps when they get to the ball to set up the shot and the next ball. What's more, when you get more proficient at taking the bigger, more powerful first steps, you actually know by your second step if you will get to the ball, giving you the opportunity to shut it down and conserve some energy on balls that you won't get to.

5. Poor lower body strength

One of the main components of speed is how powerfully you are driving off the ground with your legs. The more relative strength you have (strength relative to body weight), the faster you will be. This is one of the reasons people with higher levels of body fat are typically slow – that extra weight only provides resistance to movement, whereas muscle will assist in movement. A bigger person has to carry a larger load, so they need to be stronger than a smaller athlete to move as quickly, but the relative strength of the athletes will be about the same.

Fixing these five bad habits will bring you up a long way in terms of improving court speed. The next article will cover ways to work on the first four habits, while the article after that will cover ways to improve the fifth.

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