

Teaching Modern Tennis

PART 1: DISPELLING THE MYTHS

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modernTennis.com

This article springs from the on court presentation on teaching modern tennis that we gave at this year's PTR International Symposium - actually our first ever presentation for PTR! We were pleased to be part of this very well organized symposium, and to have a chance to speak with so many of PTR's closely-knit family of coaching professionals from around the world. From the feedback we received on that presentation, there is clearly a growing level of interest among PTR members in expanding their coaching repertoires to include the modern game. For this reason, we gratefully accepted PTR's invitation to prepare this series of articles.

In this opening article, we'll set the stage, briefly exploring the evolution of the modern game and looking at the myths and other obstacles that have prevented modern tennis from entering the coaching mainstream. In subsequent articles, we'll discuss what really differentiates modern from traditional tennis, and what coaches need to know to teach the modern game - quickly and successfully - to players of any age and skill level.

SUDDENLY "MODERN"

"Modern tennis!" Suddenly these two words seem to be on many lips. Tune into the coverage of any major tournament and you'll likely hear commentators talking about the "modern game". That was rare even a year or so ago. The modern game is also starting to raise its head at coaching symposia. At this year's PTR International Tennis Symposium, we were pleased to see several presentations on modern tennis. In previous years, especially at other US conventions, we've usually had the field to ourselves.

The recent buzz on "modern tennis" is an interesting phenomenon because, as we all know, the modern game has been played on the pro circuit for well over 20 years. This was its birthplace, and it is where the modern game continues to evolve and grow. It is here the game's most innovative players, ever in search of competitive advantage, have developed better and more adaptable ways of hitting a tennis ball. Modern technique, as it stands today, has many advantages over traditional technique: players can generate more power with less effort, use spin more effectively, hit aggressively from both high and low impact points . . . all of which have expanded the range of what can be done with a tennis ball. In short, **technical innovations have led to an expansion of tactical possibilities**, and this is what has been revolutionizing tennis.

Of course, in order to deal with the expanded range of shot possibilities and the increased firepower on the other side of the net, pros have also improved their reception skills. New and more flexible footwork patterns have evolved to enable faster movement and recovery. New patterns also allow players to turn previously defensive situations into offensive ones, for example, hitting aggressive shots when moving backward, or on a flat-out run.

Brett Hobden and Gord Runtz are founding partners of Modern Tennis, a new company dedicated to providing coaches with the knowledge and tools required to teach modern tennis successfully. The company is currently producing a series of DVDs designed especially for coaches interested in the modern game. These are available from the website: modernTennis.com. You may contact the authors through the website.

Brett is an internationally recognized expert on modern tennis. In his 20+ year post-playing career, he has keenly observed the evolution of the modern game, and helped people of all ages and skill levels learn it quickly and play it successfully. His juniors have won more than 30 national championships across two continents, and several have played on the pro tour. Brett's goal is to grow the game of tennis by showing people of all ages and levels of development how to "Think and play like the pros™"!

Gord has an unusual and diverse background that spans science, technology, music and sport. He is widely respected for his expertise in communication. With his broad range of interests, he brings a fresh perspective to the study and teaching of the modern game. It is rumored that he has a Ph.D. in theoretical chemistry.

Players like Agassi, Seles and Sampras have been among the game's more recent innovators, adding new shots and improving upon existing ones. Today, players like Roger Federer are at the game's leading edge. Federer may not have the "best" anything in the game, but he has "among the best" of everything. He can hit all the modern shots extremely well. Coupled with his great anticipation, smart decision making and creativity, this has made him one of the most dangerous players on today's pro tour. We see Federer as the first of the next wave of players that will bring the game to new heights.

Now, the great irony is that - despite the many advantages of modern tennis - the older "traditional" game has persisted in tennis coaching around the world, especially at the recreational level. The modern game is rarely taught outside of a handful of academies for elite junior players. Why is this? In this opening article, we'll look at the reasons modern tennis has been so slow to enter the coaching mainstream. Subsequent articles will look at the most important things you need to know if you want to teach the modern game, and teach it successfully.

DISPELLING THE MYTHS

Some of the main reasons that modern tennis has been so slow to move into mainstream teaching are the myths that surround it.

Technical innovations have led to an expansion of tactical possibilities.



The modern game is for everyone from tots to grandmothers! Grandmothers?! If you don't believe it, check out the video clips for this article. Go to modernTennis.com and click on Article Clips (bottom right of web page).

Myth 1:

Modern tennis is only for more advanced players with a high level of fitness.

The truth:

Modern tennis can be played by people of all ages and ability levels. We have successfully introduced the modern game to children as young as three, and have revolutionized the games of adults in their 70's and 80's. And they all love it! Yes, it is true that flexibility and fitness are important, but no more so in the modern game than in the traditional one.

Myth 2:

Players must learn traditional tennis before learning modern tennis.

The truth:

Modern tennis can be taught from the outset. For example, we have a program called Tennis in 1 Hour™. In just one hour, we

have people who have never held a racquet playing live points in the full court. Okay, you may not yet mistake them for Roger Federer or Justine Henin-Hardenne, but they are playing real tennis using modern technique appropriate to their level of play. This introductory program often has a 100%+ retention rate. Why the '+'? People come back for more, and they bring their friends!

Myth 3:

Modern tennis has a higher risk of injury.

The truth:

Modern tennis technique can dramatically reduce injuries, particularly those related to the elbow, wrist, shoulder and lower back. When modern hitting techniques are coupled with modern footwork patterns, we have stress-free acceleration and deceleration of hips, trunk and arm segments. This results in less strain on the hitting arm and lower back. With modern technique, people can play well into their 80's.

Myth 4:

Modern tennis is more difficult to learn.

The truth:

With proper instruction, beginners can learn to play the modern game much faster than the traditional game taught in a traditional way. The key is this: when working on technique, always progress to realistic situations and specific shots - situations that players will encounter and shots they'll need in match play at their skill level. We tell coaches they need to teach "**technical solutions to tactical problems™**". This is especially important in the modern game because the appropriate technique can vary dramatically with the shot being attempted.

BARRIERS TO TEACHING MODERN TENNIS SUCCESSFULLY

For coaches, the greatest barrier to teaching modern tennis has undoubtedly been the **lack of quality information**: What differentiates modern from traditional technique? How can a coach teach a beginner to play modern tennis - fast? What things need to be taught at each level of play? How should they be taught?

This is not to say that there has been no information on modern tennis. There has, but as many coaches who've tried to teach the modern game will concur, the information has been both fragmented and incomplete. There's one piece here. Another piece there. (Are they related?) Frequently there are inconsistencies. Also, we often see misinterpretations of modern technique and errors of analysis. For example, articles on a pro player's modern forehand, backhand, etc. often take the player's most conventional looking swing pattern, and reject the most modern ones because they look too "strange". Truly modern swing patterns and footwork are frequently interpreted as aberrations or "problems". For example: "It's too bad that she fell backward when hitting that shot!" Most often, the seemingly unconventional patterns are deliberate and common, and are part and parcel of the repertoire of modern tennis.

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With this state of affairs, you might wonder how anybody could learn to play modern tennis, let alone teach it successfully! The answer: Sometimes players are successful in spite of their coaching, not because of it. That's not to put down the many dedicated coaches in the trenches who spare no effort to help their players. It's not their fault. The problem is that the critical information coaches need is not readily available to them. Despite this problem, skilled athletes tend to be good imitators, and will often pick up the more or less correct way of doing something, simply by emulating a favorite pro player.

But how many players fall into this category? Not many. And can they truly reach their full potential without a knowledgeable coach? Highly unlikely. This is true at all levels of play, from rank beginner, to club player, to touring pro.

THE BENEFITS OF GOING MODERN

There's nothing wrong with playing traditional tennis. People have enjoyed it for decades, and will continue to do so for years to come. There are, however, many advantages to going modern that we think players, coaches and clubs should consider. Here are some of the most important ones on our list:

- Modern tennis is **highly motivating** for both students and coaches. It allows us all to relate to what we now see at the professional level. Students of all ages and levels quickly realize that they are learning to hit like the pros! A day or two after a lesson, students often rush back excitedly, exclaiming that they've just seen their favorite player using the same stroke or footwork pattern that they're learning. This is very motivating for both players and coaches.

- Increased motivation among players typically means **increased revenues**, both for coaches and for the tennis industry at large. When motivation increases, people play more often, take more lessons, look to optimize their equipment, restringing their racquets more frequently, and everyone benefits in the process. In recent years, we've helped a number of clubs "go modern", and it has literally transformed their business.

- The modern game can be **more exhilarating** to play! With modern technique and the expanded range of shots, players have more tactical options available to them. They can hit more aggressively and successfully in many situations. And this is true at all levels of play.

- When properly learned, modern technique can actually **reduce injuries**, frequently eliminating chronic problems that have plagued people for years. This is especially true for problems associated with the wrist, elbow, shoulder and lower back. We often work with sports medicine clinics, helping medical personnel better understand why tennis players develop injuries. We also work with their patients after rehabilitation, teaching them safe and effective modern technique.

COMING NEXT

Parts 2 and 3 of this series will look at modern coaching methodology. How is the modern game best taught? We'll introduce what we call the **Integrated Approach™**, an approach that strongly couples the teaching of technique and tactics. In our experience, it is superior to both the traditional "technical" approach, and to the newer and highly promoted games based approach. We think it's critical to teaching the modern game successfully.

Part 4 will begin to look at modern technique and the changes that have revolutionized the game. What are the fundamentals? What do you need to know at the various levels of play?



Strange but clearly modern: inverted & vertical finishes seen on certain modern forehand shots. To see video clips of these unusual finishes, visit modernTennis.com and click on Article Clips (bottom right of web page).

Photos by Myles Williams

