



Primal Tennis

We are physical animals and we know how to move things. All our lives we've moved things and have watched others move things. We have used tools (forks, knives, irons, needles, axes, shovels, hammers, etc.) and have observed others using tools. In my 33 years of teaching, I have yet to have a student show up on the court holding the frame of the racquet face and say, "I'm ready coach!" Nor have I had a student attempt to hit the ball with the edge of the racquet frame. I give my students a lot of credit for understanding the physical world.

This is why guided discovery works so well. If you ask a student who is standing at the baseline, to toss a ball to the service line, they will figure out the length of movement they will need to perform the task. Ask them to throw progressively farther away and you will notice them engage more and more body parts, including, possibly, the use of the overhand throwing action. This is why the standard teaching method has been so effective. It allows the player to explore, progressively, lengths of swing needed to send the ball varying distances.

Teaching proper concentration is logical and fairly easy to do. Executing proper concentration is very challenging, mostly because of the many inherent intellectual interferences that are present on the tennis court.

I want my students to understand how the mind works when completing everyday tasks. So, the first question I might ask them is, "When was the last time you looked at a light switch until you finished flipping it on or off?" 99.9% answer, "Never." Duh. We usually shift our attention out of or into the room as we're flipping the switch. When you make a phone call from a landline, as you reach for the receiver, your eyes shift to the key pad. This is how our brain functions all day long. This same shift of attention can happen on the tennis court. The following describes what concentration means *while playing*.

by Ken Guendel

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Assuming a player has a sense of the swing, we can proceed. The three primal skills required to function on the tennis court are **catching, hitting and throwing**. Each skill has a particular thought and eye function attached to it. A play on a tennis ball has a sequential thought process. Here is where we, as pros, have to learn to keep our students on task *mentally*.

The first skill our student is executing is catching. They are looking at the ball with the purpose of seeing its movement and positioning themselves to take their most comfortable swing. Seems like a simple enough request. Let me suggest a few things that might interfere with this simple thought/action and why these might affect the student's performance. "Turn!", "Racquet back early!", "Move your feet!", are all common exhortations heard from pros and are all potentially detrimental in their effect on the student's performance. If we are working on the catching/positioning skill, that is what their primary thought should be. Toss a ball to your student and ask them to catch it. Most likely there won't be a problem. You can ask them if they were thinking about hitting the ball. No, Silly. Of course they had a pure catching thought. Put a racquet in their hand and the challenge starts. Of course they will be thinking about hitting it! That's why they're here!

If your student is thinking about hitting the ball while they're in the catching/positioning phase, what won't they be thinking about? If your student is thinking about moving their feet, what won't they be thinking about? If your student is thinking about getting their racquet back early, what won't they be thinking about? So, they get the racquet back early and they still hit the ball late. Heaven forbid they say, "Coach, I can't get the racquet back any earlier!" Where does one go from there? How can Agassi return a 149mph serve from Roddick? I don't think it's by thinking to get his racquet back early. If our student is kept on the task of seeing the ball's movement and moving to where and when the contact (catch) will be, they will never have a problem with time.

Well then, when should the student get ready to swing? If your student is running to position, they are already turned and their footwork will be fine as long as their thought is on getting into position for the incoming ball. As for when to get ready to swing, the simple answer is, when it's time to get ready. When walking in a park and there is a bench ahead and you want to rest, when do you get ready to sit? When you're 12 feet from the bench do you turn, face your butt toward the bench and start backing up? Yet, this is what we do to our students when we tell them to get their racquets back early. If they have a sense of their swing and understand the ball's movement and time frame, they will get ready in a timely fashion.

I would like you to do an exercise. Sitting where you are, find something in the room on which to keep your eyes focused. Something small is best. See that object clearly, keep your eyes on it and then, while your eyes are on the object, visualize the interior of your car. Go ahead, I'll wait here until you get back... (whistling)... (tapping my toes)... Ah, there you are. Now, if you did it properly, your eyes would have been on the object (the ball in tennis), yet at the same time you could actually see the interior of your car. The question is, where was your mind? Your eyes were on the object (ball), but your mind was in the car. Here's the analogy to playing. If your primary thought is where you want the ball to go, or where your opponent is, or the degree of ease or difficulty of the shot, or getting your racquet back early, you think you're looking at the ball, after all it is in your vision, but your mind is elsewhere. When you get back to the ball, it's, "Oops, what is it doing this close to my body?" or "Oops, what is it doing bouncing that short?" or "Oops, what is it doing here already?" If your primary thought is not on the primal catching skill things can go wrong. It is not your student's inability to position properly, it is their lack of attention to the primal skill of catching that challenges them.

The next stage in the sequence has to do with the primal thought of hitting. The eye function in the hitting skill is to see the object we want to touch/hit and use a finger to touch it, or a tool to hit it. In the case of a stationary object, for example the Number 1 on the phone key pad, your eyes go to the 1 when you go to touch it. They don't know what else to do. The natural function of the eyes is to look to where the touch/hit is happening. Oh, if it were that easy in tennis. The ball is moving. This is why the catching skill is a crucial part of the mental sequence. During the catching/positioning phase, you are assessing where the contact is going to be and when the ball will arrive there. Timing. The catching skill sets up the hitting skill.

The hitting skill is just as challenged by intellectual interference as our catching skill. The swing takes, for arguments sake, .4 seconds from beginning to end. If we can agree that concentration means to pay attention to what we're doing, then when we swing, we should be concentrating on our swing for .4 seconds. The problem is that at about .2 seconds into the swing, the hit happens, and the intellectual interference is that we're smart enough to know a result is also happening. Being goal oriented, we want to see the fruits of our labor. If we revisit the light switch analogy, when we start our swing we can shift our attention ahead to the ball going back over the net. What effect does this shift of attention have on the hit?

Before I answer that question, I have to address the third primal skill, throwing. The concept that there is an 'over there' is a throwing thought. When you throw a ball where do your eyes go? They go to the target. They don't know what else to do. You can't play tennis or any other sport if you don't understand the concept that there is an 'over there'. So, if you are thinking about where you want the ball to go as you are swinging, guess where your eyes are going to go? They are going to look up. They don't know what else to do. Understanding this, we need to encourage our students to get their mind on their swing and keep it there until the end of the swing. Try not to think about the ball flying away. *Not an easy task*, however, the more they are able to do this, the quicker they will learn to identify what they do to produce the results they want.

Many years ago, I had the opportunity to interview and write about players on the tour and what they were thinking and what was important to them *during* the point. There has been a lot of talk the past few years about Federer and his eyes at the contact. Ten years ago, Graf, Edberg and Sampras were the players who did this pretty well. I asked Edberg twice, if seeing the ball at contact was an indication of good concentration? His response the first time I asked him was, "No." The second time, three years later after he retired was, "I wasn't even aware that my eyes were at contact." In that answer is an interesting problem for us as teachers. Do we suggest to our students to *see* the ball at the contact? We see Federer with his eyes at the contact and extrapolate, "OK, eyes on the ball at the contact (thanks, McEnroe)." Here's the problem - if you are encouraging your students to *see* the ball at contact, their mind will not be on the swing, it will be on the ball. Federer's eyes are at the contact because his mind is on the swing and where the hit is happening. His eyes are *where* the contact is happening, not on *what* is at the contact point. He exhibits a primal hitting skill without the intellectual interference, without the shift of attention. He is totally into his swing.

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A good drill for you and your students to try is hitting with your eyes closed. It is a little unsettling at first, but once you get the idea, it can be an eye opening experience. The key to doing it successfully is to close your eyes once you have started your forward swing and keep them closed until the end of the swing. If you close your eyes before you start your swing, you won't have great success. It is a good lesson in understanding you don't need to look at the ball when you swing, but you do have to think about your swing. It is also a good exercise to practice taking the temptation of the results away during the swing. There's nothing to do but get your mind on your swing. I have students complain they hit better with their eyes closed!

I will usually expose players to these ideas in their first lesson. Before I think there may be a problem, I want to see what happens when they are concentrating properly. Many problems we see are positioning or timing issues (catching thought interferences), and many can be swing concentration issues (hitting thought interferences). Without a ball, many people can demonstrate a reasonable swing. Why fix anomalies in the swing due to poor concentration?

The way I introduce these ideas is to have students at the baseline with me. Before I feed any balls, I ask them if we can agree what concentration means (as I've discussed earlier). They will, of course, agree. I will have them show me some swings. Swings they'd like to feel. I'll ask them to have their mind on the swing from beginning to end. I will explain about the .4 seconds and challenge them to concentrate for .2 seconds longer than they normally do. I'm not asking for much. Just .2 seconds longer. I will then drop feed balls, standing next to them and let them practice keeping their mind on the swing for .4 seconds. You'll be amazed at how challenging this will be for most people. Some get it right away, but generally, you notice they still sneak a peek, or look up. Just encourage them to keep their mind on the swing until the end of the swing. Don't think about the ball flying away until the swing is finished. Come on, four tenths of a second! You can also suggest that they keep their eyes still when they swing.

Do not say, "Keep your head down." Do not say, "Keep your eyes on the ball." Do not say, "Don't look up." Any of these suggestions will take their mind off of the swing.

Once I think they have an idea of the swing concentration, I'll back up and start tossing and introduce the positioning thought to them. While they are moving to their best position, I don't want them thinking about hitting the ball, or about their swing. When the brain says it's time to swing, that's when they should start to think about their swing, not before. Thinking long and hard about the swing is not what makes it happen. Providing the brain with real time information will give them the best chance to execute the swing they want. They won't forget to hit the ball. As I get farther away, their positioning skill is more challenged. I keep their thoughts primarily on positioning. Then when it's time to swing, I encourage them to get their mind on their swing.

How do we apply strategy to the sequence? Shot selection and court positioning need to be taught. When your opponent hits the

ball, you have a whole package of information. The primary thought should be on positioning. Your secondary awareness through peripheral information is the configuration on the court. Your strategic thought, 'over there', is a throwing thought. That thought needs to be translated to a position, a point of contact and a swing selection. If you decide to hit crosscourt with topspin, this decision has to translate to something you do on your side of the court. Once the decision is made, you are looking at and moving to the ball with a purpose - getting your best position and anticipating where and when the ball will arrive at your crosscourt contact position. If you are thinking primarily about your swing as you move to the ball, your position and timing will suffer. If you are thinking primarily about where you want the ball to go as you move to the ball, your position and timing will suffer. If you are thinking primarily about hitting the ball as you move to the ball, your position and timing will suffer. Keep your thoughts out of the interior of your car! Once your brain says, "Time to swing!", you have to leave your positioning thought and get your mind on your swing thought (topspin) and where the contact point (crosscourt) is going to be. For .4 seconds.

There are error management benefits that come with this understanding. As pros, we are trained to 'see' the physical manifestation of the swing and to identify what went wrong. Then we try to fix these physical manifestations, which are usually caused by poor concentration. Do you ever ask your student *why* they made a mistake? I used to ask myself, "Why don't they get it?" and "What's wrong with them?" Now I know. And, if you teach this mental component to your students, they will know also.

The mantras we use as pros are universal. The students can repeat them by heart. When they are out of position, their correction is to move the feet more. When they feel their swing stopped short, their correction is to follow through. Do we ask *why* they were out of position? Do we ask *why* they stopped the swing? If they know how to do it, then they're either paying attention to doing it, or not. If they are not paying attention to doing it, why not? What was taking their attention away from what they should be thinking about? Why weren't they thinking about their position? Thinking about moving their feet won't solve the problem. (Again, if you're thinking about moving your feet, what aren't you thinking about?) Why didn't they take the whole swing? Thinking follow through won't solve the problem of the swing thought being interrupted. What was interfering with their swing thought? So, if the student understands the thought behind the physical action, they can better *self-correct*. They become *aware* that they were thinking about where their opponent was and, therefore, were not thinking about their position. They become *aware* that they were thinking about where they wanted the ball to go and, therefore, were not concentrating on their swing properly. You are empowering them to be in control of what they are doing when they are *playing*.

Primal Tennis is not a theory, it is the truth. It is why there were players before there were teachers. These primal skills are the reason there is sport. They were our survival skills for tens of thousands of years. We've just started applying them to sport once we took care of that survival thing.