

The Return of Serve Contact Moves Article

This article accompanies the video clip on the return of serve and refers to various contact moves used when returning serve.

Any ball which is hit as a return of serve will be referred to as a return of serve ball. However, there is a variety of different return of serve balls depending on where the ball is served i.e. whether the ball is hit at the body, wide, fast or floating. The return of serve footwork selected will depend on several factors like-

- Height of the approaching service ball
- Width of the approaching serve ball
- Speed of the approaching serve ball
- Are you hitting a forehand or backhand return?
- Are you going to run around your forehand or backhand return?
- What works best for you i.e. you might prefer to slice, topspin or drive your return

The 3 main aims of the footwork drills demonstrated are:

1. To develop a great return of serve routine.
2. To hit a well balanced return of serve that is well directed and efficiently effective.
3. To have footwork recovery that is instinctive and dynamic to the midpoint recovery position.

Fundamentally, great habits and routines are important features of successful tennis player!

Following are the definitions of the Return of Serve Moves as seen on the serve sharpshooter video clip.

Note: In the video clip, 9 returns of serve contact moves are mentioned, but both forehands and backhands are included in this count. There are many returns of serve contact moves that are not mentioned. The 9 moves featured are my personal

favourites, and according to my research and observation happen frequently in matches.

The return of serve contact moves that happen frequently but are **not demonstrated** in the video clip are:

Offensive returns:

- 1.High Backhand Step Down
- 2.Backhand and Forehand Front Foot Hops
- 3.Run around High Forehand Step Down
- 4.Run around Forehand Front Foot Hop
- 5.Run around Lateral Transfer
- 6.Run around Backwards Lateral hop

Rally returns:

1. Closed Sliced Backhand
2. Forehand and Backhand Lateral Hop (common on clay)

Defensive returns:

1. Forehand Mogul move (common on grass courts)
2. Backhand Mogul move (common on grass courts)

Each Return of Serve contact move will be explained under a template of-

- Type of volley ball
- Out steps
- Hitting Stance
- Contact move description
- Balance move explanation
- Recovery steps

Special Note: Return of Serve Routines

One thing you will notice on the video clip when watching Claudine and Jarmilla (both Grand Slam players and formally ranked top 30 on the WTA tour) is how professionally they

practice each return of serve. They **have a set routine** and use all the **5 R's** every time they PRACTICE THEIR return of serve.

The 5R's are **5 progressive footwork techniques** that you use when moving to and from every ball when playing tennis.

I always list them as getting ready then reading then reacting then responding and finally recovering on the court. The 5 R's slightly differ when hitting ground strokes, approach shots, serves, volleying and returning serves but the general 5 principles do not.

Below is how the 5 R's relate to the return of serve -

1st Getting **READY** on the toes -

- 1.) Walk up in a confident and relaxed manner to their preferred returning position on the court
- 2.) Perform ready steps when the opponent is bouncing the ball in preparation for the serve
- 3.) Get into a strong athletic position when the opponent has stopped bouncing the ball and is getting ready to serve

2nd **READ** the toss of the serve -

- 1.) Take a small step with the dominant foot (player preference) when the player STARTS the up phase of the ball toss

3rd **REACT** with a split step

- 1.) Split step when the player hits the ball and adjust the feet (out steps) into the relevant hitting stance

4th **RESPOND** with an offensive, rallying or defensive contact move depending on the effectiveness of the opponents serve and the returning player's mindset

5th RECOVER

- 1.) Regain balance with a brake step (if needed)
- 2.) Followed with recovery steps to the MIDPOINT RECOVERY POSITION (this depends on where return landed i.e. cross court, down the line or middle of court)

Note: The depth of the midpoint recovery position will also depend on the effectiveness of the return i.e. are you inside, on or behind the baseline?

Please, see further explanation of the midpoint recovery position in the paper on **Court Positioning** in the **glossary** at end of this article

The return of serve routine demonstrated in the video clip and written about above is a **suggestion only**, but you will notice it is used every time by Jarmilla and Claudine. All professional players like these girls make routines an essential part of their game.

The return contact moves are ordered below as they appear in the video clip!

Note: This part of the article only deals with what happens after the split step as the Getting Ready section is the same for each return below and has already been mentioned above.

Offensive Footwork Return of Serve

Offensive Return of Serve Footwork is where the player tries to create something by transferring their weight into the shot and hitting with an aggressive mind set. They attack the ball with their feet and use offensive contact moves like the Forward Transfer and Step down.

1. Forehand Forward Transfer Return

Type of return ball

The type of return ball for the forehand forward transfer return is a high floating or kick serve that has landed short in the service box. The serve is sitting up nicely so the aim is to hit the return as aggressively as possible.

Out steps

The out steps are small adjustments steps i.e. small steps are taken to get in position but the last step is large and backwards at 45 degrees so again 65 percent of the weight is on the rear foot when setting up the semi-open stance.

Hitting Stance

The hitting stance can be a forward open or semi-open stance depending on if you need to move forward or backwards and how much time you have to sit into the stance. If the aim is to hit the ball away get into a semi-open stance. If the aim is to approach the net then use a forward open stance.

Sinking or dropping into the stance is essential and this is best achieved with a great vertical body alignment/axis i.e. front ear lines up with shoulder, hip and front knee. The front knee should be bent to form a 90 degree angle. A great tip is just to relax the legs downdon't force them (use gravity to your advantage!). Remember, tennis is a lower body sport so it is important to "Load and Explode" with the legs with the attempting the forward transfer. Another important point is to ensure the feet are wide for balance and toes pointing towards the side fence (I like to say it is like sitting on a pair of skis) as this keeps the hips side on and naturally gives you a good shoulder turn. It is also important to have the back foot flat on the ground for balance while this also helps gain maximum thrust off the ground (use the ground to your advantage)

Contact move description

The Forehand Forward Transfer Return is a contact move where the player establishes an athletic semi-open stance while loading about 65% of their weight on the outside foot. The player then transfers their weight from the outside foot to the front foot as they make contact with the ball. Often the player leg curls the back leg and then brings the trail leg around for recovery.

Balance move explanation

The balance move of the Forward Transfer Return is a leg curl where the heel of the back leg bends towards the butt, this helps keep good body balance and alignment and helps the player extend through their swing and finish with the elbow high and in front

Recovery steps

In a live ball and/or fed ball situation (see video), the recovery steps are most commonly a push step from the back leg which comes down and drives the player towards the midpoint recovery position on the baseline. The recovery steps will be side skips for a shorter recovery position or a front crossover step as the first recovery step if a longer recovery distance is required. A front crossover step is faster and covers more distance than a side skip.

If the return is hit particularly well then the forward transfer move is great to follow into the net as already the weight is going forward and you always finish the shot well inside the baseline.

2. Runaround Forehand Transfer Return

Type of return ball

The type of return ball for the Run around Forward Transfer Return is a high floating or kick serve that has landed short in the service box and directed at the body. The serve is sitting

up nicely so the aim is to hit the return as aggressively as possible and select a forehand instead of a backhand return.

Out steps

The out steps are C or U shaped shuffle steps.

Hitting Stance

The hitting stance is a semi-open stance.

Contact move description

The Run-around Forward Transfer Return is a contact move where the player establishes an athletic semi-open stance while loading about 65% of their weight on the outside foot. The player then transfers their weight from the outside foot to the front foot as they make contact with the ball. Often the player leg curls the back leg and then brings the trail leg around for recovery.

Balance move explanation

The balance move of the Run around Forehand Transfer Return is a leg curl where the heel of the back leg bends towards the butt, this helps keep good body balance and alignment and helps the player extend through their swing and finish with the elbow high and in front

Recovery steps

In a live ball and/or fed ball situation (see video), the recovery steps are most commonly a push step from the back leg which comes down and drives the player towards the midpoint recovery position (see glossary) on the baseline. The recovery steps will be ready steps after the balance has been regained following contact with the ball. I prefer ready steps to running backwards as ready steps help the player perform a more balanced split step. If you run backwards you tend to split backwards which is not a good habit to get into.

If the return is hit particularly well then the Run around Forward Transfer move is great to follow into the net as already the weight is going forward and you finish the shot well inside the baseline.

3. Backhand Transfer Return

Type of return ball

The type of return ball for the backhand transfer return is a high floating or kick serve that has landed short in the service box. The serve is sitting up nicely so the aim is to hit the return as aggressively as possible.

Out steps

The out steps are small adjustments steps

Hitting Stance

The hitting stance is semi-open stance. The forward open stance will not feel as natural on the backhand side. In general for a 2 handed backhand, better footwork is needed on this side because the hips need to always be squared up with the side fence for better balance, power and weight transfer.

Contact move description

The Backhand Forward Transfer Return is a contact move where the player establishes an athletic semi-open stance while loading about 65% of their weight on the outside foot. The player then transfers their weight from the outside foot to the front foot as they make contact with the ball. Often the player leg curls the back leg and then brings the trail leg around for recovery.

Balance move explanation

The balance move of the 2 handed Backhand Return is a leg curl where the heel of the back leg bends towards the butt, this helps keep good body balance and alignment and helps the player extend through their swing and finish with the elbow high and in front with the hips and front toe ending up facing the net.

The balance move of the 1 handed Backhand Return is a kick back (not seen in video) where the back leg kicks to the side fence and replaces the spot on which the front leg was standing. The back leg finishes foot pointing at the net post. This is because the swing line of the 1 handed backhand is different to the 2 handed backhand swing line.

Recovery steps

In a live ball and/or fed ball situation (see video), the recovery steps are most commonly a push step from the back leg which comes down and drives the player towards the midpoint recovery position (see glossary) on the baseline. The recovery steps will be side skips for a shorter recovery position or a front crossover step as the first recovery step if a longer recovery distance is required. A front crossover step is faster and covers more distance than a side skip.

If the return is hit particularly well then the backhand transfer move is great to follow into the net as already the weight is going forward and you finish the shot well inside the baseline.

4. High Forehand Step Down Return

Type of return ball

The type of return ball for the Forehand Step down Return is a high floating or kick serve that has landed short in the service

box. The serve is sitting up nicely so the aim is to hit the return as aggressively as possible. The ball is a little lower than the transfer return and by stepping into the ball the intention is to take the ball early and on the rise.

Out steps

The out steps depend on how many steps are needed to reach the ball. The steps must be taken in such a way that the weight is transferred from the back foot to the front foot and performed quickly the ball so the final step is made down the court towards the ball.

The out steps are -

- 1.) 1 step – step out with the foot closest to the ball and then step into a neutral stance
- 2.) 2 steps – rhythm step with a heel to toe action with the outside foot leading and then step into a neutral stance
- 3.) 3+ steps – Cha cha cha or small adjustment steps with the outside foot leading and then step into a neutral stance

Hitting Stance

The hitting stance is a neutral stance where the leading foot is stepped straight down the court but the step before the stance is wide, balanced and controlled.

Contact move description

The Forehand Step down Return is a contact move where the player steps down with the front foot into a neutral stance. The player loads sideways to the ball and pivots the hips around the front foot, while bringing the trail leg around for power and balance and hence pushing the player towards the next intended recovery position.

Balance move explanation

The balance move of the Forward Step down Return is usually a kick back where the back leg kicks to the side fence. A kick

back is common as the approaching service ball is bouncing higher than a groundstroke because it has been struck from a by the server at a higher trajectory. The kick back helps the player maintain good body alignment and keeps the body side on longer. This improves the player extension through their swing which is essential for control, direction and power.

Recovery steps

In a live ball and/or fed ball situation (see video), the recovery steps are most commonly a brake step from the back leg which comes around after the shot is completed, and drives the player towards the midpoint recovery position on the baseline. The recovery steps will be side skips for a shorter recovery position or a front crossover step as the first recovery step if a longer recovery distance is required. A front crossover step is faster and covers more distance than a side skip.

If the return is hit particularly well then the step down return is great to follow into the net as already the weight is going forward and you always finish the shot well up in the court.

Note: Even though the **Backhand Step down Return** is not shown the above information can be applied as it is also a very common and effective return of serve.

Rally Footwork Return of Serve

Rally Return of Serve Footwork is where the player tries to neutralize the effectiveness of the serve. The approaching service ball has cramped the returner or forcing them to hit from an open stance. The returner keeps their position on the baseline but is unable to take the ball early and on the rise. The returner lets the ball come to them and thus uses rally return contact moves like the Low Spin and the 2 Foot Pivot.

1.Forehand Shift 2 Foot Pivot Return

[Type of return ball](#)

The type of return ball for the Forehand Shift 2 Foot Pivot Return is a fast low ball that has landed deep in the service box. The service ball is heading directly at the body, so the aim is to get the body out of the way as simply and effectively as possible.

[Out steps](#)

The out steps are to shift to the side, and thus get out of the way of the ball so the swing is not cramped and the hips can be used to generate power. This is done by staying low (not jumping), keeping good body alignment (body straight), ensuring both feet are pointing to the side fence while keeping the athletic base (feet apart)

The out steps are can be 1 or two shift steps when moving into and open stance or small adjusting steps when moving into a semi-open stance.

[Hitting Stance](#)

The hitting stance is an open stance or semi-open stance depending on player preference and how much time the player has to get out of the way of the approaching service ball. In my research I have found that an **open** stance 2 foot pivot is most effective when hit straight while a **semi-open** stance 2 foot pivot can be used to hit more of an angled reply i.e. cross court

[Contact move description](#)

The Forehand Shift 2 Foot Pivot is a contact move where the player shifts the body 1 or 2 steps towards the backhand side then establishes an athletic open or semi-open stance, makes contact with the ball, then pivots their hips with the toes finishing pointing towards the target. The player stays very low to the ground keeping the angles in the legs.

[Balance move explanation](#)

The balance move of the Forehand Shift 2 Foot Pivot is an inside knee drop. A inside knee drop is when the knee furthest away from the ball drops straight down towards the floor as both feet pivot and the racket extends out through the ball. The elbow of the racket hand points towards the net as the leg that is inside drops to create a 90 degree angle. The inside knee drop will help you **extend** through your swing and prevent you from coming up too early thus losing balance and power.

Recovery steps

The Shift 2 Foot Pivot is used a lot on the return of serve mainly because of its simplicity. Hit against a wall and you will see how many 2 foot pivots you will use!!! Of course when returning you are at the corner of the court.

The recovery steps will be side skips for a shorter recovery position or a front crossover step as the first recovery step if a longer recovery distance is required. A front crossover step is faster and covers more distance than a side skip.

Remember the 2 foot pivot is a rally move. By letting the ball come to you (which you must do because you are using an open stance and the contact point is to the side) you are using your opponents power thus been low, relaxed and stable is the secret to success. Sometimes less is more and it is the reliance on the lower body with a strong snap of the hips that can make this a surprise return. Don't forgetTennis is a lower body sport!!!

2. Backhand 2 Foot Pivot Return

Type of return ball

The type of return ball for the Backhand 2 Foot Pivot Return is a fast low ball that has landed deep in the service box. The service ball is heading towards the backhand side.

Out steps

The out steps are a step out to the side or a pivot step of the foot closest to the ball.

The out steps can be 1 or no steps (pivot step) when moving into an open stance or small adjusting steps when moving into a semi-open stance.

Hitting Stance

The hitting stance is an open stance or semi-open stance depending on player preference and how much time the player has to get the feet into position. In my research I have found that an **open** stance 2 foot pivot is most effective when hitting straight while a **semi-open** stance 2 foot pivot can be used to hit more of an angled reply i.e. cross court

Contact move description

The Backhand 2 Foot Pivot return is a contact move where the player establishes an athletic open or semi-open stance, makes contact with the ball, and then pivots their hips with the toes finishing pointing towards the target. The player stays very low to the ground keeping the angles in the legs.

Balance move explanation

The balance move of the Backhand 2 Foot Pivot Return is an inside knee drop. An inside knee drop is when the knee furthest away from the ball drops straight down towards the floor as both feet pivot and the racket extends out through the ball. The elbow of the racket hand points towards the net as the leg that is inside drops to create a 90 degree angle. The inside knee drop will help you **extend** through your swing and prevent you from coming up too early thus losing balance and power.

Recovery steps

The recovery steps will be side skips for a shorter recovery position or a front crossover step as the first recovery step if a

longer recovery distance is required. A front crossover step is faster and covers more distance than a side skip.

3. Forehand Low Spin Return

Type of return ball

The service ball for the Low Spin Return is generally a fast low deep ball that lands deep in the service box and a few steps to the side. It is most common return on fast low surfaces such as grass, synthetic grass and fast hard courts.

Out steps

With the Low Spin the out steps (steps taken to the ball before the hitting stance is used) are really important to get correct. Remember you are "Only as good as your stance". And, the stance will "Always define the move"! The out steps to a low spin do not vary that much. If you do not set up in a semi-open stance then the low spin is not as effective.

To set up into a semi-open stance, step out with the foot closest to the ball, step forward with the next foot at 45 degrees and then step back into a semi-open stance. 65 percent of the weight should be on the back foot. Make sure both feet point to the side fence and then inside knee is dropped down for balance and to load the legs. When you take 3 or 5 steps to the side (depends on age and stride length) I call them Cha Cha Cha steps or adjusting steps. I call them Cha Cha Cha steps as these words emphasise rhythm and are good "Cue Words" to call out when instructing students.

Hitting Stance

The hitting stance is a semi-open stance as described above.

Contact move description

The Low Spin Move is a rally return of serve even though it is described as an offensive contact move as a groundstroke. What makes it a rally contact move as a return is WHERE the return is hit from. Remember, a return is hit from the corner of the court thus you are already in a vulnerable court position. With the Low Spin Return the hips stay low and rotate around a central axis. The body becomes slightly elevated after contact, the outside toe finishes pointing in the direction of the hit. When completing the low spin, be careful not to over-rotate and always keep the head still.

The low spin is challenging athletically and from the timing point of view is the one of hardest returns to master. If you wish to make a more conservative return then lift the inside leg and make a Lateral Hop return of serve instead. A lateral hop contact move will always impart more topspin to the ball as the weight is drive more upwards and across.

With the Low Spin it is important not to jump up or rotate the hips too far.

Balance move explanation

There is no balance move as such with the Low Spin return but keeping down through contact is essential. A good sign of a well completed low spin is when the outside foot is flat on the ground and the body remains centred and well aligned. The player should sink down into their athletic base after contact.

Recovery steps

In relation to recovery steps if you hit down the line and want to recovery quickly to cover a sharp angled cross court reply by your opponent I like to teach a crossover step where the outside leg crosses in front of the leg that is closest to the centre. This is a lot faster and covers more ground than the side skip recovery steps but is harder to master.

The best way to crossover back is to ensure the leg closest to the centre drops back slightly (drop step) to clear the way for

the outside crossing leg. Over short distances the side skip can always be used especially if you have directed your shot cross court. You find that if the low spin is correctly executed then the cross in front recovery step happens almost automatically

Defensive Footwork Return of Serve

Defensive Return of Serve Footwork is where the player is on the defence, pushed wide and the weight is lunging or shifting sideways or backwards. When defending the player is trying to cut the angle with the feet while staying low and keeping good balance so recovery footwork can be dynamic and explosive. The defensive contact move discussed in this article is the Power Move.

1. Forehand Power Move

Type of return ball

The service ball for the Forehand Power Move Return is generally a fast wide ball that lands short and wide in the service box causing the player to lunge sideways to make a forehand return.

Out steps

The out steps for the Forehand Power Move Return are very simple because the returner is already standing at the corner of the court. The out steps usually start with a drop step, where the foot closest to the ball turns out and then drops onto the ball of the foot back under the body. The drop step is a step that gets the body (in this case) lunging out to the ball.

Hitting Stance

A power move return tends to be hit off a moving unstable stance with the secret being staying down through the shot not jumping or lifting on contact. In fact the body actually should drop as you attempt the power move return. The head should remain still through contact and angles kept in the legs. It is important not to jump up when lunging.

Contact move description

The Forehand Power Move Return is a defensive contact move where the shot is hit off an open lunging stance to the backhand side. Both feet come off the ground after contact while the hips remain closed through contact. The player establishes a quick open stance and lunges out towards the ball after or just before making contact (depends on how difficult the ball is to reach). The rear leg kicks back then swings around, extends and stops the body.

The player travels beyond the ball, while keeping good angles in the legs and with the outside foot either takes 1 – 3 braking steps or may even “go for it” thus attempting an outright winner with no intention to recover back towards the court. A power move is really a sideward elevated lunge.

Balance move explanation

The balance move of the forehand power return move is a kick back. A kick back is when you kick the back leg towards the side fence as you make contact with the ball. The kick back helps stop over rotation, ensures good balance and loads the back leg so it can swing around, extend and stop the body from taking further steps. Kicking the leg back also helps extend the point of contact. It is important to stay down on contact and not to jump up. Jumping leads to lose of balance and power and either hitting the ball long or dumping it in the net.

Recovery steps

In relation to recovery steps if you hit down the line and want to recovery quickly to cover a sharp angled cross court reply by your opponent I like to teach a crossover step where the outside leg crosses in front of the leg that is closest to the centre. This is a lot faster and covers more ground than the side skip recovery steps but is harder to master. The best way to crossover back is to ensure the leg closest to the centre drops back slightly (drop step) to clear the way for the outside crossing leg. Over short distances the side skip can always be used especially if you have directed your shot cross court. You find that if the low spin is correctly executed then the cross in front recovery step happens almost automatically

2. Backhand Power Move Return

Type of return ball

The service ball for the Backhand Power Move Return is generally a fast wide ball that lands short and wide in the service box causing the player to lunge sideways to make a backhand return.

Out steps

The out steps for the Backhand Power Move Return are very simple because the returner is already standing at the corner of the court. The out steps usually start with a drop step, where the foot closest to the ball turns out and then drops onto the ball of the foot back under the body. The drop step is a step that gets the body (in this case) lunging out to the ball.

Hitting Stance

A backhand power move return tends to be hit off an open moving unstable stance with the secret being staying down through the shot not jumping or lifting on contact. In fact the body actually should drop as you attempt the power move return. The head should remain still through contact and angles kept in the legs. It is important not to jump up when lunging.

Contact move description

The Backhand Power Move Return is a defensive contact move where the shot is hit off an open lunging stance to the backhand side. Both feet come off the ground after contact while the hips remain closed through contact. The player establishes a quick open stance and lunges out towards the ball after or just before making contact (depends on how difficult the ball is to reach). The rear leg kicks back then swings around, extends and stops the body.

The player travels beyond the ball, while keeping good angles in the legs and with the outside foot either takes 1 – 3 braking steps or may even “go for it” thus attempting an outright winner with no intention to recover back towards the court. A power move is really a sideward elevated lunge.

Balance move explanation

The balance move of the Power Move is a kick back. A kick back is when you kick the back leg towards the side fence as you make contact with the ball. The kick back helps stop over rotation, ensures good balance and loads the back leg so it can swing around, extend and stop the body from taking further steps. Kicking the leg back also helps extend the point of contact. It is important to stay down on contact and not to jump up. Jumping leads to lose of balance and power and either hitting the ball long or dumping it in the net.

Recovery steps

In relation to recovery steps if you hit down the line and want to recovery quickly to cover a sharp angled cross court reply by your opponent I like to teach a crossover step where the outside leg crosses in front of the leg that is closest to the centre. This is a lot faster and covers more ground than the side skip recovery steps but is harder to master. The best way to crossover back is to ensure the leg closest to the centre drops back slightly (drop step) to clear the way for the outside crossing leg. Over short distances the side skip can always be used especially if you have directed your shot cross court.

Questions & Answers

Return of Serve Contact Moves

Question: When do you teach the footwork for the return of serve? And, which do you teach first?

Answer:

I will always teach the return once all contact moves have been taught and understood as ground strokes, even though it is a very important part of the game. This is because it is important that the player can try all the different moves and use the ones that work for them. They can concentrate on refining moves that are already familiar to them. Remember, I have given you only a sample of returns of serve there are many more to try.....especially the backhand step down.

Of course there is the return of serve routine to learn and practice and this requires learning how to get ready as the server begins to serve, when to split step, where to return from, when or if the player steps forward on the server ball toss etc....like I said before many players will have different return routines. A return of serve routine is one that you will use every time you return so feeling comfortable and confident with the chosen routine is paramount.

I always like to teach offensive returns first, followed by rally and then defensive returns because having an aggressive return of serve puts you on the front foot from the very beginning of the rally.

Question: Which return is more common, a backhand transfer return or step down backhand return? Do you prefer 1 move over the other?

Answer:

I believe the backhand step down return is more common on the 1 handed backhand and the backhand transfer return more common on the 2 handed backhand. That being said so much footwork and especially the contact move comes down to personal preference of the coach and player and what works after trying both.

The transfer return is not taken as early as the step down so it also depends on the height and pace of the ball and how early and aggressively you want to hit the return. It also depends on the spin you want to impart....for instance if you wanted to slice the ball you would hit off a more closed stance.

My answer to which move I prefer is...always experiment in practice with someone serving you controlled and deliberately placed serves, then after gaining knowledge and confidence let instinct take over in live ball and match play situations.

Question: Which return of serve footwork did Novak Djokovic use on the second serve return 98% of the time in the final of the 2007 US Open against Roger Federer? Why would he do this?

Answer:

Novak Djokovic hit a Transfer Return 98% of the time on the second serve in the 2007 US Open final. Why? It works for him, he feels comfortable with this return on both forehand and backhand sides and as a run around return and it is effective and doesn't break down under pressure.

Interestingly, Roger Federer hit a variety of second serve returns , but his returning game was more about "Staying in the point" i.e. he sliced his backhand return a lot, whereas Djokovic was more about "Doing something " with his return and trying to put Federer under pressure from the beginning of the point.

Question: Does every player have to use the routine demonstrated in the video clips? If the answer is no...Which elements should be non negotiable on every return?

Answer

Of course not! Every player has their own routine but many players have poor routines or no routines. A routine is necessary because it makes you focus on the task at hand and gets you ready to react to the best of your ability.

Non-negotiable elements –

1. Split stepping on the servers ball contact as you must react quickly to the serve and a split step puts you in a strong reactive athletic position at the correct time.
2. Starting the routine with a good ready position with the feet wide apart, standing on the balls of the feet, with good body alignment and the knees slightly flexed
3. Creating a body language that conveys confidence and concentration
4. Great balance after the return so the brake and recovery steps are automatic and effective
5. Use the contact moves that match the approaching service ball and works for you

Optional elements –

1. Bouncing up and down on the toes before getting into the ready position
2. Stepping forward (though recommended) as the server tosses up the ball
3. Where you position yourself to return serve (this will rely on strength of opponents serve, how well you return, court surface and whether it is a second or first serve return)

Question: Name some common footwork errors made when returning?

Answer

- 1.) Not split stepping when the opponent makes contact with the ball
- 2.) Not moving the foot closest to the ball first i.e. move from the back foot to the front foot when the ball is a comfortable distance away
- 3.) Bending at the waist instead at the knees
- 4.) Not shifting sideways with the feet apart when the ball is heading towards the body
- 5.) Keeping the feet too close together
- 6.) No service routine thus the return is out of sequence
- 7.) Standing too far in or too far back to return serve
- 8.) Not practicing the recovery steps when training your return
- 9.) Using the wrong contact move on the wrong ball
- 10.) Moving backwards on the return as the opponent hits the serve
- 11.) Not moving in to take advantage of a weak second serve
- 12.) Side skipping instead of making a crossover step when a large distance need to be covered quickly...remember you are

starting the point in the corner of the court thus a slow recovery will put you immediately on the back foot.

Glossary

Court Positioning

This paper will focus on the VERY IMPORTANT skill of POSITIONING **YOURSELF** at the **CORRECT LOCATION** on the tennis court. I call this court positioning.

Develop court positioning with shadow tennis and fed ball initially (to understand the concept) but training using live ball drills (with serve and return) and match play are crucial.

Court positioning is all about understanding angles, geometry and reading the clues and cues that the opponent shows down the other end of the court.

I was inspired to write this series when reading an article in my local city newspaper by Tom Smithies that was titled "Keepers improve with age". It talked about the importance of experience when trying to make it as a goalkeeper in international soccer. What is gained by experience? It is the ability to position yourself correctly and also anticipate well?Yes...both these skills are very important in tennis as well!

Following is an extract of the article-

".....goalkeeper is the position in soccer where experience counts most, and there are many examples of top flight keepers defying the advance of age.

Peter Shilton, England's No 1 for many years, played in 1990 World Cup at the age of 38, helping his team to the semi-finals.

Italian keeper Dino Zoff went one better, captaining his side to win the 1982 World Cup at the age of 40.....For all of them, the EXPERIENCE GAINED OVER THE YEARS gives them BETTER POSITIONING and ANTICIPATION.

Socceroos' goalkeeping coach Tony Franken believes that if anything, keepers in the 30s can be at the top of their game. " Goalkeepers are still learning their trade in their late 20s. In their early 30s they usually hit their prime" he said....."I put it down to three things that determine how long you can play for: your reflexes, your agility and your footwork".....with experience comes the ability to put yourself in the

right place, added Franken, evoking the memory of former Arsenal and Northern Ireland custodian Pat Jennings.

"He played until his late 30s and rarely dived - he was always in the right position."

To meit sounds a bit what the great Andre Agassi was able to demonstrate on the tennis court.....he positioned himself so well on the court it looked like he was always just walking to the ball while everyone else is lunging and twisting and turning!!

There are 3 important factors when positioning yourself on the court:

1.) Where you **GEOMETRICALLY** position yourself on the court in relation to where the ball is being hit.

2.) The **DEPTH** of your position on the court.

3.) How you **POSITION YOUR BODY IN RELATION TO THE BALL** when the opponent is about to make contact with the ball.

1. Geometric Positioning

In tennis it is crucial to understand geometrically how to position yourself on the court as correct positioning will give you maximum time to react and minimal distance to move to your opponents shot. Geometric positioning UNDERSTANDS where YOU need to recover to and/or position on the court according to where your opponent is ABLE to hit his shot. In a nutshell.....you need to bisect the angle of your opponent's greatest possible range of shot orPosition yourself at the MIDPOINT of the greatest angles that your opponent can possibly create. Thus I like to call this the **midpoint recovery position**.

For example, if you hit the ball to the center of the court, your midpoint recovery position should be the middle of the court.

If you hit the ball cross court you position yourself a few steps to the same side of the centerline **from where you hit the ball(your end of the court)** so you can cover your opponents sharp angled reply.

Remembering, if your opponent goes down the line the shot is coming towards you but a **cross court shot** is going away from you.

However, if you hit down the line the midpoint recovery position changes a few steps to the OTHER SIDE of the centerline **from where you hit the ball(down your end of the court)** as now you need to be ready for your opponents sharp cross court angled reply. The take home message is that when you go the line you must recover a lot further than when you

go cross court. I.e. **if you hit an f/hand cross court (this is for a right hander) you stay right of center, down the middle recover to the middle, go down the line recover left of center!!!**

This brings up a couple of important points about playing a shot down the line. You must understand that firstly.....you must recover further....secondly.....understand what contact move suits a down the line shot.....thirdly....be very balanced as the shot is more difficult and risky i.e. you hit over the high part of the net, the short part of the court, have less court to hit into and usually are changing the direction of the ball flight. My rule of thumb is only going down the line when you are in control of the point and your feet are well up in the court!

2. Depth of Court

Previously we looked at court geometry and where and why we recover to the correct location, but just as important is how we position ourselves up and down the court i.e. depth of court.

How deep you stand will vary with your style of play, personality, and skill level and court surface. It will also vary on whether you're taking control with offensive contact moves, maintaining control with rallying contact moves or regaining control with defensive contact moves.

The fundamental starting position is 3 to 5 feet behind the baseline when rallying and both players are maintaining control of the point. But, if your opponent moves away from the net or is stretched out wide, you should move in closer to the net..... In extreme cases when you are attacking the ball with your feet and putting the opponent under great pressure, you should stay inside the baseline and anticipate a short ball or a floating ball that you can take out of the air. However.....if you hit a short ball and your opponent is in an aggressive position you might want to take a step back and give yourself more time to react.

3. Body Positioning

The last point on positioning on the court relates to how you should position your BODY in relation TO THE BALL.

Your shoulders should be squared up to the location of the ball in your opponent's court. For example, if the ball is in the center of the court, your shoulders, hips and feet should be "squared up" directly towards the net. If the ball has bounced cross court or down the line the shoulders, hips and feet should be facing directly towards where the ball has landed.