

The Serve Footwork Article

This article accompanies the serve footwork sharp shooter video and refers to the various footwork patterns and balance moves used before, during and after serving.

Remember, this is a footwork article and will not address grips and swing lines. It will however address serving footwork and good balance technique.

The 3 main aims of the footwork drills demonstrated are:

- 1.) To develop a great serve routine.
- 2.) To hit a well balanced explosive 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 any successful serve in tennis.

Note: In the video clip, only the foot up serve is featured where the back foot steps behind the front foot and then the rear leg kicks back. The other serve not mentioned is:

- The foot back serve where back foot remains in place and both knees are bent simultaneously instead of stepping up.

Note: The preserve routine and recovery steps should remain the same for both serves.

Serve Routines

One thing you will notice in the video clip when watching Claudine Shaul and Jarmilla Groth (both Grand Slam players and formally ranked top 30 on the WTA tour) is how professionally they practice each of their serves. They have a set routine and use 5 R's every time they PRACTICE.

The 5R's are 5 progressive footwork techniques that you use when serving in 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 serve -

1st Getting READY on the toes and relax into a solid starting position -

- 1.) Walk up in a confident and relaxed manner to their preferred serving position on the court
- 2.) Perform ready steps to prepare mentally before the serve and switch into service mode (optional)
- 3.) Get into a strong athletic position and bounce the ball as many times as necessary if at all (ball bouncing is personal preference and to be discussed with your coach)
- 4.) Pause and balance with both hands in front in preparation to serve

2nd READ the ball toss as you

3rd REACT with a foot up or foot back footwork synchronised with the ball toss

- 1.) Take a small step in behind the front foot with the rear foot as you START the up phase of the ball toss
- OR
- 2.) Double leg squat as you START the up phase of the ball toss

4th RESPOND with front foot hop and leg curl balance move

5th RECOVER

- 1.) Regain balance with a brake step
- 2.) Followed with recovery steps to the MIDPOINT RECOVERY POSITION (this depends on where the serve landed out wide, at the body or down the middle)

Note: The depth of the midpoint recovery position will also depend on the effectiveness of the serve 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 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. What makes a routine a routine is the fact that the routine doesn't change i.e. it remains the same every time you perform it.*

Service Routine Footwork

The Service Routine will be explained under a template of-

- Pre serve routine (1st and 2nd part are not seen on video)
- Service Stance (foot up or back)
- Contact move description
- Balance move explanation
- Brake and Recovery steps

Remember, this article is mainly about the footwork and use of the lower body when serving.

1.) Pre Serve Routine (not seen on video)

1st) - walk up in a confident and relaxed manner to your preferred serving position on the court

2nd) - perform ready steps (player preference) or anything that switches you on mentally to serve. Some other suggestions might be bouncing the ball, adjusting the hat, breathing in and out etc. The point here is not to rush the serve. You need time to make a decision on how and where you want to serve.

3rd) - finally, get into a strong athletic position with the racket and ball comfortably resting at waist level in preparation to serve and the feet shoulder width apart. 65% of the weight is on the back foot which points to the side fence. The front foot points to the net post with the back leg slightly flexed. Relax the jaw and the hand (as discussed in the Relax and Win article- see slide show section)

2.) Service Stance (foot up or back)

1st) – as the hands drop down together most of the weight is rocked towards the rear foot

2nd) – as the hands come up together the front foot turns parallel to the baseline as the rear foot steps in behind the front foot and the tip of the racket points to the sky.

3rd) - finally, the front arm is now pointing at the ball as both knees flex and the weight rests evenly on the balls of both feet. At the same time, for balance and to create extra leg drive, there a strong and dynamic extension of the front hip over the baseline (see feet shot for good example of the hip thrust)

3.) Contact Move Description

The contact move performed when serving is a front foot hop. This is where the server takes off and lands on the front foot. The foot lands flat on the ground with the knee flexed for balance and to absorb the body weight. A great sign of a great leg drive is that the heel lands over the baseline. Keep the head up and don't bend at the waist. The non serving arm should extend up then tuck in for balance. It should look like you are performing a 1 armed chin-up.

4.) Balance Move Explanation

The balance move for the serve is a leg curl. A leg curl is where the heel of the back leg bends towards the butt, this helps keep good body balance and alignment. It also really helps the player to regain balance and produce a strong brake step (the next footwork step). A sign of good leg drive is a dynamic and naturally occurring leg curl.

5.) Brake and Recovery Steps

1st.) - The brake step is the first step taken after the serve has been hit. If the landing leg is described as being the centre of a clock then the trail leg comes around after the leg curl and the foot lands flat and the leg flexed between 1 and 2 o'clock. If the player wants to recover to the baseline the foot should land with a 45 degrees angle to the baseline. If the players want to serve and volley then the foot should land facing the net but still in the same clock face position. (See video -front shot)

2nd.) - In a live ball and/or practice serve situation (see video), the recovery steps are most commonly a push step from the back leg (leg which performed the brake step) which comes down and drives the player towards the midpoint recovery position ([see glossary](#)) on the baseline. The recovery steps will be a step back with the inside foot which is then followed by a spit step. Be very careful not to split step with the weight travelling backwards and the

weight landing on the heels. (Have a look at the feet section, both girls have the knees over the toes, the backside out for balance and the arms and racket relaxed and centred)

If the serve is hit particularly well then it is great to follow the serve into the net as already the weight is going forward and with a good serve you usually finish the serve well inside the baseline.

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 possible 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 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.

Questions & Answers

Serve Footwork

Question: When do you teach the footwork for the serve?

Answer:

I actually teach it last of all. My order of teaching is usually ground strokes first, followed by approach shots, volleys, smash, return of serve and finally footwork before during and after the serve. The next thing is then to blend all the moves together in tactical situations and include return of serves or a serve to start the sequence.

I always try and put some live ball at the end of each lesson. I usually start the live ball with a fed ball feed using the shot/s of the day to start the point.

That being said, if the student came to me and specifically wants to work on a problem area because they don't have confidence in that shot i.e. the backhand return, I might make this the very first lesson as it is always the clients' right to work on whatever they want or need.

Question: Which is better the foot up or foot back serve? What about the back leg landing first as taught 20 years ago?

Answer:

The serve where the back leg lands first has virtually disappeared from modern day coaching curriculums. Though it is still used by veteran players and as you know I am very flexible with my teaching and always

teach what works for the individual. So I still wouldn't totally dismiss this approach to serving.

I am a strong advocate for self observation. If we wrap our ideas too tightly, we can kill technique rather than let students evolve and explore.

I think teaching the foot up or foot back is more like a reference and you must work with both and see what works. The ball toss is so important in the serve and I feel that what gives the player the best balance, leg drive, rhythm and control of the toss is a big decider on which 3 methods to choose.

Question: You always have your player brake step and then recover after every serve! Why would you emphasise this?

Answer:

I am a big fan (when teaching footwork that the 5 R's are adhered to as much as possible because getting ready, reading , reacting, responding and recovering are all fundamental to great movement.)

The footwork recovery to the midpoint recovery positions need to be instinctive and automatic. To develop good muscle memory in footwork terms I will always ensured good balance is regained after the serve and brake steps, recovery steps and split stepping for next shot preparation are always included when practicing serve footwork.

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. Starting the routine with a good ready position with the feet wide apart, standing with the weight mainly on the front foot, and the racket resting comfortably at waist level.
2. Creating a body language that conveys confidence and concentration

3. Not rushing the serve routine
4. Great balance after the serve so the brake and recovery steps are automatic and effective
5. Driving with the legs into the court and kicking the back leg for balance
6. Split stepping as the returner makes contact with the ball

Optional elements –

1. Bouncing up and down on the toes before getting into the ready position to serve
2. Using the foot up or foot back footwork.
3. Where you position yourself to serve (this will rely on direction of serve intention)
4. How many times you bounce the ball before serving (if at all?)
5. Turning the front foot as the player rocks back and the racket cuts the toes

Question: Name some common footwork errors made when serving?

Answer

- 1.) Not split stepping when the opponent makes contact with the ball
- 2.) When doing the foot up serve the back leg steps to the side not in behind the front foot
- 3.) When doing the foot up serve the back leg drags along the ground instead of stepping up in a smooth and balanced motion
- 4.) Bending at the waist instead at the knees
- 5.) No service routine thus the serve is out of sequence
- 6.) Foot faulting with the front or back foot
- 7.) Not practicing the recovery steps when training your serve
- 8.) The trail leg comes around too far or not far enough. Remember that with the trail leg coming around between 1 and 2 o'clock is ideal (see brake step in serve article)
- 9.) Moving backwards after the serve as the opponent hits the serve
- 10.) Not moving in to take advantage of a weak return