

Areas of Improvement Series – Serve and Return of Serve

By Mark Dickson

Hopefully, you have been working hard to develop a positive, professional attitude. This is the key for everything else we will discuss. With your improved attitude let's move on to the next topic on my Immediate Areas of Improvement checklist; the serve and return of serve.

1. a positive, professional attitude
2. serve & return of serve
3. footwork & fitness
4. shot selection & tolerance
5. match flow momentum
6. concentration & between point routine
7. opponent scouting skills

Since the serve and return of serve are the start of every point they are a player's first chance and best opportunity to dictate play and take control of the point early. If you work smarter on your serve and return of serve you will dramatically improve your performance. The following are some keys to your success:

1. improve your technique
2. consistently hit with depth to your targets
3. practice under pressure situations

When serving, make sure you use a continental grip, keep your hitting arm relaxed and make contact well out into the court. Remember, when you serve wide or position yourself farther from the center mark at the baseline, you open up the court to extreme angles for both yourself and your opponent.

On returns, make sure you position yourself correctly to cover the angles of the server, read the toss and body action, make a strong split step, move diagonally to the ball and swing from low to high to carry the ball deep into the court.

Minor adjustments in technique go a long way towards building self-confidence and lead to greatly improved performance. I always look forward to helping a new student with these minor adjustments and seeing the smile spread across their face as they begin to build a consistent weapon. They are always amazed how such a small change can make such a huge difference.

The #1 goal for serving and returning should be to improve your consistency and depth to strategic targets so you can begin to develop the point. At tournaments I often see players who are frustrated and dejected because they can't consistently place the ball where they want no matter how hard they concentrate or how many countless hours they spend practicing. Typically, this is due to an undetected, minor flaw and lack of focus that is often easily corrected. Fix the flaw and the consistent weapon starts to blossom.

A well-placed $\frac{3}{4}$ speed 1st serve takes pressure off of you and puts your opponent under immediate pressure. When returning, your safest play is often high and deep down the middle. Many excellent tour players simply hit every return high over the center net strap. Easily improve your consistency and depth by not changing direction of the ball unless you read the ball early and have plenty of time to redirect it.

Can you consistently put your 1st serve in under pressure in a match? Can you find a way to get that return back in play? When was the last time you served and volleyed or approached the net off of the server's 2nd serve? On every shot in practice you have to create pressure situations in your mind to be able to perform to your maximum potential. Create a no-nonsense serving or returning competition with your friends that has match intensity or just imagine a match play situation until you can feel exactly as you would in a match, then practice your serve and return under pressure. Imagine how your opponent feels in the same situation and then figure out a way to apply some pressure of your own.

Remember to use targets in practice to visualize the line of flight of the ball and give yourself some immediate feedback.

Developing consistent and powerful weapons is much easier than most people think, but it takes time, patience and attention to the right details. Practice wisely, play smart and consider all your options. Learn how to dictate play from the moment your strings first touch the ball and you are well on your way to the next competitive level. Don't settle for ordinary when you can be extraordinary and remember to stay positive and enjoy the process!

Mark Dickson grew up playing junior tennis in Florida and is Director of the Mark Dickson Tennis Academy in Sarasota, Florida. A former US Open singles and doubles quarterfinalist, Mark achieved ATP Tour world rankings of #12 in year-end prize money, #32 in singles and #23 in doubles. Internationally recognized for his coaching and motivational skills, professionalism, positive attitude and serving ability, Mark is a 10-time winner of professional tournaments around the world, 3-time sportsmanship award winner, 3-time All-American at Clemson University where he was ranked # 2 in singles and #5 in doubles in the United States and ITCA Senior Player-of-the-Year. For over twenty years, Mark has been a coach and mentor to players seeking to improve their games. He has had juniors ranked #1 in the world, #1 in the United States and #1 in Florida as well as tour professionals travel to train with him in Sarasota. Mark is a Certified Professional by the ATP Tour, USPTA, PTR and Pat Etcheberry and a Sport Science Level 1 Coach. He is a member of the USTA High Performance Coaching Program, US Open Final 8 Club, Australian Open Last Eight Club and Clemson University Hall of Fame. Mark is a frequent public speaker and motivator to junior tennis players and can be reached online at www.markdickson.com or at 941.356.4932.