

Areas of Improvement Series – Footwork and Fitness

By Mark Dickson

Now that you have been working on developing your professional attitude, serve weapons and return of serve consistency, let's move on to the next topic on my Immediate Areas of Improvement checklist; footwork and fitness.

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

Footwork and fitness form the framework for your success on the tennis court. Without a solid foundation of anticipation skills, court movement and endurance a player will quickly become frustrated and watch as fellow competitors who train properly and professionally move past them.

Improve your footwork and fitness and you will immediately improve your game, gain a tremendous amount of confidence for what you can accomplish and enjoy yourself more.

With all the different exercises and theories, what areas should a player focus on? A core program should focus on court movement, strength, speed, agility, quickness and endurance. You must evaluate your strengths and weaknesses, balance the volume of your workout with the intensity of your training and the amount of recovery between exercises and exercise sessions. Be very careful to avoid high volume and high intensity with short recovery and power workouts for undeveloped youth.

When possible, try to incorporate many of your exercises on-court, especially agility and quickness, to further develop your court sense, spatial awareness of where you are at all times and concentration. This is a great way to blend physical training with mental training.

Learning efficient footwork patterns, court movement and court positioning is vital for improving your skills. Lateral shuffles, crossover recovery steps, pivots, skipping, rear leg stabilization, step-outs, step-behinds, step-in fronts, hockey stops, transfer and hop steps make up a basic footwork program. All the speed, strength and agility training in the world won't help if a player neglects developing proper footwork patterns with ball tracking and court positioning skills.

Resistance training for strength development can be accomplished with weights and bands or simply with your own body weight. In addition to core and lower body, focus on forearms, shoulders and upper back to improve performance and reduce the risk of injury.

Since tennis players need speed in short bursts, speed training should focus on rapid acceleration and deceleration over shorter distances with longer recovery times between exercises. Most players and coaches focus only on acceleration, but deceleration needs equal attention as it leads to recovering for the next shot and positioning yourself well.

For agility training, cone drills and simple line drills are excellent ways to get your feet moving in the right patterns while maintaining your balance. At our Academy we do the majority of our agility drills with a tennis ball and a coach to improve a player's quickness to anticipate, react and recover with balance. It is much more beneficial to a player's long-term development to have a partner directing movement. We add games of tag, partner shadow challenges and intense competition to raise everyone's level of intensity and FUN!

Endurance can be trained and improved with running or preferably biking at varying distances and recovery times. An exercise bike reduces the amount of stress on the feet, knees and hips while building strength and endurance. Running form drills are very beneficial for players to develop the most efficient way to move.

In my experience with professional players and High Performance juniors, there is no single, magic formula for success in improving footwork and fitness except for the following:

- DO NOT OVERTRAIN
- Evaluate strengths and weaknesses
- Have a clear, well-balanced, written training plan based on Sport Science
- Start today
- Have a friend or two to train with
- Begin slowly
- Be consistent
- HAVE FUN!

Many top players have been successful with a variety of exercises and programs so don't feel that you have to do everything exactly the same way someone else trains. Have the goal to improve every area of your physical conditioning gradually and you are well on your way to dramatically improving your level of tennis.

Two excellent resources that should be part of every serious player's library are *Complete Conditioning For Tennis* by Paul Roetert and *Tennis Training – Enhancing On-Court Performance* by Mark Kovacs. Paul and Mark are both at the very top echelon of tennis with the USTA's Player Development. These books are easy to follow and show the exercises and programs that lead to safe improvement of your skills. Another terrific, free resource is the USTA's High Performance website and the USTA Player Development strength and conditioning section.

Periodize your program and training around your important tournaments and you will start to experience the feelings in your legs, lungs and mind that that best players in the world feel. Best of all you will begin to get results that will encourage you to stick with your program.

Remember to develop your skills slowly as your body is gradually adapting to some new exercises and stress to your energy systems. Developing your footwork and fitness takes patience and time. Start slowly, be consistent with your routine and you will quickly improve your ability to anticipate and react, move around the court more effortlessly and gain self-confidence. The work will be rewarding, but you will only get the most improvement if you are having FUN!

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 holds Professional Certifications as an ATP Tour Professional, USTA High Performance Coach, USPTA Professional 1, PTR, Pat Etcheberry strength and conditioning and is a Sport Science Level 1 Coach. He is a member of the 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.

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