

## Areas of Improvement Series – Shot Selection and Shot Tolerance

By Mark Dickson

Hopefully you have been working to develop a positive, professional attitude and improving your serve and return of serve weapons. Your quicker footwork and stronger fitness should be getting you to more balls and allowing you to stay in the point longer. Now, let's move on to the next topic on my Immediate Areas of Improvement checklist: shot selection & tolerance.

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

Shot selection and shot tolerance fall under the larger umbrella of strategy and tactics and are two ways a player can dramatically improve their performance and move to a much higher level of competitive play. This is how we dictate play and either take time away from our opponents or buy time for ourselves and how we eventually become the player that everyone struggles to play well against.

Shot selection is the art of finding the right shot in your arsenal to keep your opponent off balance and out of rhythm as much of the time as possible. The thorough understanding of proper shot selection and the rhythm of the point allows you to gain a more advantageous court position even when you are competing against a much stronger opponent and rapidly improves your ability level.

Players have the options of trying to develop the point through the use and combinations of direction, depth, height, spin, power and court position.

Shot tolerance is the typical number of balls a player will feel comfortable keeping in play during a point. It's the number of shots they can readily tolerate before wanting to end the point. The mind-set of a player, their will, personality and athletic ability often influences shot tolerance.

Some players like to hit a powerful serve and then a huge forehand to try to finish a point quickly. For these attacking players their shot tolerance may be 4 balls or less. They want the point over .... now.

Other players may play more defensive tennis and try to build a point patiently and their shot tolerance may be much higher, perhaps 20 balls or more. Still other players fall in between these two examples where, for them, 4 balls is way too quick of a point and 20 balls is outside their patience level.

It's important to take a personal inventory of your weapons and weaknesses. Do you understand and can you use placement, depth, height, spin, power and court placement to your advantage when you need it? What is your playing style? Do you like to dictate play aggressively and finish the point quickly or do you like to develop longer points and wait for your opponent to make an error.

Developing your shot selection and shot tolerance takes time and it is a tremendous amount of fun!! It is important to be very self-aware of your own playing ability as well as your likes and dislikes on the court and to then gradually broaden your skills so that your dislikes become less and less over time.

There are many effective games and drills you can use to broaden your shot selection and get you recognizing more opportunities, such as:

1. Height and depth
2. Topspin vs. slice and flat
3. High vs. low targets
4. Attack and defend
5. Offense vs. defense
6. No winners
7. Opening the court vs. keeping the court closed
8. Serve and volley
9. Return of serve chip and charge
10. Drop shot and lob
11. Power vs. touch, change of pace and rhythm

To improve your shot selection and shot tolerance you have to make up your mind that you will step outside your comfort zone for a while. At our Academy we refer to this as learning to become comfortable being uncomfortable.

If you have a tendency of wanting to end the point too soon, then you need to be determined to always keep one more ball in play than your opponent and use your newly developed selection of shots to stay in the point. Instead of going for an outright winner, try to develop the point and force your opponent to make an error. Stick with it!! It works.

If you have the tendency to sit back and counter-attack throughout each match, then make up your mind you will work harder at looking for a shot earlier in the point to take early in your contact zone and attack more aggressively.

Remember, when you take the ball early in your strike zone and aggressively transfer your weight forward you can often upset your opponent's rhythm even more than when you hit with more power or spin. You will often find yourself in much better court position as well. Think

about playing earlier, not hitting harder. It works against every level of player and is a weapon you should develop.

Players who continually improve are the ones who work hard to dictate play, buy time, take time away, develop their game style through shot selection and shot tolerance and learn how to attack and defend against other game styles. Using strategy and tactics only works if you can execute the proper shots when you need them. A well rounded player will have many shots and the confidence to know how and when to use them to keep their opponents off balance and guessing.

A comment we hear all the time from students who are new to our Academy and our philosophy for developing champions is that they had no idea that playing tennis could be so much fun. Their eyes are opened up to a court with many possibilities and new opportunities to reach their full potential.

As your shot selection and shot tolerance improves your self-confidence will soar. You will have much more fun playing tennis and will be able to play well against many more opponents. Enjoy learning these new skills and take the time to pass along all you can to our next generation of players!!

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.markdicksonstennis.com](http://www.markdicksonstennis.com) or at 941.356.4932.

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