



# Smarten Up!

Push your players to practice with a ball machine to help boost their “Tennis IQ.”

By Stan Oley

**T**ennis experts are always offering opinions about what’s wrong with American tennis. But it’s simple: The “Tennis IQ” of the American player is much less than what it could and should be.

Tennis IQ includes a player’s ability to understand and articulate technical and tactical solutions given a shot or situation during a match, mental solutions, and equipment knowledge.

Let’s look at a typical tennis lesson in the U.S. Whether a player is a beginner or advanced, most of the lesson is taught with the pro standing at the net feeding balls. This eliminates the player’s ability to have solid decision-making capabilities or to have different shots in his arsenal. Players continue to perfect that one groundstroke, which is just one of many different shots a player will get during just one point of a game.

Over the years, I’ve asked coaches and teaching pros, “Why do you feed from the net?” I have never received an answer with any merit. They typically say, “Habit,” or, “It’s easier,” or, “It’s how I was taught,” etc. This has led to a “culture” where tennis is now taught in a “closed skill” (non-decision-making) mode. But in a match, a player needs to play in an “open skill” (decision-making) mode.

This “culture” has also caused teaching pros to focus their lessons on one ball, micromanaging the low-to-high groundstroke, which has limited teaching pros’ knowledge of and ability to teach and demonstrate the rest of the shots required.

As I travel around the country, I ask tennis players who are also golfers: As a golfer, what would you do if your ball were 150 yards from the hole? The golfer’s response usually begins based on his skill and power as he first names his club of choice for that distance. But then he says, “Ultimately my club would depend on if I am in the rough or fairway, wind conditions, if the pin placement on the green was up or back, if there were hazards nearby, if the ball was above or below my feet, etc.”

Then, on the court, I feed a high approach shot out of a ball machine and ask what he would do with this ball, and what his shot would look like technically. The player almost always

responds with something generic regarding where he would hit the ball, i.e. to the opponent’s backhand, and in most cases he has no idea how a high approach is played technically as opposed to his groundstroke.

Note that practice “habits” for golf and tennis are quite different. The golfer spends hours on the range, whether it is warming up or improving a weak area of his game. That same player in tennis rarely if ever just goes out and hits or uses a ball machine (the tennis player’s “range”) to improve weak areas. With tennis, the practice “habit” is almost always some sort of match play or a lesson. Golfers practice what they don’t do well; tennis players rarely practice at all.

Next, it is said that players just need to play more and drill less. Players play for 20-plus years and still do not know how to play a high approach as opposed to a low approach or a moonball. Is playing more going to help that? To be competitive, players have to learn the shots, and then game play would help them to hit different shots and construct points.

But today, there is a lot of technology available to assist us in improving a player’s Tennis IQ. The problem is, tools such as ball machines, video, apps, and racquet diagnostic equipment (to help players understand their equipment) are rarely used. The state of U.S. tennis depends on our ability to change the culture of simply feeding from the net. Let’s use more technology to do that feeding.

Changing this culture will give players a better understanding of different shots, allow us to demonstrate shots and strategies more effectively, and ultimately improve the Tennis IQ of American players. ■

**For all the latest ball machines and all their specifications and features, see our exclusive Guide to Ball Machines starting on page 30.**

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