

## Beyond the Fundamentals

I was so sure that it was the right move. He had crowded the net all day and my swift and stealthy lob promised to leave him flat-footed and cause his partner to sprint back to retrieve it. We would then take the net and seize control of this break point.

None of that happened. My net-crowding opponent had taken two big steps back before I had even made contact with the ball. It was as if he was in my head. How did he do that? How had he developed such well-honed instincts for the game?

This seminal moment took place about 35 years ago, after which I vowed to become like him. Did it work? Well, 15 years later I got a rematch against him and he beat me again. But much of what I have learned over the years can find its roots in that one match three decades ago in which I was not just beaten, but mastered. Have I said recently about how much more you learn from losing than from winning?

## When to change strategy (and when not to)

**T**wo years ago we won the first set 6-1 by pounding deuce-court serves down the middle at our right-handed opponent's weak backhand and devouring his weak returns. They began the second set by switching sides, where now his weak backhand was out wide where we preferred not to serve and from where he could poke lobs down the alley and stay in points. They pushed us to a second-set tiebreaker, largely on the strength of that strategic shift.

In 2009, after double-faulting across nearly two entire games, a server alternated between serving at the center T and serving from the furthest point allowable, at the outside edge of the doubles alley.

Once in 2010, after losing the first set, a team played the entire rest of the match in I formation.

Last year, I encountered an opponent who switched from righty to lefty in the middle of the match.

And once, about 15 years ago, an opponent tied a balloon to her shoelace. Yes, on a string! We were never sure exactly why, but we did hear her

say to her partner, who was as mystified as we, “I can’t possibly play any worse.” My partner was about to check if it was legal and then turned to me and said, “Wait, why would I want her to take it off?” Good point.

Indeed, tennis lore is graced (or littered, depending upon your point of view) with stories of people who changed strategies mid-match, sometimes in the name of strategy, other times out of desperation, and occasionally for the sake of folly (like the time that an opponent chose to serve from five feet behind the baseline, after being called for two consecutive foot faults).

So let’s start the conversation by pointing out the obvious. You should consider a change in strategy if you think it will give your side a better chance at:

- Utilizing a weapon of yours
- Exposing a weakness of theirs
- Disrupting their flow
- Messing with their minds

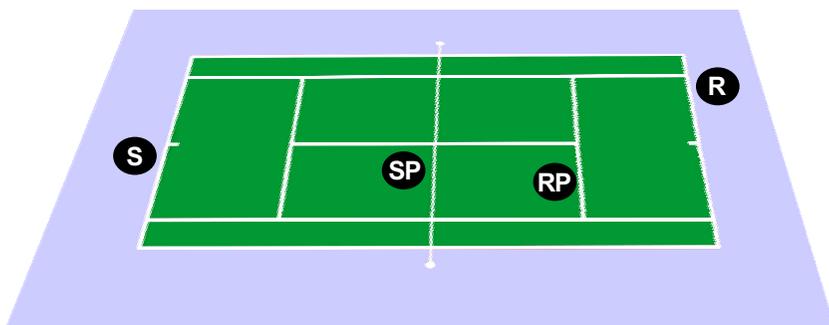
The success of the change needs to be measured in net gain, because most strategic shifts result in some compromise to your own play (otherwise, you would have done that in the first place, yes?). And while I am never an advocate of raw gamesmanship for the sole purpose of destroying an opponent’s frame of mind, I acknowledge that a good strategic shift could have that as a byproduct.

In broad strokes, you would consider a strategy change if you are having trouble holding serve or breaking serve. I like breaking it down this way because it shifts the focus away from whether you are winning or losing. I’m not convinced that “because we’re losing” should be the sole criterion for changing strategies. If you are holding serve with ease but missing 3 out of 4 serve returns, you’re not losing but you sure as hell are doing something wrong. And because most of us compartmentalize our games down these lines, you could make a change to your serve or your return strategy without it disrupting the other.

If you are getting outplayed in the normal course of a point, outside of serve or receive, that is more worrisome, because you have to contemplate a shift that would change the nature of how you play every point. But before we go climb any ladders, let’s consider our lower-lying fruit.

## On serve

If you are having trouble holding serve, play more I formation (where both you and your partner start from the middle of the court, one of you to cover in one direction and the other going in the opposite direction). We'll discuss this in detail in Chapter xx, but to cut right to the chase, it is easier to serve middle from that position, and anytime you can attack the middle of the court, good things could happen. And if you want an even simpler argument for I formation, most people simply serve better from the middle of the court.



### Quite the panacea

Most people see results from I formation simply because serves serve better from the middle of the court.

We can (and will, in Chapter xx) discuss the various types of serves you could consider hitting, but I'm not sure that the middle of a match is the best place to start hitting kick serves if you don't actually own one. But serving out of the I can help your serve no matter what type of serve it is.

## On return

While servers initiate, receivers react, and that adds a challenge to any discussion of improving your fortunes. (And once again I'm going to refer you elsewhere, Chapter xx, for deeper discussions on the return game.) If you're looking for a cure-all for return issues, the one to try first is to take the ball sooner. No matter which side, no matter what type of serve, meeting it earlier could change everything. You make it harder for the net

person to poach, you make it harder for the server to close on the net, you increase the likelihood of opponents having to hit up on their first volley instead of down, and you create possibilities for angles that might not have existed otherwise.

I'm not suggesting that you actively try to do any of those four things (defeat the poach, preempt the close, make them hit up, create angles), and that perhaps is the biggest benefit of all in moving in on returns: you no longer have time to think! Missing returns can mess with your head and the best thing you can do to combat that is to turn off your brain. But the last time you checked, it didn't have an off switch. Hitting aggressive returns is the closest you might get to finding an off switch, because you make everything happen in an instant.

Now I don't want you to put yourself in harm's way, so if you are getting blasted off the court by a big server, don't do this. In fact, do the opposite: stand five feet behind the baseline and throw every serve up in the air, as high as you can and as deep as you can. That gives you the best possible chance at getting the ball in play while also changing the rhythm of the point.

## **Are you surrendering?**

Moving off the baseline to receive serve is a concession. You could argue that any strategic change is a concession; it's all Plan B, otherwise, you would have done that from the outset.

Yes, you are telling your opponents that you can't handle what they are dishing out and I suppose that could embolden them or give them cause to think you have become intimidated.

Build a bridge and get over it. The only thing that matters is changing a result; disregard everything else. You are problem-solving and in so doing you are exhibiting some of the best qualities that competitive athletes can possess: flexibility and creativity. In fact, I would argue that showing the willingness to change could send a more powerful message to your opponents than anything else that could be inferred from a strategy shift.

## It happened on court

It's really easy to get carried away with implications and inferences. I once watched a pair of my teammates win the first set and then change their strategy and start lobbing because they were convinced that their opponents were going to start rushing the net. Their opponents did no such thing and won the final two sets when our team lost its way amid their new lobbing campaign.



Change your strategy if you think that your current direction has little or no chance for success. That is the primary criterion. Keep reading, though, for a bit of gray area.

## When not to change it up

In my experience, partnerships change their strategies when they shouldn't at least as often as do they refuse to make a change when they should have. Here's the scene: You have just lost the first set 6-3 on one early break and five easy holds by the opponents. You only reached 30-30 or deuce against serve twice while you had to fend off continual challenges on your own serves.

You didn't play badly at all, serving no doubles, returning with a high percentage, making most of your first volleys, and committing few unforced errors. And the last time you faced this team, you won in straights. But this time, your opponents have simply been unconscious and that makes you feel helpless as you sit down for the changeover before beginning the second set.

What would you say to your partner? What advice would you offer to change your fortune? You might be able to uncover a legitimate strategy shift that could stem the tide, but I want to suggest something different, if for no other reason than because so many teams fail to consider it.

Stay the course.

Let's look at the facts here. You and your partner are playing well and you know that you are not overmatched, given that you won against this team in the past. You are serving well, returning well, and not making sloppy mistakes. There is nothing obvious to point to that you can or

should be doing better; you're just being outplayed. Sure, you could try stuff, but that carries with it just as high of a probability that it will mess you up than it will mess them up. Ask yourself two questions:

- Can we continue to play at this level?
- Can they continue to play at this level?

If you think that your opponents' level of play is not sustainable, your best course of action would be to force them to keep playing that well in order to win. If they are unable to, that giant sucking sound you will hear is momentum rushing to your side, because you are in the perfect position to seize control of the match. You remained patient, you didn't panic, and now you need only continue to play the way you have been. Once the magic runs out, it is likely to be they who will start changing things, pressing, and battling their collective patience.

Let's make one change to this fictitious set that you lost. What if your 6-3 loss included two breaks of serve, a flurry of errors, lousy returns, and an 0-3 statistic on break points? Now should you change your strategy?

No, you should simply play better. Shore up your returns, don't make stupid errors, focus better on break points. There is no reason to change your game if you haven't yet played your game! Now if there is something preventing you from playing better—the sun, the wind, an injury, a hang-over—that might be different. A change might give you the jolt needed to overcome what ails you.



If I were to sum up this entire discussion about contemplating a strategic shift, I would do it with five questions to ask:

- Are you losing?
- Could you play better?
- Would changing your strategy result in your playing better?
- Would it result in their playing worse?
- Might they start playing worse without your doing anything?

**It happened on court**

My partner Elaine and I were playing an 8.0 match two seasons ago against a strong 4.5 guy and a steady 3.5 gal. The match was very close but we discovered early on that the guy, playing the ad court, either had a bad backhand return or was just having a bad day with that stroke. As his misses piled up, I encouraged Elaine to set up wider than usual to help her steer as many serves as possible to his backhand. Finally, during an ad-in point midway through the second set, he connected with one and drills a winner right down the middle of our court, leaving both of us surprised, flat-footed, and helpless.

We lost the deuce point also, and Elaine approached me to talk. “Should we serve to his forehand this time?” I didn’t remember the colorful phrase that I used in response, but Elaine reminded me of it for the rest of the season.

“Are you on crack” I allegedly replied. He is batting less than .100 from his backhand side, he hits one lucky winner, and my partner wants to change course. “No way!” I told her, “make him do it again.” She does, he frames a ball into the side fence, and then proceeds to smack his racquet repeatedly into that same innocent fence.

Moral of this story: don’t overreact to a great shot by your opponents. It’s only great if they can do it over and over again, otherwise it’s lucky. An opponent who relies on luck, well, that’s my kind of opponent.