

Learning from the Master Cup Final

Roger Federer confirmed his dominance of the men's game with victory in the Masters Cup Final in Shanghai. While not a grand slam event the Masters Cup is a very prestigious event, pitting the top players against one another – with no easy early round matches. Despite tough matches against Nalbandian, Roddick and Nadal in the qualifying matches– Federer destroyed American James Blake in a one sided final. As always Federer provided a master class in stroke production and tactics to dismantle his opponent.

Playing the Fast Opponent

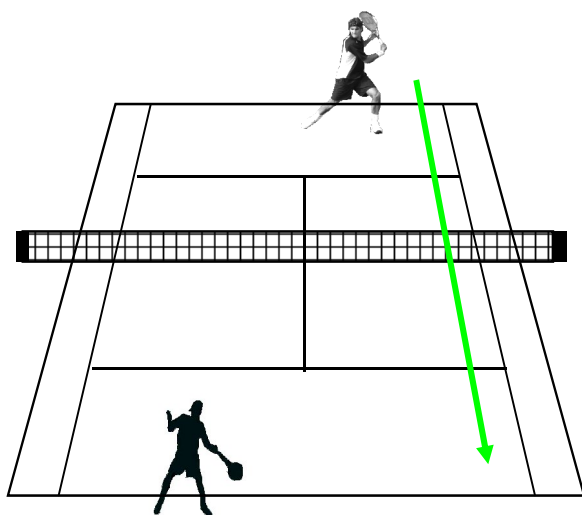
James Blake's main strengths are his explosive strokes and athleticism. He will chase down virtually anything – and his shots on the run can be breath taking. It was clear early that Federer was going to counter Blake's speed by "wrong footing" him regularly. Federer would open up the court – and as Blake ran to cover the open court – rip a stroke behind him hitting many winners, forcing errors and weak returns.

As the match wore on, Blake became more hesitant and didn't commit to chasing into the open court. It was startling how many times a Federer winner found Blake standing flat footed and helpless later in the match.

What can we learn? Some players just love chasing, retrieving and using their speed. Take that away from them by intelligently wrong footing them and unbalancing them. This tactic can be mixed into your game plan to keep your fast opponent guessing which way to go.

The Game Breaker

The patterns of the modern game are dominated by baseline play. Safe and consistent cross court shots have become particularly predominant. Despite the risk of the shot, the down the line backhand emerged as Federer's game breaker during the final. This tactic is a sound one in the modern game, where players often position themselves to the left of the centre mark to open up the forehand, leaving an opening for the player willing to attack down the line.



This diagram demonstrates the position many modern players assume on the baseline, lingering in the backhand court hoping for the chance to hit a big forehand. By hitting a strong down the line backhand Federer hit many winners or forced errors during the Master Cup. What we can learn? The down the line shot must be executed well, for the opposing player can expose a weak shot by whipping cross court or driving up the line from their return. Take the ball early and "thread the needle", sacrificing power for accuracy if necessary.

Converting on Big Points

Of all the statistics of the match, perhaps the most telling was Blake's 1/11 conversion of break points. Perhaps the impact of this ineffectiveness was best illustrated during the second set. In the 3rd game of the set Blake held break point four times but could not find the right level to clinch the game – going for too much or too little. In the following game Federer achieved the only break of the second set, only after Blake held game points though.

Crucially Blake frequently played a poor point when up the break opportunity. The previous day he had embarrassed Nalbandian hitting clean winners nine times directly from the serve. In the final he had no such success despite often facing the Federer second serve.

How can we improve big point conversion? The truth is that the best way to play better on big points is to play important tournaments and get experience facing them. Training structure can also help though. Consider playing practice games of first to 5 points; rather than first to 11. This way, big points are encountered more often and players can mentally strengthen themselves to compete at their best on the big occasion.

Turning the Momentum of a Rally

One of Federer's most sublime talents is changing the momentum of a rally – turning a defensive position into an attacking one. He demonstrated this skill in three consecutive games during the second set in different circumstances.

1. Blake attacked Federer's second serve with a superb return that landed just centimetres inside the baseline to Federer's backhand. Federer reacted quickly and hit a half volley backhand down the line for a clean winner.
2. Blake approached behind an ideal length stroke to the Federer backhand. Federer calmly chipped his backhand so that it landed at Blake's feet. Confronted with a difficult half volley Blake could only pop up an easy mid court ball which Federer hit for a winner.
3. Forced to play an awkward drive volley on the forehand, Federer scrambled back to position. Blake attacked to the backhand and lingered in the backhand court (see earlier headline) anticipating Federer would hit a safe cross court return. Federer sensed the opening and attacked with a down the line winner which an astonished Blake could only watch crash into the back boards.

What can we learn? While many of these points were won by Federer's genius, all players must practice their defence. Reaching for a wide slice backhand and throwing up the high lob to slow the tempo of a point are examples of effective defence. The coach can create these scenarios by feeding in difficult balls and urging the player to defend until they can shift the momentum of the point.

Adversity Makes Your Triumphs More Satisfying

While Blake will probably want to forget his final match for 2006 quickly – his season has been one to remember. He has finished it as World # 4 and US # 1. He defeated Nadal, Robredo and Nalbandian at the Masters Cup to reach the final. He deserves all the rewards of his success for his has not been an easy path.

As a teenager he suffered a curved spine which forced him to wear a corrective brace for 20 hours a day. In 2004 he suffered a fractured neck when he ran into net post during training; his suffered a viral infection which paralysed half of his face; and he endured the illness and death of his father. Tennis was off the radar, his ranking had plummeted and nobody expected he would climb the mountain he has done in 2005 and 2006.

What we can learn? This author has a fantastic student who suffers the same back injury as Blake, wearing a hard plastic corrective brace from hips to shoulders for 20 hours a day for over a year. Her tennis idol and inspiration is James Blake! Inspirational players like James Blake are great role models for young tennis players.