

Playing Styles – The Modern Player

“He’s doing everything great. He’s a factor from the back of the court, when he comes to the net. His serve is very effective. He knows the game well, knows court position. (He’s) as good as it gets out there.”

Andre Agassi on the all round skills of Roger Federer (2003)

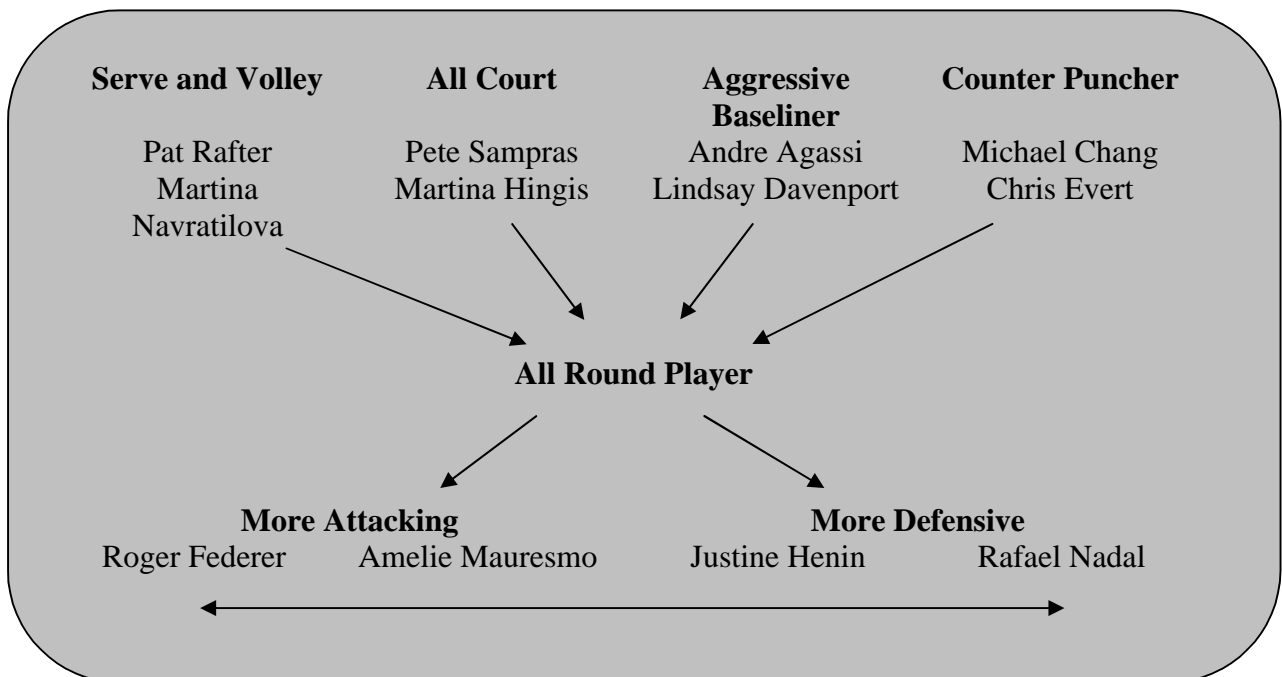
Historically tennis players have been classified into 4 categories:-

- The serve – volleyer / net rusher
- The All court player
- The Aggressive Baseline
- The Counter puncher

It was always a pleasure to witness the different styles matched up against one another and these match up’s produced some of the great rivalries in the history of the sport. McEnroe the tempestuous net rusher vs Borg the ice cool counter puncher. The same description fits the magnificent rivalry between Martina Navratilova and Chris Evert in the women’s game.

The modern game has seen unique playing styles merging to form variations of the one basic style. The modern player has developed more of an all round game where net rushers have had to be more selective about their forays into the net and baseline retrievers have added aggressive tactics to their arsenal. [Essentially the modern players are all court players with either more attacking; or more defensive tendencies.](#)

The diagram below demonstrates the evolution of playing styles.



More Attacking Style

The more attacking style suits athletic players who will grow to around 6 feet or above. Importantly this attacking style needs to be adopted by age 16 at the latest as it can be challenging involving the development of more shot and tactical options. Emulating a player like Federer or Mauresmo, while difficult will have significant pay off's and all players and coaches looking at the "bigger picture" of player development should strive to achieve.

The attributes of the more attacking style include developing the ability to:-

- Hit a well disguised / big 1st serve;
- Hit a big inside out forehand;
- Serve and volley or chip and charge;
- "Ghost" into the net behind a strong groundstroke to put away a volley; and
- Hit a "biting" slice backhand to neutralise the point or take the ball out of the opponents hitting zone.

These abilities are all designed to take control of the point early, or quickly move from a neutral to attacking situation quickly.

Tactically players need to understand percentage tennis and play with combinations or sequences in mind:-

- Approach – Volley
- Serve – Volley
- Low volley – High volley
- Low dipping 1st pass – Lob

The winning shot should always be the second in the chain.

Learning such a game style can have its set backs. Having more decisions to make can also lead to making more incorrect decisions. Selecting the right shot or combination is difficult for a young player. This style does not involve camping at the baseline waiting for the opponent to make an error. It comprises [the methodical dissection of an opponent and then moving forwards for the winner once the opponent is out positioned](#). This style of players should focus on the "Creating" chapter and its drills.

The evidence of the difficulty of learning the more attacking style is Roger Federer's losing streaks to Lleyton Hewitt and David Nalbandian early in his career. Hewitt and Nalbandian play a safer style of tennis, playing the percentages from the baseline and were able to defeat Federer consistently until 2002 although they were all the same age. Since then Federer has mastered his all round attacking game and dominates both players now.

More Defensive Style

Players on the more defensive scale are typically smaller and always super fast and agile athletes like Hewitt or Justine Henin Hardenne. While the “super athlete” (tall, fast and strong) like the Williams Sisters, Davenport, Boris Becker and Sampras attempted to wipe out smaller players they have returned. The most important reason for the player under 6 feet tall to emerge has been the ability to counter the massive serves of the tall players of the 1990’s.

The more defensive players must possess:-

- Excellent return of serve;
- Speed, endurance and agility;
- Strong passing shots; and
- A weapon (usually forehand) to dominate points.

These physical skills must be complimented with developed mental skills. They must have fierce determination allowing them to run down every ball and compete with bigger and stronger opponents. They must have composure and choose the right pass or lob when being attacked. Most importantly they must have the concentration and resolve to engage in longer rallies and patience to prevent too many unforced errors.

[These modern players are very different to the counter punchers of a previous generation who merely returned every ball into court.](#) They must find the right balance between attack and consistency, for no player can compete with the pro’s without an explosive shot that can win or control the rally. These players should focus on the neutralising chapter and its drills.

The right balance in this type of player can be best encapsulated by Lleyton Hewitt. World #1 in 2001 – 02 playing a fiercely defensive style – Hewitt was quickly over taken by more attacking players in 2003. Hewitt has attempted to re-model his game to include more approaches to the net and aggressive forehands, keeping him competitive at the top level. He still occasionally fails to find the right balance, rallying short cross court backhands, which are crushed by the top players.

