

PREPARING FOR THE AUSSIE OPEN

DRILLS TO HELP YOUR PLAYERS PREPARE FOR COMPETING ON MEDIUM – SLOW COURTS

With the 2007 Australian Open getting into full swing, players and coaches may be concerning themselves with how to prepare to compete on the “medium” paced rebound ace courts.

Controversy always seems to surround the speed of the court's, with some local players feeling they are too slow. It was feared that the “sluggish” nature of the courts would favour a Spanish / South American baseline stoush. The truth is that the most aggressive players have dominated the event in recent years, resulting in some exhilarating tennis and wonderful matches.

The style of tennis played by previous champions perhaps gives us the best indication of how to structure lessons and drills to improve our player's chances of winning on the surface. Think of Federer, Mauresmo, Safin, Williams, Agassi and Hingis; these players have won the Australian title in recent years.

All these champions play from an attacking court position and are able to flatten out their strokes; or move to the net to finish points once they have control of the rally.

With so many young players favouring the safety of the baseline in modern tennis, this article recommends several transition drills be used to prepare for play on rebound ace, improving the mid court play of students.

Drill # 1 - Crazy Ball



Many coaches will be familiar with the Z ball / Saturn Ball / Crazy Ball / Rock Ball (pictured left).

Objective:

By bouncing at odd angles the Z ball is great for improving agility: multi-directional changes; speed; explosive starts from split step position; and reaction time.

Instruction:

The coach can throw or just drop the "Z" ball and the player must try to catch and retrieve the ball.

Unpredictable bounces mean the player will have to change direction constantly. The crucial skill is the split step which allows the athlete to move dynamically in any direction. The timing of the split step is important and should occur just as the ball bounces.

Mastering this split step will help the player move quickly to the ball, allowing them to keep an aggressive court position during points.

Drill # 2 – Down the Line Approach and Volley

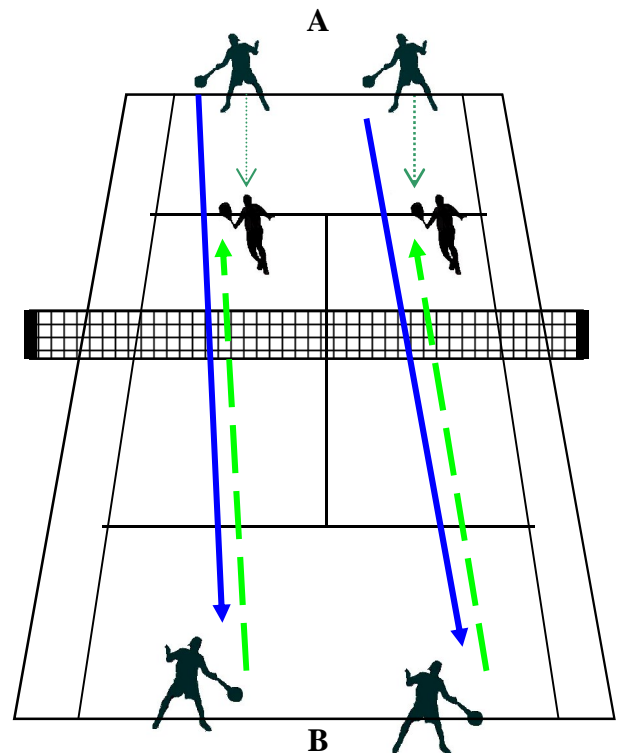
Objective:

Practise the correct stroke and movement patterns required for successful approach shot and volley tennis, specifically the timing of the split step

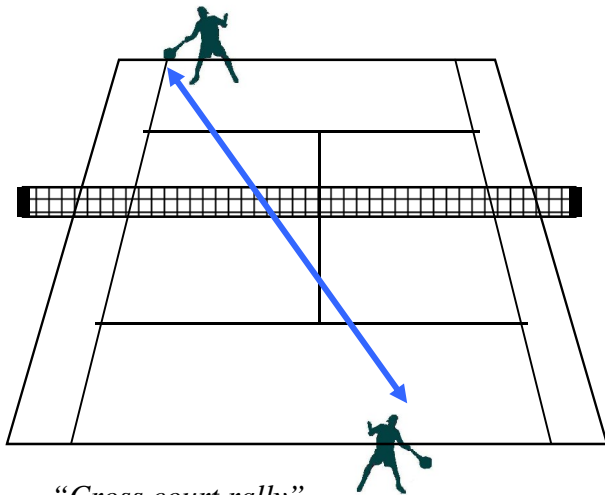
Instruction:

- Player A starts the rally with an under hand feed and follows it to the net, making a split step just as their opponent is making contact with the ball.
- Player B returns down the line and the rally is played out.
- Switch with player B approaching the net.

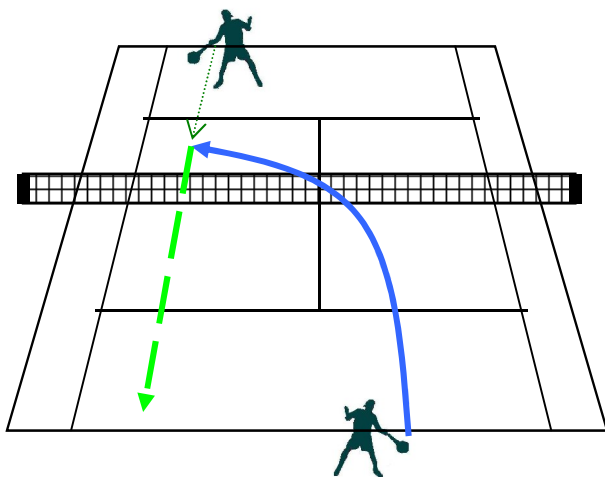
Note that this is a co-operative drill, designed to make the students comfortable moving forwards. Lobs or winners are not encouraged. The half court area makes it easier for the students to practice their skills.



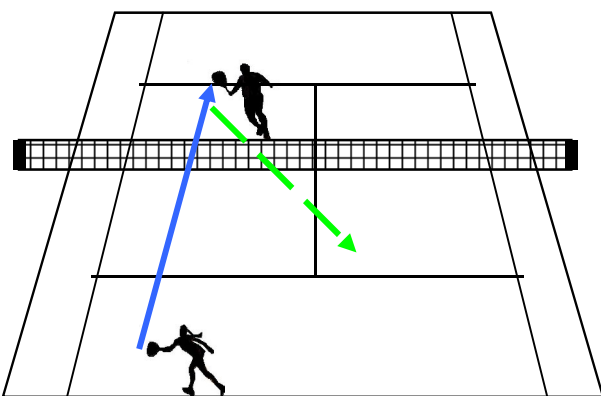
Drill # 3 - Rally Cross Court – Approach Down the Line Forehand



"Cross court rally"



"Attack the weak return down the line."



"Finish the point in the forecourt."

Objective:

Practice the correct stroke and movement patterns, as well as the tactical considerations, required for successful approach shot and volley tennis.

Instruction:

Stage 1:

- The coach or player starts rally with an under hand feed.
- Players play a cross court rally in the forehand court aiming for control and depth.

Stage 2:

If one player returns the ball short and weak into the service box area, the receiving player moves into court and plays a down the line approach shot and attacks the net making sure:

- Their approach shot is strong enough to force a weak return.
- They follow the path of their approach shot and.
- They split-step just as their opponent is making contact with the ball.

Stage 3:

- The baseline player should attempt to make the attacking player play a low or stretch volley and the point is played out.
- The net player should consider the tactical option of an open court or wrong footing volley.

Drill # 4 – Approach Anticipation

Objective:

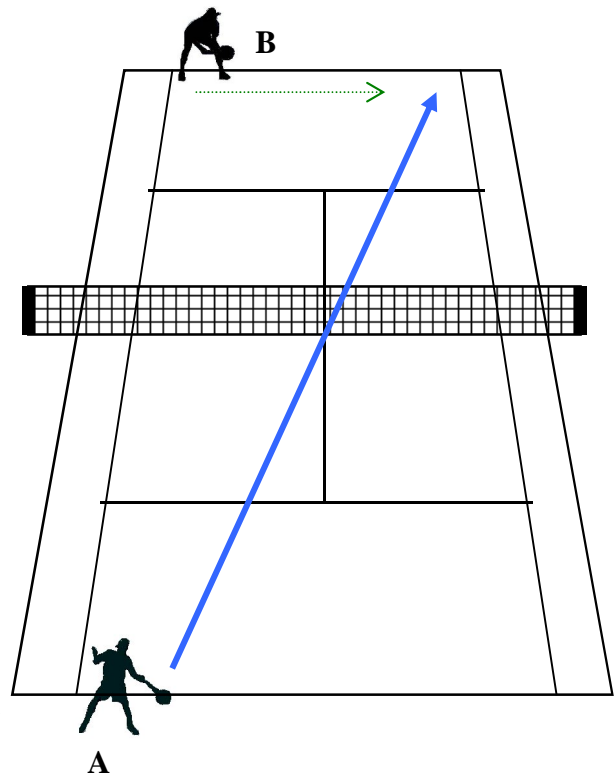
When watching the pro's you will notice that they can sense when they have played a shot that has "wounded" their opponent. The secret of the pros is anticipation; this drill helps players to read the 'cues' their opponent gives them and develop anticipation.

Instruction:

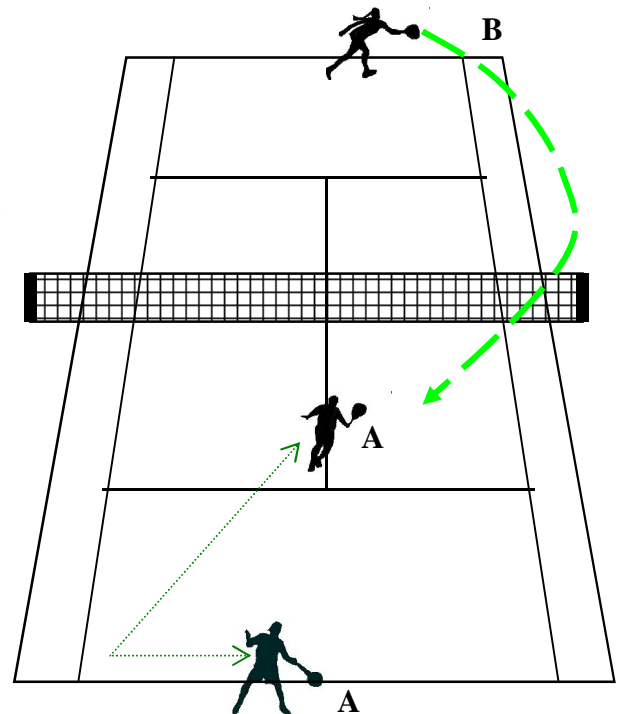
- Players set up on the sideline as illustrated.
- The point is started with Player A (or the coach) feeding in deep, cross court; forcing Player B to scramble across and attempt a defensive 1st shot.
- A should read the cues given by B and make position accordingly. For instance: -
 - If B looks like they will comfortably reach the ball, A may recover to the centre mark.
 - If B looks as though they will reach the ball, but be under pressure and play a weak reply, A should move forwards in court expecting a short ball to attack.
 - If B looks as though they will only just reach the ball, and be forced into playing a defensive shot (ie. a slice), A may move straight to the net for a put away volley.
- The point is played out.
- After one set transfer the drill to the other side with A feeding cross court to the forehand court.

Coaching Notes:

Coach the players to read the body & racquet cues of their opponent. "Will they hit the ball in a balanced position"; "Is the racquet preparing for a slice" are questions you may use to improve their anticipation.



"A feeds tough cross court to B"



"B scrambles while A anticipates"