



SERVE AND VOLLEY [PART 2] – ADVANCED TACTICS

The last instalment (Serve and Volley Drills Part 1) discussed that a combination of factors had led to a virtual extinction of the serve and volleyer and net rusher. In most matches in modern tennis players will only move to the net if their opponent is thoroughly out positioned and an easy put away is on offer.

Wimbledon 2006 provided mixed results for the serve and volley specialist. Young American qualifier Robert Kendrick almost defeated Rafael Nadal, leading two sets to love charging the net; while cagey veteran Jonas Bjorkman reached the semi's playing almost exclusively serve and volley tennis. Ultimately though it was Nadal and Federer playing in a final where virtually no serve and volley was on display (despite Federer being very proficient in this area.)

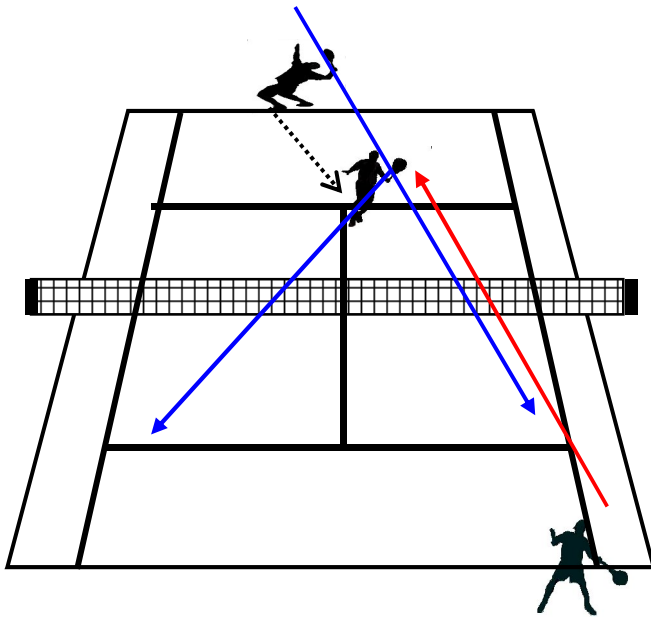
The women's tournament was won by Amelie Mauresmo who used serve and volley regularly. Mauresmo demonstrated how the serve and volley tactic can be successfully implemented in the modern game. She approached the net judiciously and kept her opponent guessing by only moving forwards on selected points. Significantly, for a player who has previously been labelled as mentally fragile, she serve and volleyed on important points – one of the great advantages of the serve and volley tactic.

It seems unlikely that a serve and volleyer like Pat Rafter, Pete Sampras (end of career), Stefan Edberg or Martina Navratilova will emerge if the modern game keeps evolving as it is. However the fact remains that the serve and volley tactic has several advantages during high level match play:-

- The element of surprise;
- Conserving energy (as opposed to long drawn out baseline rally);
- Taking time away from opponents (who often like to take a “big cut” at the ball);
- Disrupting the rhythm of the opponents return game: and
- Intimidating opponents and forcing rushed and panicked errors.

Mauresmo successfully demonstrated serve and volley still has a valuable part to play in the modern game. Particularly where players are often very similar in style (powerful baseliners), the crucial edge may be gained by a player who can confidently move forwards at crucial times during the match. It is noticeable that players like Sharapova and Roddick have stalled in their bid for grand slam success while their net game develops.

Revise last months article, Serve and Volley Drills Part 1, considering the key basic skills the intermediate player requires to successfully serve and volley. This article will cover the patterns and tactics for match play.

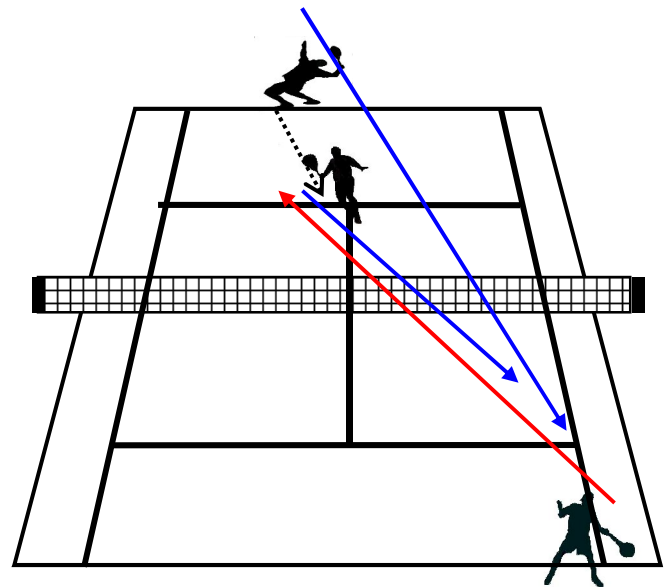


Pattern #1 – Serve wide and volley into open court

- Serve wide and move quickly towards the net remembering to follow the path of the ball.
- If the return is directed down the line, volley across court as sharply as possible into the open court.
- This will effectively run the ball away from your opponent, if executed correctly will be a winner or a very difficult pass.
- Recover to a position closer on the net and covering the line if your opponent reaches the 1st volley.

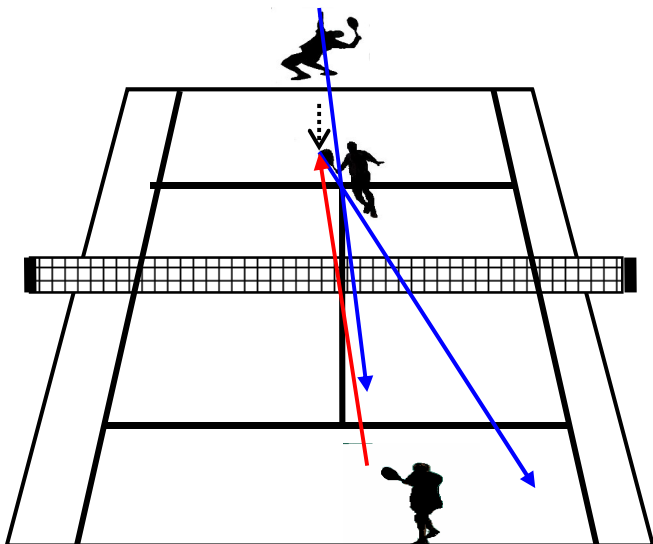
Pattern #2 – Serve wide and wrong foot

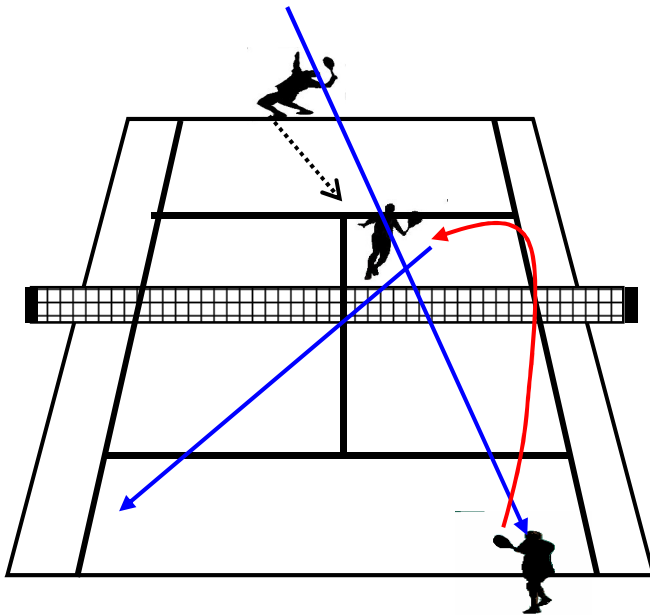
- Serve wide and move quickly towards the net remembering to follow the path of the ball.
- If the return is directed cross court, volley back cross court in behind your opponent.
- By returning cross court the opponent will give themselves a split second longer to move towards the middle of the court. Use this against them and wrong foot them.
- This rarely results in a clean winner, but if executed effectively will force a weak, off balance reply from your opponents.
- Recover to a position closer on the net and covering the anticipating the high put away.



Pattern #3 – Serve down the middle and wrong foot

- Serve down the middle and move quickly towards the net remembering to follow the path of the ball. Serving down the middle is a great tactic as it reduces the angles for your opponents preventing them hitting acutely cross court or down the line
- Play the volley back into the corner behind the opponent.
- With the return player moving towards the centre of the court to return the serve this volley will wrong foot them. Recover to a position closer on the net and covering the anticipating the high put away.





- Pattern #4 – Serve at body and put away
- Serve at the body and move quickly towards the net remembering to follow the path of the ball. The body serve is most effective when directed at the left or right hip of the opponent.
 - The benefit of a well executed “body serve” is that it will elicit a weak floating return as the opponent hasn’t the room or leverage to generate any power on their shot.
 - If serving to the forehand court the “body serve” is best directed at the backhand as the ball will follow the return player, cramping their shot all the more. For backhand court jam the forehand
 - The server can then close in on the net and complete an easy put away.

These 4 patterns are equally effective to the backhand court. Vary the tactics slightly by slicing wide serves to the forehand court and “kicking” wide serves to the backhand court (for right handers). Practice these patterns as 3 ball drills while developing the serve and volley skill, this will groove correct patterns into the player’s psyche. As players progress play out the point during training and then launch it into match play.

When teaching the serve and volley to tournament level players consider the following important points:-

- Don’t try to generate pace on the volley, use the pace given to you. Slow and low shots are effectively angled or drop volleyed; faster shots can be punched into the open court. (This respects the important technical concept of not swinging at the volley.)
- Improve speed and agility, when rushing the net players need to take explosive steps forwards close on the net and then split step, lower the centre of gravity (widen the base) and have the agility to move laterally to cover the passing shot.
- Develop the confidence and belief to approach the net on big points. In tight situations players may make errors if forced to hit risky winning shots. (Obviously make sure you attack behind a very good serve.)
- Determine the weaker or more inconsistent side of your opponent when moving to the net. Consider the strength of your opponent’s passing shots – some players love a target (I believe this is why Roger Federer moves to the net so hesitantly against Nadal.)

Not all players are suited to serve and volley and may never master the skill. They may be small and can’t cover the net effectively, they may have poor serve or volley skills which make the serve and volley a low percentage play.

Generally though, these players are in the minority. Coaches should add the net rushing dimension to their player’s game to make them a more complete athlete. This

is becoming increasingly important as playing styles converge and unique players become rare. Make your players more than just baseline hitters (as is so common these days), teach them how to move to the net and know what to do when they get there.

Has serve and volley disappeared as a result of slower courts and balls; and racquet technology? Or is it because it is a difficult skill to learn that takes time to master? Players and coaches are in such a rush to get on the professional tour (particularly the girls) that perhaps they don't give their game time to mature and develop all facets of their game.

Rufus Keown