

Introduction

The NETZONE creates a unique perspective which changes the way anyone looks at a tennis court, visually converting the net into a black wall, the real obstacle it is! It is a perfect aid for teaching net clearance, since hitting it produces a loud popping sound. It enhances “feel” for groundstrokes and serves since players no longer see where balls bounce and must rely on kinesthetic perception. And, for tactics and strategy, players clearly see if opponents are making contact above or below net height and quickly learn what shots to anticipate based on their opponent’s point of contact.

Easy to Use

1. Unfold the 27-foot wide NETZONE with the Velcro on top and the side with the hook Velcro on the top edge facing outwards. If using outdoors on a windy day, place the NETZONE on the upwind side to avoid a “sail” effect.
2. Begin at one side on the singles sideline and pull the fuzzy strip over the net to attach it to the hook Velcro on the other side to secure.
3. Attach all six locations on the top of the net and then fasten the two side positions as well. The NETZONE should be free of folds. Although the NETZONE is made of practically indestructible material, it should not be left outdoors overnight or in the rain for the Velcro to maintain its grip over many years.

Perception Drills

It’s amazing what happens to a player’s perception when their ability to see through the net is removed. In fact, when standing on the baseline with the NETZONE in place, players cannot even see what color shorts their opponent is wearing, what to speak of where their balls land. Here are some drills to help improve ball perception without looking through the net:

1. **Understanding Perception:** Walk student(s) to the baseline to see what little (if any) part of the court they can see over the net. Next, have them bend down to waist level (a normal contact point) and look. They will quickly realize the importance of the ball’s arc. Then, walk them up towards the net and stop when they can see the opposite baseline and then the opposing service line. This perception would indicate the place on the court from which they can hit an eye-level ball on a straight line over the net into a reasonably large and achievable target area.
2. **“Feeling” vs. Seeing:** Have student(s) hit serves and say where they think the ball landed (i.e., 3 feet short of the service line, 1 foot long, etc.) Then the pro or their partner in the group would correct them or confirm that their perception was correct. Examples of other shots to practice with this exercise include groundstrokes, lobs, dropshots, or even first volleys from the service line (any shot, as long as they cannot see the target area they are aiming for). The result? They learn to rely more and more on feel (kinesthetic perception) of the ball and the racquet.

Offense-Defense Drills

There are 2 considerations that determine whether a player is in an offensive or defensive position on a tennis court: Their court position and the height at which they contact the ball. The NETZONE can clearly identify these issues and therefore help determine proper shot selection. Here are some drills to try on your own:

- 1. Groundstrokes:** Position player(s) on the baseline and their partner across the net on the service line. The player on the baseline tries to bounce-hit a low ball to the partner's feet. When successful, the baseline player will see the racquet of their partner at the net disappear behind the NETZONE. Their response should be to move forwards expecting a weak volley. On the other hand, if they feed the ball too high, they should react more defensively, recognizing that the player at the net will move in to close out the point. This exercise can easily expand into serve-and-volley and chip-and-change patterns for stronger players.
- 2. Volleys:** Both players start at the net and volley back and forth. With beginners, have them toss back and forth. The goal is to keep the opponent contacting the ball from below the height of the NETZONE (a defensive position), and for you to make contact above the NETZONE to win the point from an offensive position. These exercises encourage control volleys and feel for the ball. Players should play in a focused area, such as half of the singles court.
- 3. Short high-bouncing balls:** Players can practice closing in on short high-bouncing balls since the NETZONE clearly identifies when they are making contact above the net, as well as close enough to the net to hit on a relatively straight line into their target zone. Feeds should be varied so players make decisions about hitting some shots as approach shots and with others to try and hit outright winners.
- 4. Passing shots:** Ideally, passing shots should be kept low over the net in case the opponent volleys them. Points can be played with the net player feeding a ball to the baseliner. The baseliner can reject the feed if it is too difficult and cannot hit a lob. The baseliner attempts a passing shot and the point is played out. It quickly becomes clear when the net player is in an offensive or defensive position.

Second Bounce Drills

Players are typically very happy to hit balls in their comfort or power zone (between thigh and chest height) and unhappy with balls around their ankles or above their shoulders. The NETZONE provides immediate feedback for players to practice making their opponents unhappy by giving them low or high balls. Here are some exercises to try out:

- 1. High-bouncing topspin:** This favorite shot of many top players in the world is catching on through the ranks of recreational players. A high arcing shot over the net will automatically land deep in the court and bounce high off the ground (especially if hit with topspin), forcing the opponent to contact the ball at shoulder height or above. Have one player hit these shots and another player on the opposing baseline catching the ball with both hands. It quickly becomes clear when the shot forces the opponent into an uncomfortable hitting position. With high arc and high bouncing balls, players will catch the ball high above the NETZONE. At moderate to high levels of play this concept can evolve into a rally and competitive drill opportunity.

- 2. Low backspin chips:** Another extremely effective shot is to hit a rather short and low backspin or slice groundstroke down the middle of the court. It is particularly effective against taller opponents, who rarely enjoy bending for low balls. Set this exercise up similar to the drill above for high-bouncing balls and watch the opponent's hands disappear below the NETZONE when attempting to catch the ball. When this shot is hit particularly well, the ball will barely bounce high enough to be seen above the NETZONE.