

Master Pro

Strokes Are Not Created Equal So Practice the Shots Used Most

By Joe Dinoffer, USPTA Master Pro

What are the basic shots in tennis? Serve, return of serve, forehand groundstroke, backhand groundstroke, forehand volley, backhand volley, overhead, lob, and dropshot. Of course, there are more shot options that clarify spin, placement, balance, etc. But to keep this exercise as simple as possible, let's stick with the basics. The big question that begs to be asked: "Which shots do you hit most frequently in a match?" Since players have limited time to practice and improve, it only makes sense that prioritizing the shots to practice (based on what shots are hit most often) will help players improve most quickly.

Perform This Exercise

The good thing about this chart is that a player only needs it done once.

Add the totals from each game to get the total number of swings at the ball for the entire set. Just remember that you are charting swings at the ball and not shots in the court. Example: A missed first serve counts as one first serve swing. (Here's the guideline: Count service returns or any other shots if the player contacts the ball. If the player cannot contact the ball, the assumption is that the opponent hit a clean winner.)

What To Expect

Players are always surprised what a large percentage of their swings at the ball are the serve and return of serve. Slight variations will occur based on playing style and surface (slower surfaces = longer points), for instance, whether they are playing

singles or doubles. Consistently, the serve and service return remains the most frequently hit shots, yet, ironically, these are also the shots people practice least.

What to do With This Information

The Serve. Practicing your serve may seem relatively easy. Just take a bucket of balls and off you go, right? Not quite. Just think about first serve percentages. With a little arithmetic

return (you can rotate back and forth), it is well worth the effort. A few things to consider if you want to benefit from practicing service returns:

Do NOT play out points. Remember the value of service return practice opportunities and resist the temptation to play out the points. It is much easier to find partners to play practice sets. Seldom will you get a practice partner to drill just serves and returns, so utilize it well.

Set up target areas. Use ropes and towels, for instance, to lay down target areas large enough so you can succeed more than 50 percent of the time. Do NOT make the mistake

of setting up a single cone or can of balls that you may not hit more than once every five years. And most of the time, also have the server aim for a specific target, which will increase the quality of the practice for both players.

Learn from the pros. Be consistent in your approach to returning serve, remembering that success in tennis is intrinsically connected to consistency. Stance, waiting grip, movement and targets should be controlled and consistent if you want to reach your potential. ✨



Sample "Swings at the Ball" Chart

| SHOT | Game 1 | Game 2 | Game 3 | Game 4 | Game 5 | Game 6 | Game 7 | Game 8 | Game 9 | Game 10 | TOTALS |
|--------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|---------|--------|
| 1st Serve | ----+ | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2nd Serve | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Serve Return | | ----+ | | | | | | | | | |
| FH Groundie | ----+ | | | | | | | | | | |
| BH Groundie | | | | | | | | | | | |
| FH Volley | | | | | | | | | | | |
| BH Volley | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Overhead | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Lob | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Dropshot | | | | | | | | | | | |
| TOTALS | 23 | 13 | | | | | | | | | |

*NOTES: Abbreviate as needed when you create your own chart, and expand as desired to chart more games and more specific shots.

your "priorities" chart provides a first serve percentage. In the first game of the sample chart in this article, the player only served 20 percent of first serves in the box. Of course, it takes many more games to get a statistically accurate first serve percentage, but the idea is to practice the most frequently hit shots most.

Return of Serve. Returning serve is altogether different from the serve. It is accepted as the least practiced important shot in tennis for two reasons. First, few facilities have serving machines available; Second, since few people want to practice their serves, finding players to practice your service returns can be a scheduling nightmare. But, however difficult it may be to find partners who want to practice their serve and