

A MASTERS GUIDE TO PLAYING CLAY COURT TENNIS

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Clay is the most tactically demanding of all the tennis surfaces.

In the pro ranks we used to refer to it as "trench warfare." There exist a rare breed of tennis player who has conquered the secrets and mysteries of clay court tennis. In this booklet, I'll reveal to you a few of these key secrets.

Question: "Why do so many supposedly 'great players' not win the French Open or any other clay court events?"

Answer: "They do not have the mental fortitude to adapt their games to clay."

Follow my instructions and you'll be playing as though you grew up in South America on clay.

1. BE COMFORTABLE WITH LONG RALLIES

Patience, as the well-worn phrase goes, is a virtue. Let your mental self realize that if you want to win, you must be willing to stay in each point as long as it takes to be successful!

The good clay players know that over time, point after point, most people don't have the patience to stay mentally alert to compete. Learn to think this way:

"I must win the point two or three times just to win it once!"

You must be able to moderate your concentration during points and between points. Agassi's coach Brad Gilbert implies this in his book 'Winning Ugly.' In long rallies on a hot, humid day you cannot approach each point in a physically aggressive manner.

Consistency and stroke variation will pay the big dividends here. Believe it or not , in many of the long rallies you will need to be aggressive, defensive and counter-attacking in the same point . The key is to stay out there as long as you need in order to win! As we used to say on the pro

tour when one knew that one was playing against a great South American or European 'Dirtballer' (that's what we used to call claycourters in the days when I was on the tour) "I better bring my lunch on the court."
That's how long the matches might last.

2 . TACTICS TAKE TIME TO WORK

Your new-found patience will come in handy here. The game is slower on clay and you must find a rhythm in order to implement the correct strategy.

The reliable deep shot to your opponent's backhand which reaped immediate benefits on hard courts may not on clay. The slow court surface and your opponent's defensive skills may neutralize your strategy.

You may now have to experiment with your game style. Maybe hit a wider cross court angle shot to your opponent's forehand and then slug a shot deep to their backhand ,hopefully getting the ball behind your opponent which should elicit a weak return.

Try adding the slice to your forehand side. This will give the opposition a different look and it will strike their strings differently.

Quick Notes:

Is your opponent quick? If so, hit down the middle and use

moon balls. Bore them to tears.

Is your opponent tall? If so, hit high shots followed by low slices so he will have to reach like an accordion. Be a puzzle solver!

3. MAKE BELIEVE YOU'RE IN A BOXING MATCH

Like a good boxer, you must show superior footwork and mental patience. Always be moving, ready to counter the punches you are receiving. When your opponent's guard is down, go for the opening.

Remember the rallies are longer on clay so you must soften your opponent up with 'body blows' by altering the rhythm and tempo of each point. Change pace - hit hard, soft, high etc.

Calculate your opponent's reactions to your different sequences and file these for future reference. The knockout punch on clay is usually an overhead smash or a quality net shot although, a big serve can still do damage.

“ Can I knock an opponent out with a drop shot.”

Yes!

4. ACHIEVE DEPTH THROUGH HEIGHT

Hitting a ball high over the net and using heavy topspin to cut down unforced errors, will cause the ball to land the ball deep. This will force your opponent into a neutral position behind the baseline.

In a cross court exchange, this heavy topspin will allow to you to send your opponent wide into the doubles alley.

Think of the court in color zones:

1. Very deep behind the baseline or wide cross court is the Red or defensive zone.
2. A deep shot or a moderately wide cross court is the Yellow or neutral zone.
3. And a weak or short ball will place it in the Green or attack zone.

Avoid giving your opponent green zone shots. These ball measurements of deep or wide shots will form the basis of your strategy.

5. ON SERVE: THINK LIKE A BASEBALL PITCHER

Mix your service delivery up as though you were a major league pitcher. Now, on clay, placement is more important than speed.

“Why?”

Because the ball digs into the clay court and slows down. So, conserve your energy and hit a medium slice to topspin serve. Vary your speeds, placement and spins. Use a high kicking topspin serve to the backhand and receive a weak slice return.

Against a lefty, slice out wide to their backhand.

If you vary the speed of your serves, when you do use your 'Cannonball' serve, it will appear that much faster. If you want to “strike out” your opponent use this system.

6. STEP INTO YOUR VOLLEY

Because the ball sits up on clay, you must add some extra punch to your net shots. Of course, the pace that you apply to your volleys depends on which volley you have to hit. You cannot deal with a low volley in the same way as a higher one.

Think this way to add 'sting' to your shot:

1. On a low volley - think hand or catch using the strength from your fingers to send the ball deep.
2. On a medium volley (the perfect volley)- think forearm and punch!
3. On high volleys- think shoulder and swing using some wrist snap. As a general rule always try to contact the ball at the highest point at which it crosses the net.

This will help avoid turning potentially easier high volleys into tougher low volleys.

7. SET UP YOUR APPROACH SHOT

Unlike the faster surfaces, you receive no help from the clay surface in sending your ball faster. On a faster surface, many players rush the net from a ball taken from behind their service line. On clay hit this shot and return to the neutral position behind your baseline.

In order to avoid fighting against a quality passing shot, make sure your approach shot is deep and usually to the backhand side. Your opponent's backhand will not have the same unpredictable, quick wrist snap as on the forehand.

An alternative strategy is to approach the net on a slow, high ball to the backhand. Sneaking in behind this shot is an interesting tactic. Sometimes approach down the middle, taking angles away from your opponent. Make sure you quickly recover after each shot because the ball has a tendency to come back on clay!

It is also a good tactic to try and take the net when you have a two or three point lead. This will keep your opponents thinking.

8. USE THE LOB TO YOUR ADVANTAGE

Sending up a high lob into the sun and wind is an integral part of sound, clay court tennis. When playing a net rusher, lob and then position yourself defensively behind your baseline. You'll be surprised at how many shots you'll be able to 'counter' on.

"What if my opponent does not come to the net, do I still use the lob?"

"Yes." If you're retrieving a shot deep into a corner, a lob is a good choice.

To change rhythm and tempo throw up the unexpected lob, and in a cross court exchange if you find yourself stretched out into the alley in an uncomfortable position, re-set the point with a lob.

9. NEVER QUIT ON A SHOT

The amount of balls that come back on clay increase exponentially with foot speed. Never quit, it gives you a psychological boost and discourages your opponent. They might start to overhit their shots in order to get it out of your speedy reach. Also, practice sliding into your shots- an advanced skill but on clay a necessary one.

10. USE A TWO TIME PASSING SHOT

This is a good tactic on all surfaces if you're able hit a heavy topspin passing shot which will dip at your opponents feet when at the net. You can also use the change of pace 'dink' shot (usually cross court) which will freeze the person at net. Either of these first shots will elicit a return that 'sits up' for you so that you may hit the now easy pass.

Try not to rush your passing shots. Think of hitting away from the net rusher into a general area making them reach for the volley. Do not drill the ball to an opening and hit the alley or the fence! Concentrate on your shot, track the ball, know where your opponent is , do not look up and strike the ball. Your success ratio will increase.

11. PLAY INTERESTING ARTISTIC SHOTS

Vary your game with the purpose of altering your opponent's rhythm.

Take someone out of their rhythm or 'comfort zone' and they'll be ready to be attacked.

Do the opposite of what your opponent likes. They blast -you hit soft - then blast one at them.

If your opponent does not like the net, bring them in with a short ball and then pass them or lob them. Hit sequentially-topspin, slice, topspin etc. Be creative.

It's fun!

12. FITNESS

1. Run 3-5 miles a three times a week.
2. Play long matches 1.e. 4-5 sets.
3. Add light weight training to your routine.
4. Eat bananas and drink plenty of water.
5. Take all the time allotted to you between points and game changeovers.

Good Luck!

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