

Areas of Improvement Series – Match Flow Momentum

By Mark Dickson

Your positive, professional attitude is helping you to enjoy your tennis game more, while your serve and return of serve are becoming consistent weapons. Your footwork, fitness, improved shot selection and shot tolerance are allowing you to anticipate better, move faster and feel stronger than you ever imagined. Now, let's move on in my Immediate Areas of Improvement Series to Topic # 5: match flow momentum.

1. a positive, professional attitude
2. serve & return of serve
3. footwork & fitness
4. shot selection & tolerance
5. match flow momentum
6. concentration & between point routine
7. opponent scouting skills

Have you ever played a match and felt like all the momentum was with your opponent and everything was slipping away from you? Did you lose confidence in your ability and think about your lost opportunities?

We have all experienced the feeling where all the momentum is with our opponent and it is quite a challenge to overcome. Also, we have all probably had matches where we took an early lead and then ran away with the match against a tough opponent.

Learning to recognize potential swings in momentum and then knowing how to turn and keep the momentum in your favor is one of the most incredibly powerful skills in tennis.

To understand match flow momentum well you have to understand:

1. confidence, pressure and dictating play through tempo, aggressiveness and court position
2. your game style, strengths and weaknesses
3. learning to manage the score well
4. tennis is a game where being unconventional and unpredictable are important
5. changing the momentum is more important than winning the point

Confidence is the currency in all sports. Tennis players often thrive or crumble based on their confidence and this is generally based on the score of the match or what just occurred in the match. If they are ahead or coming from behind then they are often confident and feel good about their chances in the match. If players fall behind or have just lost a lead they often feel nervous and anxious.

The player who dictates play most often has the confidence and momentum in their favor. You want to dictate the tempo of the match by pouring on either quick pressure or delayed pressure to break down your opponent's confidence. In order to do this, you must be confident in your game style and be able to execute well under pressure. You also must be flexible in how you think about "playing your game."

Dictating play is something you want to do throughout the match even if you are getting beaten soundly. You have to force your opponent to react to what you do and how you position yourself around the court. You do not have to always play well or hit great shots, but you have to always try to dictate play. This will build your confidence, upset your opponent's rhythm and help to break down your opponent's confidence.

The following are some general guidelines to managing the score of the game, for example, 15-all, 30-love, etc.:

- When you're ahead, play your game patiently, not tentatively and not recklessly.
- When you're behind, play more aggressive shots with large targets or use more aggressive court positioning by stepping into the court.
- When you're even, play your game aggressively and go with your strengths.
- When your opponent has made an attacking play on the previous point, play aggressively and attack back right away.
- When you have made a poor shot to lose the previous point, slow down and regain your concentration.
- When you make a great shot to win a point, stay calm and resist the temptation to go for too much on the next point.

Here are a few ideas to help you think of all the games within the game of tennis, get inside your opponent's head and think more about controlling the momentum and flow of a match:

- Everyone likes to play their own game style and play well, so why not instead try to play your opponent's game style, even if that means you don't play all that well, in order to try to make your opponent play poorly?
- Opponents like to attack with their weapon, so why not attack their weapon and break it down?
- A first serve doesn't have to be a hard, flat serve, so why not hit a second serve as your first serve and then look to attack?
- Everybody seems to hate playing against a steady pusher, so why not play like a steady pusher when the situation calls for it?
- No one likes to have someone approach the net off of their second serve, so why not approach off of their second serve?
- Coaches usually teach their players to approach deep and down the line, so why not approach short and down the middle, crosscourt or with a drop shot or high loop?

- Racquets are lighter, balls are heavier, courts are slower and serving and volleying is almost a lost art, so why not surprise your opponent by serving and volleying when you need to change the momentum?
- Opponents like someone who is conventional and predictable, so why not do something unexpected and be unconventional and unpredictable?

Confidence during a match is often based on the score and the score is based on what just happened. You want to file away what just happened and be more concerned with what's about to happen – you are going to put more pressure on your opponent this point than you did on the previous point. Regardless of your game style, “playing your game” should mean putting pressure on your opponent.

Remember, none of the examples listed above have to win you the point in order to potentially swing the momentum in your favor. Just the act of dictating play is often enough to plant the seed of doubt in your opponent's mind and even the minds of your future opponents who may be watching your match. Sometimes the seed of doubt doesn't begin to grow when you first plant it and then it sprouts much later in the match. Keep planting the seeds and keep your opponent thinking and guessing. Act, don't react!!

As we work with our Academy students, we refer to being either ahead or behind in the score, not winning or losing, because match flow momentum is what we strive to emphasize and teach. Thinking this way helps them and it will help you.

Players who understand match flow momentum have a huge advantage over their competitors, learn to be extremely confident in themselves whether they are ahead or behind in a match and are well on their way to reaching their full potential. Keep working to control the flow of the match by learning to swing momentum in your favor and you will improve your competitive skills dramatically!!

Mark Dickson grew up playing junior tennis in Florida and is Director of the Mark Dickson Tennis Academy in Sarasota, Florida. A former US Open singles and doubles quarterfinalist, Mark achieved ATP Tour world rankings of #12 in year-end prize money, #32 in singles and #23 in doubles. Mark holds Professional Certifications as an ATP Tour Professional, USTA High Performance Coach, USPTA Specialist in Competitive Development, USPTA Professional 1, PTR, Pat Etcheberry strength and conditioning specialist and is a Sport Science Level 1 Coach. Internationally recognized for his coaching and motivational skills, professionalism, positive attitude and serving ability, Mark is a 10-time winner of professional tournaments around the world, 3-time sportsmanship award winner, 3-time All-American at Clemson University where he was ranked # 2 in singles and #5 in doubles in the United States and ITCA Senior Player-of-the-Year. He is a member of the US Open Final 8 Club, Australian Open Last Eight Club and Clemson University Hall of Fame. For over twenty years, Mark has been a coach and mentor to players seeking to improve their games. He has had juniors ranked #1 in the world, #1 in the

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