

Mastering the Return of Serve

By Joe Dinofffer

Introduction

You probably already know that the serve is the most frequently hit shot in tennis, but did you also ever think about the fact that the return of serve is the second most frequently hit shot? With that degree of importance, we should be practicing our returns of serve quite frequently. But how many of us actually do that? Probably not very many. Some of you may counter that service returns are basically just groundstrokes, so why would you need to specifically practice them all that often? The answer is that while, yes, you do hit groundstrokes as your return of serve, due to the angle of the incoming ball; your stroke technique will be a little different. In fact, it is different enough that even on the pro tour, having great groundstrokes does not always yield a great return of serve.

In this article, we'll look at many of the key components of the service return including preparation and technique, along with planning, targeting, and tactics. Then we will share a couple of drills to practice your return. The chart in this article emphasizes how little time players have to react to serves. What this article won't do is tell you exactly what grip or stance to have while waiting for the return, although we will share with you many of the options.

Preparation

Backswing

One big thing about the return of serve is that your preparation and backswing needs to be much more compact than regular groundstrokes since average serves are hit much faster than average groundstrokes at all playing levels. This means that you have a lot less time to prepare. See the chart in this article for a review of various serve speeds and the various time elements that can make returning serve so challenging. This means that it is very important to try to anticipate where your opponent is going to hit – anticipate right and you can gain as much as twice as much time to prepare to hit that return of serve.

Grip

One big question is what grip should you hold while waiting to return that serve? Should you wait with a forehand grip? A backhand grip? With the non-dominant hand down on the grip or up on the racket throat? The answer to a large extent is dependent on personal preferences. However, one of the keys is to choose the position that will help you relax your hands, since relaxed hands and arms allow for the fastest preparation. If you are like most recreational players and wait with a fairly tight grip on the racquet handle, you may even want to try the Roger Federer “twirl” to help you start relaxed and stay relaxed.

Feet

Just as important as your backswing and grip are your feet, since position and balance are keys to a consistent arm and racquet motion. Where should you stand? How far back or forward? And what should you do with your feet while waiting for the server to strike the ball? Should you bounce in place, stand still and crouch, or “wriggle” your butt like a cat ready to pounce? Should you start with your right or left foot forwards, or both parallel? Again, this depends to some extent on personal preference and whatever helps you feel most ready. The key is not being flat-footed and to feel like you are in motion as the server hits the serve.

Recovery

We can't talk about feet without also talking about recovery, an essential component of footwork. All too often the tendency is to “admire” (or self-criticize) the return you just hit and forget that the point isn't over; you still have to recover! The bottom line is that you should remember to quickly recover after hitting your return of serve based on where you hit your shot. For instance, if your opponent is serving in the deuce court and you hit a forehand return crosscourt to their forehand (if they are right-handed), then you would want to recover diagonally crosscourt from them about one to two racquet lengths to your forehand side. If, on the other hand, you hit your forehand return up the line to your right-handed opponent's backhand, then you would have to recover further, diagonally opposite where you just hit on your backhand side. In other words, there are return of serve directions that make recovery easier on the receiver. Keep in mind that the only time the receiver should recover to the

middle of the baseline is when the return is hit straight down the middle to the server. On that note, let's turn to a brief discussion on planning and targeting.

Planning

So now that we know our grip and stance options when preparing to return serve, the process to decide on a consistent approach best suited for us individually is just to try out the different styles we see on television and make some decisions. But, there is still more. Now that we understand the keys to good preparation on the return of serve, what about planning, targeting, and tactics? How do you know where you should aim that return? Essentially, where you aim depends on two things: First is the speed on the incoming serve, and second is your overall strategy that ties into each opponent's strengths and weaknesses. One of the best overall strategies for aiming that return of serve though is simply deep up the middle. This may sound counterintuitive since many of us have it drilled into our heads that you should hit away from your opponent. So, although a bit counter-intuitive, hitting up the middle and deep is very effective since your opponent will have to move to get out of the way of the ball and move backwards immediately after stepping inside the baseline after hitting his or her serve. Essentially, the deep, up-the-middle return is much like the body serve and can be very effective. Moreover, it is a very high percentage target area. Speaking of target areas, though, be sure when you do aim to any section of the court, such as up-the-line or crosscourt, that you're not just vaguely aiming "crosscourt" but rather have a specific, high percentage target in mind that is not too close to the lines!

Another aspect of planning and targeting with the return of serve ties in with the recovery concept we touched on earlier – specification to think several shots in advance, planning not just where you will aim your return but then also anticipating your opponent's next shot and how you will respond. Again, don't get stuck in the all-too-common recreational player's quagmire of admiring your shot and "forget" to play the point! For example, one combo off a second serve in the deuce court to your forehand (if you're right-handed) is to hit a strong up-the-line shot and then look for your opponent to be late on their backhand (assuming

they're right-handed) and hit short down the middle. This could give you the opportunity to hit a winning inside-in forehand to finish the point.

One more question that begs to be asked is whether or not you should ever chip or block back your return off a hard first serve like you see some pro players do? The opposite would be to blindly and aggressively take full swings at all returns, with the mindset that even if you are making a ton of return errors now, that you will get better! The practical solution is fairly simple: If you are in a practice session, then keep doing the same thing to improve your skills. But, if you are in a match, and struggling to hit solid returns for the first few return games, you should seriously consider chipping or blocking the return of first serves just to get the ball in play to start the point. Another return adjustment that is easy to make is to stand farther back to give yourself more time to prepare for the return. However, while there is an upside to making this adjustment, there is also a downside. Your opponent will see what you are doing and can counter by pulling you outside the court by serving short and wide. To combat this try standing in and then as your opponent is in the process of serving, adjust your position backwards so they won't see you!

Practicing

All right now that we've covered preparation and planning, let's look at some drills that you can use to practice your return of serve.

Service Line Serving

This is a great drill to speed up your reaction time. Have your partner stand at the service line and serve to you at regular speed. Suddenly you have a lot less time to prepare and will force you to speed up your preparation! Master this drill and regular returning will be a breeze!

Preparation Speed Up Drill

The goal of this drill is to help you learn how to anticipate where the serve is coming. Partner up with a server who wants to practice their serves. See if you can call out "forehand"

or “backhand” before the incoming serve crosses the net. This exercise is another way to help you speed up your preparation.

Anticipation Drill

Partner up with a server and say to yourself call out “forehand” or “backhand” before the serve even strikes the ball. If this sounds impossible, it’s not. In fact, seeing serving patterns in different opponents is one of the best ways to improve your reaction time to prepare earlier and more effectively to return serves. Sometimes you will feel like you are guessing, but after some practice, you may feel like a palm reader based on the fact that most servers like to aim towards specific targets time after time. This simple exercise will help you learn to anticipate where the serve is going.

Conclusion

We’ve looked at preparation for the return of serve including the backswing, grip and footwork, have covering some examples of planning including targeting and tactics. We’ve also shared a couple of drills to help jumpstart your practices. While you might not have a pro return in a couple of hours, these tips should steer you to a better path of improving what is arguably the second most frequently hit shot in tennis ... the return of serve. Unfortunately, it is also one of the least practiced. Can you practice the return of serve on your own? Generally not, unless you have a very expensive serving ball machine. The good news is that most serious tennis players practice their serves regularly. You can put in the time to practice your service returns by finding one or more partners who need to practice their serves.