

# Percentage Tennis

How to dramatically improve your chances of winning  
by focusing on the right points.

By Robert Walker and Barnaby Kalan

## Foreword

Robert Walker was the tennis coach at Weston High School in Weston, Massachusetts, from 1962 to well into the 1980s. He was also an English teacher at the school, and as demanding a taskmaster on his students as he was on his players.

This Princeton-educated scholar was a true coach. By that, I mean even though many of us were technically better players than him, not to mention much younger, he taught us the one thing we really needed at that point.

*He taught us how to win.*

As a tennis player, there are going to be days when you're not playing your best tennis. There are going to be days when you're playing someone who's every bit as good as you. There are going to be days when your opponent is even better than you, technically, with their groundstrokes or serve. But what Mr. Walker showed us was how to still win those matches by understanding the little-known "percentages" behind the game. The most important points. The most important spots on the court. The Percentage Game.

This secret helped us, as a team, go on and win the state championship and New England Championships for high school players. It helped me throughout my junior career and later, playing college tennis at the University of Massachusetts. It helped me throughout my entire life as a competitive tennis player.

I was privileged to be on Mr. Walker's Weston High School team for three years, 1971 to 1973. Like many young people, I didn't appreciate all that he taught me—on the court and in the classroom—at the time. But the fact that I'm writing about him today, tells you how valuable his lessons were.

Here then, in his own words, with a few updates, is probably the most concise and useful lesson on Percentage Tennis you're likely to see.

Barnaby Kalan  
Toronto, 2015

## Basic Precepts

Think for a moment of all the considerations that go into hitting a tennis ball: Have you moved into position so that your feet are placed properly? Are you hitting the ball correctly with your arm and wrist? Is your grip correct? Are you concentrating on the ball? Have you followed through on your stroke? Are you hitting so that your opponent will not have an easy put-away? After your follow-through, have you recovered your balance so as to be ready for the next shot?

The job of the coach is to make his players aware of these basic skills and to analyze their playing, but the successful players are those who think as they are playing and who themselves can make adjustments to eliminate technical mistakes. As in any other game, the thinking player will be the successful player. Consider basketball for a moment: The coach instructs the principles of defense, but the player in a game must adjust those coaching precepts to fit the speed, agility, and shooting ability of the man he is guarding. So in tennis, the good player will adjust and manage his game to fit the situation on the court as it develops.

Basically, there are fundamentals to tennis success. The first is to ***keep the ball in play***. Even with the pros, many more tennis points are lost than are won. The smart player realizes this, and does not hit every shot to be a winner. Instead, he keeps the ball in play. By doing so, he either forces his opponent into making a mistake or he takes advantage of a poor return by his opponent to hit a winner. Many top players are masters at this: possessing great control over a dazzling variety of shots, but not hitting foolishly or hurriedly in a match. Instead, keeping the ball in play, trying to keep opponents moving and off balance until they see an opening for a sure winner. And when they finally have that opening, making sure to take their time and hit the ball in. If, by chance, their opponent returns the ball, that return is often a forced and weak shot that can easily be put away for a winner.

The second rule is deceptively simple: ***Make sure you win the points you have to***. Every point should NOT be played the same way; there is a strategy to tennis that separates perpetual winners from chronic losers. The important points to win are the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and every advantage point, with the 4<sup>th</sup> being the most important. Why?

Think for a moment. If you are ahead 40-love in a game, the 4<sup>th</sup> point wins it for you. If the score is 30-15, the 4<sup>th</sup> point puts you in a commanding position in the game. If the scores is 15-30, the 4<sup>th</sup> point pulls you even. If you are behind love-40, the 4<sup>th</sup> point breaks your opponent's momentum and denies him the easy, confidence-building love game. Now, consider the 5<sup>th</sup> point: At your advantage, 40-15, the 5<sup>th</sup> point wins the game without subjecting yourself to too much pressure. At 30 all, the 5<sup>th</sup> point gives you the chance for the game. At 15-40, the 5<sup>th</sup> point brings you back into a game that probably both players had considered decided, and places pressure on your opponent not to lose a game in which he had held a lop-sided advantage. And it's obviously always best to have the advantage point in a game: with it, you can hit for winners and feel somewhat relaxed; conversely, your opponent will be under constant pressure and tension, a situation which saps vitality and stamina, to say nothing of his confidence. Sounds simple, doesn't it?

Win the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and every advantage point and victory is yours. Yet, how many players think about the points as they are played in a game, and how many have the discipline to play to win?

So how can you give yourself every chance of winning these vital points? Once again, the answer is deceptively simple: when you need to win a point, **hit a shot which has a high percentage of going in.**

A high percentage shot means a shot that is sure of staying in play at least 3 out of every 4 times you hit it. For example, if the score is 15-40 in your favor, and the server is hitting a second serve to your backhand, it is NOT a high percentage shot for you to hit away for a winner, since very few players have a powerful topspin backhand return. It IS a percentage shot to place your backhand return as deep as possible to the server's backhand. Again, keeping the ball in play, and giving them an opportunity to get nervous or make a mistake. Or, for example, at 30-30: a high lob is dropping beyond the service line while you are at the net. It is NOT a high percentage shot for you to drift back and hit an overhead as hard as you can, since only about 1 out of 4 of these back-foot, mid-court overheads has a prayer of coming close to being in. It IS a percentage shot to hit a three-quarter pace overhead, just placing the ball carefully back to your opponent's backhand. It's also a percentage shot to move back quickly, let the ball bounce, and hit a medium-paced groundstroke from mid-court back into a corner and move back to the net.

Another example: on game point, the ball comes deep to your backhand and your opponent is in position at the net. It is NOT a percentage shot just to swing away at the ball and hope for the best. Or to necessarily try to hit a passing shot. It IS a percentage shot to lob to the *deepest part of his court*, or a percentage shot (but less so), to try to hit a shot with control, high and down the line.

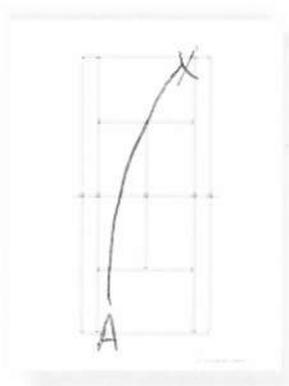


Figure 1: If you are in your backhand corner, the deepest part of the court is to your opponent's backhand.

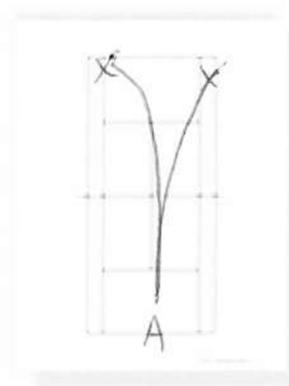


Figure 2: If you are in the middle of the court, the deepest part of court would be to either corner.

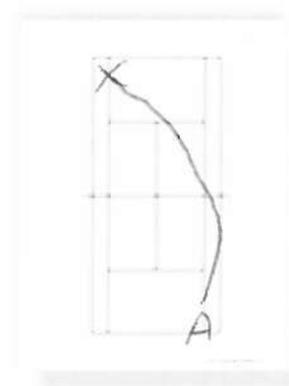


Figure 3: If you are in your forehand corner, the deepest part would be over your opponent's head to his or her forehand corner.

Likewise, as you may already know, there are percentages as to where you aim your regular groundstrokes. This is based on the height of the net, which is 3 feet high at the center, rising to 3 ½ feet high at the alley.



Therefore, a cross-court shot will always have a greater percentage of going in than a down-the-line shot, simply because of the lower net height. If you are running forward to hit a short shot or drop shot near your feet, this extra half-foot of net height is even more of a factor.

And in a high pressure situation, that little bit of room can make the difference between a shot that goes in and a shot that smacks the top of the net.

One last point about percentage shots: what is a percentage shot for one person may not be a percentage shot for another person. In other words, you have your own best shots that are most reliable in pressure situations. You have to know your own game well enough to know what these are and use them in the crunch.

The last basic concept of Percentage Tennis is like the others in its simplicity: think ahead to the next point you are playing; don't dwell on points already played (unless it's to analyze a pattern where you are winning or losing a lot of points).

In other words, learn from the point you just played for the purpose of winning the upcoming point. Don't brood about a past point and lose your concentration. This is especially true for points in which you received what you think is a bad line call, or points where your opponent completely lucked out and hit a net cord or miss-hit winner. In either case, the point is over and there's nothing you can do about it. Concentrate on winning the next point.

It's the mark of a mature player that, instead of complaining or making excuses about points played, he or she learns from past points and always concentrates on the next point to be played. If you feel yourself getting angry or frustrated for any reason, you know your concentration isn't at its best.

Finally, think about and evaluate your game as you are playing. Keep the ball in play, win the important points (but not at the expense of trying to win the other points!). Play Percentage Tennis, and think ahead. This strategy does not mean you are playing defensively or conservatively, but rather playing smart and winning tennis.