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There are Only 3 Playstyles: Poke, Dive, and Brawl #1

Today we begin a journey into the world of playstyles. Many of us strategize on instinct from pattern recognition over many victories and defeats. Others take a more inward approach believing that superior execution can make up for any strategic deficit, but that's correct on occasion. The reality is each opponent presents a new puzzle for which the pieces sometimes fall into place or crush the mind upon itself. Despite all the hours of practice sharpening our blades and building new weapons for battle, the art of strategy has many times allowed one of fewer resources to overcome a foe with greater resources, as history is littered with David versus Goliath moments.

The problem is, whether you command an army or wield a tennis racquet, we have limited battles to distill the fundamental principles of strategy and reinventing such a wheel through experience is a painful process. Plus when you're in a firefight with bullets flying left and right, contemplating such theory is counterproductive. While tennis has some common categorizations such as grinder, baseliner, serve and volley, power player, all court, counterpuncher etc each individual player has strengths and weaknesses with varying tools. Therefore, the permutations and combinations begin to explode, and despite various styles, Rafa and Roger both hit hard, Rafa and Novak are both very consistent, and Roger and Novak are both super adaptable so that is why "big hitter," "grinder," or "all-court player," respectfully, miss the mark from a first principles basis. The only answer is a framework of universal and timeless theories of strategy that apply synonymously from warfare to sport to videogames.

Let's begin. Strategy cannot exist without an opponent, so the most important question becomes, "what is my opponent trying to do?" They are trying to capture space or territory, whether it's the court in tennis, the ring in boxing, or outpost in a first person shooter video game, so the question is "how?" The only three methods are #1 brawl, #2 poke, and #3 dive. We'll define these for tennis but the terms originally come from first person shooter video games as strategy is far more prominent given there's no physical component.

Brawlers fight straight up, out in the open, face to face. A brawler looks to *exchange energy* directly with the opponent to A) push them back and take space inch by inch or B) wear them down so they can't fight back. In video game terms, brawlers are the machine gunners who have sustained firepower and damage over time, along with the fortitude to take hits in return. They can't kill in one bullet but have a lot of ammunition which forces enemies to hide. Two brawlers on the tennis court result in a groundstroke to groundstroke slugfest. Nadal brawls as his predominant playstyle as he expends energy on every ball which either pushes you backwards or breaks your bones until you capitulate.

Pokers fight from behind cover in a guerrilla warfare fashion. A poker looks to *punish mistakes* by inducing errors through A) drawing the opponent forward into open, vulnerable territory or B) giving up space to absorb the opponent's initial burst of energy, before pushing back when they are compromised to take more space. In video game terms, pokers are the snipers who have limited firepower but targeted burst damage to pick off enemies out of position. They can't force enemies out of cover, but are slippery and tough to kill themselves. Two pokers in tennis result in a "cat and mouse" exchange of baiting and attacking. Djokovic pokes as his predominant playstyle as he allows the opponent to push into him compared to Nadal who holds space with his energy, but anything less than a perfect attack or not attacking enough are subject to punishment.

Divers fight as assassins who act with haste or patiently in stealth. A diver looks to set up a scenario to finish by either A) making the first move before their opponent is prepared or B) sets up a favorable position with too much leverage for the opponent to absorb the attack. In video game terms, divers are the shotgunners, who have limited range from afar, but close out with a burst of damage upon getting in position. They have limited options without the element of surprise, but are the most potent when their attacks are timed right. Two divers in tennis result in a "first strike" frenzy when one shot can "snowball" the rest of the point. Federer dives as his predominant playstyle, as he is looking to set up his favorite shots and pull the trigger. Compared to Rafa and Novak, Roger is not rallying to "wear his opponent down" or "punish their mistakes."

To summarize in a tug of war analogy... Brawlers want to pull with hard, steady pressure to take space incrementally and tire you out. Pokers pull hard, give slack, then pull again hoping you slip so they can rip through all at once. Divers either pull with their full might right at the start hoping you aren't ready or go easy for a bit and when you think they aren't strong, pull with max power in one tug. Despite different objectives, all three styles achieve a final result of finishing the opponent off, which may look like dive at the very end, but dive by comparison is more comfortable pulling the trigger earlier.

So always go back to the question of "What is my opponent trying to do to me?" or "for what reason is this player rallying?" 1) to wear me down physically and take space inch by inch 2) to punish mistakes and bait with giving and taking space or 3) to set up a finish to take space all at once. We will soon answer "what should I be trying to do?" which depends on your preferred playstyle so that is why any given

advice could be excellent for one player and terrible for another. This equation must be solved systematically but whether it's Muhammad Ali poking with the jab, Mike Tyson diving with his bob and weave, or the calvary, archer, pikemen dynamic from the medieval age, all the concepts are the same and that's the beautiful thing. This is the foundational concept on which we'll stack, so like algebra or calculus, missing this first lesson will render all the others useless.

The Triangular Relationship: Poke, Brawl, and Dive #2

We've defined the three playstyles of poke, brawl and dive with pokers who bait mistakes, brawlers who wear the other down, and divers who set up to finish. Every style has a strength, but for every strength there is a weakness. Depending on your natural playstyle, certain types of players will present more of a challenge than others. Imagine you're playing a first person shooter game, where the machine gunner will rarely beat a sniper at long range due to precision and at close range a sniper will rarely beat a shotgunner because one player doesn't need to aim. This dynamic is less clear in tennis due to A) a disparity in skill and B) variability. Players often lose with the correct strategy or win with the wrong one, which is why we see upsets or close matches between disparate skill levels as strategy cannot overcome a large enough deficit. From a variability standpoint, both right and wrong strategies result in winning and losing points. Every player feels, "I need to keep doing what I'm doing but do it better" but in the heat of an intense firefight, watching the ball or shooting the enemy in front of you will consume all of your attention. Today, we're going to relieve you from your duties as a foot soldier and put you in the general's command center. Metaphorically, the weapons your troops are equipped with determine which fights to take and which to avoid. We will explore the triangular relationship, assuming all combatants are a singular playstyle, of poke beating brawl, brawl beating dive, and dive beating poke.

Here's the synopsis. We don't like each other, so you come at me head on and start punching, which is a brawl strategy. Since I'm losing that fight, I run behind a tree and start throwing rocks at you. As you come at me, I slip behind another tree and throw more rocks, which is a poke strategy. Since you're losing, next time I pop out to throw rocks, you're nowhere in sight. I look left, then right, and finally turn behind me for which you're right there and start to strangle me, which is a dive strategy.

Poke "beats" Brawl

Brawlers just want to be in rhythm and rip the ball to take space, but if pokers are lobbing, slicing, and mixing in other garbage, pretty strokes are useless. The brawler is the machine gunner while the poker is the sniper. The machine gun is shooting away while the sniper hides, before popping out and picking off the target with precise burst damage. The machine gun has excellent total damage output, but lacks the burst damage to finish in a couple bullets. Think about the British lobsterbacks fighting the American colonists. They are trained to stand in a line and fire round after round out in the open while the guerrilla warfare colonists hide in the trees and shoot at different angles. The poker protects themselves from damage by giving up space, and once the brawler is baited into a vulnerable position, launches a counterattack. In tennis, the brawler cannot put the point away when the poker is far behind the baseline. The poker is glad to see the brawler waste their energy generating pace with no reward and sacrifice their balance and recovery in the process.

Dive "beats" Poke

Pokers want to give up space and "absorb" the attack before pushing back even harder, but if the diver attacks before the defense is set or surprises an unsuspecting poker, counterpunch is useless. The diver

is the shotgunner that can sneak up on and knock out enemies in a burst, but unlike the brawler, never shoots prematurely to alert the enemy defenses. The diver carefully stays out of enemy sightlines and repositions to fight on favorable terms. The sniper's predictable defensive position sitting back allows the diver to initiate the fight while reacting to the offense like a sitting duck. Instead of lining up foolishly, suppose the British patiently devised an organized plan to push the colonists out of hiding and unload all their firepower at once. There'd be a lot more strawberries and cream west of the Atlantic. In tennis, the poker who waits forever is at the mercy of a diver's execution to finish. Unlike a brawler, the diver stops the counterpunch by not overhitting until the right moment to strike.

Brawl "beats" Dive

Divers like to set up inside the court where a variety of finishing shots keep their opponent guessing, but if the brawler pushes the diver behind the baseline, the finish becomes both predictable and riskier. Unlike the sniper who plays in and out of cover, the machine gunner is actively taking space in the open and pushing the enemy back with constant firepower. And opposite to the sniper who can punish enemies in the open, the shotgun lacks range, allowing the machine gun to fire uncontested. It's hard to close distance when you're avoiding a barrage from behind cover, but the shotgunner will take "chip" damage from the stray bullets when trying to get in position. Having compromised health points before the diving makes winning the fight a much lower percentage. If the British got lined up with their pikemen in front and the colonists rushed in on calvary, it would be suicidal. In tennis, the diver can accept a slow defeat to the relentless firepower or kamikaze, assuming the brawler establishes their strength to hold space.

Back and forth dynamics have commonly referred to as a "chess match" and tennis is no exception with each player countering, then countering the counter. Once the sniper gets a pick, players will stay out of sightline and key in on that position to dive. Once the shotgunner gets a quick flank, players start checking their angles and grouping up for protection. Once a machine gunner mows down a few enemies, players will start hiding and playing near cover. So congratulations on creating your own counters that will come back to haunt, but a handful of players either dumb or content will be fine losing without adjustments. Otherwise, the match will look very different from beginning to middle to end. Some useful questions to ask are... What am I doing compared to my opponent? If I counter my opponent, how long will they realize before they change? Once they adjust, do I have a counter for that? Or if we both have the same playstyle, do I like this matchup or prefer to fight a different way? I'd advise to stick with your strengths to some degree if you don't have the tools to switch, but just being aware of opponents trying to counter will help you play so much smarter. In a future video, we will discuss playing into counters.

Weapons for Different Fighters: Poke, Brawl, and Dive #3

Whether you're an assassin that travels in stealth or a medieval knight leading the front lines into battle, different tools are required for the job. While it's nice to have the full suite of tools at your disposal, there are defining skill sets to either poke, dive, or brawl successfully. Whether a player decides to further invest in their strength to supercharge their primary style or buff a weakness to cover a potential counter, the allocation of skills and tactics will tilt a player more toward one style over another. So today we're going to cover the common skills and tactics associated with each playstyle.

Since divers are looking to set up their attack, finishing skills are a premium. Dive skills include holding your shot for disguise, dropshot, attacking with feet, netplay, and putaway forehands such as runaround

and the high hammer shot. Because of this, divers usually develop excellent vision reading the opponent's position when setting up to hit along with planning out their attack. The downside often involves not having strong rally balls or the ability to absorb pace when attacked. Aside from skills, there are 5 tactics to pressure an opponent which are 1) consistency, 2) direction, 3) depth, 4) spin, and 5) power. Dive tactics lean toward power, direction, and depth. Spin slows the ball down which is opposite to putting the ball away, and while no player likes making excessive errors, consistency is not a main form of exerting pressure as it's necessary to take some chances.

Since pokers are looking to bait mistakes to counter, defensive skills are a must. This means knowing when to give up space and deflecting pace to turn defense into offense. Variety such as slice, angles, and lobs, which is equivalent to using depth and height, all fall under poke skills to both protect their court and induce miscalculated offense from the opponent. Because of this, pokers often develop excellent vision for reading the opponent's body language when recovering. This allows for knowing where the opponent is hitting and positioning for defense accordingly. The downside of many pure pokers involves not being able to generate their own pace to take space or finish points. From a tactical perspective, pokers lean toward depth, direction, and spin (slice). Placement is a priority over power when able to deflect the incoming pace and some variety prevents the opponent from attacking with rhythm and balance.

Since brawlers are looking to wear down and push their opponent back, skills to command space are essential. Having rhythm is important to exert one's physicality through strength, speed, and or endurance because a big part of brawling is taking healthy cuts at the ball. That's why topspin and generating pace fall under brawl skills to both encourage and win the energy exchange. From the perspective of vision, brawlers look to be efficient at maximizing their damage output and when the opponent is weakened to potentially move forward. The developmental flaw of pure brawlers is often not being able to adjust their positioning or lacking the variety of finishing shots once the opponent moves back to absorb pace. Brawl tactics are generally power, spin (topspin), and consistency. Not that there aren't aggressive brawlers who sacrifice some consistency for direction to hit more winners, but safer targets lead to energy exchange and breaking down their opponent.

In summary, to highlight a few skills - for a diver, serve and volley requires reading the opponent to plan the attack, timing the move forward, and finishing with disguise. For a poker, slice makes it easy to balance, read the opponent's offense, and reposition while effectively diffusing pace and protecting the court by avoiding the opponent's strike zone. For a brawler, topspin allows for taking big cuts with racquet speed, slowing the ball down to prevent winners and making the exchange very physical. However, it's unlikely a player will exclusively use the skills for their designated playstyle. A topspin lob could set up a combo to dive or an offensive slice used to create space when brawling. At a high level, players can have a wide mix of skills but generally favor those for their specific playstyle. At a lower level, the playstyle will more directly reflect the set of skills. We will learn how to assess playstyles in a future video, but in the meantime, focus on how a given player is using their tools rather than drawing quick conclusions from a single skill or tactic as that can often be a red herring.

Creating that Feeling: Poke, Brawl, and Dive #4

Sometimes a few changes from the same opponent can make the match feel very different. Other times opponents of varying shapes, sizes, and skills elicit a déjà vu feeling as if you've played many times over. The feelings we experience whether it's a sense of urgency, panic, impulse etc is determined by the type

of pressure your opponent is creating. Granted some opponents are cluelessly random or game plan with new strategy from match to match, but there is always a cause and effect. We discussed what poke, brawl, and dive are trying to accomplish, but how does it feel being on the recipient's end? Or given our own playstyle, what should the opponent feel? If the player has no endgame in mind, that often results in non purposeful shots which move them further from the goalpost of their primary strategy. The fastest way to get from point A to B is in a straight line, and that's why today we are dialing in that compass.

The brawler wants the opponent to feel constant pressure. Think machine gunner who's got a big clip and is firing away, which is a "visible" pressure because you see the bullets flying your way. The brawler wants to get in your face to occupy your attention as a reminder that the longer the fight goes, the more likely you are to lose. As the clock ticks down, the brawler's opponent can 1) Use energy to fight back 2) Relieve that pressure by giving up space or 3) Taking unnecessary risk pulling the trigger early. Whether you play a defensive brawler who makes 30 balls like David Ferrer or an offensive brawler like Wawrinka, opponents start to rush once their body starts to break down.

The poker wants the opponent to feel threatened to elicit a "fight or flight" response. Think sniper who can accurately pick off anyone in the open which makes players A) too scared to peak the sightlines and play overly passive or B) panic to eliminate the sniper so rush in from a bad position and get whacked in the process. Being afraid of getting sniped creates an "invisible" pressure where the sniper may not even be looking your way but the perceived threat can be paralyzing. Whether you play a defensive poker leaning on the back fence like Medvedev or an offensive poker actively probing your weakness like Djokovic, the urge to attack an opponent who takes little risk balances the fear of attacking straight into a deadly counterpunch.

The diver wants the opponent to feel safe, which is a subset of not being ready. Think shotgunner who sneaks behind the enemy lines and finishes with a single burst. It's paramount that a flanker not alert the enemies defenses, so does not peak corners or shoot to engage the fight prematurely. Feeling safe lures the enemy out of hiding and lowers their guard as it's human nature to fall into patterns. Ball #1 and #2 struck with low energy desensitizes the opponent to aggression. Then on ball #3 you've already seen a few pitches and can line up a home run. It's impossible for players to be vigilant all the time in safe conditions as defense is a survival mechanism when we sense danger. Nick Kyrgios massages the ball half the time before an explosive move out of nowhere begins to snowball the point.

In summary...

Brawlers are looking to maximize damage on every ball and finish when weakened.

Pokers are looking for the big counter in anticipation of you doing too much.

Divers are looking to lull the opponent to sleep for a brief moment before striking.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of players are victims of habit, gravitating to whatever shots feel good or looks aesthetically pleasing. Too many divers start hitting hard randomly which alerts the defense. Too many pokers start playing overly consistent and forget about the hard punish. And too many brawlers start hitting too close to the lines without setting up points properly, which means risk with no reward.

What occurs is randomness that moves them off that straight line from point A to B. With a high level of clarity, you will reach your goal far faster than those flying blind.

Determining Your Opponent's Style: Poke, Dive, and Brawl #5

In order to have a strategic advantage, you must first determine what your opponent is trying to do. You cannot fight what you do not understand. What makes this task more daunting is the hundreds or potentially thousands of opponents you'll face, by which a good portion of them act subconsciously and wouldn't be able to articulate to themselves what they are trying to do. While it may not be immediately obvious, patterns if it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it's a duck. To recap the 3 playstyles, brawlers wear you down and take space inch by inch, pokers bait mistakes by giving space and pushing back, and divers set up to increase their percentages finishing. Today, we'll examine 6 factors as a framework for playstyle because the faster you correctly assess, the more games you have with strategic advantage.

Energy being high or low is essentially how a player manages their gas tank of mental and physical energy to fit their objective.

Brawlers want to push the pace and empty as much of the gas as quickly as possible. Think of Nadal who puts as much energy as he can into every ball to break your bones.

Pokers will be lower energy to absorb a brawler's higher energy or often match an opponent's lower energy in neutral to create the illusion of being vulnerable before raising their energy when counterpunching. Think of Gael Monfils who hangs back like a boxer leaning on the ropes and then he explodes once attacked.

Divers either use a ton of energy out of the gates on the serve and return or lull you to sleep before slamming on the gas pedal. Diving all the time is not only predictable, but finishing requires concentrated bursts of energy which cannot be sustained. The classic low energy assassin is Pete Sampras who mopes around half the time then goes all out when he gets his opportunity.

Is my opponent using energy all the time or in spurts?

Rhythm to hit the same ball versus variance changing the angles are typically inverse to each other as more variety disrupts rhythm.

Brawlers want that "who can hit more balls in a row" type of contest that eliminates variance and thrives on rhythm allowing for the exchange of energy needed to wear the opponent down.

Pokers prefer variety to create "cat and mouse" exchanges like how a pitcher will go to the slider and knuckleball to make things messy resulting in few home runs and lots of pop ups off mishits creating easy outs.

Divers bend both ways depending on the player's skillset as some use variety to position their favorite putaways while others may prefer rhythm as seeing one or two of the same pitch helps line up the eyes for a big home run.

Is my opponent trying to help or hurt the rhythm of the match?

Space, whether captured quickly or steadily, is the end goal for all styles but the process for each is different.

Brawlers move forward to take space bit by bit. Only after enough space is created over several shots, the brawler can finish. When Nadal hits a drop shot or comes in for a putaway float volley, it's already assumed he's won the point before the final shot because the opponent is scraping the back fence. Since space closer to the baseline is more valuable to dictate the point, brawlers will expend energy to hold space.

Pokers willingly drop back to give up space but wisely pick their battles to move forward to take copious amounts of space back. Djokovic is famous for creating that "wall-like" feeling but his constant up and back movement allows him to turn defense into offense on a moment's notice.

Divers rarely give up space for long because it limits their options to finish the point, but are inclined to move forward fast and aggressively after a promising setup ball. Federer is most committed to attacking with his feet to close distance, at times making hard reads and being content losing some points. Is my opponent giving up space willingly or expend energy to hold it?

Risk is taken based on the highest reward for a given style for a given stage of a point.

Brawlers tend to be risk averse because they excel when the point is in neutral where the most energy exchange occurs. Brawlers still hit winners off weaker shots or if enough space was created from prior shots, but only take chances when losing the point is imminent.

Pokers tend to take more risk on defense because the reward is big when the opponent is attacking.

Some pokers may hit their average ball relatively hard, but safe targets versus ripping to the corner only when the opponent is out of position or off balance, falls into the category of punishing mistakes.

Divers are looking to transition from defense to neutral to offense to finishing the point as quickly as possible, and will take calculated risks through each of those transitions. If there is no pressure, a smart diver will progress through those stages without taking much risks.

Is my opponent taking risk at every stage of the point or specific scenarios?

Body Type influences base attributes on which players build their game.

Brawlers must have some degree of strength or stamina whether it's a strong core or height for leverage on the swing. On average, bigger and taller players have a higher capacity to brawl, at least from a stationary position.

Pokers must have some degree of mobility whether it's a quick first step or keeping a low center of gravity to change direction and deflect. On average, smaller and shorter players have a higher capacity to poke being able to reposition frequently. These are both generalizations because Diego Schwartzman likes to brawl at 5'7" while Medvedev likes to poke at 6'6". But typically, if a player is built like Wawrinka or Serena, they will be a brawl dive or dive brawl combination instead of poke.

Divers can come in all shapes and sizes with some being explosive to move forward while others are slower, more deliberate with balance and coordination.

Is my opponent based on physique more or less likely to play a certain way?

Racquet may be the biggest determinant of style as one must work within its parameters.

Brawlers need the consistent pace and prefer spin so favor the racquet heads with a minimum of 98 square inches, usually not too heavy to sustain racquet head speed. Any frame aerodynamically shaped to brush the ball vertically falls into brawler territory.

Pokers need a racquet that can stabilize incoming pace, so typically those with decent mass along with a more horizontal aerodynamically shaped frame to swing through the ball. Usually the head sizes aren't too large where power can't be focused but not too small where defense becomes too low margin, but more importantly not overly head light where too much snap at contact would make deflections inaccurate.

Divers need to finish points which often helps using smaller, more focused sweet spots of the smaller head frames. Aside from that, either lighter or at a minimum a head light racquet, allows the diver to both hold their shot for disguise, achieve that whip through snap for a burst of speed, and have maneuverability inside the court.

Although it may seem like a lot of factors, tennis isn't rocket science. You'll see the same patterns again and again and may even develop new ones of your own. While this may be a great head start to predicting your opponent's playstyle, always stay grounded in reality of what happening in the moment

because a player could be very well going to their "B" or "C" game, but if three or four of these factors line up, you'll be on the right track.

Fighting Forms: Poke, Brawl, and Dive #6

It makes sense that a warrior with a sword and shield fights differently than one with a bow and arrow. But an archer can choose to either sit back and shoot or force the fight by flanking around the sides. We've talked about the three playstyle of poke, brawl, and dive but these manifest in quite contrary ways. So we're going to break each down between offensive versus defensive forms and skilled versus athletic forms, which may conflict with your preconceived notion of what each style looks like. To preface this video, "aggressive" refers to the mindset being ready to confront the enemy while "offensive" refers to the side looking to take space versus protect space. As seen in nature with a lioness defending the cubs, the defender is generally far more "aggressive" while the offense is calm, calculating, and unpredictable like a cheetah seizing up its prey.

Offensive versus Defensive Brawl

A brawler's goal to "wear down" the opponent with constant pressure could be through a defensive method of being a "backboard" to win the energy exchange. But some brawlers transfer energy, less with consistency, but hitting the spot out of every ball. The points may be shorter but the same effect over the course of two sets still involves breaking down the opponent's body because everything gets harder when fatigued. The offensive brawler will often hit winners by "accident" but the goal is to land as many body blows as possible through heavy hitting. Alexander Zverev is an excellent example of an offensive brawler who controls the points ripping to the corners while an Andy Roddick towards the end of his career plays with safer targets and makes you earn every point.

Skilled versus Athletic Brawl

Bigger, stronger, and faster players may gravitate toward brawl because it's essentially like starting the race with a larger gas tank, making energy exchange advantageous. Skilled brawling includes players with superior technique, coordination, and ball striking, so the "wear down" strategy has no correlation with being lower skill. An example of an athletic brawler would be Francis Tiafoe who has a magnificent blend of muscle and movement compared to Andre Agassi who relies on his timing and accuracy. Nonetheless, these two will fight head on and refuse to give up space.

Offensive versus Defensive Poke

A poker's goal to "bait mistakes" could imply extreme patience to sit back defensively and wait for the opponent to make the first move. This creates more time to read the opponent and position perfectly, which is an effective way to counterpunch. But some pokers bait offensively using depth, a nasty short slice, or angling the opponent outside the ally to force their opponent's hand. Remember, pokers themselves do not overhit from a neutral position because counterattacking requires them to stay on their balance. Examples of more defensive pokers who sit back are Medvedev or Murray, while Djokovic as an offensive poker will use hard angles and redirects to force the opponent to either attack or suffer, but all similarly let their opponent play into them.

*As a sidenote, a poke combo that relies on an opponent making a mistake, often from an offensive position by A) over hitting and getting countered or B) doing too little and getting their weaker ball punished is different from a dive combo that can punish an opponent who camps in a defensive position

either A) early in the point before the opponent sets up or B) putting the opponent to sleep and finishing with burst.

Skill versus Athletic Pokers

Some athletic based pokers have subpar strokes so resort to lobs or slices for protection while using their speed to constantly reposition up and back and their strength to deflect. But poke can be high skill shots where the redirects have punishing accuracy and shot selection is clever and crafty to the point of maddening. Athletic pokers like Angelique Kerber stay super low to deflect pace or Agnieszka Radwanska who uses her quickness to reposition both accomplish the same goal as a fundamentally skilled poker like Ashley Barty who combos her of shots brilliantly to keep the opponents off balance and uncertain.

Offensive versus Defensive Dive

As a diver's goal is to "set up the finish," offensive and defensive refers to how fast or slow the diver plays. Some take "first strike" to the extreme by focusing their attack on the first four balls - serve, return, 3rd ball, and 4th ball. Once the 5th ball is struck, the point returns to neutral. The "offensive" diver tends to go for more one shot kills whether it's a big serve, serve and volley, serve plus one groundstroke. The slower paced "defensive" dive is less likely to press if an opportunity isn't there on the first four balls and doesn't mind rallying a few balls to create the temporary feeling of safety before exploding into offense. An example of an offensive dive would be John Isner or Feliciano Lopez who look for immediate offense compared to Nick Kyrios who doesn't exclusively rely on his one-two punch, but lulls the opponent to sleep before unloading an unsuspecting forehand.

Skilled versus Athletic Dive

Dive is often thought of as a highly skilled melange of variety in addition to blazing fast putaways to end points. Interestingly, some players gravitate toward dive to take advantage of their athleticism or to compensate for less skills. Compared to the technical requirement for groundstrokes, successful net play has a greater weighting on components such as speed, strength, positioning, feel, and reading the opponent, similar to a basketball player who can't swish a 3-pointer so drives to the rim for a dunk. The ultimate example of skilled dive is Roger compared to the athletic centric dive of Steve Johnson or Alexander Dolgoplov who don't depend on precise ball striking to fuel their ability to finish.

Regardless of which form of brawl, poke, or dive you encounter, the counter always remains the same. Many players see something unfamiliar and revert back to the game that's most comfortable instead of trusting the right strategy to prevail. With this new knowledge you won't be fooled and be able to match the correct label with each player, always coming back to first principles.

Your Win Condition: Poke, Dive, and Brawl #7

After figuring your opponent out based on the three playstyles, it's time for the next phase. Naturally, your playstyle is trying to accomplish something and your opponent theirs, so if you figure out what to do to succeed or them failing, this is called your win condition. Advanced players and even professionals struggle at times to find the "win condition." Although players generally improve through time and experience over many battles to develop their intuition and game sense, a trial and error approach will never outperform a system that comes where theory and practice meet for precise adjustments. Taking a player who gets the strategy right 7 or 8 out of 10 to 9 out of 10 is essentially cutting out half of the losses solely due to not identifying the win condition.

We will discuss each individual match up, but let's establish ground rules first. If both players engage with the same playstyle and you're winning, probably keep doing that. If you are losing at your preferred playstyle, you'll likely have to fight on other fronts. Changing your playstyle, changes your win condition. If preferred playstyles are different, that means they can accomplish objective A some of the time and you B some of the time, which creates what's called an equilibrium. If you understand that matchup equilibrium, you can either capitalize on an advantage or in this case, severely neutralize the playing into a countering playstyle. Note that each of the following matchups assume players are sticking with their predominant playstyles and are making the most of a tough situation into a natural counter.

Poke versus Dive

Pokers need to understand that divers are looking to hit home runs, not singles. Therefore, it helps to actively use variety to bait mistakes compared to just waiting for the opponent to line up their shot and T off, as good divers do not make many mistakes. This more "offensive" type of poke forces the diver into attacking on your terms versus theirs because if the diver makes mistakes forcing the finish on the wrong ball, the poker will be able to counter some of the time. In summary, time is not your friend. So not having brawl capability to hold space, aggressively use angles, change of direction, and occasional rips with good margin can keep the diver honest. Secondly, you can test the diver's ability to finish because the diver's selection of tools must match the type of defense being played. For example, if the diver cannot volley, use defensive slices and if the diver cannot dropshot, use lower, flatter deflections. Picking up on the diver's tendencies will allow you to give some space when they attack and make them finish with their B or C option.

Divers need to understand that pokers are waiting for you to try to hit a winner, so do not try to hit winners unless you are ready to commit to a finish. Since pokers willingly give space, they are not in the position to hold or push you back to create space. The vast majority of pokers will not punish mediocre rally balls, which means you can be patient working multiple setup balls until you get the ball you want. This "defensive" dive approach may involve working medium paced shots to A) maintain your balance which prevents being counterattacked and B) desensitizes the opponent to your offense, before ripping the cover off the ball or making an explosive move forward as soon as they relax. Since time is your friend, you don't need to force combos off the first four balls if the opportunity isn't there, as you can let the point develop if needed.

Poke versus Brawl

Pokers need to understand that brawlers attempt to maximize damage on every shot, which makes them very predictable and much easier to read and defend against. While you may not want to rally forever and get worn down against a defensive brawler, time is your friend because you can just wait for the perfect time to counterattack the longer the point goes, which is more of a "defensive" poke. Most brawlers either don't set up their points to finish or need to create space over many shots, thereby giving up space proactively results in them A) wasting energy B) taking unnecessary risk trying to finish or C) stepping into a vulnerable position. Any scenario above means you can take the fight against a compromised enemy when you're at full strength on balance as the aggressor. Lastly, brawlers often rely on rhythm to use their strokes for damage output. Variety to change the rhythm negates that effect allowing the poker to remain comfortable while going to work.

Brawlers need to understand that pokers give you attackable shots hoping you take the bait of attacking without quite being able to finish. Creating the delusion of hitting good shots but losing is the epitome of counterpunch. As a brawler, maximizing damage output will not disarm the opponent's initial defense, so the correct answer is to wear the opponent down “defensively” brawling to dampen their ability to push back with a counter. This may involve longer points with more roadwork, more balls up the middle to keep the angles closed, and heavier topspin to slow the ball down allowing you to recover while still wearing them down. While time is not your friend for an individual point, you can make time your friend over the course of the match. A tired counterpuncher late match will convert at a lower percentage or start pulling the trigger on the wrong shot and making errors.

Brawl versus Dive

Divers need to understand that once a brawler gets set up to output damage, the window of opportunity will close very quickly. Without the sustained firepower to hold space, time is not your friend as divers will have less options pulling the trigger the longer the point goes, and since divers use more energy than pokers, it's more difficult to lull them to sleep. Therefore, diving “offensively” which means snowballing the point off the first four balls - serve, return, 3rd, and 4th ball - prior to the opponent getting set prevents the heavy energy exchange from occurring every single point. Lastly, if the point doesn't go your way early, it's worth considering to live with a few more errors than give a brawler more rhythm as it's not just about you playing better, but making them play worse.

Brawlers need to understand that divers have far more options to finish from inside the court, so it's important to start taking space as quickly as possible. Brawling “offensively” which involves more penetrating shots to the corners will make the diver use more energy not to get pushed back. Divers are not adept at giving space and deflecting pace, so the threat of getting counterpunched is far lower. Although defense during the first four shots may be necessary, time is your friend as the diver gets worn down which allows easier transition to offense the longer the point goes. If you can survive the early barrage by picking up on their patterns and using as much energy as possible, you'll be in great shape as a brawler. The more times you can hurt them physically in a rally will make diving more difficult late game.

The biggest takeaway whether you're playing with a headwind or tailwind is to respect and accept the moments another playstyle will shine, but capitalize on yours. The fact you run into a natural counter does not mean you abandon all your hours of training for another playstyle. Regardless of a more or less favorable matchup, your “win condition” can turn a major disadvantage into a slight disadvantage and make it feasible for the value from your base skillset to overcome a deficit. That's always a dilemma when strategizing as you do the mid match calculation. Stick to your guns in the face of a counter or jump ship to try something new? Regardless of that decision, being cognizant of your “win condition” will allow you to change strategies with clarity while your opponent will be one step behind.

Chess on All 3 Fronts: Poke, Brawl, and Dive #8

Most players have a “self image” of what their game should look like and what their shots should feel like. But that's a delusion as 50% of how the match unfolds is determined by your opponent. Whether you're facing Fabrice Santoro slicing every ball or Ivo Karlovic kicking the serve above your head, you undoubtedly have no clue what your “game” will look like under those unique circumstances. To clear the mind and accept the manifestation of whatever tennis unfolds is difficult because we all have preconceived notions of who we are and who we want to be. That's where the mantra of “I want to play

my game” should be followed by “what exactly is my game?” The truth is everything that happens out there from the good, bad, sublime, or awkward is all your game. It’s similar to your personality where you may act differently around family, friends, colleagues, or adversaries, but you’re still the same person at the core responding to different environments. So although we’ve described styles from the perspective of poke, brawl, and dive, the complexity of a match involves a combination of fights being waged on each front.

This isn’t a perfect example, but imagine you’re playing three games of chess simultaneously against the same opponent where the first game to finish determines the winner, ending the other games. Clearly, it’s wise to play just well enough to stall your opponent’s best boards until you can close out the game you’re winning. In tennis, the strategy is similar: match them at their game and beat them at yours. It’s unrealistic to drop 50 aces like Karlovic or make 100 balls in a row like David Ferrer, but hitting your spots with decent pace to hold serve or making 10 balls to work the points doesn’t take miraculous talent. For the playstyles of poke, brawl, and dive, you don’t want a major deficit in one area where a worse opponent can yield disproportionate value from their one strength. It’s almost a guarantee in any competitive situation that your opponent does at least one thing better. Say theoretically, Federer and Sampras have equally good mechanics on the serve. Because Roger is by far the more complete player, Pete’s serve will be better because as a survival mechanism, his brain will devote all the focus to that area in order to compete. Therefore, winning the war isn’t about winning every individual battle, but not being charitable either.

Today we’ll cover how to play the worst of your three chess boards. Changes in strategy often go unnoticed because it is very subtle compared to the visible shotmaking and athleticism that captures the senses. The opponent will not see a noticeable difference, but the tone of the points will shift where everything from finishing to making one more ball becomes more challenging. We mediate an opponent’s strength by “mirroring” their strategy just long enough to take care of business. For each playstyle, we’ll use a team based first person shooter comparison where you may not win your chess board, but stall long enough to be victorious as a team.

Brawling into Poke

The brawler with a machine gun has the difficulty of playing into the poker with a sniper rifle. Shooting the enemy behind cover not only wastes ammo but leaves you in the open to get picked off. The correct play is to hide from the sniper behind cover and shoot at the other enemy teammates. As the sniper sees their teammates getting fired upon, it’s tempting to take a wider angle further away from cover to shoot you. Only now you can engage the sniper in the open where instead of a 10% chance of winning, it’s probably 40%. In tennis, only after baiting the poker into the open, you can then unload damage as a brawler. For shot patterns, modify your [rip, rip, rip, rip] to [rip, rip, slice, rip] or [rip, rip, angle, rip.]

Poking into Dive

The poker with a sniper has the challenge of playing into the diver with the shotgun. Backing up and hiding is stalling the inevitable as the diver will locate, close distance, and engage on their terms. The correct play is to mix in what’s called a “counter dive” where the sniper takes the offensive off angle anticipating the diver’s route and lining up the short range scope. While it’s still a losing matchup on average, an overly cautious or hesitant diver allows enough time to snipe down enemy teammates and win the game. In tennis, the poker should alternate their position not just from neutral to defense, but

occasionally for offense to counter dive. Instead of sitting back with a pattern like [slice, lob, slice, angle] try [slice, lob, slice, sneak volley] or [slice, lob, slice, inside out forehand.]

Diving into Brawl

The diver with the shotgun has to carefully navigate playing into the brawler with the machine gun. The only viable option is to challenge the brawler at close range because bullets flying in your direction from mid to long range cause “chip damage.” Being weakened prior to engaging the enemy makes the dive very risky. You need to “wear down” the brawler, not with your damage, but by prowling around long enough as a distraction so your teammates can inflict “chip damage.” A worn down brawler is susceptible to dive at a reasonable success rate. In tennis, the diver should pick their battles of when to brawl to extend the window to finish a bit longer. Instead of lulling the opponent to sleep with medium pace like [rally, rally, slice, volley] try [rip, rip, slice, volley] or [rip, rip, lob, hammer forehand.]

The point here is that subtle changes can make a world of difference, especially when you know what’s going on and your opponent is cluelessly allocating resources to the wrong areas. In this three game chess match, you might be giving up some pieces but losing battles is a necessary part to winning the war. As the match progresses take note of your opponents strongest and weakest styles, juxtapose them against yours to make small tweaks to that mix, and watch the strategy shift in your favor.

Assembling Your Weapons: Poke, Brawl, and Dive #9

With a deep understanding of strategy, a war general has decisions to make regarding how to build the army, which weapons to equip before battle, and which squadrons to move when and where depending on enemy and terrain. It’s an oddly similar analogy but few players have the luxury of planning a vision out when picking up a racquet for the first time. There are even intrinsic factors starting with personality type. A player with discipline will lean toward brawl, others who are adaptable may find poke appealing, and those enjoying the risk reward dynamic may prefer dive. Next, the physical tool being the racquet greatly influences playstyle as a small head on a wooden racquet encourages dive unlike the open string patterned spin monsters for brawl. Lastly, for many young players, the coach influences the order by which the skills are learned. So as players find their first success, the primary style is rewarded and reinforced, so the skills and tactics associated with each style tend to solidify faster.

To revisit the skills for each playstyle...

Dive skills include holding your shot for disguise, dropshot, attacking with feet, hammer/inside out forehand, and net play.

Poke skills include deflecting pace, giving space, slice, angles, and lobs (using height/depth.)

Brawl skills include rhythm, strength, topspin, endurance, and generating pace.

To revisit the tactics for each playstyle...

Dive tactics include direction, depth, and power.

Poke tactics include direction, depth, and spin (slice).

Brawl tactics include power, spin (topspin), and consistency.

As players push their strengths to new heights trying to win, the disparity between their weaknesses will grow larger without conscious, targeted practice. Given that no player in history can master every style at the highest level, the goal is to develop what’s called a secondary style. Like a first person shooter video

game, the player enters the fight with their primary weapon in hand but switches to a secondary sidearm in a specific situation. For example, Federer is dive with a touch of poke as he'll sometimes hard bait with angles and slices, Djokovic is poke with some brawl as he'll sometimes step into the open and fight for space, and Nadal is brawl with some poke as sometimes he'll give up space while raising the trajectory of his shots to bait. In terms of the tools reflecting one's style, a player such as Fernando Gonzalez brawls on his forehand by taking huge cuts at the ball while his compact backhand is used for deflecting and slicing which naturally makes his secondary poke. He can't disguise the forehand like Roger to dive nor generate the power on the backhand like Wawrinka to be a pure brawler.

From the triangular relationship of brawl countering dive, dive poke, and poke brawl, a player's secondary style will always be a counter to their counter. More specifically, it provides a soft counter to an opponent who has a primary style that's a hard counter to your primary playstyle. Part of becoming a more advanced player means becoming a more complete player by gaining proficiency with a couple skills from your non primary styles. If you ever encounter a pure poker, diver, or brawler, not having any way to finish a point, hold your ground, or bait will make for an occasional nightmare matchup.

So why a primary and secondary versus being all three? It's obvious that each of the big three possesses every skill as Roger has phenomenal rhythm and topspin while Novak and Rafa have lethal forward movement and finishing shots. But playstyle comes down to physics. Rhythm cannot be broken and maintained at the same time. Space cannot be given or taken at the same time. Spin cannot be going forward and backward at the same time. Since poke, brawl, and dive walk diverging paths, you must choose one in a given moment. In theory, a player can rip heavy topspin like Nadal one game, then serve and volley like Sampras the next. It's not impossible but questionable for a few reasons. 1) How likely can a player be equally skilled across all 3 styles? 2) How would switching styles randomly hone in on an opponent's weakness? 3) Despite the element of surprise, how would different styles not detract from each other's goals? And that's what we'll discuss further.

Since every style has a specific objective, wearing down the opponent as a brawler would be opposite to diving on the first four balls which keeps points brief. Each style looks for different cues when making their move, and by definition, the mind can only focus on one thing at a time. Nonetheless, that focus can shift mid point, but at a given moment, a player looking to do maximum damage on every ball cannot look to set up or bait. While it may appear seamless for the pros, Roger who looks for the finish throughout the point differs from Rafa who needs a split second to realize that space was created before looking to finish or Novak to noticeably see his opponent compromised before looking to finish.

But contrary to sticking with a primary style, every other skill will enhance that objective. In fact, Nadal needed the dive skills to be competitive across all surfaces. His brawl pushes opponents back forcing them to poke, and his ability to volley, dropshot, and disguise shuts down much of the counterpunch. But don't forget that poke, brawl, and dive skills fall into different categories that accomplish different goals. Nadal's vicious topspin creates massive "recoil" which reduces the speed and balance by which he can transition to net compared to Sampras coming in with flat or slice. Again, brawling and diving are distinct paths, so it's important to understand where the skills compliment versus clash. Just be clear about your primary and secondary at any given moment. Novak enjoys deflecting but against Roger he takes more chances to nullify the dive. Roger likes to probe a bit to find his finishing shot, but against Rafa he hits harder to not get pushed back by the topspin brawl. When the precise adjustments are canceling each

other out, you get tennis that comes down to execution and conditions, but these 3 players have proven to be strategically adept into all the other styles to achieve remarkable consistency year over year.

Below is a triangle diagram of where each player falls. There are moments players will resort to their weakest style to win, but that reinforces their current position on the chart.

Finally, we've laid the groundwork to understand where you are and where you'd like to go. The best feeling is to have a vision you're working toward as we often just stumble through learning various skills and hope it all works out. The dilemma is the finite amount of time in a day to practice so wisely allocating energy and resources to improve is never easy. I personally would recommend working toward the style you enjoy as technically, no style is better than another as it's about 1) how well you do it and 2) understanding the matchups. The video game analogy holds consistent where the best player can use a sniper, automatic rifle, or shotgun because each weapon has pros and cons. Elite level reflexes, aim, positioning etc are required for any gamer just like the skills and tactics are for tennis. From this point onwards, you should be able to devise a plan and order of operations to achieve the results you desire.

Navigating Stormy Seas of a Match: Poke, Brawl, and Dive #10

Tennis was previously the only sport where a player couldn't receive outside coaching, but that's not true anymore since the rule change. While a handful of pros have the budget to afford world class coaches during their matches, we are blessed with the opportunity to learn self-coaching. In reality though, players still need to strategically make adjustments point to point and half the coaches are probably guessing anyways. From the coach's box, the natural tendency is to gameplan from the lens of "what to do with the tools I have." So advice calling the specific play requiring a specific tool NFL style may be correct in theory, but lacks empathy for how the player is feeling in that moment. The theme of "what needs to be accomplished" remains the same, but the player should have autonomy on how to reach that objective most effectively within their comfort zone. Second, coaching advice must be extremely precise and accurate so the player can execute with confidence in the heat of the battle. There should be minimal to no experimenting or deep pondering given that a systematic decision making process was established prior. So how to give precise instruction where the player still has full discretion to calibrate based on their current physical and emotional state - that's what we'll discuss today.

To preface before we begin, assume fixing mechanics is not feasible. If you walk into battle with a blunt stick, you cannot ask the enemy to kindly wait while you assemble your bow and arrow. Strategy pertains to fighting with what you have and is the most productive advice assuming the player has their head on straight. This topic applies to post match as well. Many players travel from tournament to tournament building huge libraries of reference experiences that collect dust on the shelves. There is no utility unless it's filed neatly and carefully so when you encounter a new experience, those logs are readily accessible to swiftly adapt within the first two games.

Since players are not robots, the goal is to get your "teeth" into the match which is synonymous for using the first few games to set yourself up to play your best tennis as a whole. Therefore, you may not be able to play "your game" from the first toss. Let's discuss three early match scenarios.

Players often enter a match without a proper warm up. Within this category is feeling tight, nervous, or tentative which frequently includes adjusting to new set of conditions. If your rhythm is off, your brawl

game will suck because trying to take space up near the baseline without striking clean, penetrating, or accurate shots, will leave balls sitting for your opponent to destroy, resulting in you feeling overwhelmed and possibly putting your central nervous system into shock. Going dive is also a fool's errand as your body is not ready to use explosive bursts. Even if you're not a poker, the answer is to play it slow and poke, which means giving up space to find your balance to not feel rushed. Slicing engages the rhythm of your legs, protects the court, and uses the opponent's pace. Once you establish your footing, feel physically ready to fight, and settle into a comfortable rhythm, the brawl option is way more viable if you choose to switch later.

Assuming you're feeling good physically, brawling more early on if the opponent seems superior in every category may be a good idea, even if you're a non-brawler. The only way to overcome such a foe is by wearing them down to lower their quality of play late game. Some matches are won or lost if the first several games are so physically brutal because each player now must account for a limited gas tank moving forward. Lastly, successfully brawling early puts a damper on dive opponents from winning the first few games in 5 minutes, and while you may still be down, you'll buy some time to analyze and figure out what adjustments to make.

Diving may be a good idea if you sense the opponent is weak, which includes being far lower in skill, not warmed up, or still finding their rhythm (for which they should be poking). The general advice for recreational competitive players is to start slow by poking, which makes playing faster via dive more geared to advanced players. The other reason a non-dive player would dive early on is to test and find the range for the finishing balls so use later in the match. If you're up against a known poker where netplay is required, it's difficult to execute late in the set when the stakes are high and you haven't hit a volley in 20 minutes. Dialing in your shots, especially under new conditions, is the early investment that will yield high returns moving forward.

After a few games have gone by, we can assume both players have shaken off some jitters and calibrated their shots. While you may have vigilantly scouted your opponent, do not assume they will respond to your game under a given set of conditions in the exact same way. By default, still generally go into the match with your primary game but adjust in real time based on what's happening. The key question is always, "what is my opponent trying to accomplish?" Based on the answer, now you know what to do. The only two viable options are A) beat them at their style if that is your primary game or B) to directly counter their style with your secondary style. Lucky for you if your primary style hard counters their primary style, as your opponent will need a secondary style to either mirror or soft counter your primary style. If you are winning with either your primary style matching up into their primary or your secondary style countering, all you should be watching for is when the opponent changes their style to counter your counter. That is essentially the only way the better player loses. Switching quickly and more precisely allows you to snuff the flame before they can claw back, as most players are completely unaware of when or why the tides start to turn. Lastly, if your game is extremely limited to one style, you may decide to go down with the ship, and there's nothing wrong with that as long as you realize that's the situation.

Is this a perpetual game of rock, paper, scissors where you poke when your opponent brawls then they switch to dive and you back to brawl? There are definitely elements of this, where at most levels there are a few distinct switches before the match ends. At the professional level, the dynamic still exists but there's far more blending of styles to keep the opponent in check. The majority of players have limited understanding of these concepts and even so called savvy players will be slow to switch due to their

reliance on intuition compared to structured methodology. Eventually, you will settle on a primary with a mix of a secondary that either hard counters your opponent or neutralizes their hard counter. But this time it won't be lucky and you'll know exactly why. Opponents with different shapes, sizes, and shots will start to fall into the same familiar categories with a feeling like you've played against the same player many times over. You will still have to do some calculus to gameplan around their tools and tactics and adjust to various conditions with courts, balls, and weather while executing on your end is no cinch either. The goal is to achieve strategic consistency where it seems as if you've "seen everything" without actually having done so. Just like any other facet of tennis whether it's strokes or stamina, this is a developed skill that should improve linearly straight up and to the right if you know what you're doing.

Learning Strategy: Poke, Brawl, and Dive #11

Some players travel to a new tournament every weekend, and it's common to see a player doing the same exact thing one year later with marginal improvement. At the same time, it's impossible to learn tennis in a box. Experience is a means to an end, not the end in itself. Aside from mental toughness and competing skills which is a huge part of the game, one of the main reasons for matchplay is to learn strategy. But among the most common lessons after losing to the same type of player over and over again is, "I need to execute a little bit better" which is as Sisyphean as it gets. Gaining experience is a non-negotiable piece of the puzzle, but some players learn strategy up to 10 times faster than others, and many reach a cap quickly and stop. The goal of this entire series was to iron out the kinks that may have caused plateauing in this area, but let's discuss several reasons for leveling off and how to practice moving forward.

Strategy is invisible to the untrained eye. Similar to watching a first person shooter, it looks like chaos of bullets flying back and forth and tennis is no different. If one is focused only on the play by play and executing their shots, strategy will be a passing thought. That's not always a bad thing as hitting the highest quality of shots is important but strategy is completely unrelated to quality of shot. Strategy may have come easier for players with limited or rather blunt tools who had more practice winning with less. On the flipside, lacking tools may be a learning impediment long term as implementation of other strategies requires those tools. Players with either high quality or a wide variety of tools may have a harder time learning strategy if going to the familiar tools becomes a habit. And when subpar strategy yields desirable results, that can create confusion on which tool was actually better.

Part of what gives players conviction is clarity around their strengths and shortcomings. Pigeonholing a player with limitations simplifies the game and prevents confusion, which is often positive in the short run. If switching styles is not in the cards, then going down with the ship is the correct answer. The martial arts star, Bruce Lee was a big proponent of no style being the best so concluded, "Empty your mind. Be formless. Shapeless. Like water. You put water into a cup, it becomes the cup. You put water into a bottle, it becomes the bottle. You put it in a teapot, it becomes the teapot. Water can flow, or it can crash. Be water, my friend." This is a more advanced concept, so everything depends on the player's aspirations and what they are willing to do to achieve it. Every player should see themselves as having three distinct games of poke, brawl, and dive to know which to use and which to avoid based on your skills, but also some aren't necessary based on opponent or conditions. The extreme example is Pete Sampras who won 7 Wimbledon's but never reached a French Open final. He's exceptional and has done well across the board but part of being great is not playing a single tournament or opponent well, but learning to play the field. It's a blessing to do one style so well but a curse if that causes total neglect for the others.

Whether you're a natural at strategy or a hard case, immerse yourself into the theories of strategy where you actually believe them to be true. Then you can commit and stick with it through thick or thin regardless of how you feel from one day to the next. From the standpoint of training, the best way to learn anything is proper isolation and cranking out the reps. For the hard case, you may have the tools but not be sure how it helps. For the natural strategist, you may understand the dynamics but need to sharpen up your execution. Proficiency is insanely beneficial, mastery is optional. The following isolated games below force the player into a different playstyle.

For Poke

1) games your opponent can hit to the whole court while you can hit only to half. Practice positioning against offense and using variety for protection. 2) games with you must slice into opponents playing normally or only slicing on the backhand hurts your ability to hold space. You must give up space when appropriate. 3) games where you only get a 2nd serve to start allows the opponent to get in rhythm off the return and forces you to find the right position quickly.

For Dive

1) games where you get a first, second, and third serve but only have 3 shots to finish the point or your opponent only has a 2nd serve but you must win within 3 shots. This works on attacking before the opponent is set, mixing in both combinations and one shot kills. Games where you must serve and volley is a variation of this. 2) games playing against an opponent who can only slice. This encourages looking for the finish against a poker who sits back. 3) games that start as a half court, cross court only using exclusively forehand or backhand. The player hitting a clean winner up the line wins the point, but if not a clean winner, loses the point automatically. This is one of many examples of games requiring the element of surprise.

For Brawl

1) games isolating half court up the line or cross court where you must go through the opponent to win. 2) typical groundstroke games requiring 3 balls in to start establishing rhythm which encourages brawl. 3) games with topspin only require fighting for space and exchanging energy.

The developmental approach should combine learning to win with the tools you already have and having new tools in the works. To improve your versatility to win at all the isolation games, pick one or two skills from your non-primary style. The other under utilized method is reviewing footage of yourself and other players. This may be more beneficial than even playing as your mind is free to observe using these newfound frameworks. Practice as if you were in the coach's box and had to advise both the winner and loser. What you'll notice is how often the better player rests on their laurels and assumes winning is a foregone conclusion. Strategy is independent of quality so training your mind to observe the difference is the goal here. Practice judging the outcome less and just focus on what you need to do a little more.

The Changing Meta: Poke, Brawl, and Dive #12

Over the years and decades, playstyles have evolved from the changes in equipment, stroke mechanics, and court surfacing. Some playstyles struggled in certain eras and thrived in others. Even throughout a calendar year, the gritty clay compared to the slick grass while the cold, dry winters compared to the hot, humid summers all create advantages and disadvantages for every player. "Meta" in short, refers to the

most successful strategies in the game's current state. Now that you have a foundational understanding for strategy, we can address the underlying principles as to why turning the knobs of the environment influences the outcome. While you may disregard this topic as applying to exclusively professionals with distinct seasons for each surface, every competitive level experiences this as one hard court to another can nearly replicate the net effect of going from grass to clay. While it may be empowering to believe every match is won or lost on one's actions, your reality will be shaken upon understanding the meta and the forces beyond you. While you at times will realize you've the shorter end of the stick, which is not a pleasant feeling, the only question worth asking is, "what can I do to play my best tennis?"

In a nutshell, slow courts favor brawl and fast courts favor dive. When the courts are slow, rhythm is greatly enhanced. Both players are able to stay balanced, have additional time to set their feet, and take healthy cuts at the ball to exchange energy. Generally speaking, slower courts are also grittier which amplifies the effects of topspin. The friction upon bouncing creates more vertical velocity at the expense of horizontal velocity, making it difficult to deflect pace and requiring generating pace to put the ball away. Additionally, balls bouncing outside the strike zone makes the point very physical and less opportune to finish leading to longer rallies. When the courts are fast, finishing shots are greatly enhanced. The threshold to win the point by "breaking the cap" of what your opponent can handle becomes much lower, whether it's an ace or an angled off volley. Generally speaking, faster courts are typically more slick which nullifies the effect of spin. Topspin does not kick up but slides forward so using extra energy to generate spin yields a smaller reward when balls hover right in the opponent's powerzone. The pace can be easily deflected while the recoil from the racquet speed to generate topspin makes it harder to recover and balance. Generating pace is far less important when the court already provides so much pace to work with.

A brawler's dream would range from clay to a gritty hardcourt as there is ample energy exchange while a diver's would be grass to a slick hardcourt featuring the skills to finish. So where does poke come into play? Depending on the type of poker, there are advantages and disadvantages. Fast courts benefit the shorter, more mobile pokers who can easily get in position and deflect balls that are hard and low. Slow courts benefit the taller, more powerful pokers because quick first steps are not as necessary and generating pace from their swing leverage allows them to punish mistakes from more situations. Generally speaking, strikezone is super important so it's tough for shorter players on slow courts to counterpunch above the shoulders and taller players on fast courts to handle heavy pace down by their kneecaps.

Reflect back on the triangular relationship where brawl beats dive, dive beats poke, and poke beats brawl. Even though brawl beats dive, a very fast court weakens brawl and strengthens dive to where dive wins on average. Even though dive beats poke, a very slow court can weaken dive to the extent where it's a more even matchup. And even though poke beats brawl, on a very slow court can strengthen brawl to the degree it nullifies the advantage. The most typical example would be the best dive players like Federer or Sampras struggling at the French Open compared to Wimbledon.

Now we reach the question of what to do. Taking a video game analogy, sometimes the developers choose to modify the game, which happens for a number of reasons ranging from player feedback, to viewership, to ignorance. Most changes may seem as innocuous such as lowering the health points of the sniper by 10% or giving the machine gun characters 5% more damage. Some players have the skills to adapt but it's not uncommon for professional players to lose their jobs on their respective teams. Their

team cannot wait for their impacted comrade to develop new skills with a new weapon or character because they need to win right now. In many cases, there's nothing you can do in the short term except fight with the tools you have and go back to the drawing board in practice.

The best way to adapt quickly involves changing your racquet and or strings as new equipment can take a player with the same skills and completely transform their playstyle. Please do not attempt this until we cover the topic because without a systematic framework to tweak each dial for poke, brawl, and dive, 90% of experimentation will be both futile and frustrating. If dramatic changes aren't feasible because you play in radically different environments that require a dive or brawl centric game, then you may consider tweaking the dials to hurt your strength and assist your weakness for a more balanced approach. At some point, a versatile enough skillset and learning strategy is the only long term solution, but if your equipment is overly geared to dive like Pete Sampras' heavy 85 square inch head Pro Staff, even the skills face limitations on the red clay of Roland Garros.

To close, expanding your awareness helps you make choices of which many aren't better or worse but just have tradeoffs and to accept those tradeoffs and realize the universe works a certain way. A big part of accepting that reality is doing your best to gameplan around it. Everything is always changing because nothing lasts forever right? It's been quite a journey to understand the complicated reality we live in. Most importantly you continue to use this as a starting point and continue to build that framework.