Are you making these 5 costly mistakes on your serve?

The serve is the most important part of your tennis game, and equally the most difficult stroke to master. For when serving well, everything falls into place, but when serving poorly and without confidence, your entire game often goes to pieces. Ask your self these questions:

- Do you practice with focus?
- Has it been some time since you have improved?
- Would you like more zip with far less effort?
- Do you suffer from tennis elbow or a sore shoulder?

If any of these sound familiar, and you want to work on them ...then...

first things first, let’s start with the basics. Are you on balance and swinging rhythmically? These are the two most important and misunderstood elements of the serve.

So you want to get better? Then read on to discover how to improve your serve by addressing these five common mistakes.

1. Losing balance with the toss - shifting your weight forward too soon
2. Toss and swing out of sync – disrupting rhythm
3. An overly tight grip – causing tension from the arm up to the shoulder
4. Serving without any spin
5. Hitting the ball without any snap at the top of the swing
I recommend reading through this a couple of times and making notes in the margin along the way so you can address your balance, effort, rhythm, spin and snap. You may think this report is short but, in all my years of tennis, I can assure you if you master these elements you will have an enviable serve.

1. Balance
Far too many players shift their weight forward during the toss, rather than during the hit. Shifting forward too early (unless you use an EXTREMELY low toss and quick hit like Roscoe Tanner) robs the swing of power and rhythm.

In the photo below the toss has been released at eye level, note how both legs are equally weighted. Years ago Andy Roddick’s coach (at that point it was Tarik Benhabiles) showed me how Andy used a “dual leg” drive as he powered up and into the hit. But Tarik felt that first and foremost Andy had to be totally centered with his toss in order to use both legs powerfully during the hit.

Pay close attention to your movements and balance while tossing. Ideally you will feel centered while tossing, and still be centered as you bend your knees.

This works, try it!


**Balance check list –**
- In practice call out the word “peak” at the peak of the toss
- Don’t hit these serves, simply call out the word “peak”
- After four or five attempts, monitor your balance as the ball peaks
- If you are off balance, make corrections
- If you are on center then move to the next drill

2. **Rhythm**
The two parts of the serve are the toss and the swing, but often the height of the toss disrupts the rhythm. When trying to “serve tall,” that phrase influences the toss rather than the hit. For when the toss is too high (unfortunately way too common) the swing comes to a dead stop while waiting for the ball.

Try the following drill - Position at the baseline or mid court. Mimic an entire service motion from start to finish without the ball. Somewhat like a dress rehearsal, this exercise allows you to groove the serve, feel the legs, hips, torso, shoulders and arms, all without ever hitting the ball. Many times this rehearsal magnifies problems in balance or tempo.

Once you have the knack, begin a quiet counting of the beat. Find a musical tempo, where you can count one-two-three. More or less ONE - turn away from the net, TWO - toss, TWO and ONE HALF-knee bend and racquet drop, and THREE - turn and extend up and into the hit.

With practice, the tempo and three count beat will become habitual.
3. Effort

Much like the golfer who hits the ball farther when not trying, most servers tense their grip and arm in order to hit the ball hard, but often produce just the opposite result. The key to an effortless service begins with a relaxed grip. The photo captures Pete during the service motion, as he prepares to launch up and into the hit – please take a very close look at this truly unusual picture.

There is a joke (if you believe in evolution) that monkeys used the last three fingers of their hand to swing from the vines, and their thumb and forefinger to eat their bananas. But truly the last three fingers are the “gripping fingers” and when tightly wound around the handle of the racquet these gripping fingers can and will make the grip overly tense.

The three finger service grip means that the thumb, forefinger and second finger are on the handle of the racquet, and the ring finger and pinkie are either open or off the racquet. Interestingly, Pancho Gonzalez was known to remove pinkie and or pinkie and ring finger off the racquet when needing a “big one” in a tight situation.

Effort checklist

- Experiment with varying degrees of tension in your fingers
- Monitor differences in feel and rhythm
- Note with an overly high toss and a loose grip it is difficult to restart the swing
- Experiment with a four finger grip, a three finger grip –
- Can you hit one with just thumb and forefinger? If so, then you are on track.
4. Spin

Sidespin or topspin makes the ball curve down (and hopefully into the service box) as the ball crosses the net. Yes it may fool the opponent, or swing them wide and out of the court. But first, foremost and of most importance, spin makes the ball curve down. And when spinning the ball one can swing faster and with more confidence, even though many rarely practice or master this skill. The eight sided tennis grip (really it is an octagon) allows you to feel differences in racquet face with changes in grip. To develop a spin serve, moving toward (not necessarily all the way mind you but at least toward) a continental or volley grip places the racquet on edge as it approaches the ball.

**Spin checklist**

- Lead the racquet up to the ball with the edge of your hand (thumb pointing back)
- Feel a pulling rather than pushing motion in your hand just before the hit
- Strike the ball with a glancing blow, no matter where the ball initially goes
- As the ball continues to curve to the left, adjust your swing path to the right
- Voila!
5. Snap

Whether using a wet towel in a locker room, or even some type of whip, the secret is to pull forcefully and then stop the hand to snap the towel or whip, or in this instance the racquet. Good servers have a loose whip like look and feel, where at the top of the swing the hand actually slows down while the racquet speeds up, said another way an inverted “V” at the top of the swing.

I have a bull whip, and it did take quite some time to learn to use safely. But with practice it has helped me feel the rhythm of the serve, in that, I must pull the whip over my shoulder in a slow and continuous motion, then reverse the direction, gradually increasing hand speed, until finally as the whip (imagine racquet) moves in front I forcefully pull my hand backwards which cracks the whip. Though I am unable to explain in simple English, the tip of the whip actually breaks the sound barrier.

Well, the serve can in fact be a similar version of the whip, but in this case we have a racquet rather than a bull whip or wet towel. But just like the bull whip, and Pete is a wonderful example, the motion must be slow, flowing, gradually increasing tempo, culminating in a snap at the top of the swing.

Snap checklist

- Monitor your hand speed up to the ball, and on the follow through
- Feel acceleration of your hand up to the ball
- Feel racquet acceleration during the hit
- Feel a purposeful slowing of the hand on the follow through
- Note an inverted “V” at the top of the swing
6. Systematic Practice

Yes I said there were five keys, but truly none of this will be addressed in the “quick fix tip of the day” method. Improving the serve takes repeated practice. Pancho Gonzalez recommended 50 serves each and every day. But then, more specifically Pancho advised that on the first five serves to concentrate on the balance and the feeling in the feet and legs. Then the next five serves to concentrate and feel the knees and hips and how they move. Gradually work your way up the body through the torso to the shoulder, to the upper arm, to the lower arm, to the hand and finally the fingers. Everything must work in concert. No one element should predominate or overwhelm. And when in balanced, effortless, rhythmic concert with a whip like hit at the top of the swing – ladies and gentlemen you will have arrived !!!!!

I hope you enjoyed reading this and find these tips useful. I promise if you practice these over and over again your tennis serve will undoubtedly improve.

Best,

Jim McLennan

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