

The Method of Timing Correction in Tennis

by Maxim Filippov

One of the most challenging game aspects to control in tennis is timing. Timing in tennis is the order of actions performed by a player before their racket hits the ball. Timing depends on technical, physical and mental skills of the player. The timing would depend on a player's groundstrokes techniques, such as the size of the backswing. Physically, it depends on a player's footwork and agility. The mental aspect depends on the reaction to the ball, projecting its trajectory, anticipation of the bounce and coordination of your own actions according to the ball flow. It is a combination of intellectual impulses and the physical movements prior to every shot that is being hit.

Timing will vary from day to day and match to match due to following factors:

- The weather conditions: such as wind and humidity as it affects the ball flow.
- The surface: Depending on the surface (hard court, grass, clay, green clay, artificial grass) players will have to make adjustments.
- The game of the opponent: Every player will have different type of strokes that will affect the other player's rhythm by pace, spin, trajectory and positioning.
- The current player's technical and physical shape and the ability to adjust the backswing of the groundstrokes.
- Current emotional condition of a player: The players' anxiety and nervousness during the match may hugely affect his/her ability to recognize, anticipate and react to the ball.

The issues that may be caused by insufficient timing:

- raised number of unforced errors
- inability to perform desirable tactics
- becoming too defensive and less offensive
- reduced confidence level
- hesitation and inability to make decisions

That is why it is necessary for players to maintain and improve their timing in their matches. The appropriate timing will allow players to strike the ball in the most efficient zone and significantly reduce the number of unforced errors. Players have to learn how to mentally manage the issues with their timing during matches as it usually doesn't affect just a certain stroke but the whole performance overall.

Even though every player's technic is individual and unique, the timing in tennis usually falls to the same standarts:

1. The opponent takes the backswing – the player must start the split step
2. The opponent hits the ball – the player finishes the split step
3. The ball leaves opponents racket – the player recognizes the direction of the ball and starts their movement to the ball
4. The ball crosses the net – the player starts the backswing while still moving to the ball towards the projectable bounce
5. The ball makes the bounce – the players backswing ready, their feet are set up in aproprate stance
6. The ball is bouncing towards the player – the players racket is moving toward projectable contact point
7. The point of contact happens in the right zone: slightly in front and on the side of players body
8. The player finishes the swing and recovers towards the middle of the court

As we see timing in tennis is a very intensive process in a very short time period (aproximately 2 - 4 seconds) that is performed thousands times in a game. It requires ultimate focus, movement and technics. On top of that during that little time the player must make their decision on shot selection, choose the direction of the ball, its placement and pace.

The following drill is designed to help players improve their timing. It is mostly beneficial when used as a pre-match warm up, during the surface change between the tournaments, as well as a part of regular practice routine.

The "Bounce and shadow" is a two part drill which can be used separately or all together:

1. "The bounce": The coach feeds the ball to a player and while the ball is in the air, the coach yells any number from 1-3, which will stand for the number of bounces that a player must allow for the ball to make before he/she makes the shot. The goals of the drill are
 - to increase players focus
 - to develop footwork
 - to improve players bounce anticipation
 - to challenge a player by giving them more or less time to prepare for the ball (the least bounces the least time)

2. "The shadow": the coach feeds the ball to a player and a player must perform a shadow swing before he/she actually hits the ball. The goals of the drill are
 - to work on lower and upper body coordination
 - to speed up the upper body actions such as backswing
 - to challenge players by reducing the time for preparation
 - to develop players' speed

Finish both drills with regular hitting to see if the timing has improved. As we can see "The bounce" drill will benefit players who's timing is rushed and "The shadow" drill will benefit players who's timing is slow. In both drills our goal is to make players' timing more sufficient to help them perform their best game on a given day. As timing is always subject to change every player may have to be using one drill or another or both drills together depending on current conditions. When used as a pre match warm up this drill is a great way to raise players' mental concentration and mental focus.

This method of correcting one the most important skills in tennis has proven its worth at national and international professional levels and the WTA and ITF tournaments, including the Grand Slams. Since 2011, the players that I have coached:

- improved their career best rankings (Ksenia Lykina reached her career best WTA doubles ranking at 108 and Emily Webley-Smith has reached the WTA ranking of 113 in the world).
- participated at Grand Slams (Ksenia Lykina has participated at the Us Open 2016 and 2017, Australian Open 2017 and Roland Garros in 2017 in singles. Emily Webley-Smith has participated at Roland Garros 2020 and Wimbledon in 2021 in doubles).
- won multiple ITF events (Emily Webley Smith has won 18 ITF doubles titles including the highest win of ITF \$100,000 in Midland, USA since 2013. Ksenia Lykina has won 4 singles ITF titles including the ITF \$50,000 in Fukuoka, Japan as well as 10 ITF doubles titles including the ITF \$60,000 + H in Toyota, Japan since 2011).
- became national champions and members of the national team (Ksenia Lykina has won the National Russian Championship in doubles in 2015 and was a member of the national team of Russia)