

# Ask An Expert!

By Chris Oddo



What can a 4.0 player learn from a world-class tennis coach? Brad Gilbert helps this rec player's backhand with solid advice—both physical and mental.

Recently I had the opportunity to spend an hour on a tennis court with tennis legend Brad Gilbert. Brad is a former top-five ATP player, but he may be better known for highly successful coaching stints with the likes of Andre Agassi, Andy Roddick and Andy Murray.

While it was a no-brainer to seek his consultation, part of me couldn't help feeling skeptical about my brief time with this tennis guru. Of course I would get some good writing material, but was I really going to improve my game? Brad is well versed in transforming elite players into Grand-Slam champions, but I'm a 4.0 player—what could he possibly do to alleviate some of the dumbfounding inconsistencies that currently plague my one-handed backhand?

Had he ever seen something so erratic? Could a coach of his stature even recognize something that surely would pale in comparison to those of a professional?

That said, I wasn't about to pass up the chance to hit with Brad. And besides, I knew that Coach Gilbert had been more than just a mere technical advisor to Agassi—in-depth sections of Agassi's recently published book praise the San Francisco Bay Area native for his ability to entice Agassi into seeing more of the big picture in his game. During his years with

Gilbert, Agassi underwent a philosophical transformation. He learned that matching his own strengths against his opponents' weaknesses was the ticket, and in the process he conjured a more efficient yet still potent game. It was the game that ultimately brought him to six Grand Slam titles under Gilbert's tutelage.

So here's the deal: Even if Brad didn't help my backhand look like Federer's, I figured he'd definitely give me some insight as to how I could better employ the shot within the framework of my own personal game.

When all was said and done, I was pleasantly surprised to find that Gilbert helped both my stroke and my understanding of how the stroke fit inside of the complicated box of strokes that is my game.

## THE BACKHAND STROKE

While we didn't get into an in-depth discussion of the intricacies of the modern one-handed backhand, we did examine a few of the finer points of the swing—pretty much everything from grip to prep to footwork to finish. Here are a few of the areas that Gilbert found I could improve. Perhaps they apply to you as well:

**Spacing:** In order to use more of my potential power and reach, Gilbert wanted me to avoid keeping the racquet handle against my body during preparation. It made perfect sense. Instead of having the handle tucked into your stomach, then moving it away from the body as you proceed into the swing, start with it out there to give yourself some space (wrist and racquet about 6 inches from your body). This subtle change in set-up allowed me to simplify the swing, which then enabled me to make earlier contact with the ball, even when it is hit hard.

**Balance:** Many club players tend to cough up too many short balls from the backhand side, and I am no exception. It's a real issue when I play against more advanced players, because they immediately force me into defensive mode. Gilbert noticed this after feeding me a few balls and he instructed me to concentrate on transferring my weight from my back foot and through the ball. Don't let the ball play you—go out and play the ball. Those are definitely words to live by.

**Increase the RPMs:** Even at the 4.0 level, racquet-head acceleration is what is going to get the ball over the net and hopefully near the opponent's baseline. Time and time again, Gilbert encouraged me to put a good, hearty swing on the ball. He was right. It's the only way to go. Let go of the rope swing and get into the water! Deceleration of the racquet can be your worst enemy, and it will only result in short balls that allow your opponent chances to come in and attack.

**Recovery:** When hitting the backhand from deep in the corner, simplify the recovery process by bringing the plant leg back (just a one-step procedure), then begin the lateral shuffle back to the desired spot near the center of the court. Save energy, time and shoes!

**Breathing:** Exhale through contact. Stay relaxed and athletic, loose and free.

## THE PSYCHOLOGY

As many of us know, tennis is as much about mental strength and strategic insight as it is about hitting with perfect technique. Pretty much every word that Gilbert said to me during our on-court lesson was laced with purpose. I started to envision a more unique tactical approach that was tailored to my specific shots.

Tennis is about knowing yourself and what you are capable of. When I told him I had anticipated "choking" during the lesson, he quickly began a brief diatribe on why you can never, ever consider the possibility of choking. I thought it was funny, but he was dead serious. Be positive, get positive results.

With specific regard to the one-handed backhand, I was very happy to get a lot of sound advice regarding the incorporation of the shot into the bread and butter of tennis: playing points.

Here are some words of wisdom for those of you who may struggle

from the backhand side.

**Play it safe:** If the stroke is giving you problems, then be content to hit the crosscourt backhand most of the time. Sure, your opponent will know that that is your tendency, and sure the pros on television make the down-the-line backhand look so easy. But the reality is that the crosscourt is a safer shot, and using the safer shot will enable you to relax more, and cut down on the errors and short balls that keep losing you points.

**The left jab analogy:** In his career as a tennis commentator, Gilbert has become a master of the sports analogy. Remembering to use the backhand as a boxer would use a left jab means to remember that the shot is not your knockout punch. Don't go for too much with this shot. Keep it in the court and live to hit another stroke. Your time will come.

**Be Patient:** Don't panic if you don't see an opening to attack. Just make a solid shot and wait until you really find a hittable ball before you make your move. If you feel fitness is an advantage for you, try letting the rallies stretch out and see how your opponent reacts. Think and hit simultaneously.

**Love the sport:** When the lesson was over, and I was reflecting on the many things that I'd picked up in that short on-court session, I realized that the most important thing that I learned was very simple, almost elemental: Don't be too hard on yourself! Gilbert was adamant, throughout the whole lesson, about keeping things positive and relaxing.

Why worry if it only makes you tense? Anger and other stressed-out emotions cause tension, and tension causes all kind of problems from rushed swings to bad timing to poor decision-making. Don't be that guy that snowballs out of control because things are going poorly on a particular day, match, month, whatever. Just find the best "you" and let that person hit the shot. 🎾

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