

Is Holding Serve a



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On the practice courts of the world, future WTA Tour players are feverishly practicing the shots they hope will someday make them champions. While the trappings of women's tennis are virtually the same—a net, two racquets, and some fuzzy yellow balls—even the most casual of observers can tell that this isn't your mommy and daddy's tennis anymore.

Survival of the fittest has led us to the thunder-and-lightning brand of tennis that is now commonplace on tour. Women don't just stroke or massage the ball anymore—they utterly demolish it. They take wild swings at shoulder-high balls where yesterday's players would have tapped a volley, and they crush balls on the rise that yesterday's players would have guided gently into a corner.

From the baseline—a historically neutral or defensive position—players now viciously attack and hit outright winners.

But while nearly all players are riding right along the power curve of the new and improved baseline game, there appears to be plenty of room for the next great female server to emerge. As the baseline game has improved by leaps and bounds over the years, the serve—its execu-

tion at least—has been the thorn in many a top player's side.

Recently the media started clamoring when the serving troubles of Ana Ivanovic, Maria Sharapova, Elena Dementieva, and several others started to look way out of proportion with the rest of their games. Fear and loathing seemed to be a contributing factor, as did the souped-up return games that many of the game's elite players had cultivated.

"Most of the players feel more comfortable breaking than actually holding their own serves," says Lori McNeil, a former Wimbledon and US Open semifinalist who is now involved with the USTA's Elite Player Development program as a national coach. "In general, there's not a lot of focus on it. Players have good serves, but I can't think of any right now that are great servers, besides Serena."

Undeveloped Weapons

Whatever the reasons, beyond Serena Williams—and to a lesser extent her big sister Venus—players have failed to use their serves as the potential weapons that they should be.

As good as they already are, players like Victoria Azarenka, Elena De-

Lost Art for Women Pros?

By Chris Oddo

mentieva, and Dinara Safina would be even better if they could somehow find ways to hold serve more often. Azarenka, for example, won 49.5 percent of her return games in 2009 (an amazing number), but was not in the Top 10 when it came to service games won. Imagine the damage she would have done last season if she had been. Two top Russians, Dementieva and Safina, returned like maniacs in 2009 (they were third and fourth best on the tour in return games won), but a maddening lack of serving efficiency kept both from claiming the Grand Slam title that they covet.

There is clearly a disconnect on the women's side when it comes to the serve, but it's hard to discern just where exactly the problem lies. The same players who literally ooze confidence from the baseline while hitting ground strokes or returning serve appear to be plagued by doubt

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when they step up to the line to serve. Sometimes the doubt leads to a rushed delivery or a lack of tactical purpose—the server appears to just want to get it over with. Other times it leads to over-hitting, probably for the same reasons.

With so many world-class players sporting that deer-in-the-headlights look when it is time to serve for the set or a match, it's hard not to wonder if psychology isn't the biggest factor in the equation. Which is more important, the psychology or the technique?

"It's a mix. You have to have both," says McNeil. In other words you have to be part Zen Buddha, blocking all doubt and fear from your mind (while 15,000 pairs of eyes, not to mention television cameras, and a foaming-at-the-mouth returner are staring at you), and part model technician, who has burned the perfect service motion (toss, take-back, knee-bend, grip, upward thrust, contact point, etc...) onto their own personal human hard drive. It's no small feat, which is why any player who isn't dedicating a significant amount of practice time to the art of serving is doing her game a disservice.

Little Emphasis on the Serve

McNeil says there is plenty of room for improvement. "I think that sometimes the emphasis is not put on the serve," she laments. "In the women's game, I don't see a lot of players go out and just serve at targets—definitely more emphasis is put on the other parts of the game.

"The serve is one of those tricky things, I guess it would be like a pitcher, where you serve a few double faults and it gets in your head—then you start to over-think it," says McNeil. "I definitely went through a period where I struggled with my serve, Gabriela Sabatini went through troubles with her serve, Martina Navratilova at different times. At times

you think about it so much it becomes more mental."

I asked Nick Bollettieri some of the same questions, and surprisingly, he didn't seem to think that there was any reason to be alarmed about the quality of serving on the women's tour. "I do not feel that the serve is being neglected by the women; in fact it looks like all parts of the game are being upgraded," he says.

When asked if he thought it would be smart for a player with serving struggles to take three months off to focus primarily on the serve, he didn't think it would be a good idea. Should a sports psychologist attend to the player? "Spending time with a sports psychologist in my opinion is not the way to go unless you have fallen into a trap of 'fear' when serving, especially a second serve," Bollettieri says. "To improve a second serve will demand you to serve big-time and accept the faults until they start going in. Remember, pushing a second serve will probably cost you the point, so you might as well go for it and in time your second serve will be in your favor."

Sounds good in theory, but many of the WTA's top players are proving that it is easier said than done.

Only four players managed to win more than 75 percent of their service games in 2009. (Just to compare, on the ATP's stat page all of the top 25 men's players win at least 75 percent). If more of the WTA's elite players can reach that 75 percent mark, the clamor of the critics might recede, and the level of consistency at the top of the game will surely improve. ☞

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