

Battling the 3-Headed Monster

How to survive the hot summer heat on the court

It comes as no surprise to anyone who lives in Florida that the men's and women's professional tours do not schedule tournaments here during the summer months – too hot, too humid, too sunny! Only the January conditions in Melbourne, Australia (Australian Open) – summer down under – occasionally replicate, much to the chagrin of the players, the same suffocating conditions that can adversely affect performance in a big way.

Yet here in Florida, the beat goes on after the snowbirds have departed for cooler climes up north. A still large contingent of year-round, frequent players brave the oppressive heat in league tennis, tournaments and friendly intra-club play.

Naturally, adjustments must be made from the idyllic winter conditions – hydration, attire, nutrition and even accessories – in order to maintain one's level of play without, hopefully, experiencing any negative physical consequences.

Since approximately 65 percent of your body weight is fluid – about 15 percent less in women because of their higher fat tissue content – let's start there. Core body temperature can rise a significant one degree and heart rates can jump 10-20 beats per minute at the same work rate when the body isn't fully hydrated.

In 90-plus-degree heat with extremely high humidity under a blazing sun, a head start in hydration is absolutely necessary before play. Drinking up to two 8-ounce glasses of cold water at least two hours before play is necessary to pre-hydrate. Waiting until you're on court, warmed-up and into the match before beginning to drink will predispose you to the onset of dehydration coupled with the

inability to catch-up no matter how much you ingest. Worse yet, if you don't bother drinking until you actually become thirsty, you're already toast – an irreversible loss of conditioning has already begun, ultimately leading to a possible cessation of sweating, the body's cooling, heat-loss mechanism, and possible cramping or even heat stroke.

Even with proper pre-match or practice preparation, you'll still need to take in fluids during every single changeover, thirsty or not. This is where an electrolyte-enhanced carbohydrate beverage featuring sodium and potassium becomes prudent, since water alone cannot replenish lost nutrients. However, sports drinks that contain too high a percentage of carbohydrates can slow the rate of fluid absorption, so stay with recognized brands like Gatorade.

The year-round Florida player, especially more fit individuals, can and do develop a respectable tolerance to heat and humidity, but the penetrating sun bearing down on them represents another challenge. A lack of protection from the sun will bring even a well-conditioned player to their knees, reasonably hydrated or not. White hats – white to reduce radiative heat gain – are a must. Whether a baseball cap or some variation on the theme, the protection offered pays big dividends versus a dark colored hat, or, especially, no hat at all. Visors do not get the job done! Soaking these hats in cold water on every changeover, and even wearing an equally soaked bandana around one's neck, will provide a very effective moisture barrier, creating a considerable cooling effect in particularly tough conditions.



Regarding apparel, the light weight, breathable fabrics of today's tennis clothing manufacturers are designed to allow sweat to evaporate easily. Shirts and tops – white or a light color – should be loosely fitted and untucked to maximize ventilation. The old school expectation of tucking one's shirt or top in as proper is antiquated at best. I believe that Todd Martin was the last man on tour to tuck his shirt in.

Sunscreen's role in reducing skin cancer is obvious to all when applied liberally and reapplied as necessary when perspiring heavily, especially for those with fair skin and light colored eyes. Its sunburn prevention properties also regulate skin temperature, which can contribute to heat-related problems. I forgot to apply my 75 SPF sunscreen to my face one morning and then proceeded to complete five hours of lessons facing the sun without a hat. It took me one week to completely recover. Don't tell my dermatologist!

Of course, not being able to grip your racket properly because of the perspiration running down your arms and into your hands makes for an exercise in complete frustration. Wrist bands, along with daily overgrip replacement, are a necessity in hot weather. The bands also come in handy to wipe the sweat off your brow if a ball kid isn't available to dutifully deliver your towel to you after every

point on your tour. Having a plentiful supply in your racket bag will allow for frequent replacing as they become soaked in sweat.

Eating right will also help in preventing nutrition-related problems in the heat. Here's some trade-offs you can consider. Lose the sodas, fake fruit juice, french fries, white bread, processed foods, frosted flakes, donuts, fried chicken, hamburgers, canned fruit and vegetables and ice cream, just to name a few. Instead choose water, 100 percent orange juice, baked potatoes, whole wheat bread, shredded wheat and bran, bagels, skinless chicken breast, lean steak, fresh fruit and vegetables and fat-free yogurt. Naturally, don't wolf down even a healthy meal immediately before play. Give yourself a couple of hours to allow for digestion.

Finally, as an active regular player battling the ever present "3-headed monster," keep an eye on the color of your urine as an indicator of possible dehydration. Proper and consistent hydration leads to nearly colorless urine. The onset of darker colors is a warning that you are not drinking enough fluid and are at greater risk for heat illness.

Stay cool to be calm and collected to perform your best and be healthy as well. 