

No Feet No Game No Future

No feet, no game, no future. When I first heard Lawn Tennis Association British pro Steve Heron say exactly that to an obviously frustrated student who was unable to fathom why he was struggling despite Heron's repeated and crystal clear analysis, it immediately struck a chord for me.

I'd never heard that line before, and it was right on the money. The player in question appeared reasonably fit and owned a nice looking forehand and a reliable backhand, but still didn't get it. He was indeed misfiring and underachieving with an awkward, disconnected-to-the-ball movement that was not at all consistent with his racket skills.

So exactly what is good footwork? How do you define it? First, while being totally committed is a necessary component, it is much more than just that. If you don't welcome the idea of chasing a ball around 1,404 square feet of court, then I'd suggest concentrating on your golf game. Moving your feet non-stop in a completely unrelated time signature from the action at hand is certainly *not* going to cut it. The resulting out-of-sync state, one that's wholly at odds with the continually changing ball in flight dynamic, will make playing your A-game an impossibility.

Naturally, it's a bonus if you're blessed with a quick first step and speed to the ball. But in club-land, where player's athletic abilities are often burdened with the realities of chronology — as compared to the young athletes we see on television — it is essential to understand the crucial relationship between eye-hand and eye-foot coordination. The great Bill Tilden — holder of the most

consecutive U.S. Open wins — understood. “Speed and power are essential in the equipment of the great players, but they alone cannot suffice,” he said.

What it is about is simply being at the perceived right place at the right time, to make your shot effortlessly with the kinetic chain firing on all eight cylinders. What this means is arriving at the optimal ball-striking moment and place, right on stride, open or closed stance. And then recovering to an ideal court-defending position at precisely the moment your opponent is striking *their* next shot. It's an ever expanding and contracting figure eight flow chart if you will.

Get On the Ball

Watching Roger Federer seemingly glide about the court with such relative ease is something to behold, win or lose. It's almost as if his shoes aren't even touching the court, reminiscent of Steffi Graf in her prime — that unearthly ability to move on top of the court, mostly up *on the balls of the feet* as opposed to pressing heavily into the court's surface with excessive, counter productive G-forces. Amazingly, Federer's shoes don't even squeak against the asphalt when changing directions or stutter-stepping those final little adjustment moves for a perfectly timed shot. He is the Baryshnikov of tennis. Everyone else, the world's best mind you, wearing the same Nikes, are often laying very audible rubber all over the court.

Right now you're most likely beginning to think that moving like Federer and Graf isn't an option for you. Well, certainly not to



the extent that he does and she did, but, yes, it is doable to some degree. And it is certainly an improvement, and far better than the alternative of moving in a comparatively ungainly manner with an inefficient, injury prone gait.

Think back to your youth, those days when you had to get across a scorching-hot street to reach the beach or lake in the dead of summer. Without any contemplation, you instinctively became as light and quick on your feet as you possibly could, springing from one step to another, on the balls of your feet, until you safely reached the other side.

Way back in 1984, biomedical designer Van Phillips created a state-of-the-art prosthetic for amputee runners. In order to replicate the action of the human leg at its optimal performance, Phillips cleverly omitted any semblance of a heel since the heel exists – as both evolutionary history and modern biomechanical research has unanimously concluded – only for standing, not for running.

The Split-Step

It all begins with a consistently produced “split-step” – the ultimate trigger to better movement – occurring right at the opponent’s point of contact. It’s a simple, easy to execute, hop-like step wherein both feet landing precisely as the ball is struck from across the net. You’ve seen it on television thousands of times, yet, like so many club players, fail to employ during your own game.

Now you’re already naturally up on the balls of your feet, possessing a far quicker and lighter first step, and a physically

less stressful one compared to the undermining delay experienced without a split-step – flat footed, disengaged and not a muscle stirring.

However, in the end, none of this will be possible if you just stand around doing nothing in between points, which is where more match time is spent than actually playing points! Bodies at rest stay at rest. You must continually pace back in forth – be the tiger in the cage – in your own mini-quadrant until the next point is about to begin. Then, slightly before the serve, ramp up your energy level with some quick, bouncy foot-to-foot shuffling for a couple of seconds before settling into your ready position. Once there, continue swaying your torso, racket included, side-to-side along with a subtle shifting from foot-to-foot, leading up to that all-important split-step.

Bodies in motion, stay in motion. 