

Serving the **BOMB**

Wouldn't it be nice to walk up to the line, take that deep breath and reach into your serving back pocket to deliver a scorching heater, particularly when the score line is favorable to just go all out and go for it? No matter your physical stature — and yes, it really is all relative — you *can* bring it, especially if you're wielding one of today's turbo-powered rackets.

That stated, serving the bomb only plays a small role in club tennis, which mostly consists of doubles play in which first serve success is the real deal. Making 60 percent-plus of well-placed first serves not only puts pressure on the receiver but also produces far more poaching opportunities for one's partner at the net.

Nonetheless, here are some key components that will allow you to maximize your physical potential when the time is right to strike, resulting in mph's you previously thought were beyond your reach.

Numero uno: you've got to be loose. Utilizing a serving motion that's robotic and looks suspiciously like an isometric exercise will negate any racket's inherent power. It also wreaks havoc on your body parts, especially the shoulder. So where does this looseness or, more specifically, low muscle tension begin? It starts with gripping the racket loosely. Relax! Strangling the handle, typically a product of the "try harder to do better" mind set, will severely limit any possibility of creating exceptional racket speed through the ball, and that's the bottom line.

Uninhibited racket speed converts to ball speed. You already know the physics: $F = MA$, or force equals mass times acceleration. The "mass" reference is about *allowing* the racket to have as much "swing weight" as possible, as opposed to its actual scale weight. I like the way former top 10 player, author and colorful television commentator Brad Gilbert puts it. "Get some stick on it!"

If you're one of those individuals who seldom replace their grip, you'll surely be one of the stranglers. Keeping your grip fresh and free of dirt, grease and grime — white grips are particularly desirable in that they clearly show the slime build-up — will facilitate the relaxation that's essential. The resulting high-friction coefficient will negate the urge to hold on too tight to prevent a slippery racket from being launched into the parking lot.

You also have to develop and embellish *your* ritual, a settle-to-the-task technique utilized in all sports. Think of the more obvious ones seen in golfers, baseball batters or free throw shooters in basketball where the action phase begins from a static start. Prior to serving, it's aimed at fostering a similar climate of total relaxation and rhythm creation



by targeting one's entire body, including *both* the ball tossing arm and racket arm. This is particularly important when you're going to load up to really lay one in there and negative tension can easily creep in.

The toss itself plays an integral role in that your goal is for the racket to reach maximum speed at the moment of impact. This is achieved by keeping your toss well in front of your body, approximately an arm's length. Tosses drifting into the body reduce racket speed; tosses too far in front send balls into the net.

And let's not forget that the height of the toss is also very much a part of the bomb alchemy. Low tosses offer no advantage unless your rotator cuff is hanging by a thread. Creating enough time for a full, upward extension of one's hitting arm requires a toss that is approximately 6 inches higher than one's sweet spot reach — yes, big servers strike the ball as it is falling slightly — and also allows for an unhurried, "soft" coiling up movement that



readily transitions into a full speed ahead hitting motion.

The racket's deceleration is also a factor. Some players attempt serving big the way I've noticed some people drive, one foot on the gas and one foot on the brake. Opposing forces create a muscular rigidity that prevents the racket from reaching maximum velocity. It's prudent to abandon any false sense of security you experience when over-controlling the racket by steering it. Allowing a free and easy deceleration into your follow-through zone, to its naturally occurring end, enables a hyper-charged, more coordinated racket dynamic.

Regarding the grip to rip, the old shake hands with the racket adage — the Continental grip — is a good place to start. You could also experiment with going a smidgeon towards the Eastern grip side in order to completely flatten the face of the racket if necessary. Unless you can bring 100+ mph heat, you won't need any appreciable spin to help bring your laser beam into the box. Go completely flat in order to get the biggest piece of the ball and longest possible impact time. And believe me, you'll feel and hear the difference when the ball, fully deformed, explodes off your racket.

By this time you're hopefully giddily anticipating the possibility of scrambling the electronics of your club's radar gun. So let's make sure that you know where you're hitting this bad boy. No, not

the direction — up the T, out wide or into the body — but your intended margin of clearance over the net. That's the difference maker, and it cannot be much since this monster is laughing in gravity's face. Keep it close.

Last, and certainly not least, you gotta breathe! Holding your breath as you're unleashing a bomb, or any serve, actually triggers elevated muscle tension. Inhale as you toss, followed by a sustained exhalation as you're striking the ball for optimal loosey goosey relaxation.

The serve is undeniably the most mechanically demanding shot in tennis, with its nuanced kinetic chain or synchronization of myriad, accumulating moving parts. It would take a near tome to cover every single detail. Don't over think it. Just stay focused on these core essentials and let it happen.

Bob Brett, coach of the big-serving 2001 Wimbledon champion Goran Ivanisevic — still the ace record holder at The Championships (not Pete Sampras) — described the Croat master blaster's huge but seemingly easy "cheese" this way: "At his best, he's a player who lets the racket do the work. He doesn't really swing or hit that hard. Goran is all about timing."

So, go ahead and light it up on occasion. It's empowering and fun, too. 