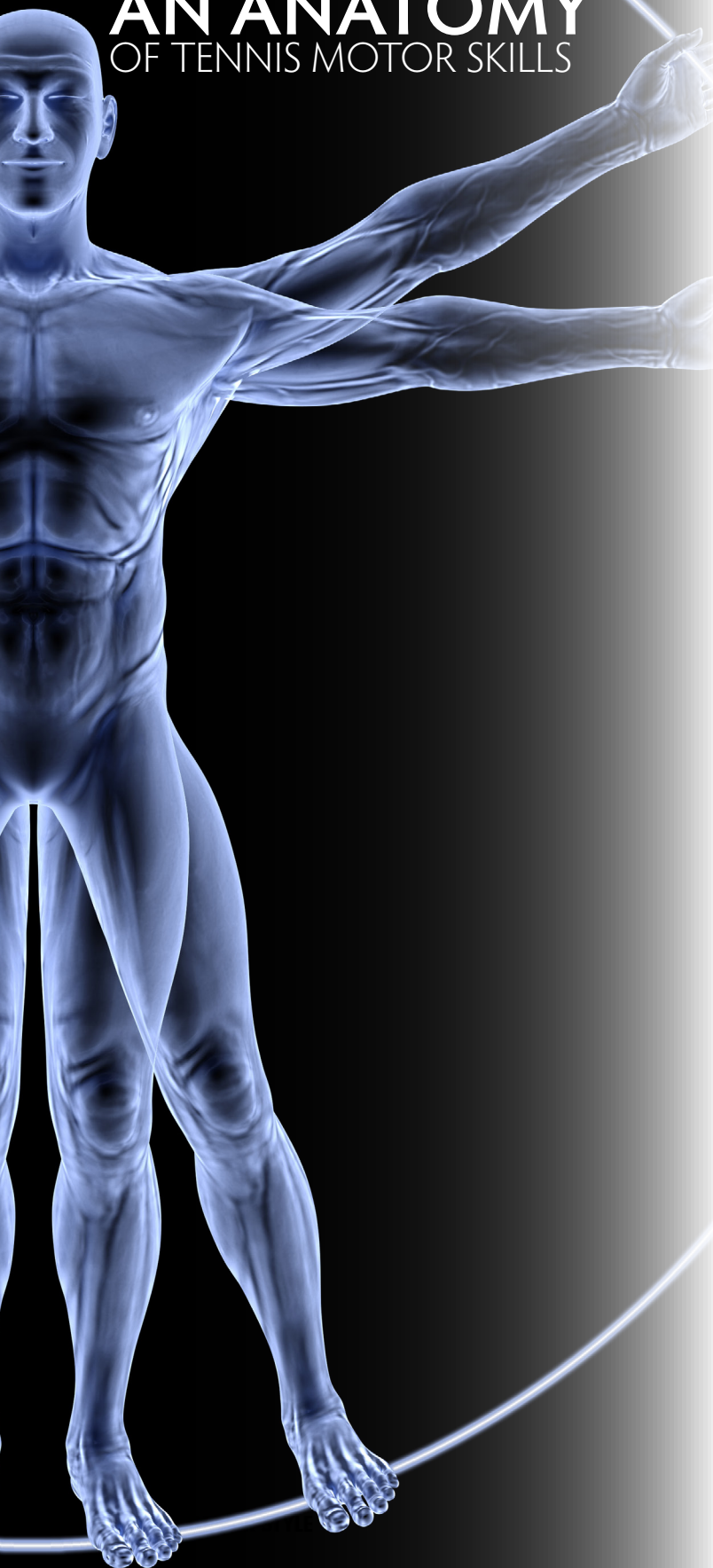


AN ANATOMY OF TENNIS MOTOR SKILLS



They are immediately recognizable. The thoroughbred movers of the game, flowing untethered from one ball to the next, seemingly playing above the court. Big and small, pros and clubbers, no matter — they motor light as feathers. Soft feet? Yes. And more.

Roger Federer, of course, heads the professional class. Athletically elegant, he appears to defy gravity when in full flight. Even in the midst of the directional changes tennis demands, he glides and reaccelerates invisibly. Martial art movies like *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* come to mind, but Federer is real and wireless.

In *Strokes of Genius*, John Wertheim's riveting deconstruction of the Swiss maestro's epic 2008 Wimbledon battle with the coming of age Rafael Nadal, the Federer anomaly is anointed: "Even in his warm-up, Federer is the picture of seamless efficiency. There's virtually no wasted movement. Like all great athletes, he has a natural mind-body connection."

Others have come before. Some well-known. Some obscure. John McEnroe, not normally mentioned as a great mover, along with Martina Navratilova, who single-handedly raised the women's fitness bar, and, yes, Pete Sampras, who too many, curiously, still think he only had a serve.

The lesser known in that era were no less impressive getting around the court. Miroslav "The Big Cat" Mecir, a US Open finalist and a big dude, whose sleepy, slow motion demeanor defied how he somehow managed to smother any fleeting opponent openings. Karol Kucera, doing the same, gave Andre Agassi absolute fits, appearing to be reading his mind. And let us not forget the silky Amelie Muresamo, the physically solid French woman that a young Lindsey Davenport, no petite damsel herself, accused of playing like a guy.

Today, Bernard Tomic, the underachieving, 6'5" Aussie bad boy, who best represents the illusion of laborless motoring, has emerged as a smooth mover with his Mecir-inspired gait. Still, he gets criticized in the press for his unique gift that's often wrongly construed as not giving his all, especially when he's compared to the hustling Jimmy Connors standard that endures.

The "Brash Basher" model, best exemplified today by Nadal, with its ballistic, court gripping, stutter-stepping, dogged ball pursuit, gets its due in Connors' new memoir, *The Outsider*, right alongside his primer on ball-striking mechanics. "Now, here comes the second and most important part: footwork. This is what made my game what it became. This was the hard part, and believe me, I worked on it every day," he writes.

For fans of brash, with a little gazelle sprinkled in, there's the recent TV commercial featuring fan favorite, Gael Monfils, hawking his KSwiss Big Shot pumps as he darts around the court from one end to the other, up and back in a blur, with his voice over proclaiming, "I am French. I am fast. Wherever you hit, I will be there." KSwiss made a bundle. Such is the tennis playing public's respect and admiration for the movement requirement of the game.

How do they do it? Is it self-taught, coached-up or inherently predisposed? Of course, one's genetics play no small part.

But anyone can, if motivated, make improvements in the way they move in and out of their shots while also defending the court in between them in a total synchronization. With understanding, and



a work ethic for a little practice repetition, the core components of motoring can be advanced.

In his 1977 guide, *Quick Tennis*, two-time NCAA track champion and Olympian, Henry Hines, crossed his track skills over to tennis right in the midst of the tennis boom, and, unwittingly, took aim at some of the then still-existing country club conventions. I can recall one such purist, a stiff but appreciated regional steward of the game, telling me, right about the same time, that I “moved around the court like a monkey.” Huh? Looking back, he was confusing a new age brand of tennis athleticism that was rapidly infiltrating the genteel Sunday afternoon mixed-doubles crowd on the grass of the most proper, and venerable, Longwood Cricket Clubs of the Northeast.

Other efforts have followed, but selections solely devoted to tennis movement are few in number and slow in coming. A good, all-encompassing offering is *Complete Conditioning for Tennis*, a USTA publication by Paul Roetert and ATP trainer Todd Ellenbecker, whom you’ve seen on the Tennis Channel.

One DVD stands out, *Fast and Furious Tennis*, featuring University of Washington coach Chris Russell’s program for movement excellence. If you’re a cerebral type, check out David A. Rosenbaum’s *Human Motor Control* with its motor neurophysiology, cognitive science themes.

Back in clubland, simply being cognizant of the active motion components is half the battle — quickness, speed, agility, balance and flexibility are all in the mix.

Quickness refers to how quickly you get off the mark in reacting to an opponent’s shot. Without a well-timed split-step, that little hop step that lands both feet lightly and precisely at their ball-on-string impact, you’ll have no real hope of a quick start. Bodies in motion stay in motion. Standing motionless, poised but not a muscle stirring, is a delusionalist formula to be late to the party, particularly on the serve return.

The *speed* reference is with regard to, once you are in motion, shifting into whatever “gear” is necessary in a forward-leaning posture to intercept the ball at the right place and the right time. When top

gear is required, arm movement, pumping if you will, plays a large part in being fast when working in perfect concert with one’s leg action. Nonetheless, this is tennis, not a track meet, so you’ll still need to prepare your racket on time.

Agility, more than anything, refers to an ability to change directions smoothly, without losing even a half-step going the wrong way. Once again, we’re back to the all-important split step. Unless you’re faced with an all-out sprint to a wide open court, a momentary split should occur, wherever you are on the court, at an opponent’s contact point. Nothing is easier than hitting behind a runaway train opponent who is without one.

Maintaining body control in a multi-directional sport like tennis is what *balance* is all about. Being aware of keeping your head still at all times, in the midst of the shot making hip and shoulder rotations while also recognizing, and managing, your ideal center of gravity, are the most important ingredients. The head moves — bobble head, swivel head — the body follows and the accompanying unnecessary motion not only slows you down but also undermines your shot.

Since you will not be able to get every ball where you want it in your strike zone, *flexibility* is a must in adapting to mis-hits, bad bounces, when fooled, and when in full stretch. If you don’t regularly



work on your flexibility, especially if you’re of an age where you can recall watching those aforementioned pro players examples, you’ll be relegated to playing “tin-man” tennis.

Being kinesthetically cognizant of your body in motion can only lead to better and happier motoring. And better playing, too. 🏸



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