soft
POWER

It doesn't take immense physical effort to hit a heavy ball.

How can power be soft? Easily. Just think of those occasional moments — I know you've experienced them — when you're returning a first serve from a good server. After already launching your racket at the ball, you realize, a split second before making contact, that the ball, although close to the line, is actually out. Unable to stop your stroke, but fully aware that the pressure is off, you make the return anyway, producing a very penetrating shot with practically no effort at all. What happened? Soft power happened.

I've never seen virtuoso violinist Joshua Bell play tennis, but I know he does. I also know that he gets it. In comparing his artistry with striking a tennis ball, he observed, "Both require immense concentration and mental focus. Physically, when one draws a sound with the bow, relaxation is the key. Technique is more important than physical strength. Often, the harder you press, the less sound comes out."

And so it almost always is with the instantaneous, no consequences, loose-as-a-goose return. In a fractional moment, muscle tension plummets into an optimal range — substantially lower than your always well intentioned but often inefficient try harder, grip tighter mode — and a perfect kinetic chain is unleashed, producing a jaw-dropping would be winner or forced error.

Don Budge was the first player to win the Grand Slam, all four majors in the same year, way back in the day. Contemporary rival George Lott, commented on Budge's ball striking brilliance: "When you come in against Budge's backhand, he hit such a heavy ball, you'd swear you were volleying a piano." Well said.

The widely known formula $F = MA$ represents force (i.e. power) equals mass times acceleration. In the context of striking a tennis ball as cleanly as possible, it's relevant to how fast you swing the racket through the ball, in perfect synergy with the "swing weight" you allow the racket to have. This results in the racket easily dominating the collision with a ball that's designed to deform and store energy. Players employing this technique hit "heavy balls" with big "gas" off the bounce, even on clay.

Other players, those with excessively high grip tension, late take backs, ultra brief ball-on-string contact time and abrupt follow throughs, underachieve with shots produced through considerable physical effort that do not translate to effective power on the tennis court. And let us not forget the arm and shoulder injuries inherent in such an inefficient technique.

At his peak, Roger Federer's match play record was 315 wins and 24 losses (2004-2007), averaging out to 79-6 per year versus the world's best. In *Strokes of Genius,* Jon Wertheim describes the way in which Federer dominated: "He won not with unanswerable power, might-makes-right power, but with flourish and flair. His game relies on precision and nuance and talent. For all the modern touches, his style is mostly a throwback, what with his one-handed backhand, his simple handshake grip, his fondness for net play."

On the women's side, the recently retired Amelie Mauresmo, a former world #1 with Grand Slam titles and consistently high ranking, also displayed the Federer-type game with the same ball striking fluidity, lithe court coverage and ability to make all the

shots look easy. She, too, played with soft power.

Just think of utilizing the racket — the hitting tool — much in the same way that a pendulum functions. The initial smooth, gradual acceleration from the beginning point of its arc, peaking in speed at the bottom of its range of motion, then gradually decelerating to its end. Or, with racket in hand, a smooth acceleration to peak racket speed through the point of impact from the take-back position, and then the methodical deceleration through one's full range of motion to the follow-through's completion.

Spectators don't always see it or fully appreciate it, but, like George Lott, opponents feel the "weight of shot," a phrase that the classic Wimbledon BBC broadcaster John Barrett is believed to have coined. Difficult to explain, it's a reference to a ball struck so perfectly that the energy produced at contact is maximized to the Nth degree, and the initial speed of the ball coming off the strings dissipates on the way to its target at a rate that's considerably less than a shot produced with less efficiency.

Opponents, even experienced ones, also find it very difficult to anticipate, and are often surprised and rendered late to the ball since the stealth factor is very high in such a seemingly effortless stroke. Pete Sampras, unfairly regarded as just a big server, was that kind of player. He could dominate from the back of the court when he chose to, such as the '96 U.S. Open final when he made #2 Michael "Mr. Hustle" Chang look as if he wasn't even trying. Strangely, Pistol Pete never received any credit for his more nuanced skills.

So, in striving to achieve your personal best tennis day in and day out, and to continue to make very doable improvements in your game going forward, what is the more achievable model to aspire to, albeit not quite on the same scale? The silky smooth, clean-hitting, ball-striking machine standard displayed by Federer, current #4 Andy Murray and the elegant Mauresmo, or the extreme gripped, concussive, brawling, physically demanding styles exhibited by the Rafael Nadals and Serena Williamses of today's game?

Go soft. Play big. It's your call.