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# Orindawoods Tennis News

Orindawoods Tennis Club: 925-254-1065; Office Hours: M-F 8:30 a.m.-6 p.m., Sat./Sun.: 8:30 a.m.-1 p.m., [www.orindawoodstennis.com](http://www.orindawoodstennis.com)  
"I like this place, and willingly could waste my time in it" – Celia, *As You Like It*, Act II, Scene IV

## **The Stops and Starts of Winter Tennis**

### ***Finding Your [Lost] Game.***

There are times, sometimes due to Mother Nature, and other times due to our crazy schedules, where we do not get to play our regular amount. If you are a player that plays five days a week, perhaps this lay off is one in which you only played once in the past seven days. If you are a player that plays once a week, maybe you have missed a month due to rain, or travel, or some such interference. Maybe you are coming back from an injury or operation that has sidelined you for a period of time. Sometimes work, home or the driving the kids is just too crazy. Maybe it's just too cold outside.

Whatever the reason, we do not feel like we have hit as many balls as we normally do in order to feel comfortable. And we have the BIG match tomorrow.

Even as a teaching pro who plays tennis virtually every day, who has tennis in his blood, and seemingly every tennis answer in his brain, I get this feeling when I haven't played a match for a few weeks. I haven't face live serves and returns. Playing is different than practice, or hitting. Certainly much different than teaching.

In the winter months, where unexpected lay-offs seem to happen more than we want or can plan for and plan around, it is especially important to have a strategy for getting the rust off in a hurry and becoming match ready with very little time to prep. What follows are a few ideas to get your game up and running as soon as possible.

### **Expectations vs. Attention**

There is a very strange phenomenon that players report, and I have experienced many times myself. It is that on the first day back from a layoff, you play surprisingly well. Sometimes even great! And then subsequent outings, where you would expect to carry on after your surprisingly good performance, are not so good. In fact, you often suck. What just happened there?

When you haven't played for a while, your expectations of how you will play are quite low. There is actually very little pressure, from a performance point of view. You're expecting a train wreck, frankly everything above that looks fantastic. You have a heightened sense of attention to the important details, like watching the ball, or proper stroking. Details that we can take a bit for granted, much to our game's detriment, when we have been playing and practicing a lot.

So you hit a couple of good shots early on, discounting the bad ones as expected, and you remember that you can play this game. You've gotten your mojo back, by giving yourself a break. Let's face it, you have checked your ego at the door. This is one of the key components of winning the mental game. You just gave yourself a free pass into the high performance state. Energy, enthusiasm, enjoyment.

In other words, we don't expect much, so we are much more focused on the process of playing, and not so much on the outcome of our shots or the match. This is how we should always play: high attention, low expectation. But we rarely do.

"Expect nothing, and you have all things," the Tao would counsel us to do as we make our way through tennis court gate into the field of battle.

### **Process vs. Outcome**

Most of the rest of my advice would continue to come under the heading of process vs. outcome. Again this is the case any time that you play, and so the advice given below really applies to any warm up, and not just after a long lay off.

I experience a feeling that I am learning how to hit again each time I go out to play. Even with a lay off of just a couple of hours, say a second match (that day) in a

## **Clubhouse Construction**

We are hopeful that at the time you are reading this, we have begun construction on our soon to be remodeled lobby at the Tennis Club. Of course this is Orinda, and Contra Costa County, and if you have ever tried to build anything, you know, "stuff happens."

So baring "stuff happens," we are hoping to be underway soon, and have the whole thing finished in a few months, before the pool season, and prime tennis season.

To the best of our ability, we are going to try to keep the bathrooms and locker rooms open during construction. There may be brief times when this may not be possible. I will try to keep the membership up to date as we move forward.

When the floors are to be redone, the clubhouse and probably the office will need to be closed for a few days. Again, I will let you know the time table for this work, which comes near the end of the project.

## **Junior Tennis**

The Orindawoods Junior Tennis Program led by Head Pro Patric Hermanson and Associate Pro Anna Marie Gamboa is in full swing this winter.

The Winter Session runs through March 13. There is still some space in some classes.

The Spring Session begins on March 23, after spring break.

For more information on the Junior Program, please visit the Club's website:

[orindawoodstennis.com](http://orindawoodstennis.com).

Orindawoods has one of the best junior programs I have ever seen for developing young players.

tournament you are playing, you will have to warm up again and recapture the “feel” of tennis. This rediscovery must happen no matter how much you have been recently training (beware of expectations here). In the pursuit of recapturing feel, there are thoughts that get us thinking process, and not outcome.

**Rhythm.** My mentor once said that rhythm was the most overlooked thing in learning / playing tennis. Teachers talk for hours about technique, but rhythm of those movements is crucial to putting it all together. When you are playing well, there is a flow of up and down, back and forth, side to side. To watch Roger Federer is to watch a dance performed on a tennis court. When you haven’t played for a while, go out and start moving the way you move when you play your best. “Fake it ‘til you make it.” Avoid fast, panic reactions in warming up, or overly stylized moments. Channel the tennis gods. Their calm, their flow, their persona. Think cool, act cool, be cool. Let your inner Federer come out.

**Proper Stroking.** There is a relationship between your stroke and the ball. In order to succeed, the ball and the stroke must connect at contact. Everyone knows that. The problem is, we often settle for just that, making contact. What we really want is our proper stroke to make contact with the ball in such a way that the ball will go where and how we want back over the net. In order to do this, the ball really needs to hit the stroke, and not the stroke adjust to hit the ball. Of course this is overstating the case, as we do have to do a lot of adjusting to the flight of the ball, but you can’t change the stroke so radically in an attempt to make contact, that when it makes contact, it does not produce the shot you want (speed, spin, accuracy, deception). In other words, much of the adjusting to the flight of the ball must be done with our feet, adjusting our body position and alignment to the ball, and not changes in how we actually do our stroke when we get there. The timing of these complex moves is a huge part of this process as well.

Simply put, I have found that when I insist on taking a proper stroke (rhythm is an important component of this), I may miss the first few, but I will start to adjust my positioning and timing. My strokes must stay relatively constant.

**Touch and Feel.** Tennis is a game where you have to catch and throw the ball. The ball is captured on the strings, and then is redirected back over the net, hopefully in the intended direction, with the intended speed, spin, placement and disguise. This requires touch and feel. We must be loose, relaxed, feel like we are absorbing the ball when it comes to us. Relax, loosen your grip. Try easy, not try hard. Move slowly, think flow. These are the ways to recapture touch and feel. Of course when we haven’t played much, or we want the result too bad, we try too hard. We are stiff, too firm and the ball collides with the racquet and bounces away before we can shape it. “Danger, Will Robinson.”

#### **Some Thoughts On Outcome.**

Everyone wants to win. When you play a game, the goal is to win. We keep score. Outcomes are important. You want to do your best, so you can be your best. There may be a player or team you want to beat, you might want to win the league, improve your rating, improve your game (and you want the victories to prove you’re getting better).

And yet, we live in a series of individual moments of time. Harshly put, we are only as good as our last [shot, backhand, match, season, tournament, etc...]. In a sense, we don’t have a great backhand (it’s not a possession), we hit backhands (individual events). In the moment, some backhands are great, some are not. Looking back, we can say, our backhand had a good day, or a bad day. Or we are satisfied with our backhand overall, or we feel confident when asked to hit a backhand. But even that, has little to do with who we are. Valuing yourself because of how you see your backhand, or what your rating is, is dangerous and unhealthy. This kind of thinking leads to a lot of unhappiness.

Mainly the unhappiness is due this conflict between evaluation and living. They just aren’t the same, and living is “real” and the evaluation is an “illusion.” If you are a 3.5, how come some days you play like a 4.0, and others like a 2.5? Can’t you just say, I’m a 3.5, and I will beat a 3.0 all the time? Doesn’t work like that. Society has clichés to capture this idea of the fallacy of rankings and past glory: “That’s why they play the game,” or “On any given Sunday.”

The real question is, when that next ball comes to you, can you hit your backhand? Can you hit it where you want? Can you hit it how you want?

And of course we have little control over our opponent’s response. One time your backhand may be a winner, and the next time they may anticipate right, time it perfectly, and crush your best shot of the day. Life isn’t that predictable.

So the most competitive person, the one who gets the closest to being their best and the one that wins the most matches they can, is actually the person who plays best, moment to moment.

Sports Psychologist Allen Fox once asked a crowded room of tennis professionals, “Who in this room wants to win?” Everyone raised his or her hands. No surprise there. Then he followed up with, “Who in this room can keep their attention on what it takes to win every single moment of the match?” People looked puzzled. “Well, do you always watch the ball at contact? Do you always take your best stroke?” Then the real kicker, “Do you only think thoughts that help you?” No hands were raised.

The best players are the ones that get the closest to keeping their attention on the appropriate little things that make them play their best, and give them the best chance to win. Consider that the toughest competitor (the person that wins most the time) out there may never think about results at all. They don’t focus on outcomes (winning and losing) until after the match. They treasure the value of each action they take or don’t take.

**A Tough Trick.** As Kenny Rogers sang in *The Gambler*, “You never count your money, when you’re sitting at the table. There will be time

#### ***Quote of the Month***

*“Any day you get up, get out, and hit a tennis ball is a good day.”*



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more!

enough for counting, when the dealing is done." Buddhism calls this concept nonattachment: "to care" and "to not care" at the same time. A tough trick to pull off.

Tennis is a sequence of shifting focus and performance. What is proper focus in one moment could lead to disaster in the next. For example, you might find it useful to have awareness of your opponent poaching. But to watch that movement to its conclusion instead of watching the ball at contact, could cause your shot to be miss hit, or miss directed (if you make contact at all).

**Is Everyone Else In The Same Boat?** Yes. The best captain sticks to his job of sailing, keeps the ship on course and waits to see if he gets where he is going. He doesn't demand or assume an outcome, but enjoys the journey and it's challenges. Good luck!

**Tennis Strategy Tip:**

***The Double Forehand Dilemma***

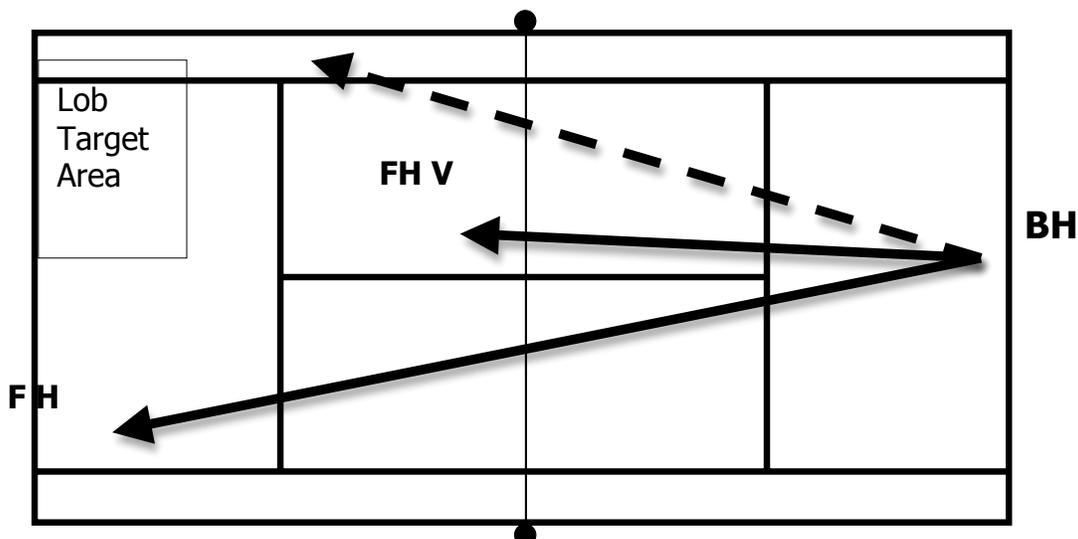
When you are returning serve from the deuce court, you are basically facing two forehands (see diagram below). The net player's forehand volley (FH V) is in the middle, and the server's forehand groundstroke (FH) is out wide.

**Limited By The Serve.** If the server wisely serves the ball to your backhand (BH) in the middle (we are assuming all are right-handed here), there are very few places to return the ball that will be effective. Hitting the ball back the way it came (through the middle) will basically be teeing the ball up for the net player's forehand volley (if they are aggressive at all). Hitting inside out (crosscourt in this case) will leave a generally weak shot out wide to the server's forehand. This gives the server the option to hit down your partner's alley, through the middle, or return wide to you. Three options with their strongest shot, and you only have two players to cover those three options, meaning something will be open, or every defense will be weakened because you are spread too thin.

So both of the primary options are not very good in terms that both really leave control of the point up to the serving team (you are just hoping they miss an offensive shot).

**Alley.** We are left with a couple of difficult shots. You could hit the backhand down the alley (dotted line). Probably physically the easiest shot to hit, but it is difficult to get it by the net person and keep it in (not hit it wide – the distance the shot can travel before it lands wide is much less than the distance to the opposite base line, therefore you have to hit slower and/or with a lot of spin to make the ball stay in). The percentages on this shot are not great. It is useful as an element of surprise, however. You can catch them napping from time to time, because net players cover the middle (if they are good).

**Lob.** The other option is to lob over the net person. This shot can be very effective because it will mean that if you clear the net person, the server will have to hit a high bouncing backhand on the run. Not an easy task for even the most skilled player. The problem is, again, it can be hard to make this shot. Lobbing is tricky, especially if the



serve is difficult (speed, spin, placement, deception).

For example, we don't see a lot of lobbing in Men's Doubles, or Mixed Doubles when the man is serving because it is difficult to lob a serve with pace. It is really hard to take enough speed off the ball to get it to clear the net person's reach, and still drop in. Again, this shot, the lob, can be used as a nice surprise, to mix them up. Hard to make this shot over and over again, unless the serve is weak and the server is just feeding you. (As an aside, this is one of the things that makes playing the net so difficult if your partner has a weak serve, especially if they want you to help out with defending the lob. You stand farther back, and now you are a sitting duck for the ground strokes. You have given up control of the middle – you play badly, but it is really the serve's fault, not yours).

**So what are we left with?** A very tough nut to crack. Every option has some real negatives, and few positives. Probably the best strategy is a combination of these shots in and around the net person. If you can get the net person to be either afraid of the lob, or the alley shot, and shift their position to cover these phantom threats, they lose a bit of their positioning on that forehand volley in the middle. You have an opportunity. Basically, you are trying to con the net person out of their dominating position by hitting a good shot when ever you are able (which might not be that often, if the serve is strong). If the net person is fooled, you can exploit them. Hit them every ball.

**Worst Option.** Interestingly, the worst option is the one that most people choose, hit the ball cross court to the server (away from the net person). It is quite difficult to hit this ball with any authority, and it is going right to most people's best shot, the forehand. Of course the returner is a bit off the hook, because the person who is going to fail most of the time in this scenario is the receiver's partner. But the returner put their net player in this sticky spot. (Similar to the position the server's partner is in, if the server hits weak serves).

"The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves."

Another temptation to hitting the ball back to the server is that the point doesn't usually end right away. That seems better. When you hit it to the net person, the moment of decision is now. You either win or lose on that or their returning shot. So hitting cross court seems safer. But it isn't. Your team is still out of position, and you will still lose most of the points. The goal is to win the match after all, not to die a slower and perhaps less painful death.

Plus consistently hitting cross court has the undesired effect of pulling the opposing net person even more into the middle of the court, right where we don't want them with that deadly forehand volley. Dr. Phil says, "We train people how to treat us." If the net person is in the middle, it's because we've let them be there.

**Best Option.** No, the best option is to try to unsettle their strongest player, the net person. It is interesting, but someone who is playing great at the net, only needs to miss a shot or two, blow a put away, to lose confidence. That is the key to the door that leads to your victory. Not avoidance of the problem by going cross court. You can literally win one point out of ten, and if you break the net person with that miss, what follows will be very positive.

## Lesson Short

### *Two Roads*

*Two roads diverged in a wood,  
And I, I took the one less travel by  
And that has made all the difference  
-- Robert Frost*

Have you every notice that when a player makes a mistake, sometimes they get frustrated, and sometimes they get more determined. Frustration and anger leads to more erratic play (see above), some good, some bad. This is because emotions running rampant are tough to manage and control, and in a fine motor skill sport like tennis, intense emotion is not particularly helpful. The energy is good, just not it being of a negative nature.

Or perhaps, they get frustrated and then they get determined. The motivational impetus may be a mistake ("I hate making errors"), and perhaps a short-lived negative feeling, but the truly great competitor is able to quickly change that negative energy, by the use of alchemy, into something positive. Determination is that alchemy.

We turn the lead of negative experience into the gold of peak performance. For you see, with high positive energy, joy, even rapture, everything flows. We love what we are doing, and we are able to perform at our highest level in a fine motor skill sport. We are in rhythm, we have touch and feel (see above). And playing well is always the best solution for a bad line call, an easy miss, or starting a match poorly.

Some days tennis is a joy to play. Other days, tennis is a game invented by the Devil to torture us into submission. We sell our soul, our happiness. We trade in our chance for success for a self-defeating rage-gasm.

How we switch from frustration to happiness often involves will. We will ourselves to the place we want to be, rather than accept the hand that fate has dealt us.

It is easier to bemoan our fate than it is to change our mood. And it must be said that certain people are predisposed to think everything is against them. But to succeed, we must fight this easy way out, to accept our bad day, and our loss, and instead to fight for a better way and a happier life. Choice then determination is our path.

*Two men looked through prison bars  
One saw mud, one saw stars.*