ONE OR TWO HANDED BACKHAND?

In the 2011 Australian Open eventual champion Novak Djokovic and defending champion Roger Federer faced off in the semi finals. It was expected to be a titanic battle as Federer attempted to resist the young up and coming generation; and with Rafa Nadal eliminated in the other half of the draw it presented a great chance to claim another slam.

Djokovic’s straight sets win was an impressive performance that he backed up by thrashing Andy Murray in the final. The score was an accurate reflection of Djokovic’s dominance over Federer that night. Once the ball was in a rally situation it became increasingly obvious that Novak had the advantage – he hit the ball with more pace and depth and Federer was having trouble competing in the baseline exchanges.

The Serbian’s authority was particularly noticeable in the backhand cross court rallies where his two hander was consistently too much for Federer’s one hander.

Novak’s compact two hander was consistently too much for Federer’s graceful one handed backhand.

The dramatic dominance in this aspect of play led respected tennis analyst Paul Fein to comment...“the one handed backhand is destined for extinction in tournament tennis.” Certainly the difference in pace between the two shots was obvious and Federer ‘shanked’ several backhands as he attempted to match Djokovic. We have witnessed Federer do this before, but only when receiving Rafa’s lefty forehand hit into the backhand corner.

Federer’s backhand can often look majestic as he strokes winners down the line and generates extreme angles. In truth the tennis purist loves the grace of the one hander which is also demonstrated by Justine Henin on the women’s side. When the two hander gained prominence with pioneer’s Chris Evert and Bjorn Borg it was initially ridiculed. Three decades later two handed players dominate the professional ranks.

As with everything in tennis, the story is not so simple that everyone should abandon the one hander and work at developing a two hander. A player’s style and physical characteristics should affect whether a coach teaches a one or two handed backhand. For example, Pete Sampras changed from a double to single handed backhand as he developed the best serve and volley game in history.
The one hander certainly has the advantage of developing the ‘feel’ and ‘hands’ that translates well to a good volley game. The two hander, which is more driven by the legs and body, can result in a lack of touch at the net. In the female game especially, players seem more comfortable hitting a swinging double handed volley in their rare forays to the net. The Williams girls are certainly fine exponents of this shot.

The one hander certainly has several positives in addition to better development of the volley.

**Slice Backhand** – the slice backhand is a critical shot in the modern game. With so many players who can hit with tremendous topspin and pace from the back court, a changeup slice which keeps the ball low and out of the opponent’s hitting zone is a crucial weapon.

**End range defence** – the double hander has the limitation of reducing reach. Having an effective one handed backhand when stretched is vital in the modern game where there is such an emphasis on defence. One of the hallmarks of Djokovic’s Australian Open victory was his ability to make the opponent start the point over with manic defence, hitting the stretch backhand with one hand and landing it within a foot of the baseline.

**Drop Shot** – another speciality shot Djokovic used to great effect was the heavily sliced backhand drop shot, usually played down the line. With players adopting very deep court position the ability to hit a backspin drop shot is another one handed weapon worth having.

The advantage of the two hander was made clear in the Federer vs Djokovic battle. Djokovic was able to generate far more pace using a compact swing. As Federer sought to create more pace and spin he had to swing longer and faster which resulted in the ‘shanks’ referred to earlier in the article. The two hander can also be hit later, allowing a greater margin for error and to receive 1st serves and big forehands with more effectiveness. The preciseness of the one hander is the source of its beauty and also its drawback.

The two hander is also much easier for a beginner to learn. There is a strength issue to learning a one handed backhand and the strength required increases the higher the ball bounces. Not to mention that a bad technique on the one hander is a sure way to injure yourself, including the dreaded tennis elbow which does not seem to afflict the double handed player. Justine Henin’s most beautiful shot was the reason for her recent retirement with an elbow ligament problem.

So we face a difficult scenario with both one and two handed backhands having their positives and limitations. Fortunately the top pro’s have come up with their own solution we can use as a template. Double handed players like Rafael Nadal [pictured] have refined their skill with one hand to compliment their powerful two fisted drives. As mentioned Novak Djokovic uses several one handed weapons like the drop shot to increase his overall effectiveness on the backhand side. In truth Rafa and Novak both look a little ‘clunky’ and unnatural when they hit their one hander – but Andy Murray who also employs a double handed drive with mixed up slice and drop shots looks remarkably smooth when switching to one hand.
Coaches need to teach the backhand as a multi-faceted weapon, no repetitive drilling on just developing a big double-fisted shot. Get your players comfortable with a continental one-handed grip and have them experiment with slice and drop shots. Develop the shot skill by skill and show them how to tactically use different backhands to break up the rhythm of their opponent, get the benefit of both the one and two-handed shot.

Try some of the following drills to work your students one-handed skills:

**Slice to Slice**
Coach and student play a cross court rally to the backhand corner with only slice allowed. Work at skimming the ball low and keeping it out of the opponent’s hitting zone.

**Progression**
The coach hits a mixture of drive, loop and slice; the student only hits slice, conditioning themselves to receiving the different shots of the opponent.

** Surprise!**
Coach and student play a cross court rally to the backhand corner with only slice allowed. Student can break up the rally with a drop shot. Work at the execution of the drop shot encouraging disguise and some side spin to compliment the backspin. Emphasise the drop shot needn’t be an outright winner, it may set up a pass or lob on the next shot or drag a reluctant volleyer forwards.

**Defensive Slice**
Coach smashes with control to the student who play defensive lobs with a continental grip. Create situations where the player must be at full stretch to practice their ‘end range’ defence and throw up a high smash and stay in the point.
The last word on the one hand vs two hand debate! Don’t discourage a player who wants to play with one hand. Their hero may be Roger Federer or they may feel comfortable hitting with one hand. The biggest hurdle in a student learning the one handed backhand is physical strength required to hit a high bouncing ball. A young and relatively short player is at a distinct disadvantage with one hand.

However, the latest coach technology and methodology involves the use of low compression balls for kids under 10 years old. Using these balls a young player can comfortably hit a one handed backhand and the coach can effectively teach the technique and tactics of the stroke. The physical development will not compromise the full development of the shot using the Red, Orange, Green ball progression.