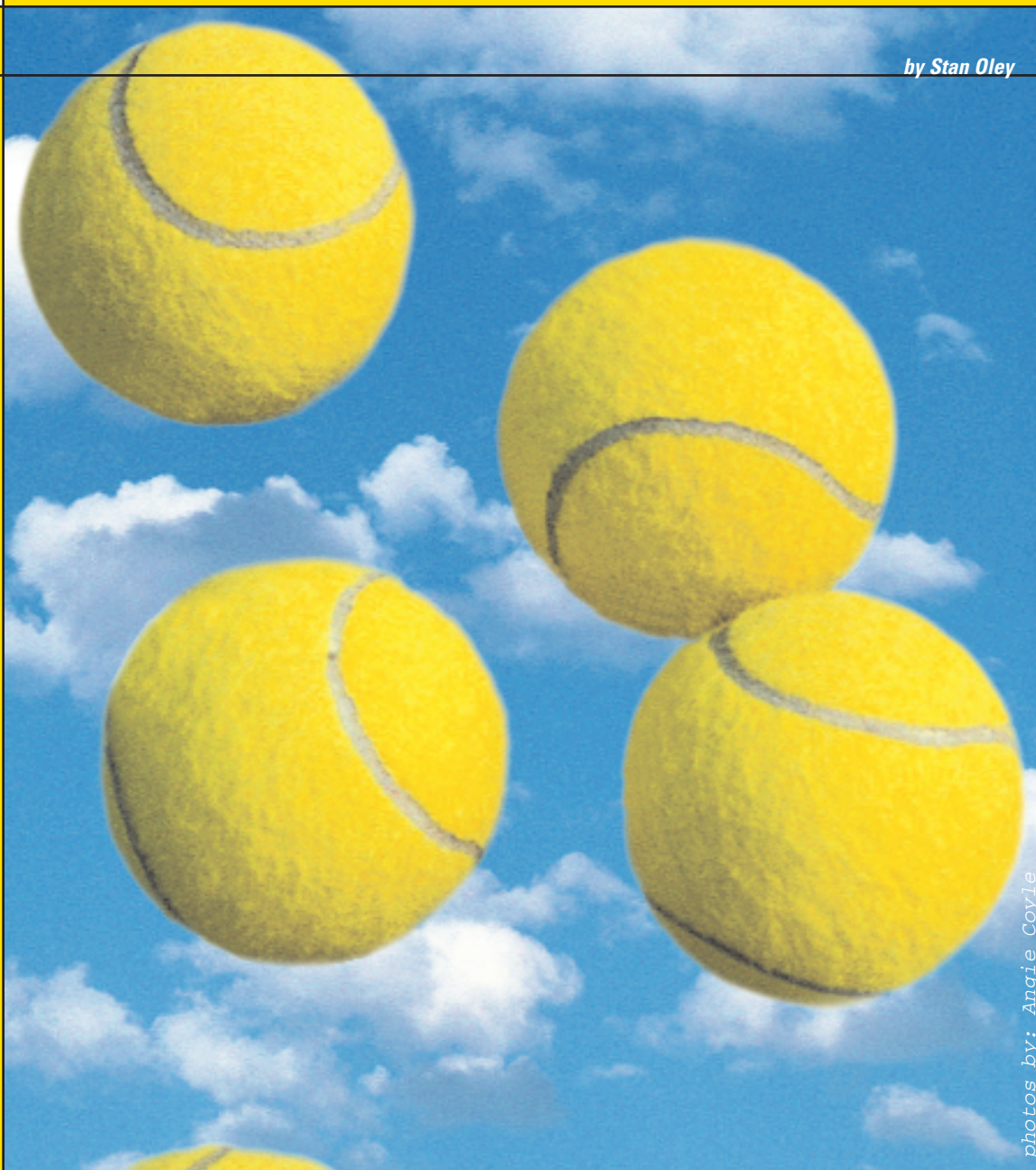


Are You a Teaching Professional or a Bumping Pro?

by Stan Oley



photos by: Angie Coyle

For the past eleven years, I have been very fortunate to travel around the country conducting seminars on how to teach tennis using a ball machine. After each seminar, I have the opportunity to talk to the teaching professionals. One of the most frequently asked questions is, "Do you have a drill book or video?" My reply is always the same, "Why do you want one?" The teaching professional usually tells me, "I am so burned out, it just seems like I cannot think of another drill."

I can honestly say that this scenario happens in every city where I give a seminar. Why are these teaching pros "burned out"? Fortunately, through my travels I am able to observe many teaching professionals in many types of facilities from municipalities to country clubs and resorts.

The first important item to note is that the majority of teaching professionals play at the NTRP level 4.5. The teaching professional that can keep their game at the 5.0 level or above is certainly the minority. I have also observed that even though the 5.0 level teaching pro has more playing skills than the 4.5 level instructor, I rarely see much difference in how they feed drills. The playing level of the teaching professional should not have much affect on their ability to teach, however it does, because they fail to utilize the equipment, such as ball machines, necessary to provide a game-like ball to their students. This results in the teaching pro standing close to the net and feeding simplistic non-game-like "bumped" balls to their student. This type of "bumping" does not expose the fact that the instructor sometimes cannot feed a ball at the stu-

dent's level of play. Of course you are burned out! How many different drills can you feed just "bumping" balls? If you ignore ball characteristics like speed, spin, height, depth and direction, your drill book is severely limited.

Let's consider a couple of examples. First, say a 4.5 student needs work on their inside-out forehand and the teaching professional is a 4.5 level player. If the teaching pro were to feed a 4.5 level groundstroke, his or her skill level would be completely taxed without even considering the fact that their primary focus should be to coach this player. Next, perhaps the student needs work on their half-volley, but because it is such a difficult feed, that is not an option. Finally, what if the player needs work on a lob followed by a hard low volley? Again, this scenario is too difficult to feed, so it is not an option either. So, the ultimate question is, what level of student can a 4.5 level teaching professional feed game-like balls to and teach at the same time? In my observation, a teaching pro will "bump" a series of elementary groundstrokes, volleys, or lobs to all levels from a 2.5 to a 4.5 level of player with no distinction. When the student resumes match play, it is no wonder they become frustrated. The ball they received in practice is nothing like the one they received in their lesson. It could be though.

The ball machines that are on the market today can duplicate the speeds, spins, heights, depths and the directions from that of a toddler to a world class player. When you want your student to work on flaws in their half-volley, set the machine up to throw a half-volley. If a player has difficulty with low, hard volleys, set the machine to feed that application as well. Some machines on the market will even throw different heights, speeds and spins at different intervals in sequence or randomly, allowing you to literally dissect a point. You could set that machine to perform a drill as follows: a topspin groundstroke, followed by a backspin groundstroke and a lob. With this type of technology at your disposal, you would never be burned out on drills, because you could now feed anything and best of all, you can then be beside the student to do what you do best - TEACH!

How do you go about teaching a private lesson with a ball machine when you have been at the same club for many years and have never taught with a ball machine? It is simple. The most important thing to remember when teaching with a ball machine is that some

members may be resistant at first, but the key to success is to be prepared. When you go out for the first lesson, have the machine sitting to the side, plugged in and ready to go. Keep your extension cord on a reel so it does not tangle and the machine can be moved easily around the court. It is also very important that you have a remote control for your ball machine so that you can turn the machine on and off between demonstrations.

Let's walk through a simulated private lesson utilizing a ball machine. First, you begin warming up with the student by rallying with them. Maybe during this warm-up your student received several attacking approach shots, but you observed that they let the ball drop below the net and just pushed the ball back and came into the net. You say, "I would like to work on your attacking approach shot today so that when you get this shot in a match situation, you can be more offensive and attack." Now. . .

- Quickly position the ball machine from where the student would receive the approach in a match (not in the center of the baseline!).
- Set the machine to throw an attacking approach shot (the first bounce being above the net).
- Demonstrate how you would like them to perform the shot by hitting off of the machine.
- Have the student first try the approach from a stationary position near the service line.
- Set a large target area to show the student that they are attacking with speed and that depth is not as important.
- Have the student move back to his or her home base behind the baseline to move in and hit the approach shot off the machine.
- Both drills here should take a total of 10 minutes.

REMEMBER: Do not spend too much time on one issue. Keep things fresh and moving along. One of the main reasons students resist the ball machine in a lesson is that the instructor spends too much time on one issue and it gets boring.

- Move the machine off the court and rally with the student mixing in the attacking approach.
- As a progression, you could set the machine to throw a low approach and show the student how the target area now becomes depth and placement.
- Rally again mixing in the low approaches.
- Randomly mix in attacking and low approaches working on the student's ball recognition skills. Here we want to see if the student makes the correct decision based on which approach they receive.

As you can see, with the addition of the ball machine into the lesson plan, you can create a more complete plan.

Could you perform the above scenario without a ball machine? Of course. Could you achieve the same results with your student without the ball machine? No way. It has been well documented in the past decade that people first learn a motor skill sport visually. Using the ball machine allows you to give a visual lesson through demonstration as opposed to just verbalizing instructions from across the net. Also, it allows you to provide the student with a game-like ball not a "bumped" ball. You will no longer limit your lesson plan to what your level of play allows you to be able to feed. Drills will be endless.

As certified teaching professionals, I feel it is important that we offer our students the best tools available in the tennis industry to accelerate their learning. Think of it like this. If you were building an addition on to your home and you were paying the contractor by the hour, whom would you hire for the job - the carpenter who comes with just a hammer and a handsaw or the one that shows up with a whole truck load of power tools?

Now, given the facts, which do you consider yourself: a teaching professional or a "bumping" pro?

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