THE DJOKOVIC BACKHAND RETURN

Body Position & Movement Analysis

*Mark Kovacs, PhD, FACSM, CTPS, CSCS*D*
Executive Director, International Tennis Performance Association
@mkovacsphd

Novak Djokovic has arguably the best return of serve in the game today. His backhand return of serve is possibly the best backhand return of all time. Although Jimmy Connors and Andre Agassi fans may disagree, it is safe to say that Novak's backhand return is something that all players, at every level, can learn from. This article will specifically focus on how Novak uses his core and lower body in a highly efficient manner before, during and after the backhand return. Although Novak's upper body and stroke mechanics are near perfect, the focus of this article really digs deeper and highlights the cause of why he has such a great return, but also why he is nearly always in such great position the first stroke after his return. The following photos and written descriptions can provide tips for any player and coach to help improve the quality and consistency of the return of serve.

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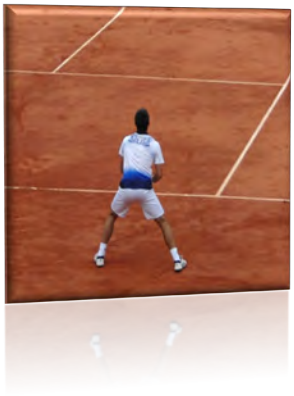

The starting position of the return of serve is highly important. Notice that Novak has a very good stable base of support where his feet are about a foot wider than shoulder width apart which is comfortable for him and allows him to easily push upward (vertically) to initiate the decision step. I prefer to call the "split-step" the "decision step" as the decision to move left or right is made at the top of the hop. Also notice the slight flex in the knee. This is the most relaxed method to await for the serve. Some players await the serve with a split foot position (one foot in front of the other), like John Isner or a crouched low return position like Lleyton Hewitt. Novak's choice of return position requires the least amount of energy, while still allowing optimum positioning and weight transfer.

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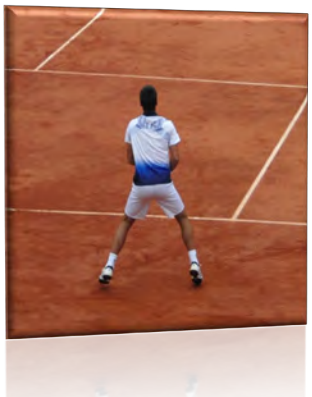

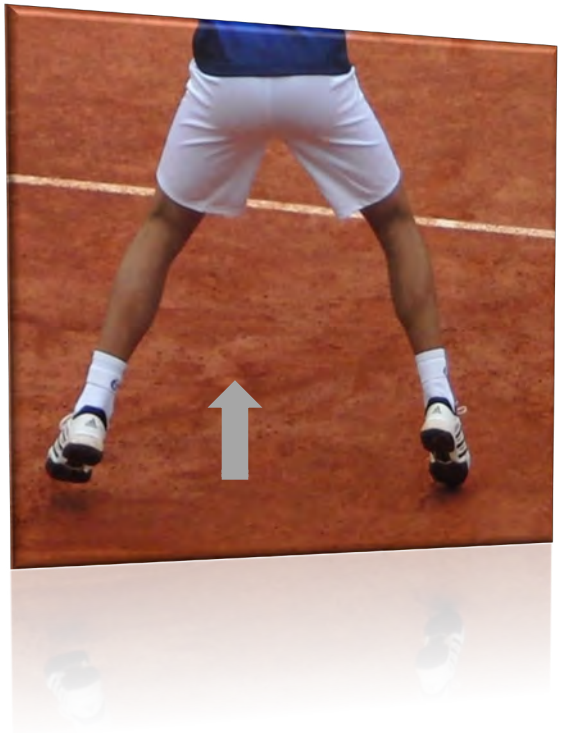

Photo 2 describes the decision step occurring where Novak has pushed into the ground and is now moving in a vertical direction; at this point the decision has not been made about whether to move to the left or the right. Novak has not yet determined where the server is going to serve (middle, body, wide). However, this neutral jump allows him to make the decision at the top of the hop, and his weight is evenly distributed so he can move left or right with ease.

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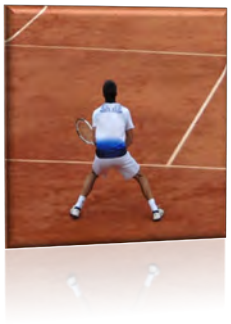

Photo 3 highlights the landing from the decision step. Novak has decided at the top of the decision step that he needs to move to his left as the ball will be coming to his backhand. Notice that Novak has landed on his right leg (this is called the base leg) which serves as the base of support to allow him to push hard through the right leg and hip region . This allows his left hip region to pivot and turn to the left before the foot actually touches the ground. This is performed to allow for an optimum foot position to save time and allow the left foot to push down and save a step in the direction the athlete is planning on moving. This is a key movement to improve efficiency in movement on the return.

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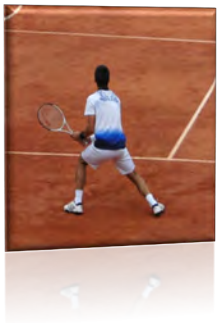

It is clear in photo 4 that the weight has shifted from the right leg and is moving onto the left leg as Novak has made his unit turn (hip and shoulder turn) on the backhand side.

Pay special attention to the foot position of both the left and right leg and notice the direction of the left foot positioned toward where he is planning on moving. This is an ideal weight transfer movement and saves Novak an extra step. It also allows for optimum mechanics to transition from the decision step to the movement and hitting aspects of the return.

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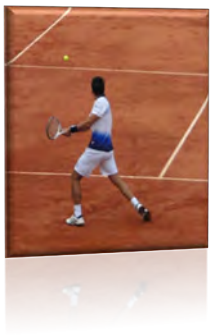

Photo 5 highlights the transition between the loading stage of the backhand and the acceleration stage. This position has Novak loading 70-80% of his weight on his left side which is storing the energy which will be released in the next photo. Notice that the right leg has very little contact with the ground as nearly all the weight has shifted from the right leg to the left leg. This is something that all players can work on when trying to generate pace on the backhand return. The timing of this weight shift is important and needs to synched effectively with the upper body mechanics.

6

The acceleration stage of the backhand return is highlighted here in photo 6. As the ball is rather high (nearly shoulder height), Novak is off the ground just before (and subsequently during) contact. This requires good strength, coordination and balance to be able to consistently time contact. However, it does provide great bodyweight transfer into the ball.

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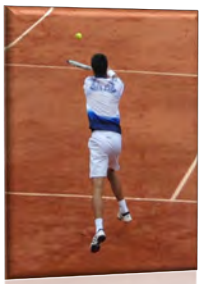

Photo 7 highlights the position just after contact. It is clear in this photo that Novak is completely elevated and his bodyweight is going toward the target. This weight transfer is something that can be applied to all players and it is important to transition the weight from the back hip to the front hip efficiently. Off-court training focused on rotational work through the entire core region can directly help this position on-court.

8

From a movement standpoint this next position is why Novak is considered one of the best movers on a tennis court. His ability to maximize his body positions and joint angles is what makes his movements so efficient. Notice in photo 8 that even during his upper body follow-through his lower body is already working to make his next step more efficient. The great aspect of this photo is the position of Novak's right foot. His right foot comes down with his heel pointing outward and toe pointing inward (see the grey arrow). This is the ideal position to help Novak push-off this right leg to allow him to move quickly and efficiently to his left in preparation for the next stroke.

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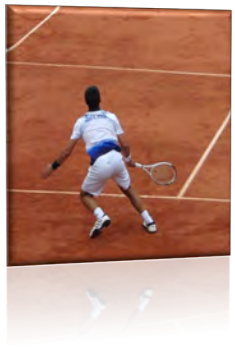

Photo 9 highlights the position in more detail as the right leg is used as the base of support (very similar position to photo three); this allows for Novak to forcefully push off his right leg to allow for the left leg to move toward his intended position (i.e. middle of the court). Notice that Novak's left knee and hip are facing his intended movement target (i.e. middle of the court).

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Photo 10 shows the next stage of an efficient movement pattern after a well struck backhand return. The front cross-over step is shown here where the right leg crosses over in front of his left leg which is a low energy cost movement and allows for good court coverage. This movement pattern is ideal in this situation as Novak hit a strong return of serve and he had time to conserve some energy. However, other movements would be implemented if he needed to move faster in instances where his return was not as successful.

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