

## Fit in your fitness

### Maximize your game in minimum time

by Allistair McCaw

To reach the very top in tennis you have to be a world class athlete. Besides being mentally, technically and tactically sound, you need to be fitter, faster and stronger than your opponents. My slogan for my company simply states '*better athlete, better player*'. Professional players put in a lot of hours on the court hitting thousands of balls, perfecting their groundstrokes, serve, returns and volleys. But besides the time on court, they also spend a great deal of time in the gym and work on their movement. The goal? To stay injury free and maximise their true athletic potential. They understand that these two elements are crucial to achieving a better performance. Not only for the pro's, but anyone no matter what age or level who wants to improve their game, needs some form of performance training that helps them combat the two most common limiting factors to the athlete: injury and fatigue.

#### **Better athlete, better player.**

Sometimes when I talk about being a better athlete, a lot of my regular clients accuse me of only speaking about the elite level. Let me say this: we are all athletes. If you are a human being and you can move, you are an athlete. The dictionary describes an athlete as:

**Athlete definition:** *A person possessing the natural or acquired traits, such as strength, agility, and endurance, that are necessary for physical exercise or sports, especially those performed in competitive contexts.* Notice it says nothing about level, age or stature.

Tennis is a sport played by young and old, so no matter where you might be level wise right now or how fit or unfit you may be, you can, like the pro's maximize your performance by adding some tennis specific fitness to your weekly routine. Here's the good news: You don't need to put aside a lot of time. For those who play a total of 3 hours a week, by just doing an extra total of 45 - 60mins per week of some type of tennis specific fitness will improve your game by 25%. And I have proof of this with numerous players I have worked with, players ranging from 13 years of age to 70 years!

**The goal of every player is to stay injury free and maximize their true athletic potential.**

When advising professional players on how much time they should spend on their performance training, I tell them at least 50% of the time they spend playing tennis. So for example for every hour they spend on court, they should devote 30 minutes to their performance training. That doesn't necessarily mean doing the 'heavy stuff' like on-court speed work or pushing weights. This allotted time includes the regeneration (recovery) work like prehab, core and foam rolling etc..

For the recreational player who holds a fulltime job or studies for example, I like to advise for every hour they spend playing tennis, they should spend 20 minutes doing some form of added physical activity that compliments their tennis game and protects their body from injury. That's not too much to ask in my opinion, especially when it could dramatically improve your game!

I understand that there is some of us out there who totally detest any form of performance training, believe it or not even some professional athlete's even dislike having to go to the gym or track. With injury being the number one enemy to anyone who plays sport, those who don't find the time for taking care of the body now (ie. prehab, stretching, etc), must find time later for injury and illness later.

**Those who don't have time to take care of their bodies now,  
will have to find time for injury and illness later.**

Below is a see basic example of how you could firstly 'fit in your fitness training' and secondly prioritize the important areas with regards to injury prevention and maximizing performance. Let's say you play 3 times a week.

Day 1 - Tennis 1 hour with 15 mins **legs** exercises (lunges, squats, side lunges etc..). Add 5mins time for stretching after.

Day 2 - Tennis 1 hour with 15 mins **Core** exercises (abdominals and lower back). Add 5mins time for stretching after.

Day 3 - Tennis 1 hour with 15 mins **Agility and speed** (court sprints and movement). Add 5mins time for stretching after.

That's a total of an extra 1 hour per week. It may not sound a lot, but it could possibly save you a few hours at the physio and more importantly improve your on court performance dramatically!

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I often get asked what i think the most important elements are to improving a tennis players' performance when it comes to athletic training. Here goes:

#### **My top 5:**

1. **Mental muscle** - Even though it may not be a muscle, i always like to jokingly say that the most important muscle in the body is the 6 inches between the ears! A smart player is a better player.

2. **Strong legs** - The wheels or the spinners, whatever you like to call them. A tennis player needs strong and supple legs to be able to cover the court well. The first thing that usually goes when a player gets tired are the legs. With tired legs come poor footwork which translates to bad timing. The best players have the strongest legs, have a look at Nadal or Federer's legs next time to see what i mean.

**With tired legs come poor footwork which translates to bad timing.**

3. **Strong core** - The core is the center of the body. A strong and well trained core controls motion and provides the player with good balance, rotational strength (strong back and abdominals) and promotes a better movement effeciently. A good mover on court will always have a good well trained core.

4. **High anaerobic level** - Tennis is an anaerobic sport, meaning it requires short bursts of energy with rest periods (intervals). I have done tests with athletes where their heart rate can reach up to 180 bpm (beats per minute) after a long point. How anerobically fit you are determines how quick you recover. Your next point is only as good as your recovery from the last because what good is it to win the longest most spectacular point of the match only to be totally exhausted after it and then losing the next 3 points or even the entire match?

**What good is it to win the longest most spectacular point of the match, only to be totally exhausted as a result of it and subsequently lose the next 3 points or even game trying to catch your breath back!**

5. **Regeneration** - Good recovery. Your next match or training session is only as good as your recovery from the last. If you don't take care of the body after a strenous effort like after a match for example, it won't perform the way you want it to. Its like driving a car and not servicing it. You drive and drive it until it eventually breaks down. Good regeneration activities include foam rolling, massage, yoga or stretching.

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**Note for the coaches:**

With learning some specific exercises and including these into your lessons, this can add an extra service for your clients. It's an area for tennis coaches to tap into and attract new clients. It not only gives the client the extra tools to perform better, but also keeps your financial income situation healthy by having more healthier injury free clients. For us coaches remember that in most cases a sick or injured client is lost income.

No matter your client/s age or level, by performing some basic exercises and drills to their lesson (preferably at the end) can increase their stamina, strength, speed and more importantly game enjoyment. It doesn't need to be the latest or most difficult exercises, just 4 basic exercises, 2 - 3 times, is enough to make a difference.

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**About Allistair McCaw:**

Allistair is a sports performance trainer and has trained the world's number 1 player's in tennis and squash, Dinara Safina and Nicol David. For more tennis related articles or information about Allistair visit his webpage at: [www.performancetennis.com](http://www.performancetennis.com)