

FRENCH OPEN PREVIEW

TENNIS

Rafael Nadal

What Makes Him Tick

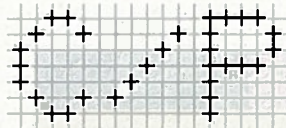
HOW REAL IS THE NEW TENNIS BOOM?

Getting Over The Yips

The Most Flexible League For You

Develop Faster Feet





Fast Feet

Get quicker with these five steps.

BY ALYSSA SHAFFER

Watch the pros fly around the court at the French Open this month and you might find yourself wondering: Just how do they get to the ball so quickly? Sure, some of it is genetics, but there's more involved when it comes to getting faster feet. We asked Mark Kovacs, Ph.D., senior manager of strength and conditioning and sport science for USTA player development, how the rest of us can get to the ball quicker, no matter what our age or ability. Here are his tips.

1. Keep your eye on the ball

Knowing where the ball is going to land before it does will help you get to it much sooner. Roger Federer is one of the best when it comes to this sense of anticipation. "Roger never looks like he is moving very fast, yet he's always in the right position," Kovacs says. "It makes him an incredibly efficient player because he's able to get to where he needs to without having to expend a lot of energy."

You can work at predicting ball placement by studying your opponent. "Try noticing things like where your opponent's racquet head is pointing, how he's gripping his racquet, or how big of a swing he's taking," Kovacs says. "All of those can help you clue in on just where the ball is going to be hit."

For example: If you notice your opponent is about to slice the ball, move forward, since the ball will likely stay low. If he's at the net with the racquet face open, a drop shot is probably coming. "That split second of movement can make a big difference," Kovacs says.

2. Stand at the ready

Being ready to move in any direction will help you overcome some of the inertia of waiting for the ball to arrive on your side of the net. So stay in a ready position with your body weight over the balls of your feet, your knees slightly bent, and your feet shoulder-width apart. "It's that little jump you take just before you land in any direction," Kovacs says.

3. Train like a sprinter

Catch any track and field competition on TV and check out the sprinters' extra large thighs. There's a reason for all that muscle: "Sprinters need leg strength so they can get out of the blocks quickly," Kovacs says.

"The stronger your legs, the faster you can move."

Start by building up a firm foundation with a series of moves that includes stationary forward lunges, side lunges and 45-degree lunges. You'll hit the glutes and various leg muscles in different angles to help develop your lower body. Next, add some tennis-specific lower-body strength exercises that mirror how you move on the court. One way is to practice taking a first step in all directions with a long rubber resistance band or tube around your waist. Finally, add core strengthening moves that also mimic how you play. "The best athletes have a strong, balanced core," Kovacs says. "It helps you maintain your body position and gives you lasting endurance, as well as helping you get that quicker first step." For descriptions of these exercises, see "Moves For Strength" at right.

4. Head for the hills

In addition to regular cardio workouts and interval training, you should spend some time sprinting uphill. "That kind of short overload against resistance will help further develop leg strength and that first-step speed," Kovacs says. Find a steep hill and sprint up for 5 seconds, then rest for 30–60 seconds. Repeat 10–15 times. Do this drill a couple of times a week.

5. Get fancy feet

Footwork drills are an excellent way to develop speed. One that's widely used is the Figure Eight: Place two cones 5 feet apart on a court in line with the net. Start behind one cone, facing the net. Move around the cones laterally, making a figure eight between them as fast as you can. Continue for 15–20 seconds and repeat in the opposite direction.

You can also use the lines of the court: Hop one foot in front of the other as fast as you can along the singles sideline. Or try a lateral alley drill, quickly shuffling back and forth between the outside of the doubles sideline and the outside of the singles sideline. Do this for 10–20 seconds to build agility in your side-to-side movement. Do footwork drills a couple of times a week before or after practice. ●



STAYING IN THE GAME

A Joint Effort

How to protect your game's most important allies

Your joints work overtime to keep you moving, so you need to treat them right. Joint injuries and pain cause many cancelled matches, but most injuries could be prevented if athletes only knew how to take better care of their joints. Here's the best joint advice you've never heard.

Break your painkiller habit. Stuart Warden, an assistant professor in the department of physical therapy at Indiana University, warns that the ritual of taking ibuprofen or aspirin, a.k.a. non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, before activity does more harm than good. "These agents are treatments for the symptoms of an injury, not the injury itself," Warden says. Using medications unnecessarily can interfere with your ability to heal and adapt after exercise, causing joint injuries in mild cases, and stomach ulcers and cardiovascular problems in severe cases. Next time you reach for over-the-counter painkillers, take only the recommended dosage for no more than a week following a serious injury, and never use them as a replacement for seeing your physician.

Try tai chi. Researchers at the Tufts University School of Medicine in Massachusetts have discovered that people over 65 with knee osteoarthritis can use tai chi to boost physical performance and reduce pain. This martial art encourages slow, rhythmic movements that relax the mind and body while enhancing balance, strength and flexibility. San Francisco-based tai chi instructor Tina Chin-Kaplan, the 2001 women's national champion in tai chi, recommends twice-weekly 60-minute practices for at least three months. You should see joint improvements and "improved balance, and stronger quads, glutes and hamstrings," says Chin-Kaplan, who's also an acupuncturist and graduate of the American College of Traditional Chinese Medicine. Include tai chi moves in warm-ups, too. Just be sure to learn proper technique from an instructor. "A video or book can't correct you if your form is wrong," Chin-Kaplan says.

Be flexible. Players who only exercise by playing tennis are at greater risk for injuries, says Dr. Neeru Jayanthi, a USPTA-certified teaching pro and medical director for primary care sports medicine at the Loyola University Medical Center in Chicago. A study he led that analyzed 3,366 matches in USTA junior tournaments found that players who played only tennis were more likely to withdraw from competition for medical reasons, including injuries to joints. It's necessary for tennis players to cross-train to prevent overuse injuries. Jayanthi says you should play other sports, such as basketball, soccer or Ultimate Frisbee, and do exercises that enhance flexibility and core and upper-body strength. "Examples include yoga, Pilates and maintaining aerobic fitness through cardio tennis instead of just playing as usual," Jayanthi says.

—GENEVIEVE P. CHARET

Moves for Strength



LUNGES

For a stronger lower body, do lunges in all directions, stepping to the front, to the side and diagonally at 45-degree angles (left) and lowering until your knees are at 90-degree angles. Do 2 sets of 10–15 reps per leg 2–3 times a week.

FIRST STEPS

Tie a long resistance band around your waist and anchor the other end to a fence or pole. Step out until the band is taut and practice taking a first step in multiple directions (side, front, back and diagonally). Move slowly until you get the movement

down, then speed up until you're going as fast as possible while maintaining your form. Do this 8–10 times in each direction 2–3 times a week.



SHADOW STROKES

Hold a 4–6-pound medicine ball in both hands and stand in a ready position. Slowly take the ball back on your forehand side and mimic the stroke. Repeat on the backhand. Do 2 sets of 6 reps per side 2–3 times a week.—A.S.