



FEELTENNIS



15

**Watching the Ball Drills
for Better Ball Tracking**

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The following “watching the ball” drills improve your tennis timing, rhythm, and ability to hit the ball clean, which gives you much better control of the ball and allows for an effortless hit.

All drills should be played in mini tennis first, as the speed of the ball is low and it’s easier to track the ball.

The total duration of ball tracking drills is approximately 5 minutes for mini tennis, 5 minutes for 3/4 (midi tennis) distance, and 5 minutes at baseline.

Even if you just focus for 5 minutes on mini tennis and then work on something else at baseline, you will experience better ball-tracking ability over time.

You can always start with just one stroke per minute to refine the skill of tracking the ball well on one side, and eventually mix both strokes.

DRILL 1

Bring the Ball into Focus After the Bounce



Try to see the ball clearly (in focus) as it comes out of the bounce, as if you were taking a clear photo of the ball with your phone.

Call out a “yes” to confirm to yourself and your subconscious that you saw the ball in focus every time you see it well.



DRILL 2

Bring the Ball into Focus on Top of its Flight



Bring the ball into focus as soon as you can after your partner hits the ball, and call it out again with a “yes.”

Extra attention should be paid to how clearly you see the ball around the top of the ball’s flight.



DRILL 3

Bring the Ball into Focus Before and After the Bounce



The previous two exercises were combined by trying to see the ball clearly in focus around the top of its flight and as it came out of the bounce.

Call out “yes” or “no” for each of the two periods of the ball flight to make sure you’re completely focused on the ball and on this task. (as the mind can quickly wander somewhere else).



DRILL 4

Say “Hit” when your Partner Hits the Ball



The most common mistake with this drill is that players observe the hit and then call it out, which means that two sounds are heard in sequence: the sound of contact and the sound of your voice.

We need to be more precise in tennis, and anticipate and read hits and bounces more accurately. Therefore, your goal is to say “hit” exactly when your partner hits the ball.



DRILL 5

Say "Top" when the Ball passes through the Top of its Flight



One of the main reasons why players prepare late is because they don't pay attention to the first flight of the ball.

By calling out "top" when the ball goes through the top of its flight, you are forced to observe the ball's flight really well and that will help you read the ball's flight much earlier and can therefore prepare the stroke earlier.



DRILL 6

Call Out "Hit" and "Top"



Combine the previous two drills and call out your partner's hit and the top of the ball's flight.

When playing mini-tennis, the hit and top will follow very quickly in sequence, but when you play from baseline, you'll find it easier to call them out.

The quick sequence of events that you need to be aware of will help you raise your alertness and concentration levels, helping you perceive the ball's flight much better.



DRILL 7

Call Out the Bounce on your Side



Call out “bounce” when the ball bounces on your side.

As with previous drills, do not wait to observe the bounce and then call it as your mind needs to work faster and anticipate events in tennis.

Your goal is for the sound of the bounce and the sound of your voice to overlap when you call out the bounce on time.



DRILL 8

Call Out Bounce and Hit on your Side



This is a famous exercise invented by Timothy Gallwey, who wrote *The Inner Game of Tennis*, and will always be one of the foundations of getting into rhythm in tennis.

Call out the bounce and your own hit of the ball, and pay attention to the timing of your calls so that it is exactly at the moment of bounce and contact with the ball.



DRILL 9

Call Out your Partner's Hit and Bounce on your Side



You can play with variations of the rhythm, mixing up the hits and bounces that you want to focus on.

In this example, you call out your partner's hit by the ball and the bounce on your side. The key is to match the sound of the ball bouncing with your voice.



DRILL 10

Call Out your Partner's Hit, Bounce of the Ball, and your own Hit



This is the most complex task that requires the highest level of concentration, and that's how focused you should be during every ball exchange in tennis.

Most players are not really in a sufficiently alert and focused state until they are about to hit the ball, which is not good enough because you need all your brain power to judge the ball very early in its flight.

This exercise is a final test of how well you can track a ball and the accuracy of your timing.



DRILL 11

Observe the Spin of the Ball After the Bounce



The next set of drills are designed to keep your mind focused on the ball by asking yourself to observe something on the ball.

We all see the ball, but how well do you pay attention to it is the real difference in how well you will time the stroke.

In the first drill, we only want to notice whether the ball is spinning after bouncing. Confirm with a “yes” when you see the spin.



DRILL 12

Observe the Spin of the Ball on the Other Side



Your next task is to try and see the ball spin as it comes over the net before the bounce.

Paying attention to the ball and reading its flight characteristics early allows you to judge its flight well and predict with good accuracy how it's going to bounce, so that you are in position early and can prepare your stroke early.

Ask your partner to vary the spins (topspin, flat, and backspin) so that you remain focused on the task.



DRILL 13

Call Out the Spin Type Before and After the Bounce



Combine the previous two exercises and read the spin of the ball before and after the bounce.

Have your partner vary the types of shots so that you remain fully focused on reading the ball's flight.



DRILL 14

Compare the Rate of Spinning Before and After the Bounce



You are still looking to read the type of spin before and after the bounce; however, you must observe the spinning rate.

You can start with “fast” and “slow” but as you become better at reading the ball's spinning rate, add the “medium” rating as well.



DRILL 15

Observe the Sunny and Shady Part of the Ball



On a sunny day, you can try this fun task: observe which part of the ball is sunny and which part is in the shade as it flies towards you.

Note this before and after the bounce, and remain focused on that for one or two minutes.



Tracking the Ball Better

As you can improve by paying attention to the ball, you can try to track it for a long time.

There are two ways you can think about it:

- take multiple snapshots of the ball as if using a phone or camera or
- think of continuously tracking the ball as if recording a video.

Taking snapshots is a useful approach to testing, as you can ask yourself how many images of the ball you remember and see in your memory after you hit it.

I can almost always recall 3-5 clear images of the ball (from bounce to contact) stored in my short-term memory.

If I try to recall images of the ball from the partner's hit to the bounce, I will see somewhere between 5-8 images depending on the speed of the ball.

The more images you can see, the more time you will perceive and the slower the ball will appear.

This will make you feel that tennis is a relatively slow game and that there is a lot of time to move and prepare for the stroke.

While you can give yourself more time at first to practice watching the ball, like 15-20 minutes per session, never completely stop with the focusing exercises.

Use them even just for 2-3 minutes at the start of your tennis session, whether it's free hitting or a match to ensure that your eyes and mind are fully alert and ready to track the fast moving small yellow ball through space.

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