

HOW TO PLAY ON CLAY

by Robert Salum - www.robertsalum.com

FIVE THINGS TO REMEMBER WHEN PLAYING ON CLAY:

1) Be prepared to play long points.

Work on the your groundstrokes' consistency. Be patient while building the point. Train your endurance, strength, flexibility and speed.

2) Enhance your repertoire of shots

You will need to hit topspin, slice, lobs and drop shots.

3) Your physical fitness determines your Mental Toughness

The more physically prepared you are, the more mentally tough you will be on clay.

4) Carve out your tactical arsenal.

You won't be able to rely on power most of the time. You need to work on **placement, depth and spin** over speed. Get ready to earn every point. Wait for a short or high ball to attack, and only do so when you have created space for your winning shot.

5) Footwork is king.

Learning to slide to get to the ball, recover, and approach the net in balance are absolutely essential.

TECHNICAL TIPS:

1- Brush up on the ball for extra topspin

- Topspin helps you reduce your chances of error while allowing you to create more angles.
- To generate extra topspin on your shots, lower the head of your racquet below the ball and brush upwards. Let your racquet follow-through until the knuckles of your hand almost touch your ear. To gain depth on your topspin shots, extend your follow-through until your ribcage points to the other side of the court.
- *Key words to remember: "Low-to-High"*

2- Polish your backhand slice

- You can profit a great deal from keeping the ball low on clay. Whenever you force your opponent to reach down for a shot -- especially if it's an angled one -- you can take advantage of a short or high return that you can put away.
- Your backhand slice is especially important. Keep it low -- don't muscle it. If you decide to approach the net with your backhand, stay sideways as long as you can while moving your racquet forward through the ball. You will notice that your feet perform what's called a "carioca step." After you follow-through, land on both feet ("split-step") and get ready to volley.
- *Key words to remember: "Slice through the ball"*

3- Practice placement on your serves:

- Clay courts are the great equalizer. Big servers find themselves sometimes neutralized by the slow surface. Your main technical consideration should be to get in as many first serves as possible. Work on placement. Vary your targets. Don't let your opponent get used to return one type of serve.
- Slice is the most effective spin you can add. For dramatically effective slice serves, imagine the ball as a clock face. Brush the ball sideways from 9-to-3 if you are a right-hander, and from 3-to-9 if you are a lefty. Curve your serves into the receiver's body. Take advantage of weak returns to approach the net or go for outright winners.
- *Key words to remember: "Placement first" -- "9-to-3" (or 3-to-9)*

4- Return serves deep:

- You can dictate the pace of the match by concentrating on your serve return. Keep it deep. Put the server on the defensive right away. Punish weak second serves, so you can gradually erode the server's confidence.
- For effective returns, crouch a bit before your opponent serves. Hop when you see the server release the ball up in the air. Land on a split-step and swing your racquet forward towards the ball with a long follow-through.
- *Key words to remember: "Split and hit deep"*

5- Use the drop-shot and the lob:

- On clay, you can rely on the characteristics of the surface to keep your opponent off-balance. Be ready to break a long rally with a drop shot. If your opponent gets it, lob and get ready to intercept the response. Your opponent should always be guessing what's going to be your next move.

TACTICS ON CLAY:**1- Pinpoint your tactical opportunities**

There are 4 ways of winning points in tennis:

- ◆ Hit a clean winner
- ◆ Get a short ball
- ◆ Get a high ball
- ◆ Force an opponent's error

2- Build up your tactical arsenal

Rely on the control, direction and depth of your shots. You can add variation to your game by mixing-up three sets of variables:

- ◆ Long and short shots
- ◆ Left and right shots
- ◆ Low and high shots

When you combine these three variables, you end up with a very powerful tactical arsenal to play on clay.

3- Play the score

When you're ahead, you can play ROUGH (aggressively). When you're behind, play TOUGH (consistent). Always strive to stay two or three points ahead of your opponent per game. Your goal should be to be up 30-0, 40-0 or 40-15 on every game. This will put consistent psychological pressure on your opponent. If you're behind, always try to stay close in the score. Keep the pressure on. Remember: most matches are won by a difference of a few points. You can change the momentum of a match in your favor only if you fight every point.

4- Use the GOLDEN TACTIC:

Right handers:

- ◆ Force the opponent to leave a high or short ball in the center of the court.
- ◆ RUN AROUND YOUR FOREHAND and hit hard and deep to the opponent's backhand.
- ◆ Step in towards the direction of your shot to close the angle of possible returns.

Left handers: Obviously, you don't need to run around your forehand.

This is the most effective clay-court tactic used by consistent, baseline players. Try to identify it whenever you watch European or South American players on TV.

PHYSICAL CONDITIONING:

Before trying any of these tips, please go through a fitness evaluation with a Certified Tennis Pro or a Certified Fitness Trainer and check your endurance, strength, flexibility and speed levels.

KEEP THIS IN MIND: While practicing the following drills, focus on your clay-court FOOTWORK. Slide to get to the ball, stop before you hit, and push-off with to recover your ready-position for the next shot.

On-Court Physical Conditioning:**ENDURANCE TRAINING:**

From the Baseline:

- ◆ Practice by rallying with consistency from the baseline.
- ◆ Gradually increase the number of shots you can keep in play with one ball.
- ◆ Start moving from side to side while you direct your shots to one spot.
- ◆ Practice hitting backhands and forehands crosscourt and down-the line, keeping the same ball in play over 25 times.
- ◆ Increase to 50 times.
- ◆ Increase to 100 times.

At the Net:

- ◆ Stand at the center of the court. Your partner stands on one side. You will alternate forehand and backhand volleys, directing all shots straight at your partner's feet. Keep the ball in play over 10 times without mistakes.
- ◆ Take a break. Repeat. Go for 20 times without mistakes.
- ◆ Your partner feeds you a forehand volley, a backhand volley, and a lob. You must hit all shots without mistakes and keeping one ball in play over 15 times.

SPEED TRAINING:

Drill #1:

- ◆ Ask your practice partner to come up to the net and stand on one half of the court. Rally consistently with you forehand only. Then, add backhands.
- ◆ Play 15 balls in a row back to your partner, hitting forehands and backhands alternatively.
- ◆ Ask your partner to shift to the other half of the court and repeat (another set of 15)
- ◆ Play 2 more sets of 15 shots.

Drill #2:

- ◆ Your partner stands at the net with 6 balls. You are also at the net facing him or her.
- ◆ Your partner feeds you a lob. You run back and retrieve it with a forehand down-the-line.
- ◆ Your partners then feeds you a drop shot. You run forward and retrieve it with a counter-drop shot.
- ◆ Your partner keeps feeding you lobs and drop shots. You retrieve the lobs alternating forehands and backhands. You answer all drop shots with counter-drop shots.
- ◆ Take a break. Repeat the series twice.

MENTAL TOUGHNESS ON CLAY:**Key points before the match:**

- 1 – Write down your strategy
- 2 – Visualize yourself performing at your ideal level
- 3 – Meditate with music

Key points during the match:

- 1 – Recover in-between-points
- 2 – Prepare your tactic before the next point
- 3 – Be aware of your rituals (in-between-points and before starting the next point)
- 4 – Let go of mistakes quickly
- 5 – Keep your intensity up
- 6 – Focus on the present