

The Battle of the Surfaces

Tennis players develop their own taste for the game. We often prefer special racquets, strings, and balls. The best players usually have a favorite court surface. Tennis lover's fanaticism for different surfaces has created controversy for years. It reached its high point in May 2nd, 2007, during an event called "The Battle of the Surfaces, in Mallorca, Spain. The event was an exhibition match between Roger Federer, the world's #1 player, and Rafael Nadal, World #2 player, on a special court: half was made of red clay and the other half was made of grass. The exhibition match had all of kinds of fun details like changeovers being extended to two minutes instead of the usual 90 seconds to give players a chance to change their shoes for each surface. "It has been a nice experience, although before the match I thought it would be a disaster because I felt it would be very difficult for me to adapt to the court," said Nadal. At the end, the king of clay, Nadal, Defeated the king of grass, Federer, with a score of 7-5 4-6 7-6 (12-10). The Battle of the Surfaces produced many fun memories for the fans of this sport.

Tennis has changed so much in recent decades. There was a shift to slow play beginning in the 1990s. Tennis fans began to complain that the faster surfaces were boring. The faster surfaces did not allow for long, suspenseful rallies, as points usually consisted of a hard serve, followed by a rush to the net, the serve-and-volley game. Slower surfaces see the players staying put at the baseline, jockeying back and forth for long, drawn-out points. Grand Slam events and many ATP tournaments have slowed down their surface in the past decade. Wimbledon changed the composition of their grass, the Australian Open changed to a slower hard-court surface and the U.S. Open added more sand to their courts' composition in an effort to slow down play.

It is common for tennis players to debate which surface is the best. Of course, each specific surface has its own fans. Players in Great Britain prefer grass. In North America, most people play on hard courts. In Europe and South America, players are fans of the clay court, especially red clay.

Each surface has its own characteristics and presents different challenges. Each type of court favors a distinctive style of play. American players tend to be aggressive baseliners with powerful groundstrokes and serves. Players like John Isner, Sam Querrey or Serena Williams love to take advantage of fast surfaces. I am personally a big fan of Serena Williams, not only for all her titles, but for her ability to adapt her game to different surfaces. Her longest gap between Grand Slam titles fell between the US open in 1999 and the French open in 2002. After winning her first Grand Slam title on hard courts, her focus began to be on winning a big tournament on clay. This was difficult because she came from an all-hard court training background. She started training in France, on red clay, learning the art of playing on clay. It took three years until she won the French Open – against her own sister, Venus. Today, Serena spends several months of every year training on red clay with her coach, Patrick Mouratoglou, at Mouratoglou Academy in France.

In Europe and Latin America, clay court players build points with angles, spin, and consistency. The king of clay, Rafael Nadal, has won the French open 12 times, more than anybody else in history. Novak Djokovic, the current top player in the world, is very skillful on the surface as well. It is telling to observe that like Nadal and Djokovic, the current top 15 men's players in the world grew up playing on clay courts. Each day tennis is getting more and more complex. Now, every player is fast, consistent, and strong. These are the skills that are best acquired by training on clay courts.

When I first arrived in the US in 2010 to play college tennis, I quickly found out that the dominant surface was the hard court. I remember my college coaches asking me to start stepping more into the court instead of staying 3 feet behind the baseline every point. It did not take me longer to make the necessary correction and adapt my clay court profile to the faster hard courts that I was now playing on. Still, when I played American opponents, I was more versatile and consistent. The skills I mastered playing in clay court for years were key components of the success I had in my college carrier. As a Venezuelan coach in the US I remember my first teaching job at a public facility in Jackson, MS. I was only 19 years old trying to teach 10 years old and older kids. My English was just getting good enough to help them have fun and learn the game. I now have more than seven years of experience working with juniors in Mississippi and in the Southern region. I have noticed that the US coaches have a great culture of training. I have traveled across the country and visited multiple tennis programs with similar programs that produce great results. But when I have spoken with South American coaches in different academies, I have noticed how they try to teach clay court skills. In the US, most of the tournaments and tennis courts are played on hard courts which evidently agrees with the tennis style of this country. More inputs from other tennis cultures, especially from South America, will add value to our junior players in the United States. Clay court skills are dominating the sport on the international level.

Brian Dabul from Argentina, former number 1 junior in the world and top 80 in the world ATP, says that, "Without a doubt growing up in South America playing on clay courts gives us extra knowledge about playing. South American coaches can combine with North American coaches to help our juniors generate more acceleration on shots, work angles better, and build longer points Adding the clay-court style to US teaching will help juniors to make better decisions on the court.." Today Brian has one of the most successful junior programs in Florida and the US. He has trained pro players as successful as Elina Svitolina, current number 5 in the world WTA, in the art of dominating the clay court and the different skills necessary to find success in this surface in general. In my opinion, the need for players to become more complete in terms of skills and variations is getting bigger every day. The game has evolved so much that the traditional training where you focus only one surface is not enough anymore.

Globalization is changing the world, including the world of tennis. As an international coach, the key lesson that I have learned is to be open-minded and to understand that the sport is changing. Every day it becomes more challenging to be successful, and our job is to guide juniors to choose from the best available styles that have developed on different surfaces. It is what you do before the practice start that makes a champion.

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