

- » Finding out why tennis is the greatest game of all time (okay, I'm biased)
- » Getting the basic gist of the game

## Chapter **1**

# What Is Tennis?

**S**o, you want to play tennis. Well, you've made a great choice! And I don't say that just because I made the same choice when I was about 3 years old. Tennis can catch and hold you for life, so be warned! If you pick up a racquet to play tennis, you may never want to put it down.

In this chapter, I touch briefly on all the aspects of tennis that make it such a wonderful game (in case you need a little more convincing). I also tell you the fundamental principles behind the game.

## Tennis: The Sport for a Lifetime

Many years ago, the United States Tennis Association (USTA) ran an ad campaign promoting tennis as “The Sport for a Lifetime.” This slogan wasn't just a catchy phrase thought up by some advertising genius — tennis really is a game that you can enjoy long-term, both as a player and as a spectator.



MAC SAYS

I sat down and made up a quick list to show you why I believe that tennis can be the sport of a lifetime, for almost everyone:

- » **You can play tennis, even competitively, at any age.** If time and work haven't killed your inner weekend warrior, you can compete in organized

tennis tournaments and league matches at virtually any age, at almost any skill level.

» **You don't need to find 17 other people to play a game.** Unlike a sport such as baseball or softball, you need only one other person to play tennis (and if just want some practice, you can play by yourself, hitting against a wall). Of course, if you do have 17 other people who want to play tennis with you, then great — you can get a great tournament going. But you may need a few more balls!

» **You don't need a whole bank full of money to play tennis.** Tennis often gets labeled as an elitest sport. This truly rankles me because it doesn't have to be. Sure, for professionals and top amateurs, tennis can be very costly, but at the recreational level, it's a much different proposition. If you want, you can spend all day at the public courts without spending a nickel on anything other than some sunblock.

Because tennis can be a cheap game to get into, people from all kinds of backgrounds can get interested in (and get really good at) the game. Tennis isn't just a game for people who can afford to pay \$100 a pop for lessons. In fact, some of the greatest players in history, such as Andre Agassi and the Williams sisters, had pretty humble beginnings.

» **Tennis brings people together.** No, I'm not getting all sentimental on you — in tennis, people of different ages and genders can match up well as partners. For example, you can find yourself in a spirited mixed-doubles game along with your spouse, your grandson, and your daughter-in-law. The only thing you may have to worry about is initiating a family feud.

» **Playing tennis well gives you a sense of accomplishment.** Tennis is a skill-intensive sport. Like playing a musical instrument or learning a new language, playing tennis requires dedication to keep improving — which is what makes it so awesome. When you're good at it, it's very satisfying.

» **Tennis is a great way to keep fit.** Tennis has a high fitness rating, and you can dial in the degree of workout you want.

## Getting the Point: Singles, Doubles, and Winning at Both

You can play tennis in one of two formats: singles or doubles. Singles involves two players, one on each side of the net, playing against each other. Doubles is just what the name implies — you've got four people on the court with two people playing as a team against another two-person team.

Singles is a more physically demanding game than doubles, for two reasons:

- » You get the intensity of one-on-one competition.
- » You have more court to cover all by yourself.

Regardless of whether you play singles or doubles, your goal is always the same: to win points. A point begins with a serve (see Chapter 11), which puts the ball into play. The player who keeps the ball in play the longest wins the point. How do you keep the ball in play? Read on, Grasshopper.

## Racquet, balls, and an opponent

You don't need much to play tennis, but there are a few essentials. First is a racquet. Racquets come in many different varieties, but all share some basic features (see Chapter 3). Finding one that suits you makes the game more fun and easier to learn. But the racquet won't do you any good unless you've got something to hit. That's where having some tennis balls — preferably fresh ones — comes in. They're sold all over, and you'll want to keep plenty around so you're never caught without them. The final thing you need is a worthwhile playing partner of a similar ability level. You could just practice against a wall (see Chapter 15), but you'll never win bragging rights.

## Clearing the net

The biggest obstacle that you face on the tennis court is the net that divides the court into two sides — your side and your opponent's side. The first thing you need to do, no matter how goofy you may look doing it, is to make sure that any ball you hit makes it back over the net. If the ball doesn't clear the net, the point is over. You've lost it.



MAC SAYS

When we first started dating, my wife, Melissa, didn't know much about tennis. Once during a close, important match, she called out between points, "Come on, Pat! Just get the ball over the net!" I looked at her like "Gee, thanks, honey!" But there it is — the fundamental truth about tennis.

Officially, the net must be 36 inches tall at the center strap. (See Chapter 2 for all the details on net and court measurements.) But even though 36 inches may not seem very high, I assure you that sometimes that darned net looks as tall as the Great Wall of China.

## Keeping the ball inside the lines

Tennis is basically a game of controlled power. Ideally, you hit the ball pretty hard and pretty far, but it must always land inside the lines (or court boundaries) to remain in play. If you hit a ball and it first bounces outside the lines that define the singles or doubles court (see Chapter 2), you've lost the point.

## One bounce only, please

Tennis would be a snoozer if all you had to do was clear the net and keep the ball inside the lines. The real degree of difficulty comes from this little kink: The ball can bounce only once on your side before you hit it. Of course, if you're standing at the right place at the right time, you don't have to let the ball bounce at all before you hit it. But more than one bounce, and you've lost the point.

Causing the ball to bounce twice on your opponent's side wins you the point outright, which is called a *winner*. Winners are by far the most satisfying way to win a point. When I played, often my preference was to keep the ball in play until my opponent missed a shot, which is called an *unforced error*. Whether you smack a winner or your opponent makes a mistake, the points count the same. Cherish them for all they're worth!

## Scoring basics

The winner of a tennis match is almost always the player who wins more points. You win points when you hit winners or your opponent makes errors (for example, they hit the ball into the net or beyond the lines). You lose points because of your opponent's winners and your errors.

In some cases, the winner of a match may have won just one single, solitary point more than their opponent. For example, when Pete Sampras and Goran Ivanišević met in the semifinals of Wimbledon in 1995, Sampras won with a grand total of 146 points to Ivanišević's 145 points. It's even possible for a player to lose more points than their opponent and still win the match! At other times, the victor may have won dozens more points than the loser. That's the difference between a blowout and a nail-biter.