

Tennis' tug-of-war

Whether you're in full control on court or trying to wrestle a lead away from an opponent, winning matches often comes down to who manages momentum shifts the best. **ROBERT DAVIS** explores how to maintain a winning advantage - or claim it, when events are transpiring against you.

When Grigor Dimitrov served for the fourth set against Andy Murray's in the round of 16 at this year's Australia Open it seemed a done deal that the match was headed for a fifth. All through that set Dimitrov had been the aggressor and, as far as statistics go, the better player.

Only minutes earlier, Murray had to claw his way out of a hole to hold his serve and save a set point.

Now, serving at 5-4, it was time for Dimitrov to close it out and level the match. What happened next to Dimitrov happens all the time in tennis - a major shift in momentum. As Murray wrestled control from Dimitrov at the last moment spectators were stunned at the sudden change and pace of events. Minutes later, Murray walked off the court the winner.

As tennis has a way of humbling all players, a similar

shift in momentum struck Murray in the final against Novak Djokovic. Tied at one set all and leading two games to love, Murray completely collapsed, the Scot losing 12 of the next 13 games.

At times like this, players and coaches often have more questions than answers - but one man believes that there are basic techniques about managing momentum that can be learned and taught.

"Learning momentum management techniques has been such a constant theme that many coaches are intrigued by the concept," says Chuck Kriese, leading expert on momentum in sport. "However, many do not want to delve into an arena that is initially foreign to their thought process about the game of tennis.

"Many players have to learn to work themselves through the pecking orders of tennis. The learning curve can be accelerated

with one's understanding of momentum control tactics, which grows into natural habits of doing the right things at the right time on the court."

While there is no exact science to tennis, Kriese has amassed loads of data and evidence of repeat behavior patterns in match play.

Pressure points

To prove his theory, Kriese points to the 2008 Wimbledon final between Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal. Specifically, the fourth set tiebreak (considered by many as greatest tiebreak ever) and then the fifth set, encouraging me to watch it again on a replay.

With Nadal leading two sets to one, the fourth set tiebreak begins with the first seven points an array of improbable winners, forcing errors and grueling defense with Nadal taking the lead 5-2. It is here, that Kriese wants me to focus; now Nadal can serve out for the Championship, but inexplicably he double faults and then a backhand unforced error allows Federer back in the match. Serving at 4-5, Federer rips

a forehand winner and then follows that up with a big serve to take the lead 6-5. Another long rally and two unforced errors by Federer off the forehand and now Nadal has another match point. What follows is one great shot after another, four winners out of the next five points, until Federer finally manages to equalise the match.

Kriese believes that players often produce their best shots when they're on the brink of defeat, and that their hands often work better when behind. And how they are more likely to commit errors when they are ahead and trying to close it out, especially if they are not confident beating a higher ranked opponent.

"More often than not, a player will commit unforced errors because his hand skills (fine-motor skills) will work worse when he is ahead than when behind. This is true until the player is finally comfortable leading, and then his hand skills will work well for the remainder of the match. Provided that there is discipline in body language, shot-selection and good tactics. Matches are usually only

"A GENERAL RULE FOR PLAYERS TO REMEMBER IS: WHEN AHEAD, MOMENTUM IS ABOUT DISCIPLINE WITH SHOT SELECTION AND FOCUS; WHEN BEHIND IT IS ABOUT COURAGE AND AGGRESSION; AND WHEN IT IS EVEN, IT IS ABOUT HAVING THE BASE CONFIDENCE TO LEAD."

- CHUCK KRIESE

reversed when there is a lack of discipline in these areas by the winning player."

Actions and reactions

The next lesson in momentum management is to understand guidelines around actions and reactions. Kriese classifies certain plays, which incorporate quick pressure or delayed pressure, as:

- **Momentum keeper**
- **Momentum breaker**
- **Momentum taker**

"Points are always terminated with one of the following ways,"

Kriese notes. "An opponent's good shot, opponent's bad shot. My good shot or my bad shot."

As far as your own play is concerned, delayed pressure tactics; which usually means grinding from the baseline while attempting to break your opponent down and force an error by using high percentage shot selection and superb fitness (think David Ferrer, Nadal, Kei Nishikori, Murray and Djokovic), are almost always the best response.

"This builds on your own good shots with



YOUR GAME

a disciplined response (making you a momentum keeper) and stops the bleeding from one's bad shots (a momentum breaker)," Kriese explains.

Quick pressure tactics are more proactive and offensive early in the point; consider how Federer, Dmitrov, Marin Cilic, Milos Raonic, and Tomas Berdych force the action immediately after their serve is in play by looking to hammer a forehand to the open court.

"This neutralises or negates the impact of his /her good shot (a momentum breaker) and also takes the opportunity to trump the opponent's bad shot (a momentum taker)," Kriese says,

Combining the guidelines will generally see players using their favourite style around 75 per cent of the time, but successful execution of the 25 per cent that is your less favorite style makes all of the difference. As Kriese explains: "For clutch play under pressure, it gives you the best chance of winning against difficult game-styles to play or against superior opponents that are dictating their will on you."



LOST MOMENTUM? DON'T PANIC!

- » Taking your time is a key to regaining momentum.
- » Where possible, slow down play between points.
- » Use a change of ends to regroup.
- » Rely on your routines as you evaluate what's going wrong.
- » Think back to what you did well early in the match.
- » Remember if you lost momentum, you can get it back again.

Kriese points again back to the 2008 Nadal v Federer Wimbledon final. With Nadal serving at 8-7 in the fifth, he opened the game with an unforced backhand error. Then he did something that he had not done the entire match, a serve and volley (Nadal's least favorite style) and won the point.

Murray and Lleyton Hewitt have similarly been known to

use the surprise serve and volley tactic at crucial times.

Beware the scoreboard

At the ATP Challenger in Hong Kong this year, Yan Bai was leading Ramkumar Ramanathan, 6-3 4-0 in the first round; seemingly, the match was in the bag. Yan Bai certainly thought so, he began to smile through the fence at his countrymen watching, made a joke or two, and then played a few ill-advised drop shots. Bai would lose the next nine games before retiring while down 4-1 in the third.

Similarly, Andreas Seppi appeared in total control against Nick Kyrgios in their match at Hisense Arena leading two sets to love before Kyrgios turned the tide and found a way to win. Murray also featured in two famous examples in recent tennis history - and remarkably, both of them were finals featuring Tommy Robredo. Murray saved five match points to win the inaugural Shenzhen event in 2014 and just weeks later, he repeated that feat to win Valencia.

Considering those matches, Kriese offers a final piece of advice on momentum management. "A general rule for

HAVE THE MOMENTUM? USE IT!

- » Play the style of tennis that helped you gain momentum.
- » Don't simply maintain intensity - increase it.
- » Be confident, not cocky. Leads can slip away easily.
- » Focus! Be wary in particular of distractions like bad line calls or spectator involvement.
- » Be ready with a Plan B if you feel momentum shifting.
- » Beware the scoreboard. Now is not the time to relax.

players to remember is, when ahead, momentum is about discipline with shot selection and focus; when behind it is about courage and aggression; and when it is even it is about having the base confidence to lead."

There are exceptions to every rule, especially so in tennis.

However, what Kriese is offering coaches and players through his momentum management guidelines are some basic (and complex) techniques that can be tailored to fit the individual player's style of play. More importantly, it also allows the player to run certain plays at critical junctures in the match rather than depend on feelings and emotions to dictate the decisions.

"There are so many things that can happen during a tennis match that are completely out of a player's control," Kriese says. "At its roots, effective momentum management is about how a player responds to these situations. Having a plan in place for the various match checkpoints allows the player to focus on execution and prevent panic and anxiety from taking over the decision making process." **ATM**

CHANGING FORTUNES: Tomas Berdych, typically accomplished in maintaining momentum, allowed Andy Murray to regain control with a 6-7(6) 6-0 6-3 7-5 win in their passion-fuelled Australian Open semifinal.

Robert Davis a regular contributor to *atptennis.com*, *Australian Tennis Magazine* and other publications, has spent more than 20 years travelling on the ATP Tour as a coach. **Chuck Kriese**, a keynote speaker around the world on his momentum principles, has authored four tennis books; *Total Tennis Training*, *Winning Tennis*, *Coaching Tennis* and *Youth Tennis*. For more information, visit chuckkriese.net