

Hitting Those Overhead Shots: Step -- Wham!

Written by Arizona Foothills Magazine
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I don't recall seeing a tennis ball go up that high, ever. The Ivy League coach who sent the ball flying just seemed to snap his wrist, sending the ball into the still air of the tennis dome, while continuing his lecture on how to hit an overhead. He continued talking as best he could, but even a seasoned coach in mid-sentence has an innate need to watch a tennis ball when it is sailing overhead.

About 30 tennis camp kids also watched the ball in high anticipation. I remember thinking, I couldn't hit a ball half that high, and this coach did so without losing concentration on what he was saying. The ball kept going up, then made a slow turn and headed for a spot about five feet back on the other side of the net. It came screaming down, heading right for my son, who had the foresight to stand, at guard, racquet locked behind his head. Down came the fuzzy blur, step – wham! My son was eight or nine at the time and the coach's draw dropped open. How could that kid even see the ball, let alone step into place and clock an impossible shot bouncing it right at the coach's feet?

That was a proud moment as a semi-official tennis coach for my son, but the true training came from playing baseball. At the time, I could truly sky a hardball into the clouds. My arm had slingshot capacity then and my youngest son – one of three – pleaded for me to do this hundreds of times. By now, he could confidently stand underneath a tennis ball without any fear.

But it takes more than fortitude to hit an overhead slam in tennis and my son also had these ingredients down pat:

He was prepared ahead of time – his racquet locked into position.

He used his free hand to maintain balance.

He stepped into the shot, turning from sideways to facing the net.

He aimed low, which requires a follow through.

There are various [tennis ball machine brands](#) that make decent equipment that can help you practice this shot until you have a slam that will impress everyone, including your coach. Brands like Sports Tutor, Do It Tennis, and Lobster specialize in this tennis training equipment of various sizes, and some are equipped with remote controls or even smartphone pairing.

But let's review these steps one at a time.

Get your racquet back early

It astounds me [how much debate this simple practice gets](#) in the tennis universe. Some argue that getting the racquet back early brings you more power. Others claim accuracy is the point. Players endlessly debate whether or not the pros do this. Some call the practice a myth (without even knowing why).

First of all, until you are a pro, don't worry about how the pros do this. Pros have shortened every possible facet of the game down to its most efficient level, because they play four to eight hours a day and have done so for years. Their motions have been distilled and their muscles have been educated. Suffice it to say, when they were toddlers, they got their racquets back early and so should you.

The reason you hold a racquet back early and hold it there is so that, when the ball arrives, you only have one motion to do in that last split second, instead of two. Waving a racquet back and forth at the last moment is much sloppier than just bringing it forward at the last moment. And who wants a sloppy shot? Nobody. It's just a matter of common sense; nothing more, nothing less.

The idea that a tennis shot is a continuous motion is just silly. Even a golf shot isn't a continuous motion: It's a matter of bringing the club back to the right position, then taking the shot. That's two motions that just happen to have no gap between them (because nobody can hold themselves in a twisted position with a club overhead for very long). But it is still, essentially, two actions, not one.

Use your free hand for balance

With an overhead shot, balance is critical. You are striking at a moving object, so the less body movement you greet the ball with, the better. With that in mind, you don't want to lose your balance and have to find it again at the last second.

Step into the shot from sideways to facing the net

This step is also a matter of balance, but also of aim. The ball will tend to go where your belt buckle is facing after the shot. But you also need to be a bit behind the ball, as it descends, so that you step forward to make the shot. That puts power into the shot, but also far easier to move forward than backward. Further, there isn't much power in connecting with the ball behind your head.

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Aim low and follow through

An overhead shot in tennis is not a ping-pong styled net shot. This is not a matter of just meeting the ball, unless you want to just drip a shot over the net.

You [aim low](#), simply because the vast majority of overhead shots miss by going out of bounds, not into the net.

Furthermore, the truth is very few people aim an overhead shot at all. They just assume the shot will power past an opponent. And while this is true, what about combining that with some actual aim? If you can do both, then more power to you.

These are just a few tips for improving your overhead shot in tennis. For ongoing and exponential improvement, you might consider tennis lessons.