



Strength Training for Better Tennis

There's a reason you see more muscle tone than muscle bulk on the professional tennis circuit. Bulging pecs and biceps look great on the beach, and middle linebackers couldn't survive without them. But on a tennis player any muscle that doesn't help increase quickness and improve range of motion is merely excess baggage.

This doesn't mean, however, that strength training has no place in a tennis player's life. In fact, building flexible, lean muscles to power strokes and provide endurance for grueling competition is as important as developing a reliable backhand. The difference is one of technique, not quality.

Because tennis is a total body sport, all major muscle groups should be trained to allow for a smooth transfer of energy from the lower to upper body. Tennis Magazine recommends 13 core exercises that involve the legs, abs, back, chest, shoulders and arms. Though designed for multipurpose gyms, the workout can easily be adapted for free weight systems.

Generally, perform two to four sets of 10 to 15 reps of each exercise. Rest 25 to 30 seconds between each set.

Abs

It is important to exercise the larger muscles groups first. And since abs always rank high on any list of least favorite muscles to train, why not get the dreaded tummy portion out of the way early.

In addition to protecting the lower back, strong abs also add power to your serves. While most multipurpose gyms allow for at least a modified abs workout, Tennis Magazine recommends old-fashioned, on the floor crunches as the most effective means of getting the job done. But with either method, limit your range of motion to avoid lower back strain.

Legs

Begin with leg curls to work the hamstrings. These are important muscles for sprinting, backpedaling and playing low balls. The exercise may be performed standing or lying face down on a curl machine. If lying down, start with knees bent slightly, slowly bringing both feet up toward your buttocks. Try to achieve at least a 90-degree angle. Hold for a moment, then slowly let the weight down. From a standing position, perform the same movements except use one leg at a time.

Leg extensions target the quadriceps and offer knee injury protection and rehab. Sitting on the machine, adjust the backrest to allow your knees to bend at the edge of the seat. Place the lower pad just above your ankles. Put your feet behind the pad and lift until both legs are nearly fully extended. Pause, then slowly lower your feet to start position.

The leg press is excellent for building overall leg strength. Likewise, it increases stamina and improves starting and stopping skills. To begin, sit on the leg press machine with your back flat against the backrest and your feet on the platform, shoulder-width apart. Push your feet against the platform until your legs are fully extended. Hold for a moment, then slowly return to start position. Adjusting your feet on the platform will broaden the range of motion, enabling you to you to target the glutes and the inner and outer thigh muscles.

Back And Shoulders

In addition to back development, rowing is great for injury prevention and rehab of the rotator cuff. Tennis specific, it helps build backhand strength, especially for returning one-handed high balls. With your back straight, brace your feet against the crossbar and slightly bent. Position your palms facing each other. Pull your arms forward, then slowly extend them to a straight position. Keep your elbows in and near your waistline.

Lat pulldowns target muscles used for the serve and overhead smash. Sit facing the machine with your feet flat on the floor. With palms toward you, grasp the bar with hands shoulder-width apart. Slowly pull down to your upper chest, keeping your head and back straight and elbows close to your sides. Release slowly, never letting the machine overstretch your shoulders. Rotator cuff muscles can be strained if your hands are wider than shoulder width apart or if the movements are performed by lowering the bar behind your neck.

The overhead press works the front and sides of the shoulders. Adjust seat height to allow the handles to be even with your shoulders. Hold the handles with palms facing up. Without locking them, slowly push your arms up to full extension. Hold them there briefly, then slowly lower.

Torso rotation is an excellent exercise for developing the rotational strength required on ground strokes and serves. Likewise, it helps protect the lower back from the twists and turns inherent in tennis. To perform this uncomplicated exercise, hold a bar behind your neck with both hands. Keep your back straight and hips facing forward. With the rest of your body held steady, twist right and then left as far as you possibly can.

Chest

The chest press mostly works the chest muscles, but it also targets the front shoulders and triceps. If using a multipurpose gym, sit with your feet on the floor and hands shoulder-width apart on the handles. Push out from your chest until both arms are fully extended. Hold for a second, then return to start.

Arms

By working the biceps and forearm muscles, this exercise is instrumental in preventing lateral tennis elbow. It also improves your ability to control the racquet face. Begin by attaching the rope to the machine's low pulley. Stand facing the pulley with feet shoulder-width apart and knees slightly bent. Hold the rope with palms facing in and arms extended toward the floor. Bend at the elbows and raise your arms. Hands should rotate outward during this movement so that palms are facing up. Pause, then slowly return to start position.

The pronating triceps rope pressdown develops muscles which come into play when serving and hitting backhands. The motion protects against medial tennis elbow and helps create topspin on the forehand. After attaching the rope to a high pulley, stand facing the pulley with palms facing in. With your arms at 90 degrees, hold your elbows close to your body. Press your hands down while turning palms toward the floor. Pause for a moment, then slowly return to start position.

Improving body strength and muscle coordination may not land you in this year's U.S. Open, but it will increase your stamina and decrease your chances of injury. As far as the game itself, if your scores don't improve, next time choose your parents more carefully.