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BACKHAND COMPLIMENTS

Improve your tennis acumen and hit the ball with more authority with these expert tips.

By Linda Formichelli

Tennis seems to be all about the arms — after all, it's *forehand*, *backhand* and (yikes) *tennis elbow* — but it's really a full-body sport that incorporates the core and lower body as well as the major muscles of the upper body.

So to improve your tennis game, your fitness routine needs to include exercises that work everything from your shoulders down to your legs. And while exercise is important, eating right is also key. We spoke with two performance coaches to get the goods on how to boost your fitness, enhance your game and smash your opponents.

BAND AID

Rory Cordial, CSCS, a Montana-based physical therapist and performance coach for pro tennis players, recommends warming up with a lateral band

walk with an external rotation. "You'll activate all your core muscles, you'll activate the rotator cuff by pulling the Thera-Band with your arms, and you'll work your abdominals," he says. Here's how it works: Slip a small latex loop band over your ankles, and hold a latex band palm-up in your hands. (Thera-Band makes both kinds of bands.) Externally rotate your arms, keeping your elbows in, so that your upper arms are pinned to your sides, your hands are out to your sides, and there's tension in the band. Then step sideways with your feet pointing straight ahead, taking small enough steps so that there's always tension in the band. Do two to three sets of 10 yards in both directions.

HIT THE WALL

Because you do so much torso twisting in tennis, it makes sense to incorporate

rotational exercises into your workout routine. Mark Kovacs, Ph.D., CSCS, senior manager of Coaching Education in Sports Science at the United States Tennis Association, suggests trying medicine-ball throws against a wall. Grab a 4- to 6-pound medicine ball and stand five to 10 feet away from a wall — how far away you'll stand depends on your strength — so that your side is to the wall. Rotate your upper body away from the wall, then rotate back toward the wall and release the ball so it bounces off the wall. Catch the ball and repeat. Do 10 to 15 throws on each side.

ROW, ROW, ROW (AND SQUAT)

To improve everything from balance to core strength to upper- and lower-body strength, Cordial likes to have his clients do a one-arm-one-leg squat-to-row. Stand on your right leg while holding the knob end or a D-handle attached to a lower-pulley machine cable in your right hand. Perform a squat with your left leg and reach out in front of you with your right. Then, as you come up from the squat, complete the row by pulling the cable in toward your body. The movement should be fluid — it's all one motion, not two separate moves. Use enough weight so that you can complete two to three sets of 10 to 15 reps with good form.

FUELING STATION

Kovacs writes in a research paper that if an athlete is as little as 2 percent to 3 percent dehydrated, his performance can decline up to 10 percent. So pound down water during your tennis matches; your goal, Kovacs says, is to weigh close to the same at the end of the match as you did at the beginning, meaning you didn't sweat out your all-important water. During matches that last longer than an hour, Kovacs recommends drinking 10 ounces of an electrolyte beverage that contains a 5 percent to 7 percent carbohydrate solution, plus a few bites of an energy bar during changeovers.

We recommend taking these tennis-specific exercises and hydration tips and coupling them with some coaching or lessons (valuable no matter what your current skill level may be) and on-the-court practice. In the sport's parlance, that's *game, set and match* for a great season between the white lines, indoors or out. ■