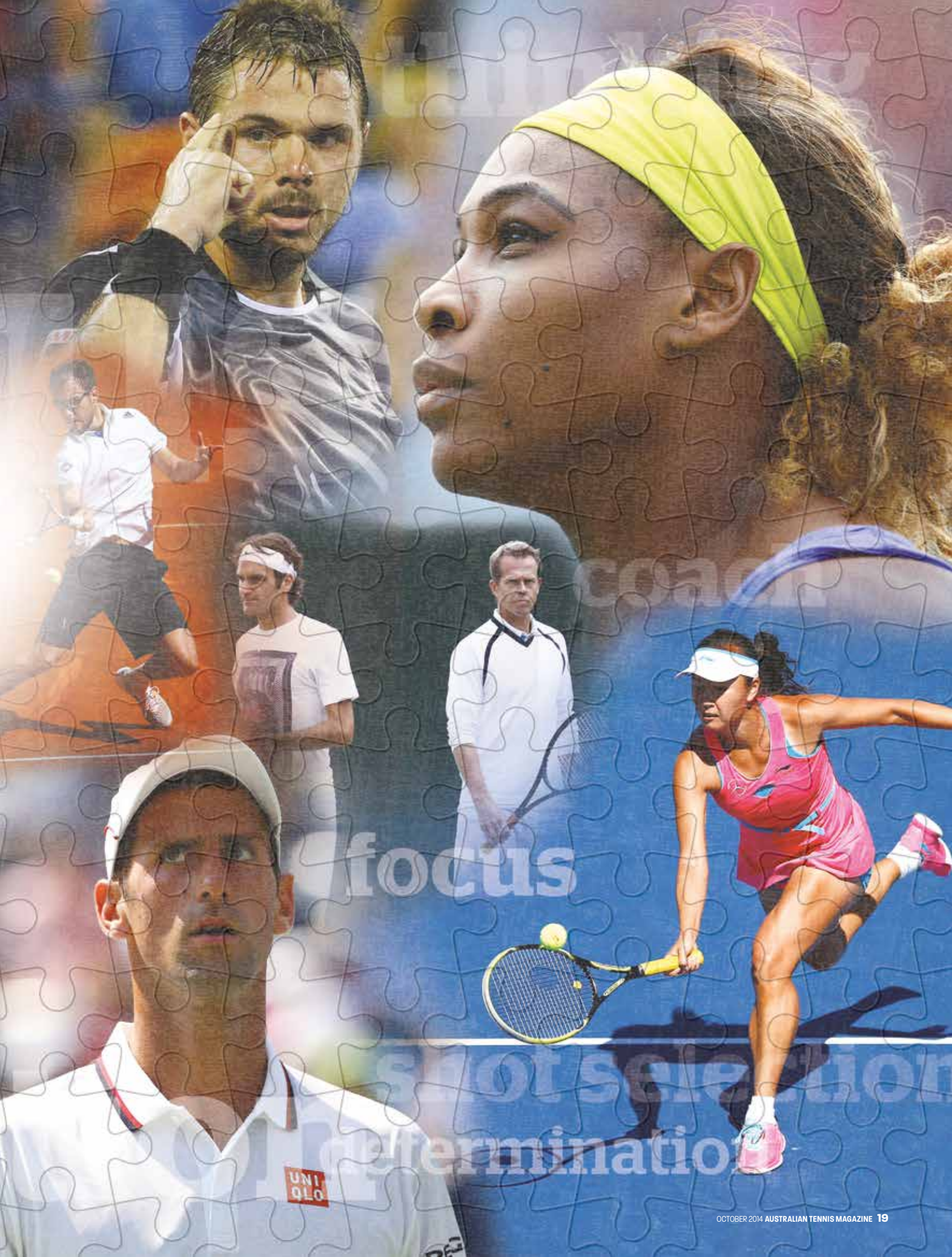


# *Pieces of the puzzle*

Talent, athleticism and competitive spirit will provide the foundation, but it's tactics and guile that help a player use those qualities to win. **ROBERT DAVIS** helps put the pieces of the strategy puzzle together.





focus



No sooner were the draws for the 2014 US Open complete than the scramble for any and all information on first round opponents began. In the gym and in the locker room, players huddled together discussing strengths and weaknesses of this player or that. Coaches awaiting transport back to their hotels asked what worked and what did not work last time.

But there was relative calm for veteran coaches like Roger Rasheed, David McPherson, Sven Groeneveld and Patrick Mouratoglou, who were all on site with highly seeded players. With each of these coaches having invested countless hours collecting data on each possible opponent of their players, there was simply no need to panic. Such elite coaches operate like CEOs of Fortune 500 companies who demand complex S.W.O.T analyses before each new business deal.

As both a player and coach, Brad Gilbert earned the respect of the tennis

industry for his skills in scouting and preparing a rock solid game plan. His book, *Winning Ugly*, remains one of the best-selling tennis books of all time. It's a treasure trove of anecdotes that stresses the importance of scouting, strategy and tactics. Gilbert illustrates over and over a simple strategy he used as a player and coach: "what do I want to make happen? And what do I want to prevent from happening?" Then he would come up with the tactics.

Dusan Vemic is known in the professional game for his tactical abilities. As the longtime assistant coach for Novak Djokovic it was widely known by all the players that it was Vemic's duty to scout opponents and prepare a game plan for Novak.

"A good coach will, first know his own player both physically and emotionally," Vemic explains. Then, he will give him or her the ideal amount of information. Sometimes more and other times less, depending on the situation.

"I always start from the basics - my player's strengths versus opponents weaknesses. But if I must choose one of the two, I would say opponents' weakness... your advantage is not only better percentage of winning a point, but also plays with a psyche of the opponent. If he or she starts committing unforced errors in that area that automatically brings the stress level up which ultimately translates into underperforming in the key moments of the match. This happens all the time in women's tennis, especially with the second serve."

### Strategy v tactics

It's easy to understand why tactics and strategy are often

confused. To put it simply, strategy is the "what" and tactics are the "how". And even on the professional entry level circuits you can see plenty of players who failed to develop a good technical skill set for the long run because they spent so much time on match tactics that brought immediate gratification but with limited chance of long term success. In *Hannibal And Me: What History's*

*Greatest Military Strategist Can Teach Us About Success And Failure*, writer Andreas Kluth explores how Hannibal never lost a battle but somehow lost the war with the Romans. Great tactician but as the book suggests, he did not have the correct strategy.

### Lines and lobs

Mark Woodforde has often said that when he and doubles partner Todd Woodbridge competed against Bob and Mike Bryan their tactics were "lines and lobs" - a tactic that will work wonders if you can execute them under pressure. The Woodies proved they could do just that but one of the big differences between their record-breaking doubles partnerships and many of today's doubles teams is that the Woodie's were both active singles players ranked in the ATP top 50. So, one could say that they had the tennis skills required to nail those lines and lobs.

### Coach perspective

Peter McNamara, one of the most qualified men in tennis, has a current coaching assignment with the Chinese men's national team. His time as an elite player (top 10 in singles and top three in doubles in the 1980s) and as coach to Matt Ebden and Grigor Dimitrov has allowed him to observe players at each level of professional tennis.

"When I played, tactics were everything," McNamara notes. "Well, almost everything; fitness and technique were needed to implement the tactics. Today, you

see so many of the boys on the Futures and Challenger circuits who are not skilled in structuring a point. And many do not have the technical skills to pick apart their opponent's game. What happened to the slice backhand, drop shot and lob? When is the last time you saw a player practising his lob? In the match warm-up probably and even then he is just half-heartedly sending up nice little duckies."

McNamara raises a very good point, which points the finger squarely at the coach. After all, it is the coach's responsibility to teach the entire game of

tennis, right. Jerzy Janowicz is a good example of a player who regularly practises the drop shot, albeit much to the annoyance of his practice partners. Anyone who has seen him play a match will understand why. Because Janowicz uses the drop shot on every return game to counter his weakness for moving side to side and while keeping the points short and disrupting the rhythm of the rally. And does anyone execute the topspin lob better than Lleyton Hewitt? With the trend in former tennis greats joining the coaching ranks we are seeing a return of the

all-court game. Stefan Edberg has Roger Federer approaching the net more than ever. Michael Chang has given Kei Nishikori more discipline with his shot selection when he is on the run and Goran Ivanisevic has

directed Marin Cilic to avoid long and tiring points and play quick-strike tennis - just like Ivan Ljubicic is doing with Milos Raonic.

So, now we've got the message. We understand the importance of scouting, smart tactics, a sound strategy and last but not least, good technical skills. We have arrived at the most critical stage, what to do when? Stay back or go on the attack?

### Matters of momentum

One veteran coach who has put over a dozen players into the ATP top hundred feels that he





found the answers. And he has considerable data to support his theory.

Fresh from his internship with the masterful Harry Hopman at Port Washington Academy in 1978, coach Chuck Kriese became the head coach of the men's tennis team at Clemson University. College tennis then was six singles matches and three doubles matches, all played in the best of three tiebreak sets. That schedule allowed for roughly thirty dual competitions, plus half a dozen individual and team tournaments. As coach, Kriese would have to deal with all those singles and doubles matches each week and he later related that it was the perfect laboratory for him to study momentum and test his theories.

Kriese became fascinated with *momentum* – specifically, how to manage it. His office filled with piles of scribbled diagrams and notes. File cabinets stuffed with sporting journals and newspaper articles that reported something related to momentum in sports. Stacks of video cassette tapes of tennis matches were constantly popped into the TV, helping him to illustrate momentum shifts in the match. Kriese soon began writing books and he was regularly invited to tennis conferences all over the world to lecture on managing momentum.

"I have always looked at one's ability to control momentum, either instinctively, or by having to learn it, as the most definitive skill for the athlete at the highest

levels to be able to master," Kriese explains "It makes all of the difference between being proactively decisive instead of being reactive with doubt. It is that skill that is needed to do the right things at the end of matches when clutch play is a necessity but also in those times when the player cannot rely on his physical skills or toughness alone.

"This is the decision making part that is instinctive to some, and those decisions are usually accurate and proactive when a player is used to winning and is the favorite," Kriese continues.

"However, when the player is the underdog or is in a losing state of mind, his decisions are reactive and often the polar-opposite of what they would be as the favourite. Those are the times when it is paramount to make good decisions based on knowledge and understanding of both shot-selection and momentum-control principles instead [of] those that are emotional and based on the heat of the moment or the situation."

Like the character played by Russell Crowe in the movie, *A Beautiful Mind*, Kriese's mind races at top speed and he switches channels between momentum based on score, momentum based on action reaction principles and momentum principles based on a player's favourite style. You have to stay focused to keep up. And it takes a while to digest but Kriese does not slow down. However, if you can grasp onto what he is

saying you can recognise the momentum shifts in tennis.

"Delayed pressure and quick-pressure tactics are usually physical skill-sets of a player's game," Kriese continues. "But one's personality and mind-set determine and can often be dominant over physical attributes. It is critical that a player must be able to vary from his/her most favourite style strategically about 25 per cent of time. Furthermore, understanding the need for disciplined serving patterns when a player is in a long game and becomes uncertain and reactive of which patterns to use when trying to close it out."

"In conclusion, decisions on tactics should therefore be made with consideration to use more attacking when behind and more disciplined point-construction when leading. And when the score is tied, one's best style is usually used."

**SUCCESSFUL STUDIES:**  
While Lleyton Hewitt provides many tactical lessons, Taylor Townsend (below) keeps notes on what works best on court.

Brad Gilbert likes to tell his players that "Five per cent of the time you are in the zone and cannot lose.

Five per cent of the time your opponent is in the zone and cannot lose. But what about the other 90 per cent of the time? What do you do then?"

Good question, Brad. And that is what makes a sound strategy and good tactics so important in today's tennis. **ATM**

