

RISKEY TENNIS –A Dynamic Learning Tool
Created by Bob Love and Guy Parks USPTA (Master Professionals)
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MISSION:

Create a success-oriented environment in which junior tennis players could acquire competitive skills. The environment would be flexible so new skills can be inserted as learning takes place and the growth of the player be continued by well-designed modifications.

Mission impossible? Although it seemed formidable, the mission was accomplished by USPTA Master Professionals Bob Love and Guy Parks at the Lansing Tennis Club (LTC), Michigan. Using *shaping techniques* and *differential reinforcement*, Parks and Love were able to create *Risky Tennis* (RT), a dynamic, positive device for junior development. The purpose of this article is to share their “discovery” with other USPTA pros.

IN THE BEGINNING points were won and lost with no “middle” place on the continuum. Players would be asked to try a tactic and would do it properly only to subsequently lose the point. The players would then discard the tactic because they “lost the point”. The real problem was that the tactic process was not being reinforced—only winning the point.

In order to overcome this problem, Love turned to wrestling scoring in which *reversals* and other processes are rewarded.

Mini-games were created using two response classes. “TAKE” points included the awarding of points after hitting a winner (untouchable shot) or properly executing a desired process (ordered group of actions).

The second class, “GIVE” points, were awarded to one’s opponent based on the type of error made.

Initial points values were set by the staff, but it was quickly discovered that the reinforcement values of the points depended on the perception of individual players. Therefore, the students were included in subsequent decisions on point values as shown in CHART A. This provided a valuable opportunity to discuss the mental impact or “weight” of points. It also provided for coach-player interactions — always a growth experience for sensitive coaches.

The psychological concept of *shaping* came into play when the staff and players tried to create the concepts for the “dream” player and then see what steps could be taken to acquire the skills within their individual reaches. The steps had to be small enough to be attainable, but always moving towards a desired performance objective. As the players helped set their targets, they were able to see the benefits of step-by-step development.

Ray Risky, a psychology instructor at Lansing Community College, assisted Love and Parks with the overall process, and they named the “game” in his honor. The name “*Risky Tennis*” also implied risk-taking which was valid as risk was created by varying the reinforcement values for the process, winners, and errors. This was the “heart” of the learning process as players fought to take

as many points as possible and give as few points as possible.

DESIGN:

The first RT progression was designed to introduce the students to the nature of the game and had the following performance objectives:

Given a COMPETITIVE SITUATION, a tournament player should be able to:

1. Execute a reversal. (This was the name given to lobbing over a netman’s head so the net player has to run to the back court area and the lobber rushes to the forecourt area and essentially “takes the place” of the netman.)
2. Get to every ball before it bounces twice. (This occurred when players tried to prevent winners which were defined as balls that touch the ground twice before players touched them.)
3. Hit winners out of the air (before the ball bounces.)
4. Stroke deep to avoid hitting into the net.

The three-game progression was as follows:

RT GAME 1: Use a bounce-and-hit serve from the baseline.

TAKE 2 points for a winner (bounces twice before touched).

TAKE 2 points for a reversal.

GIVE 1 point (only) for an error or preventing a clean winner.

NOTE: This game was preceded by a discussion of the nature of RT and a demonstration of point scoring.

GAME SCORING: The first player to accumulate 20 points wins.

RT GAME 2: Same as GAME 1 except FOUR points were awarded for a winner out of the air. That made that type of shot more attractive than ground strokes.

RT GAME 3: Same as GAME 2 except ONE point would be given for an error hit long or wide, but TWO points would be given for an error into the net making a netted error more expensive than deeper shots.

By changing one feature at a time, the response classes were enlarged so several hundred games were possible. Also, the original list of performance objectives grew from four to 37 and is still growing as shown in CHART B.

The impact of RT’s positive approach was that in the season prior to its introduction only nine LTC juniors were ranked in the Western Michigan Tennis Association; however 45 were named to the raking list in the following year. Since its inception, over 20 RT-trained youngsters have received sectional rankings and six received top-10 USTA National rankings (This was in the *Before Computer--Ranking* era).

When asked about the value of RT, Love said, “It would be scientifically inappropriate to say that RT’s use was a significant cause of the players’ successes. However, there

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was no question for those of us involved that RT provided a growth environment for these players. They were able to intelligently vary styles and adapt to changing situations because they were conditioned to trying different processes (tactics). The biggest benefits were the communication lines it opened between the players and our staff. RT gave us a language foundation for match preparation which was the finest I have ever seen.”

 In his paper on *Risky Tennis* at the Fifth World Sport Psychology Congress, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, 1981, Love summarized the following:

1. Applied behavioral analysis can be used to create competitive games.
2. Reinforcement of processes can be a successful part of a sport learning environment.
3. Student involvement in decision making can have positive consequences.
4. Successive approximations, operant models, and other shaping techniques can improve sports competence.
5. Coaching can be creative!
6. Students can and have found shaping techniques “FUN”!

 Therefore, tennis professionals might just find RT the “answer” to many needs they have had for competitive skill acquisition by their pupils. There is NO LIMIT to the flexibility of RT. New performances and progressions can be added when needed.

Coaches should be cautioned, however, that the game of RT was positive from the start. Points were never subtracted so negative scores were impossible. TAKE points were always equal to or greater than GIVE points. Players should think positively about tennis and NOT be afraid of trying something. In all cases, RT should be part of the ultimate goal of tennis professionals -- helping students have a happier, healthier life through the joy of tennis.

CHART A
RISKEY TENNIS SCORING CHART
 (Typical Values)

POINT
VALUES

TAKE POINTS – TYPE OF WINNER

<u>Any winner</u> (ball bounces twice before it's touched by one's opponent).....	2
<u>Winner hit out of the air</u> (before bounce)	2-4
<u>Drop Shot</u> (bounces 3 times in front of service line)	3
<u>Drop Volley</u> (3 bounce rule again)	3
<u>Ace Service</u> (not touched by opponent)	3
<u>Passing Shot</u> (hits in front of the service line)	4

TAKE POINTS – TYPE OF PROCESS

<u>Reversal</u>	2
<u>Draw to net and attack body</u>	2
<u>Draw to net and lob offensively</u>	2
<u>Draw to net and pass</u>	2
<u>Hit designated pattern</u>	2
<u>Delay rush</u> – if put away for a winner	2

GIVE POINTS – TYPE OF ERROR

<u>Any missed shot</u>	1
<u>Missed shot – long or wide</u>	1
<u>Missed shot – into net</u>	2
<u>Missed shot from in front of the service line (long or wide)</u>	2
<u>Missed shot from in front of the service line (into the net)</u>	3
<u>Missed service return into the net</u>	3
<u>Missed service return long or wide</u>	2
<u>Missed drop-and-hit serve (must go beyond service line)</u>	2
<u>Missed serve into net</u>	3-5
<u>Missed serve – long or wide</u>	1-3
<u>Missed volley in net</u>	2-3
<u>Missed volley-- long or wide</u>	1-2
<u>Missed groundstrokes into net</u>	2-3
<u>Missed groundstrokes – long or wide</u>	1-2

PLEASE NOTE: The nature of *Risky Tennis* is such that the above list can be readily modified to provide the shaping desired.

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CHART B

**RISKEY TENNIS PERFORMANCE
OBJECTIVES**

**GIVEN A COMPETITIVE SITUATION, A
TOURNAMENT-LEVEL PLAYER SHOULD
BE ABLE TO DO THE FOLLOWING:**

1. Execute a reversal -- exchange of positions.
2. Get to every ball before it bounces twice.
3. Hit winners out of the air (before the bounce).
4. Hit strokes deep to avoid errors into the net.
5. Counter reversals by smashing lobs out of the air.
6. Counter reversals by smashing balls on the bounce.
7. Counter reversals by volleying lobs.
8. Counter reversals by counter lobbing.
9. Hit an angled volley winner.
10. Hit a drop shot (bounces three times in front of the service line).
11. Hit a drop volley (bounces three times in front of the service line).
12. Draw opponent to net and attack the body.
13. Draw opponent to net and lob offensively.
14. Draw opponent to net and pass.
15. Hit passing shots that bounce in front of the service line.
16. Hit 21-deep backhand patterns.
17. Hit 12-deep backhand patterns.
18. Hit 21-deep forehand patterns.
19. Hit 21-short forehand patterns.
20. Hit 21-short backhand patterns.
21. Serve at opponent's body, rush and hit approach volley to the middle backhand.
22. Serve at opponent's body, rush and hit approach volley to the "open window".
23. Serve wide, rush, and volley the return crosscourt for a winner.
24. Serve, rush, and "dump volley".
25. Play *Style 1* (commitment to go to net immediately -- serve-and-volley style, and chip-and-charge on returns).
26. Play *Style 2* (hesitate, then rush on serves and returns).
27. Play *Style 3* (Baseline counter hitting and only go to net when drawn).
28. Play *Style 4* (MODERN, POWER TENNIS.)
29. Use delay-and-rush tactic with a resulting winner.
30. Hit a bounce-and-hit serve beyond the service line.
31. Hit overhand serves deeper to avoid the net.
32. Hit aces (untouchable serves).
33. Counter-lob overhead smashes.
34. Counter-drive overhead smashes
35. Hits serves hard enough so the second bounce is in the back fence.
36. Hit groundstrokes deeper to avoid net errors.
37. Hit volleys deeper to avoid net errors.

AND GROWING!