



ADELMAN FINDS ALEXANDER

Could an actor's technique be a hands-on revolution in tennis coaching?

by Paul Fein

"What a dull game lawn tennis would be if it didn't change! Part of its charm and fascination lies in the continual development of new methods, tactics, and technique." — English Davis Cupper Tony Mottram and English Wightman Cupper Joy Mottram, from their 1957 book, "Modern Lawn Tennis."

What if there were a way to learn tennis that would improve your technique, balance, vision, stamina, coordination, movement and even reduce injuries? Does all that sound too good to be true? Maybe it isn't.

If you don't know what the Alexander Technique is, you have plenty of company. It may be the tennis world's best-kept secret. Many teaching pros and coaches have yet to hear about it, let alone incorporate some of its methods.

Gary Adelman, tennis's foremost proponent of the Alexander Technique, doesn't claim it will revolutionize tennis and make you club champion by Friday. But the 50-year-old teaching pro and former Columbia University star does believe that mainstream tennis coaching is misguided because it emphasizes over-exertion, over-drilling, and over-training. Players are taught to grunt and grimace and use all their willpower to strike the ball.

"The Alexander Technique offers a better way," maintains Adelman. "It is contrary to what most coaches think is right," says Adelman, "because it is based on the principle of non-doing that less is more. It is based on the conservation of energy, using the minimum amount of energy for the task at hand. It is about a harmonious, coordinated use of the body so that none of your energy is wasted."

Alexander Technique is not a newer-age version of the 1970s "inner game" popularized by author Tim Gallwey. *Au contraire*. It was developed by Frederick Matthias Alexander, a Shakespearean actor and elocutionist from Australia, in the late 1800s. Afflicted with hoarseness, Alexander observed how he used his body while standing in front of a full-length mirror and noticed a pattern of total body tension, which began with stiff-

Good [Alexander Technique] use is exemplified by lightness, increased elastic tone and liveliness in the muscles, improved whole body coordination, and freedom of movement.

ening his neck, throwing his head back and constricting his larynx. He discovered the importance of the head-neck-back relationship to the use of his body, and he eventually gained control over his misuse pattern, which solved his speech problem. That control technique evolved over the next 50 years.

Today, about 6,000 accredited teachers in 35 countries propagate the Alexander Technique, which is used in many diverse fields, most notably music, theatre and dance, but also horseback riding, skiing, golf, singing and physical therapy. Famous writers George Bernard Shaw and Aldous Huxley, philosopher John Dewey, actor Paul Newman and Princess Diana all recognized the benefits of the technique.

Although Adelman made all-Ivy League in 1977 and later ranked No. 6 in singles and No. 2 in doubles (with Kirk Moritz) in the Eastern men's open division, he knew he hadn't achieved his potential. A self-described perfectionist, he began taking lessons in Alexander Technique 20 years ago, hoping to improve his game and reduce stress. Adelman was pleasantly surprised

when he recovered his speed of foot and gained more power in his strokes without swinging harder. He also noticed that he felt better in general because he was more relaxed.

Adelman moved from Long Island, New York, to Boston in 1989. He taught at the Wimbledon 109 Tennis Club while studying for three years to become an Alexander Technique teacher. In 2003, he received a private grant to teach the Alexander Technique at Babson College and Princeton University. At both schools, he was an assistant volunteer tennis coach in addition to being the Alexander teacher for the tennis teams.

Adelman's radically different teaching methods were embraced most by the Princeton women's team. Adelman worked one-on-one with players for five to 10 minutes off court before practices, recalled then-head-coach Louise Gengler. He would put his hand gently on the player's neck, ribs or back, and the player would often "shadow" a stroke by taking the racquet back in slow motion. Other times, Adelman worked with a player on court with serves or other strokes, while manually guiding her movements. A third facet of the training entailed 20 minutes of "table work," where he did simple, guided relaxation movements that helped lengthen the player's muscles. Only one of the squad's 12 players was not interested in learning the technique.

"I experienced dramatic improvements to my game as did some of my players," remembers Gengler. "If Gary gave a demonstration to 10 people, I think five to eight would feel something significant and say, 'Wow, I can feel that.' Others would just not get it. You do have to feel or sense what he is talking about. For example, a 'first move' with a tight stomach muscle versus a 'first move' with more balance from inner spine muscles. It's very, very subtle. And with no follow-up, it doesn't stay with you, or it's more difficult to hold onto. I try to remember what Gary showed me." Gengler incorporated the Alexander Technique into her teaching methods.

In 1993, Adelman did a year of post-graduate training in the Alexander Technique with the internationally respected Israeli teacher Shaike Hermelin. At the same time, he was hired

by academy director Shlomo Glickstein at the Israeli Tennis Center in Ramat HaSharon to work with some of Israel's elite players, including Anna Smashnova, a Top 50 WTA Tour player, and Eyal Erlich, who reached his career-best singles ranking of No. 144 in 1997. "The Alexander Technique significantly improved their play," recalls Adelman. "Eyal, in particular, was really stiff when we first got together, and after some lessons, he moved with a lot more freedom and ease."

Subsequently, the well-traveled Adelman has practiced, or rather preached, the Alexander Technique as a teaching method for players on Long Island at the Glen Head Racquet Club and in Western Massachusetts at Canyon Ranch Health Spa. He currently teaches at the Berkshire West Athletic Club in Pittsfield, Mass.

But what exactly is the Alexander Technique anyway?

"It's a way to teach people how to use their bodies in the most efficient, natural manner in any activity," explains Adelman. "It changes unconscious habits of excess effort and tension to produce an ease and economy of motion." It achieves

that by changing the relationship between the neck, head and back to a more favorable one. "With good use, the neck is free enough to enable the head to freely balance on the spine so that the whole spine lengthens and the entire torso lengthens and widens," says Adelman. "The limbs in good use are also affected positively and will tend to elongate as the arms and legs lengthen out of the back. Good use is exemplified by lightness, increased elastic tone and liveliness in the muscles, improved whole body coordination, and freedom of movement."

Adelman says that Roger Federer, Andre Agassi, Lleyton Hewitt and Justine Henin-Hardenne best exemplify the tenets of the Alexander Technique among the pros. He believes they must have incorporated its lessons and benefits unconsciously, as he has not heard of them working with a licensed Alexander Technique practitioner.

While other body-mind techniques focus on relaxation, the Alexander Technique's goal is much more than relaxation or postural improvement. The technique affects the neuromuscular system in such a way as to produce both muscle tone and relaxation in the entire body that is optimal for any given activity. It teaches people how to send new messages from their brains to their bodies. Those messages, if sent often enough, create a new track or pathway in the nervous system and eventually replace the old ones. Although not technically an Alexander Technique concept, this process might popularly be described as "building new muscle memory."

"When hitting groundstrokes, the new messages should be to free the neck, let the head move forward and up, let the back lengthen and widen, let the arms lengthen, free the legs, and free the wrists and hands," explains Adelman.

Besides improving strokes, the Alexander Technique offers therapeutic and rehabilitative benefits. "It's not surprising that there's almost an epidemic in the frequency and severity of injuries at all levels," says Adelman. "Players are fighting with and punishing their bodies so much. Eventually something must break down. One of Alexander's sayings was that good use positively affects function. This means that if you stop interfering with your natural use and allow the body to recover its natural

length and width, then things like breathing and circulation and energy levels improve as a by-product. Also, pain is sometimes relieved if it is due to misuse. However, we don't make any therapeutic claims and don't treat anything."

Adelman has spread the gospel of the Alexander Technique by writing columns on the Internet and giving presentations for the United States Professional Tennis Association, the last in 2003 at its world convention in Hollywood, Fla. During the

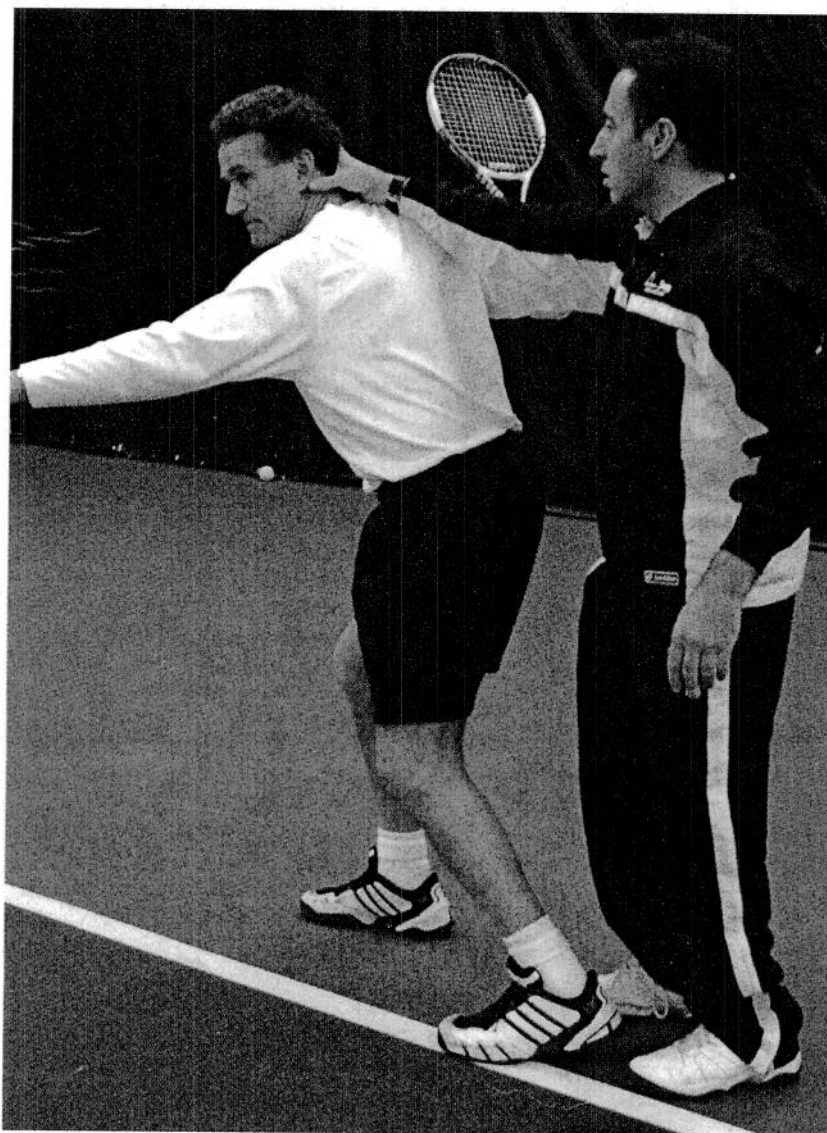
New England Professional Tennis Association's 2002 winter convention, he conducted a one-hour seminar called "Tennis and the Alexander Technique." In 1998, Adelman did a short presentation for the United States Tennis Association at the USTA National Tennis Center during a practice of Eastern junior tournament players and then worked individually with some of them.

Thus far, the Alexander Technique hasn't caught on with America's teaching pros, public parks instructors, and high school and college coaches for several reasons. First, in order to fully understand and teach the Alexander Technique well, one must train for three years — 1600 hours — which is a huge commitment. Second, most Alexander teacher training courses are held during the daytime, typically Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to noon, precisely when many tennis pros are teaching. Third, the Alexander Technique organizations have been very lax and ineffective about publicizing their work. Finally, the Alexander teacher train-

ing programs are expensive, about \$20,000 to \$25,000.

The USPTA-certified Adelman regrets that, at least to his knowledge, he is America's only USPTA or PTR teaching pro who has also been commissioned by one of the accrediting Alexander Technique organizations, Alexander Technique International and the American Society for the Alexander Technique. "If millions of people worldwide used the technique for their tennis games, I'm sure that many of them would significantly improve as well as enjoy tennis more," he says.

Adelman doesn't bemoan his fate as a lone Alexander Technique voice crying in the wilderness, although he does harbor a special ambition. "My quest to spread the AT across



The Alexander Technique requires a very hands-on approach from its practitioners. Gary Adelman (right) aligns the neuromuscular system of Christopher Masiero of Lenox, Mass., to build a posture and stroke that can be used in play to optimize balance and relaxation.

courtesy of Michael Mah

America is a quiet one, perhaps in keeping with the nature of the Alexander work, which has at its core a sense of ease and non-doing. I would love to work with top players and coaches, showing them another way to improve play," confides Adelman.

"The Alexander Technique would prove particularly valu-

knows how to teach players how to be lighter, which translates into quicker. All that I see are exhausting drills, which do nothing to change neuromuscular patterns.

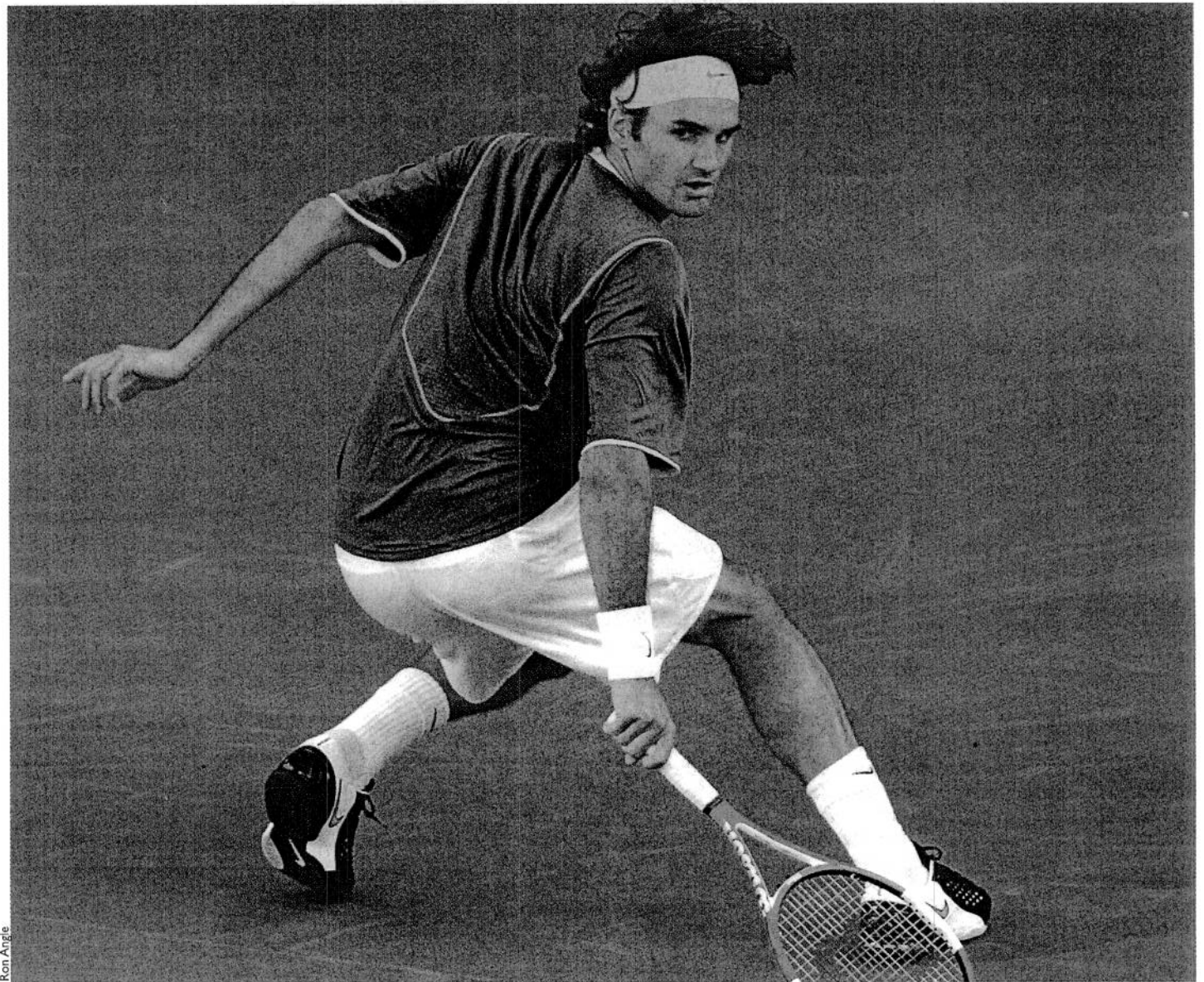
"Many players and coaches are prima donnas and are set in their ways, and I have no delusions that I will sway all of

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able to some players who seem locked into inefficient stroke patterns, like [Elena] Dementieva on her serve and [Andy] Roddick on his backhand," Adelman asserts. "I also would enjoy working with some players like [Lindsay] Davenport and [Taylor] Dent on movement. So much of court movement instruction is based on the idea of overly pushing against the ground and being super-quick. But no one knows or can teach what Federer can do — how to use the force of gravity to his advantage and fall upwards — a seeming contradiction. No one

them," acknowledges Adelman. "But I would have a lot of fun if I could find a few of them to teach, who really see the flaw in the current approach." TW

Contributing Writer Paul Fein is the author of the books You Can Quote Me on That: Greatest Tennis Quips, Insights, and Zingers and Tennis Confidential: Today's Greatest Players, Matches, and Controversies.



Ron Angle

Even stretched wide for a backhand, Roger Federer is a model of the sort of balance the Alexander Technique can create in players. His head is poised, his back is widening and there is a sense of expansion outward thru his arms to his racquet.