

Own a Sensational Serve

From worry to weapon, keys to an improved serve.

by TIM BAUER

> FACING CHALLENGES familiar to tennis players of every level, Olympic champion Elena Dementieva improved her serve and scored the biggest victory of her career.

Tennis fans worldwide sympathized as Dementieva struggled to serve effectively. As she fell apart in Grand Slam matches, viewers recognized similarities to their own service habits. While many focused on her flawed mechanics, few looked at the bigger picture. Serving successfully under pressure requires a confident state of mind as much as sound mechanics and thousands of practice balls. Serving confidently is an art, developed by training that is mental as well as physical.

While pointing out Dementieva's technical improvements, we will guide you beyond mechanics by suggesting drills and match plans to help you improve and serve more effectively under pressure, which has proven to be the key to Dementieva's breakthrough. You can improve following her model.

SOUND SERVING MECHANICS

The foundation of good serving is sound mechanics. A fluid serve motion produces the most power, the least stress on the body, and consistency under pressure. As Elena has worked to reshape her technique, she has earned confidence. These photos highlight some key points that you can adapt to your serve.

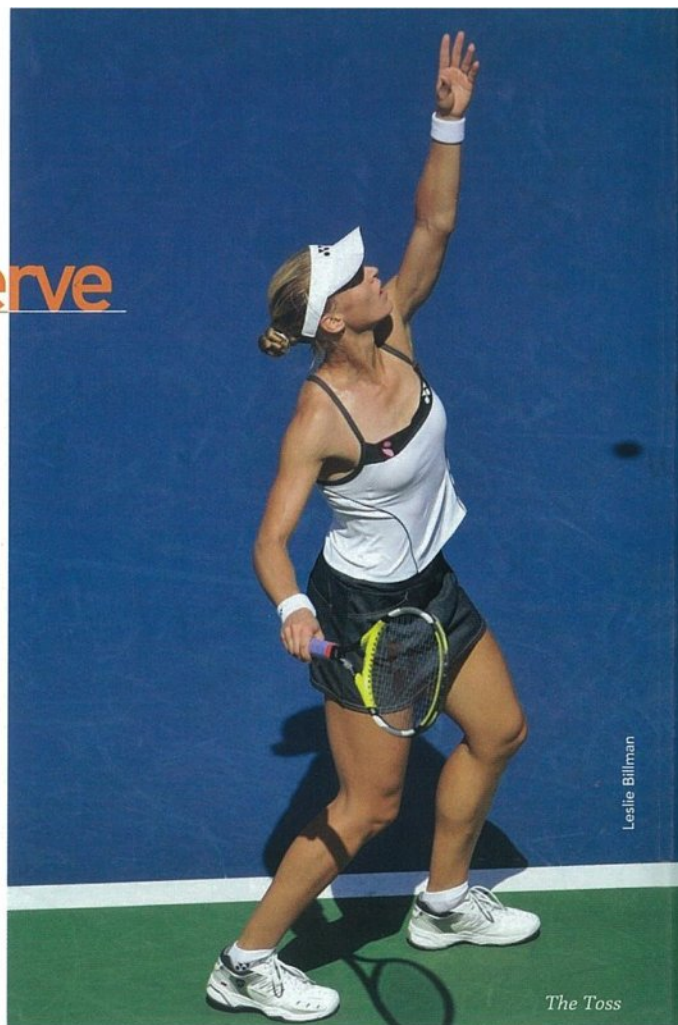
THE TOSS

Place your toss carefully. Notice Dementieva's excellent posture and tossing arm, which is stretched upwards. Her arm follows the ball to the top of her toss. Keep your tossing arm up as you reach toward the sky. This simple move will add consistency to your toss and help keep your head up through contact.

USE ALL YOUR BODY

Add power and consistency by involving your entire body in each serve. Dementieva's athletic position shows her coordinating both her upper and lower body to put all her energy into this serve.

Powerful serving starts from the ground up and Elena makes great use of her legs while serving – a move that can add speed to every serve. This photo captures her finishing a knee bend an instant before launching upwards into the ball for contact. Elena shows great balance and strength in this position.



Leslie Billman

The Toss

Equally important, her upper body and shoulder turn, bringing her racquet into perfect position preparing for contact. The more you can turn your hips and shoulders and bend your knees, the greater the potential for a powerful serve.

POINT OF CONTACT

Dementieva finishes this serve with a completely harmonious effort, springing upwards, reaching to a high contact point, keeping her head high, accelerating her racquet through the ball, and propelling herself into the court. Technically, she has improved the mechanics of her serve, but it is her new confidence that has been the biggest breakthrough. She trusts her serve under pressure.

SERVER'S MENTALITY

Great serving requires a positive mental state. When Pete Sampras stepped up to serve, there was no doubt in his delivery. Even on an off day, Pete's serve was dangerous. The aura of serving confidence that surrounded him came directly from his trust in his own ability, developed through years of careful practice, attention to sound mechanics, and match success. Over his career, Pete's success forged the ideal server's mentality.

Give any top athlete the right mixture of pressure and time to think and bad things can happen. Missed free throws in basketball, the infamous three-foot putt in golf, and the double fault in tennis are exceptionally challenging moments in sport. We must look to the mental side of tennis to understand how champions like



Use All Your Body

Point of Contact

Sampras develop the uncanny ability to summon incredible serves exactly when they are called for.

If you work at it, you can transform your serve from a worry to a weapon and raise your entire game just like Dementieva. Even the great servers have struggles at some point, but when the chips are down they trust their ability to serve themselves out of trouble. With a little work, some technical adjustments, and a new pressure based practice routine, you will gain a server's mentality and make breakthroughs in no time. ①

SERVING RULES

1. Refuse to hit bad tosses. Your discipline will be tested during pressure-filled moments. You will avoid faults and increase your serve percentage dramatically.
2. Choose your targets wisely. During critical moments, select your target by considering both your strongest areas and your opponent's weakest. Don't be predictable. Consider selecting your serves the way a baseball pitcher selects a pitch. Vary your delivery based on the situation and don't give your opponent too many looks at your favorite serves.
3. Serve within your abilities. Serving at 90% maximum during match play will probably add some accuracy and consistency; hold back your best serves for "the big moment."
4. When struggling, serve to the opponent's body. This underrated serve will keep you further inside the lines and make it easier to regain your confidence and rhythm mid-match.
5. Draw confidence from all of the hard work you have invested in your serve. After you've committed to adjusting your mechanics and practice methods, don't assume a negative attitude toward your serves in matches. Work yourself into a positive mindset by remembering practice breakthroughs and pulling that confidence onto the match court.

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PRESSURE-BASED DRILLS

- 1 The ideal server's mentality is only earned through careful practice and trial by fire in matchplay. The following pressure-based tips will help you break a negative serving mentality and begin to gain the mental confidence you need when it counts.
- 2 Gone are the days when ten minutes of serving at the end of practice are enough. When training to gain a competitive edge serving, you must build a confident mentality by simulating realistic match conditions. Carefully create pressure situations in practice so that you will be ready to respond in matches with your best serves when the moment demands. Add some of these elements to your training.
- 3 Increase the frequency, not simply the duration, of serving sessions. Prepare to serve several times throughout a practice with specific goals for each mini session.
- 4 Alternate service boxes and types of serves. Don't just hit dozens of similar serves to the same box. Aim for a minimum of ten serves in a row.
- 5 Challenge a friend to attack your serve by attempting to return winners. Practice making 10 second serves in a row. Start over if your friend hits a winner. Nothing will strengthen your second serve like this drill.
- 6 Divide each service box into three zones and practice placing your serve on demand. Let a partner choose the location; see if you can hit zones at will. This drill will give you insight into your most successful zones, as well as those that need attention.
- 7 Play practice sets using only one serve to strengthen your second serve. This classic drill always proves effective.
- 8 Use your imagination to visualize match situations while you practice. Be sure to set aside one serve a day to practice "the big moment." Step up to the line and see if you can hit your mark with a first serve. Over time you will see big improvements.
- 9 Join the "100 serve" club. Every day, take one shot at making 100 serves in a row. See how far you get before missing. Don't do this drill on a day when you have already served a lot. This seemingly impossible drill will challenge even the best servers. When you do master this drill, your second-serve confidence will soar.
- 10 Develop your personal serve routine as well as a pre-match serve warm-up routine. Prepare to serve deliberately, with the same consistency that you would like to see in your results and success will follow.

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