

The Courtesy Stroke: How and Why to Master One of Tennis' Most Crucial Skills

In Tennis, as an introduction to mastering all ball placements and a variety of strokes, the courtesy stroke should be learned. This stroke is a forehand volley with a half swing, used to start the ball for a rally or to get it back to the opponent before service. It allows the player on the opposite court either to catch it in their hand on the first bounce, or to get it into play for the rally.

The ball flight of the "courtesy stroke" is an upward arc over the net. The ball is not hit forcefully, and will land nearer the service line than the baseline. A tennis player has use for this stroke from the first day he wields a tennis racquet to the last day of his tennis career. Champions, warming up before a match, start the ball to their opponents with the courtesy stroke. Coaches use this stroke in setting up the balls for their pupils. Since ball fetchers are a rarity in most tennis matches, the courtesy stroke assists the players in getting the balls back politely to the server before each point.

Note: It is decidedly impolite to start the ball, or retrieve it by tossing it up in front of the face, and hitting it in a downward direction over the net. Too frequently the ball will not clear the net, and if it does, the bounce is usually difficult for the opposite player to handle.

The technique of the courtesy stroke will aid the beginner in learning the true forehand drive, as well as a variety of other strokes, for they have the following points in common:

1. Grip.
2. Body position.
3. Horizontal racquet swing.
4. Body moving toward the net as the stroke is made.

However, it is also important to note the differences, which do not affect the learning of the true forehand drive, are:

1. The length of racquet swing is cut down. The racquet is swung back only to a position opposite the right thigh.
2. The ball is hit on the volley (before it has bounced).
3. The ball is started with a toss by the player, instead of coming from the opposite side of the net.
4. The ball is hit when it is farther forward toward the net, and slightly lower than it is in the usual forehand drive.
5. The ball flight is slightly more in an upward direction.
6. The ball is hit with less force.

Step by step, here is how to perform the courtesy swing:

1. Stand with the left side toward the net and the racquet held out horizontally opposite the right thigh.
2. Hold the ball in the left hand, pointing in the direction of the right net post.
3. Toss the ball out toward the right net post, about two feet from the body, at thigh-height (half way between the knee and waist).
4. Immediately step toward the net on the left foot, letting the racquet swing forward to contact the ball before it has dropped to knee-height.
5. Let the racquet finish at shoulder height, out in the direction of the ball flight.

The simplicity of this stroke allows for good results in accuracy of ball placement as long as the ball toss is correct, and the racquet swings in a horizontal plane.

Most beginners can master the stroke during the first tennis practice. Beginners having difficulty will be found to be tossing the ball badly; taking too wide a back-swing; or not lining up the center of the racquet with the ball. Often these beginners will prefer to let the ball bounce before hitting it. This is not advisable, since the bounce should be reserved for the true forehand drive, wherein a full backswing is taken, and more force is applied to the ball than should be used on a courtesy stroke.

Here are some common faults to watch out for:

1. "Hitting" the ball rather than "stroking" it, caused by jabbing at the ball and stopping the racquet half through the swing.
2. Taking racquet back too high, and following through too low. Result is a netted ball, or a chop stroke.
3. Getting too close to the ball so that a cramped elbow action swing is taken.
4. Taking the backswing too late, so that the forward swing is made hurriedly.
5. Starting the forward swing too soon, so that the ball is hit before it is opposite the body.
6. Dropping the racquet head below the wrist, a scoop stroke resulting.

Practise on the courtesy stroke is worthwhile, for once it is mastered, and it will never be forgotten. Learners should use this stroke continually for starting a rally, and in sending the balls back to the server before each point. Mastery consists of the ability to place the ball accurately to the forehand or backhand of the opposite player for rallies; or to place it so that the server can catch it in his hand on the first bounce without moving.

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