



[GRAND MASTERS]

TENNIS *for the* MIND

Can chess help you become a better tennis player?

WORDS: JO CARTER

On the face of things, tennis and chess could not be more different. While one sport requires speed, athleticism and power, the other is a sedentary pastime often performed at a leisurely pace from the comfort of an armchair.

But the comparisons between chess and tennis are not new. The late actor Robin Williams famously observed, "tennis is like chess at 90 miles an hour", while American tennis great Jack Kramer claimed: "To be a championship tennis player, you need the mind of a chess master and the endurance of a marathon runner."

Former world No.1 and six-time Grand Slam champion Boris Becker was taught to play chess as a teenager by his coach Gunther Bosch.

"Gunther thought that I would expand my intellectual awareness of structuring a point if I learnt to play chess," Becker said. "Strategy

is important in chess and tennis. In a one-on-one situation it's important to always remain one step ahead of your opponent."

Becker is not the only tennis player to have played the game. Ivan Lendl, whose father was a chess master, played regularly, while Elena Dementieva was often seen at tournaments playing speed chess with her brother and coach, Vsevolod.

Sergiy Stakhovsky was taught to play as a child by his grandfather and plays as often as 20 games a day online. He also plays with fellow Ukrainian Alexandr Dolgoplov as well as Feliciano Lopez's coach, Jose Clavet.

"I play before a match to get my mindset right," Stakhovsky explains. "It helps me focus on the match and make sure my mind is not flying around somewhere. You have to think a couple of turns ahead, which is the same for tennis, and the better you are, the more turns ahead you can look."

Sir Clive Woodward, the mastermind behind England's Rugby World Cup victory in 2003, is a keen amateur chess player and spoke about how chess can help other sports at the 6th London Chess Classic in December 2014.

"The skills used in chess are transferable to all types of sport because it makes you think," said Woodward, who learnt to play chess at school. "In most sports you put a huge amount of emphasis on the physical side of things – football, rugby, cricket and tennis for instance – but a big chunk of it is also about thinking.

"It's how you develop those thinking and understanding skills. The ball may be going one way but you are thinking further forward and that's what chess is all about."

Jim Egerton is a qualified tennis coach and the founder of Chess-Now Ltd, a training organisation that uses chess to help his



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clients practise strategic thinking in business, sport and education.

“In my opinion, chess is a practice court for the mind,” says Egerton. “Both chess and tennis require you to think in combinations if you want to be successful. Combinations like serve and volley or a drop shot and lob, force you to think two or three shots ahead to build the point. In chess if you can put two tactics together in a combination you may just win the game on the spot.

“Tennis is more difficult because there is the physical element of having to execute the shot. Even if you do everything right technically and mentally, you physically still have to hit the shot to win.”

In an article for the Professional Tennis Registry magazine *TennisPro* in 2010, Egerton explains that “the science that glues chess and tennis together” is Game

Theory. The study of strategic decision making, Game Theory is applied in all walks of life, from biology to economics.

“Winning or losing is all about the decision making that went on during the contest,” explains Egerton. “Game Theory helps determine the best choices one can make to accomplish the task of winning the game. If your decisions are based on optimal strategies, you have better winning chances.”

In both sports, unlimited uncertainty means you cannot be sure what your opponent is going to do. In chess, there are a staggering novemtrigintillion [10¹²⁰] possible game variations. In tennis, there are infinitely more. However, many of the strategies in both sports involve occupying the centre of the board or court.

“The player has the advantage if they control the centre of the chessboard and

GRAND SLAM CHAMPION VERSUS GRAND MASTER

BECKER TAKES ON GRAND MASTER GARRY KASPAROV AT CHESS LIVE ON TV

→ In March 2000, Boris Becker was invited to play chess Grand Master Garry Kasparov live on CNN as the Russian launched his chess website. Kasparov played live from the New York studios during the filming of *Larry King Live*, while Becker played from CNN's studios in Berlin. Incidentally, Kasparov's agent Owen Williams was a former US Open tournament director and famously hitched a ride as a potato peeler on an ocean liner to England, where he qualified for Wimbledon in 1951.

"Garry Kasparov and I became good friends. When he launched his chess website I was living in Munich at the time," recalls Becker. "He said, 'Boris, I need a favour. Could you play simultaneously from the CNN studio in Munich with me in New York?' I said, 'No, Garry, you'll beat me in 10 minutes.' But he said, 'No, Boris, the show is 58 minutes long, you won't be disappointed.' I'm competitive so of course I wanted to play.

"So we're playing while he's answering Larry King's questions. After 30 minutes I was up. I thought, this is history – I'm going to beat the current world chess master live on CNN. After 45 minutes it didn't look so good anymore, and after 55 minutes on the dot I was checkmate. Unbelievable! He knew exactly what to do, and how long it took. What a brain."



"TENNIS IS LIKE CHESS AT 90 MILES PER HOUR"

ROBIN WILLIAMS

the centre of the court," says Egerton. "In tennis we try to get to the net, create a barricade, and control the centre, so we can cut off any crosscourt shots that typically come that way. All the chess pieces (except the rook) get better when they come toward the centre of the board.

"Is it any wonder that we tell our tennis players to hit their approach shots low, deep and into the corner? Our opponent, just like any chess piece, is less effective from there.

"Both games are sequential so you have to wait until your opponent is done to completely know exactly what you are going to do," says Egerton. "Sometimes they hit it into the net and you win or they overlook a checkmate and you win that way."

One of the best chess players on the professional tennis circuit is Rafael Nadal's coach, Toni, but while he may have guided his

nephew to 14 Grand Slam titles, he believes the sport is becoming increasingly less strategic.

"In tennis there is less strategy every year," Nadal told tennishead. "In chess there is a strategy. But how all the sports evolve it is difficult to have a strategy, especially in tennis. With this power, with this serve, it is not possible to make a strategy like chess."

While Toni says Rafa has no interest in learning to play chess, Becker has played with Djokovic, although the world No.1 still has some way to go before he can challenge Becker on the chessboard.

"He is as competitive as I am," says Becker. "He's said he has to improve his game because he is no match for me yet. Having said that his defensive skills were unbelievable – surprise, surprise! He was able to move around the board, I would be a long way up but I couldn't get him checkmate!" ■

Boris Becker makes the first move for Magnus Carlsen in 2011