

Tom Stow



The All-Court Forcing Game
How Tom Has Helped Me - Brent Abel

Tom Stow's "All-Court Forcing Game"

Brent Abel

The Forcing Game by Tom Stow

The forcing game is based on the principle of continuous pressure.

It is a game for advanced players who have acquired all the strokes and therefore are able to control the ball from all positions.

It should be called an "All Court Forcing Game" for it is too often confused with just a net game.

Coming into the net is definitely a part of the game and should be used as a climax to many rallies or when the opponent hits a short shot, but is only a part of the whole.

A player who can make sound "coming in" shots and can volley accurately will be a constant worry, for his opponent in trying not to hit short balls will tend to make more errors than he would otherwise.

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The Forcing Game by Tom Stow (cont'd)

To play the "All Court Forcing Game" it is necessary to have;

- (1) A strong first serve and an accurate spin for the second serve. A hard first serve, which will put the opponent on the defensive and cause errors, is of course the best. However, this is not absolutely essential but a serve that will keep the opponent from making a forcing shot is essential;
- (2) The ground strokes, both forehand and backhand must be sound so that (a) the return of the serve be deep: (b) the shots from the back court be firm and well placed and (c) the coming in shot be hit flat on the top of the bounce.
- (3) The volley must be accurate and fast enough to put the ball away. A blocked volley is not enough, a player with only this type of shot cannot win the point when the opening appears.
- (4) The smash is a must in this type of play for the opponent of a player with a weak overhead can lob defensively too often. This does not give the forcing player enough percentage off of his approach shots and he will find himself in trouble. Smashes, like volleys, must be put away, not only from the standpoint of winning the point but also the mental effect such shots will have on the opponent.

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The Forcing Game by Tom Stow (cont'd)

The player of this "All Court Forcing Game" must always keep in mind the fact the he is playing another human being and that the pressure he is applying has a very definite effect on the mental attitude of his opponent.

It takes nerve, determination, and strokes to play this type of game and only the strong will master it.

However, from these few will emerge the future great players of the world.

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- *"The forcing game is based on the principle of continuous pressure."*

[Where do I want to be at the end of every point? Either inside the service line OR moving there ...]

- *"A player who can make sound "coming in" shots and can volley accurately will be a constant worry, for his opponent in trying not to hit short balls will tend to make more errors than he would otherwise."*

[Once I establish the principle of continuous pressure in a match, I seem to win 1/4 of my points just from the threat of forcing my opponent into having to play another perfect passing shot. These are unforced "forced" errors.]

- *"The player of this "All Court Forcing Game" must always keep in mind the fact the he is playing another human being and that the pressure he is applying has a very definite effect on the mental attitude of his opponent."*

[It took me awhile to believe this. But once I bought in, my life changed. National senior championships...]

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- [The hardest part of trusting in Tom's All Court Forcing Game is when you approach and get passed a few times.

But you have to believe that they only have a limited number of passing shots in their bag on any given day.

Your job is to empty that bag asap ...]

- When I played Tom's "ACFG" for the first 20 years or so, I looked at literally every ball coming to me as an approach shot opportunity.
- Now that I'm in the 65s in less than two months, the body isn't quite as willing.

So, I have refined my groundstrokes over the past several years so that I'm now able to stay neutral in a point from the baseline as I wait for a calculated opportunity to move forward and 'force' another perfect passing shot from my opponent.

- I still serve & volley on approx. 80% 1st serves and 50% 2nd serves in singles, and of course, 100% of the time in doubles.

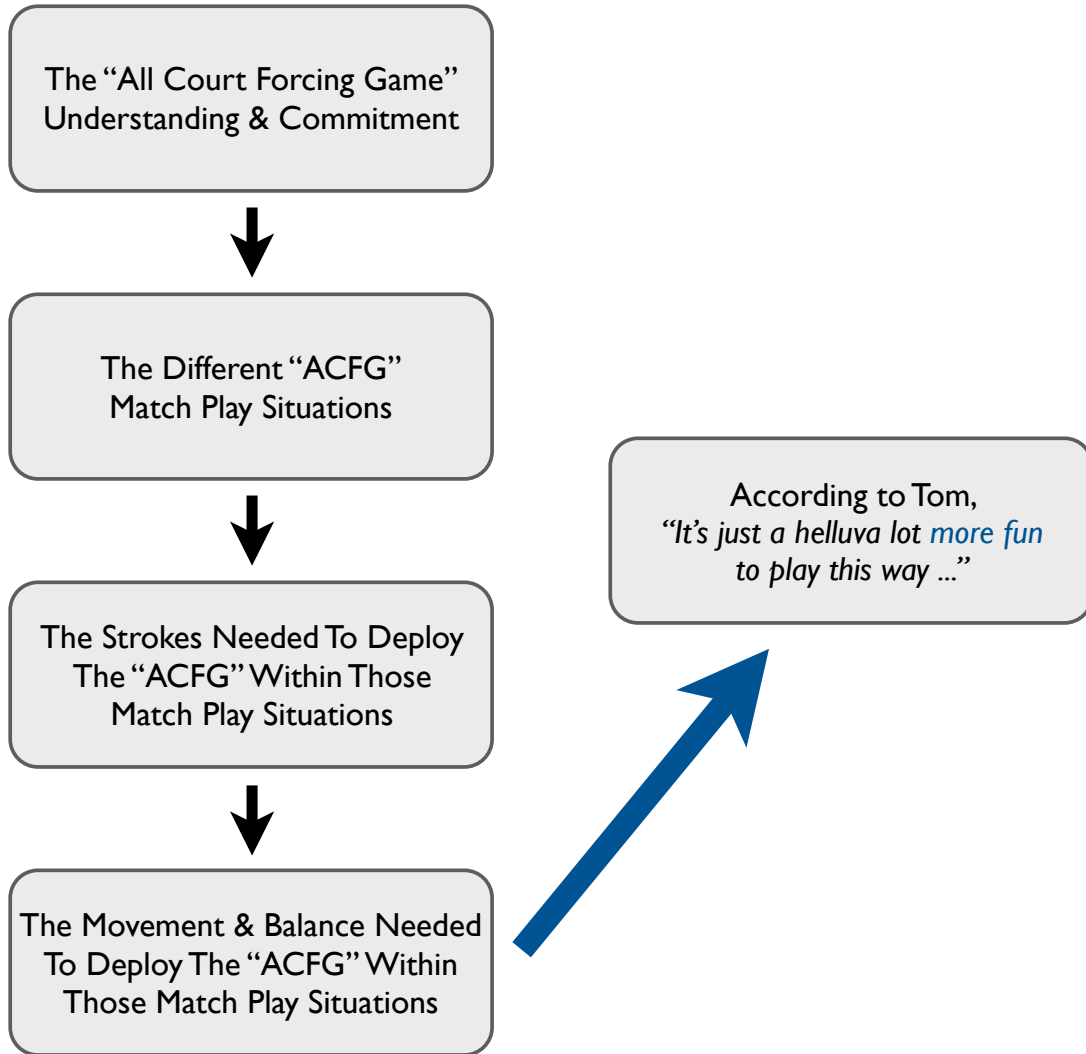
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- **My method of teaching tennis** has changed over the years from blindly teaching strokes first (never ending) to instead teaching Tom's "All Court Forcing Game" theory first.
- Once understood, then the strokes are taught as the tools necessary to deploy the "ACFG".
- The "ACFG" is comprised of numerous *match play situations*.
- Since retiring from teaching at the California TC in San Francisco in 2005, the students I teach now on a private court in Lafayette are all competitive players (3.5 - 5.0) wanting to improve their match play skill level in either singles or doubles.
- When I first meet with a new student, I arrange for a same skill level opponent(s) to come to the first half of the lesson. I videotape 45 minutes of match play without any instruction. I want to see if they have any specific style of play and what strengths & weaknesses they have in handling the different *match play situations* they encounter.
- We then start the process of improving those *match play situations*.

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- PRE - STOW - Before I worked with Tom for 18 months during 1980 - 81 ...
- I grew up in Berkeley in the late 40s, 50s, and 60s and my sport was baseball.
- Family members at the Berkeley TC, but I played very little tennis as a junior. I knew Tom Stow then as the manager and head pro at the BTC.
- Played one summer in the 14s and got beat 3 times love and love by Erik VanDillen who was 11 or 12 at the time. No fun. Gimme back baseball.
- Played tennis in HS. Taught at Gardiner's when I was 16.

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- After my frosh year at the U of Denver, I taught for Dale Lewis at the Denver CC that summer and felt that's what I wanted to do for a career.
- Came back to Berkeley, camped out at mom & dad's for a couple of years, and started playing every day at the BTC, and did some teaching on a private court.
- I had no idea of how to play, and I had zero system to teach.
- Thought I was pretty good until my 1st tourney when I get crunched 0 & 0 in the 1st round by the 2nd worst player there. Reality check ...

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- My strokes had no technique, meaning, I couldn't break an egg. Guys used to joke that they couldn't even hear my serve.
- What I did have was the commodity that everyone else had - speed around the court. Just a retriever.
- Kept playing a ton, kept trying to get better with the same stuff, and kept losing over & over.
- Eventually landed a great teaching job as the Head pro at the Moraga CC in 1978 (tennis boom - they would've taken anyone apparently).
- Hired my BTC friend Doug King as my assistant.

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- At the time I had no idea what a dumb luck thing that was to hire Doug.
- He was a top national player who, and he had this tennis teaching system he taught.
- It didn't take long to realize that I had been teaching old cliches the whole time. Turn, racket back (no, further back), make contact out in front (no, further in front), and follow through (no, follow through more ...)
- My students were not improving. Doug's were.

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- As it turned out, Doug, Steve, & John were all seeing Tom once a week up in Napa on 4 junior hs courts once a week for a 3 hour session.
- And the proof was there. All 3 of these guys were 3 of the best tennis players in NorCal then.
- So, I had to figure out a way to get into this group. Called Tom and begged. It took a few calls for him to take pity on me and say that he'd let me come to one of their sessions. Sort of like a tryout.
- After 15 minutes on the court, Tom told me I had nothing he could work with. (Great ...)

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- BUT, he did say that if I was willing to totally gut everything, that he'd take me on.
- That was an easy decision for me. Let's see ... Keep losing 0 & 0 to everyone or have a chance at losing 3 & 3? I'll take it.
- So, I got to be in this group with 3 of NorCal's best players every week for 3 hours and have Tom Stow tell me what to do.
- Tom talked to me about tennis in ways I'd never heard of before. No cliches.
- He described so much by using other sports.

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- When Tom told me to do something and to do it just like I was short hopping a ground ball at 3rd base, uh, he really had me then.
- So, for 18 months I worked with Tom, got to watch him work with these 3 guys, and over my game started to improve.
- We focused a ton on the forehand flat approach shot. Over and over and over ...
- And there'd be times I'd play an approach shot off of another feed from Tom to come in on either Steve, Doug, or John and I'd win the point. Tom would just wink at me.

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- I think Tom knew early on that I wasn't ever going to be a big baseline ground-stroker.
- He could see that I loved to move forward and take my chances up at net.
- So, my 18 months with Tom were spent mostly learning how to efficiently moving forward against the ball with approach shots, 1/2 volleys, transitional volleys, serve & volley, etc.
- Tom also spent a lot of time on my serve, my return of serve, and taught me how to drive a topspin backhand. (Left handed hitter in baseball ...)

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- After those 18 months, I was unleashed on the guys at the BTC, but frankly, my game was still so raw that I had very little control of it.
- Guess I was either too stubborn or too dumb to know when to quit, but I'll never forget when Bill Crosby told me one day at the BTC -
"Stop thinking about how the strokes work and just decide where you're going to hit this next shot. Your strokes will be there without you having to manufacture everything."
- Permission granted. And that was it for me.
- 1984 National 35s Hardcourt Doubles w/ Olson.

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- I was now beating guys I'd never beaten before.
- I was going 3 sets with some really top players.
- I had my own style, my own game. I was sort of a niche "All Court Forcing" player.
- I didn't really have one stroke that was a huge weapon like say Doug's backhand drive, but I was constantly moving forward and *forcing* guys to have to hit a *perfect winner again* ...
- Tom used to tell me as he would feed me yet another ball to play as an approach, "This style is just a helluva lot more fun." He was right ...

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- Tom Stow gave me the tools to win 3 national senior titles, make the 2009 USA World Cup 60s team, and win a good number of local northern California singles and doubles tournaments pretty much by me simply being willing to move forward.
- For me, it wasn't about developing the greatest strokes of all time. It was much more about a style of play and the mindset of Tom's All-Court Forcing Game.
- I also want to give credit to Michael Wayman, the men's coach at St. Mary's in Moraga, who has really helped me refine certain areas of my game over the past couple of years.

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- Questions ???