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Racquet Racket: Technology Is Moving The Racquet Market, Will It Move The Players?[Headlines](#)

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No single piece of sports equipment is as identifiable with its sport as a tennis racquet. Yet there is a persistent sense among many players that the racquet doesn't really matter to the game; one is more or less as good as another.

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While even the perfect racquet won't turn succotash into Serena, if you are one of those who thinks the right racquet doesn't make a difference, drag the Jack Kramer and T-2000 out from the back of the closet and hit with each for a few minutes. Equipment matters.

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However, for most players, selecting the right racquet to fit their specific game is something like the Round Table knights' quest for the holy grail, only more difficult. They listen to friends, visit manufacturer's interactive web sites, hang out in mass merchant retailers or pepper their specialty retailer or teaching pro with questions. Finally, they are left with the epiphany that all the information can only take you so far. If you have the right racquets to choose from, no other input equals the tactile sensation of actually striking the ball. Even after their combined years of attempts to quantify racquet performance, physicists Howard Brody and Rod Cross and Racquet Tech magazine publisher Crawford Lindsey, authors of the definitive "The Physics and Technology of Tennis" suggest that: "The best way to choose a good racquet is to take a dozen or so different racquets onto a court and hit a few balls with each racquet. In fact, 12 racquets is the bare minimum. Ideally, each of the 12 racquets you try should be multiplied by three so that you can try each model strung at low, medium and high tension. Then multiply by four so you can try gut, nylon, polyester and Kevlar. (The strings, of course, are the only piece of equipment you actually want touching the ball.)"

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Of course, while demoing your 144 racquets, you have to hope nobody releases a new racquet, thereby forcing you to restart your comparison shopping.

Which 12 racquets? Those who believe in the natural efficiency of markets will have their expectations turned on their head when considering today's tennis racquet market, perhaps the least efficient, most dysfunctional marketplace ever. Information is everywhere, but not in a form most consumers can use. Manufacturers are driving innovation, enhancing racquet (and player) performance through such extraordinary scientific leaps as targeting sound frequencies (Fischer), mechanical energy (Head), and nanocarbon molecules (Babolat) within the racquets. In terms of both power and comfort, today's models are changing the tennis experience, but the reward for achieving these technological advances is little or no respect from players from tour-level to occasional hacker, most of whom change racquets not with a particular goal in mind (e.g., "I need more power with my crosscourt forehand" or "I want enough control so I can try hitting my second serve harder"), but due often to some unquantifiable, perhaps unquenchable, malaise.

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The lack of respect for how a tennis racquet affects play lies to a degree with the industry penchant for not better explaining why this season's models are so much more advanced than last week's top-shelf models, which now reside in the markdown bin. For example, the announcement that Martina Navratilova switched to Prince's More Control DB racquet quoted her "rather blandly, considering how outspoken she is known to be" as selecting the racquet as part of her search for "a greater level of performance" and said only that she was "impressed with the racquet's capabilities."

One can also consider the shortcomings of teaching pros, specialty shops and even mass merchandisers for offering information, but not necessarily authority, regarding racquets across the entire marketplace. Ideally, part of their continuing certification would be education in the changing landscape of the entire racquet market, as well as the ability to offer a prescriptive assessment of the player in order to better tailor their racquets.

The media, too, in its various forms does not offer a complete source of information in any convenient format. Tennis Week selects only a handful of the more noteworthy new racquets to discuss in "Court Report." Consumer Reports, usually America's most trusted reviewer, hasn't looked at tennis racquets since August 1992. Tennis runs its annual review of the marketplace "with a couple paragraphs each on a portion of the current year's crop. On the internet, manufacturers have sites that can dazzle, but are limited to hyping their own products. The Tennis Warehouse site offers ample technical info and anecdotal-style reviews, but is, again, only focused on the racquets in its inventory. And the United States Racquet Stringers Association (USRSA) site is authoritative, but overwhelming "and if overwhelming is your cup of tea, make sure to try to wade through the extraordinary voice at racquetresearch.com. Of course, none of these sites compare racquets using the same criteria.

Players, too, are blameworthy for the dearth of respect for racquets. Despite the support they receive from manufacturers, no tour player has been heard to stand up for his or her (or against an opponent's) equipment the way golfer Phil Mickelson did for his Titleist brand when he recently dissed Tiger Woods' Nike weed whackers.

Wilson Sporting Goods Vice President and General Manager John Embree acknowledges that a variety of racquets could improve the game of any player, but that there are barriers to be overcome for an individual to figure out what will actually synergize best with one's own needs. While more "power" should not be the quest of every player, it has traditionally been No. 1 in terms of driving sales. At the same time, there are so many claims being made for control and vibration and styling, as well as power, that the temptation to stop one's search short of finding the perfect fit is very tempting. According to Embree, consumers, who are the ultimate judges of what does and doesn't work in the marketplace, are not getting what they need in terms of information and so, "don't know what they want. They [just] want a racquet that feels "good".

Marketing maven Steve Encarnacao, who has served time at Reebok, Weight Watchers, Puma and Converse and is currently responsible for the Blackburne Double Strung racquet identifies the problem as tennis's primary piece of equipment having devolved into a "commodity" category, with "80

percent of all tennis racquets being sold for less than \$50 at WalMart, Kmart or other mass merchandisers. He struggles with the conundrum that while skiers gravitated to the more easily maneuverable parabolic skis and golfers went gaga over the "Big Bertha" clubs, "forgiveness" as a feature of tennis racquets has been a difficult selling point to convey.

Talking price, rather than value, is not a shopping equation that will continue to support manufacturers' investment in research and development of performance, forcing them instead to focus only on cutting costs for what is already established in the pipeline. And, when consumers talk price rather than value, it is a clear sign that manufacturers are not getting their messages across, even the most basic ones. (Quick quiz: quote sales tags from two or more racquet lines.)

Throw into the commercial mix that there are racquets you may never hear about that address one concern (which might be yours as well) and so do not receive wide distribution. Some racquet companies do not allow internet distribution of their product in order to "protect" outlets from players who demo but buy cheaper (but who haven't found an outlet in their area). A few racquets come with prices you would prefer to amortize over two seasons worth of tennis balls rather than one racquet. As a result, talk of today's whiz-bang technology moistens the lips of the cognoscenti, but glazes the eyes of the average consumer.

This unique product has an unusual status as a performance product often bought as fashion (note the flashy colors on lesser priced models that spray the ball around the court and are geared to tennis's youth, who try to whack the ball as hard as possible) and purchased on the spur of the moment from what's on the rack rather than after extensive research and from the totality of what's available. (It is, after all, a significant investment in your game.)

For individuals to better understand the scope of the market and how a particular racquet might relate to their game, they need agreed upon rating standards and a common language for comparison. Babolat's Racquet Diagnostic Center (RDC) machine has been a standard for stringers for years. It is in fact the experience with racquets gained through its stringing machines that first set the string company on the course to racquet manufacturer. And the RDC language regarding racquet specs is familiar within the industry. At the same time, the International Tennis Federation "the entity making the rules for what is and isn't allowed in terms of racquet length, materials, etc." is working to benchmark and monitor racquet performance characteristics. Although Dr. Stuart Miller, technical manager for the ITF, says there is "no intention to issue ratings or guides [in these early stages]," it's a possibility, particularly as benchmarks are established. In an extraordinary case of truth in advertising, the actual measurements are suggesting that almost every single racquet is probably justified in its bold-lettered exclamatory advertising claim of "more power," "more control," and "less vibration." Technology has taken racquets "from the \$300+ sticks in pro shops and specialty retailers, to the pre-strung \$29-\$49 big box retailer offerings" far from where they were even a few years ago. Commenting on the technological developments, Miller notes, "Physics tells us that we are nearing the limits of racquet performance, but history says that progress is inevitable."

Navratilova and Pete Sampras offer intriguing spins to the debate about the value of the new racquet technologies. Giving heart to tennis's luddites — those who pine for a return to wood — Navratilova was quoted by Reuters during the Australian Open as decrying new technologies as the ruin of the game: “The materials are so ridiculous now, it's too easy. I would rather see them go back again to smaller rackets and take away the sweet spots. Then you can do more with the ball.” On the other hand, Sampras, reportedly testing new frames for his reportedly imminent return to the tour, is still even money to again pick up the 85 square-inch head, 27-inch long Wilson ProStaff he has used (and had rebuilt) since age 19 and long unavailable to everyone but him.

While golfers seem to be in a constant search for a playing edge and skiers trade up every couple years, tennis players are far more reticent to audition new racquets. (Research indicates men are less likely to look around than women and long-time players less likely than newbies.) Of course, when players find what they want in what Volkl General Manager Sam Cook describes as a “feel difference,” the new match can be a long-time, monogamous and mutually prosperous one. Babolat National Sales Manager Max Brownlee talks of how Andy Roddick's dissatisfaction with how his game as a junior was progressing allowed the company to introduce their racquet (through a relationship with Roddick's coach) into the demo bag. The timing of that introduction was fortuitous, as Roddick's choice of Babolat was quickly followed by junior Grand Slam tournament titles and ATP tournament successes. The American media attention on the nation's “next” standout player spotlighted a racquet newly introduced to the American market and paved the way for its acceptance by high performance and then club-level players. As Brownlee puts it, “if you don't have credibility, people won't demo the racquet.”

The barriers to demoing are the walls to be scaled when launching a new racquet — or even a line of racquets for an established brand. Madeline Hauptman, president of PowerAngle, a small manufacturer with a line of three racquets, began with a goal of addressing the pain she felt when playing by “redesigning” a racquet to almost completely reduce the shock. With no hope of tackling big box retailers and moving beyond specialty shops, she describes her sales process (with distribution outlets in New York, Florida, Arizona and part of California) as “person-to-person,” relying heavily on the buyers “who become ambassadors for us.”

While everyone accepts that player word-of-mouth is a powerful influencer, the issue of credibility seems primarily centered on tour players and teaching pros. The percentage of each on any individual's choice of racquet is hard to measure, although a recent Tennis Industry Association (TIA) study on buying habits concludes teaching pros are the prime influencers (certainly for more sophisticated players willing to pay higher prices). Their influence can be felt directly — as many of them run their own pro shops — and indirectly through the suggestion of which specialty retailer to visit and which racquets to demo.

In a recent skirmish over establishing credibility, Head scored what they believe is a major coup by taking over the endorsement of the USPTA from Wilson. Added to Head's previous relationship with the PTR, the Austrian-made racquets (a talking point in an industry relying almost exclusively — Yonex, with Japanese made racquets is the other major exception — on a limited

number of Chinese factories for racquet production) become the first in the industry to be officially endorsed by both major teaching pro organizations. Or as Head Vice President Kevin Kempin put it, there are "10,000 USPTA members in the U.S. alone, and they can move the dial." [The endorsement of these two groups] and their pros using our product will help us "influence the buying pattern" of consumers.

Wilson's Embree notes that his company continues as the official footwear and apparel choice of the USPTA and agrees teaching pros are "the cornerstone" of successful marketing. He also downplays the effect of the change in racquet endorsement, claiming Wilson is maintaining 80 percent to 90 percent of its teaching pro relationships. On the other front for establishing credibility, Wilson extended its relationship with Venus and Serena Williams for an estimated \$1 million a year each. According to an article in SportsBusiness Journal, the sisters "receiving a hefty raise from their current yearly fees of an estimated \$150,000" now play with the Wilson Hyper Hammer, but will be encouraged to consider the company's new H-Series racquet.

Opinions vary among all manufacturers about the value of endorsements, but all aggressively seek to add players to their "team" under a variety of arrangements. Fees of \$250,000 for notable names are not unheard of, lesser fees are offered to those with promise and free top-of-the-line gut (worth perhaps as much as \$50,000 if seven to nine racquets are being strung each day) is rumored to be enough to switch a player's brand loyalty. Usually available for the asking are free racquets and other branded accessories, which will certainly include a bag "with larger than usual logos to prominently appear on television or in photos when strategically placed on the change-over chairs.

The fact is, a tournament pro's use of the racquet is not only fodder for an advertisers blurb or salesperson's pitch. The endorsement of a pro should carry weight. Unlike a NASCAR driver piloting a car manufacturer's "shell" over souped-up everything, the frame a tennis pro hits with is more often than not the same one "perhaps minus some lead tape customizing" available in the local pro shop or Dick's Sporting Goods. According to Nate Ferguson, who, most notably, strings and customizes Sampras's racquets, only about 60 or so pros play with custom-made racquets, and top-ranked players even at Masters Series events, are willing to just grab whatever they need from a local store, instead of waiting for the factory to ship them a perfectly measured and balanced replacement.

The key to take away from Sampras's stand is not that he plays with an out-of-date racquet, but that he chooses a racquet that fits his game in the broad scope (heavier, smaller head) and then personalizes it with lead tape to slightly shift the balance and weight, adding customized handles and precision stringing to further refine the racquet and its effect on his game. Ironically, even though he plays with a racquet no longer produced, he helps define the future of racquets: a vision of a paradox within an oxymoron. More clearly, even as information threatens to drown a customer's initiative to pinpoint the perfect racquet match, information "with the difference that it will flow both ways between consumer and manufacturer" will aid the individual's quest within the emerging world of "mass customization" (racquets built in standard pieces that can be tailored at the retail level to address individual players' concerns).

It is likely tennis devotees will increasingly find themselves asked more and more to enter both personal and tennis related information on sweepstakes entries, product warranties, tennis "loyalty" cards. They'll be spelling out product feedback, and notes on playing habits and experiences. That information will make its way to manufacturers' emerging databases to be used to more accurately target the company's wares. For example, Dunlop Racquet Sports Marketing Manager Kai Nitsche is one of those who believe the most useful way to segment the racquet needs of those players is by identifying the swing rather than playing level. Using Dunlop's database of loyal customers will allow him to target the customer who has identified himself as a 4.0 league player with a long stroke with information or a special offer for Dunlop's "control-oriented" 200 or 300g, while the self-identified 4.0 player with a compact swing (probably looking for additional power) may receive a similar offer and information package, but for the 700g.

The next leap in racquet technology appears to be a greater ability to customize a racquet to a player's requirements. Manufacturing processes are now in place to produce different parts that still make up one racquet. Prince's More racquets feature two halves fused together and Wilson's Triad line are separately manufactured heads, throats and handles melded into a seamless product. While the infrastructure is not yet in place, it is clearly not much of a stretch to imagine a time when players can select not just the best racquets for their games, but the most appropriate features, perhaps a head with just enough "forgiveness," a fairly stiff throat and a handle reducing the vibration to something just above a whisper.

What does it all mean for tennis players and their game? Players will be better able to quantify through standard measurements what they need. Manufacturers will be faced with a niche-oriented and hopefully more efficient marketplace. Technology will continue to dazzle. The game will continue to be fun to play.

And even if they use a decade-old ping-pong paddle and you the absolute latest and greatest hitter, you still won't be able to steal a game from Lleyton Hewitt or Serena Williams.

Kent Oswald is Tennis Week's editor.