Just when you thought the one-handed backhand was a dying breed, some great young talent arrives to save the day! In these sequence pictures, we see three of the bright young stars in the game—Roger Federer, Justine Henin and Gustavo Kuerten. All three possess world-class backhands that are, in fact, one-handed. The intent of this article is to point out some technique fundamentals as well as differences in style and strengths and/or drawbacks of each player’s technique.

In the sequence pictures, these players are hitting a “standard” one-handed backhand where they all have time to set up and hit using a slightly closed stance (stepping forward and across toward the direction of the oncoming ball). As with any aspect of technique, there are elements that world-class players do differently and fundamentals that they follow in a similar manner. As we have consistently seen in the sequence pictures over the past few years, fundamentals tend to transcend the various styles of technique.

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Top to bottom: Roger Federer, Justine Henin and Gustavo Kuerten.
• **Preparation:** The players have already recognized that the ball is coming to their backhand. They have made their initial unit turn and are starting to take the racquet back.

• **Grips:** It appears as if Federer has a standard Eastern grip, while Henin and Kuerten have a more “Extreme Eastern” (closer to a Western) grip. Federer’s grip is more suited to dealing with lower balls.

• **Right Arm:** Federer and Kuerten start their racquet preparation with their right arm bent significantly, whereas Henin starts with the arm relatively straight and then bends it as she takes it back. This is more a function of style.

• **Footwork:** The players have used their footwork to establish good position. They have planted the back foot and are about to step into the shot.

• **Balance:** The players possess excellent upper body posture and dynamic balance.

• **Racquet Head Above the Wrist:** All three are preparing with the racquet above the level of the wrist.

• **Racquet Take Back:** Due primarily to their more extreme grips, Kuerten and Henin have their right hand further away from the body as they take it back.

• **Early Preparation:** Notice how early they are preparing in relation to the oncoming ball. This guarantees they will not be rushed.

• **Weight Transfer:** The players are starting to transfer their weight forward and onto the front foot with a slightly closed stance.

• **Shoulder Rotation:** The players continue their upper body rotation as they take the racquet back.

• **Level of the Shoulders:** Henin and Kuerten approach the ball with their shoulders relatively level. This is ideal technique. Federer dips his front shoulder down significantly, which can adversely affect his balance and ability to deal with power.

• **Loading:** All three players are getting into a fully “loaded” position in which they are storing energy in the large muscle groups (legs, hips, back and shoulders).

• **Shoulder Rotation:** Henin and Kuerten have tremendous shoulder rotation. Federer has less rotation and more dip in the front shoulder.

• **Racquet Preparation:** Notice how Henin and Kuerten take the racquet back further (actually it raps partially around the body) than Federer. This is due in part to their grips and their relatively level shoulders.

• **Balance:** The players are displaying beautiful balance with their heads level and eyes focused on the ball, the knees are bent and the center of gravity is directly in the middle of their base (feet).

• **Creating a Solid Base:** The players take a large step into the shot, which creates a solid base and lowers their center of gravity thereby further improving balance.

• **Optimum Hitting Zone:** All three players are about to contact the ball in their optimum hitting zone (ideal distance to the side of the body and well out in front of their bodies). Henin and Kuerten will contact the ball further out in front because of their more extreme Eastern grip.

• **Use of Legs:** Henin is drawing significant energy from the ground by using her legs to explode up into the shot. She is dealing with a higher ball and appears to be hitting a heavy topspin shot.

• **Head Relatively Still:** The head is relatively still for a split second after contact.

• **Stability:** Kuerten and Federer display great stability, balance and leg strength as they stay “down” after contact.

• **Racquet Head Acceleration:** Henin is showing an incredible amount of acceleration as she explodes up and through the hitting zone.

• **Follow-through:** The players are showing the classic low-to-high follow-through with the finish off slightly to the side of the body. Henin appears to have used more aggressive wrist extension (“snapping forward”) on the follow-through than the other two players. As indicated earlier, she looks to be hitting a far more aggressive shot.
The One-handed Backhand...
Women’s Style

by Eliot Teltscher, Director of Tennis Operations, USA Tennis High Performance

There is no doubt that the game of tennis is evolutionary in nature. Just look at the tactics and techniques employed today as compared to the top players of the past and many changes can be seen. As examples, the use of an open stance and more extreme grips have occurred to deal with the aggressive style of play now used. In the women’s game, another change we have witnessed is the predominant use of the two-handed backhand. There are indeed some advantages to the two-handed backhand, but it is evident by the three players in the following sequence—Alexandra Stevenson, Justine Henin-Hardenne and Amelie Mauresmo—that the one-handed backhand still has a place in women’s tennis.

Which type of backhand to be used is really a discussion related to game style. When working with beginning players, often the two-handed backhand is employed for ease of learning. Children often lack the strength and coordination to manipulate the racquet with one hand. As the player grows and matures, choices should be made regarding the type of game style and technique that will be adopted.

The crucial decision of what game style that a player will use sets in motion the tactical and technical components that will be taught for further development. The three players in the following sequence all play a variation of an all-court game where the ability to exploit an opponent’s weakness as well as transition to the net are both viable options to win points. For these players, the ability to hit topspin, offensive and defensive slice, and volley effectively are technically important to their game style. Thus, making the one-handed backhand an appropriate choice for them.

We should strive to help all players make sound decisions related to game style, tactics and technique that will allow them to optimize their unique skills. With this decision made, the teaching of sound fundamentals then becomes paramount to continued development. Let’s take a look at some of the key fundamentals of the one-handed backhand…Women’s Style.
Preparation: All three players have made their unit turn where there is a loading of the large muscle groups that include the legs, hips and back.

Grips: Stevenson, Henin-Hardenne and Mauresmo are each using a variation of the Eastern backhand grip. Please notice how each player uses the non-dominant hand to help prepare the racquet and to turn the upper body during the stroke.

Footwork: The players have established their hitting position where the weight is primarily shifted to the back foot and are about to step into the shot.

Balance: All three players possess excellent balance with head still, shoulders level and a solid base of support.

Loading: All three players are preparing with the racquet head above the level of the wrist. In addition you will see a pronounced shoulder turn where you can see a large portion their back facing the court.

Weight Transfer: The players are starting to transfer their weight with a step forward. Note how Henin-Hardenne is landing on her heel first. This heel-to-toe transfer of weight at first may seem stylistic, but in fact is a very productive way to transfer weight forward.

Shoulder Rotation: The players continue the upper body rotation as they take the racquet back even further. This up and back movement indicates a fully loaded backhand.

Level of the Shoulders: The women each approach the ball with their shoulders relatively level. This is an important fundamental that helps maintain balance and contributes significantly to a consistent swing path during the hitting phase.

Balance: The players are displaying beautiful balance; their heads up and eyes focused on the ball. The knees are bent and the center of gravity is directly in the middle of their base (feet).

Racquet Preparation: All three of the players’ racquet heads have been lowered and are in a position that will allow them to begin the hitting phase by swinging upward to the ball. The bent knees assist in the lowering of the racquet head to come from below the ball.

Use of Legs: Both Stevenson and Mauresmo are drawing significant energy from the ground by using their legs and hips to explode up through the shot. Henin-Hardenne is dealing with a low ball which requires her to stay lower through contact.

Stability: The best players in the world display great stability, balance and leg strength. Please note their balanced position even after contact, their non-dominant hand release backwards to assist in unloading and balance.

Contact Point: All three players have made or are about to make contact with the ball. During contact players keep their head still as the large muscles are uncoiling through the entire hitting phase. Also during contact each of the women have released the racquet from their non-dominant hand.

Racquet Head Acceleration: Notice the path of the racquet before and after contact. Each player exhibits incredible amount of racquet head acceleration up and through the hitting zone.

Head Still: The head is relatively still for a split second after contact. Note that Henin-Hardenne’s head remains still for a longer period of time.

Follow-through: Although stylistically different, each player is showing a follow-through, which follows a path through the contact point and ends with a high finish.