

Organic Tennis

Focusing and Sports ~ by Rafael Villeta, C.F.P.

Movement never lies. It is a barometer that tells the state of the soul's weather to all who can read it.

Martha Graham (Dancer and choreographer)

We play tennis the way we live and live the way we play tennis.

Organic tennis

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When I was young, my whole family played tennis. Since I was a child, I have had issues with my eyes. I needed to look for different ways of playing tennis because I couldn't see the ball well. I started to train using my instinctive creativity to develop a way of playing that was less analytical or visual and more somatically based. This led me to focus on the processes of attention and the nature of movement. For 30 years, tennis and padel have been two of the ways that I use to help others to live better. I currently work for the Madrid Tennis Federation and I am a Focusing Oriented Therapist and Focusing Trainer.

The Case for Organic Tennis

This article provides an example of how to use Focusing in learning a sport. Each sport may have its own Focusing methodology, but Organic Tennis offers fundamentals that can be applied to most sports, if understood and researched in depth. Organic Tennis also offers an experiential-holistic model that transcends education to present possibilities for the therapeutic, helping in the process of managing emotions or sports injuries, for example.

In this article I explain how Organic Tennis was developed and where it draws its insights from, explaining why Focusing is the most important of the tools it includes. The differences between Organic Tennis and conventional tennis are also explained, as well as the fundamental elements of this model. Finally, I provide a detailed case study.

Keys

Biotensegrity. kinesthetic synchrony. kinesthetic mirroring. The inner teacher. Allowing. Focusing.

Conventional versus Organic Tennis

Conventional tennis values constant and hard training, attention to individuality, competition, performance, sacrifice and victory as the essence of the game. *Organic Tennis understands that the practice of the game aims to help the whole person acquire the resources to live life more fully and unfold life potential.* In this sense, the opponent is an ally who is part of a shared plan to reveal the potential of the bodies at play, so victory or defeat is just one stop along the way.

As in so many other sports, tennis believes that faster is better. Points are won by moving faster or by accelerating the ball. To achieve this, players often heighten their physical intensity at the risk of becoming tense and stiff. Organic Tennis also understands the importance of speed, but uses speed in a different way. Organic Tennis prioritizes ease and simplicity in movement because this gives the body an efficient fluidity that dissolves tension, saves energy, and prevents injury. In order to illustrate this, I would like to introduce here the concept of *biotensegrity*.

The term ***biotensegrity*** was coined by Dr. Stephen Levin. His definition is the "tensional integrity of a living organism" or the "*tensegrity* of an organism". He developed the concept of *tensegrity* from the architect and engineer R.B. Fuller, who described ***tensegrity*** as a "combination of

forces that exist in a structure formed by an infinite network of compression elements (rigid elements) interconnected through tensile (elastic) elements that give the structure its total integrity" (Holísticaformación 2021).

What interests me about *biotensegrity* is that it applies the principles of *tensegrity* to organic structures that use bones to provide compressive support on the one hand and muscles, ligaments and fasciae to connect the bones through flexible tension. When these structures find a balance of tensile and compressive forces, they can provide the body with strength as well as lightness, flexibility and a high capacity for movement. In this sense Organic Tennis looks for a *biotensegrity* quality where all parts of the body work together in an organic way, absorbing tensions and providing smooth mobility.

In conventional tennis, players focus their attention primarily on the ball. Organic Tennis seeks a balance between attention to the ball and attention to the body because we understand that both are equal protagonists in the game and because we seek to work in a harmonious system that relates everything involved in the game with efficiency. In this way, every part of the body has its function and purpose. At any given moment, some parts have to relax more and some have to be more activated; all five senses are active so players are more efficient, with all of their resources working together with the same purpose. Sensations, emotions and thoughts relate and work in harmony.

Conventional tennis learning is largely based on a behavioral model in which the teacher is like a drill sergeant and the student obeys and executes the orders. In Organic Tennis it is *the inner teacher* who is in charge. *The inner teacher* is the present body that listens and uses both its contents and its surroundings to create felt sensations that provide reality and meaning to the game through decisions and movements.

Conventional tennis sees the body as a biomechanical tool that is used to win matches. Organic Tennis sees the body as an organism that lives and feels the game, that organizes itself around tennis but also organizes tennis around itself. Organic Tennis knows that when a stroke

is executed as an expression of a felt sense, the stroke will be technically perfect.

“It's not an era for experimentation.”

Some years ago one of my students complained to the head coach about me. We had a disagreement that actually had nothing to do with my way of teaching, but she knew that I was doing something different in my classes. She thought it gave her a good case to complain about me, and indeed it did. My head coach forbade me to teach using my method. Organic Tennis invites students to look inside themselves for some of the answers that the teacher is supposed to give at any tennis academy. This may be uncomfortable and subversive for some. After talking to my student, the head coach came to my court, very serious and annoyed, and told me: "Rafa, stop doing weird things; it's not an era for experimentation." What he meant by this was that he believed my method was superfluous, risky, a luxury that was not necessary to the academy's way of teaching.

After talking to him I remember feeling a lot of displeasure and frustration, but also a certain pride that my method evoked such a strong reaction. It is interesting to know that in his playing days, my head coach was a professional tennis player and was interested in alternative training methods, such as yoga and meditation, at a time long before they became fashionable. To the rest of the players at that time, these methods seemed strange or absurd! In short, my way of teaching was rejected by one of my colleagues most capable of appreciating it.

These experiences have brought me to believe that Organic Tennis might be an approach that is not as well received in the world of sports as much as it could be in the world of personal growth, therapy and somatic education, even if it is still essentially a method for teaching how to play tennis. Organic Tennis offers fundamentals for almost any other sport or physical activity involving training.

The Elements of Organic Tennis

The following are therapeutic or didactic techniques which focus on facilitating a certain type of experience. Organic Tennis provides a more optimal way of experiencing tennis as training for a fuller life. This process is a source of wellbeing because, first and foremost, it helps the body to develop some of its potential, not just to perform or compete.

The inner teacher: *If we know how to listen to the body*, it can tell us how to play - how to execute more functional strokes, how to prevent injuries or even heal them, and how to use energy more efficiently. The body has contact with all of the aspects involved in the game and knows how to relate to them more comfortably, more easily, more efficiently. It knows how to enjoy the experience of playing. Therefore, many times what we have to do is allow the movement.

Allowing: The more concerned we are with directing the ball and winning the point, the less we listen to the body. The more we allow ourselves to listen to our body's signals regarding balance, comfort, well-being or ease, the more relevant these signals will be to our game. Allowing is an attitude that deliberately seeks to focus on the internal experience of movement rather than control of the ball or technical perfection.

With regard to movement, Organic Tennis trusts in the benefits of *allowing*. If we say a conscious “Yes” to our spontaneous movement it increases its activity, it releases what is already in motion to move more freely, to give presence to what is in action, and to take advantage of the body's potential to update itself and adapt to the game. In this way we gain an ease that brings health and an acceptance that brings constructive change.

When we are able to recognize, greet and allow our own behaviors that are loaded with anxiety, anger, stress, tension or fear to be heard by us, they tend to relax and thus give us the opportunity to reorganize and move more calmly towards a way of moving and playing that allows for

new, more adaptive and effective behavior in competition, as well as more pleasurable and satisfying.

Kinesthetic mirroring: The teacher performs a simulated stroke in front of the student, a rehearsal without a ball that attempts to copy what the student does, and then offers new movements that can inspire the student to update their game.

Kinesthetic synchrony: This tool can be applied when the teacher and the pupil play or when the teacher observes how the pupil plays. It is about establishing a particular connection between the two through the ball. When playing with a pupil, the teacher seeks to play in a certain way, exemplifying with their body what they want the pupil to find in their own body, or empathizing with what they perceive in the pupil's body. There is an intention to use a certain muscle tone or a way of synchronizing breathing and striking.

Here the ball is a messenger that carries speed, trajectory, rhythm and energy. There is hence a collaboration - a complicity - between the two bodies through the game that updates the movements of both. The intention with which the game is played is discussed before and after the practice, but the teacher also should set a certain intention of empathy or curiosity.

When the teacher witnesses what the student does, the intention is not finding an action, but a focus, a presence in certain qualities and movements of the student. The aim is to unconditionally accompany the student's actions, to validate their decisions, but also to observe in order to mirror and inquire about the relevant contents. These contents range from how the racket is picked up, to how the student breathes, or where the ball is hit. This means that the mirroring is a fundamental element of kinesthetics, always coming from an attitude of *allowing*.

Focusing: “Focusing is a form of *felt-sensing*, is a practice of allowing our bodies to guide us to deeper self-knowledge and healing” (Gendlin, 1996). Organic Tennis uses Focusing during pauses so the player can connect with the actual physical sensations, emotions and thoughts

happening inside. This is the moment to ask oneself how this playing situation feels as a whole, with a gentle and curious attitude so any aspect of the game can be actualized.

Focusing can help sports players develop their body capacities in a more intelligent and complete way. "A felt sense is the many-stranded fabric of bodily awareness that (for example) guides golfers as they tee off. It would be impossible for them to think all the details of location, surrounding environment, and body movements that are woven into aiming. But the body knows the complex set of coordinated movements it must make to swing. The single felt sense of the situation incorporates the problem and the bodily known solution." (Gendlin 2002).

Pain: This can be a very important issue when it comes to playing tennis. We can identify two aspects of pain . On the one hand, there are the raw physical sensations, the sensory data being perceived before being considered pain. On the other hand, there might be "a part of me" that reacts with aversion to the experience. "I can't play because it hurts every time I hit the ball and if I don't stop playing it will never go away, it will even make my shoulder worse and in the end I won't even be able to drive my car."

Thus we propose to open a space to empathically accompany the reactive parts and also the raw physical sensation in all its details, so that the experience begins to uncover new nuances, new meanings and new directions of actualisation providing healthier ways to play.

Organic Tennis helps us to understand that pain or physical difficulty informs us of an arrested process that is seeking to evolve. In this way pain is a valuable guide to change direction towards constructive actualisation, rather than simply part of a diagnosed injury or illness seeking to be cured. It also takes into account the personal story behind an arrested process, the story that wants to be heard and that gives meaning to a physical experience.

During *kinesthetic synchronicity*, the teacher is aware of a process parallel to that of the student with whom they are playing. The teacher

can then find what is needed in that situation, can understand, accompany and offer new ways to play in various contexts, such as a Knock-up. In this way, students can actualize their game in a healthier way.

Case Study: *Initial Situation*

Now that the elements have been laid out, it is time to see how the whole process of Organic Tennis applies to a real-life situation. Here is the story of a young woman named Sol, who came to my class with some serious challenges, even though she didn't know in the beginning that these challenges could be addressed in the course of our time together.

Sol is a 29 year-old trainee with asthma. She applied for a training program of two one-hour sessions per week in a medium-level group. When I started training her, Sol needed several doses of *salbutamol* to sustain the physical effort. *Salbutamol* alters her system causing, among other effects, tremors, rapid heartbeat and palpitations. In addition, when Sol came to my classes I saw some cramped and shortened movements in the way she was playing.

Case study: *Process and Follow-up*

In this situation we started to train her body awareness during the game, especially with regard to breathing, by asking her body "What is it like to breathe when I play?". In different situations of more or less tiredness, we observed the differences in the way she hit the ball, the way she breathed and the sensations of these experiences.

Two months later we also started to ask the body: "What does my breathing want to have happen?" and shortly after, "Is there any relation between breathing and striking?". From the findings we made, other questions appeared such as: "What if I inhale when preparing to strike

and connect with the image of making myself bigger by doing so?"; "What if I exhale blowing out through my mouth when executing the end of the stroke, and propel the ball with my exhalation as well?"; or "What voice can the stroke have?".

We tried giving voice to the stroke with murmurs or grunts. We also began to use the end of the sessions to pause and give meaning to the experience of the session and to feel the state of the body at that moment. My goal in offering this kind of guidance was to integrate the student's physical condition with a certain way of playing tennis, trusting that we could follow the clues that would guide us through a constructive bodily process of self-propelled actualisation. To facilitate this process I used *kinesthetic synchrony*, *kinesthetic mirroring* and *Focusing*.

One of the sessions was particularly significant when none of her classmates came and we had the opportunity to work in a different way, more focused on her own process. In that session we played barefoot, closed our eyes at the moment of impact until the end of the stroke, listened to the sound of the stroke, and we were able to take longer and quieter pauses to feel into and talk about the contents that were showing up. At that point, deeper emotional issues regarding her personal history with the sport began to emerge. She was able to connect inside and talk about some of these sensations and memories.

One element she shared was times when she felt very demanding of herself and sometimes frustrated playing for the regional hockey team (another sport that she trained in). Other sensations came in remembering when she played with her family for pleasure. That turned out to be a source of inspiration when we asked the body "What would it be like for me to play tennis with enjoyment?". We looked for ways to make a space that was curious and welcoming for all the answers that might come.

In her own words here is what this session was like for her:

"In that class where my classmates were not there and we were able to talk more about what tennis was for me, what I felt when I played and the need for the inhaler, we came up with the idea of

connecting to a place in my mind that would take me to what I always loved most about the sport in order to enjoy it as much as possible. In this place, where I connect to tennis through sensations (the sound of the ball, the pressure on the racket handle, the feeling of being on the court), there is not much frustration, or demands or anger. It is mainly made up of everything I felt when my father had me take summer lessons with my three brothers, tournaments with friends, and we spent long afternoons at the club—all those moments during which all that mattered was to enjoy tennis and have fun.

In these contexts, making mistakes didn't matter because there were always going to be more shots and opportunities to improve. We agreed to give importance to this place which I can always come back to, enjoying every shot, trying to do it the best I can without caring where the ball lands, because there will be many more.

Thinking about this while I play has allowed me to fine-tune my accuracy, try new shots and plays, but above all to enjoy them more. All this time I have been combining this with the idea of making myself big when I hit, trying to release everything in every shot and remembering the power of the mind and of my attitude. I feel that without a doubt I have grown a lot in terms of technique and playing, I have enjoyed it more, and in January one year will have passed during which I have not needed the inhaler to play.”

Case study: *Final Situation*

Class after class, Sol updated her way of playing and started to use the inhaler less. She started to recognise and physically inhabit more and more “that place in her mind” where she can access a constructive and pleasurable tennis experience.

When Sol talks about “that place in my mind,” it is not something I proposed to her. I invited her to play barefoot, closing her eyes,

connecting with her breathing and other ways that seemed helpful for Sol to connect with her body. This allowed the actions of the game to be carried out from the inside out, that is, from her body (her inner teacher) to the game (her way of hitting, moving, her decisions, etc.). This process led her to connect with memories that functioned as symbols of a constructive experience.

Sol is now experiencing what it is like to play tennis without medication, being able to sense how much effort she can make, when she has to take a break, what to use that break for and what resources she can develop to continue playing without resorting to medication. Now when I watch her move, I see how much more fluid and extroverted she is in the way that she plays, and how much more daring her decision making is.

It is essential to understand that this process did not seek to suppress a problem like asthma, but, rather, to facilitate processes of adaptive updating, finding new ways of playing tennis and exploring the meaning of being an athlete for her. Through this transformative process, Sol has improved her hitting technique, the focus of her attention, introduced conscious pauses when she feels they are necessary and learned to listen to her thoughts and emotions. I didn't know what results we were going to achieve when we started, but I trusted Sol's potential because of her willingness to become more aware of herself, her physical sensations, her emotions and thoughts. From that basis, I was confident that we were going to set constructive processes and improvements in motion.

The way Sol plays tennis now is more functional, thanks to the integration of breathing and the execution of her strokes with new movement patterns. In short, although for the last year Sol has not been using the inhaler, I did not know if her process was going to be updated in that way or another way.

Conclusion: Organic Tennis offers the possibility of uniting body, mind and spirit to not only improve one's game, but also to lead towards a more fulfilling life.

Closing

I want to give the best example I know that illustrates how conventional tennis in its most competitive version can approach the philosophy of Organic Tennis. Wimbledon is the birthplace of this sport, where the first tournament in its history occurred and the place that everyone recognises as the “Cathedral of Tennis.” Its history and fame mean that whoever wins there is recognized by all. However, it is interesting to note that when the players make the journey from the changing rooms to the center court, they walk through a door above which there is a fragment of a poem by Kipling that says : "...if you can meet with triumph and disaster and treat those two impostors just the same..." (Kipling, 1948). This inspirational phrase shows that perhaps Organic Tennis can help conventional tennis reconnect to its deepest aspiration.

From my more subjective and poetic view, Organic Tennis places us at the edge of resistance and desire. We know that desire leads us to joy, but desire clashes with the resistance of fear. Thus we find ourselves in a conflict between controlling and *allowing*. Conventional tennis seeks certainty, organic tennis seeks to support the subtle, our felt sense, our desire, our joy.

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