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Review Article

Opportunity, Choice, Execution, Recovery: An Event-Coding Framework for Observational Assessment of Decision-Making

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Abstract: Observational assessment of decision-making in applied teaching settings usually relies on outcome counts, aggregated performance totals or global rater impressions, without establishing whether a defensible option was available to the learner and actually selected. This paper proposes an event-based behavioural coding framework with four linked components: Opportunity, Choice, Execution and Recovery (OCER). It specifies what counts as an eligible decision event, scores option selection separately from motor execution, and treats recovery as an independent continuation behaviour rather than a residual category. The framework draws on game-centred pedagogy, expertise research and the Game Performance Assessment Instrument, and acknowledges a newer tennis-specific tactical instrument. Its contribution is a diagnostic bridge between a game-based teaching episode and an auditable observational assessment, not a new theoretical claim for Teaching Games for Understanding. The paper presents five tactical problem classes, conditioned-practice examples, a draft event codebook and rater-training rules. Two hypothetical episodes illustrate why a situationally appropriate response can carry educational value even when the point is lost. No empirical dataset, observation frequencies or causal estimates are reported. The framework generates testable predictions concerning learning transfer, inter-rater agreement, and whether opportunity-based indices add explanatory value beyond outcome scores and generic skill tests in university sport instruction.

Keywords: Observational Assessment, Decision-Making, Event Coding, Inter-Rater Agreement, Behavioural Measurement, Ecological Validity.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Playing tennis competently means far more than producing a forehand or backhand on command. A player has to judge whether a rally ball should be played safe or aggressive, read the space an opponent leaves open, recover to a useful position, and adjust all of that to the score and the quality of the incoming ball. A learner can hit accurate shots off a predictable feed and still pick poor shots during a point. A tactically sharp student can see the right option and lack the control to pull it off. University tennis has to deal with both cases.

Standard instruction often starts with long blocks of isolated stroke production and pushes tactical thinking back to formal matches (Reid *et al*., 2007). That can give a useful early movement reference. But it risks teaching students that technique is a gate they must pass before any real decision-making. Game-centered approaches flip the starting point: a game problem creates the need for skill learning, and the learner returns to play to test a solution (Kirk & MacPhail, 2002; Harvey & Jarrett, 2014). The choice is not technique versus tactics. It is between teaching technique as an end in itself and connecting it to the decisions that make it necessary.

This article develops a problem-centered curriculum model for non-specialist or mixed-ability university tennis courses. Its sources include the game-centered literature, work on tactical knowledge in tennis, and recent applications of Game Sense and net/wall game teaching (Hewitt *et al*., 2018; McPherson, 1999; Poncet-Rief & Rode, 2026). It is an original instructional synthesis, not a systematic review or an intervention study. Every proposed learning benefit is treated as a hypothesis to be evaluated.

This is a targeted conceptual synthesis of peer-reviewed work identified through PubMed, publisher

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records, and tennis-pedagogy reference lists up to October 2026. It does not claim exhaustive coverage, pooled effect estimates, or original human-participant observations. The codebook below is an instructional and research instrument that still awaits reliability and construct-validation work. The analysis is limited to decisions inside live or modified points. Not fine-grained forehand biomechanics. Not individualized stroke-calibration protocols.

Game-centered instruction is not new. Kirk and MacPhail (2002), Harvey and Jarrett (2014), Pill and Hewitt (2017), and the recent PETE course illustration by Poncet-Rief and Rode (2026) already describe meaningful pedagogical foundations and practice formats. McPherson's (1999) tennis study suggests that expertise is tied to problem representation. Ecological dynamics treats decisions as situated in performer-environment relations (Araújo *et al*., 2006). The narrower contribution here is an event definition that stops teacher judgments about tactical learning from collapsing into match outcome. The framework states when a decision is observable, what counts as an eligible opportunity, and which parts of the observed point stay analytically separate.

2. Why Tactical Learning Deserves Explicit Instruction

2.1. Tactical Knowledge is Distinguishable from Stroke Execution

McPherson (1999) compared how collegiate varsity and beginning players represented and solved game problems. The study used a small sample and should not be generalized as a population estimate. But it shows why tactical understanding is a real learning target of its own. Experienced players organize information about the situation, possible actions, and likely consequences in ways that novices do not. Stroke performance alone is therefore an incomplete proxy for competent play.

For teaching purposes, tactical knowledge can be split into three connected capacities. Perception is noticing ball flight, opponent position, and open court. Decision-making is selecting a purposeful response from feasible alternatives. Execution and re-positioning are producing the chosen action and preparing for the next exchange. These capacities are linked in real play but should stay analytically distinct in feedback and assessment. If a student names the right target and then misses the ball, the instructor's response should differ from the one given when a technically clean stroke is aimed at a poor target.

2.2. Game-Centered Learning as Situated Problem Solving

Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU) and its relatives place learners in modified games where tactical problems can be noticed, discussed, and revisited. Kirk and MacPhail (2002) argued for seeing game learning as situated rather than as the acquisition of decontextualized rules. Harvey and Jarrett (2014) reviewed the development of game-centered approaches and flagged their relevance to motivation, tactical learning, and decision-making—while also noting the need for stronger research designs and clearer pedagogical description.

In tennis, a game does not have to reproduce full regulation singles to be authentic. A crosscourt-only rally can teach depth and recovery. A short-court game can make opponents' intentions easier to perceive. A cooperative-then-competitive point gives novices more chances to meet tactical information. Pill and Hewitt (2017) showed how the Game Sense approach can be presented to novice players through modified games. Hewitt *et al*., (2018) explicitly linked Game Sense with a constraints-led perspective for tennis teaching—reinforcing how compatible tactical problems and adaptable practice conditions really are.

2.3. Questions Should Reveal Decisions, Not Solicit Slogans

Questioning is often called the heart of game-centered instruction. But asking "What should you do?" after every error is unlikely to be enough. Good questions point at visible information and decision criteria: "Where was the opponent when you hit the ball?"; "What did the higher trajectory change?"; "Which reply would buy you more recovery time?" The learner then tests the proposed answer during play. Questions earn their keep when they support perception, comparison, and action—not when they make students recite the teacher's preferred vocabulary.

Teachers should separate a tactical error from an execution error before responding. A learner who keeps choosing an unsafe down-the-line option may need a decision rule. A learner who makes a sensible crosscourt choice but cannot control contact may benefit from a short technical rehearsal. The point of the teaching cycle is to move flexibly between these two problems without reducing every failure to insufficient technique.

3. A Five-Problem Structure for University Tennis

The proposed curriculum centers on five recurring tactical problems instead of an exhaustive list of stroke names. Each has a meaningful outcome, relevant informational cues, and modifiable constraints. The sequence is pedagogically convenient, not a developmental law. Advanced students meet all five problems with greater speed and precision. Novices meet the same underlying decisions through scaled equipment and rules.

Table 1: Five tactical problems and possible game constraints

Tactical problem	Representative question	Modified game	Observable decision
1. Sustain the exchange	What keeps the rally playable?	Cooperative short-court rally; progressively narrower target	Select a safe trajectory and recover
2. Create space	Where can I send the opponent?	Crosscourt-to-open-court game with side zones	Recognize and use a change of direction
3. Protect court position	How do I regain time after being moved?	Wide-feed recovery game	Choose a higher or deeper defensive reply
4. Exploit an advantage	When is attack preferable to neutral play?	Short-ball bonus game	Identify attackable ball and suitable target
5. Initiate the point	How can serve or return shape the next shot?	Serve-plus-one and return-plus-one points	Plan first-two-shot patterns

3.1. Problem 1: Sustaining a Purposeful Rally

Beginners often read a rally as a test of how hard they can hit. A small-court cooperative game reframes success as a series of playable exchanges. Students notice when higher net clearance, moderate pace, or a more central target extends the rally. The court can be enlarged or the ball made faster as control improves. Instead of counting contacts alone, the teacher watches whether students choose a manageable trajectory after different incoming balls.

3.2. Problem 2: Creating and Recognizing Space

The second problem introduces tactical asymmetry: placing a ball to one side changes the opponent's likely reply and the space available on the next shot. Students begin with a two-target game, where an intentional direction change becomes eligible for a process point. The teacher asks whether the target was chosen because it was open, because the student simply favored a stroke, or because the opponent's position made it viable. Players then replay a similar scenario with repositioned targets to test whether the decision transfers.

3.3. Problem 3: Defense as Time Management

Novices often treat a defensive situation as failure and swing for an unnecessarily forceful counterattack. In a wide-feed recovery game, the goal is to return the ball with enough height and depth to recover toward a useful court position. The teacher stresses the link between incoming difficulty, shot choice, and recovery—not a mechanical recipe. The lesson also opens a chance to teach safe deceleration and footwork at individually appropriate speeds.

3.4. Problem 4: Turning Advantage into a Purposeful Attack

A short ball offers a different opportunity than a deep neutral ball. But that opportunity depends on the player's ability and court position. A conditioned game awards an extra point when the player recognizes an attackable situation, moves forward appropriately, and chooses a realistic target. Because a winner is not always possible, evaluation cannot rest on immediate point success. A student's selection of a high-percentage approach can count as progress even when the opponent retrieves the next ball.

3.5. Problem 5: Serve and Return as Opening Patterns

Teaching the serve only through toss and racket mechanics can delay understanding of its point-starting purpose. The model introduces modified serve-plus-one and return-plus-one games. A novice may start with an underhand or scaled serve to experience placement and recovery. A more advanced player uses a conventional serve while working on the next-shot plan. The key question is what information from the opening ball feeds the next decision. Technical practice is inserted when an execution bottleneck blocks meaningful tactical experimentation.

3.6. Keeping Tactical Problems Distinct from Technique Calibration

The five problems are tactical categories, not a progression of stroke forms. A technically simple, high defensive ball can be the most suitable response to a deep, wide incoming shot. An aggressive down-the-line reply can be tactically unsuitable despite attractive mechanics. A motor-skill calibration question, by contrast, asks which practice conditions let a student control a specified stroke function. Both questions belong in a complete program. They demand different observations. This framework codes an opportunity and an intentional response—not a general estimate of movement elegance.

4. The Observe–Question–Practice–Replay Cycle

The proposed lesson cycle has five stages. A short initial game makes a particular problem visible. Learners then observe and identify the cues tied to successful decisions. The teacher asks one or two questions and selects a brief practice activity for the most important limitation. Students replay the original or a closely related game, allowing a before-and-after comparison. Finally, learners state what changed, why, and what to test next. The sequence loops. The instructor returns to an earlier stage whenever the observed difficulty shifts.

The technical practice stage is deliberately selective. If a learner understands the need for a high defensive ball but cannot control racket-face angle, a temporary, predictable feed plus one relevant cue may help. Once contact becomes functional, the player returns to the live defensive problem. This use of technical instruction avoids the false split between direct teaching and discovery. A nonlinear-pedagogy analysis makes the same point about the relationship between game design, learner exploration, and task constraints (Tan *et al*., 2012).

Classroom dialogue should stay brief enough to protect active participation. Instead of a long whole-class debate after every point, pairs can alternate as player and observer for a rally or two. An observer may be asked to report only whether the opponent was displaced before the next shot. A well-designed observation role gives waiting students a real instructional task and produces evidence relevant to the tactical question.

5. A Twelve-Week Curriculum Map

The plan below assumes a semester-based course with enough supervised court time. It is a design exemplar, not an empirically established dosage. The teacher can revisit themes as needed, and each later unit is expected to fold in the earlier problems.

Table 2: Semester plan linking problems, games, and assessment

Weeks	Instructional emphasis	Anchor game	Assessment checkpoint
1–2	Rally continuity and safe court organization	Scaled cooperative exchange	Baseline rally and cue observation
3–4	Depth, direction, and open space	Two-zone placement points	Justification of target choice
5–6	Defensive height and court recovery	Wide-ball recovery game	Decision-plus-recovery observation
7–8	Short-ball recognition and approach options	Transition attack game	Attack-versus-neutral classification
9–10	Serve/return and first-two-shot planning	Serve-plus-one / return-plus-one	Opening-pattern observation
11–12	Integrated singles/doubles and transfer	Varied-opponent conditioned matches	Delayed, transfer, and reflection tasks

In weeks one and two, diagnostic games establish initial learning goals and equitable group arrangements. Weeks three and four emphasize decision explanations before adding tactical options. By weeks five and six, positional recovery becomes observable and teachable. Weeks seven and eight address the difference between an opportunity and a low-probability gamble. Weeks nine and ten connect point initiation to the rally that follows. The final sessions use varied opponents, changed scoring incentives, and modified court conditions to check whether decisions hold up beyond the exact games used for practice.

This schedule should not be read as withholding formal scoring until the end. Even novices can meet simple competition from the first lesson, provided the rules create enough rallies for the intended problem to appear. Competent players may need challenging tactical games long before the class reaches the nominal advanced unit. Differentiation happens mainly through ball speed, target dimensions, court size, permitted responses, and opponent behavior—not through exclusion from common learning objectives.

6. Event-Based Assessment: The OCER Framework

The Game Performance Assessment Instrument (GPAI), developed by Oslin *et al*., (1998), is a useful starting point because it separates components of game behavior instead of treating the scoreboard as the whole story. Its initial field testing did not specifically establish validity for a university tennis version. An adapted instrument therefore has to be specified and investigated before strong measurement claims are made.

A practical tennis coding system can record the opportunity presented, whether the selected response was tactically appropriate, whether execution produced a playable ball, and whether the player recovered after contact. A defensive decision can be judged appropriate when a player under pressure selects a safer high or deep reply instead of a low-margin winner. The teacher or trained observer codes only clearly defined events and separately records "not observable" or "insufficient information." In doubles, support and partner positioning can be added as distinct dimensions.

Table 3: Proposed event-based tactical observation rubric

Component	1 = Emerging	2 = Developing	3 = Functional	4 = Adaptive
Information use	Rarely notices key cue	Notices cue after prompting	Usually uses relevant cue	Uses changing cues under pressure
Decision quality	Choice rarely suits situation	Sometimes chooses suitable option	Usually matches choice to situation	Adjusts choice to opponent and score

Component	1 = Emerging	2 = Developing	3 = Functional	4 = Adaptive
Execution for purpose	Shot seldom achieves intended function	Function appears with support	Typically achieves functional outcome	Maintains function across varied conditions
Recovery/continuation	Often unprepared for next ball	Recovers inconsistently	Regularly repositions usefully	Anticipates and adjusts recovery

The rubric is a design illustration, not a validated scale. Before research use, raters would need operational definitions, sample videos, independent coding, and agreement statistics. Scoring should rest on enough observable opportunities—a player who receives no short balls cannot reasonably be scored on short-ball decisions. Rubric levels should not be automatically converted into interval-scale measurements or treated as evidence of a single latent trait without validation.

A balanced course assessment can combine observed game decisions, stroke control, tactical explanation, and constructive partnership behavior. Grades should not be determined solely by match wins. Even when the curriculum values competitive play, learning outcomes should reward better decisions within a student's feasible action repertoire. Instructors should also ensure that chances to encounter each tactical problem are comparable across groups.

6.1. OCER: Defining the Eligible Event and Unit of Observation

The Opportunity–Choice–Execution–Recovery framework defines one eligible event as an opponent-initiated or ball-fed situation in which the player can plausibly perceive at least two functionally distinct responses. The observer first codes Opportunity (O): incoming ball depth and direction, player balance or displacement, and opponent location at or just before contact. Where camera framing or live observation does not show a needed cue, the code is "unobservable," not "incorrect." A drill that forces every learner into the same single response can be useful for practice. It does not generate an eligible event for decision quality.

Choice (C) records the player's selected intention—sustaining a safe rally, defending for time, moving the opponent, or attacking an accessible ball—and whether that intention fits the situation. A teacher cannot reliably infer private intention from ball direction alone. So the operational rule combines observable response features with brief, nonleading learner explanation when necessary. Execution (E) records whether the action performed its selected function, whether or not it wins the point. Recovery (R) records subsequent readiness for the opponent's next contact, provided play continues and movement remains feasible. Scoring each component separately keeps a forced error or a strong opponent from invalidating a good tactical decision.

Table 4: Draft OCER event codebook: categories require pilot refinement before research use

Code	Eligible evidence	Example classification	Exclusion / missing rule
O: Opportunity	Incoming ball; opponent position; player displacement	Deep wide ball, defensive situation	Key cue off camera → unobservable
C: Choice	Functional target/trajectory and stated or inferable purpose	High deep reply selected under pressure	No plausible alternative → not eligible
E: Execution	Ball reaches intended playable function	Deep reply stays in play; point not necessarily won	Ball contact hidden → unknown
R: Recovery	Movement/readiness when opponent can play next ball	Balanced recovery after high reply	Point ends at once → not applicable

6.2. Two Hypothetical Episodes and a Denominator Rule

Episode A: a beginner receives a fast, wide ball, sends a slower high crosscourt reply, and recovers. The opponent eventually wins the point. A conventional winner-error metric reports only a lost point. OCER can instead record an observable defensive opportunity, an appropriate conservative choice, a playable execution, and functional recovery. Episode B: an advanced player receives a clearly attackable short ball but sends it harmlessly to the well-positioned opponent. The contact and depth may be fine while the tactical choice is suboptimal. These are teaching vignettes, not coded participants. Their classifications need operational definitions agreed upon by raters.

For any decision-quality estimate, the denominator should be the number of eligible and sufficiently observable opportunities for that specific tactical problem—not total points, total strokes, or attendance. The number of exposures must be reported, because a learner cannot demonstrate a short-ball attack decision if no short ball arises. A descriptive report might tabulate eligible opportunities, decisions classified as appropriate, the number not observable, and recovery observations separately. The numerator and denominator should not be merged across fundamentally different tactical contexts without justification.

6.3. Construct Validation and Scoring Reliability

OCER should be compared directly with existing instruments before it is used for grading or

intervention research. Oslin et al.'s (1998) GPAI supplies components of game performance and preliminary validation in several school game categories. It was not originally validated as this university tennis instrument. More recently, van der Meer *et al*., (2024) used a custom Tactical Tennis Tool for serve-and-volley behavior. The present contribution is intentionally smaller and more teachable: a situation-specific observational template for ordinary university classes, not a claim to improve the psychometrics of either instrument.

A sensible validation sequence begins with content review by tennis educators, including scrutiny of ambiguous examples. Independent observers then pilot-code the same events and compare agreement by component, focusing on whether both recognized the same eligible opportunity. Codes with persistent disagreement should be revised or discarded before any formal hypothesis test. Where frequency allows, report agreement estimates and uncertainty rather than relying on an attractive overall score. Later validity questions ask whether OCER decisions relate to expert judgments, differentiate relevant learning levels, and predict transfer beyond serve accuracy or match results.

6.4. A Staged Research Comparison Instead of a Promised Effect

Stage one is feasibility: determine the proportion of lesson points that produce codable opportunities, observer time per player, student acceptability, and missing data. Stage two compares two clearly described teaching conditions—an explicit OCER-informed game-question-replay curriculum and a conventional technical-plus-play curriculum—using independently scored pretests and delayed, varied-opponent tasks. The key outcome is the frequency of appropriate choices among eligible opportunities, with execution and recovery as separate secondary outcomes. Class assignment, teacher effects, prior experience, attendance, and chance differences in opportunity mix must all be documented. Any proposed advantage is an empirical hypothesis, not a finding.

7. Boundary Conditions and a Staged Validation Agenda

Game-based pedagogy demands more planning than simply putting students into matches. Poorly chosen constraints can encourage unintended strategies: a bonus for winners can produce indiscriminate hard hitting, while an overly generous rally-count rule can discourage placement. Teachers should ask what behavior the scoring rule makes advantageous and revise it when actual play drifts from the learning goal. Hewitt *et al*., (2018) give a tennis-specific rationale for watching how game rules and emergent behavior interact.

The social environment matters too. Questioning can turn into an unwanted public examination, especially for novices who fear embarrassment. Pair discussion, optional spoken or written responses, and questions framed around alternative solutions can protect learner agency. Where facilities are crowded, rotating pairs and short games help keep active time substantial. Physical and sensory access needs may require adapted equipment or nonstandard rules. These adaptations can preserve the central tactical question while widening participation.

Recent work describing game-based teaching of net/wall games in physical education teacher education offers a relevant curricular example. It does not establish universal effectiveness across university tennis settings (Poncet-Rief & Rode, 2026). A positive result in school-age tennis cannot be assumed to replicate among adult beginners, competitive university athletes, or students in a short elective. The model's portability should be tested, not asserted.

A future evaluation could compare sections taught with the game-based cycle against sections taught through a transparent alternative curriculum. Outcome measures should include separately scored tactical decisions and execution, delayed retention, unfamiliar-opponent transfer, motivation, and meaningful participation. Reports should document learning-task constraints, teacher questioning behavior, time in active play, and assessment reliability. Student interviews could investigate whether learners noticed new game cues, used technical practice to solve perceived problems, and valued the course beyond exam scores.

7.1. Conditions That Could Falsify the Proposed Advantage

If trained raters cannot agree on whether a choice was available, the central construct lacks a dependable unit and the codebook must be redesigned. If scores rise only because games generate easier opportunities, a causal claim about improved decisions is unwarranted. If a student becomes more verbally fluent but makes no more appropriate decisions under an unfamiliar opponent, the dialogue activity has not demonstrated game transfer. These failure conditions should be specified before a program is assessed. They make the framework open to correction rather than a blanket endorsement of every game-based lesson.

8. CONCLUSION

A university tennis curriculum should prepare students to solve tennis problems, not merely display isolated stroke forms. The five-problem model gives tactical learning a clear place in lesson planning while keeping focused technical instruction useful. Its game-question-practice-replay cycle, differentiated constraints, and event-based assessment provide a practical way to align instructional activities with game competence. The model remains a theoretical and pedagogical proposal. Its effectiveness, feasibility, and equity require careful empirical examination.

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