

New year, better you: Small changes for steady results

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From hitting forehands and backhands at the baseline to footwork drills of sprints up and back, tennis is inherently a sport that thrives on routine. After the COVID-19 pandemic took hold last March, life overall became anything but — and as the calendar turns into 2021, tennis players across the United States are looking towards what’s next.

Forced off the courts for much of the pandemic, players of all ages and ability levels [have been flocking to the courts in recent months](#), taking advantage of tennis’ natural status as a social-distancing sport. But whether they’re returning to tennis or picking up a racquet for the first time, the question of how to balance what can be controlled in a fluid and changing global situation remains.

The answer, according to experts like Dr. Larry Lauer, [mental skills specialist for USTA Player Development](#), is to find what works for you, and to stick to it.

“We’ve been used to having times where we exercise, where we eat meals, and get good sleep. During the pandemic, our schedules have changed,” Lauer said.

“It’s very important to create a schedule, to continue to have things that you’re working towards... whatever it is that you like to do. Scheduling that in is so important.”

Making small adjustments to reinforce or improve what’s already familiar, rather than rapidly overhauling an entire lifestyle as might be typical in the early weeks of a new year, can be part of a gradual recipe for success and stability.

Take CJ Villarreal from the Texas section as an example.

“As someone who started playing a little later in life, I’ve learned to rely more on repetitive muscle memory than declining athleticism,” Villarreal, an NTRP 3.5 40+ player from Corpus Christi, Texas, said.

“With that in mind, I’ve disciplined myself to commit to hitting sessions with other players where we concentrate on countless repetitions of various shots rather than actual match play. As much as I enjoy match play, I now really look forward to these scheduled, creative rep sessions because the final result leads to a more comfortable, consistent and confident game during league matches.”

Physical improvements like the ones Villarreal describes [can also lead to better mental health](#), says Lauer.

“We see that human beings thrive on learning and challenging themselves, learning a new skill,” he said. “It allows them to feel success, like that they’re growing and improving. It certainly is a great way to buffer yourself from the stress that comes with a pandemic like COVID-19.”

Sticking to a routine isn’t only important for those who are looking to improve their play on the court. Others who are leaders in tennis in their communities across the country, like Kansas City’s Brandon Cusick, know that anything less than diligent adherence to the recommended health protocols will undo much of the recent progress made.

“As a captain, player and passionate advocate of the yellow fuzz, tennis has been my safe haven of sanity during the tenuous last 10 months,” Cusick, who captains a pair of USTA League teams and competes on four in all, said.

“In order to stay active and competitive on the court, adjustments to my routine extend beyond the mask, sanitizer and social distancing to ensuring that the safety of my players and fellow competitors becomes priority number one.

“Respect for our game and health means holding each other accountable and ensuring that our facilities, matches and play exceed the bare minimum so that we can make 2021 the best year yet for our sport.”