A counterpuncher like Lleyton Hewitt makes a living with speed, tenacity and great passing shots.

Crack the hack

Are hackers ruining your life? Follow the advice of top US coach **Nick Saviano** and you'll find next time you play a safety player who simply waits for your mistakes, that you'll actually win.

1 KNOW THE ENEMY

We've all heard and used the term, but what exactly is a hacker? A hacker (or stonewaller, or counterpuncher) is someone who plays tennis by one simple rule: keep the ball in play until the opponent makes a mistake. How do they do this? By standing behind the baseline, hitting high, safe, deep ground strokes, and never saying die. They want to torture you until the thought of hitting another ball makes you scream. Albania will win the Davis Cup before you see a hacker give up on a ball.

2 IT'S ALL ABOUT ANGLES

Unless you have some heavy artillery, trying to overpower a hacker is a bad idea. A hacker has a way of softening your shots and slapping them back at you. A wiser move – and a good pattern to establish throughout a match – is to create gaps on the court by taking advantage of angles. Move a hacker out wide and you force him out of his comfort zone. Depending on where the return goes, you should be in position to take control of the point. If it's down the line, step in and play an angle. If it's crosscourt, you can safely go up the line and have an excellent opportunity to approach the net.

You won't find many at Wimbledon or on the ATP or WTA Tours, but junior and club tennis is littered with them. The chances are that you've experienced the agony of trying to beat one. Their style isn't pretty, but if played correctly, it can drive an opponent to madness.

We're talking about hackers. A hacker invites you to beat yourself – then basks in your frustration as you do precisely that. Each and every time you leave the court, you mutter the same thing: "How did I lose to him? I'm better than he is." But merely saying it won't ease the pain or humiliation. Only one thing will exorcize that demon: revenge. Here's a battle plan for getting it.

Patrick Rafter attacks the net to apply pressure and avoid tiring rallies.

3 PRECISION STRIKES

By forcing you to play extra balls, hackers might soon have you believing that you've got to hit the lines in order to win a point. In fact, they'll often leave the lines unprotected, daring you to hit a winner. Then, when you start missing, your frustration will grow. Avoid this trap. Be smart, be patient. Overhitting is the most common mistake made against hackers. You can attack, but attack with percentage shots. Do you want to belt the ball down the line? Fine. Just make sure it's off a short ball – not one that's five feet behind the baseline. Go for winners only when you're in an offensive position.

4 RIGHT WAY, WRONG-FOOT

There's no such thing as an effective retriever with lead feet. So hackers tend to be pretty fair movers. They want you to hit the ball into the open court; it gives them a chance to show their speed. They stay in good shape in order to be able to play their grinding style and run all day. A smart move is to hit volleys and finishing ground strokes behind hackers. By wrong-footing them, you neutralize their speed and plant a seed of confusion in their heads. The next time you have a short ball, the hacker won't assume that you're hitting to the vacated area. The open court will become even more open.

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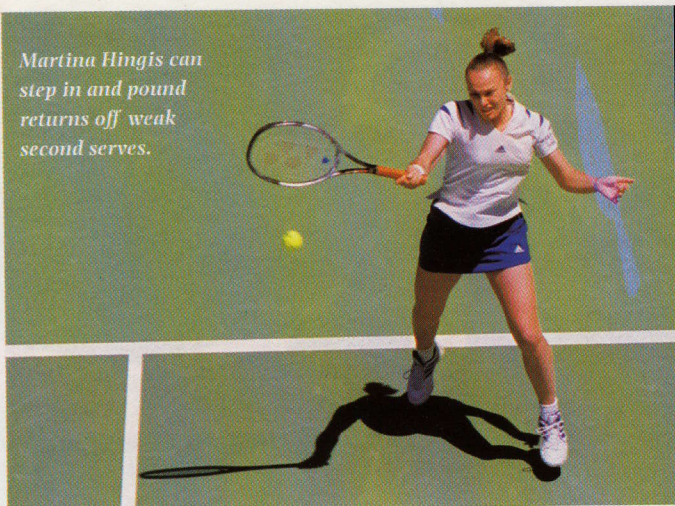
5 TAKE THE OFFENSIVE

A hacker would rather see you playing passively from the baseline than pressuring him into hitting offensive shots. That's because hackers generally don't have a big weapon, although they love beating you with a passing shot or lob. It's a matter of imposing your will. Don't let the occasional pass or lob winner intimidate you and prevent you from advancing. Look for opportunities to attack and take control of the point. If you get a short ball, follow it into the net. A great way to attack hackers is to hit approach shots deep and down the middle. This way, they have no angles to work with and are forced to create their own, something most players have trouble doing. If you're winning the majority of these approaches to net, keep at it... the pressure will get to a hacker.

6 DISGUISE AND CONQUER

When playing hackers, you're sure to be fed a healthy diet of high, looping balls. It's their forte. A smart counter-attack is to loop a deep ball back, then rush the net. The trick is not to move in right away. Be patient. In most cases, hackers won't take high balls on the rise. Instead, they'll retreat a few feet, wait for the ball to drop, and reply with a looping shot of their own. The second you see them retreating... that's when you should make your charge. Execute this tactic with the proper disguise, and the next time you hit a high ball, a puzzled hacker won't know what you're planning to do. ➡

TACTICS

Martina Hingis can step in and pound returns off weak second serves.

7 DEMAND BETTER SERVICE

Most counterpunchers don't have a big first serve, and in many cases, the second serve is a real dolly–drop – and a golden opportunity for you to be aggressive. If you continually do damage with your returns, hackers will start to press and think they have to hit their serves deeper and harder. This can lead to double faults. Nothing is sweeter than turning the tables on a hacker and goading him into errors. Remember: hackers are unlikely to give you many free points, so you're going to need to pressure them into making mistakes.

TOP TIPS

When you're sneaking in behind a looping shot, send the ball crosscourt to the hacker's weaker wing. This helps to create an angle, so that when your opponent hits his looping ball back, you've got several options for your first volley.

8 DRAW HIM IN

Logic dictates that if a player remains glued to the baseline, it's because he's frightened of the alternative. The net is a no–go area for hackers. Volleys and overheads are never their strengths. (If they were, they wouldn't be hackers.) Hitting drop shots or short ground strokes that keep the ball low will force hackers to make a difficult choice: They can (1) follow their shot into the net, a place they'd rather not be; or (2) hit the short ball, then backpedal and retreat, putting them in no–man's land. Either way, you've forced them away from their beloved baseline and into a very uncomfortable position.

9 STAY THE COURSE

Hackers want to lull you into playing their brand of moonball tennis. Don't let them. It's the worst thing you can do. Rather, settle on a style of play and stick to it. Play to your strengths and impose your game and your will on them. Try not to get discouraged if an extra ball or two comes back over the net – expect it. Always prepare yourself to hit another shot, even if you're sure you've just hit a winner. The hacker's goal is to make you hit one extra ball.

10 BEAT BATTLE FATIGUE

What hackers love to see is an opponent about to have a fit. They live for it. They'll draw you into a long rally, wait for you to make a mistake, then hope you throw your racket in disgust. In short, they'll try to break you down mentally and physically, then feed off your sorry remains. Not a pretty sight. How can you prevent it? By never giving away how angry or tired you are on the court. The release of negative energy gives the hacker reason to continue the assault. So, even if you're behind, keep your wits about you and stay focused on playing your type of match. ■

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Marat Safin blows his top... an example of what not to do against a hacker.