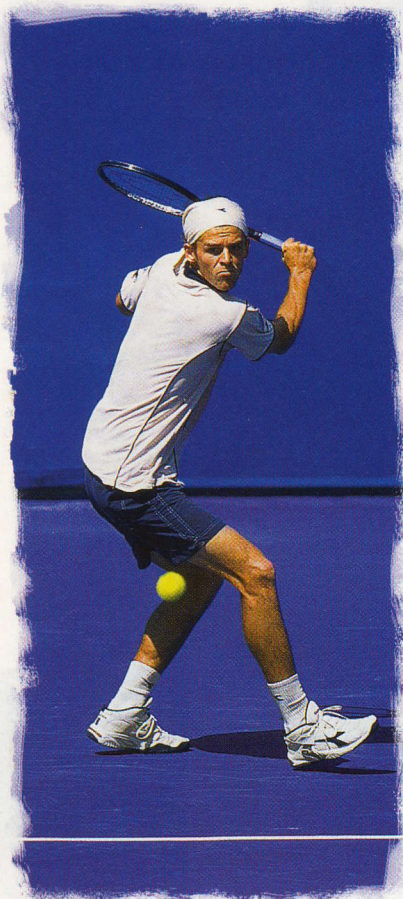


When your backhand is as explosive as Gustavo Kuerten's, there's no reason not to flaunt it, says former top ten player **Eliot Teltscher**.

Lock and load



1 Kuerten's preparation is extremely early... he's poised to strike. But the thing to note here is how he brings his racket back above the ball.

It's by his eyes. For a good one-hander, that's key. A two-handed backhand can come straight back or even below the ball, but to get a looping backswing, a one-hander must start above the ball.



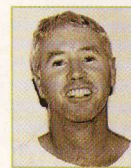
2 His right foot plants and his weight begins to move forward into the shot. Guga's feet are crossed more than you'd like, but that's because he's on the run. At this point, Kuerten has completed his superb shoulder turn. In fact, he's so far around, his back is facing his opponent. This tremendous coil generates a world of power. It also helps disguise the shot. If I were on the court with Kuerten, I wouldn't be able to tell if he was going to hit crosscourt or down the line.



3 Guga's racket continues to drop, but it won't get too far below the ball. And though he's a foot behind the baseline, he takes the ball very much on the rise. It's about waist high, in what I would consider to be his powerhouse. There's no question: He's going to punish this shot.

Notice, too, how he starts to close off his stance by bringing his left foot around so he can recover for the next shot (he's near the tramline, but can't afford to stay there).

To finish the year as the No. 1 player in the world, you've got to be doing most things on a tennis court pretty well. Of course, it doesn't hurt if you do one thing tremendously well, such as hitting a backhand like Gustavo Kuerten. Guga starts the stroke high above the ball, then brings the racket underneath it, creating that all-important loop. At contact, he locks out his right arm and drives through the shot with big-time power. Many consider Kuerten to be strictly a clay-court player. Not so. There's a subtle versatility to Guga's game; he adjusts his style and strokes to the surface, which is why he's had plenty of success on both clay and hard courts. Although Kuerten makes his living behind the baseline, if there's such a thing as an all-court baseliner, he's it.



Eliot Teltscher, a former Top 10 player, is now a coach in California.



4 At the point of contact, everything is virtually textbook. The ball is caught in the middle of the strings. Kuerten's eyes are on the ball, and his arm is starting to lock out. You also get a great look at his grip (Eastern), which puts his knuckles on top. This gives him the option of using heavy topspin or flattening it out and driving the ball. Note, too, how well he has transferred weight from his back foot onto his front foot.



5 What's important to recognise here is that Kuerten's right arm is extended before he brings the racket around. He keeps the arm locked and moving in the direction (crosscourt) the shot is heading. Now look at the ball and the racket head. They're perfectly aligned. Note: After contact, club players often open up too early and bring the racket around too quickly. Not Guga.

And his left hand? It stays back and in a straight line with his hitting arm, for better balance.



6 Bringing his left foot all the way around will allow Kuerten to make a swift recovery and return to the middle of the court. Remember that you need to bring the back foot around; otherwise, you'll stumble your way into the next shot. Gustavo's long arms and his lengthy, powerful stroke - plus a touch of showmanship - result in an extensive follow-through. When you hit the backhand as well as Kuerten, you've earned the right to show a little flair. ■

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