

ADD A NEW DIMENSION WITH A SLICE BACKHAND

BY MATS WILANDER, with Norman Zeitchick

During my career, the two-handed topspin backhand has been a great strength of my game. I know I can always rely on it. Over the last couple of years, however, I have developed a one-handed slice backhand that I feel adds a whole new dimension to my game.

I decided to start hitting a one-handed slice backhand because I found I didn't always have the time to hit a two-hander with topspin, especially on faster surfaces. On clay courts, where the ball bounces slower, I had no problem hitting the two-hander. But on fast courts, I sometimes found myself hitting the ball too late.

I discovered the answer to the problem on the practice court. I always enjoy trying new things, experimenting with different shots. And when I began experimenting with the one-handed slice backhand, it felt good to me right from the start. It's easier to hit than my topspin backhand because I don't have to bend my knees as much or use as much effort with my upper body to drive the ball. I also like the way the ball seems to float through the air.

Because I need less time to hit the slice and it is easier to execute than the two-hander, it's a good

shot to use defensively if an opponent is pushing me around in rallies. I know I'm not going to miss too many slice shots. And it works well when my two-handed topspin backhand is a bit off in a match.

But what began as a defensive shot has become an important part of my effort to become more offense-minded on the court. There was a time when I played mostly on clay, which was ideal for my two-hander. But I'm playing more often on fast hard courts now, and I'm trying to go to the net a lot more than I used to. So, I'm using my slice backhand on approach shots. I can get into good volleying position more easily after hitting a slice backhand approach than a topspin. On the two-handed shot, I have to get down low, hit through the ball and make a long follow-through before moving forward.

Also, because my slice approach doesn't have that much speed on it, I can move closer to the net before the ball reaches my opponent. If he doesn't have good passing shots, he's going to have trouble putting enough speed on the ball to hit it past me. If I hit my approach with topspin, he would be able to use the speed I put on the ball to hit it back harder and earlier.

How do I decide which of my

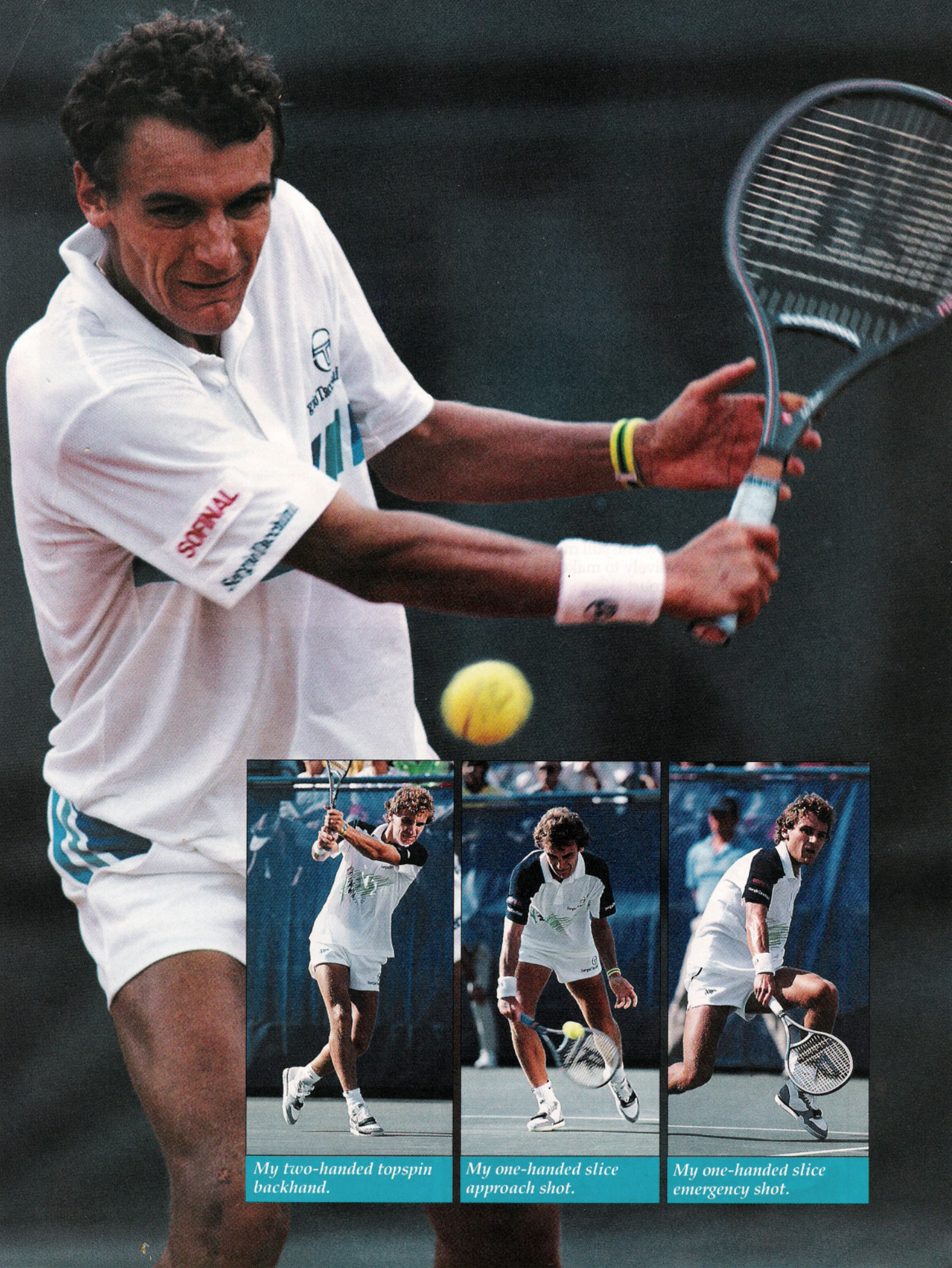
backhands to use? That depends on how the ball is coming toward me, what kind of spin my opponent has put on it and what I want to do with the ball.

If my opponent's shot is hit with slice, I'll usually return it with a topspin backhand. It's harder for me to hit a slice backhand when my opponent hits a slice. I prefer to hit my slice backhand off flat or topspin shots, and off short or low balls. On high shots, I try to hit my two-handed backhand, taking the ball on the rise.

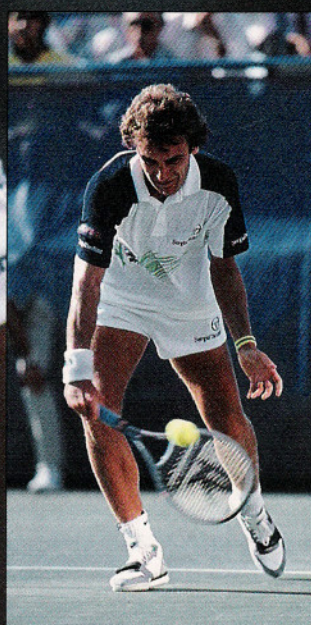
Court surface is a factor, too. The slice backhand is good for all surfaces, but I tend to use it most on hard and indoor courts when I know there will be a true bounce. On clay, I don't use it that much because I have to put more power into my backhand for the shot to hurt my opponent. Also, a bad slice shot on clay will often sit up for the other guy to hit.

I still think my two-handed topspin shot is my best weapon on the backhand side. I try to hit it as often as I can. But the one-handed slice backhand has rounded out my game both defensively and offensively. It has given my opponents something else to think about and made me a better overall player.

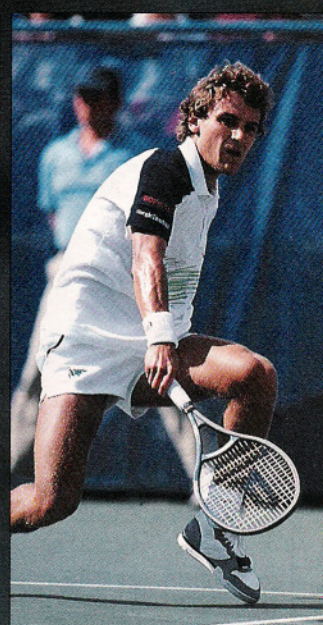
Perhaps it can do the same for you. →



My two-handed topspin backhand.



My one-handed slice approach shot.



My one-handed slice emergency shot.

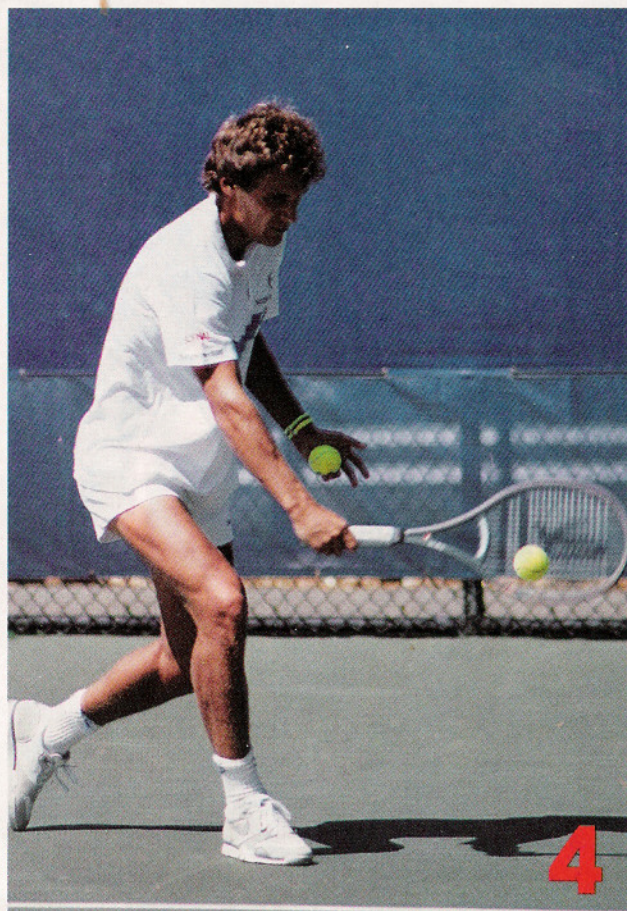
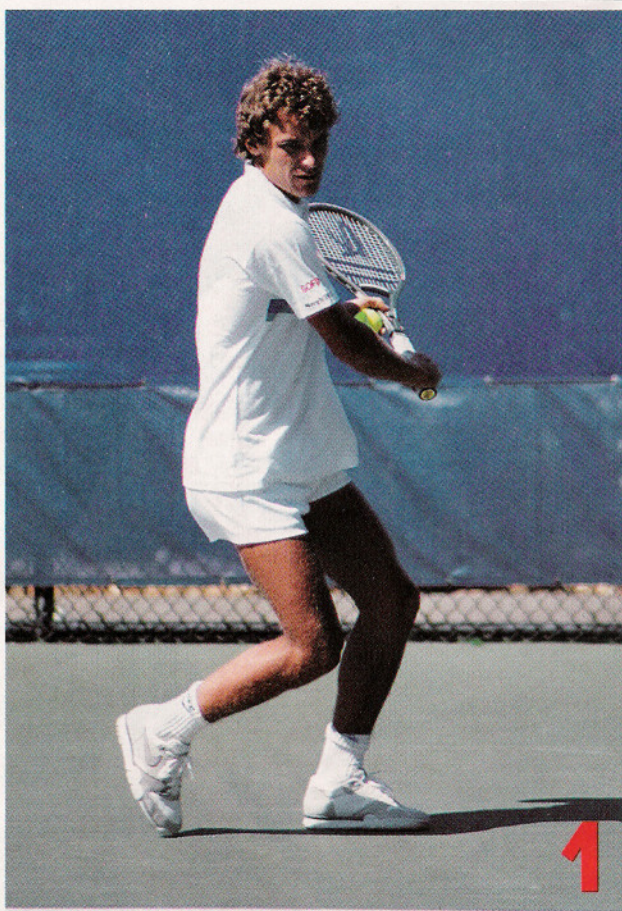
HOW WILANDER SLICES HIS BACKHAND

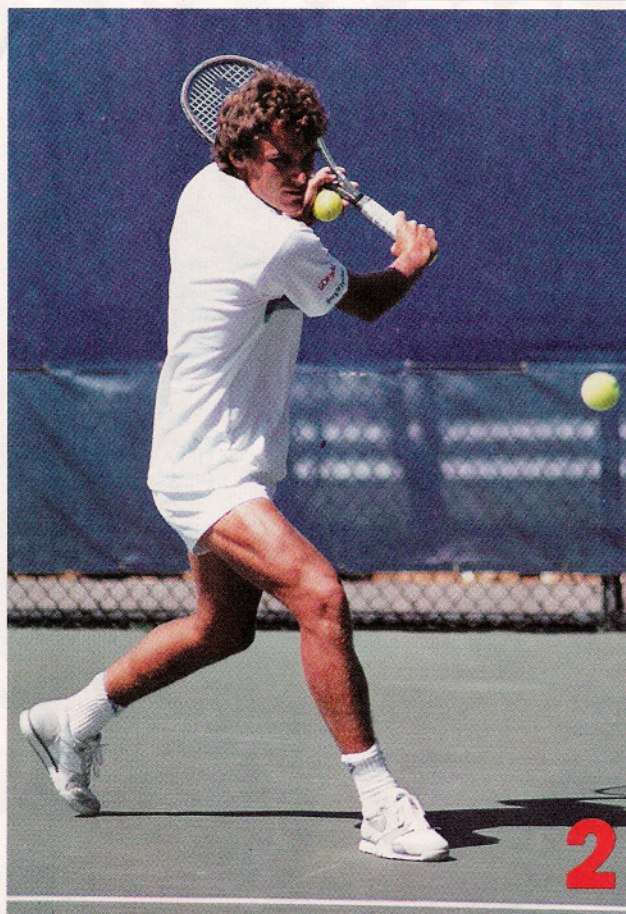
Mats Wilander has gained a tremendous advantage by adding a one-handed slice backhand to his game. It gives him better reach on his backhand side, a reliable emergency shot and an excellent approach shot. Let's take a look at his stroke mechanics.

1 Early preparation. When Wilander decides to hit his slice, he changes his grip from his normal two-handed shot and slides his left hand up the racquet throat for stability on the backswing. He takes his racquet back with an open racquet face. In contrast, if he were hitting a two-handed topspin drive, his racquet face would be almost on edge and perpendicular to the ground at this stage.

2 Backswing. Using a full shoulder turn, Wilander takes his racquet back to head level, opening up the racquet face even more. A good upper-body turn is important on slice shots because it enables you to put some pace on the ball. If you hit the ball with your shoulders open to the net, your slice shot will have nothing on it.

3 Forward swing. Wilander starts his racquet forward on a downward, sloping trajectory. Although a sliced ball won't have the momentum of a topspin shot, he knows he still must swing through the ball aggressively to make sure it lands deep in his opponent's court.





4 **Point of contact.** Wilander meets the ball a bit later on his slice backhand than he normally would on his topspin stroke. At impact, his racquet is still traveling downward, but the racquet head is now almost perpendicular to the ground.

5 **The follow-through.** As Wilander hits through the ball, his racquet continues its downward momentum toward the ground. Notice how he keeps his head down even after contact. He also has maintained great balance throughout the stroke. If you were to put a glass of water on his head, it would not fall off as he swings.

6 **Completing the stroke.** Wilander's racquet head follows the flight of the departing ball forward at the same time it continues on its downward path. Then his racquet arm comes up naturally at the end of the stroke.

If you were to ask me to teach you to hit a slice backhand, I would teach you initially to hit it like Wilander: Start with your racquet high and swing forward and down at a sharp angle to get the feeling of a good slicing motion. As you got better at it, I would then teach you to take your racquet back a bit lower than Wilander does in photo 2, and keep the racquet face slightly open at impact. Those slight modifications would allow you to generate more forward momentum and crisper spin on the shot, for greater depth and penetration. ●