

The Human chessboard

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Index

About the Author

Page 3

Introduction: The Mirror

Page 4

Chapter 1: The Sport for a Lifetime

Pages 5-7

Chapter 2: The Geometry of the Chessboard

Pages 8-10

Chapter 3: The Toolkit (Technique as the Servant)

Pages 11-13

Chapter 4: The Great Divide (Professional vs. Amateur)

Pages 14-16

Chapter 5: The Rituals (Preparation and Competition)

Pages 17-19

The Final Word: Your Journey Begins

Page 20

The "Never-Ending" Lesson

Page 21

Your Next Moves

Page 22

About the Author

At just 19 years old, **Mohammed Alhaily** brings a unique blend of athletic excellence and technical ambition to his work. His journey on the court began at the age of four, marking the start of a 15-year dedication to the sport. This lifelong commitment led him to the prestigious ranks of the **Saudi National Team**, where he has earned the title of **National Champion** multiple times and secured **1st place in the Saudi Men's League**.

Beyond his personal accolades as a competitor, Mohammed Alhaily is an **ITF-certified CBI Tennis Coach**, committed to developing the game through professional instruction. When he is not on the court, he is navigating the world of digital innovation, currently pursuing a degree in **Information Technology**. By balancing the discipline of a high-performance athlete with the analytical mindset of an IT student, he represents a new generation of multifaceted Saudi talent.

Introduction: The Mirror

Tennis is a unique sport. In football or basketball, you have teammates to hide behind. In tennis, it is just you, a racket, and a yellow ball. When you stand on that court, there is no one to blame for a mistake and no one to share the glory of a perfect shot.

Many people look at tennis and see a game of strength—they see athletes hitting the ball at incredible speeds and think, "I could never do that." They are wrong. Tennis is not a game of muscles; it is a game of the mind. It is a "Human Chessboard" where your brain moves your feet, and your racket is simply the tool you use to finish the puzzle.

This book isn't about the rules of the game—you can find those in any manual. This book is about the **soul** of the game. It is about why tennis is the "Sport for a Lifetime" and how it teaches you to handle pressure, solve problems, and stay calm when things go wrong.

Whether you are five years old or sixty-five, whether you want to play for fun or dream of becoming a professional, the lessons in these pages will change the way you look at the court. You will learn that technique is the servant to your tactics, and that the smartest player on the court will almost always beat the strongest one.

Tennis is a mirror. It shows you who you are under pressure. This book is here to help you like what you see in that mirror.

Welcome to the game.

Chapter 1: The Sport for a Lifetime

The Full-Body Engine

When people look at a tennis player, they often see the arms. They see a powerful serve or a sharp volley. But tennis is a sport played from the ground up. To be a tennis player is to be a sprinter, a weightlifter, and a marathon runner all at once.

Physically, the benefits are unique because of the "start-stop" nature of the game. Unlike jogging, where your heart rate stays at a steady pace, tennis uses **interval training**. You sprint for 10 seconds, rest for 20, and repeat this for two hours. This builds a heart that is incredibly resilient. It improves what doctors call "anaerobic endurance"—the ability of your body to perform under sudden, intense stress.

But it doesn't stop at the heart. Tennis develops "**Dynamic Balance.**" In most sports, you run in a straight line. In tennis, you run sideways, backwards, and diagonally. You learn how to stop your body's momentum and change direction in a heartbeat. This builds the small stabilizer muscles in your ankles, knees, and core that most other sports ignore. This is why tennis players stay agile well into their 80s; they have spent their lives teaching their bodies how to stay balanced while moving.

The Laboratory of the Mind

While your lungs are burning and your legs are moving, your brain is doing more work than it does during a math exam. Scientists have studied the brains of tennis players and found that the sport increases "Neural Connectivity."

Every time a ball comes toward you, your brain must solve a complex physics equation:

1. **The Trajectory:** How high is the ball?
2. **The Velocity:** How fast is it moving?
3. **The Spin:** Is it kicking toward me or skidding away?
4. **The Environment:** How is the wind or the sun affecting the flight?

You have less than a second to process this and decide where to move your feet. This creates a "sharper" brain. It improves your hand-eye coordination and your reaction time in the real world—like when you are driving a car and need to react to a sudden stop. In tennis, you aren't just hitting a ball; you are constantly recalibrating your brain to handle high-speed information.

The Character of a Champion

Perhaps the greatest benefit of tennis is what it does for your personality. In a world where we often look for someone else to solve our problems, tennis is the ultimate teacher of **Self-Reliance**.

When you stand on that baseline, there is no coach on the court to tell you what to do. There are no teammates to pass the ball to when you feel tired. If you make a double fault, you cannot blame the weather or your equipment—you have to own it.

This builds a specific kind of mental toughness called "**Emotional Regulation**." You will get frustrated. You will feel like the "luck" is against you. But tennis teaches you that the moment you lose your temper, you lose the match. You learn to breathe, reset, and focus on the next ball. This "Reset Button" is a superpower. If you can learn to stay calm after missing a break point in front of a crowd, you can stay calm during a difficult job interview or a stressful day at university. You learn that success isn't about being perfect; it's about how you respond to being imperfect.

Social Logic

Finally, tennis is a social bridge. It is one of the few sports where a 15-year-old can play a competitive match against a 50-year-old and both can have a great time. It creates a community. Whether you are playing at a local club in Riyadh or a public court in London, the language of the game is universal. You meet people from all walks of life—doctors, students, engineers, and artists—all brought together by a yellow ball. It's a sport that builds friendships that last decades, all because you shared the struggle of a tie-break together.

Chapter 2: The Geometry of the Chessboard

The Myth of the "Winner"

If you watch tennis on television, you see professionals hitting the ball at incredible speeds into the corners of the court. These are called "winners." Because of this, many amateurs believe that the goal of tennis is to hit the ball as hard as possible into the smallest possible space.

This is the biggest mistake in the game.

In reality, tennis is a game of **percentages**. The net is a physical obstacle, and the lines are boundaries. The court is a chessboard where some squares are safe and others are dangerous. Professionals don't play to hit "great" shots; they play to stay in the point until their opponent makes a mistake. This is called "Percentage Tennis."

The Three Zones of the Court

To understand tactics, you must imagine the court divided into three distinct horizontal zones. Your "plan" changes depending on which zone your feet are standing in.

1. The Defensive Zone (Behind the Baseline)

When you are pushed deep behind the baseline, you are in the "Survival Zone." Here, your goal is not to win the point. Your goal is simply to not lose it.

- **The Tactic:** Hit the ball high and deep into the middle of the court.
- **The Logic:** By hitting the ball high, you give yourself time to run back to the center. By hitting it into the middle, you reduce the angle your opponent can use to hurt you.

2. The Neutral Zone (On the Baseline)

This is where most of the "Chess Match" happens. You and your opponent are trading shots, waiting for someone to get tired or hit a weak ball.

- **The Tactic:** Play cross-court.
- **The Logic:** The net is lower in the middle than it is at the posts. Also, the court is longer diagonally than it is straight. When you hit cross-court, you have more "court" to land the ball in and a lower net to clear. It is the smartest mathematical play in tennis.

3. The Attack Zone (Inside the Baseline)

When your opponent hits a short ball and you step inside the court, the "Chess Match" is almost over. Now, you have the advantage.

- **The Tactic:** Change the direction.
- **The Logic:** Now that you are closer to the net, the angles have opened up. You can now hit the ball "down the line" or at a sharp angle to move your opponent off the court. This is where you finish the point.

The "Big Target" Secret

Amateurs often aim for the lines. If they miss by just one inch, the ball is "out" and they lose the point. Professionals aim for "**Big Targets.**"

Imagine a circle three feet inside every line. That is where a pro aims. By aiming three feet inside the line, they have a "buffer zone." If they hit the ball perfectly, it's a great shot. If they make a small mistake, the ball is still in.

Tactics Rule #1: Aim for the middle of the open space, not the line.

Technique is the Servant

Now we come to the core philosophy of your training. Why do we practice a "smooth" swing or a "compact" backswing?

It isn't so we can look good in photos. It is so that our "tools" (our technique) are reliable enough to execute our "blueprint" (our tactics). If your technique is messy, you cannot hit the "Big Targets" consistently.

- **Technique** is like the engine of a car.
- **Tactics** is the steering wheel.

You need the engine to move, but without the steering wheel, you will just crash into the wall. In this book, we learn to build a reliable engine so that we can steer the ball exactly where the "Chess Match" requires it to go.

Chapter 3: The Toolkit (Technique as the Servant)

The "Why" Behind the "How"

Most tennis lessons begin with a coach telling you to "take your racket back early" or "bend your knees." While this is good advice, most students don't know why they are doing it. In this book, we believe that if you understand the **tactical purpose** of a movement, you will learn the technique ten times faster.

Technique isn't about looking like a professional; it's about **Repeatability**. You need a swing that works exactly the same way at 2:00 PM on a Tuesday as it does at 5:00 PM on a Sunday when you are tired and facing a break point.

The Three Foundations of Every Shot

Before we look at specific shots, every "tool" in your kit must be built on three pillars. Without these, your tactics will fail.

1. Footwork: The Delivery System

You cannot use a hammer if you cannot reach the nail. In tennis, your feet are the delivery system for your racket.

- **Tactical Purpose:** To get your body in a "neutral" or "balanced" position so you can hit your "Big Target."
- **The Technique:** The **Split-Step**. This is a small hop you take the moment your opponent hits the ball. It "primes" your muscles like a coiled spring, allowing you to move in any direction instantly.

2. Contact Point: The Moment of Truth

In the "Human Chessboard," where you hit the ball is more important than how hard you hit it.

- **Tactical Purpose:** To control the direction of the ball.
- **The Technique:** Hitting the ball **in front of your body**. If you hit the ball late (beside or behind your hip), you lose control over the geometry. You cannot hit cross-court effectively if your contact point is late. To execute the cross-court tactic from Chapter 2, your technique must prioritize meeting the ball early.

3. Follow-Through: The Guidance System

Many beginners stop their swing the moment they hit the ball.

- **Tactical Purpose:** To ensure depth and "spin."
- **The Technique:** Finishing the swing high (usually over the opposite shoulder). This ensures the ball clears the net with a safety margin and lands deep in the opponent's court, keeping them in the "Defensive Zone."

The Forehand: The Sword

For most players, the forehand is the weapon. It is the shot used to "dictate" the point.

- **The Servant Technique:** Using your "non-dominant hand" to point at the ball. This ensures your shoulders turn, giving you the power to push your opponent back without using just your arm muscles.

The Backhand: The Shield

The backhand is often the "steady" shot. Its tactical job is to stay solid and not give the opponent a weak ball to attack.

- **The Servant Technique:** A shorter backswing. Since you are usually defending on this side, a shorter, more compact swing means there is less that can go wrong. It prioritizes "accuracy" over "aggression."

The Serve: The Conversation Starter

The serve is the only shot in tennis where you have 100% control. It sets the "tone" for the chess match.

- **The Servant Technique:** The "Toss." A consistent toss is the secret to a consistent serve. If your toss is in the same place every time, your opponent cannot "read" where you are going to serve. You keep your tactics a secret.

Chapter 4: The Great Divide (Professional vs. Amateur)

The Invisible Gap

If you stand a professional tennis player next to a high-level amateur, they might look similar. They both have fast serves, clean strokes, and high-end rackets. However, the moment the match begins, an invisible gap appears. This gap isn't made of muscle or "talent"—it is made of decision-making and emotional discipline.

The amateur plays the game they wish they had; the professional plays the game they actually have. To reach the next level, you must understand that the difference between winning and losing usually happens in the mind long before the ball touches the strings.

The Trap of the "Highlight Reel"

Amateurs often watch highlights of Roger Federer or Carlos Alcaraz hitting impossible shots from outside the court. They go to the court the next day and try to replicate those shots. This is the "Highlight Reel Trap."

- **The Amateur** thinks greatness is hitting a shot that no one else can hit.
- **The Professional** knows greatness is hitting a shot that they themselves can hit 1,000 times without missing.

A professional's secret is that they are "boringly consistent." They don't go for the lines unless they are forced to. They understand that tennis is an **unforced error contest**. In 80% of matches, the winner isn't the person who hit more winners; it's the person who made fewer mistakes.

The "20-Second" Strategy

A tennis match is roughly two hours long, but the ball is only actually in play for about 20 to 30 minutes. The rest of the time is spent walking, picking up balls, and sitting on the changeover.

The amateur uses this time to dwell on the past. If they missed an easy volley, they spend the next 20 seconds shouting at themselves, shaking their head, or looking at their strings. By the time the next point starts, they are still playing the previous point.

The professional uses a **3-Step Reset Routine**:

1. **The Physical Trigger:** They might fix their strings or wipe their face with a towel. This is a signal to the brain that the last point is over.
2. **The Breath:** They take a deep, slow breath to lower their heart rate and clear the "fog" of frustration.
3. **The Tactical Command:** They give themselves a one-sentence instruction for the next point. "Body serve," or "High to the backhand."

Ego vs. Efficiency

The amateur's ego often dictates their tactics. If their opponent hits a powerful shot, the amateur feels the need to hit it back even harder to "prove" they are just as strong. This leads to high-risk tennis and rapid exhaustion.

The professional has no ego on the court. If the opponent is hitting the ball hard, the professional will hit it back high and slow to neutralize the power. They don't care if the shot looks "weak" as long as it is **efficient**. They play the "Percentage" because they know that over a long match, math always beats luck.

The Definition of "Pressure"

Amateurs view pressure as a threat—something that makes their arms tight and their breath short. They try to "get the match over with" as quickly as possible when they feel nervous.

Professionals view pressure as a **privilege**. They understand that if they feel nervous, it means they are in a position to achieve something. Instead of rushing, they actually slow down. They take more time between points. They bounce the ball a few extra times before serving. They use the pressure as fuel to focus harder on their "Big Targets."

The Practice Mindset

The final divide is found on the practice court.

- **Amateurs** practice until they get a shot right.
- **Professionals** practice until they can't get it wrong.

An amateur will hit one great serve and say, "I've got it!" and move on. A professional will hit 50 great serves and then start their real practice. They train their "boring" shots so that when the pressure of a match arrives, those shots are automatic. They don't have to think about "how" to hit; they only have to think about "where" to play the chess match.

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Chapter 5: The Rituals (Preparation and Competition)

The Match Starts Before the First Ball

In tennis, your performance is a direct result of your preparation. An amateur views a match as something that begins at the first point. A professional knows that by the time the first serve is hit, the "battle" is already 50% won or lost. Preparation is how you remove anxiety and replace it with confidence.

If you show up to the court rushed, with tangled strings and an empty water bottle, your mind will be chaotic. If you show up with a plan, your mind will be calm.

The Ritual of the Bag

A tennis bag is a professional's mobile office. It contains every tool necessary to handle any problem that might arise on the "Chessboard." To play at your best, your equipment must be a source of "Zero Stress."

- **The "Multiple Tool" Strategy:** Professionals carry at least two or three rackets, all strung at the same tension. If a string breaks during a big point, they don't panic. They simply walk to their bag and pick up an identical tool.
- **Environmental Control:** You will find spare grips (for sweaty hands), electrolytes (to prevent cramping), and extra sun hats or wristbands. By preparing for the worst-case scenario (heat, broken equipment, low energy), the professional ensures their mind stays focused entirely on tactics.

The Professional Warm-Up

The amateur uses the first three games of a match to "find their rhythm." This is a dangerous mistake because, by the time they are warm, they might already be losing 3-0.

The professional uses a two-stage warm-up:

1. **The Physical Warm-Up:** Before touching a racket, they perform dynamic movements—lunges, arm circles, and short sprints. They want their heart rate elevated and their muscles warm before they step onto the court.
2. **The Tactical Warm-Up:** During the five-minute hit with the opponent, the pro isn't just hitting the ball; they are "calibrating" their tools. They check the wind, the speed of the court, and most importantly, they "scout" the opponent.

The Art of the "Scout"

In the "Human Chessboard," you are playing against a person, not a wall. Every player has a "glitch" in their system. The warm-up is your chance to find it.

- **The Backhand Test:** Send a few balls to their backhand. Does it look as solid as their forehand?
- **The Net Test:** Bring them to the net with a short ball. Do they look comfortable hitting volleys, or do they look panicked?
- **The Nerve Test:** Watch their face. Do they seem angry when they miss, or are they focused?

Once you find a weakness, your tactical plan for the match becomes simple:

Repeatedly test that weakness until it breaks.

Consistency in the Chaos

The greatest ritual of all is the **Pre-Point Routine**. Between every single point, the professional does the exact same thing. They might bounce the ball five times, adjust their strings, or stare at the back fence.

These rituals act as an "anchor." When the match gets intense and the crowd is loud, the ritual reminds the player: "I have been here before. I know what to do." It turns the chaos of a match into a predictable series of steps. You don't play better by trying harder; you play better by staying more consistent in your rituals than your opponent.

The Final Word: Your Journey Begins

Congratulations. By finishing this book, you have already taken the most important step in your tennis journey: you have started to think like a player, not just a hitter.

You now understand that the tennis court is not just a place to run; it is a **Human Chessboard**. You know that your racket is a tool, your technique is its servant, and your mind is the master of the match. You have learned that the difference between a professional and an amateur isn't the strength of their arms, but the discipline of their decisions and the resilience of their heart.

The "Never-Ending" Lesson

The most beautiful—and sometimes frustrating—part of tennis is that you can never "finish" it. Even the greatest champions in the history of the sport wake up every morning with something new to learn. There is always a more precise target to hit, a faster footwork pattern to master, and a deeper level of mental calm to achieve.

Tennis is a journey of constant growth. It will challenge you, it will test your patience, and it will occasionally break your heart. But in return, it will give you a sharper mind, a stronger body, and a community of friends that spans the globe.

Your Next Moves

As you close this book and head to the court, don't try to be perfect. Instead, try to be **intentional**.

- When you practice, ask yourself: "What is my tactic right now?"
- When you miss a shot, ask yourself: "Am I staying calm for the next 20 seconds?"
- When you compete, remember: "Respect the geometry, trust your tools."

Whether you are playing under the lights of a stadium or on a local court with a friend, remember that every ball you hit is a chance to learn something new about yourself.

The court is open. The sun is up. The chessboard is set.

It's your move.