

The Coman Tiebreak Demystified

This article was extracted from ([The Coman Tiebreak Demystified](#)) by Cliff Render

If you have played USTA League Tennis at any point since the early 2000's, then you probably have some kind of experience with the Coman Tiebreak Procedure. Even though it has been the USTA standard tiebreak procedure for many years, there is still quite a bit of confusion over it. Finding official non section-specific rules can be a very difficult and frustrating experience. The best information that I could find on the USTA's website was in the Improve Your Game section on the [Tiebreakers page](#). There are many other places online that offer information about the Coman tiebreak online, unfortunately, most of them just repeat the same information:

"The Coman Tiebreak Procedure is played out the same as the standard tiebreak except that court sides are changed after the first point, then after every four points (i.e., after the 5th, 9th, 13th, 17th points, etc...), and at the conclusion of the tiebreak."

Remarkably unhelpful.

Most league players (like myself) head into a tiebreak knowing in general how it should work but missing certain key details that we don't even realize we need to know like who serves next after a tiebreak or when to switch sides of the court before or after the tiebreak. We all secretly hope that one of the other people on the court with us (if you're playing singles, then your options are limited) will know what to do. At least we hope that one other person on the court will have a strong belief that one way is right or wrong so that we just do what they suggest. More than once, I've heard it said, "Well if we're wrong about doing it this way then at least we'll all be wrong together." I think that translates into something like "Okay, we'll do it your way because I really don't have a clue."

So, I'm going to try to lay this all out for you so that you will all have a clue. If you leave this post still unclear then please check out these two posts by Kim Selzman of [TennisFixation.com](#): ["The Coman Tennis Tiebreak – It's So Easy!"](#) and ["After The Tiebreaker, Who Serves?"](#). She gives great (and concise) overviews that cover pretty much all the bases. As a matter of fact, you probably should just stop reading my post right now and flip on over to hers to save yourself some time. If, however, you are too lazy to click one of her links or you're on one of my teams and are finally getting around to the "Required Reading" portion of the team member agreement then please stick with me.

A tiebreak can occur at one of two times in a match:

- 1.) When the set score is tied at 6-6. This is a Set Tiebreak because the winner wins the set. The first person (or team) to make it to 7 points (and be ahead by 2) in a Set Tiebreak wins. People will also call this a 7 Point Tiebreak or a 7 Point Set tiebreak. I will use this convention, as well, because it just makes sense. The USTA, however, in some of their material such as the Tiebreakers page above and their [Coman Tiebreak News release from 2010](#) refers to this as a 12 point tiebreak. Very confusing. The basic reason

why they do this is because if you were to have a game played to 12 points then the first player/team to get to the 7 point mark would win. For more of the crazy history on this (and a much more thorough explanation of the USTA's "12 Point Tiebreak"), please see Michael Y's [History of USTA 12-point Tiebreaker](#) post for more information.

2.) When the match score is tied at 1 set apiece. This is a Match Tiebreak (for obvious reasons). The first person (or team) to make it to 10 points (and be ahead by 2) wins the Match Tiebreak. I assume that the USTA would like for us to call this an 18 Point Tiebreak to indicate that the first person to hit the 10 point mark will win but since that's ridiculous, I will not do it. Most people call it a 10 Point Tiebreak or a 10 point Super Tiebreak. My favorite is "10 Point Super Tiebreak" mainly because anything with the word super in it is just...well...super!

Because there are only minor differences between how these two types of tiebreaks are handled, I'm going to list the details for you side by side in order to make them a little easier to follow. Please let me know if this helps or hurts. Since we're about to play a tiebreak, you have either reached a set score of 6-6 or an overall match score of 1-1 either through the heroic efforts of yourself or your competition or the both of you. Now it's time for the rubber to meet the road and leave some serious black marks. Here's what to do and when to do it:

	7 Point Set Tiebreak	10 Point Match Tiebreak
Do we switch sides to start?	No. (because the overall set score is even at 6-6)	Yes, if the previous set score was odd or it ended in a tiebreak
Who serves first?	The player who would serve next in the rotation (remember who this person is!)	The player or team who would serve next in the rotation. If the previous set ended in a tiebreak then the player/team that received first in the tiebreak will serve first in the new set. In a doubles match, either player on the team can serve first (the Super Match Tiebreak is treated like a new set)
How do we serve?	On the first service point, the server serves just one point and serves from the Deuce side of the court. All successive servers serve two points serving their first point from the Ad side of the court and their second from the Deuce side.	On the first service point, the server serves just one point and serves from the Deuce side of the court. All successive servers serve two points serving their first point from the Ad side of the court and their second from the Deuce side.
When do we switch sides?	You switch sides after the first point and after every 4 points thereafter (1, 5, 9, 13, 17, 21, 25, 29, 33, etc...)	You switch sides after the first point and after every 4 points thereafter (1, 5, 9, 13, 17, 21, 25, 29, 33, etc...)
Do we switch sides after the tiebreak?	Yes. (the tiebreak counts as a single game for the first server which make the set score odd at	No, not usually since the match is over.

	7-6)	
Who serves first to start the next set?	The team (or person) that received first in the tiebreaker, serves first in the next set (the Set Tiebreaker counts as a service game for the first server). In doubles, either member of the team can serve first.	Traditionally the winner buys the drinks. It's only fair.