

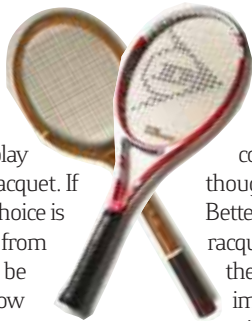
Anyone for tennis?

As Andy Murray warms up for Wimbledon, it's once again time for Britain to go briefly tennis-mad. We test nine top-brand racquets to help you find the right one for your game

You may not have the youth and athleticism of a Murray or a Sharapova, but that's no excuse for turning up to play tennis with a dodgy old racquet. If your current weapon of choice is a wooden-framed model from the Björn Borg era, you'll be pleasantly surprised by how much easier it is to get the ball in court with the latest breed of graphite and carbon-fibre implements.

Choosing a tennis racquet can be a confusing business: it needs to be light enough to allow manoeuvrability but heavy enough to withstand the power of the ball. Buying a heavier racquet will give you more power, but if it's too heavy you can't swing as fast so you'll lose power.

To avoid buying the wrong one, take a realistic view of your playing ability. If you're an inconsistent ball striker, it is



essential to choose a racquet with a larger head. This gives a bigger 'sweet spot' – the part of the racquet which gives the most control and minimises vibration – though it can impede manoeuvrability. Better players swing and twist the racquet faster so a big head will slow them down. So, as your confidence improves, graduate to a light racquet with a smaller head. Racquets used by top players are moderately heavy and flexible with a relatively small head and narrow cross section (about 20mm).

We've tested nine top-brand racquets and picked three Best Buys which offered a good blend of power, shot-making and comfort. They cost from £130 to £150. If that is beyond your budget, look out for last year's models from the top brands, which are often sold at a big discount. See 'What you should look for' below to find one to suit your game and physique.

A heavier racquet will give you more power if you are strong enough to handle it



We combine technical tests with expert assessment to pick the Best Buy racquets

The cannon ball test

All of the racquets were put through their paces in a tennis test laboratory. To measure racquet power, they were rigged up to devices which shot balls at up to 35 metres per second (78mph) at them. The balls were changed after every 20 impacts to maintain consistency (new balls are firmer) and the racquets were tested both with their original strings and restrung with our own test strings to ensure that we achieved consistent measurements.

On court

We also enlisted the help of top coach Toby Clark (pictured above) to see how the racquets performed on court. Toby trains juniors at the All England Tennis Club at Wimbledon and put each racquet through its paces for us at London's Regent's Park Tennis Centre, where he is head coach.

If you fancy testing – and improving – your own tennis skills the LTA's Play Tennis Campaign (see www.playtennis.org.uk) contains details of one-day events where free coaching is available.



What you should look for

Deflection

This indicates frame stiffness. Stiffer frames flex less on impact with the ball, which can aid stability and power. But playing with a stiff racquet can rob you of touch and feel on delicate shots

Grip

When holding a racquet, there should be a gap between your fingers and thumb just big enough to insert the first finger of your other hand

Swing weight

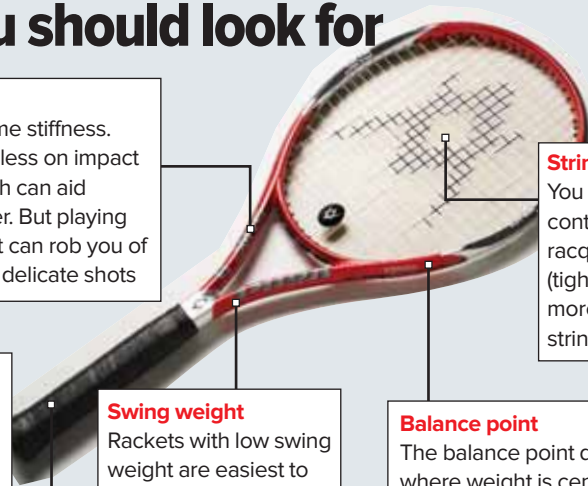
Rackets with low swing weight are easiest to manoeuvre but have less intrinsic power. They're generally suited to faster, more compact strokes

Stringbed

You get better ball control if your racquet has a stiff (tight) stringbed, but more power if the stringing is looser

Balance point

The balance point describes where weight is centred, high being in the head and low closer to the handle. Head-heavy rackets are generally more powerful, whereas head-light ones offer you better manoeuvrability





Prince O³ White £140

This racquet was a star performer in our tests, producing powerful ground strokes from the baseline and great volleys at the net. The string holes – Prince calls them O-ports – are noticeably bigger than those on other racquets and are designed to create a bigger ‘sweet spot’ (the area of the stringbed that produces the best combination of feel and power). Our coach’s verdict? It is ‘definitely the easiest to play with’. It also proved to be the most comfortable racquet we tested, with virtually no vibration through the handle. The Prince is available from independent stockists.

WE FOUND Although it’s sold as a performance racquet – and is endorsed by grass court powerhouse Maria Sharapova – we think its large head and sweet spot actually makes the Prince the ideal choice for beginners and improvers.

WHICH?
BEST BUY

Cheapest store Independents **Strung weight** 308g
Racquet length 69cm **Head size** 645cm²



Head Flexpoint Radical £150

If you play tennis the Tim Henman way, serving and volleying your way to victory, the Head Flexpoint is for you. It’s the lightest racquet we tested (295g unstrung) and has high stringbed stiffness, both of which make it good for controlling the ball. The balance point is low, so it’s head-light and again that makes it easy to manoeuvre. It’s a comfortable racquet to hold, too, with a soft grip, and very little vibration.

This is not a racquet for the beginner prone to off-centre hits, though. It has a relatively small head and also a narrow frame, giving it a smaller sweet spot. The Head Flexpoint is available from independent stockists.

WE LIKE Its light, stiff frame makes this racquet great for volleying around the net, but its smaller sweet spot means you’ll need to be an experienced player to get consistent results.

WHICH?
BEST BUY

Cheapest store Independents **Strung weight** 304g
Racquet length 69cm **Head size** 630cm²

The Prince was the star in our tests, producing powerful ground strokes and great volleys



Yonex RDS 001 Square Shape £130

The bright yellow Yonex RDS Square Shape is another racquet that’s good for net players who are looking for a weapon that’s easy to manoeuvre when punching away those winning shots.

Its ‘isometric’ – squareish – frame shape is designed to create a larger-than-average sweet spot, but in our court test our coach found that it was not the most forgiving racquet, so this is really one for the better player rather than the beginner.

The Yonex is heavier than other Best Buys (though only by around 25g), so powerful players will get more out of it than park court waifs. The Yonex is available from independent stockists.

GOOD FOR The Yonex is an excellent volleying racquet that would be ideal if you played lots of doubles matches with friends. It is not suitable for beginners, though.

WHICH?
BEST BUY

Cheapest store Independents **Strung weight** 330g
Racquet length 69cm **Head size** 581cm²

MODEL	PRICE (£)	WHICH? TEST PERFORMANCE							
		WEIGHT	SWING WEIGHT	BALANCE POINT	DEFLECTION	STRINGBED STIFFNESS	RACQUET POWER	COMFORT	SHOT-MAKING
1 PRINCE O³ White	140	M	L	L	L	M	M	★★★★★	★★★★★
2 HEAD Flexpoint Radical	150	L	M	L	M	H	M	★★★★	★★★★
3 YONEX RDS 001 Square Shape	130	H	M	L	L	M	M	★★★★	★★★★
4 VÖLKL DNX 8	130	M	M	L	L	M	L	★★★	★★★★★
5 DUNLOP M-Fil 3 Hundred	100	M	L	L	H	M	L	★★★	★★★★★
6 BABOLAT Pure Drive Team ^a	80	M	M	L	L	M	H	★★★	★★★★
7 FISCHER Magnetic Speed M Pro-No.1 98	150	M	L	M	M	M	M	★★	★★★★★
8 TECNIFIBRE Tfeel 305	140	M	M	M	L	M	H	★★	★★★★
9 WILSON nCode Pro Team	100	M	L	L	M	M	M	★★	★★★★

a Has been discontinued but can be bought in some stores and online

USING THE TABLE

We tested new racquets aimed at recreational players and above.

Test performance

Weight/Swing weight/Balance point/Deflection/Stringbed stiffness and Racquet power H = high, M = medium, L = Low. Comfort/Shot-making Ratings based on our tennis court test.

Contacts

Babolat
01932 844 344
www.babolat.com
Dunlop
01924 888 244
Fischer 02891 456
582 www.fischer-tennis.com
Head 01539 724740
www.head.com
Prince
www.princetennis.com

Tecnifibre
0870 242 2070
www.tecnifibre.com
Völkl
0161 484 5151
www.voelkl-tennis.com
Yonex
020 8742 9777
www.yonex.com
Wilson
01294 316 200
www.wilson.com