

Sunfish-san, How Do I Win? (Part 1)

Using Casuals as a Tool for Improvement

Hi, I'm Sunfish (@hi_im_sunfish). I thought I'd write this as a way to express my ideas on effective training strategy. Everything here is anecdotal and I make no claims that this is the best way to train, but it's helped me keep my mind in the right place while also being fun. If anything, maybe it can spark a discussion on training strategy that is more abstract than just "hit the lab" / "watch videos" etc

Preparation

Before you can jump in, you'll need to set a foundation. I recommend putting everything in the prep portion that I talk about, into a portable medium (evernote / phone / notebook). Be sure it's going to be easy for you to read and add to. If you're confident that you can keep things in mind during your set, don't worry about it, but I find it hard to refocus my thoughts during sets. Especially if I've gotten aggravated or I'm losing

Now, on we go!

Set a Focus

A focus will give a sense of overarching purpose to your matches while helping you prepare for the next step. A focus can be as simple or abstract as you'd like; you need to decide what is most important for your own improvement. Good thoughts to help direct focus are things like "I notice that I'm really anxious when I'm forced into neutral situations; I want to improve that" or "I'm so bad on offense; I need to figure out how to open people up"

Understand that anything can be a focus, it just needs to be an area you feel you're lacking in. You'll get better at identifying these as you level up your analysis

Create Goals

With a focus identified, you'll need to create goals that allow for growth within the ideal. Something like, "I want to win EVO," while admirable, isn't something that you can achieve until EVO rolls around. In the meantime, setting smaller, more manageable goals is how you'll prioritize and track your improvement

Let's say your focus is, "I need to get better at opening people up." Setting a goal such as "I'm going to throw my opponent 5 times" would be good to improve that focus. Your goals should be dependent on your own ability to understand and interact with your opponent. What I mean by this is, if you don't understand why an opponent would get hit by a throw, setting a goal like "I will bait 5 throws" is going to be next to impossible

I feel that having 3 goals going into each set is more than enough to give yourself something to accomplish, but experiment and find what works for you. You don't want to overburden yourself and find that you're losing sight of your goals while playing matches. Also, keep in mind that you want these goals to be interesting to you, so remember to have fun with it

Lab Applications

Casual sets are the perfect test run for setups, tactics, and strategies. These are tangible things that do not depend on a live opponent to practice, but do depend on your opponent's reaction to them. When possible, try them out and note the effectiveness of the application

Remember to use them on multiple opponents before you make a decision on their effectiveness. Everyone is different, so what may work on one opponent may not work on 20 others and vice versa

Opponent

Who and what character you'll be running sets with is important. Some goals will be innately suited for different skills levels, so be mindful of what your best option will be

♦ *For the most part, people above your level (able to 10-0 you consistently) will not be useful for this portion of the process. They have an integral use, but it'll come later*

♦ *People around your level (streaks can go either way) should be used as a barometer for how well you can stick to your goals while under the stress of potentially losing rounds. This is where the majority of your training should be focused*

♦ *Players below your skill level (consistent 10-0 streaks) are good for training the muscle memory and recognition portion of your focus and goals*

♦ *All types of players are great for running lab application on because you want a large sample of what works at each level of play*

Matchup Notes

Take a moment to note down anything unique to the matchup(s) you'll be playing. You want to create a reference for yourself so you can go into each match without having to deal with character specific combos, interactions, or forgetting countermeasures

Record Matches

I know it's hard to watch yourself, but this is absolutely the most important element to facilitating growth. Being able to look at you and your opponent's play from outside the game environment provides you with a gigantic well of knowledge that you can draw conclusions from. Please, please, please do your best to get sets recorded!

Sunfish-san...?!

Do I play online or offline?

Offline is optimal if you have a scene to support it. With no lag present, you can be absolutely sure that whatever worked or did not work, wasn't due to frame delay. Sometimes though, online is the only option. Incredible players have come from netplay and as long as you can separate what lag can effect, you'll be fine

The thought of watching myself makes me nauseous!

No kidding! I wish I had a good piece of advice for this, but just try and internalize that it's for your own good. You'll get better at dealing with that insecurity over time

I can't figure out a focus?

Then think about what your goal as a player is. How do you want to express yourself? If you wanna style, come up with focuses that prioritize cool looking setups or combos. If you want to go crazy, implement focuses that mess with your opponent's head. Basically, find out what you have the most fun with and explore it

When is a lab application worth something?

Always! Especially when you're starting to develop as a player, you won't know until you test it. Good rule of thumb is to try it on yourself and see what happens. If it works, go test run it. If not, note why it didn't and use that data to help other developments

When do I play opponents who are better?

I recommend playing against people who outclass you, when you feel comfortable with your play. What you're looking for in these sets is for someone to show you, through their play, what your weaknesses are. Do your best to take the Ls with the thought that being shown your weaknesses is a gift

I'm still a newbie and I can't find anyone at or below my level!

If after checking in discords, forums, and your local scene, you can not find others around your skill level, you're in a rough spot. If everyone is better than you, your best bet to get up to speed is to play people as close to your level as possible with a mentor watching. The mentor's job will be to give you info on what areas you need to improve in ASAP while you're playing. I do not recommend playing versus the CPU because you won't understand what's genuinely useful against a live opponent

Running Sets

Ready up

Before the set starts, remember to go through your goals and matchup notes so you solidify your purpose. Training is going to be a balancing act between trying to win the match, but also keeping goals in mind

Whatever it is you want to work on, facilitate situations that would let you do that. You can't learn a CH confirm if you don't go for it; you can't learn that aerial combo if you don't go to the air. **Do not sacrifice opportunities that you can learn from** in order to win a match. You'll be hindering growth for a temporary payoff

Post Match

After every match, take a moment to reaffirm your goals and adjust. If you notice anything isn't going to work, **DO NOT BE STUBBORN**. Remember that everything is malleable while training. If you feel like something isn't worthwhile, or it's just not as good as you thought it would be, disregard it so you can prioritize new ideas and re-explore

If you happened to complete a goal, well done! Be proud of yourself and feel that victory. Your next step is to set the bar higher, or if you feel comfortable, you can come up with a new goal, or focus on other goals. When in serious mode, I like to set the bar higher so I can solidify more, but finding new areas to improve is always fun too! Experiment and find what keep your motivation up

In addition to reaffirming goals, ask questions of yourself or your opponent (only ask your opponent if you can't figure it out, or want verification from them) if you notice yourself wondering:

- ◆ *Why your opponent did something*
- ◆ *How your opponent deals with an application or situation so well*
- ◆ *What to do in situations you keep losing to*

Other good things to ask your opponent are (these are best reserved for players who are better than you, but everyone can have useful input):

- ◆ *What scares you about my play?*
- ◆ *What am I not doing that could potentially help my play (characters-wise and game mechanic-wise)?*
- ◆ *How do you beat me?*

Questions like these can give you insight into what new goals and focuses you could experiment with, while also improving your ability to understand and analyze

Profile Opponents

While running your set(s), you should be creating a profile of what is and isn't working on your opponent. At the end of your set, you should be able to answer three important questions:

- ♦ *What mixups, movement patterns, lab applications etc. work against this player?*
- ♦ *What causes me to lose situations, exchanges, rounds?*
- ♦ *What do I need to improve upon, in order to be able to 10-0 this player?*

As with many things, being able to answer these questions thoroughly will depend on your ability to analyze. Do your best to understand what you can; you'll get better as you put effort into it

Stay away from any emotional justifications such as "their character is cheap / I'm outplaying them / my character sucks / my character is hard" While these can be true, falling into these traps is letting your ego put blame on your opponent rather than yourself

Sunfish-san...?!

How long do I play?

First to 3 / 5 / 7 / X: FtX sets add elements of pressure you won't get in a long set. Ideally both players will be prioritizing winning so you'll get a good idea of what the other player does in order to seal matches. It's harder to learn during these sets, but the data you can get will be of higher value

Long Sets: Great for learning and getting a feel for personal stamina. You can run into fatigue which will definitely affect your level of play as well as potentially develop bad habits if you get used to an opponent doing or not doing something

Both have merits, so think about your needs and experiment. I prefer long sets if I just wanna have fun and learn but prefer FtX for serious mode

I keep forgetting to implement mid match?

This is a tough one, but my best advice is to plant one thing into your mind and hold tight mentally. Force a situation that will let you practice it. This could also mean that you're setting too many goals for yourself and should think about re-prioritizing your prep to make it easier

I can't complete goals?

This is a good indication that you either don't understand how the game and/or player functions, or you've set a goal that's just too hard. Take some time to examine what you're trying to accomplish and decide if the goal is worthwhile at your current skill level or if you can adjust it to be more viable

My tech isn't working when I feel it should!

Thems the brakes. Make sure you test run it versus many styles and skill levels, but if it just does not work, give it up. No use being stubborn and prideful about it when you can just go cook up some new ideas. You'll get better at seeing inherent usefulness as you develop and test more

Losing is hurting me too much!

Seeing your opponent's win counter go up and up and up is definitely an awful feeling, but it's all in how you look at it. Try to realize that the win counter is telling you something. Every win on you is the game saying that you are doing something wrong, and it's up to you to deduce what it is. Keep your chin up and keep focus on what matters; solving your weaknesses and exploiting your opponents. You'll figure it out

But you said to not prioritize winning, why 10-0?

u rite... but you need to think of wins as in the above question's answer. Wins are earned through understanding the game and your opponent. If you can take someone 10-0, you should look at it as a solution to the problem at hand. Feels damn good too, so be proud and use it constructively

Wrapping Up

Start a Discussion

This is similar to asking questions during sets, but being outside of the game allows you to go much deeper than when asking questions between matches

I feel discussing sets is one of the most fun aspects of developing as a player. Learning how others approach the game is extremely useful for developing future lab applications. Whether it's in adopting strategies or planning countermeasures. It's also fun to just test my knowledge of the game and understanding of my opponent. Depending on how important it is to you, it can also contribute to building friendships

Evernote Updates

Remember to reference your foundation and update anything applicable, such as:

- ◆ *What goals you completed / new goals and focuses you thought of mid matches*
- ◆ *How useful lab applications were / new developments you'd like to explore or test*
- ◆ *Matchup notes*

You're using this as a means of motivation and achievement just as much as a means to improve. Allow yourself to be proud of what you accomplished while also taking into account any new areas you found you could improve upon

Watch Replays

This is integral because you'll get a perspective similar to having a discussion. Looking at your play from outside of the game, will make it easier to analyze potentials and reasonings. **TURN INPUTS ON IF POSSIBLE!**

Here's what to look for:

When in offensive situations, ask and answer these questions:

- ◆ *What are my opponent's inputs telling me? Does it match my profile of them? Can I exploit it?*
- ◆ *How accurate are my mixups? Are they working enough to continue using them?*
- ◆ *Are my opponent's defensive options forcing me out enough that I'm losing rounds? How do I capitalize?*
- ◆ *Can I use resources to create a more advantageous situation?*

When in defensive situations, ask and answer these questions:

- ◆ *Am I missing patterns in my opponent's offense?*
- ◆ *Are there answers to the setups and mixups my opponent is using?*
- ◆ *Could I have used resources or game mechanics more effectively?*
- ◆ *What reads is my opponent making? Are they accurate? What does it tell me about their thought process?*

When in neutral situations, ask and answer these questions:

- ◆ *Am I seeing patterns that I missed from myself or my opponent? How can I improve / exploit them?*
- ◆ *What is my opponent's gameplan? Can I counter it more effectively?*
- ◆ *What risks am I taking and whose favor are they in?*
- ◆ *Am I responding or am I enforcing my will? Which is preferable within the context of the situation?*

♦Are my actions resulting in the outcomes that I want? Can I improve this?

Every time you were hit, in any situation, ask and answer these questions:

♦Why was I hit? How could I have prevented it? Is there a way to mitigate my risk in context of the situation?

Every time you hit your opponent, in any situation, ask and answer these questions:

♦Why were they hit? How can I optimize the situation? What could my opponent have done to mitigate?

There's a lot to learn from watching replays, so take it as slow and as in-depth as you want. You won't be able to answer every question, and each question may not even be worth asking. Developing the analytical side of your play is just as important as developing tangible applications

Repeat

Get some good rest and repeat the process, simple as that

Sunfish-san...?!

I feel like I'm wasting other players time, especially ones who destroy me!

This is a valid insecurity I feel. I don't doubt that some players will think that you're wasting their time, but try to remember that not everyone is playing for the same reasons. Some want to help, some just want to have fun, some might be practicing things specific to your skill level, some might love bopping lower level players. Whatever their reasonings are, remember that you're trying to get better and most people will respect that. Don't feel too bad if someone won't play you, instead, use it as motivation

I'm too afraid to ask questions or start a discussion!

Being vulnerable is scary. Opening up dialogue is hard when you think the other person might feel you're stupid or a fraud, but you need to push on. We all started at the same level of skill and most of us still remember how hard it was and are more than willing to help others. Just don't let yourself, or whoever you're talking to, make you feel like crap because you may not know something or have a bad habit

I'm not confident in my own assessment of myself, how do I know what is right?

Your best bet is to go to players that you and/or the community trusts. Ask them if they would play you and/or watch your replays

Do not let them answer questions for you, instead, you need to test your own analytical ability against theirs. Bring up your feeling on the matches and see how they respond. If you hit the same notes, great, you're onto something. If not, rewatch those replays until you can understand what they are trying to say or call them on their own assessment

Just because someone is better than you are, does not make them better at analyzing play. I've met great players that have no idea how to be objective or think critically. No one is infallible and always try to get multiple opinions to bounce off of

Replays go by too fast to digest information!

Something cool you may not know about is that YouTube has a slowdown function. If you can get your matches onto that platform, look into watching games at reduced speed. You'll be able to catch way more information and digest it at a much more relaxed pace

Why are inputs useful to see?

If the eyes are the window to the soul, then so are a player's inputs. Notice the movements and buttons your opponent is pressing while in your offense. If you see throw tech attempts, chicken blocks, odd motions, mashes etc. do your best to understand why and come up with a way to exploit it

OS's are extremely hard to verify mid match, but if you're using replays you can spot them without much difficulty

Final Thoughts

Keeping motivation up is one of the hardest things to do while trying to improve in any field. Failure is so obvious in regards to FGs and it's easy to fall into the downward spiral of frustration and imposter syndrome. Every loss is another twist of the knife, especially in games where you can see win counts

If there's anything I want you to take away from this, it's that the journey of growth can be fun if you pay mind to the right things. Each goal you set and complete, each matchup you update, every new thing you learn, **you should allow yourself to feel that victory**. Please understand that getting good is mainly a by product of three important things:

- ◆ *Level of players you have access to*
- ◆ *Ability to recognize and correct mistakes*
- ◆ *Time invested*

In that order. It has less to do with natural talent as most tend to believe. Do your best to keep your fire lit and you'll get to the spot you want to be. As the great philosopher king Narto once said, "Belive things!"

P.S. Keep in mind that you need to offset casual training with matches that actually mean something. Go to local tournaments or participate in online ones, put money on the line, start some beef with someone. You need to be able to exit the growth mindset and jump into a winning mindset when it counts

take care, have fun, be kind

