THE PAST TENSES – SUMMARY (SIMPLE, CONTINUOUS AND PERFECT)

A. The past simple (I played)
The past simple is used when a definite time is stated, known, presumed known or implied. It is therefore used with dates, yesterday, ago, last, when?, etc…

He went there last Christmas.
It didn't rain when we were in Spain. (time is presumed known or implied)
When did you learn to drive?

The past simple tense is also used to describe a past habit.

Ex: She always went to see her granny on Saturdays.

When describing consecutive actions in a finished period of time, one also uses the past simple.

Ex: She got off the bus and then stepped in a puddle.

B. The past continuous tense (I was playing)
It is used to describe a continuous past action at a certain time.

Ex: When her son returned from China, she was living in Brighton.

In a past context, while is followed by a past continuous

Ex: Someone came to the door while I was having a shower.

!!! There is no continuous with certain non-continuous verbs or if the number of times an action took place is given.

C. The past perfect simple (I had played)
It describes an action that took place before a moment or another action in the past. It is a past before the past (like the ‘plus-que-parfait’ in French)

Ex: Before June 22nd she had spent most of the money.
By the time the ambulance arrived, the man had already died (the action described by the verb in the past perfect had already finished before the other one took place)

It is often used with words like: before, previous, previously, by the end of, …

D. The past perfect continuous (I had been playing)
It is used with verbs which imply continuous action.

Ex: He had been working on his book since 1979 and longed for the day when it would be finished.

!!! It is not used with non-continuous verbs, if the number of times that the action took place is given, if the action had definitely ended and did not continue, in the negative form.