

# **Pickleball Thoughts for 2021**

Rich Hume

## Foreword

This is a file of all the posts in [pickleballthoughts.blogspot.com](http://pickleballthoughts.blogspot.com) for the year 2021. At least it started out that way. But with over 100 pages, I think this is now a book. Now, since I need a large font to read it while I type it, it may not really be a 100 page read.

As a book it lacks a whole bunch of stuff. Probably a good editor to start with (or is it “with which to start?”). The other problem that bothers me and keeps this as a list of short topics instead of a worthwhile tomb, is the lack of organization. For example there are a number of posts on movement, perhaps the main topic in my vision of the sport of pickleball, and they are scattered among a number of posts.

Then there was my “clever” habit of naming the posts with enigmatic topic lines and now how does an avid reader find the nugget they are looking for? I suspect that I should go back and rewrite them or provide some keywords.

However, there really are not a lot of topics that encompass the sport, it's not too terribly difficult to play, has a nice steep learning curve, and a lot of other sport habits carry nicely over to pickleball. It then becomes a discussion of style and finding your own way of playing. We'd all to play well, but that requires more effort than showing up for a couple of hours a day.

Yes, there is some technical knowledge to pass on; grips and basic movement, but those topics are soon exhausted. Yet, this is a resource that I wish I had had starting out. And there are a lot of

things I describe in here that I want to do, but I've not been able to incorporate into my game. Thus an ongoing, pleasant, wistful adventure.

One more point that the casual reader who doesn't play at Down's park in Livermore, California, USA, Earth (think big!), while there are only a few names in here, they are local folks who play at the Down's. There are probably other references that are assumed to be known by the locals. If you are from afar, then they will not make a lot of sense. But I've kept names and references to a minimum.

I do have a co-author, Scott Clemens, who has written a number of the posts.

Rich Hume 12/31/2021

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Posts with an \* by them are useful to beginners. The other posts are more esoteric and more useful as the basics are mastered.

## Post 1, Introduction

My intention here is to create a number of short posts about my thoughts while learning the game of Pickleball.

I tend to seek a deeper understanding of things as I do them. This is not always a good strategy as some of these understanding can get in the way of performance. You might want to look at the golf blog for evidence of that. But PB is not golf and so far it seems to be a simpler game. I may be wrong about that.

As of late 2021, I've been playing for a couple of years. As I've gotten better and watched a bunch of videos of the pros playing, thoughts of how to play the game better have arisen.

The folks I play with range from beginners to maybe 4.3 or so. That number is in PB ratings. The number range from about 2.5 to 6.0; the bigger the number, the better the player. Pros are north of 5.0.

I'd love to write this in the style of the P. G. Wodehouse golf stories, but I don't think I can carry that off. I may drop names of my fellow players, though I've not decided about that. I plan to pass notices about new posts to my local players -- names would be identifiable, and since I really have nothing bad to say about anyone, I may do it. It would make the blog more newsy and perhaps interesting to my targeted readers. But I don't want to pass out anyone's secrets!

I'm guessing that I'll produce a blog post a week or so. I've got about five topics written down and I expect that more will arise as I do this.

I'll stop here and write a couple posts and then publish when I'm happy with what I have.

## Post 2, No Sorry in Pickleball

I'll start with a simple one... There was a video on YouTube about how to be a good partner. One of the things it suggested you do when talking to a new partner, is to inquire about pet peeves. Here is mine.

I'll start by saying that if a partner is really repentant after a bad shot, then I don't mind them saying "Sorry." It might be one of the seventeen steps to enlightenment in an unknown religion and I shouldn't scoff at that.

But this is a game and we are all doing our best (well, sometimes we're thirsty and the drinking fountain is broken, and the porta-potty not as inviting as it might be and you've left three jackets at the park and you are fast running out of them, and you need a new paddle, and it's just a bit hard to concentrate at the moment, so we can't play our best), we are here for fun and we are all basically recreational players, we all miss shots, slams, and dinks into the net. We all hit it long and too hard and too soft and too wide and basically suck more than we color our play with brilliance. Hell, even the pros miss the same shots we do. Of course we have to discuss frequency of errors to be honest about it.

So, in my view, saying you're sorry is not needed and might, just might get in the way to making the next shot -- which is the only shot that matters!

I was informed the other day that if one were raised Catholic, that apologies might be deeply ingrained and hard to suppress. I suggested saying "Harumph" instead of sorry. The reader is invited

to substitute his/her own word for harumph. I've heard stuff in four languages, not all of it polite. :-)

Pickleball tip 1: ignore the last miss and just think about the next shot. It's all any of us have.



## **\* Post 3, Moving around the Court, helpful hints to the New Player**

I was going to put a number of items in this post, but when I got to seven, I realized that it was going to make for a very long post. Short, sweet, and frequent is my intended style for now.

So let me scale this back to two important points, one which is not obvious to early beginners, and the second is pretty universally ignored.

We have to two topics:

- Follow all service returns to the net - extra tip: get as close to the kitchen line as you can. Don't be afraid to run.
- If you serve the ball, never step into the court until you see what the return of service looks like.

Allow me to add some commentary.

Since the serving side must let the ball bounce, we can use that rule to control the kitchen line. Like a goalie in hockey, the closer to your opponents, the less angles they have, the less time they have, and any errant shots can be better punished from the kitchen line. The pundits suggest that getting to the kitchen line (KL) first is worth about 5% advantage with evenly matched teams. That is probably accurate for very good players, but it's a larger advantage when the play is not of the highest quality. The third shot drops are not perfect, drives are not too punishing (usually!). If you are up at the KL you might be able to end the point quickly with an angled slap, or you can keep the serving side at the baseline and seek to develop the point from there.

Of course this is a bit more nuanced and like a lot of stuff that will be passed to you as "correct," it works most of the time. If your opponents are good, you may find drop shots more difficult to return as they are closer to your feet. So you have to adapt to whom you are playing. I'll write a post on adaptation one of these days. But basically, getting to the KL is much better than not, so do it please!

Let me add a bit of what will happen if you don't make the effort to move up. The serving side likes service returners who stay back. That allows them to hit an easier shot deep to the baseline. They're not worried about keeping the ball low over the net or even care much about the shot's angle. If they get it deep, they can get to the net. Then if you don't hit a great shot they can keep you back, angle the ball off, or put it between you and your partner as the center is now wide open.

Enough about that, just run forward and make everyone happier.

Second point is rarely seen in my short experience. Even some of the more experienced players hit their serve and step into the court. Well that's fine if the service return is short. But a good opponent will try to keep you close to the baseline and you will frequently find yourself stepping backwards before the third shot. It's difficult to hit a quality shot when your weight and momentum are on your back foot. There is no reason for a service returner not to hit a higher shot which will bounce higher and if it's deep will become awkward to return. (There are some good reasons to return the ball high actually, as it provides more time to get to the KL, and makes a service return into the net less frequent.)

My suggestion is to be a step behind the baseline after the serve is hit. Watch the return carefully, listen to it, then decide where you are

going to move - up hopefully, sideways and on a rare occasion backwards. Your partner is doing the same thing as well, so the team will smoothly develop the third shot and start working your way to the KL. Always seek to move forward, don't get caught having to move backwards.

I hope this helps!

## **\* Post 4, More Court Movement**

The last post dealt with second shot kitchen line follow ups and staying behind the baseline after you or your partner has served. Let me explore a couple more items here.

The serve and the return have to bounce, but all the next shots don't and that makes court position very important. Do you seek to volley every shot? I would suggest yes. And you need to be in the proper position to do that. If you have to run something down or are out of position, then you are more likely to have to hit it on the bounce.

A volley returns the ball to the opps earlier and the less time they have, the better for you.

I suggest the following actions to get you in a good position to win the point or start the process to winning the point.

**Follow all shots by you or by partner with some thought of where the ball will be returned.** After that thought move to the expected location. Don't admire the shot -- react before the next one is hit. The only important shot is the next one. Think about how the opps see your shot and what they are going to do. Always assume your shot will be in bounds. Nothing more silly than hitting a drop shot and not moving up because you thought it was short. If you were returning the shot you just hit, where would you return it?

**If your (or partner's) shot is going to drop into the kitchen or be below the net, rush the kitchen line.** Don't wait to see it bounce before acting. All short balls should trigger a full team press to the KL. (Extra points if your team shifts to the side the ball is on. More on that in a later post.)

**More generally you want to get in the way of the opponents --** don't give them easy shots choices, cover their likely returns. It's frequently a good idea for one of the team to stand very close to the T at the center of the KL. Hog the middle!

**One of the interesting parts of this game is picking up on the habits of the players.** There are few players who randomly hit the ball. Most shots are going up the middle, some down the line, a few are lobs. Keep an eye on what your opp likes to do, then exploit that tendency.

Almost all dinks will go cross court, for example. However there is one player who likes to dink up the line. I'm been asked not to reveal secrets. An Erne might be a nice surprise for that shot. Oh, and who tries Ernes a fair amount?

More on these topics another time.

## **Post 5, Make Sure These Two Shots are In the Court**

There are just two shots in a point that are pressure free. They are the serve and the service return.

**If you miss hitting a good serve**, you give up half your chance of scoring any points. If you watch a lot of pro matches you will find top pros in the women's and men's side who put no effort in hitting a tricky or fast or difficult shot on the serve. They are willing to trade that for not missing a serve. I miss one to two a day, usually when I'm trying hit a serve that will kick wildly and I like to hit it near the center line. When it misses I regret the lost opportunity, I am ashamed, I cry for my partner's anguish and disappointment. Try for fancy shots when you have a seven point lead, not when the game is tight, beginning, or you're behind. Tip: try hitting serves with a bit of side spin, it will make it easier to keep them from going long.

**Service returns are much the same.** You can cross the net at any height, your angle is not that important, up the middle is fine - added bonus to your side if you can hit the line. A lob is fine, a drive is fine. The crime here is hitting it long or into the net. What's worse is that you give the opps an easy point. Now I admit that there are some folks out there that hit the serve pretty hard. There is no shame in not getting back good serves. But strive to return all of them. Tip: the slower/higher/more "lobby" your return of service is, the more time you have to move forward.

Most of the pros will return a serve with a modest cut spin. That will help keep the ball in the court and will help keep the ball from bouncing too high. A low spinney return will also require the serving side to lift the ball, which might allow you to score an easy point as it comes over the net. You are going to be at the KL when it

comes across, right?

## **Post 6, Scoring Easy Points**

PB can be a lot of work. Dashing here, there, back to the baseline for one of Sammy's lobs, and then back to the net. Work, lots of work.

But there is a way to score a few more points with little effort. Oh, you have to pay attention and make some decisions, hopefully correct decisions, but it can be done.

The path to restful points lies in not hitting as many balls. "What?" I hear you say. "Yes," I answer. What you want to do is get into a ready position, wide stance, knees a bit bent, and when the time is correct, then just duck and let the ball pass over your head and on beyond the baseline.

This is a skill, like all the others, but primarily a mental skill, than physical. Oh, the ducking can be hard on the knees and back, but better than straining a shoulder on a hard, high ball.

Yes, we want to get good at letting balls go. Now, how to hone this ability? I would suggest this exercise, which I have done, and that is to watch a good game. Stand by the net if you can and keep track of the number of balls that would go out, but were hit. It's easy to see which balls are long and I think you'll be surprised how many there are. It sure looks different if you are on the court.

Useful data are: 1) how many would go out, 2) how many did, 3) who hits them out, and 4) who will hit any ball, in or out, on which they can get a paddle.

You want to store all that information. Your goals are to recognize, nay, expect which balls are going long. Who is more likely to hit those balls, and when you run across the player who will not let a



ball go by, you can play more loosely and hit the ball harder at them. This mostly will happen when you are at the KL and the opps at the baseline. Be prepared!

So we did our homework, we know who tends to do what, and we wait to see them wind up to hit a hard one. We get in our crouch and prepare to duck. Extra points if you don't bother to watch the ball go out. Just announce the new score and wait for the next chance.

## Post 7, The Many Shots of PB

I thought I'd make a list...

- Ground strokes - includes drives (5):
  - top spin, flat, cut spin, side spin, inside out
- Half Volleys/Short hops(1)
- Dinks (21)
  - Cross court, middle, straight ahead
  - cut, flat, side spin, top spin, body shot, lob, push
- Overheads (1)
- Drop shots (3)
  - From baseline, middle ground, resets when at the KL
- At the kitchen line, when punishing opponents longish shots (3)
  - flat slap, chop, roll

Well, that adds up to 34 distinct shots and when we suggest that having them from forehand and backhand is a good idea, we're over 60. Hmm, lots to learn. How many of these shots are on your Christmas list?

## \* Post 8, How the Pros Dink

The pros are different than you and I...

A couple of things I've noticed when pros dink:

- If the ball is taken on the bounce, they take it at its apex
- Don't use a lot of spin
- Move feet first,
  - stop the feet
  - stretch their arm(s) out, getting the paddle ready
  - Hit the dink with an enthusiastic pop

The big difference I see from the casual player is the pop to hit the ball. It's awfully easy to kind of move the paddle as one would for a full stroke, then slow down as the contact is made. This is common in golf and it's a bad habit in either sport. It makes for a weak hit that may well find the net more than anywhere useful.

Robo does a nice job with the pop. There may be others; I've not looked for it much.

Obviously, getting to the ball is critical and so is stopping before hitting.

I would suggest, without getting too preachy, that spin is over rated. Any spin you put on any ball, will take away speed from the shot, so it's one more variable that us rec players don't need. It's also very hard to create enough spin that would bother any player.

OK, try some of this, let us all know if this helps. Good dinkage!

## **Post 9, Guest Post from Scott! Good stuff on Movement, Split Steps, and More Court Movement**

Here is a wonderful post from Scott. His background is in tennis, he's taught, and he's a very nice PB player. I asked him about trying to return a shot at one's feet. He was kind enough to think about it and sent in the following post.

First, let's discuss No Man's Land (NML).

So when is it a **good** time to be in no man's land?

1. When you hit a shot from the baseline and you start coming in but can't make it all the way to the KL.
2. When you just don't move well enough to cover the short balls you should move into NML so you can cover the court better.
3. When you are at the net and your partner hits a lob or sitter try to move back into NML to give you time to have a chance at making the shot.

How to improve your NML play:

1. When you can't get all the way to the KL you need to take a split step before the opponent hits the ball. This helps you get balanced. Once the opponent hits the ball, you then hopefully move forward to hit the ball and then you end up at the KL or maybe just a few more steps closer.

A split step means moving forward and off the lead foot you make a hop step and you land with both feet square and on the balls of your feet, preferably right before the opponent hits the ball so you quick move forward (or right or left) for the shot.

2. When you have a hard time covering the whole court and need to move into NML, stay balanced and on the balls of your feet. Bend those Knees as best as you can. Don't get on your heels, hold your ground. A low setup will allow you to volley some of the shots that land closely in front of you.

3. When you are in trouble because your partner threw up a lob and you are at the KL and have time, you need to do a reverse split step and land on the balls of your feet and knees bent and get ready to try and block the ball back. Don't give up and hide! A lot of overheads are playable! Don't ever move back and be falling backward and be on your heels, you give yourself almost no chance to make the shot.

## Part 2

When is it a **bad** time to be in NML?

1. When you are at the net and you give ground and end up in the NML. Your opponents love this, they have no reason to hit to your partner who is at the KL because now they can just keep hitting at your feet and watching you play from your heels.

2. When you hit your serve and you or your partner move into NML BEFORE your opponent makes contact with the ball. You need to stay by the baseline and see where the ball goes before you start moving. When it is clear your partner is playing the 3rd shot you

should be moving forward into NML and split step, if you see it is a good return, you should move up to the KL. Don't blindly move to the KL before you can evaluate your partner's shot. It puts a lot of pressure on partner to be perfect. That can result in a lot of net shots due to being too delicate with a third shot drop.

3. When you spend too much time in NML or at the baseline because you think you can win by banging ground strokes. Good luck with that! You might hit some flashy shots but in the long run you are going to lose most of the battles. You need to be at the KL!

## **Post 10, Qui Custodiate Media?**

We had to get to the Latin at some point...

Who guards the middle? And When? Bonus, a suggested doubles strategy, see case 5.

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I think this will be the last post on movement. The subject has been covered with this post and several of the earlier ones in more detail than probably the average reader is interested in. Hmm, preposition at the end of a sentence... Bad writer! But back to the point. I've tried to apply the information to my own game. One of the issues with PB is that the ball is changing left to right, back to front, and up to down very quickly. It's a very dynamic battle to keep moving for the next shot. When I watch a pro match, usually on YouTube, I like to follow a player who is not engaged in hitting the ball, but is getting ready for a possible opportunity to hit one. Lots of small movements, always facing the ball/action. I also recently noticed the side to side distance between pros. It looks to be about seven feet or so. They stay close together. Which leads us to this post. Enough talk, time to get to the subject...

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As I've written this, it's gotten a bit long, but there is a lot of good stuff here. It's the fundamentals of PB doubles and worth the wade through. However, these are my views and yours may differ. My PB knowledge is hardly thorough or authoritative. All additional thoughts are more than welcome. Guest posts are more than welcome!

Ok, into the breach:

Case 1: Let's start this with an easy case. Your team is receiving the serve. One of you is at the KL. The person at the KL should cover the middle. They were looking to poach anyways, yes? Added points if the player at the KL has moved close to or onto the T position. This is very simplified and assumes the serve was returned up the middle or to the side line away from the guy at the KL, see case five below.

Case 2: Everyone is dinking, we are all at the KL. Usually there is a lot of cross court action. If your partner is the target of the cross court dink, you should be sliding over with your partner and becoming a menacing figure in the middle of the court. If the dinks move from your partner to you, you shift to return, partner shifts with you and takes over the middle. But in all of this, there is a player watching and responsible for the middle. Always face the ball.

Case 3: Your partner served and the return comes back up the middle. It seems to me that the non-server should take more of these third shots as partner is probably a tiny bit awkwardly placed due to having hit the serve. This is very important if your partner likes to step into the court after hitting the serve. Of course, that should never happen, but we live in an imperfect world. :- ) I like to stand quite close to the center stripe and a couple of feet back from the baseline when my partner is serving. It gives me more time to return the expected middle shot. I've never found it a problem to start from that position. The pros typically advance up the middle of the court in these instances, they do not start spread out.

Case 4: Partner hits a drop shot; third or fifth or whatever. Well, we are all running to the KL, yes, as soon as we see what partner did? Middle coverage is not horribly an issue if the drop is a good one as



we are expecting a dink back. But if the drop is up a bit, then expect a strong shot up the middle. When you run up to the KL, you should be running towards the ball, not straight up the court. One of you should be well placed to look for middle balls. Again, read case 5, as it relates to this too.

Case 5: Your partner returns the serve, and let's think about where it should/might be going. The usual answer is right up the middle. However depending on the opps, you might want to vary that a bit.

Let me suggest this variation, return the serve to a side line. One of your team covers the "down the line shot," the other straddles the T at the KL.

What's the opp going to do? What would you do? They can drop or drive, things to expect from better players, or try to hit the open court area. The open area is pretty small and the sideline comes into play quickly. There are a couple of players who can do this, but it's a short list. If the opps can't make great shots, there are usually good opportunities for quick points. And why quick points? Because if the returner doesn't come forward after hitting the shot, the opps are split with one at the KL and the other back a bit. This has opened up a lane between them. You'll be able to hit in front of the returner and behind the guy at the KL. Very satisfying...

It's a play that I don't see much of at Downs, so you might want to discuss it with your partner. Basically, this is like the dink strategy, shrink the space between you and your partner and cover the line. Ice hockey goalies do this "cut down the angle" move all the time.

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Bonus historical note about "Who will watch the watchers." This is used today to suggest that you can't trust police, bankers, politicians,

etc., or as Reagan said, "Trust but verify." But in the play, the speaker was discussing the difficulty of protecting property and if he locks it up, can the guardians be trusted? Now, to toss one more historical wrench into the whole thing, the property was his wife! O tempora, o mores!

### **\* Post 11, Paddle Up or Down? Yes!**

"Master, this humble student wishes to know where to hold his paddle," said the student (S).

"You need to hold it low, middle and high," replied the master.

"Master, I cannot hold it in three places?" said the humble, confused student (HCS).

"It then, is not where to hold the paddle. You must notice when."

"Please enlighten me," said the humble student (HS).

"When the ball to the opponents is low, where must they hit the ball, Grasshopper?"

"Why, it has to come up to cross the net!" said the partially enlightened humble student (PEHS)

"And when the ball is hit high to your foes, where will the ball go?" queried the master.

"Ah, I begin to see the light. The ball must come down to avoid exceeding the back boundary line of shame," replied the almost fully enlightened humble student (AFEHS).

"And when you, Grasshopper, dink the ball too high, what will happen then?" asked the Master.

"The vengeful foes will seek to speed the point up!" said the fully enlightened humble student (FEHS)

"Yes, Grasshopper. So it is not where you should hold the paddle but when."

"If the opponents have a low ball to hit, raise your humble paddle, look for a chance to speed up the point, hit the winning downward

dragon shot, or return a modest dink."

"If the ball has popped up, you must expect their downward dragon shot, and attempt to save the point, move back, lower your paddle, try to block."

"And if the ball is up a dangerous amount, watch for a fast ball from those who don't dink, be ready to provide them with an unexpected block, move your paddle to the holy middle position."

"But in all cases, position your paddle for the expected shot. Grasshopper, your lesson is complete... Would it be too much to ask for a cup of tea?" quoth the Master.

## Post 12, How to Tie One On

"And now for something entirely different..." Monte Python

I've noticed a number of players who hold up the game to... tie their shoes. Since they were already wearing their shoes, it's clear to the most casual observer, that they didn't tie them properly in the first place.

Oh, I was one of you at one time. For me it was always the right shoe that came loose. I never figured out why, but it did bother me. Then I found the light and have been using the "Ian" knot for a few years now. It's quick to tie, it stays tied, and it's easy to undo.

I pass on the following link for your edification, time savings, and general life improvement:

<https://www.fieggen.com/shoelace/ianknot.htm>

New note, of all the posts that are useful, this is the most useful. Try this knot and improve your life!

## Post 13, How Long?

I got into a set of games with folks that were happy to dink. Kind of a rarity for my play. I was involved in a couple of cross court dinking battles and I was surprised how far and hard I could hit the ball. The idea of a gentle shove or lift did not seem to apply.

So I'm thinking, "Just how far is that shot?" And as the astute among you will already be thinking, the number 596 pops up right away. "Metric?" No, but we have to take the square root of that number to get to feet. Pythagoras and early education rises to the surface.

What is that number? Well, I don't know that one off hand and I'm too lazy to look for a calculator, ask Alexa, or dive into the box of slide rules to find the exact answer. I do know that the square root of 625 is 25, so it's a bit less than that.

The exact number is not real important, because the number does not take into account the net height, nor at what altitude the initial hit is made. But the distance is of use. We'd all like to practice that shot and its utility becomes more important the better your opponents.

The distance is about 8 largish steps, 24 feet. If you pace those off from the kitchen line towards your opponent's base line you will find that 24 is about half way into the service box or the middle of the transition zone.

If you want to practice that shot, then when warming up or drilling, practice hitting balls that will go short to middle of the transition area is of use.

For those who don't remember the hypotenuse equation it's the sqrt of the sum of other two legs squared, the court is 20 feet wide and the kitchen area is seven feet on each side, so we get 14 and 20 for

the legs:

$$\text{Hyp} = \sqrt{20^2 + 14^2} = \sqrt{400 + 196} = 24.4\dots$$

## **Post 14, Game of Five**

It bothers me when the number of players is not right and one or two people are waiting for a game to finish. If there is only one game in play it is worse.

I've played five handed a couple of times and it is a nice way to get some practice in, play with all the players, and be punished just a bit for bad play. The way it works is to start a normal game. When someone misses a shot, long, short, wide, etc., they sit out the next point and the fifth person takes their place.

The serve moves to the next server in normal order. Score is not really kept, as players will be changing sides as the points are played out. The best part is that the wait time is only one point. Hey, how long is that? Probably about five hits on average.

The only thing that is done is keeping track of which server is serving, be it the first or second server.

Now, how do you minimize your own wait time? That's easy too, don't make any mistakes. The game encourages steady, conservative play, Who doesn't need a bit more of that?

It there are six players, then each "loser" will sit out two points before getting back on the court.

Give it a try, it's a nice way to practice/play.



## **Post 15, Tennis Elbow, a Public Service Announcement**

For all those who suffer from tennis elbow, I pass on an observation...

Tennis elbow is when the inside of the elbow joint is hurting. Golfers' elbow is when the outside of the joint is unhappy.

I watch a disc golf video on how to throw a side arm shot. It's the same motion if you were to skip a stone. But the important point is that the elbow leads the forearm. And the forearm leads the wrist/hand. At the moment of truth, the wrist joint snaps across generating a lot of the speed.

I tend to look for universal solutions and the leading elbow shows up in the golf swing with the trailing arm, and disc golf, and I thought I'd try it with my pickleball shots.

I do have tennis elbow and there are shots in PB that really hurt. Sorry, I can't tell you what they are, you might be tempted to abuse me.

I tried to lead with the elbow on forehands and of course, that means the serve. I found that I was getting all the power and accuracy I was used to, plus I could feel that the elbow joint was not being stressed at all. It felt good.

This also is part of the backhand stroke. I was not very good at implementing that, but I think it has a lot of promise.

If you are hurting with the various elbows pains, you might try this modification to your stroke.

## Post 16, Paddle Position Thoughts - Updated 10/27

Update is in the last paragraph...

Hello there PB fans. I have taken a renewed interest in paddle positions. To be more specific about that, the position of the paddle's center line, extending from the bottom of the grip to the end of the blade, that line, would be parallel to the ground for most strokes.

Serves are more of a dropped wrist position, and some dinks would also be more of a low to high scoop shot where the paddle would point towards the court surface than parallel or upwards.

I was watching the pros play and they all seemed to do it that way. I don't know if this is because they are mostly tennis players, or if this paddle position provides power, accuracy in trajectory, or advantages in producing spin.

I have no answers here and would like to hear your thoughts. Kirby teaches to have the head of the paddle up, so the center line described above would be above the parallel line to the court surface.

That's the PB thought of the day. Chime in any of you classically trained pickleball players!

**Update:** Jordan Briones has a pickleball channel on YouTube. Good information though he is a bit repetitive for my taste. He addressed the wrist position in one of his videos on dinking drills. His view is that the natural wrist position will cause you to hold the paddle with a 30 to 45 degree angle to the arm. Let your arm dangle with the palm out and you will see the straight nature of hand, fingers are down, but the grip of a paddle will have the angle to the arm. His view is that this is a more stable condition for the wrist and thus the

paddle. I wonder that if you are having wrist pain, that a different position might be added physical stress. Something to look at.

## **Post 17, The Master Helps Again**

"Master, I bring you tea," said the acolyte.

"Thank you," said the Master.

"Master, I have a problem."

"Yes, usually you do. You are young and most things are problems for the young. With experience, one improves. Why this reminds me of a time when I was young..." said the Master.

The acolyte interrupts. He has heard these stories before and while they make for an interesting hour, he has more pressing needs. "Yes, Master, I do recall it too. But I have been getting strange stares from my partners and strange questions too."

"Ah," said the Master, "What questions are those?"

"One of my partners asked me how long it takes me to get to the kitchen line."

"And what did you tell him?"

"I said that I didn't know."

"And did he reply to that?"

"Yes, he said, 'why don't you run up to it a couple of times and find out.'"

The Master allowed himself a small chuckle. "Yes, a typical beginner error. Grasshopper, is it easier to score points or defend against them?"

"Defend, I guess. It can be a challenge to score."

"That is correct. And why is this a universal pickleball truth?"

"Well, defenders usually can reach the kitchen earlier than the

serving side."

"Well said, Grasshopper. But to do that you must get to the kitchen line. Do you always seek the kitchen line?"

"I do, but sometimes I cannot get there quickly. I return the serve and it comes back before I can get to the line."

"Yes, there are three common problems with that. You stand too close to the baseline and lend the deep serve additional menace, or you admire your return and stand wreathed in pride losing time, or you see your return might be long and you stand in angst."

"Hmm, I can see that Master. Pride and fear and setup lead to dismal results."

"Yes. Be prepared for a deep serve. Strike your return with righteous force, believe in your return and stride, neh, leap forward to do battle."

"Is that all Master?"

"One more pickleball pro tip, Grasshopper. If you start deep in your court to return the serve, then as you move forward to hit it, run through the shot and use that speed to arrive at the kitchen line. You will easily get there and setup before the ball comes back. Very strong position, very early preparation, very happy partner."

"Thank you Master. I will try that."

"Do not try, do or do not. ...Er, the tea has cooled down, would you please fetch the Master another cup?"

## **Post 18, The Master Explains Another Secret**

"Master, why did the ball go left?" asked Grasshopper.

"You were late hitting it," replied the Master. "Everything in its time. You must respect the ebb and flow of time around the paddle, you, the court, and the game."

"Master, there is no time limit in pickleball, what is this ebb and flow?"

"Time is the silver and gold of pickleball. You can earn it and spend it, wisely, or like the drunkard down in our village, foolishly."

"How can I control time? I don't understand," said Po, the student.

"It is simple and it is not. When you hit a ball hard, you compress time, when you dink, you expand it. When you poach, you take time from your opponents, as when you speed up during a dink. Fast, slow, long, short, are all time elements.

"When do you want more time, young one?"

"When I'm trying to get to the kitchen line."

"When else?"

"Hmm, when they dink well and the ball is almost past me, is that right Master?"

"Yes, being out of position is a time squeeze. It can be anywhere on the court or off it. If you are late, you are squeezed. If you are early, you have gained time. Gained time is valuable, owing time is like the sore on the foot, it will stop you walking on a long journey. With plenty of time you can setup for a hit, consider where your shot should go, evaluate the opponents' positions and greed, and execute with the seeming nonchalance that proclaims a mastery of your

game."

"Thank you Master, once again I am awed at your knowledge."

"Grasshopper, let us reason together... When you are out of time, what should you do?"

"I could hit a high soft ball for a service return or when the opponents are back. That always gains time as the ball must be allowed to bounce."

"Very good. What else?"

"When I am trying to get to the kitchen, or am out of sorts, I could dink. Oh, or I could lob!"

"The dink is fine, elegant and approved, but lobbing upsets the digestion. Use it as a last resort, and never show glee if it succeeds, it is contrary to the nature of the game."

"Yes, Master, I will remember that."

"Now, if we are done, perhaps you might refill an old man's rice bowl?"

## **\* Post 19, Crisscross Thoughts**

The question of who will return a ball can be resolved a couple of ways. One of the more utilitarian ways is the crisscross rule of thumb.

Basically it boils down to the idea that the ball is usually heading towards one of the players. And that is the player who should hit it. The difficult part is that the ball frequently starts on the side of the other player. We can think of this as applying to all cross court shots, which move diagonally across the court. This will cover a large majority of the shots. It's something to talk to your partner about before the game starts. Most people have heard of it and it's a chance to ensure that you and partner are thinking along the same lines.

The shots that come up one side, aka straight back, bring with them little confusion. Which leaves the shots up the middle that are still a problem.

The rule of thumb I hear a lot is that the forehand should take them. I think it's a bit more complex than that. Let's look at the various scenarios.

A soft high bouncing ball is easily handled by either player. There is usually time to allow a player to take on the challenge, call the shot and promptly dump it into the net -- ok, maybe just return it nicely back and see how the point develops.

If the shot is low and hard, I think it is easier for the player who was not serving the ball to handle it. That player should be fairly close to the center line and behind the baseline -- you were behind the baseline, right? And the non-server has more time to prepare for the



return.

And if the ball heads for one of the lines and you expect the dreaded "Downs" skipper ball, then I think both should take a swing at it, one high and one low. "Mine is high!" or "I'll take low!"

This also appears to a lesser extent when in a dinking battle. The trajectory of the ball is sometimes harder to react to, and can lead to the deadly "hesitation" when placed in the middle of the court, but the time to react to a dink is about a second and that provides enough time to figure it out.

Sarah Ansboury on YouTube claims that the difference between 3.5 and 4.0 is that the 3.5s move their feet at the net too much. She likes a bit of sway, paddle in front, use forehand and backhand and try to cut off wide balls with a volley, elbows in. I'm personally working a bit on this. I'm not quite convinced, but I lack a lot of data at this point.

Of course, having one of the team call all the balls works well too. That's what the pros do and if it didn't work, they would do something else. "You, you, you, hurry, hurry, hurry!"

## **Post 20, One More Knot**

One of the guys I played with today had a problem... Here is a solution!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3R0Lp86GEBk&list=LL&index=2>

It's a knot for draw strings and we all have a couple of those.

Cheers!

## Post 21, It's a Poetic Game After All

My game was a bit in the sink  
I thought it was due to my dink  
So I loosen'd my grip,  
and vowed not to flip  
No good, I'm returnin' to drink

Thomas Sowell, a brilliant guy, heavy thinker, might play pickleball, don't know. He has spoken out on numerous topics, one of which is equality. The quote that caught my eye the other day was. "No man is equal to any other man. And no man is equal to himself on different days."

I'm sure we've all thought about how we played as we've driven away from the PB court. There is the day you won them all and the day you couldn't win any. None of which is a reflection of the state of your game. I've seen beatable opponents that suddenly could only hit it at your feet, their lobs landed in, and the cross court rollers hit all the lines. It's easy to feel clumsy and out of sorts if your opps are playing perfectly.

The answer? Remember the good days and forget the bad ones. I've heard Bjorn Borg was a master at it. Jack Nicklaus claimed he never missed a putt on the 18th hole when it mattered. When they showed him videos of his untimely misses, he still denied it. Maybe denial is a great way to play pickleball.

Always look to the next shot, it's the only one you can control!

## **Post 22, Drill Baby, Drill**

I did some dink drilling with Robo the other day. The drill is simple, stand in front of each other and dink the ball back and forth. Use half the court and a point is scored if the ball does not land in the kitchen - it's bad if it's wide, long, or in the net.

The drill is not as easy as you might think. If I'm dinking for real, I'm happy to hit it a bit beyond the kitchen line (KL), but in the drill that was a loss of a point.

I've looked into athletic training and the current theory is that drilling is not preferred to a more random, game like scenario. If you need to learn a basic skill, for example a wrist position while dinking, then the drill is probably a good idea. But the more the activity matches a real game, and is more random in nature, you will improve faster and you'll remember it better when you are back playing. Retention of the skill is a major problem. Things learned during drills have proven elusive to long term behavior habits.

This theory seems to have been born out as time has passed. Having said that, my pickleball skills are such that learning a wrist position for a dink, is still a good idea. And since I'm happy to hit dinks that get past the KL, I don't mind crediting Robo with those points, I'm hopefully picking up the experience. I appreciate his willingness to pass on knowledge and time. "You're trying to win the points! Just get them back and don't be wimpy!"

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The above was written a while back. I was talking to one of the up and coming players today and he was talking about getting better and I brought up some of the stuff above. An approach that I'm

going to try is to concentrate on a single thing while I play a game. For example if I'm trying to use a looser grip, I'll play an entire game and judge every shot based on how my grip was rather than the usual successful measurements of a shot. I think this approach may provide a way to incorporate a new skill. One requires an understanding partner as I can see it being a bit unproductive in the short run. We'll see what tomorrow will bring.

If you are interested in the research behind learning physical skills, there are posts by researchers on YouTube and I'd also point you to Tim Gallwey, who has written a couple of "Inner Game of" books, one on skiing, one on golf. He suggests ways to use your mind to provide feedback and make changes. I've got the golf books and they are different and interesting and I think quite useful. They are worth a read.

## **\* Post 23, Dinking, Some Additional Thoughts**

I saw a video on the two types of dinks. I think it was called "Why you lose at dinking" or something of that ilk. There was some good info there and I pass it along below. Below that discussion I've provided some modest thoughts on how to win points at the kitchen line.

Per the video we have the lift dink and the push dink.

The lift dink attempts to bring the ball over the net with a high trajectory, lots of room for error. What keeps this shot from being a disaster is that the ball does not / cannot land deep in the kitchen. Think of it as being a lob over the net with no attempt at being long. There is no attempt to win the rally with this shot. You are just keeping the ball in play. Use it when you can't hit a push dink, or are out of position, out of breath and you want a bit of recovery time.

Push dink... Now we are trying to score points or trying to make the opponents uncomfortable and setup a kill shot a couple of hits in the future. This shot clears the net without a lot of space. It also travels deeper into the kitchen and may well land beyond the kitchen line. You can't hit this at any time, you need to have a ball that is up a touch and/or back from the net a bit so you have room to get over the net with a flat arc. The danger with this shot is putting it into the net, or hitting it too hard, or giving the opponents a high ball. This is frequently hit cross court. Though hitting it into the middle is pretty effective if you are hitting it from a kitchen corner.

Both these shots are hit with an arm swing. Don't use your wrist to pop the ball if you can. A controlled arm swing is preferred.

Here is the link to the video:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0iO\\_CiTUGzE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0iO_CiTUGzE)

How to win points...

Ok, you've mastered the two dink types and you are happy to dink and your opponents fear you. How can we win points with all of this? There are a couple of scenarios worth thinking about:

- Just keep dinking until they dump one in the net or they
  - get bored and speed it up or
  - they hit it hard and hit it long or
  - they get clever and hit it too wide or
  - out comes the lob, aka "the devil's shot"
- If you want to be more proactive, you want to move your opponents around, side to side, use the middle of the court to reset, dink towards feet and finally...
- Wait for the pop up and smash it or roll it down the middle.

Basically it is a waiting game. You are looking for an error. Try to avoid trying for the hero shot -- yes we all do it, but less is more in this case. We're all rec players and the errors will arrive. It's your job to be ready to exploit them.

I had a lot of dinking points this week and it made for a lot of fun points, IMHO. Hard to run out of breath doing that, but also hard to get your steps in.

### **\* Post 24, Paddle Grips, Spin, A Case History Part 3**

I've mentioned in a past post that the position of the paddle relative to the forearm is an angle. The angle is ranges from about 90 degrees to maybe 20 or so. There wasn't a good explanation for why this was recommended. I modified that post to put in something about less wrist strain, but upon reflection, there are more basic reasons for that kind of a grip... Let's explore.

I see a lot of folks who are holding the paddle where the paddle wrist angle is close to zero degrees, in other words, it's inline with forearm.

With no angle you can more easily hit a top spin shot and some dink shots are easier. But you are giving up a lot when using this paddle attitude.

If we have an angle closer to 90 degrees we get a number of benefits. The force of the paddle comes from the arm swing and the attitude or trajectory of the ball is controlled by the wrist rotation/position. Think of the paddle as a golf club and the loft of the paddle is the club face. This is an important function and it's quite valuable to have it separate from the mechanism that creates the paddle speed. Direction is another part of this and there are a couple of cases.

If you push the shot, then the paddle is always moving in the direction the shot will go as long as the paddle face is pointing along the push direction. If you swing at it, then at the moment of impact the direction of the paddle face may or may not be facing where you want the ball to go. A personal issue is that I tend to swing too early and I'll pull a forehand shot (it will go to my left) and if it's on the backhand side, it goes right. I have a theory that I'm swinging and



not pushing as a swing will allow for a bit more reach. Moving my feet might be one solution, but then there is the kitchen line as a hard boundary... In summary, with a swing, there is a timing issue that is important.

Next we have to talk about spin. There are top, side, and back spins available. This is a function of the paddle swing and the paddle face angle. When they don't match a slippage is created and that creates the spin. So, swing up on the ball and you get a top spin. Go a bit sideways and you get side spin and move downwards with the stroke and you get a back spin.

If you have that 90 degree angle it is easy to create any spin you want. But if the paddle is closer to the zero angle, you get tons of back spin, some side spin is available, and you will not be able to create any back spin. Think of a serve, the paddle is supposed to be moving up and it's considered impossible to create a backspin serve. A note to you backhand servers, if you are getting backspin you might take a critical look at the paddle path at impact. I suspect a lot of them are moving down and are illegal!

Spin, what is it good for? Absolutely everything!

Everything is an exaggeration, but I'll share my view of what the spins are good for.

Top spin is an easy one, helps keep the ball inside the baseline and when used in third shot drive/drop scenario allows the ball to be below the net when the opponents try to return it. Probably the most useful spin to get good at. There are also folks who like it for dinks. I've not found it very valuable for that and I mention it only for completeness.

Side spin... Not used much, but I have some from tennis and I can hit it with enough of this spin to jump out of a player's reach. What is more useful is a combination of side and top spin. Think of a spin that is about 45 degree to vertical, it will slide right and also sink pretty well. It tends to kick right when it bounces.

Back spin. This is most useful when returning serves. This idea is to return the ball fairly low and with the back spin, it won't bounce very high.

You need to add more lift if you are returning a ball with back spin on it. Frequently less experienced players will dump these shots into the net. A low spinney shot, even if it's short, can't be easily be attacked, adding to its usefulness. Watch a pro match and see how often the return of service is a cut stroke.

Case History...

I played the other day with a player who said she was a beginner. She played pretty well and had some good strokes, moved well, got to the kitchen line; all the elements you want from a partner. But she had one glaring problem. Every shot she hit was flat. None had any spin. So if she was at the net, the ball was coming up. All ground strokes were low to the net and that reduced her ability to safely play over the net without worry of being long. Service returns were a problem since she could not cut them back. She needed the top and cut spin shots and it would make a large difference in her ability.

To sum it up, there are a lot of reasons to make sure you're holding the paddle more like a beer mug than a screwdriver. Spin is king and the more control and separation of speed and spin, the better it is.

## **Post 25, Scoring Points**

"Master, I've been beaten up lately at the weekly temple tournament!" said the young disciple.

"Yes, I've seen the scores in the bulletin. You are not scoring many points," said the Master.

"Help me, Master, for I am lost."

"Grasshopper, when do you score points?" asked the Master.

"Only when we serve, Master. Is that not right?"

"It is close enough for now, Grasshopper. Tell me, when you serve, are you hitting good serves?"

"Oh yes, Master. My new triple spin, kick serve is working very well," said the disciple with touch of pride.

"Yes, and how many points did you win with this new 'super' serve? Did the opponents have trouble getting them back?"

"Er, no, they returned all of them."

"Did you miss any serves?"

"Only a few Master. I've found," talking rapidly with passion only the youth can muster, "that I need to get the serve close to the baseline to be effective."

"Yes, so it is. When we consider that, is it not true your opponents returned all the serves you hit in and didn't need to return the ones you missed?"

"Yes Master."

"So all in all, the fancy serve served only no purpose?" said the Master with sly chuckle. He was fond of a nice turn of phrase.

"Well, we didn't score any points and we lost several. I guess it wasn't worth the missed shots."

"Correct Grasshopper. But your errors lie not there entirely."

"Where else Master?"

"Let's talk of the points you won. How did they go?"

"We served in, hit the third back and if they didn't miss the third shot, we got to the net and played pretty well there."

"But you didn't get to the kitchen line very often, did you?"

"No Master, we couldn't get into the points."

"Let us be blunt, 'getting into the point' is way of saying that you couldn't get off the baseline, yes Grasshopper?"

"Now that I think of it, we made errors from there. We hit a lot into the net, some long and some that the opponents were able to put away."

"Ah, just so... What kind of third shots do you hit?"

"Mostly drives. Drops are so hard."

"And what kind of shots do your opponents like?"

"They were converted racquetball players. They liked to hit the ball hard and they didn't mind hard shots. Oh, and their backhands were pretty good."

"If you play them again, what should you do differently?"

"Well, against those kind of players, I need to hit third hand drops. Try not to get into a banging game."

"Excellent, Grasshopper. Practice your drops! Oh, and if you don't mind, give my feet a nice rub, would you? I spent the afternoon

drilling the beginners and my toes are quite sore."

## **Post 26, How to Get Better**

One of the intermediate players suggested a post on getting better. I find that an interesting topic and I'm happy to spew a few words on it.

Let me start with a reasonable way to go about it.

Firstly, I think you need to collect some data. We want to know where to put our efforts in improvement. So, we have the 72 shots of pickleball, see the prior post and we want to know which of those are a problem.

I'm joking a bit, but let's just simplify for a moment. We have backhand and forehand ground strokes. I would include serves in that category. I'd guess that most people have weaker backhands than forehands. I'll pass on a tip here. The backhand in pickleball is not too difficult, but it does require more of a setup than the forehand. You want to turn your shoulders a bit and use them to produce the power for the shot. Since the ball and paddle don't weigh much, the strength required is not a lot, but you need to make the shoulder turn and thus it takes more time to hit a backhand, so you need to prepare earlier. A bit of attention/drilling/practice would show immediate results.

Most people smash the ball just fine. I'd say they try to smash it too often, but shot selection is a topic for another day. But don't spend much time trying to improve the smash, it doesn't come up that often.

Dinking... The better you get the more important these shots get, but play at the net is most common in better play, so when you play with less skilled opponents, you don't have the chance to practice it.

When you play in a better game, it's typically a problem area. To get ahead of that work on the dinks. There is a post about it and if you can get reasonable with the lift and push dinks, you are in good shape. It's primarily a touch shot; it's easy to net the ball. I'd suggest using more lift dinks initially, before trying to push or hit winners. There are a lot of drills and dinking games. I think this is a skill that is not too difficult and improvement will come rapidly. It is just the rarity at less skilled levels that keeps this skill from being more universal earlier in a player's evolution.

Alright, on to the hard skill... Getting to the net. Two parts, one is when you return the serve, this is easy, hit the ball and sprint to the net. You want to volley the next ball. It is too easy to saunter up and find the ball at your feet. If you sprint only the very best drop shots will be any trouble. Don't admire your return or worry about if it's in, just get to the net.

Secondly, if you're on the serving side, getting to the net is a huge priority and we have to talk about third shot drops. They are not easy. They are a touch shot, so there is a fine line between a net ball and a sitter. If your opponent does not sprint up to the kitchen line, then you don't have to be great at it to be effective and that allows you to return deep, use this extra time to sprint to the KL.

You can/should err on the high side for the third shot drop -- actually for most shots in the game, strive to cross the net too high rather than too low. Obviously low is better in all cases, but we want to avoid the dreaded net ball.

When playing today, I was in a reasonable game and on several occasions partner and I were closing on the net while serving. The ball, probably our fifth shot, was nearly at the kitchen and it was an

easy hit. But a bit too easy. Partner chose to hit it hard, rather than to dink and get our team fully up to the kitchen. Some of his shots went into the net. Some came back harder than he hit them. Some were points. But we would have been much better off on average if partner had just dinked to get us to the kitchen line and solidly in the point.

But I digress... Third shots are the pivotal skill in pickleball. Nothing is as hard nor as valuable. If you can't get to the kitchen line on your serve, you won't score and that makes it really tough to win. Practice that shot whenever you can. There are lots of YouTube videos on this skill.

The problem is that you don't need this shot against weak players, but it's vital against strong ones. Due to that, it's a skill that is suddenly in demand and you've not gotten good at it yet. You need to have it to move up. Think of it as a future skill or a long term investment. Also, don't expect to get perfect at it. Many a pro point develops into servers defending overheads from their baseline because the third shot drops was too deep.

I just watched a Jordan Briones video. His list of shots needed to get to 4.0 is: consistent serves, returns in and deep, third shot drops, resets from the transition area and solid volleys. So he and I differ a bit.

All of the above is a bit of what and how. I think spending some time on these skills is useful. It's tough to get practice time, since almost everyone just wants to play games and there is a lack of an extra court or two. I'd suggest finding a like minded player and meet up at an off time to work on things. How people learn things is a topic all on its own. But there is a limited amount of new skills any



session can ingrain, I'd suggest work on only one or two skills at a time. Good luck!

## **\* Post 27, Their errors, My errors, Our Errors**

Editor's note: I wrote the post below a week ago or so. Then I had a couple of conversations today with my fellow players and some of these themes came up. I'm not inspired to write anything else today, so I'll pass this post along. It seems a bit disjointed as I read it over, but I'm too tired to punch it up a lot.

"Are you going to write in your blog all the things we do wrong?" she asked with a grin.

"Yes, but not for the reason you think," I replied.

This pickleball is an interesting sport with its mixture of moderate speed, minimal strength, soft shots and hard, and all the timing to put it together.

I think that there are only a very few differences between the very good and the intermediates. I'll spell them out in a moment, but for the run of the mill point, the errors committed by both groups are basically the same. If you watch pro matches, you will see that all points are ended due to an error. And the errors are same as in your game, gentle reader. A ball gets hit into the net, long, or wide, or there is a popup and a ball gets smacked away.

One could make the case that winning a fire fight at the net might be an exception to this, where someone gets surprised with a lobette or takes one to the body. But mostly the dink battles end with someone getting too exuberant or too careful.

There are differences between us and the pros, of course. The big one in my opinion is that the pros are always trying to get to a good position for the next shot. There is no "stand and then react," it's "I

hit it, it's going to come back over here, and I'm moving to head it off."

Once you are in the proper position, you have a lot of time to deal with the next shot. You look like you have faster reflexes than you do, your partner will admire your nonchalance, your opponents will hate you for it. "That shot was for Bill!" "Sorry, I was there and felt I should hit it."

The recognition of the proper position is derived from a number of things. Most people at our level have shots that they are comfortable with. They use them so often that they become recognizable patterns. If you look for the patterns and trust them, you can be moving well before the opponent hits the ball. It's an easy game if you know where the ball is going to be.

The pros are also much more consistent than we are. Well, golly, they do it for a living, they had better be. How good would we be if we did for eight hours a day?

But they make the same mistakes we do. I saw a video with Ben Johns, arguably the best player on the planet, miss two soft forehands in a row. He was just caressing a soft ball and was trying to just dump over the net. He netted them both. I think I'm not alone, when I take some comfort in that.

So the route to greatness, in my opinion, is to move early and correctly, keep the ball in play (be consistent) -- no hero shots, look for patterns. It's a game of not making errors. One more point is that making errors late in the game is very costly. As the scores get tighter, try for a more conservative style, let the opponents make the mistakes.

## **Post 28, Questions for a good Partnership**

Ramin asked about setting up a partnership in five easy steps. Well, I'm not sure five is the proper answer.

I did run across a video on YouTube about this very topic. I've included the link to it at the bottom of the post.

I'm listing their points and I'm going to insert comments of my own.

I've spent a lot of time playing bridge, where you sit down and fill out a card that explains the major 50 or so understanding that partners need to agree on. If you have professional or very high level partnership, your agreements might run hundreds of pages of notes and understandings.

Pickleball is a touch easier and less complex than bridge, but being on the "same page" is a good idea. And as the ladies in the video point out, we are here to have fun and being a good partner will make it easier for your partner to have a good time. Hopefully your partner is trying to make sure you have one too.

Ok, on to the understandings...

1) Which side will you do the most damage on? I think this is most useful if you are stacking. But maybe if you have a partner who has a preference, then you should stack. If no one cares, then this question is moot. But if partner has a great forehand and not much backhand, then stacking to minimize the weak backhand in the middle might be a good idea.

2) Who will take your lobs? The question boils down to which shot you will be hitting when you get to the lob. If you are forced to hit a weak backhand, it might be a good agreement that partner will chase

down lobs over your head and you get partner's. When you are on different sides of the court, then it makes sense for each player to get their own. This is an interesting discussion point and I'll confess I've never talked about it with a partner. Pro Tip, always get a young, fast partner and let them get everything!

3) How can I set you up for your best shot? - seems a bit advanced to me. If I knew how to setup for partner's kill shot, I'd do it every time.

4) Pet peeves... For example: partner displaying unhappiness with your play, sighs, eye rolls that are too loud, etc. Basically anything you do that causes partner to think about the last point or two, will detract from future performance. Don't do it. Always encourage. Most points will have something good about them. For example, partner hits a sitter into the net, well, you were winning the point to get the sitter, so comment on that. Pros miss the easy shots too. If partner misses shots and it bothers you, you're playing the wrong game.

5) Disagreements on out calls -- tell partner if you have any problem with them over ruling your call. And I'd comment that we are in a rec environment, so err on the side of calling the balls in if it's really, really close. In a tournament setting it's a bit different. Also, even the pros, used to very fast play, often call the balls incorrectly. I think the last thing you want is to become known as is someone who never calls a close shot in. Whether a shot is in or out, they can look very different from the other side of the net, too. This is particularly true of serves that "hit the kitchen line." So be a good opponent and get tighter when you are playing in a tournament.

6) Calling who will hit the shots particularly at the net. I've not done

this much with partners. I think the crisscross understanding resolves 90% of all responsibility, but if someone likes/wants/needs to call the shots, I've got no problem. Again, go along to make partner happy.

7) Standing at or near the T when partner is returning the serve - ask if it bothers partner to be that close to the center. If it does, start off to the side and then close after partner's shot has been hit. No comments on my part on this one. I've never been hit by partner on a service return, though I think it's been close a couple of times. :-)

8) Make partner happy! A good general philosophy. A happy partner plays better.

9) The ladies in the video didn't mention about the partnership getting to the net. Maybe this is more resolved in upper circles than I've seen with my partners. But here are a couple of rules... A) if you return the serve, always follow it in to the kitchen line. B) If we are serving then we rush the net after we have hit a good short shot - don't rush it when your partner is about to hit the third shot.

OK, that is about it. Five rules did seem a bit restrictive, but we kept it out of double digits! Below is the link to the video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jqoNeRpEDhY&t=252s>

## **\* Post 29, New Technique for Service Returns**

I watched a YouTube video about things beginners don't do well and one of those was service returns. Here is the link to the video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zns7W176li8>

They suggested to return the serve deep into the server's court, good when you can! But the two points I found interesting and are passing to you guys are these: Firstly, start well back of the baseline, and secondly, run through the shot to generate movement and momentum towards the KL.

How far back do you start? If at the Downs, they would be very close to the boundary fence. They did mention that if the wind was at your back or the server was known for short serves, then move up a bit. But they were still talking about being three feet behind the base line.

The idea is to be moving forward when the serve is hit and continue to run after you've hit the return.

How well does this work? Well, I'm glad you asked. I usually setup further behind the baseline than anyone else I've noticed. So far back that Robo has on occasion tried to sneak in a short serve. I also was running through service returns and found that I had a lot more time to setup at the KL before the third shot came back.

You might be worried about hitting returns that go long when running through the shot. I think I hit one long when I tried it, but it was not much of a problem.

So give it a try and see how it works for you.

## **Post 30, About Those Bruised Knees....**

So I'm playing today, for a short period of time, sadly, and my partner misses a shot a few feet up from the baseline. "I hit my leg," he said.

I smiled wryly, because I've got some nifty bruises on my right knee and they don't seem to have enough time for the purple, abused flesh to heal.

I don't know how frequently this happens, maybe there will be a comment or two. It is, however, a problem for me and I'm happy to fix this.

Then it struck me why this happens. The big error is that I and my partner had our paddles at our sides, which is ok, but not in front of our legs, which "ain't so good." Now it might be that the right leg tends to move first, leaving the paddle behind. But in either case, that paddle needs to stay in front of the body.

That protects the knees, and feelings of self worth, and it also extends the paddle's reach towards the ball. There is no reason not to like that. Be like a fencer and get that foil out in front.

An easy way to make sure that happens is to keep the paddle elbow bent somewhat. That keeps it up and hopefully in front of the body.

I hope this will help someone. I'm going to put it into practice.



## **Post 31, Master, The Net!?**

"Master, if it weren't for the net, I think I would be a very good player." said the young acolyte.

"Harrump," said the Master and stifled the smallest of burps.

"Think Grasshopper, if you don't have a net, then your feared opponents will not have one either. The yin and yang of the world would be in disarray."

The Master sipped his tea and nibbled a bit on a macaroon. "Who's side does the net help, Young one?"

"Hmm, well if I am hitting the ball, I guess it is against me."

"The net is a like a sword with two edges, it cuts both ways. Your answer is true, but not always. A master can use the net to alter time and space and create a drop or hop shot at will," said the Master. His lips smiled with hidden knowledge, albeit coarse with macaroon crumbs.

"But for normal players, you are correct. The net punishes the hitters and protects those who seek to return the next shot. As soon as a shot comes over the net, then the forces switch, as have the roles of the players. The ebb and flow of the point, as you learned in your early lessons," said the Master.

"You must embrace this relationship," the Master continued, with another slurp of rapidly cooling tea. "How can you help the net protect you and your partner?"

"Hmm, I don't understand that question Master, how can I help an object?"

"Think geometry, Grasshopper, the closer the ball is to the net, the

less angle space the hitter has. Of course as the ball approaches the net the available angle space will diminish to nothing. Do you not remember the graceful curve of the sine wave, as the length of adjacent leg of the triangle approaches that of the hypotenuse, the sine of the angle approaches 1, an angle of 90 degrees or, in your rudimentary view straight up, creating, as a non-master might say, 'a challenging shot.' Not impossible, mind you, for a master. But we were talking of you and ordinary players. So, yes, if you can hit your ball close to the net it is protective in nature as a dense woods protects from the wind and rain. What else is protected by the net?" asked the master.

"If I envision it correctly, the closer the opponent is to the net, the more my feet are protected from attack!"

"Yes, quite so. Your upper body is more of a target, so you will of course carry your paddle higher as the ball is low or close to the net. Your feet can only be hit with a soft drooping shot. Think of a noodle in hot broth too long. Such a shot can't be moving rapidly, so even if your paddle is held high, you will have time to respond. Is that all young one?"

"I think so Master. I should seek to use the net to help my side and avoid its energy when it opposes me."

"Yes, exactly. Hmm, I seem to be out of macaroons and this tea is cold. Would you be so kind?"

-----

Many years ago I created a mnemonic aid to remember the definitions of the sine, tangent, and cos functions. It is strange how often that has been useful over the years since 1968. I have a horror story about the 23.3 degree latitudes of the tropics of Cancer and

Capricorn, too. That, sadly, has been of little value. It's all my teacher's, Miss Zur's, fault who said in 5th grade while interrupting my very precise oral report on the topic of Capricorn, "You'll never remember that. Use 20 degrees." Of course that's a bad case of rounding; she might not have been hired for her math skills. It is strange, as the master might say, what stays in a man's mind for decades.

## **Post 32, Student Po Receives More Insight**

Student Po was called to the Master's study.

"You wished to see me, Master?" he asked.

"Yes, Po, you watched the masters play this morning. As part of your training, we shall discuss what you observed. From your observations, hopefully we will derive knowledge, and from knowledge, comes skill. And as you know, skill will provide mastership."

"Yes, Master, I am ready to think."

"What are your first impressions, Po?"

"I was surprised how gently the masters hit most balls. They did not seek to win points, but still they did win them."

"Yes, thus as it is, thus shall it be."

"They also didn't move very quickly. They flowed to the net, they dinked, they dinked, they dinked, and then it was over. Then it began again. How is that possible, Master? I run all over and often lack for breath. They were not even sweating and we are having unseasonable heat."

"The ways of a master are profound. Did you notice that they knew where each shot was going?"

"Yes, they were always in place. It was magic."

"Heh, heh. No not magic. A true master can foresee the shots of the point, when master plays master. Lessor players do ill advised things and are thus less predicable. Points are like players, they follow patterns. Know the player, know the pattern, you then know the point. Let us talk shot selection then, Po," continued the Master,

"were you not surprised by the shots the masters hit?"

"Yes, they simply moved the ball to allow them to dance the court and caress the point."

"Student Po, the essence of pickleball is control. It is not savage overheads or huge topspin shots that paint a line. Oh, those shots have their place, for example when you are leading ten to nothing, but have little place in a master's game. What then are the main shots that a master uses? You watched their game, what did you see?"

"Serves were nothing special, but they never missed one."

"Yes, the sign of someone in control."

"Then the returns of serve seemed to be nothing special either," said Po with a frown. "The shots were not hard, they were fairly deep, but nothing that would win a shot. And the servers had no trouble hitting them back. Even the deep returns were easily returned."

"So the servers stayed behind the baseline after they served?"

"Yes, I guess they did. They either returned from where they were, or just moved smoothly forward to return a shorter ball."

"What did their returns look like?"

"Hmm, well they didn't catch my attention, I confess."

"Let your attention capture everything, Po. Master the details to become the master. So, continue."

"The returns seemed soft, Master. They looked like marshmallows crossing the net. I often thought that their opponents would slap them back and win the point quickly, but that never happened."

"Of course, a master will not take on a small percentage shot. Sum

up a typical point for me, Po."

"Ah, there is a soft or perhaps better called a smooth serve to the middle of the service area. Then a softish shot towards the baseline. Then the servers would hit a soft shot that crossed the net, usually dropping near the kitchen line. Then would come a soft shot to the middle of the court or a dink, depending if the servers were at the net or not. If the servers were not up and had to hit a shot from the middle kingdom of their court, then they would always dink or drop. There was no attempt to win the point then, just to get to the kitchen line."

"Yes, when master plays master, the play is completed over the kitchen."

"And Master, there was no hurry with any shots. It seemed like the points were in slow motion."

"The masters' path is like that of the tiger, waste no energy and yet enjoy the antelope. And so we could summarize, which sadly will destroy detail, but the goal is to move forward, capture the net, then bend the opponents like the north wind will bend the willow. All shots contribute to that end. They do not seek to hit a 'magic' shot from the middle kingdom to score a quick point, nor return a serve so severe in nature that Brother Ben Johns would struggle with it. No strive for a sudden victory. The flow of the game is of the highest import. Po, do you have a questions? Do you now see a hint of the game at its peak of pleasure?"

"Yes, Master. Strive to simplify and walk the jungle path with a soft foot."

"Ah, well said Po. Now, shall we adjourn for lunch? I think they are serving sand dabs today."

---

Ok, some background. The other day I had two games where the play went as described above. Smooth and efficient, little running, no attempt to over power a point by anyone. It was a game of chess rather than hand grenades. I highly enjoyed those games as the control/strategic aspects of PB are what draws me to it. (I claim no flowing robes, or mantle of the master. I cheerfully admit that all of this is my opinion, but that's what I like and allow me to proselytize in my small way.) :-)

I was also watching a game yesterday, where the whole game was resolved with "who could hit it harder, sooner, faster." The ball kept moving faster and faster until each point was over.

Interestingly enough there was only one player who was pushing a power game. And as soon as the ball came to him, bang it went. Even when it would have been a much, much better shot to drop it over the net, and keep moving up. Nope, it was whack, followed by whack and players frequently were hammering it back and forth from mid court.

I talked to one of the players afterwards and he mentioned that it was frustrating that all of the points were the same. He was playing with the "hitter" and win or lose, it just wasn't a pretty or satisfying game.

There are a lot of reasons to play any sport. I'd like to think that some of those reasons would lead to harmony with the heavens. But I can't claim that my reasons for playing are more valid than anyone else's. If someone gets their enjoyment from smacking the ball continuously, fine for them.

Maybe this boils down to being a perfect partner, one more question might be "what style of pickleball do you want to play?" Of course

that would require you to play several styles on demand! Then there are the opponents, if they want to bang, then you have to be good at resets, or everything escalates...

Let me finish this overlong post with this: I don't want to be critical of anyone's reason to play, or style. It's all good. For me there are some styles that are more interesting and fun than others. And it seems I'm gentling proselytizing again, see you on the court!



### **Post 33, Holiday news**

The Master and acolyte, Po, are traveling to see family due to the holiday celebrating the victory of the temple over the monastery from Yangun Provence in the 1847 pickleball masters tournament.

They will spend time in meditation, as is traditional.

They send best wishes to all who celebrate this and all other international holidays. Normal communication will resume at the end of their journeys.

## **Post 34, Just Out of Reach, or a Just Sew Story**

They called him "the Tailor," since he was so good at seams...

Two thoughts here.

Treasure:

I've noticed an area between opponents where one is forward of the second. The seam that you can exploit is between them and just out of reach of the forward opp. The forward guy goes for it, it's too close to let it pass, but he only gets the paddle top edge on it. Or it just splits the court up the middle. The back guy is going to have trouble handling it, even if he doesn't just stop after seeing his partner try to hit it.

Granted this is a small area, but it seems worth looking for. I think the seam is wider than you would think as a lot of players will not let any kind of a near ball go by. Then there is the tendency of not moving one's feet and we have the perfect storm of a pickleball point. A ball that is hit with some side spin to go around the forward guy works quite well. It has a high aesthetic value as well.

If you grant me that this seam exists, and if you look for it, you will see it too, then the question is how to create the needed separation between the opponents.

Some opps will do the hard work for you, as some will not follow a service return to the kitchen line. Once that happens the forward/backward gap is produced. Then you want to tempt the opps to hit to the player who is facing the back opponent. From there it is an easy cross court shot to take advantage of the gap.

This gap also occurs if you can keep one of the opps back and keep them there. Again you are looking for a cross court shot to finish the

point. This scenario will more likely show up against the serving side.

Defense:

There is defense to this. If you are on the side with the gap, the solution is to dink or drop to the side where your partner (or you) is at the kitchen line. This is basically a short soft cross court shot, that doesn't allow the opps a cross court shot and allows the back player to advance and eventually close the gap. A softer shot allows more time to advance. Just avoid hitting it hard at the opponent in front of you.

A lob would probably work too, as it gains some time for your side.

And the best defense is to avoid creating the gap in the first place. Do your part and... always follow your service return into the kitchen line, and... Don't go up to the KL unless your partner can (and will) join you. (You can get away with an early rush if your last name is Waters or Johns, otherwise stay with your partner.)

## **\* Post 35, Rules of Thumb -- Hints for New Players**

This post came out of my mental doodling. I wrote some of it a couple of weeks ago and have let it simmer. I think this is of more value to a new player than one who has banged the ball a lot. Rules are good things in general. It's a rare person who should transcend them. But this is not a real difficult game and while it has some subtlety to it, it ain't chess or go.

All of that aside, I think the stuff has some value and usefulness. Feel free to add to the list via the comments. So here are 11 items for discussion.

- 1) The ball slows down quickly, you have more time than you think to hit a shot. Good players have developed a small pause before impact to improve their timing. If you come from other racket/paddle sports you probably react too quickly. Enjoy the shot, relish it, and hit it in its proper time. Being too quick results in a pulled shot, too late and it goes right, straight is what you want. (Assumes a right handed player.)
- 2) Get closer to the ball than you think you should. This is a lot like the first point. The ball slows quickly and doesn't skip, it tends to sit up a bit shorter than you may be used to. Don't let it bounce too far in front of you. Foot movement is the mark of a good player.
- 3) Strangely hit balls may have a lot of spin -- so look for strange jumps to the sides or towards the net - they probably do not have top spin on them. Like point 2, get close enough to handle the strange bounce.
- 4) It's a simple game, but you need to realize what's happening, e.g., if a player winds up and likes to cut ball, if it's high at all, it's going

out. Partner gets pulled wide, shift towards the middle. Move where you would expect the next shot to be hit. There are a lot of shots that are going out. Look for them, expect them, and enjoy letting them go.

5) When hitting the "sitter," usually at the kitchen line, hitting the ball downwards is more important than hitting it hard. Feet make a great target.

6) When in doubt, or out of position dink or drop it. The soft game is under valued. We all like to hit the ball hard, but hitting it softly and accurately will be better in both the short and long runs.

7) Hit most service returns with a cut spin. It takes speed off the ball, it will provide a bit more carry into the court and it will provide more control. Finally, if your opponent doesn't provide a lot of lift, they will hit your cut shot into the net.

8) Return the ball into the middle is a good thing to do. Hero shots up the side line work on occasion, but a shot in the middle is usually more productive. Extra points if you can keep it low.

9) Have a serve that you always hit in. It doesn't need to be fancy or hard just consistent. A long smooth arm swing will help if you are having trouble with it. A lot of beginners seem to find the bounce serve easier to use -- if you're struggling, it might be worth a look.

10) Don't follow your serve by stepping into the court. Stay back and move up as appropriate. Also true if your partner is the server. Hang back and look for a short ball, then go forward.

11) Always follow your service return by advancing towards the kitchen line. This is a rule and not a rule of thumb! Always do this.

### **\* Post 36, Who Hits it Harder...**

I was watching a doubles match at the Downs recently. It was a mixed doubles match and the guys playing were better players than the gals. Nothing unusual in that and everyone was having a spirited game and a good time.

The gals were making more mistakes than the guys, perhaps the greatest differential in abilities. But what I noticed was that the gals were hitting the ball a lot harder than the guys.

The gals were hitting the ball too hard. There were more net shots and long shorts on their part. I would suggest that the path towards being a better player is working on hitting the ball softer. Control is much more important than hitting the ball hard. Would it be reasonable to say don't hit the ball harder than you can control it?

As a more general note, trying to "win" a point outright than to nudge your opponents to a losing position is a trip towards the dark side. Don't go to the dark side! Strive to hit a shot in, then good, then better and some day best. A really tough opponent to beat, is the one who makes few mistakes.

---- And now for a bonus. A short play in one act.

Player 1: "How tightly do you hold your paddle?"

Player 2: "If I'm not stretching for a dink, then very tightly."

Player 1: "Hmm..."

## **Post 37, Game for a Wet Court**

It was a wet Friday and the folks without imagination had abandoned the courts and left for coffee. As if coffee was going to solve the problem.

A hearty group of four stayed and imagined and played a game. Put all four at the kitchen line and one serves cross court. The rule being that all shots have to land in the kitchen. Serves that landed on the kitchen base line were in.

You are allowed to volley the ball, but your volley has to land in the kitchen.

Balls that were obviously long were stopped with paddle or hand. No one wanted to run after them.

A lot of points developed into a cross court battle, some of them quite lengthy.

Serves and scores rotated and accumulated as in a normal game. Note that aces and unreturnable serves were possible.

We also played it 5 handed as one of the Mikes came by.

This was a nice way to pass the time and sharpen some of those dinking skills. Highly recommended.

## Post 38, The Master Talks Happiness

"Master, I am having problems," said Po.

The Master was writing a scroll detailing the proper way to polish a pickleball net cord.

"Eh, Po, what is it blocks your happiness?" asked the Master.

"I've been getting to the net properly, as is written in the temple's *Guide to Pickleball Greatness*, but once I am there, it seems to cause me problems."

"Are you dinking properly?"

"Yes, that is not a problem. I'm striving to lift and push and use hybrid shots as required."

"Excellent, the dink is not for the hurried or impatient. It is the Chi of the sport and transcends the heavens and the earth."

"Er, yes Master, but I'm having problems when I try to score points."

"How so then, Po? If you are dinking well, the points will arrive."

"I am waiting for an error from the opponents and when I see one, I try to pounce and exploit it," said Po.

"Are you sure the opportunities that you see are really there?" asked the Master.

"I think so, I'm able to speed the ball up and keep it in the court."

"And..."

"When I hit, the opponents seem to return it too often. And it comes back harder than I hit it," said Po.

"Are these good opponents?"



"Yes, they are."

"Perhaps the fast ball is less effective the better the player?"

"I understand Master, and that seems correct."

"But it works better with your level and below?"

"Yes."

"So you must change your game depending on whom you are playing? Is that not always true? If a player hits soft serves, then there is no need to play back. If a player will not poach, then more of the court is open to you and you select shots thusly."

"Ah, so speed up a ball only against certain players?" asked Po.

"No, you must punish all the mistakes of others. But what is a mistake with an average player is not a mistake with a good player. You must decide if your sped up ball will be suitable for the skill of your opponent. If not, then dink more. Wait for a better shot. Marginal shots will be punished by the opponents! Strive to hit no ball that can be attacked, for that is the path to be punished," elaborated the Master.

"Ah, so more patience?"

"Yes. As it takes time to properly make rice flour and tea, a pickleball point is an item to be properly constructed, coaxed along like an egg in a fry pan, and finally served when properly completed. Cut no corners, Po, for that is not the path to happiness.

"Alas, all this talk of tea and flour has made these old bones hungry. Is it not dim sum day at the cafeteria, Po?"

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Here are some thoughts that are hinted a bit in the above:

- 1) A speed up has to be good, as the return shot will be coming faster
- 2) don't use marginal opportunities with good players
- 3) don't forget to expect a return shot
- 4) It might be better to look for a soft, low, well placed strategic shot than a hard one that will be returned. think "mate in five" not "stroke of death"
- 5) How good is your return of a hard shot? Gets back to #1, the ball tends to speed up with average players. If you are overwhelmed, then a reset shot is needed, do you have one of those? Mark of a master!
- 6) If you have a good return of the initial speed up, then you can tease opponents into speeding up. Hit a shot that is just high enough to tempt them, and be ready for the faster ball.

## **Post 39, Another Thought on Speeding the Ball Up, The Net, No Man's Land, Shot Evaluation**

I was thinking about the last post a bit and another way of thinking about speeding up the ball came to mind. And I was playing with Susan and she made a remark about No Man's Land. We had a short conversation about it. I think it's a good topic for some more thought.

### **Firstly, the Speed Up**

My slant is to think of having the net as a player on your side. If you speed a ball up, you are going to leave the ball above the net line. Your opponent now has no or little net to worry about. You've removed the net as your third partner.

If your speed up is a good one, that is a good trade off. But if the opponents are looking for a faster ball and can counter hit it, then the speed up was not a good idea. It would be better to keep dinking and wait for a better chance.

Marginal fast shots work well against poorer players. It is easy to get in the habit of speeding every time you can as you learn the game. The problem is when you hit the better players, who are happy to counter hit and get into fire fights.

### **Net Stuff & No Man's Land**

Let me get back to the strategic value of the net. Let's assume you are in the transition area, frequently called No Man's Land. If the opponent's shot has to be hit from below net level, then your feet are safe by being blocked by the net, and you will get a shot that you'll be able to return as their shot will either be a dink or a softer shot to mid-court. But if they are hitting from above the net, then your feet

are the target and indeed you are in trouble in the transition area.

Enter the transition area when you are protected by the net.

Otherwise, stay back, defend, and try to hit a better shot that allows you to either move into the area, or get all the way to the net.

A lot of players try to move into the T. Zone or back court too early. They hit a serve and step into the court a pace or two. Or they hit a third and start moving in.

I'll make another rule of thumb here, never move into the court until it's proper to do so. Not automatically after a serve, and only maybe after a third. Do move up if the third shot is a good one, and you might be able to get to the net with a great third. But it's better to move up a little than to move up too much.

Both you and your partner should be evaluating all shots as to future movement. If you hit it short/well, get up as far as you can, but you still want to be able to defend, so don't run through the 5th shot. Stop, get ready, hit the 5th, evaluate and then move somewhere.

How to Play Pickleball...

Shot evaluation of the opponent's second shot is very important.

You are going to do one of three things:

1) If the 2nd is short, your team moves up, if the opponent is still back, hit it to him, get to the net.

2) If the 2nd lands in mid court, then move up, try to drop the 3rd shot -- you might not be able to get all the way up.

3) If the 2nd shot is deep, hit a drive and stay back, or a drop and move up. Only move up immediately on a good drop.

Hmm, this has gotten too long, and I think there is enough there for some thought. As I ponder this, the drop shots and dinks become

more and more important as you get better.

There is also a lot on movement here, and I still see a lot of folks moving up and then having to move backwards to hit the second. Hopefully there is same framework here to help with this concept.

See you all tomorrow.

## **Post 40, Playing When Abilities are Uneven**

From a conversation at the court on Monday. I thought of this topic a bit earlier, but never put it down on electronic paper. Here is my take.

Cases:

- 1) You are the one player who is not as good as the rest
- 2) You are the player greatly better than the others
- 3) One team is much better than the other

The discussion should start by recognizing that there are a lot of reasons to play PB. A few are interested in getting tournament ready, some would like to just play well/better, and a bunch are happy to play with what skills they have and get some exercise or enjoy any social engagement that comes from the game.

What should we all do when these motives collide? I think we have to suggest that everyone wants to have a good time. But if you are in a game that is not going to provide what you want, then adjustments are needed.

First case, the other players are better than you are. If the ability differences are large and it's common knowledge, then I'd want/hope the better players to challenge the less able player, but not punish him. It should make no one happy to beat up on another player. It can be a very scary and uncomfortable position knowing that you are low on the totem pole. It will be hard to ignore that fact and play as well as you can. Try not to be self conscious about your abilities as that will make it harder to play as well as you can. That is very tough to do, but in reality no one really cares how poorly someone else plays. Everyone makes the same mistakes in PB, ball in net,

ball long, ball wide, so try to relax and enjoy the experience.

Second case, there are three at one level and you are much better. A couple of thoughts here, one, don't teach or coach unless asked about it, two, play down a bit to challenge the others without killing the ball every chance you get. Encouragement is welcome at any level, so remark when partner does something well. Note that a miss might still be a good shot if it fit the situation. Don't say anything even if partner hits three serves in a row into the net. Pointing out errors won't make anyone feel or play better. (Well, there is my pet peeve about partner not coming to the net after returning a serve. I must confess that I've mentioned that a couple of times. I hope anyone who heard that appreciated the tip. But I was probably out of line to bring it up. Sorry.)

Third case, we have one team much better than the other. This is a lot like the other cases, play at a level that allows everyone to have a good time. Don't pound the ball away with every pop up, just get it back and work on your defense and drop shots. If you don't do this folks will always split the good players and you'll have a partnership that won't have that smooth oiled cooperation that is one of the reasons to play the game. "You two are welcome play together, but don't beat us up! We'll try to be challenging." And I think letting the good players play together occasionally is a way of thanking them for being willing to play down a bit. There are a lot of better players who are willing to play down, but it can be tiring if that scenario lasts all morning. Watching two good players together is an opportunity to learn more about strokes, movement, dinking.

I've played some games where the skill levels were wildly different, and it was said and understood that the game would not be cut-throat in nature. More a "gentlemen's game" than one of quick points and

hard hits. It was enjoyable for all concerned. The poorer players might not win, but can see a different partnership style than might be used at their level.

So there are my thoughts. I welcome others. If there are large differences in ability, maybe a discussion before the game starts about the intensity of the game might be a good idea. I would also hope that the better players would play down a bit automatically just to keep the points going longer. At some point, as the Master might say, playing well need not include winning at all costs, or even winning at all.



## **Post 41, Abbreviations Used**

To cut down on my typing, I'll be using the following... I'll put it at the bottom of posts on occasion. Thanks for your understanding!

NVZ - non-volley zone

KL - kitchen line

BL - baseline

2nd - second shot, performed by serve returning side

3rd , 5th, 7th ... - server side's second and successive shots

TA - transition area AKA no man's land

PB - pickleball

ATP - around the post, a shot that looks harder than it is. :-)

## **Post 42, Some Statistics on Where Points Are Won**

I am interested in collecting some data on how points are ended at the Downs courts. I recorded the details for four evenly matched games for, let's call them some of our, advanced players.

I roughed out some categories of how the points ended. I think I would add more reasons/columns for points lost when I do it again. For example hitting the ball out is worse than popping it up, but not by much. I can't see those details in the data I have.

I've tabulated the results below in case anyone wants to do their own analysis. The results were a bit surprising to me, as I was not expecting as many winners as I saw. I would have expected more errors, but about 40% of all points were ended with a winner.

Note that if someone popped one up and it was put away, that was a winner and not a dink or ground stroke error, though the case could be made for more categories to separate these kind of things.

Ground stroke errors and balls hit out, were the major errors I saw. These two categories were pretty close in number at about 22% each.

And finally the last large category was dink errors at about 11%.

Let me lay out some more caveats. The skill levels of the games were different by a little bit. For example I looked at no beginners, or intermediate players, which would be very interesting as it could answer some questions about game development and might suggest areas for teaching or training. Most of the games were quite close in score, so the errors would be distributed to both teams. If the games were all 11-0, then the losers were creating all the misses and maybe the winners all the put away shots.

Then there is style. One of the games had a lot of dinking and was less about banging the ball. In that case, I would expect more dink errors as that would be the more frequent shot. But if the dinkers were used to that kind of game, they might well be better at it, so loses might show up in winners than dink errors.

In a bangers' game, there may be more ground stroke errors as people don't / can't get to the KL. Probably more winners too, as angles get created or feet get hit. No conclusions from me, too early to tell!

Finally, I'm interested in how some stats might be useful to point to personal skill issues. For example, there were very few serves going out. But if you personally hit out three a game, then you might want to work on that. It might be reasonable to suggest that the categories that have very low percentage frequency, are ones for skills that have to be mastered if you tend to make those errors. Then as a guide, it looks like everyone struggles with hitting it out and ground stroke errors - so getting better there will lead to immediate improvement.

Game #	Winners	Serves	Serve Return	Grnd Strokes	Drops	Dinks	Out Balls	Total Points
1	14	4	1	20	1	7	5	52
2	13	2	0	8	0	5	16	44
3	16	0	0	9	0	3	11	39
4	21	2	1	5	3	4	7	43
Percents								
1	26.92%	7.69%	1.92%	38.46%	1.92%	13.46%	9.62%	
2	29.55%	4.55%	0.00%	18.18%	0.00%	11.36%	36.36%	
3	41.03%	0.00%	0.00%	23.08%	0.00%	7.69%	28.21%	
4	48.84%	4.65%	2.33%	11.63%	6.98%	9.30%	16.28%	
Ave	36.58%	4.22%	1.06%	22.84%	2.22%	10.45%	22.62%	

## Post 43, Looking Deeper Into Error Frequency

I'm finding the data collection and analysis to be interesting. So today I collected only error information and specifically if a point was lost to an error, what was that error. If a point was won with a put away, then I didn't record anything unless it was the result of a pop up error.

As I think about it, I would like to have the frequency of each shot. It's not very important to know that 16 volley errors occurred if there were 120 attempts, but vital if there were only 25 attempts. If it were 25 attempts, then there is an area that needs some work, or volleys are being hit when a dink or something else is a better percentage shot.

So the data design is still in flux. I think I look at a single error type and gather some frequency information.

The data here were from a couple of advanced games. Certainly the data might be different for intermediate or beginner games.

Here is the table with percentages of total errors.

Errors

Dink	Serve	Srv Ret	Gnd Str	½ Volley	Volley	Ovr Head	Net Winnr	Total
7	2	4	16	9	16	1	4	81
8.64%	2.47%	4.94%	19.75%	11.11%	19.75%	1.23%	4.94%	

Some additional thoughts on the data...

These were collected from two games. The style played was more of a hitters game than a dinkers. There weren't a lot of over heads, nor lobs.

Let me quickly go through the column definitions.

Dink is a dinking error, might have hit it into the net or wide, also might have been due to not being able to return a good dink.

Serve is a serve that was out. Srv Ret is a missed service return.

Gnd Str is a ground stroke error, defined as a ball that bounced, but not a half volley.

1/2 Volley is the short hop or half volley. I don't remember a lot of attempts and this error looks to be fairly frequent error, aka a difficult shot.

Volley is a ball taken out of the air, might be at the KL or mid court.

Ovr Head is an attempt at a smash or full tennis type over head.

There were not many in the games I watched.

Speed up is someone getting aggressive at the net. This looks to be a low percentage shot -- I don't remember a lot of successful ones.

Pop Up - the shot that leads to a lot of winners and the bane of all players. Certainly a frequent error, since it can be generated from any position on the court, usually hit by some already at the KL.

Position - I think of the game as one of being at the right place at the proper time, so a couple of points ended because a player was not in a good position. The actual type of error could be anything.

Drop Shots were attempts at a third or other drop shot. Not frequently attempted in the games looked at.

Net Winners - points that ended with the ball hitting the top of the net and still going over. I was surprised how often they came up.

The total errors was the sum of all the items I recorded.

A bit more discussion... Ground strokes, pop ups and volley errors lead the pack.

A secondary area is dink errors and half volleys are about 10 percent, the first group about 20%.

Assuming that these data are correct, a player wanting to improve should work on the ground strokes and keeping the ball low. Half volleys are a subset of ground strokes and practicing with ground strokes ought to create a few half volley opportunities too. So maybe warm up hitting long shots and not dinking. A touch shot is easier when the muscles are warm and hitting tiny dinks is not going to warm up the bulk of the muscle system.

That's about all I see in these data. Any thoughts otherwise are welcome and any suggestions for different statistics are welcome too. The next think I'm going to look at is picking up some frequency information about a couple of the error types. Stay tuned!

## Post 43, Ground Strokes Success Rates

Of course I might also call them failure rates.

I watched three games and kept track of how many ground strokes (GS) were hit and how many were missed. I started with the service return as the first GS, and then the 3rd shot would be the second GS. So there were at least two per point. How many others depended on a couple of things. In many points the third shot was a drop and all subsequent shots were either dinks or volleys. It was rare that anyone got pushed off the net to a situation where a GS would be used again. It probably required someone lobbing the ball to do that. Nobody in the games I watched lobbed.

Two of the three games were fairly close in score. I think the other was 11-5 or so. I'm not sure that matters, much. Here are the numbers:

- Attempts - failures – Percentages for Ground Strokes
- 127            17            13%   Game 1
- 84             8             9.5%   Game 2
- 42             10           23.8%   Game 3

I'm sorry, but I can't provide much wisdom from these numbers. The bigger the number of attempts would be indicative of a lot of points played. Which means a tight game, lots of side outs and scoring a point was not easy to do. On the other hand the game where only 42 GSs were seen would suggest that points were easy to come by and the game ended fairly quickly.

I'd be hesitant to call it a skill level difference, though as skills improve defense against the serving side gets better --better volley and play from the net and defense to 3rd shot drives, for example.

It's not clear to me what a good failure rate is. I would guess that it's closer to 10% than 20%. If you, as a player, are missing 25% of your service returns, then it might something to work on. However as skill improves, the serves tend to get faster. When everyone's skills are the same and fairly high, then the speed and "cleverness" of the serve means little, as all the serves are going to be returned. At that point missing a serve is more of an error than the occasional outright winner. You can see this at the highest ranks of the professional game, yes there are those who try to win points from their serves, but there are more that just hit with moderate pace to the middle of the service court. This is true for both the men and women pros.

One final note, I've mentioned in prior blogs about the importance of returning a serve. Since the serving side has to let it bounce, there is no pressure to flirt with the net, depth is not critical as long as you get to the KL before the 3rd shot. Just get it back is the take away and get to the KL -- but then, you knew that. :-)



## **Post 44, Spin, More Thoughts**

I've commented a couple of times on spin in the past posts, but new thoughts keep coming up.

Almost all serves produce a top spin. This is due to the paddle moving more upward than the trajectory of the ball. Think of it as brushing the back of the ball. The point I find interesting is that it takes no special effort to get the top spin as long as your serve is legal. If you "cheat" a bit and come more sideways into the serve instead of with an upward swing, you can interfere with the production of the top spin. That makes the serves easier to get into the corners, but lacks legality!

There are three situations where top spin is the proper tool. Obviously the serve, then there is the third shot, and finally when at the net the famous roller shot is useful.

In almost all other situations, a cut or slice spin is a better choice. I'll deal with that down the road.

When the serve has top spin two nice things happen. You can and should hit the serve well above the net and let the spin bring it into the court. As you hit the ball harder you will generate more spin, so hitting harder serves usually does not require a different trajectory over the net to keep the ball in the court. Play with this and find a speed that places the ball mid to deep into the serving court. The second nice thing, is that on occasion the serve returner will hit the ball out because the top spin will make the ball jump towards the baseline. You can vary the amount of spin by where you contact the ball and how hard you swing. A little experimentation will be useful for this.

Third shots... The serve has come back and usually we can hit the third shot a lot like a serve; swing from low to high and create the top spin. That produces a ball that can dip nicely below the net level. Since the ball is dipping, you have more room over the net than with a slice or flat (no spin) ball, thusly much safer. Since you don't want this shot to go deeply into the court since the opponents are at the net, a moderate pace is better than a full drive. The ball will dip nicely, you might get the golden shot that lands at the feet, or the silver shot that creates a mishit by coming off the bottom edge of the opponent's paddle due to the excessive dip late in its flight.

A full drive is a good shot for a third, but you have to hit the ball closer to the net and hitting the net is a real danger. I like the moderate paced ball for that reason. Top spin is vital for this shot. If you like to bang the third, a wily opponent will let you hit them over the baseline.

The famous roller shot, is done from the KL, you get a ball that's a bit high and you can hit it deep into the court with the top spin keeping it in. Again, it is a low to high hit, brushing the ball. The ball does need to be close to or above the net when you hit it. It's not a dink and you are trying to get it past your opponents. The center of the court is good target.

Note that all top spin shots will lift the ball due to the upward movement of the stroke. Take a look at serves and note their path. The extra lift is why this shot is not the best tool in all situations. Trying to hit a top spin dink can lead to pops up for example.

And top spin ground strokes are easier to return than slice spin shots. Which is why you would prefer not to use them for the second shot. Basically, slice all service returns. I'll put out a

different post on slice spins down the road. This one is getting a bit long as it is.

## **\* Post 45, Another Take on Getting to the Net**

Maybe the largest conundrum in PB is coordination in getting to the kitchen line (KL). This is, of course as regular readers will know, solely an issue with the serving side.

You have a new partner and you hit the serve, the ball comes back to you, fairly deep, and you setup to return it. Where is your partner? Where should he be?

Here is a structure that is borne out by my limited experience. Your partner should move up the same amount that you did to return the second shot. If it was deep and you returned it from the baseline or in back of it, your partner should keep you company. If you only get a couple of steps into the court, then both advance, those couple of steps.

If you were able to move up to mid court to hit the third shot, then partner moves with you. If it's short, then, both of you will move up gleefully all the way to the KL.

The most frequent deviation from this that I have experienced, is that the player not involved in returning the second hit, will advance beyond the ball. The problems with this are twofold.

One is that you, having seen your partner run up, now need to hit a perfect drop shot to avoid the fourth shot skewering the advanced partner, (or a lob, which is plainly against the spirit and beauty of the game, but this a topic for another post (don't take that too seriously!)).

The second issue is that it creates the "dreaded diagonal gap" between you and partner, which is a tasty target for the opponents, who don't think it as a "dreaded gap," but as an "exciting

opportunity," every shot makes someone happy!

Third issue, I thought of another, if the third shot "ain't that great," then you frequently have to defend the ball from the back court.

This is more the case if the second shot was nice and deep. You'll be trying to advance, but in the mean time, you're trying to hit drops and returning overheads and volleys from the opponents. If your side is split, this usually does not end well, but it does end quickly!

There is a good reason for partner to violate the above guidance.

When he or she has the hands of lightning, the reflexes of a hungry cat, and the fast feet of a dancing leprechaun, then sure, get up there and make ready for close combat. But for us mortals, staying with partner and advancing as a stately couple seems to be a better way to go about it.

Now there is one more situation that you are looking/hoping for. If the service returner doesn't follow the second shot into the net, here is what should happen automatically: hit the third shot deep to the guy who has not come forward. As you do that your partner advances all the way to the kitchen line, and you follow your shot to the KL too. The happy result is that you've captured the KL and you've split the opponents - which is the ideal situation for your side.

If your partner doesn't follow the second shot in, then perhaps a stern talking to, or just stay at the baseline with him. If he points out that you should be more forward, you can agree as long as he will join you at first opportunity! Of course, that is no one at the Downs!?

### **\* Post 45, Winners, Another Guest Post from Scott**

Scott has passed on the following information. I greatly admire Scott's game and style and he has my full endorsement - which isn't worth much, but he's got it. The following points are designed to make you a steadier player and tougher to beat. It discusses common errors made by beginners and advanced alike. It also embraces a style that will lead to longer points, which is the philosophy of pickleball. So to make yourself tougher to beat and to maximize court time, read on and hopefully make this part of your game. -Rich

Ok here is what a lot of people don't want to hear....STOP GOING FOR WINNERS ALL THE TIME!

1. Always get your serve in. 3/4 deep is fine with plenty of clearance over the net. You can maybe try something fancy when up 9-0 but not at 8-9, or 0-0. The serve should be treated as simply a way for the rally to start.

2. Always get your return in. Send up a moon ball 3/4 deep and get to the net. You never should go for a winner or flirt with the sidelines. I like to return in the middle of the court and watch my opponents sometimes fight over it and make an error, plus a lot of times the ball hits the center line and does the Livermore skid!

3. When at the baseline stop killing the ball and watching it fly out. If you want to hit it hard go 3/4 pace and hit it down the middle or at a body, but avoid going for the sidelines. Most shots from the baseline should be hit softly into the kitchen so you can get to the net.

4. When at the net stop taking big swings and going for winners. You need to master control before you master winners. I rarely go for an outright winner when I am in control of a point. Your first option should be attacking opponents feet, second is going middle, and the 3rd option is hitting it long when you want to end the point, and the 4th option is hitting it wide because you feel you have to hit a winner. Eliminate options 3 and 4 and watch how much you will improve.

5. When you are in no man's land and are trying to get to the net, stop taking full swings and expect to make the shot. You should take no backswing in this area and hit the ball gently so hopefully it goes into the kitchen and you can move up to the KL. Hit to the middle if you want to be aggressive.

6. When you are forced off the KL (BIG MISTAKE) don't get on your heels and try for a wild swinging winner that might go in 5% of the time. If you have to step back, you need to be balanced and land on the balls of your feet right before your opponent hits it at you. You want to be gentle with the shot and try to get it back into the kitchen for a reset. If you can start making half of these shots it's a lot better than 5% wild winners.

7. When you and your partner are at the net and your opponent throws up a nice lob and you run back and hit a wild attempt at a winner and miss every time....STOP DOING THIS! The pros never do this, they always hit soft back into the kitchen, but this shot is not easy. I recommend always to lob the lobber. Hit a high defensive lob to the center of the court and medium deep. Then you and your

partner have time to move back to 3/4 court and dig in and play defense.

8. If in doubt where to hit the ball, always choose at the feet or middle of the court. Location, Location, Location!

9. Good defense will beat good offense, just watch the Newman siblings play mixed doubles together!



## **\* Post 46, A Summary of Getting to the Net by the Serving Side**

The post about approaching the net was a bit long, but I think the idea of a reasonable strategy for the serving side to get to the net can be simplified and useful. I'll take a crack at that in moment. I think there is some useful background in the prior post, so it may be worth reading in any case if you started with this one. OK, let me strive for simplicity.

This is all about the serving side, as the receivers should be at the net when the third shot is hit. And I'm only discussing how to move efficiently, not shot selection, though there is a brief note about that down below.

The depth of the second, fourth, sixth shots are going to control what the servers can do, note that those shots are coming from the receivers.

The servers control the first, third, fifth - hmm, we might just call those the odd numbered shots? Might save some typing. Though on a rainy day, typing is as good as anything else, I guess.

Second shot: if it's really deep, both servers stay back, look to defend from the baseline.

If the third shot is good, then that should result in a shorter fourth shot, and the servers can start moving into the court, again based on how short the fourth shot was. Basically move into the court the to the same depth as the shot your side is returning. That keeps you together, hopefully with middle coverage.

It may take a number of back and forth exchanges to fully get to the net. There is no time limit, no need to panic or try to win the point

from the baseline.

What the servers are really looking for, and should act on immediately is a short ball by the receivers. And also recognize a really good shot by their side. If either happens, then dash to the KL! Both of the servers should do that immediately and without hesitation. Get up the KL, get ready to dink or volley.

Shot selection by servers: I've not suggested that the serving side shots be drives or drops, that's not the concept here. Whatever you use, have, can do, still starts the process.

It may be that the servers never get to the KL during a point. I've found myself in that position many a time. The opponents kept us back and the point ended there. Very sad, of course, but the nature of the game.

I am watching multiple PB tournaments now and I thought I would look to see how the pros move forward. Well, low and behold, they are doing what is described above. There are pairs that do the "shake and bake," for example the Waters, but the men's double teams were basically moving up together based on from where the even numbered ball was returned.

PB can be called "king of the hill" and I think that is a reasonable way to think of the game. And the joy of playing doubles is that team work and efficiency are sought after and lots of fun.

I hope this helps. I'm no authority, and if there are better ways to think about this, please drop a comment or if you have a lot to say, you are more than welcome to do a guest post, anonymously or otherwise!

## **Post 47, About Those Comments**

Several players have told me that they are having problems posting comments. I've had those problems too. I don't have a solution. I've tried reloading pages and rehitting the buttons, but the software seems to be a bit flaky. I've eventually managed to post, but it wasn't easy nor obvious how to do it.

You should be able to post anonymously or from a google account, but, again, this stuff seems to work intermittently at best.

If you want to just send them to me in an email or whatsapp, I'll do something, either make into a new post or get them posted or just respond directly to you.

If you have posted comments, I have responded to all of them. But you'll have to go back to the post to see them,

Thanks for any interaction. It's a lot more fun if there is discussion. I'm just learning the game too and other views and experiences are welcome.

I encourage guest posts. I'd love to have some of the beginners pass on what they learned or didn't learn or wished they'd learned early on. That would be very useful to any others freshly joining us. Just pass something on to me and I'll edit and spell check (Ha!) and post. If you want to do that anonymously, that's fine. My email is [rich\\_hume@yahoo.com](mailto:rich_hume@yahoo.com).

Finally, thanks for all the comments that have been made in person. It's nice that people are reading and finding value here.

Update: I usually look at the blog in the Firefox browser, which has some ad blocking. I tried it in Brave, which also blocks ads, but I

was able to easily post replies to comments. So try a different browser if you are struggling.

## **Post 48, Five Vital Points for Good Pickleball**

I watched this video today: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ewRmnNHh7fw>

Its topic was five really important points in re how to play your best PB. Let me see if I can remember: 1) engage your whole body and watch the ball, inhale on the backswing and exhale on the hit!, 2) can't remember, 3) Gone too, hmm, pretty bleak, 4) Be happy and encourage partner, and be positive with yourself, 5) Always expect a drive.

Let me yak about number four for a moment. It is really easy to get down and swear a touch and feel the gods are against you, but it's not real productive. Best to just worry about the next shot. I always want to play better at the end of a game than the beginning. So when you or I miss an easy one, and we will, we should think about the proper swing thought for just a moment, then get ready for the next point. No need for "sorry, partner" or anything else.

And point five is worthy of discussion and I don't think I've talked about what shot you want to look for. This is important. I like the idea of looking for the drive, as it is the shot that will give you the least time to prepare. "Prepare for the worst, hope for the best," Jack Reacher, vaunted PB player, probably also the motto of every soldier.

If I am expecting a drive, I want my paddle above the net, because a driven ball is not going to be dipping below the net. I'm in a bit of a crouch, as I can see the ball better and it might allow me to move to a side if I need to.

Lastly and very importantly, a lot of driven balls will go long. So

get ready for a drive and if it's coming in too hot, or a bit too high, then that crouch will allow you to duck out of the way.

Prepare for a good drive and hope for a bad drive.

As a local note to the player at the Downs, there are a number of players who are known for their drives and perhaps also known for their long drives! Know them and strive to let the bad shots go. (Or you can return the high, long ones, and encourage them to hit bad shots. That makes it more effective for me, since I like to duck. :-))

## **Post 49, Another Scott Post, Chain Reactions**

Simone Jardim has some new videos (I think) on YouTube. I'm watching one now. It's the third one of them. It is about advanced attacking strategies.

But we are not here for that discussion. I think she is going to get quite technical and detailed and it's probably worth more posts later. Her first point is that the available attacking strategy depends on a lot of things, and those include if you were trying to hit off your heels and what your body position is at that moment. Her view is that your initial body position will limit your ability to attack the next ball.

I'd like to kick that point around a bit for this post. Scott and I have had a number of conversations about body position and movement, where your weight is -- heels or toes or flat footed. I think this is a very important point. Here are Scott's comments:

If you are going to hit the ball well, you need to be moving into the ball, which requires a solid position before you hit it. And that assumes that you have moved to the proper place to hit the ball. And that requires an initial location on the court and your body being ready to make that initial move to the next shot. Think of all of this as a chain of conditions that rules a point. Be Ready, Move to the ball, Move into the shot.

One of the most frequent errors I see are people who move prematurely into the court and then have to back up to return a shot. That puts a lot of folks on their heels, weight is back and there can be no body movement into the swing. So, out of position and can't get to the next shot and the body position is wrong.

A weak hit that might be in play is about the best that can happen.

I'm guilty of this a bit too. It is easy to get caught doing it. There are some exceptions to staying back: if you are playing against folk who never return a deep shot or a strong wind is at your back, then you may need/want to move in a bit.

But against good players and normal conditions, being back and ready to move forward to where the next shot will be hit with comfort. Start that chain of events in your favor.



## **Post 50, Achieving Parity for Your Side**

Until your side makes it to the KL, you are an underdog in the point. I've seen the number of five percent disadvantage by not being at the net. I would estimate it as close to 30%. Being pinned to the baseline, or worse, having one player up and one back, is a serious problem.

Therefore being it resolved: Make sure any shots you hit until you get to the KL are helping you do that. A third shot drive is not designed to win the point, but to generate a mid court defensive block from the opponents, that will allow you to hit a softer shot, that promotes forward mobility. A useful point here is that the fifth shot is almost always softer than the third shot drive. An exception would be that you get a pop up off the drive and can move forward fast enough to volley it in a downwards direction.

And a third shot drop is the same thing. It's harder to hit, but the aim is to hit so softly that it can't be attacked or used to force you to stay back. If it's not the best drop shot, you still will mostly get another opportunity to try again and move in.

Until your side is at the KL, in balance and ready for the next shot, you are at a disadvantage. So keep the soft stuff coming until the point is square. Then out dink them and wait for an opportunity to start winning the point.

One last point... As soon as your side has hit a good soft shot, be it third, fifth, seventh, then do not hesitate to follow it to the KL. This is what you and partner are waiting for, so don't admire it, don't worry about it hitting the net, just jump on the opportunity and go. The thunder of feet will make the opponents nervous, so you'll have that going for you too. :-)

## **Post 51, The Master and Competition**

"Master," said Po, "are you going to enter the Masters Tournament this year."

"Po, the Master has no need of competition, so to answer your question, no. Is there anymore tea?" replied the Master.

"I will fetch more tea, master. Why do you no longer need competition? You won the Masters Cup five years in a row," said Po.

"Ah, yes, well even the Master learns things. I was younger and didn't understand pickleball. Winning was important then, but no longer."

"What is important now Master?" asked Po.

"Think Po, of the components of a ball hit. The path, the paddle position, the body position, weight shift, body rotation, perhaps some arm swing, wrist pronation and supination, yes?"

"Yes, I remember Master, the eight major parts to the hit. We studied it in our first year here."

"Then what else comes before that? You've studied it, tell me Grasshopper."

"Prior to the hit," Po retreats to his teachings and begins to recite, "the player must arrive at the ball, he must steady his body, prepare to strike with weight properly placed. His mind must be cleared and ready for the moment to come, be unburdened by prior points, and be unburdened with the expectation, either false or true of the resultant hit. Nor must he expect to win the point with his strike. He must seek and believe in only the purity of the strike taking place in the now. There is no past, there is no future, there is only now. In

the proper frame of mind, all time will slow, the ball will slow, its spin will creep around the ball, slowly. The player will begin the stroke with paddle and body as one. The ball will contact the paddle precisely in the center of the paddle."

"Ah, very good Po, you have recited your lessons, but have you learned them? Can you apply them when you play?" asked the Master.

"Not yet, Master, but I've come close a few times."

"Shall we journey deeper then Po? What comes before the arrival at the hit?"

Po returns to his lessons. "The player was balanced and no longer in motion as the ball reaches the opponent, he watches the swing and paddle and knows where the ball will go. As the ball leaves the paddle, the player has moved to the hitting position, once again stopping. The paddle will setup for the desired stroke, depending on the expected bounce of the ball and to produce the exact spin the shot requires."

"Yes, again have you learned this lesson?"

"It is difficult, Master, there is much to think about."

"Perhaps the answer is not to think? The answer is to do? You become one with the hit. It is an extension of yourself or perhaps you disappear and the hit becomes everything. Your Id vanishes, your self vanishes, the hit and the movements before the hit become the universe. You transcend time and place. You mentioned that time slows, it in reality becomes a slow river that you drift along. That is the essence of the hit."

"Master, I am humbled. What is it like to achieve this state?"

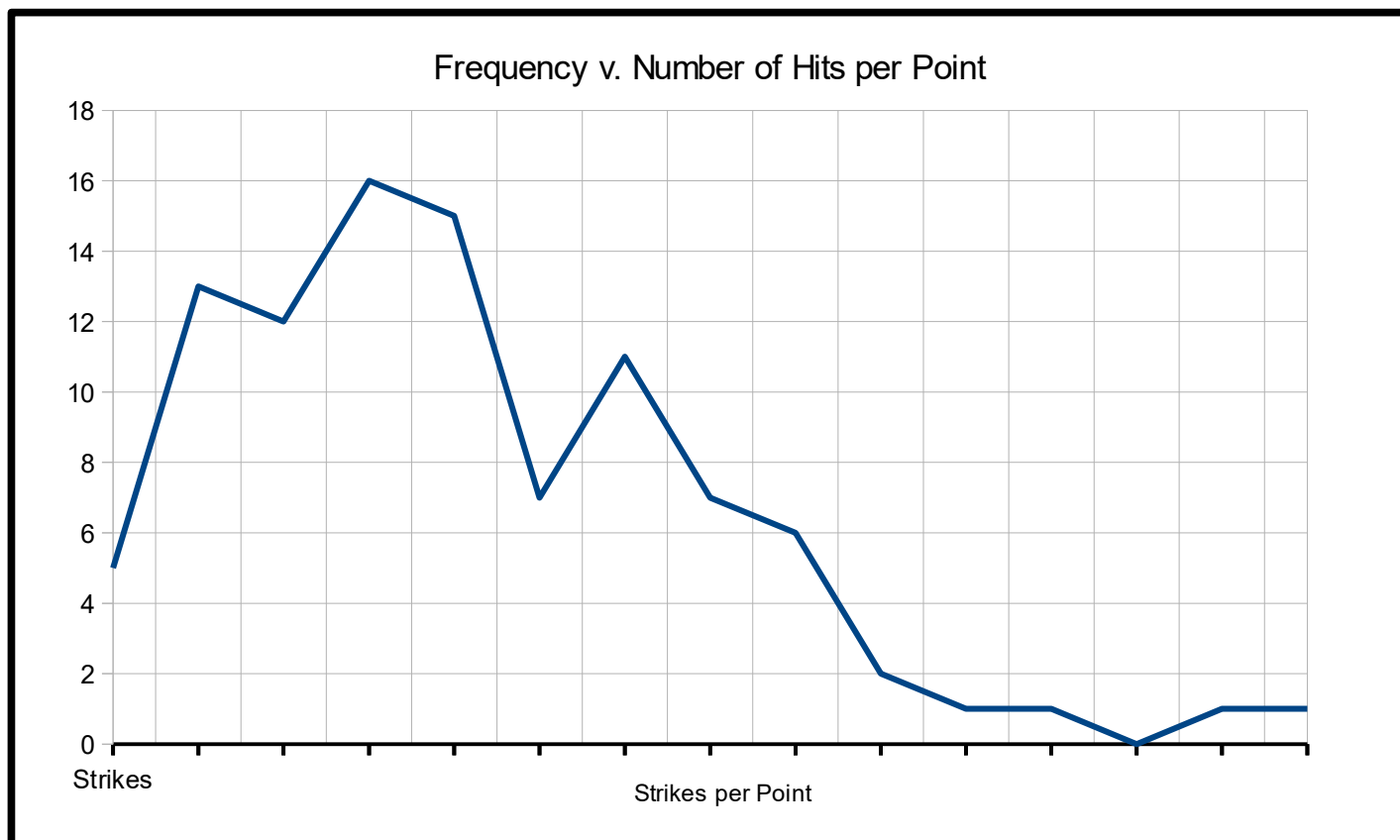
"It is beauty and grace and the embodiment of all we seek to know and understand at the temple. Along your journey as an acolyte, you will approach this understanding. When you become a grand master, you will know this. It will be part of you and it will free you.

"And when you achieve this state, there is no need of tournaments or competition. The purity of the art form is complete and there is no need strive for a medal or a trophy engraving. These things are markers on the path to enlightenment and at the journey's end, they are no longer required nor sought.

"But we were talking tea, yes? And see if there are any of the coconut cookies?"

## Post 52, Strikes Per Point

Hello data buffs,



I was wondering how many times a ball is normally hit during a point. So I collected some data from two games today. I counted the strikes per point and created a nice histogram in a spreadsheet, see above!

I wasn't able to get the strike numbers to print on the x-axis, but since they run from 1 to 15, it's not really important. I do have average values and the standard deviation, because an average without the deviation is suspect.

The total points were 98, strikes were from 1 (a bad serve or an ace), to 15, which was a epic battle, though sadly not a dink battle, more of a thrashing of wheat while standing too close each other. But I digress into the area of style and aesthetics.

The average hits per point was 6.5, the deviation was 5.6. Almost all of the action (95%) was less than 10 hits.

I don't have the data to back it up, but as I was watching it was clear that almost all shots that ended a point were misses, either in the net, long, or wide. There were very few clear winners. Tip all you players out there, just get the ball back!

## **Post 53, Stacking Instructions**

Update for those who have read the original post: I talked Randy and Lefty Lori into stacking today. It was a bit difficult to keep track of stuff, I have a minor problem knowing the score a lot of the time, and you need to know it to stack with elan. But I see the value of this and getting used to doing it is a nice additional skill to have. Thus I reaffirm the following post. :-)

----- Original Post starts here: -----

When I play with a lefty, I've come to the conclusion that stacking makes a lot of sense. A majority of all balls come down the middle of the court and having two backhands there for an extended period is not a good way to play.

It's easy to lose your way with the stacking it seems, so I wanted to figure it out for myself, there have to be easy methods to determine who is where, and as long as I'm figuring it out, it makes sense to share with you all.

If you're a lefty, I think you have a responsibility to learn this, to be the best partner you can be. :-)

Let me write in second person, it will hopefully make the conversation easier. So I'm talking to the lefty. (The righty just needs to follow directions.)

So we have a righty and a lefty. We want to the lefty to start on right hand side of the court so the forehand is on the middle.

- Lefty will always serve first and when your score is even will always be on the right side.
- Lefty will always start/be on the left side with an odd score.

- All the shifting around comes when your score is odd. And it happens for all odd points. Note that if you are returning serves, you may be at an odd point for a long time.

- The lefty always needs to cover the right side of the court. If it's an odd score, then the shift always happens. Make sure you return to the left hand side for the next point -- basically unstack for each new point.

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On serve with an odd score. Have a clear path to the right side and don't run into partner. You are going to shift, so be ready. You will serve first when the side out score is even - just like the start of the game. If the score is odd, it will be backwards from the start of the game.

When receiving: 1) if you have an even score, then it's just like the start of a game and there is no switching.

2) If an odd score, always switch. Note that half the time you will be starting from the KL, not returning the serve, but must cross to the other side, or at least get to the middle area.

The returner starts at the baseline, hits the return, and then must move diagonally to the other side of the court and get up to the KL. So there is more movement if you are stacking and you can't sit back and admire your shots, you have to move. Note that a softer, more lobby type return will gain you time to get in position. Also where you return the serve will help or hinder the positioning of your team.

I think that's it. Not too difficult after the smoke cleared. I think it has to be done a bunch so that it makes sense. The biggest problem is keeping track of your score. (As an added zen thought moment, I



find the better I play, the less I can keep track of the score. The joy of being in the moment and losing the big picture. I do it in golf too, so I think it is the sign of "the zone" and should be encouraged.)

So get out there and stack!

## **Post 54, More Thoughts on Dinking**

I like a dinking game for its finesse and stylish points. But I'm not real sure of my theoretical foundation. I've hit dinks that I thought were unattackable, yet they were attacked. The more I dink the more questions I have. And another dinking post is probably overdue. I'm still learning a lot and the knowledge base continues to change.

Then as my father would say, "Don't forget your aperceptive mass, as it won't forget you." Well, he might not have stated it that way, but he was aware of the aperceptive knowledge base...

In an earlier post about dinks, I think it was called "Dink like the Pros" or something. I mentioned a couple of things that pros do, to wit, they extend the arm, then run, then lean, then stroke the ball a little bit. The stroke is with the arm, not the hand. Also the angle of the wrist/paddle and the direction of the stroke are important. The shorter the dink, the more upward and lifting the stroke is, and the longer, typically cross court shots are more of a push, and are flatter in trajectory.

I have no quarrel with any of the above. I think there is more to say on where you want to place the shot and other aspects.

Assume I'm dinking and I'm in the left hand side of the court at the kitchen line (KL). I can hit to the left most side line, which a few degrees to my left, straight ahead, to my direct opponent (DO), to his left side, the cross court opponent's (CCO) right side, at the CCO and to the CCO's left side, which is basically the right side line and finally right between the opps - but more discussion about that later.

And that is about it, assuming I don't want to speed it up. We'll talk more on that down post, too.

A couple of observations. A lot of the dinks points consist of cross court shots. The shots tend to get closer and closer to the net as those shots build on each other. Question, what is the reset shot for that? The ball is getting closer to the net, you're getting pulled wider and wider and it doesn't seem to be going in your favor. Where do you dink to interrupt this? The experts say to hit it to the CCO's right side, which is right middle if you are hitting it from left side. One thing to be careful is that your DO is looking to whack a ball that crosses the middle too high. This shot needs some care, but it should get you off the cross court merry go round. It may be you will be right back into a cross court battle, but you will reset from the "how close to the net can I hit it" circus.

If you are hitting cross court, the ball tends to be closer to the net and with that trajectory, they're going to go deeper into the court. If the opps are fairly close to the KL, then the ball probably can't and won't be sped up. There is always the body shot, however.

High dinks: if the ball is short enough, then it won't be sped up. But, then the lobbers like to lob, bless their hearts, rather than hit a respectable dink. Such is life and there is little to be done about them. (Hmm, maybe booing them would help to change behavior?)

Lobs are one of the problems with a dink or any shot that gives the opp a lot of time to think about their next shot. You'll see this same issue when a serve is too high and not very deep. Sharply angled shots with lots of top spin come out of that scenario. The solution is more pace and depth, with depth being more important.

A high dink that goes cross court is usually safe. These can be quite high actually. Beware the opp who is not receiving the ball, but has long arms. A high dink to the middle will be punished.

Let's talk of depth too. A lot of the pros will keep most dinks landing in the deep third of the kitchen. But they are good at them and don't hit into the net like us rec players. I think a touch more height and depth are a better goal in general.

I like the dink that is deep enough that the opp wants to volley, but short enough for doubt to creep in. That causes more thought and limits what shots are available.

Note also that the ball is near the opp's feet, which is a great place to hit and they really can't hit it hard from there. Look for a lot of net balls if you can hit it there and weak pop ups -- be ready to punish. Tip: if a dink looks like it's not coming over, then prepare for a net ball and maybe step into the kitchen.

Hitting unexpected dinks... If you watch Matz a bit, you'll see some crazy angles and paddle work. It may be a deal with the devil, not sure, but there are insane things coming from his paddle. They are hard to read too, which can make an opponent feel disoriented and out of position. So how can we steal a bit of Matz's magic? If you hit a shot with the paddle wildly out of alignment with the stroke, the ball will go in the direction of the paddle. If the angle of the paddle is altered just at impact the ball's direction will be hard to read.

A lot of players will watch your body position and arm movement to predict where the ball will be directed. Practice looking one way and hitting the ball elsewhere. It's kind of a blind shot, but since it's not hit hard, it's not too difficult to do.

What do you watch when dinking, the opp's paddle or body or head, or eyes? There are valid reasons for all those, but I think watching the paddle is the best technique. It's difficult to do, but worth the effort to learn. But the best way to be prepared is the history of your

opponent. It's rare that people will do unexpected things. Watch and learn! A small number of folks will dink directly back across the net. For the others it is a cross court shot almost always. And a cross court shot will be followed by another cross court shot, so if you are the cross court position, move to return it. If the ball doesn't go to you, you'll have time to move to a more central location as your partner will be returning the ball.

Middle shots... I mentioned them up above. I'll almost always hit a speed up shot there if the ball is high enough and I can hit it with top spin. As to just hitting a dink in the middle, I don't have enough experience to evaluate the shot. I would say, that if you normally don't do it, then do it occasionally just to keep the opps guessing.

Speed ups: In the world of Down's PB, I think you should speed up any time you can get it over the net. If you miss a lot of them in the net, then your view of what is "high enough" is lacking. When in doubt don't do it. Also there is statistical data about speed ups. If your opps are good at counter hitting, you may be at a disadvantage to start the speed up if you can't hit a real good one. But if the opps don't counter well, then do it as much as you can.

Body Shots: I've done them, the pros do them, I don't have a problem if they are hit softly. Whacking the ball hard is not nice per my new way of thinking. I don't want to hurt anyone, but I'm fine with a couple of gentle pops to the chest. (Well, Robo didn't like it and hasn't forgotten! Another story for another time. :-)) They are easy to hit from a dink that is soft and right in front of the victim. And to defend against the body shot: Keep your paddle up at all times! Beware! Look for the gleam in the eyes!

I guess I'm done for the moment. Time for more play, observations,

and data. See you when the courts allow it. Merry Christmas to my fellow PBers. It's been a great year and I look forward to next year's challenges.

## \* Post 56, More on Paddle Movement

I was warming up with some dinking and was reminded about the advice to "keep the paddle in front of you" and its corollary of "hitting the ball in front of you." That led to follow throughs and if you watch too many PB videos you'll stumble across the idea of letting the follow through from a dink bring your paddle back up to chest height. You are in a bit of a crouch, so this chest high stuff is actually closer to the ground. We might call it mid-torso, but the paddle needs to be a touch above the net and in front of you.

A dink isn't much of a hit, but it has to be a hit. And let the paddle climb after the hit. Why doesn't this happen automatically? I suspect in our fear of hitting the ball too high we stop the stroke and don't let it follow through. You don't get the follow through and you probably get more net errors too.

So it's the old song and dance of *angst* versus reality. (BTW, as an old German major it is pronounced *ahngst*, in German it just means fear, it doesn't have the flavor of an irrational fear as when used in English.)

Turning off fear with an endeavor is pretty tough. You hit a ball that might go long and you freeze in angst rather than moving up to the net. Swallow the fear and keep going, nothing you do after the hit is going to change the outcome. Same with short shots, is it in the net? Yikes! Just follow it in, get the answer later.

With all of that in mind, I think the suppression of the follow through might be part of the fear. Your new job is to recognize the fear, accept it and do what's correct anyways. Having the paddle in the proper position will quickly return dividends, some effort here will be worth it.

## **\* Post 57, Movement when you are not Hitting the Ball**

Scott has more to say about moving when your partner is hitting the third shot. This is a continuation of the movement posts, most of which are concerned with movement by the serving side. The non-servers should be at the KL when the third shot is hit. Then, follow the words of Master Scott:

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When your partner is hitting the 3rd shot what should you be doing? I think most people would answer rush up to the KL as fast as possible. But this is not the right thing to do.

The answer depends on the return, and what matters most is what type of 3rd shot your partner is hitting.

So really you should never sprint up to the KL until you have figured out what shot your partner is hitting.

Here are some examples:

3rd shot is a banger shot that is up where a good net player likes it. Partner can stay at the baseline or move up a little and split step before opponent makes contact and look to play defense on the next shot and try to reset. Better than being target practice!

3rd shot is cross-court topspin shot, could be too high or just right: Partner should look to move forward and split step before opponent makes contact and look to move forward if you can attack or prepare to play defense and reset.



3rd shot is an attempt to get the ball in the kitchen: Partner should look to move forward and split step before opponent makes contact. If it is a high attempt then split step and prepare to play defense and look to get the ball in the kitchen for a reset. If it does go into the kitchen then move forward and split step before opponent makes contact and prepare to attack if the ball comes back high or prepare to dink if they keep it in the kitchen.

3rd shot is a lob: Partner should stay around the baseline to see where the lob goes. If the lob is short, prepare to play defense and try to get it back. If the lob makes the opponent go back for a tough overhead move up to 3/4 court and look to block the ball back the same side the overhead was hit and look to move up to the kitchen to take control of the net. If lob goes over both opponents and bounces then move up to the kitchen line together.

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Rich, here, allow me to add emphasis to Scott's post, note that anyone who is receiving a shot should be stopped and in a split step when the shot is struck. And prepared to move up, side to side, or back to return the shot. A good stationary position is vital for the final movement to get you to the return shot. Nothing worse than being caught leaning in the wrong direction. Thanks Scott, for the post.