

Pickleball Thoughts 2022

# Pickleball Thoughts 2022

Rich Hume  
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# Foreword

Hello Pickleballers,

This is a compilation of the blog posts for 2022 of the blog [pickleballthoughts.blogspot.com](http://pickleballthoughts.blogspot.com). The blog is still active as of January 2023. And will continue to be as long as I have something to say.

I've been playing for four or more years. The exact details are starting to be hazy. From a beginning of being self taught to watching all the YouTube videos and playing usually five times a week, my knowledge of the game has increased a bunch. The game, though simplistic, has a subtle richness of detail. The ball and court and the game of doubles, have created a playing field that rewards more than the usual strength and speed attributes of a player. The usefulness of thought, pattern recognition, and guile are big parts of the play that, by necessity, come after the game is understood at a certain level.

The blog posts are my musings and thoughts. There is a book with the 2021 posts and if I went back to compare this book to that, I hope to find a lot of common ground, but more detail and insight in this year's book.

In 2021 I wrote 56 posts. 2022 was on the order of 130. One day I'll combine by topic for the student of the game who is looking for particular information. Until then, you'll just have to read the whole thing.

The prior book ended with blog post 57, and I'll continue that approach in this book. Unlike the blog these posts are in chronological order oldest first. That might be best way to read them if you've not been following the blog.

As I went through the posts there were a number of posts that had not been published. I either made them publishable or discarded them. New posts have a indication in their titles.

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## Table of Contents

Foreword.....	2
Post 58 Where to Hit the Ball .....	6
Post 60 A Dubious Stroke Pattern.....	7
Post 61 A New Pickleball Game.....	8
Post 61 The GUP.....	9
Post 62 Wisdom From Prime Time Pickleball Updated 1/12/22 with some contact info from PrimetimePickleball.....	11
Post 63 Skill Timing, What You Need and When.....	14
Post 64 To Lob or Not to Lob.....	16
Post 65 Down's Pickleball.....	17
Post 66 X Factor Part II.....	18
Post 67 Paddles, Thoughts from the Dark Side.....	19
Post 68 Player Profile: Jimmy!.....	21
Post 69 Paddle Position II or is it III?.....	22
Post 70 Playing Away from Home.....	23
Post 71 Aggression.....	25
Post 72 Aggression II.....	27
Post 73 Over My Shoulder, In My Head.....	29
Post 74 Future Prediction Play Part 2.....	31
Post 75 Your Partner is the Server, What are Your Duties?.....	34
Post 76 A Tiger at the Net.....	36
Post 77 How to Move Like a Master.....	38
Post 78 Can I learn from Todd? Not Published Before.....	40
Post 79 Tournament Fun and Games.....	41
Post 80 Short Term v. Long Term -- Goals, Rewards, etc.....	43
Post 81 Sand Bagging.....	46
Post 82 Miscellaneous Thoughts.....	47
Post 83 Stages of Understanding.....	48
Post 84 The Serving Stroke.....	50
Post 85 Dinking Song.....	52
Post 86 Style Notes Part 1, Bryan and Lori.....	54
Post 87 More Thoughts on Style.....	55
Post 88 Third Shot Drop Model.....	57
Post 89 Asymmetry.....	58
Post 90 Most shots are Dinks!.....	60
Post 91 A Question from a Mike, Strategy!.....	61
Post 92 Winning by Not.....	63
Post 93 Bad Shots That Work.....	65
Post 94 About Being Ready - Or What Will Come My Way?.....	66
Post 95 Livermore Pleasanton Scramble Report.....	67
Post 96 About Those Out Shots.....	68
Post 97 A Visit from an Angel.....	69

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

Post 98 Angel II, or Things I forgot in the First Post.....	71
Post 99 A Podcast that is Worth Watching.....	72
Post 100 Paddles, or What a Long Trip it's Been.....	73
Post 101 Quick Tips of Great Value.....	75
Post 102 How About a Droop? Not Published Previously.....	76
Post 103 Defense to Offense Conversion Not Published Previously.....	77
Post 104 Ground Strokes Part II.....	78
Post 105 Game Parts, Partners, and Signals.....	79
Post 106 Electrolytes.....	81
Post 107 They are different from you and me.....	82
Post 108 Hitting the Ball Low.....	83
Post 109 Thoughts on the Third Shot Lob.....	85
Post 110 Playing with a Partner.....	87
Post 111 Electrolyte Report After Week One.....	90
Post 112 Keeping the Ball from Going Long When Hitting from the Kitchen Line.....	91
Post 113 Notes From Angel Part 1, Dealing with Frustration.....	93
Post 114 Electrolytes Part 3.....	95
Post 115 Angel and Ozzie Part Two, Compatibility Thoughts or Partnership Synergy.....	96
Post 116 Drilling and Getting Better – Not Published .....	98
Post 117 Zane's Point About Center Coverage.....	99
Post 118 Allen and I Disagree.....	100
Post 119 Grip Pressure.....	102
Post 120 It's a Fickle Game.....	103
Post 122 Electrolytes Part 4.....	105
Post 123 Angel and Ozzie III, Evaluating the Game – Not Published .....	106
Post 124 Thinking and Dinking.....	107
Post 125 It's Not the Heat, It's the Humidity.....	109
Post 126 Oh Boy, Lots to be Done.....	110
Post 127 Another Bit of Tony Wisdom.....	112
Post 128 Ground Stroke Technique.....	113
Post 130 Beginner to Something Else.....	114
Post 131 Top of The Pyramid.....	115
Post 132 A Bit More on Dinks.....	116
Post 133 Third Shot Drops.....	117
Post 134 A Learning Experience.....	119
Post 135 Dink Issues? Here is a New Way to Think of Them.....	120
Post 136 Spin Generation and Paddle Control.....	121
Post 137 Paddle Angles.....	122
Post 138 When Partner Errs.....	123
Post 138 A Quick Tip to Help Scott be Happier.....	124
Post 139 About That Roll Shot.....	125
Post 140 Po Learns to Control Bangers.....	127
Post 141 What I learned from 16 Hours of Pickleball.....	130
Post 142 Defense Thoughts.....	133
Post 143 Three on Three Pickleball Game.....	135

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

Post 144 Finding Style.....	136
Post 145 The Power of Stopping.....	138
Post 146 Skill versus Knowledge.....	139
Post 147 Interior and Exterior Thinking.....	141
Post 133 Transitioning to a Better Game.....	143
Post 148 Making Changes.....	144
Post 149 Miscellaneous Topics.....	145
Post 150 How About That Elbow?.....	147
Post 151 Simplified Strategy and Some Notes about Kitchen Line Position.....	148
Post 152 Leading Elbow Part 2.....	150
Post 153 Shot Selection at the Kitchen.....	154
Post 155 The Story of Jim and Lucinda.....	158
Post 156 Playing with a New Partner.....	162
Post 157 The Man Who Couldn't Dink.....	163
Post 158 Get Closer to Your Partner as You Move to the Kitchen Line.....	167
Post 160 Good Games – Not published .....	168
Post 161 Thoughts on Volleys.....	169
Post 162 Technical Validation.....	171
Post 163 That Which Makes the World Go Around.....	172
Post 164 Doubles Match Ben Johns, the Waters, and McGuffin.....	176
Post 165 Pickleball 201.....	177
Post 166 The Upward Dink, or Dinking Like Angel Not Published.....	180
Post 167 Why a Drop is Better for a Third Shot.....	181
Post 168 The Pickleball Doctor saves Bob.....	183
Post 169 Bob is Back on the Couch - Part II.....	185
Wrap Up for 2022.....	188

## Post 58 Where to Hit the Ball

If we disregard the overhead and smashes, where on the ball should the paddle make its impact? Let's think of the ball as a globe, with the south pole at the bottom, equator is straight on, parallel to the court surface.

The answer is you must hit the ball below the equator, and for some shots, short dinks for example, you want to strike the ball near the south pole.

If you play some billiards, you might think about catching the ball a bit right or left of its vertical line. That will add some side spin depending on the paddle swing path.

Always hit the ball below the equator. If you swing low to high you'll get top spin. Swinging high to low yet still hitting low on the ball will create slice / backspin / English. As your hit moves to the side, you'll be able to get spins at a mix of top, slice and side spin.

Any ball that comes at you during a ground stroke has to be elevated above the net. Hitting the ball on its bottom does some of that. If you are returning a slice shot, this is vital too, you have some lifting to do and have to hit lower on the ball for those shots.

If you get a ball over the net, then you are already doing this. Errors occur as the impact starts to climb too close to the equator line. Net balls and out balls occur from that error. Out balls, since you have to hit the ball pretty hard to get it over the net and there typically will be little spin; a good ball to duck if you are defending!

It's rare to get too low on the ball, but trying to hit a soft cut shot can cause this. As you get lower on the ball, the less efficient the hit will be, slower speed, etc.

Finally the paddle orientation is important here too. If the paddle is too open (pointing skyward), then you can generate a pop up. Not open enough and the shot is too flat and can go long or into the net.

All shots have to be hit with a paddle that is open to some degree. For that reason the grip you use is vital for consistency. Note that backhand and forehand are the same, thus the grip that angles the paddle the same for both shots is easier to use.

Smashes and "swats" have to be hit down into the court, so the impact point climbs above the equator. Side spin stuff will still apply, so there are areas to explore there too.

## Post 60 A Dubious Stroke Pattern

I've seen at least three people who have this stroke. And it ain't the best for a couple of reasons. The players are solid players, not just beginners.

Let me describe the stroke.

They hit the ball with little spin and the paddle moves parallel to the ground. It's close to an inside out spin, but they usually do not spin the ball. It's more of a flat jab, push, or swipe.

The problem is that the ball is not lifted or hit in any upward direction. The trajectory is very flat and the amount of lift on the ball is minimal.

While that might be a great thing in a few cases, it doesn't work for many cases.

For example, if you are hitting a dink and you hit the ball with the flat stroke, it passes over the net with little space to spare and thus more prone to catch the net. I agree that it's hard to return, but the error rate makes it a bad choice in my mind. Better to swing up on the ball, hit it more softly to get more of an arc to the ball flight. That creates a better safety zone over the net. It also allows the ball to be closer to the feet of the opponents when they hit it back.

I've also seen this shot from just off the kitchen line as an attempt to win the point. Again the ball goes into the net more often than it should. When it does clear the net, it is hard to return, but again, it does not seem to be a high probability shot.

You can dink with it, but it has the same issues, no margin for error, lots of net balls.

The game of pickleball requires many things and graceful, arcing ball flight is one of them! As Scott might say, "hit less winners and droop the ball into the court."

## Post 61 A New Pickleball Game

I was thinking of a new PB game that would be exciting. Maybe too exciting. Think about this: The ball comes to your side, you hit it to your partner, who then hits it over the net. So you get two hits to return the ball.

Things to think about: maybe if it drops in the kitchen, you can't hit it to your partner. Otherwise, any drop shot would be put away as the partners create their own popup.

Maybe it has to bounce at some point on your side, otherwise, it's like volley ball, where the ball gets setup and then put away. So volley to your partner, who has to let it bounce, then return it.

Otherwise if you take it on the bounce, then hit it to your partner, who must volley your pass across the net.

Service return: the ball comes into the service court, receiver lets it bounce, passes it to partner, who must volley it to the other side.

Server side has to let it bounce? Not sure on this, maybe not as I don't know what the receivers may be able to do with the ball. If they can hit great returns from the serve, then maybe the no volley rule should not apply.

So serving side, must hit the ball from one player to the other, it has to bounce at some point before it can be returned.

The ball has to bounce on each side, and each player has to hit the ball once per return.

But if the ball bounces in the kitchen, then you are not allowed to pass it and must return it with one hit.

I can see wild strategies to move the ball around. You'd also have to pay a lot more attention to your partner.

What about lobs? I think their sting would be minimized. Partner goes back for the lob, passes it to partner is closer to the net, then bam!



## Post 61 The GUP

My father, who never heard of pickleball, nonetheless passed on the term "GUP" as part of the oral history of the family. There are a lot of items in our oral history. Not all of them unique to our family: "No free lunch," "Rich or poor, money is good," "Frequently wrong, never in doubt." But I digress.

The GUP is short for [the] Great Unifying Principle. As I've wandered through life, I've looked for the GUP in the various activities that I've attempted to master. And I would say that many activities can be divided into areas that you must seek to master to ascend the stairway to glory.

A wag suggested that golf had five separate games in its structure. Putting, iron play, driver, sand shots, woods, etc., well you get the idea. Does each game of golf have its own GUP and problems to solve? Well, there is a large amount of overlap, but there is subtlety there, which makes golf interesting in the long run even if you only want a "walk spoiled."

Let's return to the sport du jour, our beloved PB. In my estimation we have rather simple game compared to others. And there are a couple of GUPs that I'd like to comment on as being really, really, good things to practice. I don't think any of these items require much in the way of physical strength or speed and are well within the abilities of any who've taken up the sport, even casually. However, I don't see people doing a lot of this, myself included, which is why the post is here.

Let me digress for just one moment before I climb the pulpit to preach, I've run out of things to say about PB. The topics below will be found in the earlier posts, if you're a careful reader. One could look at this post as guide to the important basics in the game. Let me get to the writing and we'll see if that bares out...

- Grip - it must allow you to deliver a strike to the ball with a paddle face pointing a bit towards the sky. Smashes are not included in this. It must work for forehand and backhand.
- If you return a serve, start running to the kitchen line. Your partner is there, join her!
- If you are serving a ball, stay behind the service line after the serve, only start to move up as the point develops.
- Move (up) with your partner. If the second shot is short, then expect/make a soft third shot and move to the KL. (Let's talk about this some more below...) Otherwise, evaluate the third shot and move appropriately together.
- How to hit a ball... 1) You are stopped and balanced and have evaluated the incoming ball, 2) Move to the ball, 3) STOP, 4) hit the ball with weight moving into the hit, 5) maybe move and get ready to stop and get balanced before the opponents hit the next shot. This is true for ground strokes, dinks, half volleys, etc.
- When in doubt, dink.

That's about it! Oh, there are a couple of more topics of which to be aware. For example, where should you hit the ball? What spins are best? How to hit various spins? But if you do all of the above most of the time you will do quite well in the game of pickleball.

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

A couple more points about third shot choices. You have two traditional styles, those being drive or drop. A rule of thumb would be to drop if the second shot is deep, but drive if the second shot is short. But those same folks would say that after a third shot drive, you would then drop the fifth as you should be a softer/short ball to hit. Which might lead a shrewd reader to suggest just drop when the second is short. If the main goal by the serving side is to get to the kitchen, then any drop shot would be more constructive than a drive. And in my opinion, a dinking point is more interesting than a hitters' dual, so I like the drop third for any position.

# Post 62 Wisdom From Prime Time Pickleball Updated 1/12/22 with some contact info from PrimetimePickleball

I'm on an email list from Prime Time Pickleball. I'm not sure how I got on the list, but there is useful stuff in my mailbox on occasion.

I got such a one today and I'll share parts of it with you. It covers some of the stuff that Scott has emphasized in his guest posts. Here we go:

## **Myth #1 Pros swing hard**

Pros don't swing "hard", they swing fast and loose. They know how to **transfer energy onto the ball with the right mechanics** so that even though they hit it "hard" and it travels quickly through the court, it does not feel "hard" on their body.

When players try to simulate this and hit "hard", they tend to tense up their whole body and swing stiffly. Incorrectly emulating the pros here is a fast way to get injured.

## **Myth #2 Pros go for winners**

When you think back to matches that you watched or your own matches, what are the shots you remember most vividly? If you're like most people, usually it's those flashy winners.

What doesn't get remembered is all those **fundamental shots that were the setup for the flashy winner.**

Pros don't go for winning shots until they have earned that shot. And even then, they're not usually going for a "winner".

They are hitting it to a spot where they think their opponent will be in a very compromised position as they hit should they get to it. **They are always ready for the next shot should that ball come back.**

Sometimes it ends up being unreachable by the opponent and it becomes a winner.

They are actually "going" for a winner far less often than people realize. They mostly go for strong and well placed shots that end up being winners at times.

Unfortunately, far too many players are too quick to pull the trigger and go for a high risk shot without a strong setup.

They end up overhitting and the ball sails out.

### **Myth #3 Pros have perfect technique**

This one is a biggy and more tricky to understand.

There is no such thing as perfect technique, there is only **the most efficient swing path and proper use of the kinetic chain** relative to your body position, the type of ball you have received and the type of ball you want to send.

I know that was a mouthful but it boils down to this....

...are there certain checkpoints that most players with good strokes achieve on each stroke? Yes, they typically have a strong shoulder turn, no excessive back swing, contact point in front, get through the ball well etc...

And, they make micro adjustments on the fly depending on the ball they receive and what type of ball they want to send back.

They learned the proper basic “form” early in their playing career based on receiving gently fed or hit balls right in their strike zone and at a gentle speed.

Once they had that core form pretty much locked in, they adapted their technique as needed to be able to deal with a ball in any scenario.

And they did that incrementally over time, not all at once.

They ramped up the difficulty of the incoming shot as their skill improved and they worked on it and worked on it until they could **deal with even the most difficult of incoming shots.**

If you look around at the pros and their shots, yes there are key similarities but they all have different style to their shot that is unique to them. It’s their interpretation of “perfect technique”.

If you struggle with a certain type of ball, such as one coming in: too deep, too hard, too low, with too much spin or whatever, then you need to dial those conditions down a bit and figure out your technique in a less pressing scenario before you can move on to a more pressing scenario.

Many players want to practice at top speeds, top spins etc.... That makes no sense if you’re missing every other ball or your technique is very forced and breaking down.

“Perfect Technique” is achieved when you can achieve the desired output you want on the ball as far as speed, spin, depth etc... with the least amount of effort.

**You have to learn how to FEEL your shots** and that is different for everyone so there is only the perfect technique for you. There is no universally perfect technique.

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

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I don't have anything to add to the above. All good stuff and I pass it along. Again that is from Prime Time Pickleball and it seems they are in San Leandro! The email came from Nicole Havlicek at [primetimepickleball.com](http://primetimepickleball.com) - give them a look!

## Post 63 Skill Timing, What You Need and When

I had a conversation with a player on the rise and he was thinking about the topics in this post. I'd written this awhile back and hadn't finished it. So think of this a bit of a request, a bit of a revisit. :-)

The question before all beginning players are which skills do they need? I think there is a timing aspect in play, as you would like to have all these skills, but some are more important than others based on what level you are at.

An interesting part about PB is that once you've acquired all the skills, you will be making the same mistakes you made in the beginning. OK, not as often, but you and the pros make the same mistakes.

Let me lay out a plan of skill acquisition that will let you play with better players as soon as possible. I'm also going to assume that you have some prior skills from some racket sport. This will be more of a list and if I add why and how, it's going to be a book. So this will be terse.

In my humble opinion, a basic skill set to play pretty well are the skills from 1 to 5. Once those are integrated into your game, you're on the way to becoming a player, feared by opponents and welcomed as a partner!

1) Grip, start with a handshake with the paddle, so that your forehand and backhand both have the paddle facing a bit skyward at all times.

2) Learn to hit a simple serve that you get in all of the time. Deep is great, but wide and short are no good.

3) Ground strokes. Hit a forehand and a backhand moderately well. I have data that show that about 25 to 30% of all points are ended with a ground stroke error. So work on hitting shots from the baseline and middle of the court, have a good setup, stop before you hit them, etc. See prior posts for more details. I'll include volleys here too, since the technique is not much different.

3a) Block shots, you are at the KL and a hard ball is right at you, you want to be able to hit this back with minimal paddle action and control the ball, not speed it up.

3b) Second shot play when at the kitchen line. If you are the up person, then you are responsible for the balls that come down the middle when the opponents hit their third shot. So be careful where you are setup for the second shot, you should be biased towards the middle of the court. Now, if the ball is down one of the sidelines, then one partner needs to cover down the line, and one must sag in towards the middle. In almost all points, there is implied middle coverage. Good players hit the ball down the middle, someone needs to be there to defend.

3c) Poaching - this is a volley when you've moved into partner's side of the court. I have much to say on this, so we'll put this off for another post, but since you were watching the middle, a ball that comes close to the middle deserves your attention. Try to hit it down if you are in a good position to do so, if it's marginal let it go to your partner. If you don't do this, that is fine. It's a skill that is not needed immediately.

4) Movement - learn when to move from the baseline to the kitchen line. a) After you return a serve,

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

get up there, no excuses. b) in all other cases go up when you have an opportunity to do so. Don't just rush up there, basically move with your partner, create a "wall." **Don't move into the court after serving unless it's appropriate!**

The movement skill is very important. Know where you should be at all times, that will make all of the other shots easier.

5) Now that we've gotten to the kitchen line, we need to learn how to dink. There are two dinking shots, a lift and a push. No strength involved, but some touch. There are YouTube videos about this and there are prior posts about dinking.

----- On to the next level! -----

6) Third and other odd numbered shots, are shots that help you get to the kitchen. This is the first skill that is difficult as you are hitting a soft shot to folks who want to pound it away. There is a fine line between greatness and disaster. So as you acquire this skill, you are going to get beaten up for a time. But hang in there and keep trying, this does not come easy.

7) If you've "mastered" all of the above, you will be playing a bunch at the kitchen. A couple of shots besides dinks are hit from there. Play at the kitchen is a waiting game looking for errors from the opponents. An error is a shot that you don't have to dink back. Let's simplify this, if the ball is a few inches above the net or more, you want to whack it. And you want to whack in a downward direction. If the ball is a bit low and/or the opponents are good, then just dink back. If you are not going to dink, then we would like to hit the ball down, at someone's body, or through the middle. Think fly swatter action, not tennis stroke.

8) You've attacked a dink and hit it with pace. Whoops, back it comes. Now you'd like to be able to return the point to dink battle, so we'd like to hit a reset. Hard to do as the adrenaline is flowing. This skill is also part of "always expect the ball to be returned - be ready even if you don't think you'll have to."

9) Lobs... I'm not a big fan of them, but they usually produce moments of anguish and humor, so we'll not be rid of them. Hitting them from the kitchen line is a useful shot. Chasing them down and lobbing back is a useful shot. But it is not a pressing skill.

10) if there are lobs, then there will be lobs that are too short, so being able to hit an overhead is useful. Tennis and badminton players know how to do this. Worse case you can let them bounce and then apply a variation of a ground stroke.

OK, you've moved across all 10+ skills! Congrats! Now, start over at the beginning and refine your skills. Get more consistent! Move better! Stop before you hit the ball! Don't admire the hit, just move for the next one.

## Post 64 To Lob or Not to Lob...

Scott has promised a post on the glories of lobbing. I must confess I find them uninteresting and I usually am not interested in chasing them done. Which brings us to a new, third perspective. Pickleball is a lot older than you might imagine. Here is a short essay I found that lays out a position, no unlike my own. This is from a guy named Bill, who was quite the player in his day. Oh, things were different then, but here is some wisdom that has passed through ancient times and now to us. Behold mortals!

To lob, or not to lob, that is the question:  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous dinks,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles  
And by opposing, lob them. To poach—to push,  
No more; and by a point to say we end  
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks  
That flesh is heir to: 'tis a consummation  
Devoutly to be wish'd. To dink, to drop;  
To chip, perchance to slam—ay, there's the rub:  
For in that slap of death what nets may come,  
When we have shuffled off this mortal court,  
Must give us pause—there's the respect  
That makes calamity of so long a rally.



## Post 65 Down's Pickleball

Sung to the tune of "Yellow Submarine"

In Livermore where I was born  
Lived a man who played at Downs  
And he told us of his life  
In the land of Pickleball

Go to the end of the Paseo,  
Where you'll find the courts of blue  
And we play beneath the trees  
At our Down's Pickleball

We all play at Down's Pickleball  
Down's Pickleball, Down's Pickleball

We all play at Down's Pickleball  
Down's Pickleball, Down's Pickleball  
And our friends all play there  
Many more of them play indoors  
And the ball begins to bounce,

We all play at Down's Pickleball  
Down's Pickleball, Down's Pickleball

We all play at Down's Pickleball  
Down's Pickleball, Down's Pickleball

As we play the game with ease (game of ease)  
Everyone of us (everyone of us) has all we need (has all we need)

Bats of blue (bats of blue) and balls of green (balls of green)  
In our Downs (in our Downs) Pickleball (Pickleball, ah-ha)

We all play at Down's Pickleball  
Down's Pickleball, Down's Pickleball

We all play at Down's Pickleball  
Down's Pickleball, Down's Pickleball

We all play at Down's Pickleball  
Down's Pickleball, Down's Pickleball

We all play at Down's Pickleball  
Down's Pickleball, Down's Pickleball

## Post 66 X Factor Part II

While resting the back after a busy morning of PB, or maybe it was the acorns in the driveway that needed sweeping? Doesn't matter, I ran across this video:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ItFZ5JWm\\_hw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ItFZ5JWm_hw)

From the In2Pickle channel. They have some pretty good stuff. Ah, I can quibble in re style, but we are here for improvement!

In this video Tony talks about the X factor. I think this is important and valid. Basically, the person to whom the ball is heading should take the shot. Don't reach in (too much), let your partner do her thing.

Tony mentions three reasons why poaching on your partner at the baseline is a bad idea. It tends to open a court, pinches the partner who should have taken the ball, and makes for a more difficult shot as reaching for a shot can make the shot more difficult.

Tony mentions some exceptions to this, so watch the video.

What I wanted to discuss is when all the players are at the net. Does the X factor still apply? Tony says yes, and I think I agree with him. Basically let the ball go to the partner whose in line to hit it, don't reach in to try and hit a winner unless the ball is really high and close enough to avoid too much reaching.

In my own play, I tend to reach in too much and take balls from my partners. Well, all that stops now! Partner, you are on your own to hit the ball heading for you.

I have recognized this lately as a problem. I move towards partner's side too much and when partner takes it, as he/she should, I'm out of position and trying to regain footing and position.

The final point is that use of the X factor will resolve almost all problems of who hits the ball. If you like to call the shots, that's fine, but just adhering to the X factor will remove almost all ambiguity.

## Post 67 Paddles, Thoughts from the Dark Side

One of the problems with pickleball is that the sport is so cheap to play. If you don't think so, I can tell you stories of other hobbies that would raise the hair on the back of the proverbial neck.

And the problem with this inexpensive sport, is that I don't see paddles as being particularly expensive. An expensive paddle is about the cost of a single golf club and I've got a bag of those.

The next problem is then to find the "proper" paddle. One that allows the bearer to exceed his ability and strike fear and wonder into the hearts and minds of his opponents, respectively, of course.

My early paddles, still in residence for the most part, started at a modest \$130 or so. I then thought it would be a good idea to pick up another one in case I wanted to introduce someone to the game. Back then, there were only three players at the Downs. We'd play two on one and just keep swapping teams. Then break for the Costco hot dog, what a nice morning that made!

I found a returned paddle at PickleballCentral.com, for about \$15. That might have included postage too, I can't remember.

After some testing, I realized that I couldn't tell the difference between the \$15 model and the \$130 one. Hmm, well that might slow down a normal person, but not one with the bit between the teeth.

I watched reviews and ran into John, the Canadian engineer, who comes out to play on occasion. He is a member of the "Paddle of the month club." I bought another paddle from him. Tried it, no real benefit, passed it on to Whitney as it was supposed to be good for tennis elbow.

I followed that up with a Gearbox Model. Light weight and the control mode. No real difference either. Then I tried the elongated version of the paddle I got from John. No real difference and it didn't improve my game much. I actually returned that one. Not something I tend to do

Then I tried the TMPR Oculus.

Well, hmm, I say. Now I felt more power and more spin. Yes! I knew there was magic out there for sale, one just had to find it! It was rated as a paddle shape that was comforting to a tennis or other racket player. I think that was accurate. My background is tennis with a lot of table tennis too.

The Oculus didn't last a long time and I moved on to the Blockbuster of paddles, aka, the Hellbender. My thinking is that any increase in sweet spot is worth paying for. I'm not the most obsessive player, so hitting the ball in the middle of the paddle is more a happy accident than through mind numbing hours of practice.

The Hellbender is slightly longer and more of a tear drop shape than other paddles. It had the pop and spin of the Oculus, but maybe just a touch more of each. I liked the longer shape as it's a valuable feature when lurching for a short ball at the kitchen. That seems to happen a lot. I feel the sweet spot is also a touch better than the Oculus.

Alas the Hellbender started to crack and then there was a middle ball multiple paddle collision and a couple of square inches of the face lifted and the edge guard did some splitting and cracking. I glued down the skin with super glue and then welded the edge guard back in place. It seems to be holding,

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

but...

Then I purchased the Diadem Warrior. It's a bit longer than the Hellbender, got good reviews, supposed to be good for dinking and control. It's too early to tell, but it has a lot of the play characteristics of the Hellbender, which is good, and I'm not sure about the better dinking aspects or sweet spot area. The Warrior is the heaviest paddle I've used at 8.5 ounces. I really don't notice the additional weight when I first got it and even when switching back and forth.

I swapped paddles with another player for a game. He had a Selkirk, I'm not sure of the model. It had a nice feel too. I like a subdued impact sound.

There is my story. It looks like the paddle technology is still young. New things should be coming out. I hope it is not like the golf world where it's more hype than reality.

If I were to design a paddle, I would want it to be a multi-layer construction so that soft hits would play differently than smashes. I think the rules do not allow for moving parts on the paddles; is compression part of that? I think of table tennis bats where the outer layer provides spin and a foam rubber layer provides power. Since PB is such a soft then hard kind of game, a paddle that plays differently based on the strike makes some sense to me.

If you are looking for your first or second paddle. Try as many as you can and then see if something resonates with you. Weighting on the perimeter may also be significant, and that leads to a lot of experimentation and thinking about what type of game you want to play.

And I still think this is a really cheap sport. :-)

## Post 68 Player Profile: Jimmy!

One of the joys of this game is that it is fun to watch. If you are interested in getting better than doing some watching is useful. I thought I would talk about some of the players at the Downs and point out the good shots they have, comment a bit on how they work and what to look for if you get to watch them play. I'm going to start with Jimmy. He has a very good all around game and is a joy to watch and play with. He is a bit difficult to play against however, but that's not his problem! Here is my take on Jimmy's game.

I wanted to talk about Jimmy's game for a moment. He plays quite well and in my opinion plays four shots with extremely well. I wanted to talk about his shots and why I think they work well.

The shots are overheads, third shot drops, service returns, and fly swatter hits at the net.

Jimmy's background is in badminton, and that has provided him with a great overhead. I've seen few misses and he delivers them with accuracy and power. I have no comments on how he does it. I'm comfortable with my overheads, so I've not spent a lot of time analyzing his. But they are worth the watch if you are struggling.

Third shot drops are a particular strength. He hits the ball well above the net and here is a key point, the spin he uses is more side spin than top or slice spin. The shots are very effective and consistent. I'm finding the use of a side spin shot to be more useful than I thought before. Note also that the paddle is not used to scoop the ball, but there is a nice angle between arm and paddle. I think this is very important for shot control.

Service returns look a lot like Jimmy's drop shots. They clear the net easily and carry fairly deep into the court. They usually have some slice spin on them. He doesn't hit this shot hard. A softer, higher shot gives him more time to get to the kitchen line. His depth and modest slice spin provides a more difficult shot to return. Jimmy looks unhurried as he advances, which is true, since he has the additional time to advance.

At the net Jimmy has very fast hands and can hit an accurate put away. His stroke on those is more of a fly swatter hit than a swing and there is usually some of the side spin on the shots. The side spin makes the ball fly flat and he doesn't need to lift the ball as much as a top spin shot would require. A slap shot instead of a swing takes less time to hit and creates a ball fast enough to be effective.

Jimmy and I have talked about his game and he would like to hit serves harder. I don't think that's necessary, as good players are going to return a faster serve just as well as a softer one. I think it's more important that the serves be somewhat deep and land in the court. I'd rather have a partner get the serves in than miss 10% and have some outright winners.

If you get a chance spend some time watching Jimmy. He plays a very nice game, oriented to rallies and net points. Have I mentioned he is fast on his feet? Well, he has that going for him too.

Thanks Jimmy, for permission to talk about your game.

## Post 69 Paddle Position II or is it III?

There is an older post that is a conversation between the Master and Po, the acolyte, where the various paddle positions are noted and discussed.

Link: <https://pickleballthoughts.blogspot.com/2021/10/paddle-up-or-down-yes.html>

Since then I've run across one of the Pickleball Pirate's videos (YouTube) where a teaching pro gave a lesson on the same topic. Surprisingly, his suggestions and explanations matched those of the Master, so you know it's all good. :-) Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D0yQU2wOxZc>

The reason for this post is that I've managed to get my paddle above the net line for the the last few days of play and I must say that it has been a tremendous help and has improved my ability to hit the third shot in a fire fight and to scare my opponents. It's also a lot less work and has made the game simpler.

I was over at Robertson park watching some intermediate players today. There were a lot of popped up balls with people at the net, but the paddles were down by players' knees and a lot of shots that should have ended the point led to longer rallies. Nothing wrong with a long rally, but if you get a pop up you'd like to put it away.

The low paddle positions required a lot of movement to return the shot and by then the ball had dropped and the best shot opportunity had vanished. If your paddle is up, it's easy to hit down on the ball, which is the filet mignon of the pickleball shot selections.

To simplify the earlier posts, when you are at the net the ball has to come to you above the net. Keep your paddle ready for a higher shot and that means your paddle should be higher than the net level. If the ball is a low dink, you'll have time to drop your paddle and return it. But if the ball is coming fast and hard or high, then your paddle is where it needs to be.

Give it a try, I think you'll like it.

## Post 70 Playing Away from Home

I wanted to blog a bit about playing down in Laguna Woods. It's my first foray into another group of players.

If you've not played the tournaments then one must always wonder a bit about how well one plays.

Laguna Woods is an old Dell Webb type place where there are a 1000 things to do. They have seven pickleball courts, with lighting and a nice covered sitting area. Water fountains, sinks, sign in sheets, it has it all.

All of the courts are individually fenced with eight foot fences. You can hit the ball over the fence if you work at it. The courts are set up for paddle tennis as well as PB. So there are multiple stripes laid out with contrasting colors. The net is lower for paddle tennis; they have a nice way to lower the net easily.

The way they resolve who is on court next is via a paper sheet. You put your name down and when there are four players, they are next up for a court. The courts are used for a single game. They tell me that the system is frequently ignored and I'm guessing that a lot of folks play with their selected group.

I was introduced to the "guys" who were the better players and got a number of games with an extended group. Before we talk quality of play, it needs to be mentioned that this is an older crowd than at the Downs. There were probably more gals than guys. But it looked like the guys were the better players for my small sample.

Now as to the play... There was a lot of hitting and very little dinking. They usually would not duck a ball, if it was in reach it got hit. I ducked a couple of out balls and got strange looks from my partner and, "How did you know it was going out?"

Lots of lobbing! Of the six I had to deal with in one game I hit four overheads, watched one sail long and got beat on one. Those are the odds I'm willing to trade. But there were guys whose style was to lob.

"Hey what about dinks?" I hear you ask. Well, if I didn't dink, it didn't happen. They just liked to hit the ball hard. Fire fights didn't last very long. They did like to hit little angle shots too.

The courts had two real problems, one being the lines caused skips just like we have and the fencing is very tight so that ATPs would be difficult and a serve that kicks to the side can put an opponent into the fence.

I didn't have any trouble being competitive down there. I had a variety of partners, mostly Downs Intermediates in skills and maybe a touch less than that. There was one fun game against the local hot shot, I was down 6 to 9 with Roy as partner. Roy's court positioning was not the best. But I got hot and ran off five fast points to beat them 11 to 9. Roy looked a bit shocked. Mario, the local ace, looked a bit stunned too.

I would conclude that if you can play at Downs, then other games might not be as daunting. The abundance of lobbing and lack of dinking was interesting. Maybe that's more common than I expect.

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

I would characterize Downs as more dinks than lobs usually, but not a lot of either. Of course that depends on who is playing.

It's good to be back, it was interesting to play with some strangers and read the room -- a skill you tournament players should be good at.



## Post 71 Aggression

"Master, how can I be more aggressive?" asked Po, the young player.

"What does that mean, Grasshopper? To be aggressive?" asked the Master.

"Hmm, I've heard the word used a lot, I think it means hitting the ball harder or scoring more points or something?"

"If we think of the opposite of aggressive, perhaps we can understand this concept. What is the opposite, Young Po?"

"Passive, I guess."

"And what is that?"

"Hitting the ball to the opponents and waiting for them to make a mistake?"

"We can start with that. While it is not a bad way to play, the game is rumored to be about the mistakes and not the gems of wonderful hits. Let me suggest a more interesting way to play.

"Let us consider returning a ball to the opponents and if we do it well, they will have to do a couple of things. They will have to move their feet, and their paddle, and perhaps due to those things, produce a modestly awkward return.

"While that is going on, what are you doing, Po?"

"I'm waiting to see what they hit back."

"Precisely and now we want to think about that. If you hit a shot that requires the foe to move and stretch; to be aggressive, you must expect a less than perfect return, and move before the return comes back. Get into position to hit a winner, to attack, to force the foe to deal with a better shot than the last one. You deliver chances to fail to your opponents. There in lies "aggression." Bring trouble to your foe, don't just trust that errors will occur," said the Master as he reached for his cup of green tea.

"So aggression is not about hitting the ball harder, it's about anticipation," said Po.

"Well put Po. But always with movement to take advantage of your good shots, always! Do not stand and admire them, use them as stepping stones help you cross a creek, they are tools for stealing the opponents time and space. You can feel a good shot as it comes off the paddle. Trust this feeling and run like the wind.

"Think of the game of Go, or if you must Chess, where we build the middle kingdom position for control and a base from which to attack. Attack from the High Ground as the Kitchen Line used to be called, force weak shots from your opponents and be in a position to hit them to your advantage. Mark well, Po, if you move early you are also well prepared for miss-hits, net top hits, and other items that a desperate opponent might produce.

"Finally, Po, like things in the heavens, it will not always go according to plan. Sometimes your shots are not as good as you expected or the opponents find an excellent return and you will lose the point quickly. But do not give up. Your moving earlier than expected will make the play more complex for your foes. Even if they hit a few winners, you will get them back from the time and space pressures

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

you create. Now, I fear the room is as cold as the tea, shall we find a fire for our feet and a warmer drink for my old bones?

## Post 72 Aggression II

The last post with the Master discussing aggression is just a beginning.

What I want to stress is that the longer I play the game, the more I see movement as key to playing well and being dangerous. Now, if I am able to move really well with little thought some day, then something else will float to the top of the pond as the "next great answer." One could see that consistency, better overheads, etc., might become more important at some point, but you still have to be there to worry about those things.

But for now, the more I move and the earlier I can know where to move the less pressure there is on being consistent and the easier it is to put the ball away. There are a lot of shots that linger like soft balloons over the net and if you can be there on time, you have a lot of gratifying shot choices available.

The last post suggested that aggression was the assumption that a good shot would enable movement that would lead to a better shot. Iterate until the point is over.

There are some complications to that simple suggestion. The opponents are trying to do the same thing of course, so if they produce a great shot, you may well have to be conservative in positioning for the next shot. You'll get fooled on occasion. The opps might be unfair and lob -- imagine that, I mean, really!!

And then if your shot to start this cascade to supreme happiness is not good enough? If so, then we want to be more defensive in position and shot selection and shot placement.

The second shot "has to bounce rule" has taken some of the power of the serve away. It would be nice to serve and volley, which would favor the serving side for most points. It is wise to require the bounce, basically giving the net to the service returners. The servers are fighting a bit of an up hill battle from the beginning.

The initial goal of the servers is to get to the net. Third shot drives are not going to work unless they are followed by a drop. The key to getting up there is the drop shot. If it's good then you can ease into an attacking mode. This shot is vital to so much of the game after the basics are incorporated. I think it's under appreciated in the modern literature.

One of the "errors" I see in some players is to rush the kitchen line ahead of their partner. However, if your partner hits a good to great drop shot, then it's the proper play. Get up there and try to poach off of the drop shot.

I always saw it as an error until recently, but it's not, if the third shot (or fifth) is a good one. In that case it's the appropriate play. As long as it doesn't distract partner from making a good shot. Also note that if the drop is too high, the forward player is going get the pin cushion treatment on occasion. A small bruise on the path to victory, one hopes... And hopefully only a few of them.

Hmm, I might be able to sum all of this up, including the prior post, as pick your attacking spots and then go for it. It won't work if your partner is not on the same page and looking for the same things.

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

To simplify it, follow any drop shot to the kitchen line. Stamp your feet loudly, gnash teeth, crack knuckles, raise your arms in a threatening manner and give the opponents something to worry about.

## Post 73 Over My Shoulder, In My Head

In a prior life I played a lot of bridge. One of the bridge learning mechanisms is an article where an expert explains what he is thinking about as he plays a hand. These are called "over my shoulder" pieces. While I'm no expert, I thought it might be fun to write such an article for pickleball.

It's probably more the things I should be thinking about rather than what I do think about. I hope it can add some insight to the game. I wrote about the two main scenarios, they being service returns and also third and fifth shot scenarios for servers. The article got pretty long, so I'm going to break it up. I'll start with the serve return.

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I'm returning a serve against a reasonable player. I set up well back from the baseline as I want to be able to handle a deep serve easily. Yes, it makes it harder to field a short serve, but there are indications of when that's going to happen, and it will be easier to move forward if it happens.

I'm expecting a serve to my backhand. I don't have a problem with that shot and prefer it to a ball hit straight at me. I don't like to run around backhand shots to hit a forehand as that will pull me out of position a bit and I'll have to move back.

My goal is to hit a low spinney shot to the middle of the court. That maximizes my ability to get to the kitchen line and a ball in the middle can be a problem to random partnerships. However the most important aspect of service returns is to get them back. I don't need a great shot here. The opponents must let the ball bounce and that is a huge advantage for me. While I want to hit a low ball back, I do not want to net it or hit it long. That costs a point and I want the opps to work for every point they get. If the serve is good, it may be that the best shot I can get back is somewhat high and mid court. So it wouldn't be ideal, but it may well be good enough. I'll follow any return to the kitchen line, the quality of my return is not a consideration for moving up.

I watch the server closely. If there is a big wind up or a long swing then it's more likely the ball will be deep. If there is a quick, short swing, then I'm looking for the short serve and I want to be moving forward quickly.

People who hit serves with their backhand usually don't hit them long or hard, but they will be spinney with cut spin. I'll have to lift that ball more than a top spin shot, but since the ball is usually not hit hard and short, I'll have time. If it's a backhand server, I'll move in a step, also if the wind is at my back and strong enough to be a factor, I'll move in too.

Someone collected pro data and realized that the average serve landed in the middle of the service box. In a rec game, should I expect something different? The more skilled the player, the more likely the serve will be difficult to return and deep. It's the deep ones that are the hardest for most of us. Again, starting well behind the baseline is important against good players. Know your opponents and position yourself accordingly.

OK, I get the average ball, it's in the middle of the service box and I can comfortably hit it. I would like to hit it on the run as that will make it quicker to get to the net. If the serve is not particularly low, then this is easily done. If I have to stop or slow down to hit the ball that's not critical. What is

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

important is that I hit it and then move up. There is no time to admire the shot or cringe if it looks like it's out.

I want to return the ball deep. I like to use a "cut" spin on these. That spin will make the ball carry further into the court and not bounce as high as other spins. That spin is often netted by opps, as it requires more lift in the hit. All good from my perspective.

I also want to hit it to the middle of the court. If I hit it to the middle, it's more likely the shot coming back will not be angling off to a sideline. My side will be at the net and we should have no problems getting a paddle on the ball.

When I return the serve, I'll run up the middle of the court and as close as I can get to the kitchen line. (If I return to my side of their court, then I will run straight up my side and my partner will move into the middle and vice versa.) The important part here is that the middle of the court has to be covered and covered well. I don't want to have to stretch to hit a middle ball back. Either my partner or I should have a foot straddling the center line or be ready to step across the line to hit a shot. Have those feet ready to move. We'll share middle duty based on where the return ball goes, how much partner likes to poach, etc. But one of us should be there.

And... I think we are done here. We plan on hitting deep in the middle and will either keep the opps back or angle off the ball. What I want to happen is that the opps will feel under pressure, hit the ball too hard and long. I'd love to duck the next shot.

## Post 74 Future Prediction Play Part 2

In the last (now prior) post I talked about my thoughts during service returns, now we swap sides of the court and we are going to serve.

Personalities come more into play here, names have been changed to protect the ~~guilty~~ innocent.

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Let me see, to whom am I serving? Ah, yes, it's TopSpin Tommy. OK, while his forehand is very good, his back hand is not at the same level.

I'll serve to his backhand, and I want to hit a soft, high, and deep serve with some top spin. That should make him the most defensive.

Most importantly I need to get the serve in. I don't want to lose an opportunity to win a point by trying to be clever. I want a lot of room over the net and a lot of room inside the service court area. If I don't get it to the backhand I'm OK with that. Serves are not very important in doubles.

The serve is good enough and to Tommy's backhand and I'm hoping for a shortish return. If I get one, I'm going to expect to be at the net soon. Whether I drop the shot or place it up the middle with some pace depends on how high a bounce I get.

My dream is that the return is mid court and high, so I can hit a forehand down into the middle of the court. No, wait, my dream is that Tommy knocks it long. OK, I'm behind the service line and ready for anything.

Oops, the service return is deep and back to me, so I'm not going to get to the net quite yet. (If it looks like it might go long, I will simply play the shot and trust that partner will call the shot out if it's long.)

I'm still in back of the service line, so it's no problem to handle the deep shot. I don't have to back up to be well placed to hit the third shot. There are a lot of players who are happy to hit this shot off their back foot or leaning back or after three quick steps to get back behind the service line. I think it saves a lot of time to remain back of the service line after I or my partner serves and I can hit a better shot more easily.

Now, where to return the third ball? Tommy has followed his shot up to the kitchen line, so I can't just hit any old shot deep to his side of the court. Also if Tommy's partner likes to poach, then I would be more careful even if Tommy stayed back.

(If Tommy stays back, and a number of players do, it is worth deciding what to do in that case. We want to keep Tommy back so our shot choice is a deep shot to his side of the court. But wait, what will his partner do? The partner is already at the net and is probably aware that Tommy is back. If you're in that position, you've got to think about looking to poach. Because if you were not going to poach then the shot of choice is a high top spin shot somewhat over the middle of the net for safety. If there is a potential poach, then the ball has to be lower and closer to the sideline. If a poach is going to happen for sure, then hitting the ball behind the poacher is a good choice.)

So it's a classic situation, the ball will be hit from behind the baseline and there are two defenders at the net. There are three basic plays here, drop, drive, or lob. A lob is out as that would be easy to chase

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

down and I don't practice those often and they are not my best shot.

Drives are OK, but lack an interesting element to me and I don't hit the ball very hard. I'll try the drop. If it's good, partner and I can close to the net quickly. I should hit this to Tommy, he is probably still moving, which makes the shot more difficult for him.

It is in my interest to slow the point down. This is more important against good players as I might not be able to out hit them, especially since they are at the net already. Since I am serving, I'm starting behind in the point, so all my initial actions will be to achieve parity.

Back to the third shot... I let the ball drop a bit because I want to hit up on the ball producing an arcing shot that will fall to Tommy's backhand and I hope will land in the kitchen. Hitting a chop spin shot that skims the net is OK, but it won't be below the net when it's returned and it is easy to net that shot. Also if I over hit it, it will go long. But if the return shot is hard and low, it might be all I can manage.

If my drop is too deep we will be forced to stay close to the baseline if the opps are on their game, but more usually they will hit the ball back to mid court.

I can hit the fifth shot even softer as I'm closer to the net and then can continue to close. These are touch shots and there is no need to panic or hit the balls hard.

The third shot drop is pretty good. The opponents will not be able to attack, Tommy can't run around this shot, and we can move in a couple of steps and work on the fifth shot. I'll hit that shot short as well. If the fifth shot feels good off the paddle, then I move immediately; there is not wait and see. Our team running forward will add a little pressure to the opponents shot too.

OK, now where will Tommy return the fifth shot? It should be short and "dink like" if they are good players. The less experienced they are, the more likely they will hit the ball hard.

If I had hit it to Tommy's forehand I would be expecting a hard roll shot to the middle. But he doesn't have that shot on the backhand side. So I'm expecting a soft to medium shot to the middle but tending to cross court. Everyone likes to hit the cross court shot, it's easier and if I was sure this was going to be a dink, I would be moving to cover the cross court shot, either moving to the sideline or towards the middle as partner will shift to the sideline.

It is rare to get the ball back at me. Though there are a couple of players who prefer that to a cross court shot. Know who they are!

Since my partner and I are not yet up to the kitchen line, we want to dink the shot back as we are still not favored to win the point. So hopefully we'll get a shot that can be easily dinked. Then we'll settle into a dink game, which at the Downs will only last a couple of hits before the inevitable speed up or lob. So note at this point, I've not seen the 4th shot yet, but I'm thinking about the next couple of shots. I'm close or at the kitchen line, so the points will have more time for me to move.

As you close to the kitchen line, it's vital that your paddle is up. The worst shot from a defensive point of view is the too hard shot. You have to judge whether to hit it, you might not be able to duck it, etc. But if your paddle is up, it will be easier to block. If you get a dink, you'll have time to drop your paddle and dink back.

As an added bonus, if they pop it up, your paddle will be nicely placed to hit down on the ball and



## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

maybe end the point.

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So there is what I try to consider as I serve and seek the net. Most of this is just reactions and having played a bunch. More of it is a question of whom you are playing. Players get tired, get lazy if they are behind or ahead, watch for those that will not run up as they return the serve. They deserve to be punished! I was playing with Dan today and I think I made a remark about being up at the net asap. The next point he was there and easily put away a high ball. "Is that why I'm here?" he asked with a grin. "Yup," I replied.

## Post 75 Your Partner is the Server, What are Your Duties?

We have two more posts to go which describe initial thoughts for the up and coming PB player. Those are the thoughts for the non-server on the serving side, and the player at the net whose partner is going to return the serve.

Let's look at the first case... Your partner is going to serve. What are you going to do?

The first question is who is going to hit the third shot.

There are a couple of cases that we should consider and they deal with how good the service return is.

Worst case is that the return comes back deep into the court and into the middle. The player who should return a ball hit to the side is obvious. Oh, you can say, "Mine" or "Yours" if you want, but simple reactions will suffice.

The real problem is a ball in the middle. Even if it's short, being too polite or too aggressive might interfere with who hits the ball back. I like to use the crisscross structure for these. Basically if the ball is coming at player A, player A returns it. The ball might start on player B's side, but it's the direction of the ball that is the deciding factor. Talking to your partner in this case is a good idea. Pro tip, decide who will call out the responsibilities of receivership before the game starts.

Have I mentioned where you will be setup waiting for the service return? Not yet in this post, but if you've done a little reading, you'll know that you are a step or two behind the baseline where the server should be too.

If the return ball comes down the middle, you will find that the server might not have fully returned to a ready position because of the bodily distortion of hitting the serve. I think the non-server should be more responsible for the center ball than the server. Even if it's on the backhand side of the partner. So aggressively let your partner know that you will return that shot.

Let me digress a bit here. If your team returns a deep, hard, middle shot and does not hit a great return, you are in trouble. The opponents are going to return the ball from the net. They have options! They can drop, hit it back deep to the middle or angle it off. Basically, your side has made the first major mistake. You need to get ready to defend. The hardest return shots I've seen are another hard shot up the middle. There is one bright note here, you can volley the ball, so stepping into the court and being in the middle will allow you to do that. But be wary of the shot back to your feet -- a problem for anyone. I have no wonderful solution here. The deeper you are, the easier you can return a middle shot, but it exposes you to the drop and angled shots. That's pickleball.

The prior posts have mentioned where to return the ball, etc., so let me touch on a couple of general ideas in re movement. The big goal is to get both players to the kitchen line. The important word is both. We again have a couple of cases. If the third ball is a drive, then both players need to be cautious about advancing. The return ball will be coming faster than a drop. So look to move in some, but stay with your partner, don't run up ahead of the action.

If the third shot is a drop or is going to be a drop (how do you know what your partner is going to do?

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

(More below!), then you can/should advance ahead of the play and get to the kitchen line well ahead of partner. Partner is going to follow in his drop, right?

How do you know what partner is going to do with the third shot? There are clues! One, watch him hit the ball. Is that the swing of a drive or drop? Also, your partner is a creature of habit like all of us, so expect the usual shot selection. Some partners will always drive, some always drop. Pro tip, it's a good discussion to have with a new partner about what they will do with a third shot. If you can mix drives with drops, that's the best plan. Maybe you'll drive short returns and drop deep ones. Having a plan is useful.

If you've hit a third shot drop and your partner has gone up to the net, you might not be able to join him there if your shot is a bit deep. Come in as many steps you can and defend the fourth shot. Try to drop the fifth and keep moving forward. Pros on occasion will not get to the net before the seventh or ninth shot. Don't be in a hurry or panic and over hit the ball.

While my partner is working his way up for the fifth shot, I am at the net and placed to easily cover the middle of the court. I want to look for errors from the opponents. I'm looking to poach if I can. My movement will reflect where on the court the ball is. I'll try to smack any pop up. But barring an opponent's error, a good outcome for my side is to get to a dinking rally at the net.

I think that's it for this part. The next part is what to do after partner returns the serve and we'll save that for the next post.

## Post 76 A Tiger at the Net

The last post of this series is what to think about when you are at the net and your partner is returning a serve. Note that when this point starts, that you are the only one at the net. You are king of the hill, on top of the enchilada, the eye at the tip of the pyramid! It's a position of leverage over the rest of the players. Massive power and grand responsibilities! Let's explore this situation...

I think this is the most fun position to play. You can make play, if not life difficult for your opponents, hit a lot of put-aways, and generally be a pest (in a nice way of course).

Let's start with setup. You want to favor the center of the court, but still on your side of the court. And the reason for that is you are responsible for covering the center when the third shot comes back.

Let's say that you are on the right side of the court. Partner returns the serve to one of three locations. He'll hit it directly across the court, up the middle, or cross court to your right side.

If the ball is hit to the middle or to your left hand side, then center court is where you want to be. Feel free to step on or over the center line just a touch if you want to. If the ball has been hit cross the court to your right, then move one or two steps to your right. (There are people who will hit up the line for the third shot a lot. If that is who is going to hit the third shot, then be ready for it.)

If the ball is on your left or middle then you should be looking for a poach (unless it is a very friendly game, in which case poaching can be poor form). I'll chat about that below. But if we are all in to win, look for the poach. If you see one coming, take another step or two or whatever you need to hit it without having to stretch for it. If the ball is high and soft enough this might take you all the way across the court. That's only three or four steps if you were ready to move, but it will seem like a lot and it will amaze the other players. Doing that once early in the game will make the opponents nervous and even if you miss the shot, think of it as an investment.

If the third shot is not poachable, then you as the net person may have to contend with drives and drops and middle coverage. Being prepared for blocks of hard shots and drops is the name of the game.

General strategy is to return the fourth shot deep and keep the opponents at the baseline. It's an advantage to be at the net when the opps are not, so use that. Keep them back. If you want to try for a winner, then drop shots and angled shots are good, but easy to miss. Deep shots back to the middle of the court are rarely wrong. If the opps manage to get three or four balls back, don't panic and hit the ball too hard. Just being at the net is the advantage and it will pay off in the long run.

When not to poach... Friendly and gentlemen's game are not the place to poach. We are all on the court to hit the ball and have rallies. Poaches shorten points and can be boring for everyone but the poacher. If you want to practice your poaches, then hit them, but hit them so the opps can easily return them. Keep the rally going!

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This finishes four posts covering the main positions played in doubles and what thoughts are in play to start a point. That pretty much covers the opening moves. But like chess, all the subsequent moves make things more complex. I think that knowing what to look for at the start of the point is important, golly, call them the fundamentals of the game. More importantly since most play I've seen, new teams

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

with no conversations, are typical. It would be nice or expected that a pickup partner with some experience would know and follow the fundamentals. I've not seen them written down until now, and of course, these are my opinions and may not be universal.

A lot of what I think is correct will lead to points with dinking in them. I like those points and my observation is that the higher level games have a lot of dinking in them. Dinks become more important when everyone can hit all the normal ground strokes back without too many errors, so you will have to dink to beat them.

I did mention in a post a long time ago that the closer the ball is to the net, the more the net acts as a shield/barrier. The dinking game is more about working around the net than it is working the opponents. They of course have the same problem. Hmm, might be time for another post on dinking; part III or IV or something.

## Post 77 How to Move Like a Master

"Master, with the hot weather my heart rate is climbing!" exclaimed Po, the acolyte.

"Harrumph," grunted the Master who was working on his next book with a working title of "Details of the Inside Out Backhand when a Tailwind is Blowing, Volume 3." He was well into the 43rd chapter and did not like the interruption.

"What are you saying, Po? You are out of breath?"

"Yes, Master, I seem to be working too hard or my condition is lacking."

Another grunt from the Master as he puts down his pen, straightens up and regards Po with a tiny bit of interest.

"Whom were you playing, Po, that brought you to the edge of exhaustion?"

"I was in a game with Do and Jo. As you know Do is a heavy hitter and I struggle with his game."

"Ah, yes, Do has the sad story of a childhood growing up in a tennis family. Even worse they played on clay and spent all their time at the baseline, hitting long shots, and sliding too and fro, like chickens scratching for a nice pebble to swallow. Well, the monastery's feelings on tennis are well known, but lack universal adoption. And we are all worse for it. Perhaps in another hundred years or so..." the Master leaned back and his face took a serene set as he imagined the future that might come to be. He shook himself and returned to the imperfect present.

"So you struggled with Do? In what way? We must understand what you were doing before we can find a solution."

"I was moving well, I thought, but I kept getting caught trying to hit Do's shots. He was hitting up my sideline or short to my cross court and I was lunging and running to try to catch up."

"Yes, Po, a classic problem. Fortunately there is a classic solution. You must run less."

"Less, Master? I can't get to the ball now. How will less running get me anywhere?" asked Po, as sweat seeped out on his brow.

"Po, you are still just learning and now it is time to learn more about court movement. Shall we start with a question or two?"

Po nodded and reached for his personal scroll and pen, ready to scribe the knowledge of the Master.

"As you know Po, there is a five volume set of books describing all the current theory on court movement. You as a student have not been tasked with learning them yet. Let us look into one facet of this topic for a moment.

"If you were at the baseline warming up with Do, would you get all of the balls back?"

"I think I would rarely miss, Master."

"And if you were drilling from the transition area, would you get all of the cross court shots hit to you?"

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

"Yes, almost all, though not as well as from the baseline."

"That is correct, Po. You have more time when practicing. Is it obvious now why that is true?"

A light went on in Po's face. "I understand Master, when I'm practicing, I'm at rest when the ball is hit to me!"

"Exactly Po. You are ready, in a good setup position, paddle properly placed and looking for all the possible shots. Sadly in a point, those fundamentals are tossed aside like last night's melon skins.

"The non-master is likely to be running, or trying to stop when the ball is hit to him. All motion creates momentum. And a momentum burden needs to be shed for the next shot. Oh, yes, of course if your momentum carries you to the right and that's where the next ball comes, then you look like you know what you are doing. But if the ball goes to the other side, it frequently cannot be returned. It's very sad to watch a returnable ball vanish past a player.

"Po, we do not want to let the game go to one of guessing. The elegance of pickleball is to pressure your opponent to eventually give you the scoring opportunity you want. To do that you must also return his shots. Do favors two shots due to his tennis background. Which will he hit? If Do is playing well, we will not know until we see him hit it. And while he hits the ball, we need to be ready for either shot, or even a rare shot up the middle.

"To maximize the ability to reach all shots, we need to run less than you are used to. You must stop and compose yourself earlier. Place the paddle where it needs to be and empty your mind. Relaxation will let you move your fastest and let you move in any direction. Let your calmness flow around you like the circles of a pond which has accepted a pebble tossed into it.

"Here is your homework Po. In the next few games you play, make sure you are fully stopped before the ball gets to your opponent. Be conscious of this. You cannot be unconscious until you've done it deliberately. So start with deliberate action and let it modify your game. Take no more than two steps before stopping and waiting for the next shot.

"Learn this Po and take one more step towards the Master's podium."

"Yes, Master, I will. Thank you for sharing your knowledge."

"It is I who thank you, Po. This conversation reminds me of when I was like you, young, and needing of direction. How many years was that? More than leaves on a tree. Now, be off with you, I have more writing to do." The Master redipped his pen and bent back over his papers.

## **Post 78 Can I learn from Todd? Not Published Before**

Todd suggested that I beat up on a less skilled player just to win the game and if I hadn't done so, I could have a learning session by playing to him.

Hmm, well I don't remember the game in question and when I play with a less skilled player (LSP), I try to alter the play level to challenge the LSP, without being punishing. I'll moderate serve spins and depths to encourage rallies rather than try for service winners and not hit the ball as hard. There are other things along those lines and I've written about this sort of thing before.

Now on to the part second... Learning from Todd's play. Todd plays a very good game and I would rate his service returns amongst the best on any day at the Downs. But would I learn more from playing a normal shot to Todd or trying a challenging angle or spin to the other player?

I don't think it is axiomatic that play from/to Todd will "learn me" more about the game than stretching my shot selection or execution to a different player. Au contraire, if Todd hits a shot back too fast for me to handle, I might actually learn more from an interaction with the LSP. The point might last longer depending on what I do, for example.

Any learning experience consists of some trial, error, feedback, repeat. Add in some memory and the ability to not repeat errors and one is on the way to new skills.

A mistake might work out, AKA, "better lucky than good," or you might end up as the pin cushion. Perhaps a little pain makes the memory more permanent -- a topic for another post. Both winning and losing points should be examined for lessons.

All kidding of Todd aside, at my level of play, I can learn from anyone if I pay enough attention. Did I beat up on the LSP just to win the game? I hope not, but I will not swear I've never done it.



## Post 79 Tournament Fun and Games

So you are going to play in a tournament. How do you beat the team in front of you?

While I've not played in tournaments, I'm quite interested in how your team should quickly (shall I repeat that?) figure out how to play against the next team. Nothing worse than being down early and no clue how to turn it around.

Let me suggest the following.

During the first points when returning serves, try this as a set play. Hit the ball cross court so that the ball is in front of your partner at the net. You advance up the middle of the court to cover the middle.

Do that on both sides of the court and for each player. Think of it as squeezing your opponents off of the court.

What you are interested in finding out is the relative strengths of the backhands of each players. See if they like to return cross court or up the middle or are drivers or lobbers.

If it works well, then you can keep doing it, though I would play to the middle a bunch as I don't want to be too predictive.

A couple of things to keep in mind. Watch out for lefties as the backhand will not be in the proper place (tongue in cheek here a bit). You would like to learn what each player will do with a backhand and forehand shot. In the early part of a game they will probably hit their normal shot. This is valuable information as it provides a map to defense and under pressure it's very likely they will hit their usual shot.

You would like to find glaring weaknesses, but baring that, there may be some tendencies that will allow you to predict the flow of future points. If there is an early time out, be prepared to discuss observations with partner.

What you might find in mixed is that the guy will drive the ball at your partner and the gal will hit it cross court. Use that tendency to control future points based on your strengths. For example if your partner blocks well, then you don't fear a drive at her. And cross court shots can be poached.

Also drivers of the ball tend to hit a lot of out balls, so evaluate their shot types with respect to hitting it out. If there is a lot of top spin on the shots, they tend to stay in, but someone who hits a hard cut, will sail a lot of them long.

A great discussion with partner prior to the game would be to try some of the above and see what you learned from it.

How about serves? Pro Tip: serves are vital if not sacred. You've fought to get the ball so don't quickly hit a serve into the net. This is your only chance to score points and if you don't score you will not win the match. Serious stuff.

Take a breath and a half second of time make sure it's in. Deep is usually better than shallow, watch where your opps setup in re the baseline. And then there is the forehand backhand question. Feel free to add in some spins as you can use them to move the opponents around. A good serve requires an opponent to move her feet, a great serve might be straight at the body and force an awkward shot.

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

Finally variety is useful. Even if you have a great serve the players will learn quickly how to get it back, so soft and hard, up the middle and off to the side are good things to do. We don't want comfortable opponents who know where the ball is going.

Have I mentioned that getting the serve in is important? Well, it still is and getting it in is more important than all the other stuff.

## **Post 80 Short Term v. Long Term -- Goals, Rewards, etc.**

Win the game or try to learn something...

Todd suggested this topic. There are posts already written about how to play when the skill levels are uneven, the enthusiastic reader can go back and look for those. But basically, it is my opinion that everyone should play to the top of the lowest level player's skill level. Doing that should increase the enjoyment of everyone and by playing at the top or a smidgen beyond the lowest skill level, provide a challenging environment to the player with the most to learn.

Now, Todd accused me of beating up on the weaker player in order to win the game at all costs. Now, I don't remember this the way Todd does. Actually, I don't remember the game at all. If I did beat up the weaker player, I'll apologize now. And by "beating up" Todd may actually mean, that I didn't hit the ball to Todd as much as I could have. Let me pass on a thought on that point. The less skilled player, the more likely they are in the wrong place. Either they don't follow a service return to the net, or they get caught in the middle, or they advance too soon, or don't back peddle in panic often enough... If I see this, I usually will play to this position because that shot is my best selection, but I'm not going to try to just put the ball away. It is the same with serves, I'll cut back on spin, speed, and depth so that there are fewer service return errors from the other player.

OK, but let's get to the topic. And I've had this discussion with Robo, who gets less than his share of balls hit to him in a match, usually because he is the stronger player. There are others in this same boat and I deliberately will play to them (recently) so they don't feel excluded. Feelings matter!

But what I experienced with Robo two years ago, is that if I hit to him, I usually got a very hard shot right back at me. It only took a couple deflecting off the top of the net and face bound to make me 1) a bit fearful of my life, 2) thinking that it was a silly thing to have done. The returns from Robo were rarely returnable, and watching a ball zoom by my face was not improving my game or blood pressure much either. So I quickly saw no point to doing that.

Times have changed and I've gotten better and played a lot with Robo and against him and I'm not too worried about a ball in face or my life at this point, so I am happy to hit to Robo -- and I am hitting a better shot, so he can't just whack them past me. So there was a learning process there that worked for me. But balls in the face all day long was not where progress (and/or fun) was made. I've written about learning before, but if I were to sum it up, you need motivation, practice, feedback, and some of that needs to be in appropriate doses. Tossing a beginner into a 5.0 game is not going to pass on as much knowledge as some time in front of a ball machine or a bang wall.

There is an old tradition that you have to (should) play with better players to improve. That there is no "boot strap" method. I disagree with that. I think that you will get better faster with better players - probably due to feedback and providing insights to what just happened. But you can do it yourself. This is not a game of strength or esoteric skills. There is a lot of "don't panic," "be conservative with shot selection," "don't hit the ball when you are running," and other tips of that ilk. I would also suggest that playing in a game where you are competitive will provide more practical experience and more actual shots to make and feedback, than getting beat up in a game well beyond your level, where

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

if you don't hit it effectively, the points will be short and lacking joy.

### Case History:

Mr. Y and I had a brief discussion the other day and he mentioned that he'd played three games that morning with player X, who continually made the same mistakes as he had since he started playing a couple of years ago. Y found it difficult to watch after three games and sought other players.

So what to do about X? It is a bit rude to provide coaching unsolicited and not everyone cares about getting better or does not care if they win or lose the game. I can't say any of those attitudes are "wrong." But if you and your partner are not at the same level, skill, interest, or attitude, it can make for a game that one partner didn't want to play or repeat. I'm not sure X cares or is capable of improving. And just playing may not be enough to get better. There is something to drilling and lessons... But it may come down to self reflection and interest.

There is another complication. In my two years playing with the Downs crowd, it seems to me that there is a lot of improvement and the average skill level has risen a lot. The success of the Downs' players in outside tournaments provides some objective evidence to back that up. If you are not improving, then the field is rising past you.

Hmm, this is getting long and I'm worried about upsetting players. And all of this is just my opinion anyways...

One of the things I hope that the Tri-Valley Pickleball Club might do is to provide workshops for intermediates and advanced players. It is great that they have started a beginners workshop. I would be excited about attending more advanced classes.

I'm playing a point and when it is over, it's time to reflect... Did I do something wrong? Was this judgment, execution, or understanding?

Judgment: I chose a stupid shot - too hard or bad serve, or off the back fence, or trying to be too clever?

Execution: I chose a good shot, but dumped it into the net or hit it just wide, or popped it up turning my partner into a pin cushion. (A shot that just misses might have been a bad shot choice.)

Understanding: I was caught in the wrong place (I think), my partner and I were split (what's that mean?), when we served we never got to the kitchen (why?).

You can add more detail to all of those categories and see where the problems lie. There is a lot of instruction on YouTube for all areas of pickleball. It's a great resource and if you want to get better, it's a great start.

Hang in there loyal readers, another couple of topics have appeared.

### Why are beginners difficult to play with?

What makes a game fun? Which brings us back around to why we are playing. If winning is everything, then yes, playing with a beginner is unfun depending on your competition and whether the game will take into account the level of the weaker players. Also, as Robo has mentioned, the ball is going to go to the weaker player and he might be just standing around being bored.

Secondly, playing in a highly competitive game will test your game more efficiently. You might get

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

none of that with beginners. Or their shot selection is so strange that you spend the game chasing down lobs or stretching for down the line shots, rather than getting some dinking or blocking in. Also you may not get any reward for a good shot. You hit it, they return it to partner who can't handle the speed or pops it up. Unless you can enjoy the shots you make and how well you contact the ball and don't mind getting beat eleven to two, then you can still have a fun time, but it may not be the game you would really like to play. Finally, playing with beginners is an investment in their skills. Down the road hopefully their skills will make them good players.

Why would I want to play in a game where I'm well over my head? Let's look at this from the beginner's point of view. Downs is very good at including people regardless of abilities. There is the view that everyone should get access to the courts and have the same play time. However when there are a lot of players, groups will form and play amongst the same four players all morning. I don't have a lot of problem with that. People should be allowed to play with whomever they want. And if I were a beginner, there are a lot of games I would not want to play in. I've noticed that players with less skill will often defer to more skilled foursomes and wait for another game. I have no problem with that either and I wouldn't want to get crushed - what fun is that? I think the best game for everyone is where the level of skills is pretty even.

So, have I addressed Todd's question? Have I upset everyone? Well, then my job is done! But seriously, I think that the skill levels is important to take into account for all players when a game is played. I think the good players should play to a lower skill level. If you are going to ask to play in a game, be a bit sensitive to the skill levels and maybe watching a good game would be more of a learning experience than playing in it. Particularly if you were to discuss aspects of the game with one of the players after the game. I don't think anyone would refuse that discussion.

This is long, thanks for hanging in there. Feedback is appreciated and this is probably a topic that will never resolve itself. I understand that there are other courts where there is some strict ability level segregation. That has its pluses and minuses, I guess. Maybe the beginners ought to wade in here. Maybe I should have talked to a few of them too. They might be more sensitive to this than the advanced folk. OK, time to publish and perhaps perish. :-)

## Post 81 Sand Bagging

Sandbagging has a long tradition. Not being a tournament player, I'm not really affected by it in PB. However in past activities I've seen various solutions.

The problem in finding a PB solution is that there is no real way to score a player in an absolute sense. In bowling or golf you have scores that don't reflect people playing defense and it's easy to place a handicap on someone based only on the scores. This does not always work and some golf organizations will only use competitive scores as a measure of ability. But wait, if you are interested in sandbagging and are playing in a competition that you can't win, it would be easy to miss a couple of putts or hit a couple shots out of bounds to fatten your score.

I watched some of the 3.0 PB play up in Concord the other week. In the title match I saw only one player whom I would call 3.0. The rest looked closer to 4.0 to me. The 3.0 player was frequently in the wrong position, couldn't or wouldn't volley a dink. However, she was very consistent at returning dinks - her super power. Her partner was pretty strong and highly active and they blended well together. But 3.0 as a team? I don't think so.

I have no solution and if I were a tournament player, the category that I played in would be an important decision. Now, if everyone does it, then sandbag away!

The tournament directors might make a rule that if you are first or second in your category, then you get an automatic bump into the next level. Which makes a lot of sense in the lower ranks. If you keep winning, you keep going up. Pretty soon everyone is at 5.0! This has some problems, so maybe you have to win twice to go to 4.5 and three times to go to 5.0. It's not clear how well that would work, but it would clear out the lower brackets of the sandbaggers.

I guess we need the actual players to chime in here...

## Post 82 Miscellaneous Thoughts

... that you are in the right place, at the right time, properly balanced between order and chaos, where everything lines up as best it can at that moment.

Those wise words are from Jordan Peterson, who is a psychiatrist. I don't know if he plays pickleball, but one has to admire the succinct turn of phrase in this paragraph. Jordan's area is that of human mental stability, but I think it plays to our corner of the sports world too.

One of the great strengths of the game is that the pace is fast, but not too fast. Sometimes you've got a full second to get ready for the next shot. How generous is that?

Of course the amount of time you have and the court size has to be in balance. If the court is too big for the time, then it becomes a game of put aways. PB singles is close to that particularly in re the ladies singles.

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"I keep popping the ball up!"

"Well, if you are not holding the paddle too tightly, the experts suggest about 30% of maximum, then make sure your wrist is straight (when held, the paddle should form a ninety degree angle to your arm). You want to move your hand (and the paddle) independently of the arm swing. That allows you to control paddle angle and thus height of the shots. The arm provides the power and spin and the hand and wrist provide elevation and direction. Dinking tip: don't use much if any active wrist movement when hitting a dink, the shot is a short arm swing, which should bring the paddle back up in front of you.

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I'm taking a couple of days off from playing games, but I still want to hit a bit. A goal when hitting it gently back and fourth is try to hit the ball on the sweet spot every time. It's easier said than done. The skidding line shots are no help in this and the paddles smallish sweet spot is an added complication. They do sell a paddle that is much smaller in the head area used as a practice aide. I would have bought a couple but they are not inexpensive. I may sacrifice an old paddle to mimic this.

## Post 83 Stages of Understanding

"Master, when will I understand the game?" asked Po, the acolyte.

The Master was busy with pumice stones and assorted sandpapers. Not only did his favorite paddle need some maintenance, but the callus on his right foot was getting too advanced. An advanced callus will slow even a Master.

"What did you say, Po, as you can see I'm a bit busy here?" replied the Master.

"I'm wondering about understanding the game, Master. Sometimes it seems simple and then it seems complex. What is it?"

"Oh, Po, I thought you knew this. The game is both simple and complex. As a player you must make the complex become simple. Hand me that nail file please."

The warm air in the Master's study and beams of light from the narrow window were awash with the callus' and paddle's airborne sandings.

"But Master, that seems to be little help? How can I make a difficult thing simple?"

"Oh, that. Of course you simplify the game by movement."

"Could you provide an example Master?"

"What? I'm very busy, but oh well. It is my destiny to provide enlightenment, I suppose.

"Remember back when you started to play Po? You just stood there and were surprised when the ball came to you?"

"Yes, those were scary times."

"Harrumph, and then later you expected some balls to come to you. And you became better at returning them. Then you expected that any ball might come to you and were even better at returning them as you more ready to move or block.

"Now Po we seek the final chapter of this short book. What is next?"

"Hmm, nothing comes to mind Master."

"Yes, I know. How sad, but the next step is to understand where the ball will go and to go there before the ball does. Understand, move, and strike like they teach at the Cobra Kai, down in the village."

"Master, I've never heard you say anything good about the Cobra Kai?"

"Yes, and you will not. Recognizing that they do something well is not high praise, it is what any capable player must do, even the 'Leg Sweepers.'

"So let me finish the progression of a proper player. One is that they are surprised at the location of the ball, then two they are ready if it comes to them and finally, three you move to where the ball will be. Thus the complex becomes simple.

"So Po, recognize the flow of the game, and the mental flow of your opponents, then move to interrupt the flow and create time and space pressure to defeat the enemy. The blessed Erne is such a move as is



## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

the proper poach. Do both when they are right. And further Po, since your partner is doing this as well, when they Erne or Poach, you must also move as the court coverage for your side has been disturbed. If/when the ball comes back, you must be in position.

"Only trees should grow roots, keep you feet and mind moving at all times. Now where is my foot lotion? I got some new Henua lotion around here. Po, it provides twelve important healing ingredients. So I'll have that going for me..."

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Editor's note. If you watch the YouTube video that Angel put up you will see him move to where the ball is going on a number of points. This is usually in a poaching situation. He moves well and he moves early.

## Post 84 The Serving Stroke

I helped Kirby with a beginners' and intermediates' pickleball introduction recently in San Ramon. I offered to help by passing on some instruction in re serving.

I wanted to talk about serving rather than dinking or volleying or ground strokes as I feel it's probably the most important portion of the game. That is, in some ways and not so much in others.

My current belief is that serving is important as it is the one chance to win a point, and if your side has the ball, the game is not lost. Thus getting the serve in is the important part. Hitting a non-returnable serve is wonderful, but don't do it if you miss some of them too.

The topic I wanted to discuss, is that of the serve stroke itself. I borrowed deeply from my golf swing knowledge to promote some shoulder rotation into the students' strokes.

Since the paddle weighs little and the ball weight much less, you can get away with just an arm swing or if you come from racquet ball, you can just flip your hand at it.

But if you golf, or bowl, or play tennis, then you should have some shoulder turn already. This is useful to PB as it promotes the use of the large muscles of the body, which will be less prone to error when tired or when the pressure is on, e.g., playing a tight match in a tournament.

Basics:

We stand in the middle of the serve side (assuming doubles).

Feet should be facing towards the center of area into which you are serving. Think 45 degrees or so. Your aim is to hit the ball into the center of the service area. (When you can do that all the time, then worry about getting it deeper and/or playing deliberately to a backhand or forehand side.)

Now with left hand holding the ball out in front of you, you want to rotate the shoulders to move the paddle behind you. This doesn't have to be far, if you are from tennis, you probably have a longish wind up and that's fine, but it's more movement than you need.

The vision of our wound up position might be that the left arm is extended in front, and the right arm is behind you (maybe a lot, and maybe a little, your right arm might be bent a bit, more stylistic than of issue). Your weight should be on your back foot.

At the wound up position your right shoulder should be higher your than the left - there should be a bit of turn via the torso or legs. For this to happen, you need to be a bit bent over. You are not standing straight up. It is an inclined plane as is the golf swing. The shoulders are not level to the ground.

Next is to step or shift your weight to the front foot. Then the swing starts. You drop the ball from your left hand and now we rotate the shoulders.

The shoulder rotation will do a couple of wonderful things, one is that it will pull your left hand out of the way of the paddle, secondly it will bring the paddle up to hit the ball. I see some new players who hold the ball in front of them near the impact position and then make an arm swing and let go of the ball microseconds before impact. They don't look comfortable and it seems they are worried about bruised fingers. Drop the ball early and higher and let the shoulder rotation move the left arm out of the way, but...

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

An important point here is the height from which you drop the ball. I'd suggest about neck high, with the intention of hitting it after it has dropped below the waist. And per the rules, you have to hit the ball from below your navel. It's wonderful how that all works out.

There is a lot of time to do this. The ball will not fall very quickly and you can use your shoulders in a very leisurely pace. (Let me see,  $32 \text{ feet/second}^2$  is the acceleration assuming we are on Earth and the wind is not blowing too badly. We have a drop of about 3 feet, the ball starts at zero feet per second. Hmm, "Google how fast does it take a ball to drop three feet?" ...And that would be 0.43 seconds. Plenty of time to swing at it.)

The shoulders rotate in place, with the right going down / forward and up and the left moving up a bit, then back a bit. Your spine will straighten out and you should be close to standing upright when the smoke clears.

If you do it correctly your chest will be facing your target before the ball is hit.

Let the momentum of the swing stand you up and face you forward. Your paddle will be up in the air and you are ready to face the service return.

Also note that your weight has shifted to the front foot, but your body stays behind the baseline. Please don't move forward until you judge the service return will be short. (Pet peeve number two.)

Let me emphasize a number of points:

- Wait for the weight shift (feel free to actually step forward) before swinging
- You have a lot of time, don't feel the need to hurry the shoulder turn
- There is not a lot of hand/paddle manipulation in this, the swing will do that.
- Drop the ball above the impact area
- The location where you strike the ball will determine its height over the net. There is a lot of subtle adjustments happening here, all automatic, as our bodies are really good at making things happen. In any case don't worry about it, if the serves are long or too high, you will quickly adjust.
- Don't worry about trying to hit a hard serve, just get them in.

There is a nice drill for this weight shift. A lot of the students had trouble with this. There were swings off of the back foot and such. This is important for all the ground strokes too. You want your weight forward to hit a sufficiently powerful shot.

Start with both feet together, take a modest back swing, step forward with your left foot, then drop the ball and swing. It's the step part that is useful as it will quickly let you feel where your weight is and keep you from swinging too early/quickly. You can do this without a ball or into the fence. (Community service tip: this is true for golf too, so this drill serves several masters.)

I wanted to talk about spinning the serve. I've addressed it before in an earlier post. But I've got a new analogy to try on you all. But next post!

## Post 85 Dinking Song

I published this on the wrong blog! But here it is:

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We're coming, we're coming, our brave little band.  
On the right side of dinking we now take our stand.

We like to hit high lobs because we do think  
That the people who chase them aren't able to Dink!

Away, away with dinks, by gum, with dinks, by gum, with dinks, by gum,  
Away, away with dinks, by gum, the song of the Non-Dinking Army.

We never eat granola because we do think.  
That gals with oats in their teeth are liable to dink!

Away, away with dinks, by gum.....

We never hit soft thirds because we do think,  
that soft shots will often lead people to dink.

Away, away with dinks, by gum.....

We never eat cookies because they have yeast,  
And one little crumb makes a man dink like a beast.  
Now can you imagine a greater disgrace  
Than a man at the kitchen with crumbs on his face?

Away, away with dinks, by gum.....

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I remember this song from long ago. It was about the demon alcohol as I remembered it, but it lent

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

itself to a bit of a brush up. The source where I found it, stated that the author is unknown. It became popular with Teton Tea Parties in the 1960s. There are other verses, but I think what we have here ought to be enough! Dink on!

## Post 86 Style Notes Part 1, Bryan and Lori

I was watching Bryan and Lori perform their magic on the challenge court yesterday.

There were a couple of style points that I found interesting in their game and I thought that passing them along on a rainy day might inspire others to try new things for their pickleball arsenal.

When you watch these two you will notice a couple of things. The first is that Bryan has Pogo sticks for legs and can hop all over the place. The second point is not about anyone else's legs, but the lack of a third shot drive by either of them.

They drop all third shots, and try to initiate a dinking point. You don't get this much at Downs. It is easier to whack a ball than to caress it into a small target area. If you are playing against them, you will not have to worry about a high speed block, but you want to be able to hit a good shot off of a drop shot. Think about volleys versus stepping back and hitting off of a bounce. I'm not saying which is better, but some pre-thought will be useful against all opponents.

They dink quite well. Lori likes cross court and Bryan likes to push right back at you, usually to your sideline hand.

They rarely will speed up unless it's a glaring pop up. So you don't need to hit the perfect dink, and it need not be a net skimmer; depth is usually the overriding issue on the quality of a dink in any case (shorter being safer than deeper!). But your dink is going to come back, so make sure you stop and are ready to move for the next one.

What they both do very well is drop thirds and return serves. They take back swings that usually do not place the paddle behind their body. The paddle will be held at the side and then there is a short hit to engage the ball. They typically don't hit the ball very hard, nor are the hits very low. There are large margins over the net and inside the sidelines for miss hits and such. This very good as it eliminates a lot of in the net errors.

The shot is close to being a push and is certainly not a tennis type swing. The stroke is short, and leaves the paddle close to the ready position for the next shot -- very tidy. I don't know what their sports backgrounds are, but if it's tennis, they've converted over to short strokes very nicely. And most of these short shots have a touch of slice spin on them, for depth and bounce control -- well done!

The only shots I saw that were struck with force were put aways due to getting pop ups at the kitchen line.

I really like their game. There are others at Downs that have that "hit it softly for the most part" game. This style keeps you in the points for a long time. They score by out dinking opponents and taking advantage of errors, rather than trying to hit it through or past opponents. What they rarely will do is hit the ball out and provide an easy point.

Now add all of that to first class friendliness and B & L are some of my favorite opponents. I've played with both of them and that's quite the treat too.

Take some time and watch them play. There is much to learn there.

## Post 87 More Thoughts on Style

I wanted to add some thoughts in re style inspired a bit by thinking about the last post, which described some of the elements of Bryan and Lori's usual game.

To summarize their style we could call it conservative in that they don't try to out hit opponents, but to out dink them. There is a lot to like about this style as it lends itself to few errors. The points tend to be longer with a mixture of soft shots and few of hard ones. Since missing shots is a major downer, this style looks like it maximizes happiness, which ain't half bad...

Others, like one of the Pauls, tries to hit winners off of a lot of shots. You'll get either a down the line or cross court short ball. He hits them quite well due to his tennis background, but it leads to very short points with little rally time. And it requires a lot of stretching on an opponent's part (which is fine except for the first game of the day!).

Those are the two extreme styles. There is a large middle ground where the style is a mixture of the above. Hitting the ball hard shortens points and soft shots lengthen them. The good player will use the appropriate shot for the conditions. And the conditions are not as simple as pure pickleball game theory might suggest...

We are all out here to have a good time and lunging for the extreme passing shot might not be at the top of the list of fun things to do. (I'd put in a cheeky reference to chasing down lobs too, but I'm trying not to overly prejudicial on that point and I've actually hit a couple of lobs that were successful recently. Perhaps I'll welcome the dark side one day.)

Back to conditions... As Jason has put it, "Partners matter." There are styles that you and/or your partner can't handle. For example, if you like to rush the net early, that requires your partner to hit perfect drops shots. And if your partner won't follow shots to the net, that makes it awkward as well. Expectation of fundamental pickleball movement is a bit part of the game.

Also speeding up a shot at the kitchen is fine, except if your partner can't handle the counter shot -- and there usually will be a lot of counter hits. If that's the case, then speed up less and wait for exceptional opportunities only. Shots you may want to take may only be appropriate with the proper partner.

If you're playing against beginners, hitting hard shots won't be sporting and won't help the beginners improve quickly.

The circle of posts has come around and we can see that with whom we play and against whom we play affect which style we use for a particular game. The end goal being to have a good time for everyone. (Exceptions below.)

As Strunk and White, said, it's all about the elements of style. Ah, a literary joke there, but I think it's useful to look at some of the choices to be made in re how to play in all circumstances.

These choices are more varied for recreation play versus tournaments, but I think it's worthy of discussion for both.

Broadly speaking we have drives and drops, dinks and lobs, and we can place those shots either in the middle of the court, deep, and/or to the sidelines. (Lobs are best done over certain shoulders, maybe a different post on that one.)

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

If you are playing a rec game with less skilled players, then playing gently up the middle or right at the opponents will generate the longer points and let everyone hit the ball more -- kind of what we are there for. And playing with a less skilled partner, softer shots tend to come back soft, which your partner can handle better than hard shots at extreme angles. Play the shots that your side can best handle and don't be an oaf and beat up on lesser opponents.

I've wanted to write about how to play tournament PB for a while, but I've not gotten around to it and since I've not played in any, it's been put off. But let me extend some of the thoughts from this post to that venue as it seems useful and it's raining, and you're here reading, so more content is better than less.

You've got the same choices in a tournament. But now the gloves come off and you are interested in the most efficient way to score points and win. Shot selections, depth, speed, angles are chosen to provide your opponents with problems to solve. You hope they can't manage that and you get a ball you can put away.

It's also important that you take into account the ability of the partnership and if you seek to out dink or out hit the opponents, you have to consider how well your team plays with that style. Speed up a lot if you both have fast hands and like a fire fight, or be more careful and patient if you don't, for example.

Also the opponents might be great hitters and lousy dinkers, so even if your side is not great at dinking, you may gain an advantage with that style. With a single game match, you want to figure out the winning style very quickly.

If I were to embark on a partnership for serious play, I would have detailed discussions with partner about style, shot selection, and placement. I'd also know what partner expects to do or cover, when balls are at extreme sides of the court and also, most importantly, the middle shots. If that is all understood, then you could have deliberate plays to push one or the other or both of the opponents off the court, modify coverage and seek to gain an advantage. Some of that might work best if the opponent is left handed and which sideline you use might be vital too.

When the game begins, evaluate each opponent quickly and figure out how to play to them. The answer might be to never play to a specific player -- unlike rec play you don't care if they don't have a good time. :-). And your partnership needs to agree on whom to attack and how and do that efficiently. So there is an additional element here, that looks complex and rewarding to figure out. "How to beat up on Strangers!" Might be a good book to read or write.

This has turned out more interesting than I thought it would be, at least for me. :-). I can see a checklist for partnerships, either on paper or mentally. And a quick evaluation of partner's abilities ought to influence shot selection to allow partner to play at the top of their game.



## Post 88 Third Shot Drop Model

Zane Navratil, in one of his YouTube videos, describes the third shot drop as a dink. This makes sense as you are trying to drop the ball in the kitchen like any other dink.

What he adds to this is that the swing motion is identical regardless of how far you are back from the kitchen line. The way Zane suggests you moderate the length of the shot is by the follow through length. A dink follow through will leave your paddle in the ready position. But a dink/third from the baseline might require a follow through wherein the paddle ends up head high.

I was using this today and found it worked quite well. So give that a try if your third shot drops are not what you want.

Here is the link to Zane's video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OIkAK3Ch1WY>

## Post 89 Asymmetry

The sun rose with evil intent and flooded the sunken park with rays that reflected like an oiled arm on a beach determined to get an early tan off the bedewed playing field. The basketball courts sat lonely with just a sheen of dust and motes to mark their areas and promises of future play.

A harsh set of plonk, plonk, plonks came from the pickleball courts as the early morning crowd of players determined to beat the temperature rise like antelope getting to the water hole before the lion wakes up. Dressed for heat and sweat, the players struck the warmup balls with scant attention to technique or direction. Muscles tried to warm as feet moved sluggishly in the preheat cool air. Joints, not quite ready for the stresses of the day's play, pushed out chemicals that warned of yesterday's stresses not yet healed. Comments crossed the net as a mixture of friendship and humor, roiling in the early sun. Plonk, plonk, plonk. Finally, modest patience burned off like park mist, the call to play a game was uttered as the desire or need to eat once more at the chemical soup that derives from competition was upon the players...

In the chaotic model of life one might suggest there is very little symmetry. Ben John's brother, Colin, suggests that doubles pickleball court setup should not be symmetrical due to angles.

I've been stumbling into this view for a while and it was a nice memory jog to read of Colin's comments. Shall we explore this topic?

For example, you receive the serve which landed in the left hand court. Your partner is at the kitchen and on your right. Where do you want to return the serve?

The position of the return is going to present an angle for their third shot and you can force your opponent to either hit through your partner or around him.

Let's assume that you put the ball on the right side of the court, which places it where your partner controls most of the angle of the third shot.

Partner has been to a couple of rodeos and knows to slide to his right and cover the sideline and sets up to cover the right side of his half of the court. He should be looking for the sideline shot as highly probable. Be ready to hit it before it comes at him. Where to return it depends on how the opponents have moved to hit the third shot.

You must cover the rest of the court. If you move to the center of the court, that will allow you to cover the large portion of the rest of the court. You are not in a great position to cover an extreme shot to your left, but that shot is very difficult as it must cross close to the net and the sideline is not very deep there and it is easy for any ball with speed to sail long.

Notice that your team has abandoned twenty to thirty percent of the court. But you have the sideline and middle well covered, which I see as a net benefit.

Let's try for the other side of the court. You decide to return the ball, mostly straight forward as the second shot of the point. You must move up the court and a bit towards the left sideline. Your partner needs to sag in a lot towards the middle. And now you leave the right sideline open deliberately.

Final case is if you return the second shot right up the middle. The expected return is back up your middle. Someone needs to look for the center shot. Maybe the forehand, maybe the player who is

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

already at the kitchen line, but it needs to be clear to both players who is going to take the expected shot. I've been taught that the person already up at the kitchen is responsible for the middle shot. I think this is reasonable.

I would add some nuance to this. If the second shot has some side spin, then a more angled return is more likely. Also, know your opponents, as they usually like certain shots -- be careful of those.

John, the Canadian engineer, likes to straddle the middle of the court when his partner is returning the serve. I've never seen him at a disadvantage in doing this. I suspect that he shades to one side or the other depending on the location of the service return. When this is done, the partner who returns the serve and then moves up to the kitchen line will have a very small area to cover. With little to do, look for out balls and try to warn partner. :-)

Middle control and setup is done during dink rallies too, especially when there is cross court repetitive dinking going on. The non-involved partners on both side, should be stationed pretty close to the center of the court. You'd like to reach in and slap any poor dink that you can reach. You'll also have to shuffle back and forth a bit as the ball crosses in front of you, as you have to cover a dink that doesn't go cross court. This seems to be fairly hard to do and doesn't come up much. In any case, the side to side movement is good practice to get used to. Is there a Latin motto about moving before you need to? Well, there ought to be...

## Post 90 Most shots are Dinks!

With the exception of overheads and some slapping shots, the rest of the shots are ground strokes. I would suggest that most ground stroke might be hit like a dink. Not a lot of wrist, some arm movement, not much much of a backswing. If you apply the dink structure to other shots, you will find more control and less anxiety! All good. Now let flesh this in a bit and add an exercise to test this proposition...

A good dink is a smooth, short stroke without much of a follow through or backswing. It contacts the ball near the south pole. The more you need to hit a short dink or get it over the net, the closer you hit it towards the bottom of the ball. A cross court dink is closer to the equator. As a human machine you'll do this somewhat automatically.

Step back from the kitchen line two paces and then hit a shot into the kitchen. It's just another dink but with a touch more follow through. It doesn't start with a bigger windup or body movement or wrist flip, just a gentle lifting of the ball. Since this is more of a lift than a hit, you again need to hit the ball closer to the south pole. Keep this in mind as we move further back from the kitchen line.

Step back another six feet and you're close to the baseline. Hmm, a short shot with a lot of follow through is all you'll need to hit the dink, but now we will call it a drop shot. It's the same shot.

How about a lob? Hit the bottom of the ball, long follow through. You don't hit the ball hard, it's just more lift as you hit it.

The location of the strike on the ball controls the elevation. For a dink it's three feet, for a drop it's maybe six feet, and the lob is 10 or 15. Again, you'll do this quite well with a bit of practice.

Try this out by starting at the kitchen line with a dink, hit it, then step back a step or two, hit the shot, and keep moving back with the same shot just varying the follow through.

How about a lob from the kitchen line? Just get under the ball more, and a longer follow through. Though I think people should dink when at the kitchen, it is possible to just lob -- how sad. :- ) (Sorry Sam!)

## Post 91 A Question from a Mike, Strategy!

One of the Mikes wanted to discuss strategy a bit. I suggested that it was basically king of the hill. Get to the kitchen and wait for a mistake.

Mike seemed dubious about that take. Shall we examine the issues?

I think it's important to start with a simple division. Are we talking about tournament play or rec play?

Rec play is all about having a good time. I think that means longer points, everyone gets to hit the ball and while hitting a put away is fun, it's not a great thing to do if you are beating up on a beginner. I'd suggest trying to prolong points and win them by moving opponents around, being clever, keeping the ball in, etc.

What Mike might have in mind is how can a team play better together and I think that's an interesting topic. Playing together basically means moving together and shot selection.

The basic movement implies that you can move ahead of your partner's shot if it's going to be a soft one. If partner likes to hit the ball hard, then you have to be back to return a hard shot.

There are players who will hit the third, fifth and seventh shots all hard. This is not my style and I prefer a soft third, or at least soft shots after a hard third. I see situations that cry out for just dropping the ball over the net allowing my side to scamper to the kitchen and get in the dink battle, but partner winds up and misses or we get caught with a return too hot to handle. I agree that hitting the ball hard is fun, but it's not the funnest way to play in my opinion.

You can also look at the post about Bryan and Lori, who basically do not hit hard shots unless they can win the point outright. If you get a chance to play with one of them, you'll see that knowing what is going to happen makes the points much easier to play. You know where you want to be, where they will be, etc. There is then a smooth bit of team work that I find quite rewarding. Win or lose, I'll have enjoyed the "dance" of the play.

If you go back to some of the early posts you will find one about who covers the middle of the court. This is vital and it requires anticipation and movement. If your partner is pulled left, you have to shift left too. Same thing when you are pulled away, partner covers/shifts. Thinking about having one or more of you sitting on the center line at all times and switching roles, is simplistic, but pretty close to the truth. This is more basic to advanced play than strategy, actually.

One of the difficulties of rec play is that you will not have discussed any of this with your partner. You're going to get at most a couple of games together. How much does partner know and what will they do about shots and coverage, etc, are the questions. Being on the same page is part of learning the game. What an advanced player does automatically, a beginner is probably not aware of, or might even be hesitant to do. Abandon a side of the court to handle the middle? Camp on a sideline because of whom you are playing? Hmm, scary at first, comfortable later, and soon a standard element of the game.

When all the finer points are integrated, then they can all get warped due to whom you are playing. For example you are playing against a banger who likes, OK, loves the down the line shot. Well to control the point you want to coax them to hit that shot because if you know where the ball will go, you have a

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

large advantage.

There are other examples of this, if the opponents bang all the balls, be ready to block and angle the returns off. If the banger's partner is in the wrong place, then punish him.

Mike and others are fervent about getting better and are interested in the learning the finer points of the game. That's great, and there are a bunch of players who were beginners and are getting better quickly. The beauty of the game is that a rapid skill acquisition is easy to do. But what about partner? You learn something new and want to try it, if partner has not heard of it, then you may be in trouble. You don't want to do things that partner won't understand and react to properly.

So once again I'm off topic. Strategy is a bit nebulous, I guess, and I'm leaning at more altering play based on whom one plays rather than the basic movement and shots of a game played by the book.

So maybe to answer Mike's question, the answer lies in getting real good at coordinated movement, better at controlling the ball you hit, and best, which shot to hit.

Tournaments are a different case and there is a very recent post about that. Basically, beat up on the weaker player. Dink if you are better dinkers, bang if you are better bangers. Serves become a bit more important, but still vital to always get them in.

## Post 92 Winning by Not

"Master, I am having trouble winning points," said Po after entering the Master's room.

The smell of incense filled the room, or maybe it was Louisiana Hot Links, the Master was partial to both. The carpets were rich, soft and lent the room a quiet that the slap of a court shoe would not disturb.

The Master was busy with a small cotton ball and some cleaner, making sure the grip of his paddle was perfect. A cup of tea and a saucer of almond cookies lay at his elbow.

"What is that Po? I did not hear you come in," the Master replied.

"I'm not winning a lot of points. Points that I think I should win," said Po. He looked dejected and any glow of a long day's play had faded his features. His tan couldn't break through his lack of winning.

"Remember Po, the movie that was shown last week. The one with the little green creature, who suggested that doing and trying were different things? What was his name?"

"It think you are thinking of the Star Wars movie and that was Yoda, who was training the last Jedi."

"Yes, well, whatever. The issue of trying is one that must be understood. Trying is a measure of impatience, Po. Doing requires patience and waiting. Effort must be used only when appropriate." The Master reached for a cookie and took a nibble. The cookie made a soft sound as it was replaced on the plate. The tea was slurped and the Master put down his paddle to concentrate on Po's lesson.

"But Master, I wait for an opportunity, but I can't seem to finish the points."

"Of course. I suspect like all young players, you see the path to win the point."

"Yes, I get a pop up or loose shot and I strike, like the cobra."

"Of course. And how many times does the cobra eat for each strike?"

"Well that is the problem Master, my strikes are not wonderful."

"So we have opportunity. Errant ever are opponents given time and teasing. The game is one of waiting for the gifts of the gods. Or lessor opponents, heh, heh," said the Master. A gleam shown in his eyes as his memory skated back over decades of matches.

"But Po, what happens then?"

"Then I strive for victory!" replied Po.

"Ah and in doing so, you miss on occasion?"

"Yes, but I have the chance, should I not take it?"

"Po, we are back to doing and trying. The little green man knew something of the truth in this, but not all. I guess it was made that way to satisfy the base understanding of the masses. Sad that, but Po, you are not of the masses. You need to know more and do more and do better. When opportunity arises,

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

you must do several things, you must recognize it, which is not as simple as you might suspect. Some opportunities are easy and some are traps for the unknowing.

"It is often better to be conservative in your cobra strikes, Po. If you seek to accrue more advantage rather than end the point, you will find more success. Stretch the opponent, make them run, of course hit it past them if you can, but only when you can do it without error.

"Po, the final phase of all players to become the player that cannot be beaten. To do that, remove errors. Never miss easy shots by over hitting. Better to dink back than to miss long or try to overpower the net tape. Patience is supreme, wait and then wait some more. If an opportunity shows up, take it but do not over take it. Play the ball back firstly, then winners will come. Let the opponents err, you just strive to be serene and patient and accurately and thus deadly. Does that help Po?"

"Yes Master. I see your wisdom. I will strive to the wall that misses no returns."

"Excellent Po. Would you like an almond cookie? The chef seems to have given me an extra today. I need to watch my figure, heh, heh."



## Post 93 Bad Shots That Work

I had a couple of games against Larry and Kirby the other day. The game they lost was due to a lot of shots going long.

But one must recognize that there are shots in PB that are technically bad, but will work in the heat of battle.

The technique is to hit the ball too hard, but keep it barely in reach of the opponent. Where to hit it, is the topic of the day.

You can win points by hitting the ball where the opp can't get to it. For example a drive to the feet or a corner, or the dink that gets behind the opp as the net.

You can also do well by hitting a ball that is directly at an opp. This is useful for serves and at the net. If you can, the dominate hand hip and shoulder are traditional targets for good reason.

If you hit a ball at an opp that jams him and yet is moving too fast to duck is also effective. Note that this shot doesn't have to be in to be effective, as it will never get past the baseline.

There are variations on this too. Hit it over a shoulder, somewhat hard, but in reach and it's the rare player that will duck it.

In the dinking game, it's easier to hit it hard (maybe at the opponent) than the touch shot. There are a lot of Downs' players who do this and will hit the dink very flat, sometimes at you and sometimes trying to get it past you, but never intending it to land in or near the kitchen line.

It is my opinion that a lot of these shots will go out, but ducking is difficult as the ball are typically low over the net and there is little time to decide about returning it and it may be too awkwardly placed to duck. These kind of shots usually turn the point into a fire fight as the ball will keep speeding up until someone misses.

Now for the moral dilemma, should you deliberately hit balls that are going out? You can probably get away with it for a while and it might be very good tournament strategy as you will be up against new opponents every game and tournament players are probably more likely not to duck as they are aggressively going after all balls.

Is it a violation of partnership responsibility to play as well as you can? Game theory might suggest that you should do it, as long as it succeeds more often then it fails.

I might suggest that you hit a couple of wild ones early in a game, just to give the opponents something to worry about. Also, try a poach that takes you all the way across the court. Do that early in the game and it may well modify the opponents play and what kind of returns they feel safe making. I'd suggest that in any tournament game with strangers -- make them think and worry, then settle in to play solid pickleball.

Lastly, to be a good player you don't want to be predictable, so do some weird things on occasion and have a partner with a sense of humor and advanced strategy.

## Post 94 About Being Ready - Or What Will Come My Way?

I personally find myself getting caught by a dink that goes to an extreme edge of the court.

It may be that my large feet are not the quickest or perhaps more accurately, not as quick as they need to be. But while watching the pros play, it looks like they don't move until the ball is hit and they manage about three steps before they hit the return.

If that's doable by a rec player, then they must be aware of other things than you and I. There is literature about experts who are spending their concentration on different things than beginners. I might suggest it's the same in pickleball.

One of the things I've noticed is that they tend to face the ball and not the opponents' baseline. Since the issue is more moving laterally at the net than up and back, this makes some sense. So shift your feet as the ball moves around and face it, particularly if a cross court dinking battle breaks out. You want your feet to be moving all the time, so this ain't [sic] a bad idea in any case.

I also suspect that they watch the paddle face to see where the ball is going to go. If you watch Todd play, there is a lot of last sub-second paddle face manipulation (LSSPFM) to create an angled shot. I have watched paddle faces in the past, but it is difficult for me to concentrate enough to do it all the time. Lazy, perhaps? You may be right, but it might be one of the things that an expert does that others don't/can't. Still the pros get fooled on occasion.

Watching a paddle gives you more time to move your feet in preparation to make your return. And where will you return it? If you pause to think about that, it's going to be a problem. How many times has the reason for a miss been, "I changed my mind?" If you are playing and not thinking, you'll do wonderful things with no internal deliberation or hesitations -- I think that is what you want to strive for. As a master once said, "Become one with the ball..."

There is another point here, is that a professional is probably a lot more predictable than a rec player. If you are going to grind out high level play all day long, you can't be hitting the balls on the lines all the time, you need to be somewhat conservative in your shot selection. If you watch Andrea Koop, a top level female player, she has the most relaxed, simple serve. Doesn't try to win points with it, just getting it in and starting the rally and she can do it for hours.

If you play against Matt, Scott, Roger, et al., you will get very predictable shot selection. They are interested in beating you with consistency rather than by being clever. It is an easier way to play, being clever all the time is hard work.

So, a quick summation: align your body with the ball location when at the kitchen line, When you are running up to the kitchen line, then a good habit is to run towards the ball and not just straight forward to the net -- you'll be able to cover the middle of the court better. Try and watch the paddle of the opponents for clues as to the next shot. Play with freedom and with verve. Keep your feet moving. :-)

## Post 95 Livermore Pleasanton Scramble Report

I thoroughly enjoyed playing in the first Pleasanton Livermore social get together pickleball scramble. Oh, I was just going to watch a bit then wander over to the Downs for some play, but there was a need and I was drafted.

Some of you may know my aversion to highly competitive play and it's a real condition, and not one that should be thrust on the world stage anymore. But the play today was without scoring or winners or losers. And that made it just fine in my mind. The format of playing with a new partner for 15 minutes, then getting a new partner and opponents added some spice to the meal. All in all it was well run and a lot of fun. Thanks to Tri Valley pickleball club for putting it on.

The abilities were varied and I played for long points rather than slams and put aways and the usual body shots. And for the most part everyone was playing like that, which made it an exercise in resets and dinking. I found that fun and good for my game even if ball speeds were not very fast.

One of the common issues I saw with players was paddle position when at the net. Typically it was not high enough. While there were no real fast shots hit, having a low paddle makes it very difficult to kill a pop up. By the time the paddle is in position, the ball is no longer hanging in space ready to be smacked. The only shot left is a highish dink that typically floats too long into the court.

The paddle up position is needed for a couple of reasons. You want to protect your body, block an aggressive speed up, and mostly to punish a bad dink.

The droopy paddle is seen across a lot of skill levels. Even some of the Downs' tournament players can get into this position. So check your form on occasion and make sure I'm not talking about you. :-)

There is another occasion when this type of issue comes up. In the blog posts from early on, I stressed the need to follow your service returns as far into the court as you could. There are several advantages to doing this. For example you take away an easy deep third shot which is available if you stay all the way back. Secondly if you can get all the way to the kitchen line, there are high balls just asking to get smacked away, but if you are not in position, then they can't be hit aggressively. Thirdly, there is nothing more scary than being at the kitchen line expecting to hear your partner's shot and there nothing but the belated sound of a bouncing ball.

There you have it, hopes, fears, inner issues and a touch of training, all in one post. Thanks again to the TVPBC for their work (and brownies, and swag, and cookies...).

## Post 96 About Those Out Shots

At the meet and greet, sadly without wine, one of the Downs' regulars asked about out balls, when and what, basically.

This topic has been addressed a couple of times most likely in conjunction with other topics, yet it deserves its own post. Let's explore this useful topic.

The first point I will make is that out balls are not rare. But frequently they do not end the point.

Secondly, if you want to get good at ducking, then a big part of that is to expect out balls. Actually, you want to hope an out ball is hit to you. What is more consistent than ducking? A good ready position allows you to duck easily.

Most out balls that you can duck will take place when you are at the net and the opponents aren't. They might be at the baseline or moving up, but this is one of the more frequent scenarios.

So, how to judge... Firstly watch a match and evaluate how many shots would go long. It's a surprising number.

Secondly, an out ball is usually hit pretty hard, it's usually pretty high over the net, and it might have some backspin on it. So a ball that is hard, high and spinning, is not going to land in. Step aside and give your opponent a wry smile. I like to add a compliment, for example, "You got all of that one!" Just to keep things light, you understand.

Spin is a big part of this as it causes the ball to sail a bit, so if it's spinning, it doesn't have to be very hard nor high to go out.

The one shot that can fool you is a high shot with a lot of top spin on it. The good and the bad about the pickle ball is that its velocity decays rapidly and with some top spin, it will stay in.

Like poker, you want to be playing the player and not just the shot hit. There are those players who will always hit the ball hard, and others who will always chop spin the ball. And there are folks who do both, sometimes always! These guys are most likely to hit out balls. Know your opponents! Study them and compile a book of weaknesses.

When all parties are at the net, there are a lot of out balls too. Mostly from folks who don't dink much. They hit shots that are not "lobby," i.e., they have little spin and will not land in the kitchen. A lot of those shots are going to go long. However it's hard to let them go or even to duck as decision time is limited and you might be the target. But stepping aside is worth doing on occasion as it keeps the opponents honest and you can learn what shots are going to be long. Again, looking for specific shots is a way to speed up your decision making.

I hope this helps, it's a big part of the game. The more people let bad shots go out, the more likely folks will adopt a more genteel style, which suits my vision of a wonderful future.

## Post 97 A Visit from an Angel

Angel dropped by the Downs today. I got to play with and against him. We had some time for conversation too.

You all should know that Angel has read all of the blog posts. I asked if he had any technical disagreements in re content and he replied that it was all pretty accurate. So now you are assured of veracity, at least by two peoples' opinion. :-)

Angel is currently ranked 4.67 or thereabouts, he is expecting that to go up as they had a good tournament result the other day. I told him he had to play at 3.875, and he agreed to that.

I want to talk about the conversation we had, but let me jot some thoughts about his play.

A lot of shots from his ground strokes landed about half way into the service area, i.e., not flirting with the end line much. His speed was reasonable, but not outlandishly fast. The balls could easily be returned, if, of course, you were there to hit them. He placement was usually up the middle and then up the middle and more so, up the middle. If you were determined to cover the middle like syrup on a pancake, then suddenly the balls seemed to go up the sidelines. Hmm...

But the major difference I saw that made Angel different from you and me and greater Downs population is that his shots were very well controlled for height above the net. He hit most shots with a touch of top spin, kept them low, and as mentioned previously, not particularly deep. Oh, and you are not likely to hit a ball to him when he is at the net that he can't get a paddle on.

He wasn't perfect and missed some shots, usually side/wide shots and net balls. I guess he missed a couple long, but that was rarer than the other misses. He was very consistent and controlled. It looked like a game with little angst in it, quite relaxed and a player with time to deal with any shot he got. It was very polished and smooth.

I gave an assignment to a couple of players to let me know what they wished they had talked about before playing in the tournament this past weekend. So far nothing has been turned in. Angel mentioned that his partner and he had a four hour conversation before they started to play together. There is a lot to talk about it seems. Of course if they talked really slowly, maybe not that much, but I joke. Tournament preparation is a topic that sadly I know not much about. If anyone wants to contribute a guest post, I'm all for it. This paragraph is here as Angel mentioned the topic.

Partnership agreements is a topic that has not been explored much in these pages. In some ways it is not important for the Downs as there is so much mixing and not much pairing off. But maybe down the road it will be worth talking about. Note that if there are a lot more courts, then the game may change from "there are too many players here," to one of "Who can meet me at some park at some time." That may herald in a time of partnership v. partnership and change the look of the whole PB scene around here. But this is a topic for another time.

Let me note some things that I picked up from playing against Angel. The middle of the court is where the action is. Keep the ball low. You don't have to hit it hard to be a good player. When he was not playing, the shots was three feet higher in the air and a lot more errors! His drives, while probably not at full speed, were still difficult to block from the kitchen line as they were usually below the net level

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

and had a lot of topspin on them. He had some wild serves that he used a couple of times, lots of side kick and difficult to return. He mentioned a game against a fifteen year old who had an incredible serve that they couldn't return much at all. They quickly found themselves at zero to seven - it was a game that didn't end well.

In summation, the road to "Better" might be to control the arc of the ball keeping it lower, moderate speed - no need to hit them long, get better at hitting diving balls. If you want to crank hand speed up to eleven, that wouldn't hurt either. :-)

Angel mentioned that he thought that the level of play at the Downs was much better than he has seen previously. I guess we're doing something right!

Thanks Angel, for dropping by and sharing thoughts and play!

## Post 98 Angel II, or Things I forgot in the First Post

One of the other topics Angel and I touched on, was the attitude towards bad shots.

I've long thought that the important part of any sporting activity when done at a high level is emotional control. If you do well and get excited, that's fine as long as you'll play better with that attitude. Also, doing poorly might cause you to "dig in" and play better, or drop you into a dark mental hole where victory is a receding dream.

Angel had a story to share about that. His partner missed more shots than he wanted to miss, became vocal about his lack of happiness, and then found out that the opponents began to hit every ball towards him. If you are going to get upset make sure it will help your game. If it's not going to do that, then work on not getting angry or showing that you are angry.

This is a strange game. The pros make the same mistakes we do. It's inevitable that you'll net some, miss a few put aways and serve out (on rare occasion, yes?). You can't control that or its timing. But what you can control is your attitude. Being calm and unruffled might be best - of if you can convert darker feelings to better play, then go for it. I'd suggest just digging in for the next point. Don't let a bad shot affect the next point. And realize that you may well hit several misses in a row -- something you and Ben Johns have in common.

Let me drop in another nugget gleaned from Angel's conversation, that being, think about stuff when you are warming up or drilling. Get analytical then, but when it's time to play, then play. Don't try to find a fix for every errant shot, just try to become absorbed in the play and react to that. Dance around the court, be free of fear, and wreak devastation on your opponents! At the end of the day, you will have won or lost. Think about what could have been better then work on it in practice and prepare for the next game.

I guess for completeness sake, we must always work to keep partner playing at their best - be encouraging and supportive, you'll both have a better time.

Thanks Angel for dropping in and sharing your play and knowledge!

## **Post 99 A Podcast that is Worth Watching**

Dear readers,

I have a link below of a PB podcast that is really good. There is a list of topics in the "more" section and you can skip to where you want to go. The talkers are at a 4.5 level and have a fair amount of tournament experience.

Starting at about the 17:50 mark is a discussion of skill levels and what each should be able to do. Worth the watch just for that as you might want to use it as a map to getting better.

I've got a paddle blog coming up soon too, so stay tuned.

Here is the link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z59TQAXawaQ>



## Post 100 Paddles, or What a Long Trip it's Been

One of the Dans asked about paddles the other day. I've been jotting some notes down about this topic anyways, so I'm happy to finish it.

I started out with a medium priced paddle, maybe \$130, then I got a \$15 dollar returned paddle from PickleballCentral because I was trying to get some of my golf buddies interested and a spare paddle was useful.

The performance of the two paddles was the same. I couldn't feel any difference in impact and the other stuff, which I'll talk about in a minute.

Then I tried a bunch more, usually in the \$150 range or so. Gearbox 6 control I think was the next one. I didn't feel it was much different either. There were a couple of others too. One of which was elongated in shape.

Then I saw a review for the Oculus by Tmpr. The review suggested that it had a nice shape for those of us who come from tennis or table tennis. Well, that's my background and I said, "why not?" This was the first paddle that provided more ball speed and more spin than all the others. I finally found a difference amongst the paddles.

Coming from table tennis, spin is a big part of my strokes. Getting more of this from the equipment was of interest.

I didn't play with it long before the Hellbender came in to my hot little hands. I liked this paddle a lot. It was a bit longer than wide, and a touch more pop and spin. It also had a larger sweet spot by being a wider at the top of the head rather than by the grip.

The Hellbender, btw, is a name of the largest lizard in the US, suffered some damage. It had started to crack, then a paddle - paddle collision raised a two inch section of the surface. But, not to worry, I had ordered the Diadem Warrior by them. So the HB was put to the side after I glued up the face to get it back to playable state.

The Warrior has some issues with the edge band being poorly glued. I contacted them and they suggested that a two part epoxy would be the best glue to refasten it. I did that, played some and then had to redo it. But not to worry, I ordered a Gruvn 16E in the mean time.

I really liked the Warrior. It is about 8.5 ounces, but I never felt it was heavy. What I was nervous about was the surface finish. I was worried it would wear and the ability to spin the ball would diminish in time. It was more rectangular in shape and the corners near the grip seemed a bit dead, but I grew to prefer it to the Hellbender. But with surface considerations in re the Warrior, the Gruvn came on board.

The Gruvn has a "raw" carbon face that has some texture built into it. Hopefully as it wears it will retain its coarseness.

If you've been keeping notes, you might realize that there has been a fair amount of money spent on this quest. I won't argue with that, but even so, PB is the cheapest sport I've even done as an adult. By the way golf clubs are north of \$150 each, with putters and drivers a lot more and there are 15 of those in a bag. Oh, and the bags are a couple of hundred too.

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

On to Dan's question. Dan has been playing for four months or so and getting better. He question is really about whether the paddle he has was going to slow his progress.

My experience is that the paddles don't matter too much, but there are some characteristics that are important. I'll pay a lot for a paddle that has an edge to edge sweet spot. They don't make that one yet.

Surface is useful as spin is important to me. Dan doesn't spin much at this time. Tennis players and table tennis guys spin the ball, racquet ball people hit it pretty flat.

The paddles vary some in re how fast the ball comes off. I have noticed this, but there doesn't seem to be a huge difference in this parameter.

I finally decided for myself that I want the elongated paddle. I don't think there is a substitute for reach. I hit a lot of balls on the tip of the paddle – probably more due to my slow feet than anything, but it's what I got.

Other things that are in play: how noisy the hits are, grip sizes and wraps. Noise I'm not too concerned with, different face materials will create more or less noise.

Grips can be easily built up and if you're a bit handy, can be slimmed too, so I don't think that's a bit deal.

So paddle progression and player progression... I think you want to discover what kind of a player you are. If you need blocking speed at the net, then a lighter, more compact paddle might work better. If you are going to be a banger, then a faster paddle with more weight might be better.

But until you find things you can't do, then chasing paddles for improvement is fun, but not effective.

I've had some discussion with John, a Downs' player who is a member of the paddle of the month club. He has not settled on anything yet and buys a bunch and returns them. A lot of companies will do that, so if you want to try some with perhaps the cost of shipping at stake, why not.

Of the paddles I've owned the Warrior is the most advanced. It is very thick, maybe 19 mm, with three layers. I suspect that paddles have a few more years of development ahead of them. I think about golf balls with 3 to 5 layers, all of which react to different levels of impact. I could see PB paddles the same. It maybe that the rule makers will not allow that, but one could see the utility of a paddle that does different things at dink speeds and drive/serve speeds.

So I think we are a few years off for those details to be available. Until then I think paddles don't make a lot of difference other than sweet spots and spin rates. And you can overcome the sweet spot problem by hitting the ball where you should - so more practice, less paddles!

Kirby reps some paddles, or did, so you might see him if you want to try various variations.

## Post 101 Quick Tips of Great Value

Here are four items that come up a lot, but are a bit more advanced than the basics. They don't require a lot of explanation and I think they are technically sound. I'll pontificate a bit on the fourth one, as it touches a couple of the basic principles.

One: Moving your feet is vital (everything?). It's real easy to get to a good place and then try/expect to lean to get shots from there. That ain't the best. Get used to moving the feet all the time. A bit of a bounce or pressure shifts are a good way to be ready to move them for a shot. You should probably have to move for every shot. Maybe not a lot, but a step or half a step makes poaches and ground strokes much more consistent.

Two: When you are coming up to the kitchen line, it's easy to just run up your side of the court. But depending where the ball is, this may widen the gap between you and your partner. A great habit is to run forward, but towards the ball. Think of this as closing the angle that a goalie does.

Three: When you are waiting for a shot, face the ball's location. This doesn't matter a lot when you are at the baseline, but at the kitchen line it's important. You want to be able to move laterally to hit shorts and facing forward and twisting to track the ball puts you in a bad attitude for quick movement to at least one side, maybe both.

Four: Don't stretch for shots that are on your partner's side of the court. This is correct for two reasons, one is that it's difficult to hit a good shot when you are stretched out. Two, you've got a partner who is probably better placed to hit it. (And if the point goes badly, you can then blame partner!)

We are all here to hit the ball, so let partner hit his. The less court for which you are responsible, the better you can cover your side.

Now, if partner is used to you taking all the middle shots, this may lead to some awkward misses, but a quick word to partner will clarify this.

It is an extension of the theory of the crisscross responsibility, that is, the person to whom the ball is going, should hit the return. I'll toss in an exception to this -- when one player has taken control of the point, usually when receiving a pop up, they should aggressively hit any follow up shots as required. This is mid court to kitchen line stuff and it's pretty obvious.

There you have it, some simple plays that will make it easier to play well.

## **Post 102 How About a Droop? Not Published Previously**

We have the dink and the drive, but where is the acclaim for the droop?

What. never heard of it? OK, here is how it goes...

Instead of a delicate drop or a boring power drive, try hitting a shot that will land a touch beyond the kitchen line, and have a ton of top spin on it.

The idea to to present a target that has a large vertical component to it. Its height above the net is somewhere between the drive and a drop.

This is an easy shot for a table tennis player or a tennis player, but probably foreign to you ex-racket ball players.

Another way to this of this is a soft serve. When you hit a serve, you will normally get some top spin and if you hit it softly you ought to get a lot of vertical, spin induced, drop.

What makes this difficult to return is the dip in the flight path and also that is it might be dropping near the opponents feet.

## **Post 103 Defense to Offense Conversion Not Published Previously**

I've seen a number of people who miss hitting a sitter when at the kitchen line. They are well positioned to dink, but lack the hand and arm positions to strike down on the ball.

This shot needs to be easy to hit as it will end many points. It comes down to paddle position. If it's too low, you don't have the time to raise the paddle and then hit down on the ball.

Paddle position is not static. Depending on where the ball is, you want to alter the height of your paddle. If the ball is low, then raise your paddle, the ball has to come back over the net and thus must come up. If it's too up, you want to smack it down – so be ready to do so.

It just occurred to me that changing from a backhand ready position to a forehand position might be a good idea, again depending on where the ball is. If you're right handed and the ball is well to your right side, it's more likely you'll get a forehand opportunity. I've not been aware of this and I've got no data to support it, but it might be worth thinking about.

## Post 104 Ground Strokes Part II

Zane Navratil is producing some interesting videos on YouTube. His latest was about ground strokes. He says he sees a lot of folks using just an arm swipe to hit the ball. What he likes is to use the whole body.

He has a drill for that! He keeps the non-dominate hand in close contact with the paddle hand. When the hands are together it will cause you to rotate your shoulders and that will engage the torso and legs and as you go to hit the ball, it should all unwind from the feet up. I think I mentioned this before, but keeping the hands together when dinking is also a good drill.

This is not a lot different from a good golf swing.

Doing this drill will keep your body pretty compact and not stretched out, which he sees as a good thing. But if you don't stretch, you'll need to move your feet!

Here is the video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6sVo62oe35w>

Worth a watch.

New: if you want to try a two handed backhand, then you'll need this body rotation. It's worth exploring for new skills.

## Post 105 Game Parts, Partners, and Signals

I was musing about what parts of a game I enjoyed. I have to vote for the end game with a tight score.

The early points are OK. If you are playing with a new partner then you have to figure out what shots he will hit and what he likes to hit. (I'll use the generic "he" as partner's pronoun, feel free to substitute.) I realize the satisfaction of working out a lot of stuff with a regular partner. And as you would play together, I would hope that the agreements and roles would be altered to match experiences as they occur. A couple of posts back, I suggested that stretching for a shot in front of your partner is not good policy. A regular partnership would understand that and perhaps do it more or less based on forehands and what the partners' strengths are.

The drop/drive question is important as you might want to move and be positioned differently on the court if partner is a driver versus a dropper. My preference is to drop, but I can easily go along with a drive third and then a drop fifth. What I don't like is third, fifth, seventh all being drives. I think it's boring pickleball as it lacks elements of touch and control. But if that's what partner is going to do, you don't want to move much off the baseline until it's a good idea.

A commentator on one of the pickleball channels suggested that you could call a shot with "Mine" to denote a drop and "I've got it" to tell partner you are going to drive. If you know your partner is going to drop, you can move well ahead of the ball and get set at the kitchen line. But if it's a drive, being back to handle a good block is a better play. Will the partnership remember that kind of signal in the heat of battle?

In my ideal point the serving side will work hard to get into a dinking battle. Then the next question is speeding up the ball. I'm a bit too aggressive in hitting my backhand roller, waiting a bit would be a better percentage play. Also hitting the ball flat at someone is all well and good, but it depends a lot on to whom you are hitting. If you can hit the proper hip/shoulder then it probably doesn't depend on the player. But if you miss and the player is looking for it, you will have lost an advantage.

Back to partners... Some are willing to dink, some can't seem to stand it. I see it as an accomplishment to get to the kitchen line and start dinking, so I think you ought to have a good reason for speeding up or lobbing or trying the body shot. If the conditions are correct for one of those shots, then by all means. But doing it because you are nervous or bored, seems wrong. Learning to dink for a long time is a good skill to have. Lowers pulse and blood pressure, not a lot of running and you'll be admired by all who watch. If you learn to dink aggressively and can fluster opponents, then you are on your way to greatness. A path that we all might want to tread. To continue our thoughts about a new partner, these tendencies are useful to know as it will help you predict how the play will go and what you might have to do.

Also a big part of the early game is to look at the opponents and think about how the play will go. (If there is a beginner, then I try not to pick on him or hit hard shots, I'll provide balls that can easily be returned -- I'm happy to have a long rally. But I also want to not exclude the other player. Lopsided teams usually exclude one partner for a lot of the play. This doesn't bother me much when I'm not getting a lot of balls, but others don't share this view.) Since you are unlikely to talk to partner about how to play and to whom, this is more likely an internal dialog, but one that has value, I think.

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

Certainly if you are going to play tournaments, then this skill is vital, as would a quick couple of words with partner to suggest strategy. If things are not going well, use a time out and talk about different ways to play. Your general play style should have been discussed prior to the tournament, yes?

The middle game can be a bit boring assuming the game is fairly even. It's kind of a grind to get to the end. One team might make up ground or move ahead here, usually due to errors accumulating on one side or the other. Missing serves or netting balls and popping stuff up are what makes the game what it is. Don't get discouraged if you have a bad couple of shots. Hang in there and don't try to make up for it by hitting the ball harder. Nobody really cares about your bad shots but you in a rec game. We all make the same mistakes.

And then the end game, where each shot becomes more valuable. So, don't serve out, and be careful about hitting "the winner" if you have a good chance to miss. Play solidly and be willing to have a long rally. Make the opponents work for every point. If you are behind, remember that no lead is safe and comebacks are quite common. My personal best is to have won from being down 0-9 and 3-10. It takes steady play and some luck to do it, but never give up.



## Post 106 Electrolytes

I watched a YouTube video on various electrolytes the other day. I was interested in the video as it was talking about water consumption during exercise.

One of the issues is that whatever electrolytes you have in your system, you might be diluting them just by drinking water.

I'm a bit skeptical about all of this, but I was wrong about carb consumption and so I don't feel I can condemn it out of hand.

Part of the video was what the electrolytes are and what they do. Some of them provide muscle contraction and others muscle relaxation. An unbalance might cause some muscle cramps. Others might cause general skeletal muscle soreness.

Without imparting too much personal info, I would be happy to have less muscle soreness and less cramping. I'm not sure I have big problems in these areas, but there are some issues.

So I went to look for some electrolyte powder with the intention of using it in my water bottle that I schlep to the Downs every day. I can keep adding the powder as I drink it down and this might be a large portion of the water that I drink every day.

About powders, some of the sports drinks have a fair amount of sugar or maltodextrin in them. As I am trying to avoid carbs, I wanted a powder that didn't have that. The stuff I found has a touch of Stevia in it to provide a bit of sweetness, but no insulin reaction.

The stuff is not cheap, a touch over \$2 per ounce usually. I bought the stuff from Dr. Berg directly from his web site. It is available at about the same price on Amazon. His was the cheapest in price and I liked the Stevia in it. He has a lot of YouTube videos, if you are curious.

I will try this and see what happens and pass along the results.

The electrolytes are magnesium, potassium, chloride, sodium and calcium. There are others, but I think these are the biggies in re muscle issues, etc.

That's the introduction. I'll start in on the powder when it gets here and maybe check in on a weekly schedule.

## **Post 107 They are different from you and me.**

Start with a quote from the Great Gatsby, that can't lose...

I've been watching Major League Pickleball, which has been fun. They are using a modified rally scoring system. The games move along pretty well and there is a lot of variety in the teams, people are playing whom I've never seen before.

But what I noticed in the play is that there is a huge difference in what they do compared to us rec players. One thing leaps out and that is moving the feet.

When I'm having a good day of play, I find that I am all over the court, moving well, I get to a lot of shots, I have time to hit the ball. This looks like it's true for the pros too. But what they do is move their feet only when they are not hitting the ball. Move, then hit, then move some more...

And what do we do? We move too late and end up running through the shots. Ah, we can get away with it on occasion, but the speed of the running makes distance calibration harder, so long and out balls are more frequent. This happens quite often with a third shot as a lot of us will move up a bit after the serve, then backpedal furiously to return a deep return. Or we are surprised by a soft second shot and have to sprint to get to it. That rarely leaves time to stop.

Watch the pros and see the stability they have for every shot. Dance, stop, then hit. They do it for ground strokes and dinks a like.

## Post 108 Hitting the Ball Low

You can do a lot of bad things and get away with them as long as you keep the ball low. The key concept is that a low ball is not easily attacked by the opponents and frequently has to be hit up to clear the net.

I've been playing around with low ball trajectory technique (LBTT) and I'm starting to think that hitting a cut shot with an open paddle faced is the answer. And it seems that a very open face is often needed.

Some terms: open face means the paddle is pointing to a spot above the net; facing the sky a bit, would be another way of thinking of this.

Like most things, a cut or backspin shot is a delicate thing. Most of the shots you need to keep low are hit around the kitchen line. We are not talking about a ball struck with a lot of force. (If you do it hit hard with that paddle and some cut, it can float long.)

How to impart some cut spin: you need to swing from above the ball to below it. This is not a very vertical swing as you need to drive the ball over the net. What the open paddle face gives you is a bit of a hop to get the ball on a trajectory to clear the net. There is a range of good swing paths here from very high to low to almost horizontal.

Try these when you are warming up. Usually everyone starts with dinking, so there is a chance to play with it. Don't be surprised if you pop up a few at first as you figure out how open the paddle must be and how much of stroke you want. The "above to below ball" stroke doesn't have to be a long one. We are not interested in a lot of spin, but enough to bunt the ball over the net. The stroke may be quite close to horizontal and it might even have a bit of lift to it if you are doing this from well below the net. The stroke and the face angle will influence the trajectory and the amount of spin. We seek a ball that is pretty close to the top of the net -- and we are less concerned with how much spin it has.

The ball will not dip much after it crosses the net and this is fine. We are not aiming for feet, we just want a ball that can't be hit down at our feet.

There are two alternative shots to this shot, one being no spin, id est, a flat shot, and then there is a topspin shot. The flat shot will work well too, but it is harder to get over the net, it requires an open faced paddle too and then a swing that is horizontal to the ball or parallel to the ground. Maybe a post on that down the road.

A topspin shot has a problem in that you have to lift the ball further above the net than the others, and if everyone is at the kitchen line, you are likely to pop it up. The shot has more of an arc to it and usually presents higher to the opponents.

The three shots have their different uses and you want to understand all of them even if you have a go to shot.

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OK, if you got this far, thanks for reading... However this is maybe a "truth" that isn't. I tried to verify the slice shot being the stroke of choice for keeping the ball low. But the data didn't show up to prove that it was better than other shots.

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

I think my fall back position that the slice shot is a good idea for a number of reasons the big one being that a slice shot is harder to return, but the shot does not seem to be a better way to keep the ball low as a general rule. It will do the job, so it's one more of those things that are worth learning and using..

## Post 109 Thoughts on the Third Shot Lob

A wise man once said that if you pay attention, you will learn something every day. I'm not going to argue with that! Today I was introduced to the third shot lob. "Eh? What's that?" We have the drive, the drop, and I'll write up about the droop down the road, but a third shot lob? Hmm...

As several of you might know I have some strong feelings about lobs. Perhaps "about" is the wrong word. I could be called anti-lob and not have a real objection to it.

This, one must realize, is not a technical argument, but one of aesthetics. As I wander through this game, I find the soft shots to be of more interest than the lobs and fire fights to me, your feelings may vary widely. Give me a soft spiny shot to handle and I'm happier than chasing down the top spin lob.

Thus I'd prefer to see a drop shot that allows the servers access to the kitchen line and not by having pushed net folks back with a lob. The drop shot provides the opponents with an interesting puzzle to solve. Should I let it bounce, or lean in and try to volley it, and how will the apex height compare to the 34 inches of barrier between the player and the opponents? Whereas with a lob, it's just run back and then hit a high, low, or drop shot from the baseline.

And we can't forget the fourth shot if the opponents managed to handle the third shot drop. Now we have the opportunity to move in a bit or a lot and if the drop is less than wonderful, we may get the chance to defend from the baseline. All good stuff, clearly.

So a person with no bias, disinterested, (or as my calculus teacher in high school put it when doing proofs, "entirely obvious to the most casual observer") can clearly see that a third shot drop provides more entertainment for everyone and should be the shot of choice for any player who has moved their feet to allow them to hit said shot.

I have been known to lob myself solely for intellectual curiosity and to judge the wind properly for later shots of course. But as a main weapon, I have to draw the line. I would much prefer to be known as a great dinker, drooper, driver, or dropper than a great lobber. (Would we call such players lobsters?)

Now I will admit that on occasion, caught in a terrible spot, where panic or a lob seems the only two ways out, well then, go ahead and lob. It would be polite, but not necessary to apologize to the game for such a shot. Perhaps a humble, "Sorry, it's all I had" would be sufficient and reasonable. Actually, I think I heard Larry say that exact thing one time...

I realize that my views on this and many other topics do not conform to much of the world. Perhaps the world will come around and see the light, but I doubt it. I also understand that on rare occasion, I might be wrong. Not a problem, one must be willing to change as the data roll in... (Family motto: *Saepe in errore sed numquam in dubito*)

And there are players who lob a lot. In fact they seem to get a lot of satisfaction from it. I hear chortles and out right laughs when they drop in effectively. but rarely do I hear an anguished cries of despair, regret, and depression, when they sail long and if I am to judge it, they do that fairly often. Perhaps I'll collect some data on that. Who knows it might change the game for those folks who practice this habit.

So folks do it, pros do it, folks like it, and enjoy it. There are many reasons to play any game and I can be open enough to accept that. But it's not my favorite way to play, either win or lose. I want the

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

mental puzzle. Chasing down lobs is boring, dinking and out thinking is where my interest lies. Your views may differ! And that's all right.

Update: I'm watching a California PB tournament with the usual pros and by golly one guy is using the famed third shot lob. He was a hockey player in his hay day, maybe that explains it. It worked about 40% of the time...

## Post 110 Playing with a Partner

A Text I got about playing when partner is less skilled...

<text start>

The biggest challenge that I have these days is playing with different partners and each partner has their own weaknesses and styles.

Options: either overpower my partner and take the center stage or practice tough shots that they miss or cannot get to, like defense or drops.

But I repeat myself on a few key topics:

- take the line
- take the T
- when receiving use the X (crisscross) concept
- slow down and dink more

Another interesting phenomenon is that I lose my touch and my way playing and cannot get it back when I play with other 4.0+ players.

This leaves me in an awkward position of either ignore my partner (usually I don't) or suffer as the game becomes less enjoyable as I cannot perform/practice my needed skills.

thoughts?

<text end>

There are some interesting points here. I've touched on some of them as there are a couple of posts about playing with weaker players. My view on that is to play at the weaker level or a touch above. That view is trying to make it enjoyable to all playing. Even if you are a really good player, the challenge of playing perfectly is beyond you. Even the pros will miss an easy dink and quite frequently at that. See more of this below.

The next point is that playing the way the game should be played is a good idea, and I think you should do that. A lot of folks learning the skills, have no idea about grabbing the T or poaching from 20 feet away, for example. So those actions are to be done as that's the proper way to play, though maybe in moderation, especially the poaching. Maybe partner will become inspired!

I can remember by own early play where the more experienced player would take a ball just off my ear, rather than leave it to me. And another who would straddle the T and get in an aggressive crouch while I was pushed off to a sideline. I was surprised by both of those actions, yet instantly saw the utility of them.

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

The crisscross (X) strategy is also not known by a lot of beginners. Yet, it's the best way to decide who will take a shot if you are going to play equal roles on the court.

Let me diverge for a moment and suggest that playing on equal terms is probably not the most effective. You can play and most do, that each person has their side of the court and is responsible for it. But the mixed doubles and the Johns brothers have shown that having one player take a larger portion of the court (and net), and the other looking to put away any pop ups and handling the cross court dinks.

Now, it might be useful to switch off those roles depending on how the play goes. So I grab the middle, while you dink cross court, but if I get into a dink rally, then I'm on the side you grab the middle.

Let me diverge to another level down... Someone has to be responsible for the middle. So by my view the roles have to be a bit asymmetrical always and in all games. This responsibility must switch back and forth as the ball moves from side to side. Who discusses that before playing?

We must also consider that there are players out there who just want to play at their level and not get caught up in the technical aspects of a higher level of play. I would expect that you are not playing with a lot of those folks, but at the Downs, some of the team mixes can be quite divergent in levels. If you play there, you play with that possibility.

And finally there is your loss of touch when playing at a lower level... My reaction to this is that this shouldn't happen with a good player as they should be able to "shift gears" and hit different shots at any time. The game demands it. We have smashes and then resets, dinks then drops, then smashes, etc. Every shot is a separate challenge and whatever shot you are going to hit, it requires the some concentration and I think they all don't get it. That's when the scenario shows up where you get the five hard shots back, but then then miss the "easy" one.

The easy ones are still difficult. You need to manage the net, then the outer boundary lines and also not pop the ball up. There is a lot going on, even with an "easy" dink. If you try to hit a winner, then you are shrinking the area that is available in which to land the ball and making the shot harder. And that would require more thought, and that requires more time and so it goes...

More thought about playing with a weaker player or someone who, for example, rushes the net prematurely. If you like to speed up the ball during a dink rally, you need a player who can return the counter shot. If your partner is not up to that, then you shouldn't speed up the ball unless you can hit a very good shot as it is a losing strategy. So not all of your usual shots will be available when playing with different skills. Maybe more dinks are a good idea and practice a bit of patience - another good skill.

If your partner is up at the kitchen line without the hands of one of the Waters girls, then your third shot drop has to be perfect, or you need to drive the third to keep your partner from getting involved with something other than a dink. (Or, you hit a bad shot, partner get turned into a pin cushion, and maybe realizes they were in the wrong place! :-))

I'm guessing that getting your touch back is the main problem here. The big difference between the game levels is the speed of the ball. It is difficult to play in a faster game as there is less time to do things. Perhaps a different warm up with some fast hands stuff might be a good way to transition back to the faster pace. And you could always do more dinking until you're back to speed.



## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

There was a lot going on with this post. For such a simple game, there are a lot of things to think about. The differences between skill levels can be found in the base knowledge of the game. Straddling the T, crisscross theory, asymmetric play, who guards the middle, where and when to move is more important than hitting the ball well. I think back to a comment Angel made about having a multi-hour conversation with his partner... There is a lot to be aware of.

I watch a lot of pickleball and on occasion they have the good players providing some insight. Ben Johns did one a few months back and the things he commented upon and saw, were not seen by the other commentators, and I had not been aware of. And also, you might get a comment like, "great defense from player X" well the important thing was why was player X where she was. She moved early because she predicted how the play was going to go. But those topics are rarely addressed. Another example is the Riley brother sister doubles team. They get more ball back than are hit at their feet than anyone. Do we get discussion about how they do it? Is it their use of two hands, or straddling the shot, or what? Never explained, always a mystery!

OK, I think this is enough. Thanks for the questions and topics!

## Post 111 Electrolyte Report After Week One

As mentioned I started using some electrolyte powder in my drinking bottle at the Downs. The one I bought is Dr. Berg's. It's a modestly raspberry & lemon flavored powder. It comes with a cute scoop and the recommended serving size is one scoop per 16 ounces of water. (OK, it's fluid ounces of water...)

The jar contains about 50 scoops of powder and it costs close to \$50. My cost is close to \$2 a day to spike my water for PB, which is my water intensive activity.

The powder contains Mg, NaCl, K, Ca. The dietary recommended amounts of these is 29%, 2%, 21%, and 6%. The amounts seem low to me, but reviewers have said that this formula has a lot of content that others have less of. In theory, you would get all of these and more from your regular food intake. Clearly you need more NaCl for example. So what you eat is a big part of this. Right now I'm eating a fairly restricted diet, so I thought I'd try this just in case I was missing something important. And my dose is two scoops per cooler full.

Jigsaw, who advertises on the pickleball tournaments has the following for their powders: Na 90 mg, Cl 900, Mg 50, K at 800 mg. Clever of all these folks to change units! The Berg Powder has Na 40 mg, Cl 60, Mg 120, K 1200, and Ca at 75, which is not in the Jigsaw powder. I'm happier with the Berg mix as NaCl I'm going to get when I eat my daily peanuts! The Ca is an added bonus, but I eat a lot of cheese, so am not too worried about that. Jigsaw stuff looks to be about 83 cents per serving when you buy the packets. It's a bit less expensive when you get the jar of powder and scoop your own. I'm not sure of shipping charges, so the prices are really close. The Jigsaw powder is also sugarless if that's an issue.

So now we discuss how well this is working in the first week. There are two muscle issues that are electrolyte driven and that is general muscular weakness, and then muscle cramps after working out. And I suspected that I was having some of those symptoms. I get sore in my back and even with a couple of days off, it never seemed to subside. Also If I clenched my toes, my feet would cramp up easily. And every now and then a thigh or calf would cramp and actually hurt a bunch.

I think that I'm feeling better. I'm not thinking about how much my back aches and if I clench the toes, I'm not getting all of the cramping I used to. There has been no thigh or calf cramps, but those were rare. So I'll conclude that as far as I've gone with this, I'm feeling better. So I've got coincidence! I have also dropped a couple of pounds, which doesn't happen much and while I'm not aware that I'm eating differently, I'm guessing that it's not connected to the powder.

I'm paying \$2 a day to not have a sore back. Which is a bargain I think, and I'm saving some money on Ibuprofen to boot.

The stuff does seem expensive to me and to others. There are a lot of homemade recipes out there, you can make your own. They use lemon or lime juice, some apple cider vinegar, some Himalayan salt and usually a keto friendly sweetener. I'm not sure I have the ingredient list compete, please look one up if you are interested. Also bullion cubes seem to be popular as well as eating a lot of avocados.

Let's end the update there and I'll return to this in a week or so. Basically, I think there is something going on and it's positive for me.

## Post 112 Keeping the Ball from Going Long When Hitting from the Kitchen Line

It's time for a bit of calculations. Let's stroll back to those physics classes in which I wish I'd done better.

Imagine that you are standing at the kitchen line and you want to hit the hardest shot possible and keep in inside the court. We will make some assumptions here, one being that you will hit it over the middle of the net, which is the lowest point and thus has the most likelihood of landing in.

I'll bring up gravity and spin in a moment, but consider a ball at top of net height. If you look at the angles, there is no path for the ball to land in the court unless the ball was hit from a height of 44.8 inches, or 11 inches above the net. Think of a laser pointer that just clears the net and lands on the base line or just goes long and then you raise the pointer until it hits the baseline. I used a tangent calculation to get the 44.8 inches -- I have no laser pointer anymore. it's a long sad story.

If you are going to hit the ball hard and spinless and it's not very high above the net, it's unlikely to succeed.

Gravity: I'm guessing a bit on hang time here, but a shot hit from the kitchen line might hang somewhere between 0.25 seconds and 0.5 seconds. I've noticed that the time for a shot and then a return is about a second. More time if hit softer, less when smashed, this shortens as players more closer together and/or hit the ball harder..

In 0.25 seconds a ball will drop about 1 feet, and in 0.5 seconds, the drop is about 3 feet. So the slower you hit the ball, the more likely it will drop in. One more reason to never overhit a ball.

Spin: top spin will help drag the ball down and a cut spin will cause it to stay in the air longer. I'm not real sure about how to calculate that and since spin varies a lot, and wind is big deal since the ball is very light, it seems there may be a lot of important variables yet in play. Where is Bernoulli when you need him? Actually there are probably equations there, but I'd need a lot more data to figure it out. Well, I just looked a bit and it seems that no one has calculated the total drop per rpm or something like that. However, top spin is a great friend to have when trying to keep a ball from going long.

Also the ball is slowing down because it is so light. As we saw above the slower ball will drop more than a faster ball.

So how does this help us play better? I was surprised by how high you need to have the ball to keep it in. I tend to speed up balls that are at net height and even a bit below. This seems to work with my backhand roll better than my forehand. It is a slow ball with lots of spin, the best of both worlds. (It also tends to change the pace of the point, but tempo is a subject for another post!)

If you hit the ball from a lower position, you are going to have to do something. Note that you will need to initially hit the ball up to clear the net and then to keep it in we need spin or gravity. Adding to that are the opponents who will gladly counter shots that are above the net on their side. The PB problem in a nut shell: get it up, but not too far up...

If we ran the numbers, I would suggest that marginal shots should be dinked back. When in doubt, dink. Get them over the net and reasonably shallow. Wait for a higher ball to not dink. (OK, if you

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

want to lob, fine, just go ahead, I don't care... ;-)) If you hit the marginal shot, you will be fine if you can get it past an opponent or more likely, hit it right at them. The dominate side hip to shoulder is a traditional target for that shot. And to keep the ball in at a reasonable pace, you need to hit a top spin shot. If you are going for a body shot, then hit it hard and flat, don't worry about keeping it in.

There are players who use little top spin and are effective at the net. They hit the ball very flat and it can be hard to handle. Top spin shots have more arc to their trajectory and if they are not good shots are easily countered with a block or counter hit. The flat shots are awkward, but they will go long if not done well. If you are playing against the flat shot people think about letting some of the shots go by.

This all seems a bit disjointed, but I'm getting tired of it. It's been through a number of revisions. Let's boil it down to these points: Don't speed up a ball that is below the net, Learn to spin your ball, think body shots, when in doubt dink! Oh, and "Lob if you must."

# Post 113 Notes From Angel Part 1, Dealing with Frustration

Hello all,

As I've mentioned a time or two, I had a conversation with Angel and he said that he and Ozzie had spent a number of hours going over things that affected play. He was kind enough to send along some of the details of his conversation.

I'm going to break this in chunks and add some commentary from my point of view as a rec player.

A lot of what they talked about are tournament specific but what I'm interested in is the base knowledge that any advanced player would/should/might be conversant with and trying to extend that knowledge base to the greater Downs' players. So let's explore what Angel and Ozzie are thinking about and see if that can make us better players...

Angel:

Below are a few things that Ozzie and I talked about after our first session playing together to start prepping for tournaments.

## 1. How to deal with frustration.

After our first session together, we talked about what to do if either of us were to get frustrated. It is more common that I get frustrated sooner than Ozzie, so we established ground rules/signs to let the other know when frustration starts and how to deal with it.

We first established that if one gets overwhelmed, the other will take more court. (e.g., as is done in mixed doubles) If this doesn't work as much as we hoped, using timeouts was our next step.

Not only do we slow down our opponents, but Ozzie and I also get to talk about anything, even if it's unrelated, to try to trick our minds into concentrating on something else, even if it's just for a minute.

Timeouts are probably the complex situation as calling it depends on where we are in the match. The first rule is to call a timeout if our opponents win 3-4 points in a row. But like I said, it depends on where we are in the match. Let's say if our opponents are up 7-4, if they win 2 points in a row, then we call a timeout.

Rich:

I think the above are quite interesting. Let me comment in turn. The solution to frustration or bad juju, is to play a more asymmetric court division. Angel mentions the Johns brothers later in his note about this. I think it's a topic that deserves more study. For example if you play with me, you might want to decide to encroach on my forehand, but not on my backhand and particularly at the kitchen line. There will be more on this point later as Angel talks about Ozzie and his strengths. But I think that a partnership is a synergy but not always a symmetry. We all play parts of the game better than others and designing defense and or offense based on those makes sense. How to go about this hasn't be discussed much in what I've run across. So a topic that any partnership of length ought to discuss in

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

detail. Who has the middle? Who will stand in the middle? Who will watch the line, the lob, and stacking, which could be a big part of this. "Partner, you like to hit nothing but forehands, let's keep you near the sideline and I'll sag into the middle?" Update: a new video hit my YouTube feed by Collin Johns dealing with this topic. Probably I'll get back to this. I've not seen the video yet.

Timeouts can be used for a bunch of things, getting some oxygen after a long point, or "let's dink, we can't hit with these guys!" I would suggest that the first timeout be used to decide to whom the team will play. Obviously if you are up 8-0, you're doing just fine and keep going, but if it's 0-5, then maybe isolate an opponent and hit to just backhand or something. If it's 0-5, then you ought to do something differently for sure, don't continue a losing strategy.

"Get your mind in the game!" I find that when I'm not moving well or concentrating, moving my feet more is a nice trigger for me to get ready to run, poach, and advance. Find something that will help you forget the trash talk and joggers and get ready for the next point.

Angel's last point about what part of the game you are at... Hopefully you use timeouts as early as required and not wait until it is 0-9 for example. The end of a game is critical. You have less time to catch up and errors are quite costly. If you lose at point at 0-1, you lost just 10% of the remaining game points, but do it at 8-9 and you've lost 30% of the rest of the game. Be a touch more conservative in shot selections and speed ups, and never serve out at the end of the game.

Angel has more to say and I'll be passing them along soon.

Thanks Angel for sharing your insights!

## Post 114 Electrolytes Part 3

It's been about two and a half weeks of using the electrolyte powder in my water bottle whilst playing PB and visiting the driving range in the afternoons.

I initially saw some weight loss of a couple of pounds, that has not continued, but the missing two pounds has not come back. I can't really suggest these are related.

I reported some better muscle aches and pains and by better, I suggested that they were cramping less and I was feeling better. Curious about this one, I didn't have any electrolytes for a couple of day in the middle of last week and then had a pretty achy next day. I'm suggesting that the powder is still providing some benefit here.

Thanks to Tony in a comment on post two, there are cheaper powders out there on Amazon. I'm going to try them next.

Finally, I seem to have better endurance while playing. When it gets to be 11:15 and I've been playing for three hours, I'm now up for more play. I think is powder related. I don't eat breakfast and so this is about as hungry as I get, and yet I'm in no hurry to get lunch.

Bottom line at this point, they seem to be providing some benefit to me. But I've got a strange diet and it may well be providing things that are missing in what I eat.

I've never mentioned taste and it is a consideration. It tastes a bit soapy to me. It is better when cold. I've not tried it hot. It was easy to get used to and I don't find it objectionable anymore. There is a hint of fruit flavor too, but it is mild at best. Ice cubes go well with this. I put a bunch of ice in my water bottle, it's 40 oz., add two and one half scoops of the powder, pour in tap water to fill it up, then do some shaking. This is a lot of work in the wee hours before play, but it seems to be worth it.

That's a wrap up on the journey so far. I've got a couple of weeks of powder left and I'll probably try the other after the Dr. Berg is gone.

## Post 115 Angel and Ozzie Part Two, Compatibility Thoughts or Partnership Synergy

Here is the second point that Angel brought up and it's a framework of how to play together for them. I'll comment afterwards on this and seek some universality for the rest of us. Rich

Angel:

### 2. Compatibility

Not sure if you remember the games that Ozzie and I played together at Downs, but I am the "aggressor" while he is the "backboard."

During our tournaments, he will set up shots for me as I tend to have stronger put aways and am more likely to attack first in most situations.

Although it may be wrong that I typically attack first, people are more likely to hit fewer balls to me and shift more balls over to Ozzie as they would prefer to have longer rallies than getting the ball slapped back at them. For Ozzie and myself, this is a win-win because our opponents either have the choice to get smashed at or play against a backboard. (Rich: note that with this setup it's likely that Angel will commit more errors in the play. You have to accept that and not worry about it. There should be a positive return on that "investment" as their setup should cause the opponents to modify their play.)

No matter what happens here, both of our strong suits are being used. Ozzie is a great re-setter and can keep a rally going all day, while I love speeding things up to get pop-ups.

We picked each other for these specific reasons in this partnership. The most famous team that has this exact partnership is Ben and Collin Johns. We are trying to simulate their game as best as possible to get the same results. This was proven to us from our results in the Monterrey 5.0 19+ Tournament.

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Rich:

One of the things that is not said here is how they go about making this happen. Angel mentioned to me that the technical stuff they leave for their drilling, thus the document described above is more of a philosophical thesis.

I find the idea of playing the court lopsided is a good one. In dink battles I find myself on the T a lot and rarely in the cross court battle. I think someone needs to be on the T or at least covering it at all times to avoid missing a shot up the middle and also to slap down an errant dink. Lurk, lunge, and slap -- not a bad motto.

Now how could Angel and Ozzie do this? The Johns brothers put Collins off to the right side of the court and Ben covers the rest. I've not watched Angel with Ozzie enough to observe their setup. But it has to be something like that. The aggressor becomes the "in your face guy" and Ozzie provides coverage if they don't want to challenge Angel. You'll see this with other players at the Downs who



## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

grab say 60% of the kitchen line and dare you to play to them. Angel has to move well and have some fast hands for this to work.

How to defend against this? These folks generally are comfortable with a hard hit ball, so drops to their back hands will generally slow the pace of play and work better. Or hit away from them to their partner, who is probably on the move after returning the serve. But you can't float a soft high shot over the middle as that is the shot they are looking for. Keep it low, lots of top spin, not a lot of speed are good elements in this situation.

Next point, how might you include this court division in your game? If you have a steady partnership it's something to explore. What kind of shots you want to hit, Which would you prefer partner hit/get. And it comes down to style. Do you want to play chess or some kind of smash and hit game? These are good questions for a partner, but it seems out of place at the Downs, when you change partners every 10 minutes. But if you are going to play in a tournament, it would be a valuable discussion to have...

For me generally, I want my partner to be aggressive. And by that I want them to actively take shots they they feel good about hitting. If that brings them into my portion of the court, that's absolutely fine. If it's their backhand versus my forehand, that's fine too. I often feel very comfortable about a backhand drop and occasionally that could get in partner's way.

This view frees up partner to play actively rather than passively waiting for the ball to come to them. If partner likes to call the ball, that is an added bonus (it's something I don't do enough). If my partner is hopping all over to take shots I think the team is better off as we are moving more and I think that's the key to playing really well.

This also keeps me from backing up all the shots that come near me or between me and my partner. I'd much rather be moving for upcoming shots than being there in case partner delegates to me. (Pro tip: don't stand there and admire partner's shot, get moving for the return shot.)

I watched the video that was called "Collin Johns says you are playing pickleball all wrong." Or something like that. There wasn't a lot of technical info there. The story per Collin is that Ben recognized the need for a backhand sitter position and then the roamer, who would take a lot of shots. He and Ben have decided which shots belong to whom and they don't deviate from that. Any ball that comes over the net is recognized as to whom the ball belongs. They designed the partnership around that philosophy and have embraced it. It sounds like Angel and Ozzie are happy to play that way too.

It seemed like such a simple game at one point.. Every now and then I think what would happen if the kitchen was 15 feet instead of 14 or the court was a bit wider. A post for another time perhaps.

## **Post 116 Drilling and Getting Better – Not Published**

This is probably my favorite subject that Ozzie and I touched upon. What is our potential for growth, and how can we do it? (These are Angel's comments)

We established drilling 2-3 times a week as our first foundation.

What is the purpose of playing matches if we don't drill? It's the same as saying, hey, I can ride a bike, so I might as well bike the Tour de France.

Please take this with a grain of salt, but you understand the point that I am trying to make. It does not make sense to play matches if we are not getting better and refining our tools. To get better, we must put down an excess of hours to get the best results.

I'll be honest, there have been multiple times where I have been on court for over 7 hours, and I wouldn't say I liked it, but to get to my goals and ambitions, it is required.

There's a quote by Conor Mcgregor that has stuck with me and completely relates to my thoughts, and it goes like this,

"I've lost my mind doing this. Like Vincent van Gogh. He dedicated his life to his art and lost his mind in the process. That's happened to me. But f--k it. When that gold belt is around my waist and when my mother has a big mansion, when my girlfriend has a different car for every day of the week, when my kids have everything they ever want...then it will pay. Then I'll be happy I lost my mind. I'll die a crazy old man!"

I am trying to make the point that to get to our goals, we have to give other things up. It may be dates or missing movies with friends, but it is a small price to those who want to achieve their goals. Our goal is to make it pro in pickleball and mine is to get sponsored with Engage pickleball.

## Post 117 Zane's Point About Center Coverage

Zane Navratil has a series of good PB videos on YouTube. He gets to the point, doesn't cover too much, they're quick, and not very repetitive.

The last post I saw was on covering the middle, which is a topic close to all players' hearts.

The situation that he covers is one where the ball will be hit from off center. The player in front of the hitter must move over to cover most of the down the line shot - but not all of it. More on that in a moment. and the other player has to shift over to avoid the center coverage gap.

The big point that Zane makes that I had not heard before, is that your team should cover most of the shots that the hitter can hit with a hard shot. We have most of down the line covered and the middle. We will allow Paul, oops, the opponent to hit the one in ten shot down the line and reward him for his fine shot. In exchange for giving up on that shot we take away the other nine shots that are on our alley.

The same for the middle. Due to the angles involved there may be some double coverage between the defenders, and we are willing to give up a wide shot. Why that shot? Because the ball can't be hit hard cross court as the side line comes into play. If the hitter goes for it, we can watch it go wide and if it's soft we might be able to run it down.

I might suggest that the center defender faces the hitter a bit and might want to take a step backward to get more time to defend. Zane doesn't mention that, but I think it's a strategy worth trying. I have no data to back it up, but it seems to provide a better defensive setup.

Here is the link to the post: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FC44JwoyudU>

## Post 118 Allen and I Disagree

Allen and I have a philosophical difference. The question is when hitting the second shot, AKA the service return, if you should always move to join your partner at the kitchen line.

I am of the opinion that you should always go forward regardless of the quality of your return as the positional advantage is too great to pass up even if the service return is not good. Since the service side must let the ball bounce, I feel this provides enough protection and time to allow an advance.

Allen's view is that if you return a deep shot advance, but on shorter balls stay back so that you can more easily deal with the third shot.

Let us explore the various cases and see if we can resolve this question...

Deep Returns:

1) No one disagrees that if you hit a good service return you should move up to the kitchen line.

Middle Returns:

2) How about a mid court return that is spiny and doesn't bounce high? We would still want to be up at the KL since a low ball must be hit up to clear the net, it also can't be hit too hard as it would carry past the back line. If we can get to the KL, the net protects our feet from attack.

3) Mid court top spin shot? These shots tend to bounce a bit higher and are more easily returned. However they also tend to bounce aggressively towards the baseline, so in effect a mid court shot with top spin will tend to push the servers back a bit and if that happens, we again want to be up at the KL.

Short Returns:

4) We are left with short second shots. If the second shot is low, then we get net protection and we still want to be up to punish any high thirds.

5) If the second shot is short and with cut spin we are still in better shape than if we stay back.

6) If the second shot is mishit and is very high and looks like a lob gone bad, you can make a case that you'd prefer to return it from further back. A shot that goes off the edge of a paddle usually is spinning a lot and is a tough shot to return. I'd still rather be up than back.

7) Second Shot Lobs (and bad ones at that):

In fact the only shot where you would like to field from the baseline is an over head. So if a second shot resembles a bad lob and is going to bounce quite high (more on this later), then sure, stay back.

Things that Happen and Most are Not Good:

More generally let me comment on what happens if you stay back. Note that your partner is at the KL and you've chosen to contest a point with the partners split. This provides a nice corridor for the opponents to hit at, splitting the defense. Even when you manage to return the third ball, you must return a good shot that doesn't imperil partner, nor does it allow the shot up the open slot. The response in this case would be a fourth shot that drops in front of your partner. If you manage that, I think you need to quickly get to the KL and expect a dink shot back.

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

If you stay back to return a third shot, good opponents will always try to keep you back on the baseline by hitting only to you and as deep as they safely can. And what does that allow them to do? Hmm? Perhaps they will move to the KL while you are working from the back line? Then your partner is up, you are back and both opponents are at the KL. How many points are you going to win from there?

Is it Possible, an Overhead Third?

Here are my comments on hitting a second shot that ends up providing opponents with an overhead.

Since the opponents have to let ball bounce, I think it might be impossible to hit a ball that will bounce over say seven feet in the air. I don't think it's possible. I'll test this soon. If I'm correct on this, worst case is some kind of drive from a short position. You might be able to block it from the KL, and it might be dinked back, or it may well go long.

Let's flip this around some more. If you had to defend a ground stroke, would you prefer to be at the KL and block the shot or at the baseline and then try to keep the opponents from advancing?

Advice From an Expert:

Finally, I looked at the video called

Doubles Pickleball Strategy 101-How to Play Smart Pickleball, Ten Tips

The link will be below. Let me quote a bit, "Tip 3, after returning the serve, advance to the non-volley zone..."

There are no exceptions to this rule."

Here is the link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x5ceh-7D11Y>

I'm open to any discussion...

## Post 119 Grip Pressure

So I'm watching this golf video and the guy, John Erickson, is talking about grip pressure.

The old saw in golf and pickleball is that it's a loose grip that sails the ship and if you're clutching the grip, it won't work.

Now John thinks this is wrong. While the gentle grip might be correct if you hit the middle of the golf club face, it doesn't work very well if you miss the sweet spot, aka in the real world. He has video to prove his point. I could run on and on for a couple of paragraphs about the the club twisting and the ball angle being much worse with a loose grip. John is on YouTube and you can look it up if you are inclined, but the differences are dramatic.

I was thinking about this and wondered if PB paddles would match some of this phenomenon. One of the things I don't like about PB paddles is the size of the sweet spot. Shots that are out at the edge of the paddle will cause it to twist and the energy transfer goes way down. Might this be the reason for a lot of netted shots? Quite possibly, a short dink with a small swing, and top it off with a miss-hit and then have a loose grip and we are talking about an "in the net error!" I don't know about you all, but I hit the fringes of the paddle quite often.

I mentioned this to Tony, who is visiting the Downs from Mexico and he pointed out that a loose grip was good for softening up shots and let me talk about that for a moment. If you are blocking a hard shot and want to hit it back deep into the court, then a firm grip will provide more speed and thus depth. But loosen the grip and now you kill the shot and can turn your opponent's drive into a drop. This is a useful tool. Hand pressure thus acts like a pressure moderator for a hit.

I haven't played with this too much, but I'm thinking that a firm grip might be useful for a lot of shots and might save an error or two. So give it a try and see what works for you.

## Post 120 It's a Fickle Game

Take a recent pro match, deep into the tournament, mixed doubles I think. The first game goes 11 to 8 to team A. It was close and the lead was exchanged occasionally. It could have gone either way.

The second game goes 11 to 0 for team B. Team A comes back to win the third is a somewhat close game, but the lead was held by A through out.

Let's talk about the second game. Or think about it. How is it possible for a pro team playing well after winning the first game lose so lopsidedly (is that really a word?)?

Meanwhile back at the Downs:

"How is it going?" I asked.

"Horribly, I just want to go home," said one of many players.

I've had this same conversation with more than one player. One day you are 4.0, the next 2.5 and you're wondering where that 1.5 points of ability went to.

My data point from the pro game proves that this happens at all levels of the game and happens in a very short span of time.

I don't know what causes it. I suspect that the game itself is to blame. There is so little difference between a great shot and one that hits the top of the net, or between a good shot and one that goes long.

When the gods conspire and you miss a couple of "easy" balls and the opponents decide not to hit any out, the game collapses and you seek the comfort of a sofa and a self help book. (Sadly, no one has written one about pickleball... "Pickleball for Idiots," "A Pickleball Guide for those who are Lost," "The Inner Game of Pickleball," "The PB Players Guide to Reclaiming Greatness," "How to find your Mojo")

The next problem we human have, if something is not working we try something else. Making broad changes to adjust for tiny problems is a fool's errand. The ball that hits the tape and comes back is half an inch from toppling over for a point. What change can you make that will give you that extra half inch? If you work it out, please let the rest of us know. Toss in some wind, a different ball, a bad bounce, some more wind, an opponent you'd love to beat, the skip off the line, and it's a strange game to try for perfection.

So what should you do when you are running too cold for comfort? I'd suggest that you ignore it and play your game. This is difficult as our brains are not setup to do the same thing and expect different results, but every shot is pretty much unique, so even if you try to do the same thing, it's likely that you can't. Trying random things is not a good strategy. Stick to your usual game and hope your shots start coming over, and the opponent's start hitting the tape and going long.

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Having said all of that, it still might be that your game has issues. There are shots that are safer than others, have larger margins of error and you don't want to cause yourself silly unforced errors. The first one is a serve. Not too many have serves that can't be returned, but all of us serve out on occasion. There is no excuse for netting a serve. There is no need not to give yourself lots of room over the net,

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

so use it. Learn to hit a bit of top spin and never miss a serve short again.

The next shot that requires less than perfect technique is the second shot. You would like to hit a screamer deep down the middle, but since the ball must bounce, here again is a lot of room over the net, so never hit the second shot into the net. A high floating return is just fine and it gives you more time to get up to the kitchen line.

The first and second shots are special and kind and gentle; try not to lose points by doing silly things with them, Get them in and back and worry about the rest of the shots, which do require more care and net flirtation. Embrace these shots as bit of breather, hit them with safety in mind and not out right performance.



## Post 122 Electrolytes Part 4

I've done the electrolyte powders for a couple of months. The first month with Dr. Berg's and the second with Keppi which was pointed out to me by a comment in a prior blog -- again thanks for that, Tony!

What's next you might ask and wonder if the stuff actually worked. And worked, I must emphasize, is for me.

I've got a strange diet going and there is not a lot of veggies, carbs, and fruit in it. Some some of the electrolytes might be in short supply.

And did it work? I'm not sure. What I'm going to do next is take a month off and see how I feel. If there seems to be no difference, I might do it anyways and I can't see that it hurts to use the stuff, other than expense.

So I leave you hanging once again.

There was a question put to me if I used the powder other places than when playing. I have somewhat. If I drink some water before I play, I'll usually add the powder. I also have used it occasionally after a morning's play. Since those can be three hours in length and in hot weather, I can see that I might be running low. One of the uses of the electrolytes is to help avoid muscle cramps, so I can see that during and post exercise might both be useful.

I have no physical symptoms to pass on. I've been feeling pretty good lately and that's one of the things I want to watch for deterioration. I get some hip muscle pain on occasion, and that might be a sign of something or other, so I'm paying attention to it.

That's all I have. Note that if you order from Dr. Berg, you'll get at least one email a day. I guess he cares and keeps checking up on me. It's not all bad, he offers 15% off usually. :-) The Keppi product is still cheaper and it's on Amazon.

## Post 123 Angel and Ozzie III, Evaluating the Game – Not Published

Angel: Flow Awareness

This concept relates to communication but the main premise of this is understanding what is going well or not during our games. Are we playing too aggressively or should we slow it down? Hey this person doesn't have a great backhand drink, let's go to that person.

Rich: I think this is a vital skill and for tournament players. You have to constantly be looking for the good and the bad in a game/match. And you have to be ready to play differently if your usual game is not winning.

This shows up in the rec environment as well. However it's usually two to eight by the time it dawns on a team that trying to out hit the opponents is not a good idea and maybe working to do some dinking is worth trying.

Since there are rarely timeouts at the Downs to discuss this as a team, what can a single player do? If the game is bashing and it's not going well, you can try to dink more. But if there are three bashers that is probably not going to change much of the play. "Partner, let's do some dinking," is a good idea, but unless your partner is up to changing his style, it might come across as being critical of partner.

With uneven skilled teams, a frequent occurrence, the ability to play a different style is kind of a rare commodity. Even players who have played for a number of years may well be welded to a single style or shot. I think in a lot of cases, you are in a game that you can't win on skill. But it's a game of runs and if the opponents start to miss shots, then a comeback is always a possibility.

One final note about styles, is that you might want to be more careful as the game grinds out to the end. It's no time to serve out and aggressive speed ups of good dinks is probably not a good idea. Be more patient and wait for solid opportunities, then smack the ball.

## Post 124 Thinking and Dinking

The Tri Valley Pickleball Club put on their second Pickleball 101 class today. This is in cahoots with the Livermore Park District.

I selected dinking as my topic of teaching. I had been the serving instructor the last two times out.

I taught five or six groups of four students. And to my surprise each bit of teaching came out totally differently. This was based on the skill level of the students for the most part. While all were beginners, the dinking ability was varied in success. The ones who got it, were able to do it after very little exposure to the art and science. I was impressed in the improvement in just minutes, and by minutes, let me guess two or so.

If the group got it, then we played the dinking game, where it was straight PB, but you had to hit the ball in the kitchen. This was good for the dinking and also as an introduction to the scoring and to switching places after a point had been won.

There is research about drilling versus playing "a game." The game scenario has been found to be a better teacher than drilling. The skills are picked up faster and the retention is also better. Basically, get them playing something as soon as you can.

When I thought about how to teach dinking, I was expecting to talk about the lift dink and the push dink, but as it played out there wasn't time to get into it. What I did pass along was: a quick grip check, then a simplified arm stroke, a target of hitting the ball about six inches above the net. After that I turned them loose and kept two balls going at all times. We did cross court, then straight ahead dinks and then basically, the horn sounded to move on to the next skill.

One of the errors that seemed popular is to use the venerable wrist flip at the ball instead of an arm or arm/body movement. I think that little kids might be more inclined to flail their whole body at the ball. Perhaps we adults, having used a mouse and keyboard as solutions to things, are apt to be more hand oriented. Interesting to golfers, this is a common problem in that sport as well. Trunk and arm movement is easier and more consistent than hand and wrist, but it does not seem to a universal starting point. Curious.

If one were to teach dinking for an hour or so, how would it be different? When some of the students were really struggling, I stole an exercise I've seen Kirby use and I had the folks just lob the ball over the net without the paddles. I think this is a great way for a student to feel the motion and get some idea of the effort required to dink. This went over well and I think is useful. Not everyone needed it.

For an hour's lesson, I think I would spend more time to make sure of grips. Some people's grips deteriorated as they played. Then I would work on keeping the wrist neutral so that the paddle stayed at an angle to the arm. Then work more on a ready position and hitting the ball in front of them and being in more of a crouch rather than standing fairly straight.

Keeping the paddle up with a modest follow through would be stressed. Most of the beginners let the paddle stay low. Also if you wrist flip, then your arm isn't moving, so a follow through to a ready position is not natural.

Finally, I think putting out some cones to aim for would be useful, one across from the student, then

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

middle, then cross court.

I enjoyed the challenge of teaching a new topic. But the lack of time was a frustration. I don't know what the students will retain. Perhaps that is every teacher's cross to bare...

An item that I noticed that might be a problem with my own game is to break the wrist when hitting a dink that is coming at your body. I think I tend to have the wrist flat and I want to present a paddle face that is close to parallel to the net. Not exactly parallel as I do want the paddle to be pointing to the sky just a bit. I'll play with this in mind on Monday and see how it goes. I'm hoping this will eliminate some pop ups.

That's all I know for now. Sorry for the lack of posts, but I've not had much to say this past week.

## Post 125 It's Not the Heat, It's the Humidity

I got a Garmin golf watch a couple of years ago and it also does some body monitoring things. One is heart rate and another is steps.

There is an app for it. If you input your weight and age it can calculate calories burned and bodily stress.

I find watching the heart beat chart to be quite interesting. My maximum rate for pickleball is dependent on the heat and humidity. Basically a cooling function rather than a circulatory muscle oxygenation thing, or so it seems.

Pickleball is the most strenuous activity I have going. It's not unusual to play three hours or so with little break. Usually a maximum rate of the mid 120 is about all I can reach.

However today I hit 153 as the maximum rate. I found this surprising as it wasn't that hot this morning, but it was muggy. I wasn't the only one affected, another player was talking about being dizzy and another retreated to the shade to cool off. This is the highest rate I've ever seen.

Other than the heart rate, which I didn't notice while playing, I felt fine with the heat. It is a curious thing that the closer the game, the higher the heart rate. Perhaps concentration requires more blood to the brain than an easy, relaxed game.

The watch also tracks strenuous exercise minutes. I'm supposed to get 150 per week. But today... I got to 79 minutes that are considered to be moderate and 68 strenuous and I get double minutes for those. So all told today was 215. Done for the week all in one day. Not sure that's a good thing.

It's about 8:30 and I'm not feeling any effects of day's workout. I also hit a bucket at the golf driving range and had a late afternoon pickleball game too. A busy day and I've drunk some fluids, but all in all ready to do it again tomorrow. I didn't use any of the electrolyte powders today. The jury is still out as to my needs along those lines.

See you all on the courts!

## Post 126 Oh Boy, Lots to be Done

I've been interested in getting some instruction to improve my PB game. I spent a half an hour with Tony from Mexico. Tony is related to a couple of the Down's players, Jeff and Brandon, and he was gracious and invited me to a half hour drilling and practice session.

It was an eye opener. I was happy to get some criticism of my game, there are a bunch of weak spots, and some idea of a path forward.

There was also a comment that Tony reported twice during the session about dinking that resonated with me and I had not heard it before. Let me pass on the comments and some of the collateral thoughts that might stumble behind in its wake.

The idea is that when dinking you don't ever want to dink directly at someone. Always make them move to one side or the other.

There are a couple of reasons for this. This first is that if the dink is well placed you might get a weak return that you could attack just because they might overextend and lean rather than move their feet.

Secondly, one of the goals for all PB shots is to create some separation between the opponents that you could exploit. So dink cross, dink to the middle, make them move and wait for a middle shot or pop up to win the point.

Now, this is all great but it requires that you can dink a bunch without popping up yourself or dumping one into the net. A modicum of consistency is required, which leads us to another point.

Tony mentioned that before he serves he the first three shots all decided. Serve there, return here, and (plan A) a drop to this position, usually the middle. That gives you the first five or so seconds of a point already figured out and all you have to do is execute it. What you also don't get with this sort planning is the issue of "I changed my mind," which is heard occasionally after dumped shot.

Tony has some additional plans based on the opponents doing some thing wrong, for example a weak service return which could change the third shot drop into a drive, or the service returner doesn't advance to the kitchen line, and then the plan would be to keep them back and maintain the gap between the opponents, which could be exploited later in the point.

All of the time at this training session was spent at the kitchen line. Blocks were the item of the day. And I'd noticed that I don't block or even push much as I like to roll the backhand. It is a gap in my game and needs fixing.

If we look at a shot from the kitchen line we have a progression of shots. Let's put them in order of how far the ball will travel usually. We have dink, block, push, roll, and hit/swing. All of these have their uses and well rounded player should be able to pick and choose as required.

My general tendency is to roll or swing, which are effective unless they are not the best shot. Then the ball comes back more awkwardly than I would like. I have the bruises to prove it.

Dink is a gentle push or lift to move the ball into an awkward spot or to reset if out of position.

Block is an attempt to take a ground stroke from the opponents and drop it into the kitchen. It takes a soft grip and you don't want to attempt to speed up the ball. So no pushing or swinging at it. It is also

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

vital as a reset when the ball is sped up. We all know the players who dislike dinking and love to hit.

Push is like a block, but you will add to its speed with a pushing motion where the paddle stays on the line to the target.

The roll is where a lot of top spin is applied the ball, its trajectory might be fairly deep to kitchen line in depth. It's nice to have as the ball rarely goes long and it will dip a lot so if you can find your opponent's feet, it is difficult to return.

Swing -- you have time and the space and a great ball position to give it a whack. You will usually have to hit down on this shot as it's generally a fairly high ball and will be moving quickly after being hit, so it's not going to drop, you'll need to drive it down into the court.

I'm going to work on the blocks for a while. Tony passes along the image of a baseball catcher, waiting for the ball to come to him. Loose grip, no effort to speed up the ball. Good for resets and frustrating the drives from the baseline.

Finally, he mentioned the other day that my paddle position was a bit low when at the net. I've been working on that and it has gotten better and it looks like I have faster hands. All good.

Thanks Tony for sharing your knowledge and insights.

## Post 127 Another Bit of Tony Wisdom

I've talked a bit before about what to do when things don't go well. It's easy to feel discouraged when you don't win much on the day. Tony had a couple of comments on this. I think he was talking to Brandon and I was near by, eavesdropping...

There were three things that come into play with this. One is how good the opponents are - in other words you might have played well, but you still got beat badly. The contrapositive to this is if you were the better or best player in the game, it's easy to feel good about what happens. You don't get punished for all your mistakes and you might not get a lot of balls hit to you, so you had less chance for error.

The final point is you might be having an off hour or day and reacting to that. I think the "first game warmup" theory is well founded. You need to warm your body and get your head in the game. Don't judge the day by that first game. I think the first game I played with Tony last year, I had three quick errors. I said, "Don't worry, it will get better." And it did and if I recall it properly, it was a pretty good game.

But back to playing poorly... The game is one of mistakes and the difference between a good or great shot and an error is quite small. The more you strive to hit a winner, the more likely you are going to err. If you want to look like a great player, hit nothing but high percentage shots and don't pop anything up! All easier said than done, of course. Proper shot selection is the path to greatness.

I wanted to pass along what Tony said about this situation, and that was "you have to play through the tough patch." Never give up and expect the next shot to be better. One of the problems is that we humans see patterns in everything and if we have a series of mistakes, assume that more will follow. What we want to do is to think of each shot attempt to be an independent event. Don't let bad shots create more bad shots. Some compensation of technique is unavoidable, but over compensation is equally bad. Better to be loose, relaxed, and optimistic. Not always easy to do.

I played a point recently and my partner hit a bad shot. Then he hit one more or was just looking pensive and remarked, "I was thinking about the last point." A chill went up my spine, the sky clouded over a bit, the sun dimmed, the earth shook, and my vision blurred. I was scared and stammered out a reply along the lines, we'll get the next one! Hopefully in an upbeat manner.

And thinking about the last shot got in the way of playing the next point. It's best to go with the goldfish model of memory retention - only save the last eight seconds or so. In pickleball that might be a lot of shots, and it seems that eight second stuff was wrong actually, but only think about the next shot, never the last.

This is why great players have trouble remembering the score and who is serving -- that's my story and I'm sticking to it!



## Post 128 Ground Stroke Technique

I was watching the women's gold medal match for the Beer City open (link below). The opening scene was the gals warming up. They are both ex-pro tennis players. What caught my eye was the technique used for hitting ground strokes.

The technique is not to use your arm as the means to create the swing. The gals' arms stayed directly in front of them as if reaching to shake hands. The stroke was performed by rotating the shoulders and probably the torso and hips to get about a 90 degree rotation of the shoulders. The paddle didn't get behind the body except for the wrist cock. Then as appropriate to the hit, the body rotates back, starting with the legs and walking up the rest of the body and the arm just comes along with the shoulders. That leaves the arm in a very stable position, the elbow is close to the side -- think of hanging naturally down from the shoulder. The elbow is bent with the arm in front and the paddle back in the ready position.

The power created was just fine. They were hitting the balls back and forth with no attempts to put a shot away, but they were not hitting soft lobs to each other.

I was wondering if they were actually using this during the game and I took another look at the video. They were indeed using a body swing during play. This is most easily seen during the serves and service returns. Certainly if you can get into the proper location to hit a ground stroke, then you would like to do it with your body for a number of reasons - easy on the elbow, less body distortion and less recovery to get back to the ready position.

Note that there is a bit of loose wrist as the paddle gets into a position where to provide a hit or snap as they rotate through the shot - there is probably no attempt to help the paddle close to the ball. (Added Bonus: If you are a golfer, this is basically the golf swing too. You want arms to move with the body too, the club hinges back to provide more energy. The two swings are very consistent with each other.)

Next time out, think about a turn and not just sticking your arms or hands out to hit the ball. We might not be able to be pros, but at least we can try to look like them! It's on the top of my list for Monday.

Here is the video: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s5\\_y9ABkC08](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s5_y9ABkC08)

## Post 130 Beginner to Something Else

When you start out there is a lot to learn. Let's talk about service returns for a moment. Where should you hit the service return?

Well, over the net is a real good start - not always easy to do. The step after that is to know where to hit it. If you look up this question as I did on YouTube a couple of years ago, the answer, you will find, is "up the middle."

Two years later I still embrace this suggestion. Return up the middle, slightly cross court if you can and as deep as you can without going out -- better shallow than too deep. And it's still a good idea to clear the net by a bunch. The opposition has to let it bounce and you should take full advantage of that. The higher you hit it, the more time you will have to run up to the kitchen line -- you were going to do that, of course!?

Let's talk third shots - you've served, the ball has come back and now you get to hit it again. Where o' where? How about the middle? Yes, it's a fine location for third shots too.

I could ramble on and on here, but hitting the ball up the middle is a great place to hit it. Like a good joke, it never gets old.

I guess I wouldn't extend it as a blanket suggestion for dinks, but for all the other shots, you will not see a raised eyebrow if you choose the middle of the court.

This post is a bit short, so I'll expound about what happens when you decide to hit for a sideline. If you do that, you will need to control two things with your shot. You have to hit it in, which means its velocity has to be high enough to clear the net and low enough not to go out. The sidelines are running at an angle to your shot and too much heat and you are the loser. PB, as in life, if curves cross there is an event.

Now hitting to the corners gives you a bit more length for your shot, but it also provides your opponents with more angle to play with when they return it and the point may change in texture rather quickly. Thus, prepare for up the line shots, cross courts and if they are reading this, shots up the middle -- still effective when a ball has come to a corner.

If your opponents are at the net, then the direction of your shot is less important than how low your shot is. You want the opps to be hitting from below the net. Worry less about direction and more about how much droop the ball has. I was playing on court four today and watching a bit of what was happening on court three, the most effective shots I noticed on both courts were the softest as they had to be returned from below the net.

Final word... Your opponents from the Downs are all reading this and they will be hitting the ball up the middle to you. The next really important thing you want to understand is middle coverage. There are a number of posts about that. Someone on your side has to have responsibility for the middle at all times. When you are moving up the kitchen line, it's usually a good idea to run up the middle stripe or angle towards it. And if you were returning a serve, your partner should be stepping towards the middle of the court too.

Control the middle and control the kitchen! It's such an easy game!

## Post 131 Top of The Pyramid

I was hitting golf balls the other day, my other problem in life beside pickleball, and it struck me how much getting the club head on the golf ball properly was a big part of the whole thing.

Then my mind wandered to PB and I recognized early the importance of a paddle with a large sweet spot. I would say that my paddle quest has been looking for a larger sweet spot with spin production and touch second and third. I'll toss sound in there somewhere too, I like the paddle to be quiet.

From the driving range to the pickleball court is a short drive, but the need to hit either ball correctly seems interwoven.

It is frightening how often I miss-hit a pickleball. Edges, throat, top of the paddle are all in a day's work. It is nice when they work out, but I think I'd be better served to hit the ball better.

I played a game with a new guy. "I hope you don't mind a beginner," he said. "How much of a beginner?" I asked. "I've played 10 games," he said. Well, hmm, that is a real specific number. I don't know anyone outside of Randy, who tracks that kind of thing.

And a beginner he was. After the game, it looked like he was going to have the first sit out and I suggested he take a ball and practice bouncing it up and down. There is feel, wrist control, concentration, watching the ball, and paddle attitude to learn with this. And he went off to do that. He played in some other games later. I hoped the practice helped.

It is probably a good exercise for all of us to do that on occasion.

I was also thinking that I ought to judge all shots on just how well I hit them, rather than their point generation characteristics. If I remember I'll spend a day and work just on that. I have the TVPC dinking school tomorrow and I'm thinking that solid hits pays big dividends there too.

The class was on drills and skills. I thought about the sweet spot for a bit, but then got caught up in the drilling. I did mention it to one of my drilling partners and he agreed with it.

The question is how to hit the ball better. The golf way is to make sure I accelerate through the hitting area. This will stabilize the club head and you'll get better results. I've seen video where they stressed hitting through a pickleball. Another way to think about this, is to not manipulate the paddle as it contacts the ball. Set the wrist angle and maybe the shoulder joint and rotate your body to bring the paddle to the ball. You certainly don't stop as you make contact. This implies that there is a momentum transfer towards the target and if that helps you move to the next place on the court, then this is a good thing.

A final point, as I'm leading into the next post which is going to tie this stuff to dinking, you need to be the right place for all this to happen as you would like it to happen. Doing at a full lunge is not what you want. Movement and anticipation once more show up.

So more exploration needs to be done here, but I'm thinking this is important and useful. I would think that racquet ball players would be very good at this as they don't worry about hitting a ball too hard - so no last minute "yipes!" thoughts, which show up in golf and in PB.

## Post 132 A Bit More on Dinks

One of the topics I've not talked about in re dinking is keeping the arms and elbows close to the body.

This is part of the theory that you don't want to stretch for any shot. Either be in position, or let it go to your partner.

So we are in the ready position, relaxed, paddle up, and elbows at our side. The ball comes and we scuttle crab like to a position where we can extend an arm in front of us and return the shot. The pros are great at this, they move, they extend the paddle and then there is a hit that provides the energy for the shot. The paddle looks to be within a few inches of the ball when the stroke is started. It's not long, but it's there. Watch Bryan for this, he does it very well. (He was by today and I had a chance to marvel...)

We let the paddle follow through back to the ready position and we scuttle to get back to a stopped position where we are ready for a possible returned ball.

I took part in the Drills and Skills today with the TriValley PB Club and I didn't think about all of this until late in the day. There was a lot of dinking involved, but technique was not discussed. When I thought of this and tried it, I was very consistent. Now, I didn't hit a lot of shots with this nor in a game, so my fear is that good cross court shots might be out of reach. But if I am better balanced by a good position, it might just take some effort to get used to the movement needed to cover the wide shots. Dinks that are in the middle and easily in reach were not a problem. Being more ready provides more time to return the shots. I liked the shots I hit with this. They were easily controlled and calmer with the additional time I had.

I mentioned this to the other Rich today and he pointed out that I'd have to move my feet more -- so there are probably problems right off the bat -- sad, so sad.

I hit some ground strokes with this too. Keep close to the ball and use more torso rotation instead of an arm swing or a wrist flip. A short swing is important if you are going to rotate as it is easy to hit the ball out -- personal experience speaking. :-)

## Post 133 Third Shot Drops

I was watching some of the pro women playing and I was keeping track of how many third shot drops actually bounced in the kitchen. I was surprised to note that about 60% of the drops actually bounced. The others were volleyed. (Note: I've seen other statistics that put this number at about 40%, 60% of all dropped shots are volleyed back.)

When the drop shot is volleyed then the point becomes one of "keeping people at their own baseline" as much as possible.

The point I would like to make for us folk trying to get better, is that most drop shots are not going to be perfect. Maybe what we should be expecting from our drops shots is that they are good enough. I would say that if you get a chance to hit a fifth shot then your third shot drop was a success. Add bonus points if you managed to advance into the court by a step or two. You need to be brave with third shots and not worry about hitting a too high/deep one. I've found that the follow through has to be quite high, if not I'll drop them into the net almost every time. I played a game with Angel and when he hit a shot that might come back hard from a less than perfect drop, he would say "Look Out." And indeed, he said it a number of times. This is nothing unusual regardless of your level. Get rid of the angst and try to drop.

I was playing a point today and my partner scampered up to the net and put away the fifth shot. All good, of course. He remarked that he felt empowered to do so as he expected a good third shot drop from me. Well, he got one that time and was able to end the point. It might have been different if I didn't deliver.

A number of players have the view that advancing to the kitchen is always a good thing if their partner is going to hit the third shot. I am of mixed mind on this one; no, I take it back, I don't think this is a good thing. It's a great idea if the third shot is going to be good. But it's a bit tough to see into the future as Yogi Berra mentioned one time. And if the pros miss 60% of the drop shots, what is the percentage at the Downs? So we have amateurs who are venturing where pros fear to tread...

As a general philosophy I would argue to 1) be ready to advance if your partner hits a good third, 2) be ready to retreat if the third is bad, 3) or step into the court a bit if the third looks reasonable but expect to defend a volley. Bottom line, wait close to or behind the baseline until you can evaluate the third shot. (New: My views on this are fluid and I'm willing to convert to a more aggressive net rush. I suspect that rushing and not rushing are pretty close as to success.)

I would "play" this point differently depending on a couple of things. Let's say the serve was really good and the return was not, then the third shot will be easier and access to the kitchen should be available. With a weak/short second shot, you ought to be able to aggressively move from the baseline to the kitchen most of the time. I would suggest that your goal ought to be to move to the kitchen and not try to win the point outright.

Frequently the person who hits weak second shot will stay back, a bad error in my estimation, and they usually can be punished for this by returning a deep shot to their side of the court. If you can keep them off the kitchen and your side can get there, you've done well. Again, don't try to win the point, just get up and keep them back if possible.

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

When the chance to advance comes, both of you must advance and do it quickly. If you are not hitting the ball, then you can move up ahead of partner and get ready (balance, paddle position, court position, middle coverage, etc.) for the fourth shot to come back assuming partner is on the same page in re shot selection. The shot selection should be to make things awkward for opponents, hit something that can't be attacked, but rarely trying to win the point. Think placement over power.

If you adopt this framework it will make the fifth shots easier to handle and you and partner will be moving to the kitchen more easily.

One last point is what that third shot should be. Is it drive or drop? It shouldn't matter much. Because partner should be waiting to see what you will do and how successful it is before moving. I think if you drop always, it's easier for partner to get ready and you'll usually be able to advance to the kitchen more quickly. You don't want a hitting battle when you are at the baseline and the opponents are at the kitchen.

## Post 134 A Learning Experience

The other day I played with the same four people for three and a half hours. We mixed up partnerships, but for five games the players were fixed.

There were a couple of things that came out of this. It was possible to adjust to the shot speed of the game. The propensities of the players became better known. There was enough repetition in the point patterns that I could improve my consistency and also I could change my shot selections.

One of my faults is in swinging at the ball instead of blocking or pushing it. This shot comes up when at the kitchen line and you get a drive or medium speed shot from the baseline or middle court. Swinging at it is OK, but if the timing is a bit off then a net ball or out ball is common. A block or push provides more control and results in a shorter shot.

Shorter, softer shots have their own appeal. Good opponents are used to fast balls, ones where they have to move their feet and generate their own power can cause them problems. And, of course, a shot that lands in the court is highly preferable to one that misses.

After a lot of play, it morphed into some cat and mouse play. If you did the same thing every time, or you were expected to do the same thing every time, defenses were created and it became essential to vary shots.

And finally there was a fair amount of dinking and soft play, which I enjoy and don't see much of usually.

One of the joys of this game is finding compatible levels and playing for an extended time. It's a different game.

I've been thinking about what happens when all the new courts come on line in Livermore and other local towns. Will certain levels move to May Nissan and others remain at Downs? Another scenario is that the drop in games dry up as the people scatter. Then getting a game up might be a task to arrange and schedule four players. It's not clear what will happen and I'm curious. And how long could a group of four have a court? One game, an hour, a morning?

But whatever happens it should cut down on waiting for a court. But it might change to waiting for a player to show up.

That is the trade off; as it is now, you can always find a game to play in, but the competition might not be perfect and there may be some waiting. I'm very happy with how it works now, with the waiting being the main problem. Mixing of skill levels is less of an issue. I see playing with newer players as an investment in future players, so I'm willing to spend some of my playing time doing it. The pickleball players are wonderful regardless of ability and it's been a joy to know and play with this community.

## **Post 135 Dink Issues? Here is a New Way to Think of Them...**

In this video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0InHucmYYEA>

John Cincola talks about catching the ball then throwing it as a dinking method. He extrapolates to the full swing and it looks quite useful.

I'm going to try this as I struggle to get the old ball back over the net on occasion...

Also I've been drilling a bit and one of the things practiced is to get in a bad position and encourage folks to hit the ball hard at me. It's to simulate the defense against a smash. The practice is quite useful and I managed to get a couple back yesterday that I ordinarily would have thought a lost cause.

With this new ability, I am less fearful of a too high third shot drop. Hey, if they hit it hard, I'll get some of those back, so no big deal.

I looked a pro match, men's doubles and they hit poorish drops about 10% of the time. We rec players should probably be fairly happy with 30 or 40 percent or so. Obviously more is better, but you've got to hit some bad ones before you can hit 90% in.



## Post 136 Spin Generation and Paddle Control

If you watch Angel or Jose Marie, they have a smooth and efficient service motion. The paddle seems not to be controlled as for a hit, but more like a swing.

If you play golf for example, the club is designed to hit the ball as long as you don't interfere with it much. This, the physicists tell me, is due to the weight and length of the club. A baseball bat will not swing in this automatic fashion and the forearms have to rotate to help the hitting motion by "squaring the bat." You might notice that baseball players have big forearms.

Also, long drive golfers have the same problem and can't swing like a normal player. They have longer clubs, or at least they did, there are new rules to limit length, but once upon a time they were quite long and also required some forearm "work" to square the club.

How does this affect us students of the game of pickleball? The racquetball player has this flipping motion. If this is to create more speed or is required to square the racquet, I don't know.

I've been playing with this with a pickleball paddle and I think that the less wristy you are with the paddle, the more speed you will get out of it as you get a snap to propel the ball. I find it difficult to trust this swing, so it's an effort, but it seems to work.

Spin...

One of the things I've noticed in dinking is that when I expect to see topspin on a ball hit with my forehand, it comes out as a side spin to the left. Which means I'm closing the paddle and wrapping it around the ball -- the paddle is pointing a bit to the left of the target line. So my forehand dink is a lot like the above topic in that I'm getting in my own way by closing the face of the paddle. I'm fighting this tendency. I would like to have a forehand roll and the side spin instead of the topspin is a problem.

I can see this when dinking but not so much with ground strokes, however I'm sure I'm doing there too. Today I hit a bunch of ground strokes where I was able to properly produce topspin. As a third shot, a medium speed top spin shot is quite effective as it will dip below the net level.

So watch the spin you are producing when dinking. Make sure you are producing what you want to and change wrist/paddle angles and strokes to make it so.

## Post 137 Paddle Angles

When I'm not at the PB court I am frequently found at the driving range. There is much to practice in life...

What you get from golf clubs is a fixed angle to the ball. Then, of course, the golfer screws that all up by not presenting the club to the ball properly. But there are some parallels to this in pickleball that we might find useful.

When dinking is taught, the current theory is to freeze wrist and elbow and swing with the arm. This puts the paddle into a fixed state of loft and with an arm swing ought to provide more consistency. The "wrong" way to do it would be to move the wrist close to impact. This is OK, but when you move the wrist and how much you move it are additional variables and make the shot more complex. So an unbiased observer might cautiously state that the more wristy shot is not for the faint of heart. If you have this shot, fine, but it might not be the best way to learn to dink without any paddle sport background.

Let's go one more step with this paddle angle and golf stuff. The golf swing is likened to a sidearm ball throw with emphasis on leading the action with the body and doing the throw late in the swing. If you were tossing a ball around in the backyard, you would probably have a nice long motion with plenty of body even if you were not throwing the ball very far.

PB ground strokes are much the same. Ideally, you want to get in position to hit a ball, then there is a chain of events that use the lower body to shift weight and provide a nice solid platform to rotate the upper body and finally bring the arm through to hit the ball. Your weight should be on the foot closer to the net before you hit the ball. The added benefit to this is that your momentum should be moving forward and that will make it easier to follow a good shot towards the net if required.

I might suggest that the angle of the paddle is important here as you need to clear the net with its initial trajectory. Getting the ball to land in is another topic, but first let's get the ball over the net. Its height and how fast the ball will be going are the output of the paddle angle and the swing speed. Whatever spin you might put on the ball is more important to control where the ball lands, than where and how it crosses the net.

If you golf I would suggest think of putting the paddle in the face angle of a eight iron (say 35 degrees to the sky) or so, to ensure that you will drive the ball over the net. If you are hitting a drop shot, then you want to toss a pillow into the air, with a nice high follow through and a paddle angle that is maybe sixty degrees open.

This all applies to the serve too. Whether you bounce the ball and hit it or you hit it right from your left hand, you want your body to be doing some movement and the strike should be pretty close to your body; don't be reaching towards the net to hit it. If you're off balance after the serve, check where you are hitting the ball and whether you are using your body. This is the easiest shot in the game, there is no pressure to get it low to the net and not a lot of pressure to hit it deeply. Oh, we'd prefer deep to shallow, but for rec play, being in is all that is needed. I see a lot of new players struggle with this, so jump back to the fundamentals and make sure you're not making this shot a difficult one.

## Post 138 When Partner Errs

The question has come up, "what to do when your partner misses the easy ball?" And we could intensify that to "what to do when partner misses three in a row?"

I've played a lot of bridge, a sport where the partnership is everything. Bridge divorces happen and it's probably a reasonable idea not to play with your real spouse! (That's not quite correct, but I'm exaggerating a bit here.)

PB is a silly game and to get upset about a partner who misses a few shots is a path to madness. Why? Because you are probably going to miss three in a row in the near future. How do you want your partner to react?

Besides the play, every game is a chance to enjoy the synergy of a partnership. There is a lot of individual effort in life, but here is a chance to work with someone to achieve something together. This is a great thing. A nice shot to setup partner's put away is a rewarding achievement.

Now let's flip this a bit. It's easy when it all goes well, but not a lot of fun when nothing seems to work. First case is partner screws up. To lessen the chance of that happening again, you want to support partner, encourage them, concentrate on the next shot. As my grandmother used to say, "No sense dwelling on the past." Of course she had little short term memory, so she couldn't dwell on the past, but that doesn't make her wrong. Bottom line, help your partner! And being critical is rarely helpful. I think beginners are interested in help and if it's something basic, talk to them after the game.

And what if you err? You try the stroke again, you are not happy with the miss. If you've missed a couple before, you question your choice of hobby and wish for a quiet place to recollect. If your partner is not supportive, it makes it worse. You've already chastised yourself, you don't need partner to pile on.

Bottom line in all of this is to work to make your partner have the best game you can. It might not be a win, but there ought to be the satisfaction of working to a common goal and hopefully spending a fun ten minutes together.

There is one more situation that occurs and that is your team is out classed by the other side. Maybe the good players wanted to get a game together instead of being split up and you should encourage that on occasion as you get a chance to see two players moving about the court properly. OK, you don't expect to win, but here is a chance to bond together and do the best you can. Think of it as a learning experience and don't worry about the result. You might find that you put up a better fight than you expected and at some point realize that you might actually win the game. Good times then...

The final point I will make is that the difference between a good shot and a poor one is very small. A great dink and a netted ball is measured in millimeters. This is a simple game that you can't be perfect while playing. There are bad bounces, strange skips, opponents who work miracles and partners who turn you into a pin cushion. You cannot expect to be perfect or always be rewarded for a good shot. All you can do is try to make a good shot and then... move to position to defend the next ball. This is true for all levels of play. I've seen video of Ben Johns miss the simplest shot twice in a row. Of course a soft touch shot is not really simple, but he didn't expect to miss either much less both. We will all miss simple shots, so no excuses, just take a breath and get ready for the next chance to play well.

## **Post 138 A Quick Tip to Help Scott be Happier**

Scott has a pet peeve that he passed along to me. I've got something to say about the play, so I'll kill a couple of avian type critters with one post and maybe Scott will sleep better...

What Scott would like to pass on to all you players is how to play the nearly out ball. Imagine that you are by the baseline and shot comes your way. "Is it out? I hope it's out!" But you don't hit the ball and it's in. Or worse yet catch the ball and shout out "Nice Shot."

What Scot would like you to do, is to always hit the ball back and let your partner worry about its being in or not. If the ball is out, you can call it after the shot, or your partner can, or you can just keep playing the point. In all cases, work on returning the shot and nothing else. This is very important in a tournament where every shot is valuable.

What I would like to add to this, is if you are not in a position to hit the ball easily, then you were too far into the court when the shot was hit to you -- one of my pet peeves -- stay deeper in the back court if you are expecting a deep shot, for example a service return.

## Post 139 About That Roll Shot

The shots that people bring from other paddle sports to PB are quite interesting to the thinking, pondering observer.

I wanted to discuss the roll shot today. I have this in spades due to a table tennis background. In table tennis there is a lot of "half volley" shots on the backhand side that require the paddle to be stroked vertically and then rolled to a "shut" position. A shut position is where the paddle is pointing more to the ground than the net. Open is pointing to the sky. Note that almost all PB shots require an initially open paddle face, which you will learn rather quickly or give up the game.

The important features of the roll are:

- The paddle must be parallel to the net all through the stroke
- The paddle face is open a little bit
- The Stroke is mostly vertical
- You can roll the paddle after you hit the ball, but it's optional
- You need to bend your wrist a lot for this shot if you are going to strike the ball in front of your body, aka at the kitchen line

Let me elaborate on the last point. Let's discuss the backhand first. Some worthy opponent hits the ball too high (for them) to the backhand. I'm at the net and I want to roll the ball. I want to use this shot as it will put the ball in the court and it's good for hitting at feet. My wrist will bend to about a 90 degree angle. If I were to extend my arm towards the net, the paddle face will be parallel to the net. When I hit the ball I rotate my forearm to create the upwards stroke. There is not much push forward or effort trying to hit the ball deep into the court. This is not a power shot, it's designed to control and confuse.

If there is an opponent in front of me at the kitchen line, the ball may not travel much past their feet. It will be fairly slow and it will have a lot of topspin on it. It will dive quickly to the feet. This shot is frequently a winner as the dipping nature is hard to return.

The forehand is much the same -- the wrist must be broken, then the forearm is rotated to generate the stroke. Again, don't try to swing at the ball, you are brushing against it.

I don't hit the forehand shot very well, and I'm trying to improve. In writing this it seems that the two key points to this stroke are the wrist bend and then the forearm rotation.

Without the wrist bend then you can still roll the ball, but it is more like a tennis stroke and you have to let the ball get along side your body, id est, it's not a shot where the arm is in front of your body. Watch Randy play, he has this shot and you will see a long stroke from low to high. It's the basic tennis topspin shot.

Todd seems to have the forehand roll at the net. He is able to take very low balls and hit them aggressively with the topspin he generates.

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

Give this shot a try. It is mostly a shot when at the kitchen. If you do it correctly you can hit balls from below the net level and easily get them in.

## Post 140 Po Learns to Control Bangers

The weather was turning cool in the valley where the monastery has existed for hundreds of years. The leaves had turned to various colors and the river was low due to the summer's heat.

Po and his fellow acolytes had finished another year in their quest to master the sport, game, and life of pickleball. Of course there were always problems, as the game is difficult and how much can anyone learn in a mere few years?

"Master, I am playing well, but some games are not in the style that you and the other masters teach," said Po.

"What elements of the divine style are lacking in these points, Po?" replied the Master.

"I find that many of the players from the village only want to hit the ball and hit it hard. I struggle to play as I have been taught, to caress and guide the ball, without excess speed or effort."

"Ah, you've finally realized that bangers are detrimental to the game?"

"I think that now. I used to like hitting the ball hard, but now it seems just wrong."

"Po, I am pleased with your progress. In only seven years, you have seen the light. Many don't see this until the tenth year.

"Let me pass on some thoughts and we will find some wisdom there, hopefully. Firstly, let's talk about the serve. What is it for?" asked the Master.

"Well, to start the rally and to try to move an opponent around a small amount. The emphasis is to get the serve in, with a modest bonus of pressuring the opponents if possible," replied Po.

"That is good Po and this was an early lesson, but fundamental to the play. A rally where the serve is out, is not a rally, it is a cry for help and perhaps, a symptom of a wounded psyche or deep set problems. Fortunately Po, you are not affected with sick spirits.

"Now, we move to more detail. The serve also sets the initial path of a point. If the serve is spinney, we expect a spinney shot back. If it's hard, low to the net, and deep, we might expect the point to be framed around such shots. But Po, what kind of point do we expect if the serve is a modest lob? One where the ball is fairly deep, coming deep into the court with some top spin and a nice high bounce? We don't teach that serve to our beginners, but the time is right for you. What will the return be like?"

"Hmm, a high shot near the baseline can be quite awkward to return. The fence can get in the way and it's impossible to hit top spin with this kind of ball. And very difficult to hit the ball hard and flat. So the ball hit back might be fairly soft with a lot of height to it? Would that be correct Master?"

"Yes Po, it is very difficult to hit a hard shot from deep in the court. A "banger" to use the crude term, would much rather have a low shot that they can hit up on a bit and put some top spin on it. So with just a soft, high serve we have pruned the weed of the banger just a bit.

"Now Po, let's look at a service return. We turn to the other side of the court and we are receiving the ball. How do you normally return it?"

"I will hit a deep shot that is close to someone's backhand, usually up the middle of the court,"

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

answered Po.

"Very good, and if the players are bangers? What do they do with that ball?"

"They usually drive the ball and we try to block."

"Try to block?"

"Often I can't get all the way to the kitchen line and It can be difficult to hit a hard shot from off the kitchen line."

"Po, let me suggest a new service return. Try hitting a lob back. It doesn't have to be very high, but like the soft serve, hit it deep, with a nice high trajectory, into the middle of the court. How would that change things?"

"Well, we discussed that it's difficult to hit a high shot hard, so I would expect less third shot drives," said Po.

"You also get one more thing from this type of return, Po, what is that?"

"Umm, oh, I see, the shot is slower, so I will have more time to get to the kitchen line!"

"Excellent Po. Not only have we blocked the bangers from their favorite shot, but we've made it easier for our side to get in position to defend against the third shot. A third shot that should be easier to hit rather than block. Also bangers might easily hit a lot of balls long from being pressed into the fence, so watch for those."

"Thank you Master, your words of wisdom are always shrewd and useful."

"You are welcome Po. Go fourth and teach all bangers you come across the error of their ways. Heh, heh. Now, as it is getting a bit chilly in here, would you mind fetching a pot of tea for these old bones?"

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The lobby serve and the lobby second shot are obviously nothing new to me and I'm sure to all of you. However I was playing with Melissa this week and she is using the lobby serve and it's been effective in my judgment. Since she can hit the ball with anyone, I was surprised by this choice of shot. If I had her reflexes I would seek to play as many "bangy" points as I could.

But I'm slow and old and when I realized the usefulness of the soft serve, I thought about the second shot too. One of the cardinal sins (from where does that phrase come?\*) is to hit a serve return into the net. And like Po and the Master, I'd rather not play a banging game, so it occurred to me that with the serve and return being anti-bang, that I could control the early tempo and style of a point.

I trotted this out the last couple of days on court and I found that I could get much easier second shots back with a lobby serve, which made my third shots easier. And if I used a lobby second shot, I could easily get all the way to the kitchen line and would never net a service return. The third shots that were "forced" with a lobby second were much easier to return as well.

So there were a lot of points where my side got easy to handle third shots. Oh, we didn't win them all, but we were better off with the shots that were not being banged at us.

(OK, you will get a full lob back on occasion. There are people who hit them, but it's not the end of the



## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

world and with the point being a bit a slower in pace, you have more time. We are talking of disrupting bangers a bit, we will deal with lobbers another day!)

If you like to bang or not, there are ways to bend the opponents to your preference for the point style. This is worth playing with I think, so give it a go!

\* (Cardinal sins are a common phrase referring to the seven deadly sins which are not quite in the bible. Sadly missing a service return in the net is not one of those, but it could be...)

## Post 141 What I learned from 16 Hours of Pickleball

I didn't play 16 hours, but I watched it this weekend at the Harvest Crush tournament.

For those who were not there, I was one of the runners. We had several duties. The first being to get new players out to the proper court, making sure we had the correct players, talked them through the coin toss routine, and then to collect and check over the score cards when the match was over.

I decided early on that doing those tasks inside the fence was good idea. I could quickly see if a match was over and grab the score card and I could keep a few balls from running into the neighboring court. And then I had a better view of the action.

There was a mix of beginners, the intermediates, and then the advanced players. I'm using those terms loosely as I'd like to contrast the playing styles of each group.

With the beginners, the ball was frequently hit quite high over the net. There was a lot of shots hit either straight across the net or lobby in nature. We don't see much of the lobby shots at the Downs except in folks just starting out.

Beginners were also unable to hit the ball towards an opponent's feet. The shots were waist level and above. I didn't see a lot of poaching either. The feet move more the better the player on average.

Beginners hit a lot of balls long. Also there were some dinks, but not a lot.

The intermediates hit their shots more flat and lower to the net. There was very little dinking, maybe less than the beginners, as these players could get the ball down and could hit the ball harder. They poached a bit and were very willing to hit long balls. The points were pretty quickly over as "smash it until it hurts" was a common mantra. A lot of out balls were played as rallies were frequently done with no players at the baselines. It was kind of bang the third shot and then hit everything else harder.

In both the beginners and intermediates, there were very few third shot drops. Drive, drive drive for glory!

If we look at the best players out there, I finally saw some drop shots, but it was not a universal strategy. There was still a lot of banging. The people who did drop, did pretty well with it.

Finally as for strokes, I saw very little backhand rolls or top spin backhand shots. Backhands were struck as a swipe, or cut shot. There was one guy who had some roll to his backhand and it was quite effective. I've become convinced that this is a very useful shot. I saw a lot of dinks that bounced quite high to people's backhands and the return shot was invariably a dink. I would have rolled a bunch of them.

Let me talk about speedups for a moment. This was not always in a dink battle. No one was hesitant about hitting the ball harder at any time. However, I saw some great block shots and counter shots from everyone out there. It maybe that these counter shots were within my ability, but it since I can't see myself play, the speed of the counters seemed to be scary fast. It seemed that the people who first sped up the point were quite likely to lose it too. The blocks were better than the speed ups. One might want to be more careful about when to speed up a point. But back to the prevalent theme, it was hit as

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

hard and as often as possible!

Serves were nothing important relative to all the other play. I didn't see a lot of service errors, except in a couple of the beginner matches. There was one guy with a spin serve, but he never aced anyone and no one had problems returning his shots. My philosophy in re serves is to get them in at all costs seems vindicated at the tournament level with these players.

Heat... I was out on the courts for a long time. Saturday was very hot and I was feeling it and I was hanging around in shady spots whenever I could. If you are playing, don't waste energy in warming up for more than the first match. I drank a lot of water too. I wasn't running much, but I managed 14,000 steps per day. Find shade, a breeze, and wear a hat! There were folks with no hat and no sunglasses out there -- perhaps they were made of sterner stuff than myself.

Let me pass on a couple of suggestions to the tournament organizers... I think the tournament was run very well. All the players I talked to were very positive about that. There was not much waiting for the next match. Food, snacks, water was well done and welcome -- they took care of the players and volunteers quite well.

The sound system was good, probably could have been louder when calling players to matches, though this was a minor matter.

It would have been useful to be able to pass scorecards to the scorer by passing them through the fence rather than having to walk them around every time. If you ever build a tournament court system, it's something to keep in mind.

There were a couple of instances where the rules came up and it would be nice if a couple of the club members had referee credentials /experience so that on court disputes could be handled quickly. We runners were in the middle of a lot of it and having one or more of us with more rules knowledge would have been useful.

If there had been more courts and if they had been spread out, having a radio to call a rules judge to a court would have been useful. It didn't matter at May Nissan, but I could see it at a larger venue.

If you play tournaments, let me pass on the role of the players and runners and directors. It is the player's job to make line calls. If the ball is too close to call out, then it is in. If the calling players split on the call, then the ball is in.

You cannot dispute a line call by an opponent. An agreement to "play the point over" is to me a gray area. If it's like golf, then you don't get to vote as the rule is absolute. I suspect that as soon as someone calls a ball out, the point is over. (I could use some rule learnin' myself!) If they call it out, play stops, then they reverse the call, I'd still guess the point is over and goes against the calling team.

If you are in a situation where a lot of calls seem wrong, then have a runner talk to the director and get a line judge or referee to judge the rest of the match. Note that asking a runner or spectator if the ball was in or out is not part of the game. If a runner sees a bad call, they should not speak up or pass on their "view" if asked. I saw one bad call that I was close to and a few others from distance that didn't look correct, but my opinion was not relevant to the play and I wasn't asked.

There was one interesting point upon which I was consulted. It was in the intermediate play and the teams were stacking. The wrong player served the point and the point was played out. At that point the opposing team called the service error.

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

My understanding of the rule is that as soon as the wrong player hits the ball, a fault has occurred and the point is over. I don't know what happens if the next point is played before the error is determined...

OK, but what happens if the proper server serves but the opponents are positioned incorrectly? The point ends when the wrong person hits the service ball. But suppose the server hits the serve out to the wrong person? My guess is that there is no receiver fault since the incorrect player never hit the ball and the normal service out ball is the end of the point. You're allowed to stand where ever you like, so in this case no hit, no foul. One more reason to always serve in!

There was an incredible amount of work that went into running the tournament. Kudos to the organizers and volunteers who put up and took down both days, fed and watered the volunteers and made it all happen with ball blockers and signs and ladders and tie-wraps and a thousand details that had to be done. My part was tiny, but I could appreciate all the effort the board and their helpers put in.

It was fun to volunteer and I'd encourage others to try it. The job of runner is a good one as there are a lot of movement and you could get a good view of the action. More runners are a good thing, so try it if you have an interest.

Did I want to play after watching it all close up? Nope! It looked like work to me and medal hunting is not an interest of mine. I'm more than happy to play with friends where the result is almost meaningless!

## Post 142 Defense Thoughts

The style of PB that I enjoy the most is one where there is the struggle of servers getting to the kitchen and engaging in a dink battle.

This style requires drop shots. There is not a lot of room for error with a drop shot, so things can go wrong on occasion. What should/can we do in that case?

Let's look at a typical scenario of the drop that is a bit deep. As servers we want to be cautious in moving towards the kitchen line in all cases, but especially with a bad drop shot. So we are hanging back as we are expecting a deep return from the defenders. (If the drop shot was great, we move together into the court.)

I would suggest being further back based on the quality of the drop shot. If it's really bad, we probably would like to be behind the baseline as we are going to defend against a smash.

A step or two into the court would be reasonable if the drop is mediocre. We are expecting a deep shot, but a normal ground stroke or half volley or volley would be a reasonable way to defend.

And to continue that, as the fourth shot is shorter, it allows us more time to move into the court.

My preference is to volley the fourth shot if possible. I don't want to do that off a smash, but anything that is marginally short will allow me to get in and volley.

If they are smashing the ball, then there is a court coverage problem. If they angle it off, we probably can't return it. But shots that are inside the sidelines are probably returnable.

We are happy to hit another bad drop shot as a reply. Think of it as a bad lob. Another smash by the opponents is usually not a big problem.

Returning smashes is a lot of fun and one should embrace this kind of point.

The idea, of course, is to still get to the net. We'd like to hit better and better returns until the other side cannot put a lot of pressure on us. Their shots might be short, or they might have to hit from below the net. We will work our way up, still trying to get into a dink battle and turn the tables on the opponents.

I've never practiced the defensive shots, but there is room for error as the return height doesn't matter much and you usually have a lot of time to return the ball as it won't bounce into the stands like a tennis ball. I would think those of us who like to lob would be good at this.

Another thought is that to lose these points is not a disaster. As the serving side we are playing at a disadvantage due to the two bounce rule, so our expectations should not be too high. If you get a couple of shots back, that is probably a good result. If you can blunt the attack and get to the kitchen, you've done very well, indeed. These points should be recognized as a normally frequent part of the game at the amateur level. Obviously, a very good drop shot is the best way to get to the kitchen, but even the pros miss about 10% of those. (New: last stat I saw reported that 60% of pro level drops were volleyed back.)

Drop shots are a touch shot. What you want to do is avoid all of the drop shots into the net. Easier said than done, of course. But if you are not great at them make sure you hit them too hard. Better to play some defense than give the opps an easy point. Doing that gives you more opportunity to practice

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

some defense and not fear a drop shot that is too deep or too high.

## Post 143 Three on Three Pickleball Game

It had come to our attention that there is a 3 on 3 pickleball game. We tried to play it, but were unsure of rules, etc. I looked it up.

The game I found was named Mortimer pickleball. Each team has three members who are all on the court at the same time. The third member is called the Mortimer. Old Mort does not serve nor return serves. The three players will rotate exchanging the Mortimer role as points are played.

Serves are done normally with all three players staying back. The idea is that two will move up the kitchen line and Mortimer will stay back as extra middle coverage and to field any lob. (I'm liking this already!)

That's about it. I read about it here: <https://monmouthpickleball.org/can-more-than-four-play-pickleball-at-once/>

I think it sounds like a lot of fun and gets more people on the court. Might be worth trying when the courts are busy.

## Post 144 Finding Style

As one wanders through life, one may find their style at some point. Is it required that this be discovered? Can you live, or love, without style? I guess that is a deep subject and beyond the scope of this blog. Perhaps commentators may speak up.

Back to pickleball. I've found a style of play that suits me. And by style I would define that as the types of serves, service returns and other elements of play that follow from those. "The Elements of Style" has a familiar ring, does it not?

Let's begin with serve. I favor a lobby type with some top spin. It should land as close to the baseline as I dare. The crime being being too long. Note that I'm not too worried about a short ball, as my lobby trajectory with top spin provide a high, deep bounce that should be effective.

The serve is also not a fast shot, which allows me time to recover from the service stroke and get ready for the return. This is valuable. Finally, this serve is hard to miss. I don't want more than one bad serve a day. The lobby shot with some top or side spin is easy to hit and difficult to hit out. I can hit it to either side or hit it with enough curve to cause the returner some minor problems.

Service return: I also favor a soft, high return. That provides me with more time to move to the kitchen, stop, and get ready to defend, and it removes the net as an obstacle. The opps have to let it bounce and I want to use that rule to my advantage. I'll usually hit this shot with some top spin so I get a high bounce which will push the opps backwards. I'll use a cut spin on occasion as people like to hit that shot into the net. Note that the cut shot is more dangerous to me as it brings the net into play. Hitting a high cut shot is difficult and it seems to be attackable as well as the bounce will be more upright.

The next element of style is the third shot. I'm much more comfortable to drop this shot than to drive it. I really don't enjoy hitting the ball hard, I don't do it all that well, and drops allow me to express my gentle side.

If my drop is not very good, then I'm happy to defend from near the baseline. Defensive type points are fun as are the "drop and then advance" ones. I'll follow all drop shots into the court. The better the drop, the further I go. I want to volley the next shot if I can. I should be able to unless the drop is really bad. I'm happy to drop the fifth and seventh shots off of a volley. If I can't volley, I'm happy to half volley and still work my way in a step or two.

Dinks and things... Dinking is fine and I'm happy to do it. The key to being a great dinker is to be ready to move to the location of the next dink. I want to move, stop, dink, and move back to a neutral ready position. If you are waiting for the next dink, make sure your feet are not glued to the ground. Be ready to move in either direction.

Anti-style Tip: I usually won't lob from the kitchen line. I think it's a useful shot, but I not interested in it or lob points in general. I'll leave that to others. :-)

Speed ups: While dinking one has to look for opportunities for speed up the play. My favorite time is when the dink is directed to partner, but the shot is too high over the middle. I want to reach in and hit this up the middle gap. I gain a time advantage and hopefully I'll hit this shot down, which makes it



## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

awkward to defend. Otherwise, I'm happy to dink and I try not to give the opponent the same dink twice in a row. Move them around and make them work...

Other speed ups are to hit the ball straight at an opponent. I don't have a problem with this as the ball will not hurt. My target is the waist to shoulder, usually on the dominate side. This requires a fairly high ball, so I wait for it.

If the dinking point gets sped up but not finished, the ball usually starts to get higher over the net and moves faster as the point is played. I will look for a chance to reset if I can. I'm happy to return to a dink point.

Finally, I'm more than happy to hit a backhand roll at almost any time. I can hit this from marginal shots; its spin makes it difficult to defend.

I think that's about it. But now we come to the big, expensive question... What is partner doing in the mean time?

With my lobby type shots, I'm providing partner with a lot of time to be in a good position at the critical moments early in the points and should result in points that are fairly relaxing. We have time to setup and execute shots. We're not on the run and we've not allowed the opposition to hit hard shots off of our shots. They can try to speed up the service return, but they will be doing so from deep in the court and I like my chances to defend those shots. This is also true for drop thirds, which require the fourth shot to be fairly soft. In all cases, I'm trading shot speed for time to move. I'm happy with that trade. I don't have to sprint to the kitchen, which would be required if I hit a hard service return, for example.

So, the issues revolve around how partner serves and what his third shot style is. If partner is a banger, then I will remain in the back court until I have a good opportunity to move forward. Note that soft shots allow you to move forward earlier than hard shots. Hard serves require you to be further behind the back line than soft ones. A hard return can skip if it's returned deep and flat.

Same with partner's third. If he's a banger, I stay back. If partner bangs the fifth and seventh, I'm just hanging out and wait for the point to ripen. If the ball is hit to me, I want to drop so our side can get to the kitchen line. If we are not there and the opponents are, then we are at a disadvantage. My first goal when serving is to get to parity. I don't try to win points with my serve, or third shot.

I've stumbled into this approach by watching Melissa serve and playing around with it and extending it to other parts of the game (she tells me her service returns are soft too, but I'm not convinced. :-)). I've used it quite successfully against some good teams who bang. But mostly it's the type of pickleball I prefer to play. I'm removing pressure during the point and the need for speed in my movements for the next shots. It then becomes more like chess then dodge ball -- not that there is anything wrong with dodge ball!

## Post 145 The Power of Stopping

I discussed a style of service return in the previous post. There are two wonderful things that come from hitting a deep soft service return. One of them is allowing you to get to the kitchen line in time to... stop.

As I hit that soft return more often, I am amazed at the ease of returning all shots from the kitchen line when I'm nicely stopped, balanced and ready for the moment of truth.

If we extend this to other shots and you look around, you will see a lot of shots when hit on the run that are really ugly. The usual problem is long or in the net. The running adds paddle speed and it makes any shot more complex.

If you watch the pros, they are very good at stopping before hitting. Move your feet early, not late. It's true for ground strokes and dinks.

Next time you are going to hit the ball, pay some attention to your setup. Are you stopped? Will you contact the ball at the side and the height you want? The mantra is: Move, stop, hit, recover for the next shot.

In seasoned partnerships you might hear your partner say, "Look out!" This usually follows a pop up. If you were moving in anticipation of a good shot from partner, that would be a real good time stop and get ready to defend. A lot of smashes can be returned as long as you have some room and are ready to take it on.

If you are trying to get to the net and it will take a fifth or seventh shot to do so, make sure you've stopped and gotten ready for each step as you move in on your opponent.

Stopping is involved in all shots and probably needs to be studied a bit more.

## Post 146 Skill versus Knowledge

My other problem in life is golf. Sadly the Master can shed no light on that topic. Perhaps an auld Scottish caddy might be the way to go...

Back to the topic at hand. One might summarize it simply as, "I knew I needed to stop before I hit the ball, but didn't." We have here a case of knowledge, but not enough skill.

Skill might then be thought of as the incorporation of knowledge into one's play and its application in a useful way.

There are several paths to skill production and there is a lot of scholarship out there in re this. For example using drills as a path to skills. Research has found that drills ain't so good. The skill takes longer to be absorbed into the aperceptive mass, but along the path from knowledge to skill, it's been found harder to remember.

Remember? I hear you say. If I can return to golf for a moment, a sport that is less dynamic than PB, still requires a few movements in a certain order. But try to remember the simple 45 steps and their order and see how well you do. Dave Pelz is a golf researcher and his expertise was in data and quality control. His research suggested that for something to become second nature or fully integrated, you needed 20,000 repetitions. So if you are trying to copy my backhand roll, don't start unless you are still young. :-) Now you can do these things after just a few reps, but in the heat of the moment and in times of stress, it's really hard to think of doing the "new" thing.

I'll argue with that a bit. For example you stumble across a better path, and it hurts less and the ball goes better, I think a lot of minds would incorporate that solution to the problem quickly. Will it toss the old way? Maybe, but I think that's a struggle too. Things you want to remember and things you want to forget. It would be nice to have better control over these things.

So what to do? You are a player who wants to get better. I think the emotion of desire will help you remember the new thing. But let me start in on the official second part of this post.

How to become a master? When I was working there was a lot of training of customers, whether they knew it or not. My co-worker Bob and I saw a lot of this. We had a definition of a genius as someone who made every mistake, but only make it once.

The path to skill that all children take is try stuff. And deliberately try the wrong thing. This is just a boundary search for the truth about something. They learn how far to go by going too far. Watch a baby move those arms and hands. They start off with a lot of excess movement and soon become more efficient, smoother, and faster.

Think of a top spin shot at the net. You need to hit it hard enough to get enough spin. Hit it too soft and it goes long because of the lack of spin. It's really difficult to say, "Well it's going out, so maybe I need to hit it harder?" But that well be the answer. A kid might just keep banging the ball and find the answer by exploring the "wrong" answers and getting past them.

But as adults we don't do much of that type of learning. We can relate what we already know to new things. But we rarely explore, go past, or push boundaries like a kid would. We could probably hit a ball harder or with more spin, but we rarely try.

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

The converse is also true. In occasional moments where the ball puts me in a awkward spot I've managed to return it with some unreal spin. I therefore know that a lot more crazy, other worldly, shots are doable, but do I seek to figure it out? Sadly no. Even when we are aware of secret knowledge, it's hard to explore it.

In a more obvious example, there are people who cannot dink. Everything is a hit and it's very hard for them to address the lack of a soft game. Even if it would bring an immediate boost in ability. I think it's a bit of fear and of looking foolish or not getting it right immediately. Kids don't have those problems. They've failed at everything they've tried initially, but somehow managed to gain skills on the way out. If you struggle with this, you have to grit your teeth and be willing to take a short term hit to pride or fear and concentrate on the long term benefits. What's the worst case scenario? Someone laughs at your dink? Golly, everyone misses dinks and by everyone, I mean all players from the worst to the absolute best. Go be brave! Think of your partner!

This post gets long... What have we learned here? The path to skills is built on the experience of failure, testing, retesting, being brave, and showing no fear. Book learning is fine, but time in the trenches is still be required. OK, a post about exterior thinking next time.

## Post 147 Interior and Exterior Thinking

I'm stealing some of these concepts from a golf video I saw on YouTube.

Interior thinking is "I want to hit this shot down the line with some top spin. Let's see, to do that I need to rotate my body and swing from low to high and then..."

Another solution to this problem is available. Consider just writing something down. We know all the letters and we've done it before, so we just start writing. We don't internally think about the shape of the letters or spacing to make it all fit, we just imagine what we want and it happens. And this is what the golf pro defined as external thinking. The desire or goal drives the mechanics and the less you interfere with it, the better you are.

Now back to a PB point and we can "see" the ball scooting up the line and then we just do it. Ben Johns has been quoted as saying, "When I'm playing, I'm not thinking."

Now this is not a perfect method as we might not have the skills needed to hit the shot we can "see," but I'll suggest that if you embrace this view and feeling, that it will work surprisingly well. Dinking skills are not based on strength; it's delicate work and you have to be fearless to do it well. The same with drop shots, trust and go for it are the proper attitudes.

I spent a couple of minutes at the driving range using this for golf practice. I'm pitching the ball about thirty yards and I want to just carry it over a small hill. As soon as I adjusted to just thinking that it happened and I could do it many times in a row. I played around with other shots and was quite happy with the results. My golf skills are roughly on par with my pickleball skills. So I'm thinking that more of "I want the ball there" rather than "how do I hit that ball there?," is the way to go.

There are a couple of areas in my PB game that I would like to improve and they are dink consistency (I usually hit the ball too low), and service returns.

I'm going to go more with a "shot shape and destination" and less with a stroke generation model of play. Time will tell if I have sufficient skills or trust to bring this off.

Now is this a good way to develop skills? There is some evidence for this in the golf area as well. "How do I hit the ball lower?" Here is the classical answer: "You reduce the loft of the club and get your hands further forward, add some pressure to the left leg and then quieter wrists through the shot." (Very complex and how does that really help even if it's all true?) Or with an external approach. "Here is a ball, you've played with balls in three different sports, so step up and hit it lower. You can do this." The second approach has much merit and is usually successful. The teacher can add in all the other bits after the skill is "discovered" if required.

If we divide up the world into player types, we have those who are technical and those who play by feel. The feel players frequently can't tell you how they do something, but they can repeat it. The technical guy can probably describe the whole thing, but I'd guess loses the ability to perform well on occasion.

There is a series of books written by Timothy Gallwey called "The Inner Game of xxxx." He wrote about golf and skiing and maybe one other sport. His terminology is backwards from the internal v. external. Thus he wanted you to embrace your inner voice and liberate it. He said that you have one of

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

the greatest processors and hardware systems every created and if you trusted it, you could get it to work for you and work quite well. I've read his golf book and there are some interesting methods for creating your own feed back loops, etc., and if you are serious about performance in sports, you might find it quite useful. He embraced the "imagine the shot and then hit it" approach.

I'm signed up to teach at one of the pickleball 101 clinics this weekend. Shall I try: "OK, here is a ball and a paddle, bounce the ball on the paddle." That works. "Stand here and hit the ball to the right side of the court... Now hit it to the left. Not too difficult, was it? Now, let's move to the kitchen line and we want to hit the ball to the right, then left then forward and we want it to land at the other kitchen line."

"How do we do that?"

"You already know enough to do it..."

Will that work? It can't be worse than, "Keep your wrist firm, rotate your body to the left, swing in an underhanded fashion." Probably will work great for artists, not so much for engineers! We shall see.

## Post 133 Transitioning to a Better Game

I watched a match at the Downs on Monday. It was Jimmy and Sammy against Roger and Puneet. On paper I would see this as a very even match. There are some style differences between the players, but all of them are good players and not prone to excessive errors. Both teams did some banging to start the game...

Jimmy's team builds rather quickly to a 5-0 lead. Sammy and Jimmy tend to speed up play and they are doing it well.

But then Puneet starts to hit drop thirds instead of the drives that everyone else had been using.

Well, that changed the game completely. The ability of Jimmy and Sammy to speed up was suppressed and they were forced to hit more touch shots and dinks. More errors were committed and in short order, the score was tied. It didn't take much longer and Puneet and Roger ended up winning by 11-8 or so. Good play by Puneet to shift the speed of the points.

The solution to the puzzle was the soft game, which took away the main weapons of the other side. Banging and speed ups work up to certain levels and after that you have problems. As all skill levels rise, then counter attacks are more routine and being selective is more important than being aggressive.

Fast forward to Wednesday. I'm playing and there is a lot of dinking. Everyone is about the same skill level and I'm doing my usual speedy roll stuff but more balls are coming back than I'd like. It was clearly another case of dink first, dink second, wait for an opening, and then selectively try for winners or faster shots.

As I mentioned in the post about style of play, this style is my favorite. I like the dinking and the selective speed ups. What I didn't like was my inability to be more selective as to when I did it. Bad player! I thought of playing a game and doing nothing but dinking. I didn't try it, but I thought it might be worth a doing.

The bottom line on this is, that after a certain level of ability, you have to embrace the soft game or you are going to start losing. There are upsides to being selective, your paddles will last longer, shoes stay cooler, you sweat less, and you don't have to run as much.

## Post 148 Making Changes

A lot of PB shots requires some interesting wrist angles. Most of which we are not aware as we are cleverly evolved monkeys and do a lot of things automatically.

The basic need is to present the paddle face to a position that is roughly parallel to the net. Usually there needs to be a few degree of tilt in the paddle face so that the paddle faces the sky. (Obviously there are exceptions to that, *exempli gratis*, over heads.) This is true for forehands and backhands, dinks and long shots. You are using the full range of your wrist's ability to bend outward and inward. For full shots you take the ball from a side position, which does the same job of aligning the paddle. But at the net when dinking and your arm is extended, then there is a lot of wrist play involved. (Usually not "flippy" wrist play as it's another, complicating variable.)

In my own PB strokes I find that my forehand shots have a side spin to them, rather than a pure top spin. This is always a surprise and I "feel" that I'm getting the paddle parallel to the net, but the spin says that I'm wrapping the paddle around the ball from right to left and not bottom to top.

I'd prefer a bit of top and side spin in a perfect world. I'm not getting the paddle where I want it for a forehand roll. As I mentioned above, the only way I can see this is when hitting a soft shot and watching the spin. This is my feedback. I need to repeat this and get a feel for the proper stroke and wrist position. Maybe I can do this, but maybe not as wrists don't bend in both directions the same. It may be that I need to use some body rotation to get the paddle in the proper position. I won't know until I figure it out.

How to change something? Ah, the great philosophers' question dating back to the days of cave dwelling.

If you want to change something you need some feed back. If the ball keeps going long, we do something. If it's wide, we do something. But if it seems OK, we don't see the need for a change in the stroke and probably will never think about what is really happening. Lack of critical observation is a problem.

The pattern to make a change is: identify the want, figure it out at slow speed with feedback, speed it up as long as you get it mostly correct (slow back down if you regress), then build some trust with some repetitions.



## Post 149 Miscellaneous Topics

I'm just catching up a bit with the loyal audience today. There is, pardon the expression, not much on my mind, so no new posts for bit.

But there are a couple of observations I can pass on.

I played with and against Scott today, one of our very fine players. He has great paddle control and delivers angled shots as well as anyone. One of the things he does well is to get the paddle positioned very early, then there is a late hit.

He frequently hits soft rollers with his forehand. They are not very aggressive shots, he is just keeping the play going, but with the slight lift then roll, he has good net clearance -- it's a high percentage shot. His shots are made with a very short swing, an approved pickleball style element. Watch him play if you get a chance.

One good quote from Scott during today's play: "Even if you hit a bad shot, get ready to play the return." Worthy of the Master..

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I find Scott and other good players easy to play against. Their play is much more predictable and less aggressive than the those whose skills are lagging just a bit. It's easier to hit the ball too hard, which makes for shorter points and less consistency. Longer points are funner!

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I also played with a couple of beginners recently. One of the concepts that they usually lack is the mandatory move to the kitchen after their service return. Even if the knowledge is passed to them, it's rare that they will do it.

It doesn't seem like a difficult play, but it's obviously hard to accept. I find that quite interesting. I would guess that the beginner has so much to think about, that any one element seems lost in the brain storm. Yet, I would suggest that this is one of the most important duties as a player.

There are two main reasons you want to do this, you need to join your partner at the kitchen. If you don't you provide open lanes that can be attacked by the opponents. And you give up the advantage of the necessary bounce on the service return. It ain't pickleball, if you ignore this issue. Of all the rules of thumb for PB, this is the only one with no exceptions.

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One day there will be four more courts when the nets arrive at May Nissen. I'm quite curious as to what that will do to the attendance of the players. Will one set of courts "belong" to certain skill levels? Or will the talent be spread out to all available courts. I've seen a lot of drop off in attendance at the Downs this last week. I know some of the people are trying out Muirwood park. If they remain there or come back or alternate will be known down the line. Certainly the M/N courts will affect Livermore folks. Fun times ahead!

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## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

I've been playing with lead tape on my Diadem Warrior. The paddle started out at 8.5 ounces and is somewhat over nine at this point. I added more tape down my the throat for today's play. I was hoping to get more sweet spot on low and wide hits. I didn't notice much difference in how the paddle felt. I'm not sure I hit much near the throat, so I can't comment on how effective it is yet.

If you want to try it, tape is available in most golf shops. You probably want to put on about 4 inches on each side of the paddle. Towards the top for more power, on the middle for more sweet spot in the mid section of the paddle, and lower down for sweet spot and a bit more control. I've got about seven inches of lead on each side at this point. Put some electrical plastic tape over the lead tape. The adhesive on the LT is not the greatest. Lead is bit toxic, so wash up before eating peanut butter out of the communal jar with your fingers.

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I bought a bigger PB bag the other day. I wanted room to toss in a jacket for the cold season. I've got a 40 ounce water bottle in there with some balls. The balls kept getting in the way of the water bottle, so I made a holster to hold it and keep the balls in their place. It was made with some foam and cardboard and I connected the pieces with some duct tape. It's working quite well. I wish the bag had some more pockets and bigger ones, but it will do. The only down side is that it's getting heavy as I keep putting stuff in it. I've got some first aid stuff and some tools for court repairs in it.

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I think that's about all I have. The Master and Po, the student, are off for the holidays. They will return in due time. I'll see you at the courts and as always, get ready for the next shot!

## Post 150 How About That Elbow?

So I'm playing with Larry this morning and he asks, "You don't hit the ball very hard?"

"There are a couple of reasons for that, Larry," I replied, "One is that I won't hit many out, nor many in the net. Also a well placed shot is just as effective and finally, I don't really know how to hit a hard ball."

Larry and I discussed styles of various good players and many of them follow my philosophy of minimal ball destruction.

After our game, which we won, thank you very much, I was watching some of the beginners. One of them had a ready position where the elbows were stuck out away from the body.

If you watch instructional videos, there is a fair amount of talk about keeping the elbows tucked in. But wait there is more...

I'm also working on a disc golf game currently. Due to a misspent youth my ability with a disc or Frisbee is not very good. I studied calculus and not how to toss a long one. Ah, the regrets of old age.

One of the characteristics of a good disc throw is that the disc does not wobble in flight. Basically you throw, spin, and release the disc in the same plane of the throw. When everything is in harmony, the disc is happy and will fly further and not wobble.

I practice my disc golf at the local school and today I was working on the forehand throw. This throw is usually less powerful than a backhand throw and I struggle to get the disc to fly without wobble. What the disc golf instructors will tell you is that this is just like throwing a ball. Well, I can do that. I'm not any prodigy at it, but I did some pitching back in my distant youth. I can hold my own.

But still this throw was a problem. After a bit of pondering, one will recollect that the people who throw balls for a living, use their elbow to lead the forearm, which is then levered to throw the ball. We have an action chain in this.

I applied this to the disc and finally found some success. I emphasize the leading elbow with a late arm and I'm golden.

This sequence also shows up in the golf swing. The trail elbow should lead the trail arm in the down swing. Without this sequence you are doing bad things, over the top, and lack of power.

Finally, we return to PB... Now I propose that this leading elbow might be a key to an effective forehand and overhead strokes. Make sure the arm lags the elbow and it might work quite well. Now, I'm off on travel for a week, so if anyone would try this or can verify it, I would be eternally grateful.

Which reminds me of a droll story from high school. I was in study hall and the teacher who was assigned watching us, announced that she would be "internally grateful" to anyone who would lend her a red pen. I chuckled and was glad she didn't teach English. Imagine providing a dalliance for a pen?

## **Post 151 Simplified Strategy and Some Notes about Kitchen Line Position**

### **Simplified Strategy...**

In the normal point, we all crawl to the net. From there it is usually a small test of patience, with a speed up, or lob, or net ball, or pop up to end it all.

Let's think about this net play shot selection. It's too easy to try to win the point. You see/know the hero shot and try to make it and it rarely works as a single shot winner. The speed of the ball and width of the kitchen makes it difficult to pass someone. So the hero shot frequently comes back. And if you didn't make a great hero shot, you may have traded a small advantage for a large disadvantage.

What should our aim be? Jordan Briones, in one of his YouTube videos simplifies it as "try to make your opponent hit a low shot." I agree with this for a couple of reasons. You should not try to win the point immediately, but are setting your side up for a popup. If the ball has to be hit from a low position, the opponents have to return it higher to get it over the net. Unless they do a great job with that shot, your side should have a ball that is quite easy to attack.

Note that the attacking shot need not be hard or fast, it just needs to be awkwardly placed near the opponents' feet. And the resultant attacking shot need not be hit hard, just placed well and the point is probably over.

### **Shot Velocities...**

When hitting any shot to the opponents, the better shot is low. The speed of the shot is less important. A soft shot is rarely hit out. You can curve a soft shot more easily.

But wait, there is more... A shot that is a change of pace, be it faster or slower is quite effective. Think of it as an unexpected shot. We are all familiar with the dink when both opponents are at the baseline. It works, might be a bit unsporting (like a lob), but one cannot claim that it won't work. If we wander down this shady path, this trip towards the dark side, let's consider the shot that is just slower than the preceding shots in the point. Suddenly the ball is half the speed of the last shot. It's difficult to change pace if you are trying to return this ball. It's hard to create the soft shot too, but it's worth the effort to learn it.

Paddles are interesting things and holding them loosely or not hitting the ball very hard will change the shot's velocity a lot/a bunch/mucho. The very pace of any point makes a soft shot difficult, and that is another reason that the soft shot is effective. The next time you are at the kitchen and the opponents are back and they are doing a good job returning your deep shots, try hitting a soft shot for a change and see how that works.

### **Kitchen Play...**

A kind reader asked about some information about venturing into the kitchen. There is not a lot of nuance here. You can stand anywhere you want. It doesn't have to be in or out of the kitchen or on the court. However if you volley a ball before establishing both feet out of the kitchen, you lose the point.

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

For that reason it's usually a good idea to maintain your position outside of the kitchen as the need to volley can arrive quickly.

There are a couple of cases where you want to boldly move into the kitchen in preparation to hit a shot. (Obviously you are expecting the ball you return to be bouncing.) One such scenario is you've hit a ball that caught the net cord, and the ball drops down very close to the net. If your opponent gets to it, their best response is to hit a ball very close to your net -- basically mimicking the net cord hit. You need to be in the kitchen a step or so to reach this ball. You will hit and then move back out of the kitchen. If you do not, the mean old opponent may try to hit you.

Another shot to be careful about is the one that looks like it will not clear the net. There are three cases here, the best one is that the ball doesn't clear the net. In that case it doesn't matter what you do. Case two: the ball hits the net cord and drops very short. If you are expecting this, you can get into the kitchen, drop your paddle, and do something smart with it. Case three: the ball hits the net and bounces up. Suddenly you want your paddle up. Cases two and three require different actions. Note that case three is more time critical than the ball that drops short. So I would recommend that your best paddle position would be higher for shots that look like net balls. Sadly you still need to expect either a shot ball or a jumper - so stay in a good position to move forward.

The next shot that you want to setup for in the kitchen is a mishit by opponents that is very lob like and will bounce near or in the kitchen. You want to get very close to this ball as a lot of them will have a metric ton of spin on them and they can bounce at some strange angles. So get close and be ready for that. Extra points if you look for the spin on the ball as it comes down. Give it a modest whack and then get out of the kitchen.

One last comment on this, don't be afraid to get into the kitchen in a dink rally. You should be moving for every shot and short dinks need to be fielded from the kitchen. There is a lot of in and out at play here. Note that you would prefer to volley the dinks coming your way, but if one is short you must be ready to move in to get it. And to be complete, if a dink is too long to be easily volleyed, you want to move back, let it bounce, return it and then get back to the line (don't stay back and admire your shot).

That's all I have to say about this. More stuff to try and to look out for as you play. Now if only the rain would stop, the courts would dry, and the sun would warm my old bones.

## Post 152 Leading Elbow Part 2

As we wander between holidays and wonder what happened to our fighting weight after feast after feast, I wanted to return to the elbow leading the shot post that went up late last month.

The general idea is that the elbow leads the forearm and you want to keep the hand and paddle behind the elbow until a bit after contact with the ball. This is true of golf in re the trailing arm and backhand disc golf throws too.

I've been paying attention to it and trying to make sure I do it when I serve. This is an unhurried stroke and I have time to make sure I lead with the elbow and follow with hand and paddle. Not a lot of speed is required for a serve, so it's a perfect time to try some of these things.

When I do it correctly I get a more solid strike with less vibration. If, on the other hand, I manipulate the paddle with some wristy action, then the elbow will pivot away from the net as the hand goes forward of the elbow at impact. This seems to stress the elbow. I think the idea is that the paddle swings into the ball and you don't want to try to hit it, just rotate your shoulders and let the arm and then the elbow and finally the hand and paddle follow the rotation.

Let me diverge about elbow pain a moment. I've had bouts with tennis and golf elbow -- tennis elbow is when the pain is on the outside of the joint, golf the side closer to your body. I've been pain free for a while. I don't know what causes it to show up and retreat. It's done that a few times across a large number of decades. I suspect a tiny difference in the golf or PB swing will start the cycle of irritation. The cause seems to be very subtle.

When I swing the paddle with a lead elbow I sense no strain on the elbow joint, the joint and the shot feel very solid. I can sense the power and ultimate ability to crush opponents with this technique. I yearn for the day when I do it on all strokes.

But getting back to reality, if you are having elbow issues, this may be something to consider.

A swing with a leading elbow seems to be a more powerful action. It requires more of a body motion than a hand action. I have hit some really interesting serves that have heavy topspin, are fast, and don't seem to bounce very high. They land about the center of the service area and then skid a bit. All useful characteristics.

As for ground strokes, I suspect that this is the proper stroke too. I don't trust it enough yet to incorporate it. I do it while warming up and it works quite well.

Trust? No Trust? Yes, well, let me explain. When you swing this way you are making very little effort in positioning the paddle to the intended ball trajectory. The paddle should be pointing towards your baseline as you start the stroke. As you turn and bring your elbow at the shot, the paddle will rotate to the proper position. The face will rotate 90 degrees to be perpendicular to the net.

The paddle's "squaring" is inherent in the swing. If you try to make sure this happens or "help" it, you will stall the swing, flip your wrist, and not be able to hit it as hard. You have to do it enough to figure this out and calm an overly active mind that's thinking about how to hit the ball. Athletes don't think much about what they do, they just do it. I suspect that they figure this stuff out through trial and error early in their career and don't analyze why it works or what they are really doing. Certainly more

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

true of the very high level athletes, where conscious thought will only slow them down. They act and react and just play. Analysis comes later if at all. We can learn a lot from that, but it's hard to do and your mind may not be wired for that kind of flow.

If you watch some pro level PB you will see a constant movement of the players and by that I mean all the players. If you watch a single player and not just who is hitting the ball, you will see constant adjustment of feet, paddle, and location as the ball moves around the court. Highly entertaining if you are interested in the minutia of it all. But no one is having the internal conversation, "The ball is left, so I want to step one medium step left." Nope, the pattern of play is recognized and the step left is automatic.

There are not a lot of patterns to pickleball, so this automatic movement is easily learned and after a bit it's just reaction to what's happening or going to happen.

I think that's about it for this. Try the elbow attitude, I think it's the proper way to swing for power and less pain. And then keep moving your feet!

Update: I know that no one has actually read this yet, but there are some modifications that need to be made. That's the problem with research, it might change your theory! So there is a John Cincola video up on YouTube about the forehand drive. He shows that the whole arm is handled as one unit. That's fine. But note that his stroke is more of a service stroke that something that comes from the side. He doesn't lead with his elbow, but the paddle lags everything. So I don't think I'm much wrong with the above topic. It might be an exaggeration and that is the "feel" that I need to do it differently. If you try it out, I'd be interested in your experience.

## Post 139 The Master Runs Around



Fall had come to the province and the play had moved to the interior courts. The stone walls were cold to the touch, and if the wind was wrong, would be covered with dew in the morning. The outdoor courts would see rain and frost and the colored leaves from the stately trees that surrounded the courts. The apple crop was good this year and the monks and masters enjoyed them, the pies, the sauces, and looked forward to some cider later in the season.

The Master was taking a morning walk. He was working on a small, four volume book of instruction about the bend of the right knee while hitting the inside out backhand. He had some additional research that he was planning.

His stroll took him past the upper level courts where the students were sparring. After a casual glance...

"Stop!" cried the Master. And all of the students, in their seventh year of training, stopped and remained motionless on the court. After years of instruction, holding position to allow a Master to instruct was automatic. The ball rattled through the court to fetch up against the back wall.

"Po, by the scales of the Fire Serpent, what are you doing?" asked the Master.

"I've just returned a serve and I am heading to the kitchen line," answered Po, a bright student, but with still a few rough edges. Oh, he could hold his own against the other students, but was not able to perform near a master's level.

"Then why have you not reached the kitchen line? Are you slow of foot today, would you like to run some laps around the monastery?" asked the Master.



## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

"I was heading there, but you called for us to stop."

"Had you made a good service return, you would already be at the kitchen line. Where was your error Po?"

"Hmm, I thought I hit a good ball and then moved up. I don't see the error Master."

"You were a step late and half a step left, Po. And why was that? Because you returned the serve with your forehand!"

"Yes, I did, but..."

"No, but!" interrupted the Master, "By running around to hit the forehand, you surrendered a full step to your opponents! You also distorted your position on the court, so that the path to the kitchen line was longer than had you hit the proper backhand shot. Is that not clear Po?"

"I see that now, Master. While it seems harmless to run around the shot, it warps the play."

"Yes and your partner should move to cover the gap you've created by being in the run around position and also not being at the kitchen line in time. He must move a quarter step over to correct for this. That creates an alley for the opponents to attack. You can get away with this sloppy play, Po, with sloppy opponents, but against good players you've given up several percent points of advantage. As a lesson, Po, got to the library and report to us tomorrow on Master Yan's book, *The Lack of a Backhand Shot and the Inevitable Fall of Civilization*. Look at volume six, chapters 34, 35, and 40, for the pertinent information."

"Yes Master, I look forward to enlightenment." Po returned to his game and Master was off for an afternoon tea. The students again admired the knowledge of the Master and hoped to one day share it. Alas the library, devoted to pickleball theory, housed thousands of volumes. Not all students would have the opportunity to read them. Each year some students were released from the monastery to play on tour. These were the students who lacked the vital essence that was a Master. While they had was enough to play professional pickleball, but not enough to extend the world's understanding of the game. The truly great players stayed at the monastery, studied, thought, played, and wrote.

(With only kind thoughts to those who like the run around, Editor of the Monastery.)

## Post 153 Shot Selection at the Kitchen

This is new topic for me to think about. Up till now, my at net shot selection has been very reactionary and instinctual. Let's see if we can bring some understanding as to what we do, what we like to do, and what we ought to do.

There are two cases here. First is that my team is at the net and the opponents are not. The second is that we are all up. Let's look at the first case.

So we are up and they are not. The rule of thumb is that we should hit shots that will keep the opponents at the baseline. But the goal is really to win a point, so just keeping them back is just a suggestion. What we'd like to hit is a shot that won't come back. We might drive the ball through an opponent or the middle, hit a sharp angle, or hit a drop shot. Those shots we expect to be winners. If not an outright winner then we would hope for an advantage so large that we could dominate the rest of the point or force an error by hitting a ball that won't come back.

The danger here is to hit an out ball. Too much angle or too deep and we've been very generous to our opponents whom we had at a disadvantage. So safety is maybe the first consideration.

I agree with deep shots. But I'd suggest that they don't need to be hit very hard. Topspin is your friend as are the feet of your enemy. Try to hit the balls about 3/4 of the way into the court. Vary placement and which opponent you hit to. Beware of hitting out, either too deep or wide.

What frequently happens is that there are a number of shots being hit and fielded. I like those points and I'm happy to feed balls back to the baseline and keep hitting, sometimes to the same spot. If you are impatient, changing the pace of a shot can be quite effective. So the rally is at 15 MPH and suddenly you hit a shot at 8, an opponent may have an awkward time adjusting his timing and will err. (BTW do you say "AIR" or "UR" for the word err? Correct answer at the end of the post.)

Secondly, if the opps are very deep and behind the baseline, then I like the drop shot. You can't hit this off a hard ball. But something with middle pace is a good candidate. Use a soft grip and swing a bit, but not hard. The big error is hitting it into the net. A smaller error is hitting it too deeply and letting the opps return it. If they do get to it and do a good job, then it's probably a dink and you've brought them into the net -- which was their highest priority -- and you've swapped an advantage for an equality. It's a effective shot, but does require a bit of skill. If you want to look like your winding up to hit a hard one, that's fine. If you look like you are dinking, the opps might be running forward earlier than you would expect.

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BTW, let's talk about reading the next shot from the opponents. A lot of players who drive the ball have to wind up. Watch for this and if you see it, prepare to duck. Lots of those shots go long. If they don't wind up, then look for a softer shot. Finally, watch their paddle face for directional information.

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We have to talk about what shots are coming from the opps. With the above shots, we are playing a ball that we can volley. If the ball is not very high, then hitting a topspin shot deep is best. If the ball is quite high, then look for an angle as you can hit the ball down into the court. If the ball is low, or you

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

can't volley it, then 1) if the opps don't follow their shot in, then you can still hit a soft shot deep into the court, but 2) if they are heading to the kitchen line (KL), then a dink off at an angle is your best bet. You've lost an advantage and now it's time to get into a dink battle and look for an advantage later.

A usual point might be a large number of shots. Either the opponents will hit one good enough to advance, or you'll find one you can angle off or hit through them. My only caveat would be to make sure you keep the ball in play.

Is that it? I think so... Don't be in a hurry to win the point. You are ahead and to try to keep hitting good (not great) shots will work just fine. Imagine if you were defending, you're under a lot of pressure and have a lot of court to cover. Even a routine ball may well be too difficult.

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Editor's note: as I proofread this, I realized I never addressed the case where everyone is at the net... Sadly, that will have to be in a future post.

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And for the AIR, URR answer. One might think that it's air as in error, and you would be correct. However urr is also correct. The Latin root is common to this verb as well as error, erroneous, etc. It can also mean to stray out of normal bounds, for example, when he lobbed the ball he erred. :-)

## Post 154 Height Above the Net -- Thoughts on Spin and Skill Levels and Ball Control



Joel Demonstrates the Forehand

When absolute beginners play, the ball probably averages 6 feet or so above the net as it's batted back and forth.

After some improvement, the ball gets lower to the net and the speed of the ball gets faster. Let's call this the broad belly of intermediate play. The ball continues to get faster and lower until...

You get good enough and realize that hitting the ball hard and skimming the net is frequently not the best way to play and might be holding back your improvement. About this time you've hopefully acquired the ability to spin the ball.

Spinning the ball is a skill that's not talked about very much. Oh, there are videos on hitting the topspin of the pros and I think you can buy a device to practice the stroke to do this. There are a lot of reasons to spin the ball.

The main reason for topspin is that it allows you to hit the ball higher over the net and still keep the ball in the court, another is that a sinking shot is below the net more quickly, hopefully forcing a return to be hit upwards.

Less net balls, the better, of course, the holy grail of PB. With topspin the ball will also bounce higher and when used as a deep service return, can be effective as a high bouncing ball can be awkward to return. (If the serving side likes to creep into the court prematurely, this will work very well.)

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

Underspin or cut is also useful when returning serves. It keeps the trajectory flatter and that will cause the ball to land deeper in the court. And as a service return has to bounce, so the height above the net should be conservatively high -- don't get too cute. Also the ball will carry further, so the danger becomes hitting it long. A gentle chop is what you want. An added bonus is that a cut shot needs to be hit higher to get it back. A lot of newer players will not recognize the spin and easy points can be had.

When serving, I like side spins. I like to curve the ball a bit and I think it makes the serves more consistent. Also you can swing harder at it as the stroke that creates spin will not be effective in imparting energy the ball, (It varies with the cosine of the angle, but then you knew that.)

Another place where a curving shot is amusing is on a service return. You want to return up the middle of the court, of course, but if you start the ball at the opponent on the left and have the ball curve to the right, the returners will frequently fight over who should hit it. A left to right curve is the typical side spin for a right handed forehand shot.

Let's return to the topic. The essence of this game is that you want to make fewer errors. Spin is a very useful means to provide a better margin of error.

There are two other issues here that play in the arena of errors. The first is how hard you hit the ball. At some point you will decide that hitting the ball too hard might be fun, but it doesn't win a lot of points. At that point you work on controlling speed not just generating it.

The second item is shot selection. Hitting for sidelines are missed fairly often. A shot down the middle is much safer and frequently highly effective. Now, there is a time where you want to make the line shot, when your opponent is crowding the middle and you can't stand it anymore, or you want to mix it up. If you hit down the line, I would suggest that you needn't hit it hard either, just low down the line and you'll be fine. Hit it softly to avoid hitting it out. But, make the middle shot 90 percent of the time and avoid giving easy points to the opponents.

Summary: Walk softly and carry a soft paddle, Swing gently into that good court, spin it as often and as well as possible, and strive to light up the center of your opponents' court.

# Post 155 The Story of Jim and Lucinda

## Chapter 1

(Editor's note, there is only one chapter and it's not too long.)

It was a normal Tuesday at the courts, kind of slow, not too many players. But suddenly it wasn't normal. There was a strange player on court three.

Jim watched her play and decided that he was interested. Besides her grace, there was a tasty backhand to admire. The stranger was playing with three other women and they soon finished their game and surrendered the court.

There was only one gate on the courts and Jim hung near by. Jim was a regular and one of the better players. He knew almost all of the other regulars.

The ladies exited the gate and went to look for water and phones. Jim sidled over to Janet. "Who's your friend, Janet?"

"Hi Jim, and good morning to you. Her name is Lucinda and she's new to the area."

"Really. She has a nice overhead and seems to be able to dink."

"Yah, she's pretty good. I've only played with her one game, but she didn't do much wrong. So Jim, can we get a game?" Janet wasn't interested in talking about Lucinda, but was ready to go back on the courts.

"Sure, and see if Lucinda wants to join us." Nudge, nudge.

"Ah, you are interested... Naughty boy! Okay, let me get something setup."

And she did and introduced Jim and Lucinda. The play went well and Jim was, in a word, smitten.

She had the grace thing already mentioned, and played around the court as if she were dancing. Never a foot wrong and a strong serve to boot.

She glided about as if on roller skates. Not the ones that were in line, but the real ones with four wheels and a toe stop, those skates, where corners could always be taken at high speed. She could slap a ball like an angry child after a fly. Or gently lift a dink over the net as if neatly placing a scoop of ice cream into a crumbly cone. In fact, she seemed to have all the needed parts for excellent pickleball and then some.

Jim was in love and vowed to follow her from podium to podium, as he could see tournament play with Lucinda, or Lu as she preferred to be called. They played all morning only stopping for water breaks.

"Lu, we must play tomorrow! Can you add me to your play card? Maybe play the day away and then all the others to follow? Please tell me yes?" asked Jim.

"Why, Jim, that's quite the invitation. I'm available tomorrow. As for all the days thereafter, well, we'll just have to see." Lu smiled and Jim's heart throbbed a bit more. His smart watch beeped a warning that his pulse was a bit high. But he cared not.

My God even her eyes matched her paddle and her paddle matched her top and that the skirt, and so on

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

down her legs to cute socks and dainty court shoes.

Yes, Lu was the full package and Jim, too long alone, had shifted his tired sports car of a life into a new gear and vowed to drive this road until it ended or he crashed.

They played the next day and the day after. They met for coffee before, and lunch afterwards. Soon they were an item.

They began to drill and then to play local tournaments. They won and played again. They played so well together that they soon moved from 3.5 to 4.0. They had oodles of plastic medals and splinters from climbing on so many podia.

All summer long they played and won. Skills rose and happiness rose with it.

"Jim," said Lu one day.

"Yes, my dear," terms of endearment trickled from Jim's lips all summer. He was, as we have already noted, very smitten and a smitten partner is apt to say endearment type things.

"I, I'm, I..." said Lu.

"Is there a problem, Lu dearest?" Jim was suddenly alert and stressed. His smart watch beeped a bit as his heart rate climbed.

"I, er, we can't play anymore," Lu said in a small whisper.

"My, dear, what is wrong? Are you ill?"

"I'm well, thank you. But we can't play. It's difficult and these months have been wonderful, but we must part. I'm sorry but I can't say more. It's intensely personal and private."

"Lu, it must be my fault! I've erred in some manner, please let me make it up to you. Our bond on the court and off, is too important to let die. Please, tell me my dear."

"Oh Jim, it's horrible, but, but, if you must know. You've become a lobber. There, I've said it, a lobber and I can't go on like this."

"I don't think I'm an over lobber? Sure I hit a couple every game, but I..."

"Jim, a lobber is the last to know. You were a fine player once, great with drops, and you could dink softly like stroking a small kitten. My heart melted to see your deep knee bends and soft sure strokes. Oh, I remember those days so well. The sun glistening off your forearm as you produced slice after slice. But now, you rush a couple of dinks, not treating them like fine china, but more like a plastic cup to be tossed in the sink for a bit of a scrub. Two dinks and then you lob. I tear inside to see it."

Jim died inside. Yes he lobbed, but not too much, one would think. All players lobbed, it was really part of the game and well, sure he liked it, but he could give it up any time.

"I'll never lob again!" he cried. "I love you too much and if that means no more lobs than I shall go and lob no more."

"Oh, Jim, I couldn't ask that of you. It would tear your soul apart. It would be impossible to stop and I can't make you change yourself. We must part. I will miss you every day and with every game, but go I must."

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

Lu was in tears and Jim pretty close. He was a guy after all and sobbing on the courts was frowned upon, though there were often squeegees about.

They parted. They were sundered. They were split like an accident from a bad diamond cutter.

Lu as mentioned was from out of town and she went home for the rest of the summer.

Jim struggled from then on. Before he was often invited to the most skilled games at the club. But soon the invitations dried up.

He was playing 4.0, then 3.5, and then 3.0. His skill had fled like a tide on a super moon.

He tried to return to tournament play, but partners were soon impossible to find. The tournament hosts quietly lowered his DUPR score to allow him to try to be competitive again.

He played the Southeast Open. He was tempted to toss out his paddles and do something frowned upon by pickleball players, namely golf. He could see striding the fairways along, beaten and taking out his sorrow on a small white ball. But he would play this last tournament and then decide.

It was bad. Very bad. He lost all his matches and by the end of his play, he was going to be happy to take up golf or shuffleboard or something else.

As he walked off the court after his last match, a hand came out and touched his arm.

"Jim," said Lu.

"Lu," said Jim, with a startled expression on his face.

"I watched all your matches," said Lu.

"I'm sorry, we hardly scored seven points a game."

"Jim, you didn't score four points."

"How could you stand it?"

"Your game has changed," she reached out for his paddle. He allowed her to take it,

Lu ran her hand over the edge guard. She noted the scrapes and scars. The entire face was weathered and worn. In the old days the face of Jim's paddle had a small worn area right in the sweet spot. The edge guard would be pristine as a good player will never scrape the court.

Lu raised her eyes and looked into Jim's. "I could not stay away."

"I've, I've, been having troubles," Jim said.

"I want us back," said Lu.

"Why? I'm no longer the player I was. I'm about to take up golf."

"No, anything but golf!"

"Well, I was thinking of shuffleboard too."

"NO, NO, Jim, we can rebuild our partnership! You've been cured!"

"Cured?"

"Jim in all of your games, you never lobbed. I thought it couldn't be done that a man would change so



Pickleball Thoughts 2022

much. You've re-won my heart. Jim, I am yours if you will have me."

"Lu, I want nothing more." They embraced and held each other. The pain of separation evaporated like a sunny court after a modest rain, where towels and squeegees were industrially applied.

"But, Lu, I played so badly, I've won nothing for months."

"Yes, but you didn't lob. It's not whether you win or lose, but how you play the game! I love my non-lobber!"

They returned to their former happiness. Jim's play improved and soon they returned to the podia of tournaments.

They married and had two children, just enough to fill a court. Jim taught the kids to play and honed their games, but he never taught them to lob, for he had learned his lesson.

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Well, I hope this was entertaining and also a bit instructional too. No resemblance to anyone living or dead. I've wanted to write something in the style of P. G. Wodehouse, who wrote a bunch of stories with golf as the back drop. This was a nice exercise for me. Little additional details have been running through my head for a couple of days. Not all of them made it into the story. Perhaps there will be more. Rich

## Post 156 Playing with a New Partner

A bit of autobiography here in a PB sense...

It seems to me that the better you get, the more balls you can and want to hit. Following a volley with two more volleys and moving into your partner's side of the court is part of that. Your partner should move out of the way and let you have the room to finish the point.

Of course your partner is thinking the same way and while a two or three shot sequence is not difficult to stay out of, what is a problem is who gets the first shot. It's usually in the middle somewhere, as shots to the side are obviously someone's.

So we have a middle shot that is the problem. The crisscross model is a good one (take the ball that is heading towards you, even if you are encroaching on partner's side of the court). But there is still a spot where the ball is up for grabs.

The better the players, the more quickly they are going to do something about that ball. The worst case is in the transition area and it's more dangerous when the ball is head height or so. I've been hit by paddles a couple of times and it's left marks and some damage.

If it's rec play and you've not played much together there are going to be problems. The best solution is to call the ball. When I was starting out, I never saw the value of this and was, perhaps, a bit self conscious to do it. But it's very useful and safer to call the shots. It's better if one of the partners calls all shots, but even if you call the shots you are going to take it's better than not.

The issue with both calling is that if no one speaks up, you may both take a stab at the ball. Paddles collide, etc. I'd suggest that going back to the crisscross model for those, but they tend to be shots that are directly up the middle and it's often not clear who should take them.

You could use a "forehand takes middle" for sure, but that almost needs to be explicitly stated and repeated as the players change sides.

That's my take and if anyone has a better solution I'd like to hear it.

## Post 157 The Man Who Couldn't Dink

Bernie Untertopf was a newish pickleball player. Or at least he wanted to be. He had come from another sport, far, far away and he lacked a lot of the needed skills to move up in the PB world.

He managed to master most of them as he played regularly, but the skill that eluded him the most was dinking. He tried and tried. Read "An Idiot's Guide to Dinking," watched YouTube videos, "If you Don't Do This, You'll Never Dink Properly," until his eyes required glasses. But still he couldn't do it. He was athletic enough and young enough that the game shouldn't have been that hard. It seemed to have become a mental issue. He tended to tense up when playing and when it came time to hit a soft shot, he would freeze and dump the ball in the net, or slap at it and hit it out. While he might be deadly at mosquitoes, hitting the hanging drop shot was not his best.

He played at the local club and was there frequently. He had time off in the mornings and could usually play three times a week.

He found a group of advanced beginners and did well. At the beginning level, the need to dink was not a hindrance to social play and acceptance. And there he stayed. Without the dink he wasn't going anywhere. Interestingly, he hardly noticed. He had good days and bad and played and had a reasonably good time.

Nancy Machtbesser was a lady if a certain age. Too young to be a cat lady, old enough to be comfortable in who she was, she owned three pickleball paddles all of different colors, for example, and didn't care who knew about it.

She cared about stuff, too much, it must be said, about all sorts of other things. The environment, her Corvette, organic food, beef jerky, proper recycling categories, and good plastic wrap, for example.

A free spirit as it were and after having traded away her last flat of rescued succulents, was looking for a project. The soup kitchen was fully staffed and fully souped. The veterans' dining hall was fully decorated. All her friends were healthy. Her library books were all returned. Her favorite authors had nothing new for her to read. In short she was bored and ready for something new.

Nancy set her eyes on Bernie. She liked what she saw, except for the dinking of course. His other strokes were reasonable, he wasn't enamored with any strange shots, he didn't lob much, for example. He looked like broken in shoes, that would be a comfortable fit and ready for a lively walk. But not too old, nor too worn, he looked just right, with a bit of moderation. Well there was the dinking hole in the sole that needed patching...

She decided that Bernie was her next project. She could "fix" him, she was sure, er, not like fixing a stray dog, of course, but could still help set him up for a better future.

Nancy had come from tennis and in spite of that, had developed a good pickleball short game. The only reason she noticed Bernie is that she had friends in the beginners' group.

Nancy cut Bernie out of the heard. No cowboy would have done it better with a rope and pony. One day he was in one corral and the next day another. They started to play together, then the old, "let's go for out for coffee" thingy happened. Who can resist that siren song, hmm? And resist he didn't.

"Bernie, we have something to talk about," Nancy said, while slurping at her Americano.

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

"OK, what's on your mind?" a rich, dark roast in his cup. This was a nice coffee shop, where coffee came in cups and was not in permeable cardboard with ill fitting lids.

"I was thinking, Bernie, that I can help you with your problem."

"Well, my car is due for a wash, but I don't think it's anything I need help with..."

"No, I was thinking about pickleball."

"Oh. Oh. And what problem is it?"

"Well, Bernie, you don't dink much. I need you to dink. It's frankly a bit embarrassing. You don't do it when you should and mess it up when you shouldn't."

"I know, I know," he said wearily, "I struggle with it. It seems against my nature. I can hit and serve and stuff, but that dinking is tough for me," Bernie's thoughts returned to the five dinks he had netted, hit off of ordinary dinks. Not the difficult dinks where anyone, and on occasion everyone, misses, but the biscuits and gravy type of dinks, where the pressure is minimal and even someone with very slow, large feet could get to them and get them back.

"Oh, Bernie, I sense your pain and it's a deep fester I'm sure. Maybe a sign of a difficult childhood?" Nancy, was used to reading psychological self help books. Perhaps the self help library could actually help someone besides the authors and publishers?

"I don't know about that, my mom and I get along well..."

"Maybe you just need to relax more. Maybe it's stress?" That was another book on Nancy's shelf, "Live a Stress Free Life and Live Long and Prosper." That book had many unusual fans.

"Well, my job is pretty stressful. No one appreciates how much accountants struggle to get every penny correct. So many folks just say 'close enough!' but that doesn't work in my business. When I play in the mornings, I often am thinking about work later in the day. A lost penny here, and then one there and pretty soon you are up to a dollar," Bernie chuckled at the accountants' joke. It was an old one, but a good one.

"Ah, I thought so. Work has its purpose, I suppose, but helping with dinks seems not to be it. Tell you what, come over for dinner on Friday and I'll fix you something nice and we'll work on relaxation exercises."

"I'd like that. I don't get a homemade meal all that often. I'll bring some wine. Red or white?"

"Don't be silly, of course red. We won't be having fish or pasta! Red meat is the answer to stress," she said it as if it were obvious, commonly known, and fundamental, like refraction and nuclear resonance.

The meal on Friday was lamb shanks in a thick rich gravy, with a bottle of wine and that was just what was in the gravy. Bernie and Nancy drank the other two bottles. After they had eaten and all were fed and full, Nancy stood and took Bernie's hand.

"Come with me and I'll relax you."

He did and she did. Nancy believed in complete stress relief, she had read many books and was willing to share all of them. The details are not important and we will draw a curtain across them. Our story resumes some thirty six hours later...

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

On Sunday, they returned to the pickleball court. A careful observer might have noticed a weakness in Bernie's knees, and a tremor in his hand, his non-paddle hand thankfully, and the hint of smile and some lassitude in his demeanor. Yes, Bernie had been truly relaxed. He had never been this relaxed.

His stress vanquished, his fear of a missing penny or two gone, and his play was a revelation. His baseline shots were deep and throbbed with cut spin, except for the ones with top spin. His angles were acute when his opponents were obtuse and vice versa when required.

His drops were the drops of the Gods. And as he drew close to the kitchen line, lo, his hands remained steady, his eyes keen and shoulders ready to gently lift the ball and place it just so. Bernie became a dinker. He embraced it, he succeeded, he fell in love with the soft and short game. Where he used to slap the ball, he now caressed, instead of an infinite variety of netted balls, he now could drip one after the other over the net, like dropping doughnut dough into a fryer, and hitting his corners were as nonchalant as 5.0 at a 3.0 picnic game.

The fear of the net vanished and the yippy slap shots were gone forever. Bernie was a changed player.

Nancy and Bernie romped, if that is the word, through their normal opponents. Mistakes were so seldom that it seemed a practice session. Nancy observed this with a satisfied feeling that it was a project gone well, but wistful in that Bernie was done in one, like the inside out shot down the line to a center leaning poacher wannabe. Bernie was on his way and he didn't need her anymore.

The only task left, was to gently send Bernie on his way.

Between games she had gotten a text. The animal welfare group she worked with, "Felines for Friends," had an entire litter of kittens that needed someone to raise them. Feedings every four hours for a month. Yes, Nancy was on call and ready to take them on.

They finished playing that morning. Bernie glowed with victory and new skills. His hands were the calm of a large rock well placed in a sluggish stream, his knees had recovered from their earlier weakness. He was ready to climb the pickleball ladder. Who knew how high it went?

"Nancy, that was great play today," he said. His eyes sparkling and his confidence on the top shelf where one finds all the best bottles.

"Bernie, I'm so proud. You dinked like a fiend and played like a young devil!"

"Shall we celebrate our play this evening? I've got some more wine," he wagged his eyebrows in a suggestive fashion, with the confidence of a man who knows more than his share about, say, a high backhand roll shot, or extended means of stress relief.

"Oh, Bernie, I'm sorry, but our time is up. We've worked wonders with your game and you are now ready to move on. Go find the 4.0 game and impress them. I'll never forget this weekend, but we can't do it again. You are cured and I've got kittens to raise. I'll be up all night and not fit for company for a long while."

Bernie pondered this. It was not what he had expected to hear. The weekend and now the play this morning seemed a dream. And now, the dream was over, it seemed. But it was one of those dreams that you remember and cherish, he supposed, not the ones you barely remember and you lose yourself trying to recall them.

His world was upended again it seems. He found ultimate relaxation and a short game all in one

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

weekend. Now part of that was going away.

"I understand, Nancy. I'll not stand between you and the kittens. Send me a picture, please."

"I will Bernie," she said wistfully.

They took their leave. They never played again. Nancy was not on the courts for a couple of months. Bernie moved up to the 4.0 group and then a bit beyond. He played in other cities and was much in demand as a partner. He truly had been fixed. He played, improved and moved on.

Nancy raised her kittens and found them homes. The smallest kitten, whom needed the most help, grew strong, became a little tiger, and was the last adopted, she named Bernie.

## **Post 158 Get Closer to Your Partner as You Move to the Kitchen Line**

John Cincola has created another video on YouTube about basic movement.

Basically, he says, if your side hits a shot that will bounce, your team needs to move toward the kitchen line. It's all about blocking as wide an angle as possible to be able to return the next shot.

Conversely, if the ball won't bounce (and your opponents are at the kitchen line) then hang back to give your side more time to defend, as the return is going to be volleyed.

What John didn't mention, is that it is frequently a really good idea for both you and your partner to get close together. And the overlap of coverage will be in the middle. He has some nice diagrams on what the coverage is. The video link is below.

As you rush towards the net, you rush towards the ball's position. Don't just rush forward. Note also that you want to be moving before the ball lands. As soon as it looks good, get going. If your partner is good at drops or the opponent(s) has hung back, then move before the ball is struck. You can move ahead of your partner's hit in these cases. If your partner likes to drive the ball, then hanging back a bit is reasonable play.

Also you don't/can't cover the whole court, think about covering about 2/3s of it. If the opps hit the hero shot, good for them. If you and your partner are close together, then you can't cover the entire court -- don't worry about it.

Here is the video link. It's worth the watch:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5R60Y17nUt8>

## Post 160 Good Games – Not published

"How were your games today?"

"Good, I had some challenges and some fun ones."

"Yes, the upper level games can be less than interesting. Nice get a couple in, but beyond that, a bit boring."

It was an old discussion, but still relevant. A game of pickleball is a lot like a cross word puzzle, there is a fine line between too easy and too hard.

Why are you playing PB? That is a really important question. If the answer is to get some exercise, then it doesn't matter what the makeup of the game is. And by makeup let me define that is the players, personalities, styles, and skill levels of all the players.

I've written about this before. My view is that the play is at a level just above the least skilled player. If there is a huge differential in ability, then play mostly to the better player.

If you want to just get really good, play at your absolute best and not regulate play level based on the other players, then it might be better to find someone to drill with and not play much.

If you want to have a good time, then seek out players whose personalities and style agree with yours. If you enjoy dinking, then don't seek out bangers, for example.

I can usually hold my own in the higher level games at the Downs, but they are not very relaxing and usually too tense for top level enjoyment. Every error is punished and then all shots are on a razor's edge of disaster. Points are shorter as the put aways are more frequent as are the errors as players strive for perfection. I'd rather play for more extended rallies, where out playing opponents is more important than out hitting opponents.

If you are a beginner, then the lower skilled the game is, the more opportunity to hit the ball and improve exists. I'd suggest that watching good games to be a very useful exercise than playing in them. And the things to watch are the movement of the players and shot selections. Those are things that beginners don't have much skill at yet. When to advance and hit soft shots are what good pickleball is all about.

Figuring out why you're playing is a route to more happiness.



## Post 161 Thoughts on Volleys

In order to make this game as easy as possible, it seems to me that you want to volley every ball you can. They used to say that about tennis too. I'm not sure of the state of that game these days. But it was serve and volley when I played it. Let's return to PB and how that might apply.

As usual we need to divide the play into the servers and the returners. Obviously the returners want to volley the third and hopefully all the rest of the shots. After the second shot is hit, both of the returners should be on the way to the net. No excuses!

The servers have that pesky second ball to deal with. And it's a problem because they have to let it bounce. We will return to that in a moment.

But after the third is hit, the servers should strive to volley everything too. Even if they are not at the kitchen, a volley is a better shot to make. Reasons for that statement are: the ball can usually be hit at a comfortable height, you don't have to worry as much about spin, you'll avoid bad bounces, and a volleyed ball is returned faster to the opponents, robbing them of movement time.

(I've not mentioned dinking at all in this post. But my current thinking on dinking is to volley all of them if you can. Same reasons.)

In my view both sides want to volley. Initially the servers goal is to achieve parity and that means getting to the net. Hanging back deep in the court is not a good way to move up. Hit a third, try to volley the fifth and keep moving up.

I've recently been moving forward a lot more and earlier than I used to. I'm finding it more comfortable to do so. Maybe my hands are getting faster. This does require a reasonable shot from partner. I'm ahead of him and if it is a soft, high ball, that can end the point. A drop is a better choice. If one of the opponents is out of position, id est, too far back, then just dumping the ball into the court and capturing the net is a good move.

I've also found that when forward of partner, that most shots are then hit to my partner. Since I try to crowd the center of the court, this forces the shots to be on the side third of the court. There are not any angles to hit as I'm blocking the crossing point. As long as partner is up to the extra attention, it seems to work pretty well.

OK, let's look at the pain and trouble we want to cause our opponents. If I can force the opponents to hit a bounced ball, I gain a lot of time. The ball slows dramatically when it bounces. That's time to be more prepared for defense. It also keeps the opponents frozen in place as they wait for the bounce.

The rule of thumb is to keep the opponents back. I'd agree with that, but the ball that keeps them back ought to make them move their feet a bit. Side to side or up and back are all good. And if I can get the ball to bounce I'm very happy with it. Same reasons as before, they might have to half volley it, they can't volley it, more time for us, etc.

One more case that shows up more than it should and that's a service returner who does not sprint to the kitchen line after the second shot. How to punish this? You want to hit it to the player in the back. He has split his team as his partner is at the net. And if we hit a ball that is semi deep, to a backhand we can probably capture the net. If the 4th shot is not good, it can be hit through the open lane between the

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

opponents.

What I don't want to do is to hit it hard to the opponent in the back where he could volley and drive it back at me or out, as we are way ahead in the play and it's silly to throw that away trying to win the point outright. I want them to have to play a shot from a low position that I can then drive downwards.

A lot of this happened on Wednesday. A couple of time 5th shots could be volleyed and were not - partner didn't follow a good 3rd shot in when he could have.

Also we had chances to get to the KL by playing a shorter ball to opps who were deep/didn't come up. Dump the ball, get position and look for a put away, or a long ball -- that happened a lot.

When I was up, I crowded the middle and it worked. I don't think I got punished much for being there.

This new philosophy is kind of a high pressure, get in the face kind of thing. Does it belong in rec play? Is it fun for all concerned? I'd suggest not at all levels or when playing against much weaker opponents. It's a lot like poaching and I think that poaching has a time and place and probably should not be done in various cases.

(Of course lobbing is a wonderful shot and should be used whenever possible. There is no situation where a lob is not a good idea. ;-))

## Post 162 Technical Validation

One of my basic fears is getting some bit of technical advice wrong. I've not been playing that long and have avoided tournaments, so I'm hardly an expert, much less some kind of authority.

But I was lucky to get in some practice with Angel today and as we were drilling to hit kitchen line shots back to the baseline, we were basically interlocking feet a bit, crowding one another and fighting to take the center shot. So it looked like my positional play was spot on.

Angel has read some of the blog in the past and I asked him if the technical side was valid. He agreed with that and had no corrections to make.

When I approach some thought on what is reasonable, useful, and perhaps new, I apply it to my own play for a time before it gets written here.

Now Randy, on the other hand, mentioned that he agreed with what was written "mostly..." Perhaps he'll chime in with the bits that strike him as incorrect.

So far no real corrections! Play on!

## Post 163 That Which Makes the World Go Around

The club's Oldest Member was leaning on the fence and watching play. His thermos of coffee was at hand. His faded eyes had seen it all, but he still liked to watch the play.

The Downs had twenty courts and a few players could remember back when it was only four and no club house, or earlier still when there was no Pickleball in Livermore.

Most of the courts were busy. The play was divided roughly by skill level. And The Oldest Member was watching the good players, but not the best. The good players had more fun and the points were more interesting. Entertainment is not always about competency.

A game finished and the players came off. Joe walked over to the Oldest Member and said hello.

Joe: Good morning. Were you watching the play?

Oldest Member: Yes, but I didn't see all of it. I was watching some of the match on court four, too.

J: Ah, Jill was playing there.

OM: Yes, she was. Her game is coming along. Do you two play together at all?

J: Well, I'd like to. I like her a lot.

OM: Mmm, forehand or backhand?

J: What?

OM: Do you like her for her forehand or backhand? Maybe dinks...?

J: Oh, I get it. Nah, she has a nice game, but if I'm honest...

OM: 'To thine own self be true'... (His eye glazed a bit as old memories wandered through his memory.)

J: I like her ankles.

OM: Excuse me? (His eyes cleared, he shook his head a bit. Maybe due to tremors, maybe just reconnection to the current world.) Ankles?

J: Ankles.

OM: Really?

J: Yes, really. I like her ankles.

OM: Her overheads are nice, what about those?

J: No, I love her for her ankles.

OM: Where did that come from?

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

J: Who knows? Where does anything come from? Blondes versus gingers? I don't know. I just know what I like.

OM: Hmmph.

J: I'd really like to date her.

OM: Have to talk to her?

J: Yes, well no, but about pickleball I mean, not love or dating.

OM: Hmm.

J: The club championship is coming up. I should ask her to play.

OM: Sounds like a good idea. Gets you close to the ankles and all that. Heh, heh.

J: <dreamily> Yes, it does... But...

OM: A small but or a big one?

J: She is a most sought after partner. She might be committed already.

OM: Then you should ask her promptly.

J: Well, she is still playing.

OM: She has to come off the court at some point. Like pickleball defense, being in the right place is what the game is all about. Your pickleball game is good, apply it to your love life.

J: <dreamily> Love life,... Ankles...

OM: I've got to go, good luck with your quest.

J: Thanks. I'll let you know.

The OM left the park and headed home. He drove to avoid the outlet mall that drew crowds all day, every day. The driving of the customers around the mall had not gotten better as the mall had grown. The crazy driving had amused him 15 years ago. Now it was a constant annoyance and he avoided the area as a matter of happiness.

He thought briefly about Joe and Jill. They were both good players, sound of mind and all that. Did they belong together? Who knew? But, ankles? What was that really all about? Joe seemed pretty normal. Considering the sportswear found on pickleball courts, it seemed that focusing on ankles left a lot of other elements neglected.

The OM didn't return to the courts until after the club championship. And Joe had not gotten back to him. It mattered not and the OM had forgotten Joe's problem.

When the OM next dropped by the clubhouse and ordered a pint, a couple of weeks had gone by.

He sat at his usual table and looked forward to a nice drink with the sound of well struck pickleballs coming in the window.

Joe came into the club house, stopped by the OM's table and pulled a water bottle from his PB bag.

They nodded agreeably as each worked on their drinks.

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

"How are you and Jill doing?" asked the Oldest Member.

"What? Oh, Jill, well we are not together."

"Did you summon the courage to ask her to play in the club championship?"

"Oh yes. That was fine. It seemed she was between partners and was willing to give me a game."

"But...?"

"Well, the story is, if you want the long version, we had a pre-game lunch, which I had hoped might lead to talk of life and children and all. But all she wanted to talk about was pickleball."

"So, the age old dichotomy of life..."

"Yes, I wanted life, she wanted pickleball."

"Was that the end of it?"

"No, I saw how the wind was blowing and we talked PB for a long while. The usual conversation of who, what, where, and how much. She and I were on the same page for most of it and all was well."

"Then was the championship play a problem?" asked the OM.

"No, we won all the games in our pool and then romped undefeated through the medal games. We won and if you look on the plaque by the door, our names are there. So all in all the play was fine."

"Surely, a good run like that would lay the foundation for a future together?"

"You'd think so and I pressed her for dinner that night. And she was willing."

"But it didn't go well?"

"No, the conversation was still all about pickleball. This woman has a problem, I think. Every time I mentioned something else, she steered it back to wrist angles and the proper number of cross court dinks that are reasonable before trying something new."

"Yes, I can see your problem. Err, not to be indelicate, but you didn't mention the ankles thing did you?"

"Oh, no, no. I don't talk to many about that. And if you are talking to a girl, you can't mention that kind of thing."

"Maybe after marriage?"

"Exactly, and not during the honeymoon either, of course."

"Of course."

"I did mention her beautiful eyes however. And they are nice, but not as nice as her ankles. And she steered that comment back to the color scheme on her pickleball gear bag! And, well, there were other problems in all of this."

"Yes, go on."

"Well the day of the championship was quite cold and damp and windy. So Jill wore these legging that went down to her shoes and then socks that went up her calves, and so you see, or not see, I guess, but the ankles were not there. Kind of threw me off my game actually."

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

"How so, how much time could you be looking for ankles during play?"

"Good question, but I was thinking about it and I was a bit sad. A sad man can't play his best I've found."

"Agreed. The mind needs to be clear as the paddle needs to be clean."

"Yes, of course. So there was that. As I said we won all the games, but I had to, ah, had to, oh, I'll just come out and say it, I had to lob a couple of times as I got caught out of position and I was in an awkward spot."

"Oops. I see. Did Jill react to the lobs?"

"There might have been some eye rolling, I'm not sure. My blush of annoyance and shame was burning my face and I didn't want to face anyone."

"How many lobs did you hit?"

"A lot, I think three. Those points did not end well as one could expect."

"Yes, usually true. Awkwardly positioned and forced to lob... So the play was OK, as you won. But those lapses were, ah, destructive to the future life scenario?"

"I guess. It seemed to just collapse and the dinner ended early and we went our separate ways."

"Too bad, it looked promising for a bit."

"Yes, well..." They both went back to their drinks and a manly silence descended over the table. The plonk, plonk of the pickleball hits wafted in the window. The OM worked on his Stout and Joe on his water. Sip, gurgle, and repeat.

Joe suddenly came alert and sat up straight. He tossed back the last of his water and starred out the window. "I say, who is that?"

The OM swiveled around and peered through the window. Due to the elevation of the courts and the location of the club house, most players could only be seen from the waist up.

"I'm not sure," said the OM.

"Doesn't matter, very fine ankles there. I think I need a closer look." With that Joe leaped up, grabbed his bag and headed for the courts.

The OM sat back, his pint nearly gone. It was too early for another. Perhaps he would watch a game or two before his afternoon nap.

He wandered out to the courts. There was Joe, with someone new. The OM watched a bit and had to admit that whoever this woman was, she had nice ankles.

## Post 164 Doubles Match Ben Johns, the Waters, and McGuffin

Here is an interesting doubles match. Ben Johns and AL Waters v. McGuffin and Momma Waters.

There are a couple of things that struck me as worthy of note.

- 1) Watch Ben's shoulder action when he is serving. This is not an arm swing, but a 90 degree shoulder rotation. He's getting a lot of speed and top spin with it.
- 2) There are a lot of unforced errors in the match. The first game seemed to have more than the other games. But not a lot of put aways; netted balls and long shots were rife. Errors were made on very common shots. If you doubt your game watch this and you'll feel that you're not that bad.
- 3) There is a huge advantage to volleying the ball. If you watch closely the tempo of a point changes the minute the ball can't be volleyed. So volley when you can and try to make sure the opponents can't -- hit at the feet, a slower ball that must bounce are the usual tricks.
- 4) Anna Leigh is getting into the middle of court aggressively even before her side (servers) is up at the net. She is ready to block and volley from there and it's more of that "in your face" style that she plays constantly. Considering it's mixed doubles, is rare that the girl crowds the middle as she does. When everyone is at the net, then she cedes most of the court to Ben, but before he's there, she's there.
- 5) When it's a cross court dink battle, note asymmetry of setup. Frequently both players on one side would be squeezed into half the court. There is no middle gap on any dink battle. It looks doable to leave almost a full half court open on your dominate side, well, it seems workable for McGuffin, who does it a lot.

This is a pretty entertaining match. I don't watch too many of them anymore as they get pretty repetitive after a while. But this one held my attention.

Remember to keep a finger on the the right arrow button as that will advance the feed by 5 seconds (on my browser) so you can skip all the movement to get ready for the next point.

Here is the link address:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CQdCnmZ4D4U>



## Post 165 Pickleball 201

So you've played a bit and can hit the ball forehand and backhand and your serves are in 90% of the time, what's the next step to being a better player?

In my opinion, the next step is to be where you need to be. Let's call this looking ahead one shot. Let me lay out a framework of a point played at the reasonable level. I'll sprinkle in notes about defense and offense along the way.

And like most PB discussions we need to talk of server versus receiver sides as their roles are very different at the start of all points and until both sides make it to the net. The servers are, by design, behind in any point and are playing defense.

OK, let's look at a typical point played at a skilled level:

1) The Serve: The best practice for a server is to get the ball in. Deeper is better than shorter and backhand is usually better than forehand, but being in is the most important point.

2) Second Shot, service return: A good serve will be deep on your backhand side. So be prepared to return that shot. However most shots will on average bounce in the middle of your service box. If the serve is not too challenging then you have options as to where to hit the return.

A service return ought to go up the middle and towards the guy who served. The non-server is looking for something to do, best to keep him idle. The server is recovering from hitting the serve and he might not be fully ready to return the second shot, or may have stepped into the court due to an inferior serving style.

In any case, hit the serve back and move to the kitchen line - this is vital and there is no case where you don't do this. The ball has to bounce, you want to be ready to defend the third shot and that means not running and at the net.

3) Third Shot (fifth, seventh, all odd points when not yet at the net):

We expect the Second shot to be up the middle and towards the server. The best return will be deep, so we want to be behind the service line in order to hit a good third. If we get a shorter ball, we can easily move up and hit it. Pro tip: the sound of the second shot will give some indication of how hard it was hit and how short it might be.

Hit the third shot to the person who returned the serve. That person might still be moving towards the net, or moving, or, heaven forbid, is hanging back by the baseline. That person is more likely to not be ready to return a ball.

If the player who hits the second shot does not come to the kitchen line, always, always hit it deep to the backhand and immediately rush the net. You now have split the opponents and you control the net. This is a perfect situation to win the point on the fourth or sixth shot. This is the situation most favorable to your side.

If both opponents are at the net, as they should be, then drive the third ball hard or drop it. I prefer the drop, but either is workable. (It's best if your partner knows what you like to do as he should/can be moving up if it's a drop shot and not moving if it's a drive.)

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

Driving the ball is fine, but you are still at a disadvantage if your side is not at the net. So you have to stop driving the ball and start dropping it at some point. The sooner the better in my view. Players who keep driving the ball do a couple of things. They never move up, they usually hit a lot of shots long, and it's not too difficult to defend. Note that if they hit with a lot of top spin, they can be effective if they can get the ball to dip below the net, but anyone who hits these shots with some cut and or side spin are in trouble.

For all shots after the second, you want to volley the ball if you can. One of the advantages to moving aggressively into the transition area, or to the kitchen, is to volley the next shot. Sure, some shots are harder to return from the transition area, but any volley gains a lot of time and advantage.

4) Fourth, sixth, all even shots - assumes the opps are not at the net: this shot should be deep in the middle of the court. This is the best chance to keep the servers from the net. If they are moving into the transition area, a ball to their feet is the best choice. Putting it in the middle is the best chance for an unforced error. With middle shots, it might not be clear who is to return it and there may be a coverage gap or folks not willing to sacrifice a paddle to return a shot. If the third shot was a good drop, then better to make a good dink than a bad harder shot.

If everyone is at the net, then we are dinking. Speed up if you can hit a good one. Otherwise, work on hitting a good dink.

A defensive exchange is not discussed much in the literature, but in a pro match where either third or fifth shot drops are de rigueur, about 10% of the drops will be volleyed and a defensive battle from baseline towards the net will ensue. This battle of drives from the net and blocks and lobb-ish things from the baseline. The point resolves when either the baseliners make a low/soft enough shot to get to the net (i.e., a ball that can't be volleyed), or the net holders manage to get an angle and put the ball away.

I think rec players see this kind of point as a basic mistake, but it's actually a large component of play from the servers' point of view at the pro level and probably is about 80% of points in some rec game. That varies with skill level. In a game where the unforced errors are minimal, it's usually very difficult to score.

5) The Rest of the Shots: The net/dink play continues until something happens. An error, speed up, boredom, or lob come to mind. But the main thing is to cover the middle. In doing so, you are leaving your sideline open a bit. This is OK. It is harder to hit than you might think. If a player is going to try to go down the line, they usually will telegraph it with a bigger windup or a sneaky gleam in the eyes. So while you are covering the middle like a nice smear of mayonnaise, be ready to shift quickly to cover the line.

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Let's summarize a bit about the shots mentioned above. The careful reader will note that the recommended shots are up the middle. So as a defender of those shots, you need to defend the middle. One or both players have to have a paddle ready to return those shots. Defending the court where each player has his side of the court to defend is not the best. It's better to overlap the middle and leave room on the far side to the opponents. What I mean by the far side, is the side away from where the ball will be hit. This changes as the ball moves around, so this coverage of middle and side must shift from side to side as the ball moves around.

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

In dink contests, we still want to cover the middle well. I've found it possible for one of the players to be very close to straddling the center line. It looks like this opens a lot of the side court, but it's difficult to hit that shot. It's usually predictable as demeanor and paddle positions will change to hit that shot. A watchful defender is rarely surprised. From this middle position, quick backhand shots and poaches are possible. If the opponents try for a middle shot, you are well positioned to defend. Paddle up and be eager!

Speaking of middle coverage, I played a couple of games with Angel this past week, it was surprising how close we were to each other during play. Our paddles when extended out would more than overlap the middle.

Back to our main theme of being at the right place is to use the above structure to expect the location of the next shot. If the ball should come up the middle, then be there. If your side hits a good short shot, then advance and look for a popup.

The earlier you move, the more time you have to get there and more slowly you have to move. If you watch pro matches you'll see the service returner sprints to the kitchen line. They hit the ball hard, so there is less time before the third shot comes back - less time, then move faster.

Can this all be summed up as, "Block the middle, face and crowd your opponents?" Perhaps and as a summary, I wouldn't argue with that. Of course if everyone follows that, then the variations become more important, but the basics are vital. If you play with random partners, then these basics should be common ground.

One of the goals in any sport is to get to the level where most of the unforced errors don't happen. At that level you enter into a bit of cat and mouse, where out maneuvering your opponent is a vital element. Pickleball with its steep learning curve allows you to get close to this level fairly quickly. If everyone plays the above structure well, you'll be in a dinking game a lot of the time and then you try to out dink / out think your opponent. Physical movement, psychology, and a puzzle to solve; it's a great game!

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Editor's note: This has gone through a bunch of iterations. It's getting terse and with terseness comes heavy, laden prose. Which is fine, but you can't read it quickly. This may be a problem with all instructional writing. You need a flow that's not too light, not too heavy. So best to stop here.

I can see an instruction manual coming out of this. All the shots are there, no instructions about how to hit the shots, but that's too much for this.

In re hitting shots, Scott has talked to me about it. I've not covered it much in other posts. I think it's somewhat easy to pickup since the paddles are light and so is the ball. You can get away with some bad technique, where, for example, you might not be able to do that with tennis. So stay tuned.

## **Post 166 The Upward Dink, or Dinking Like Angel Not Published**

Angel is our visiting professional. He has videos on YouTube, look for Angel Hernandez to see his posts. He plays professionally in men's doubles.

He dropped by the Downs a couple of times over the holidays and I was lucky enough to play with him a couple of times and against him, too.

Aside from all the things he does well, he has a dink action that I've not seen before. It looks to me that he has an open paddle face, i.e., facing a bit towards the sky, and the stroke seems to be totally vertical. He does not seem to lift the ball or push it. What this stroke does is pop the ball up and forward and with top spin.

A version of dinking theory would categorize all dinks as either lifts or pushes. Lift for short shots, and push the ball for longer shots. Angel's version is not covered by this model.

The forward motion is provided by the speed of the ball when he hits it. All he provides is the open paddle that transforms the momentum into some forward motion and the top spin.

These balls don't rise much over the net and then they kick a bit when they hit. He is very good at placing them at the kitchen line and his directional control is also very good.

I've found this stroke is not easy to hit without some practice. I think a soft grip is essential and then the usual trust not to try to help the ball over the net.

Try bouncing a ball on your paddle then altering the face angle and letting the ball hit it. See what happens with distance and direction.

## Post 167 Why a Drop is Better for a Third Shot

After I reached a certain level of pickleball play, I learned about third shot drops. I had not heard of them early in my play as I started with two other friends and we taught ourselves to play. We were starting from scratch, we had all played tennis, so it wasn't too hard to play proto-pickleball, but of the interesting details and shots, we knew nothing. I found some videos and made my friends watch them. What is a game without homework?

The three of us played at the Downs for about a year. It was pre-Covid and we never saw another player. We played two on one for that entire time. Finally we found a fourth.

Then Covid showed up and then a hoard of players showed up and the rest is history. Two of the original four retired after pickleball injuries.

Now since those early days, I like to think that my knowledge of the game has moved on a bit. And I wanted to talk about third shot drops.

My current "model" of the game is that it's like king of the hill. The hill being the kitchen line or net area. Dominate that and you dominate the game.

To that end, all play that allows you to move towards the net, is good stuff and ought to be encouraged.

Drop shots are the main tool that the serving sides uses to get to the net. There is nothing more effective than a good drop.

Frequently a third shot drive is effective, but it less effective in allowing the team to move up. My reasoning for that is that a drive is a harder hit shot and thus is returned faster. If you move up when hitting a drive, you might get only one or two steps before you have to defend the fourth shot. With a drop, more time is available and you can move forward earlier and you have more time to move.

If the service returner is not coming forward to the net, then always drive back at them and you rush the net.

Finally, I find it easier to play when I know that partner is going to drop. I will move up as the drop is hit and hopefully be ready to aggressively defend the fifth shot from the kitchen line. A driven shot requires that the serving side needs to hang back a bit and see how the fourth shot is handled.

That's my case for a third shot drop. Yes, they are more difficult to hit than a drive, but more satisfying when they come off. If you hit a bad third shot, you stay back and defend. That defense is a needed skill and don't feel you failed because the third was not perfect.

**Mini lesson on how to hit a drop.** The key to this shot is to lift the ball and to do this you want a swing that will end over your head. Think of a big lazy, long swing. The ball should be at least eight feet in the air at its apex. Too high is not an issue, but how close it comes to the net is vital. A high shot will be dropping vertically and is hard to hit.

**But Wait, here is a bit more...** Apparently a third shot lob is an actual thing. I'm not a great fan of lobs as I think they distort the time space fabric and are awkward at the best of times. But you can lob as a third shot. The downside would that you hit it out or you get an overhead back, both of which

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

you'll have to weigh against pushing the people off the net. So maybe a frequency analysis would be a good thing before doing this a lot.

## Post 168 The Pickleball Doctor saves Bob

"Do you know why you are here?" asked Dr. Fixemup?

"I was told that I had to come in," said Bob, eager pickleball player.

"Yes, well sometimes it's difficult for us to realize that we need help. Your regular partners petitioned the pickleball court to have you come in."

"Can I leave at any time?"

"Let's not worry about that now, let's see if we can make some progress. We are here to help you."

"Well, OK, I guess. Though I don't know that I have any problems..."

"The reports I have read seem to suggest there are some rough edges, which we call 'areas of improvement.' Shall we get started?"

"OK," Bob said, in a tone that suggested he was tired of the whole thing already, would much rather be playing, and also had a touch of surrender in it. Clearly the first steps towards healing and noted by the good doctor.

"Let's start with net play, Bob. Your partners hint that you are not comfortable with dinking. How would you respond to that 'suggestion'?"

"Hey, I dink. It's not as fun as banging an overhead, but I do it."

"Bob, we are not here to judge, but to understand. How many dinks in a row would you say is a healthy number?"

"Maybe one or two? It's not really important how many, is it?"

"Well, Bob, there is a difference of opinion on that in the literature. How would you feel if your partner only dinked and never sped the ball up?"

"That's just wrong! You want to hit the ball and win the point."

"Bob, we don't say right or wrong here. We just present alternatives for life skills. You mentioned that you don't dink a lot, how does that make your partners feel?"

"I never thought of their feelings, I was just trying to win the point. But maybe they would be unhappy if a speed up or aggressive shot went out?"

"Why, Bob, do your partners play pickleball, do you think?"

"To win, Right?"

"Perhaps, Bob, but can you think of other reasons?"

"Some seem to be more than interested in talking, than playing. What's that all about, Doc?"

"Again, we don't judge here, Bob. Many reasons are valid and can be incorporated in balanced life outlook. Social, physical, mental reasons are all valid. Are you happy to dink say, five times in a row?"

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

"I guess that's OK. Am I fine with it? Nah, that's poor play I think. In just a few shots, there are opportunities for aggression."

"Is aggression a good way to go through life, Bob? Could you miss opportunities when being aggressive?"

"Hmm, well, if the ball I speed up is not quite high enough, I could end the point early and not in my favor. It's a skill like any other... I owe it to my partners to play the best game I can."

"What should the play be if your partner and you disagree on what play style is the better? Have you talked to your partners about this?"

"No, we drill and play, there is not much talking."

"What kind of drills do you do?"

"Mostly dinking, I guess. I don't really know, I kind of go along with what my partners want to do."

"If they want to do dink drills, maybe they are trying to tell you something?"

"What? No, it's just a drill."

"Is it Bob? Maybe it's an attempt to bring you over to a more gentle style?"

"Gosh, Doc. I don't know. Sure dinking is low key compared to hitting the ball. I guess my partners like it. Maybe. I like my partners. I could try dinking more. Or maybe hitting some lobs? I like to lob."

"Bob, our time is about up here. I'd like you to think about your style of play and what your partners might like to see from you."

"Are we done, doctor?"

"No, Bob, I've scheduled you for weekly sessions for the rest of the season. Your comment about liking lobs, will require some deep therapy. We'll have to get you on the couch next time and see what we can resolve. There is no shame in getting help."

"Now, to improve, I suggest that you try to dink at least three times in all points. Hopefully consecutively. Try to be soft. Points can be won by being gentle."

"Thank you Doc. I'll give it a try. I didn't realize how I was stressing my partners."

The doctor noted signs of improvement in his notepad.

Bob came in for weekly sessions for the rest of the year. He learned to like to dink and drop. His speed ups dwindled until he became known for never hitting a hard ball. His partners were not happy about that. They seemed to have destroyed the vibrant side of Bob. But that is another session in the Bob Saga.

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Doctor's Note: This is a fictionalized case study from my best selling book, "Pickleball Therapy and the Right Minded Player," and it does not represent any individual player. However the play and therapy techniques are quite real and can be safely applied to the general public. Good play and mental health.  
-- Dr. Fixemup.



## Post 169 Bob is Back on the Couch - Part II

We return to Dr. Fixemup for another session with Bob. Bob as you will remember was a banger and his partners had sent him in for treatment. His initial problem was excessive aggression, now we delve more into other topics...

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"Bob, are you ready to begin? Please lie on the couch and we'll get started. What I wanted to explore today for the next several sessions is the phrase you used in our first session. You said that you 'liked to lob.' Do you remember that?"

Bob is on the couch, but not relaxed as yet. Sessions are draining as some needed medical procedures must necessarily be.

"No, I don't remember saying that, but I do like to lob."

The doctor makes a note that Bob didn't remember the lob-love statement.

"Why do you like to lob, Bob? Let me remind you that there are no wrong answers here and I'm here to help."

"I've never really thought about it. I don't think it's any different than any other shot, is it? Do I really need help with this?"

"Opinions differ on the lob shot view, Bob. We are here to explore your feelings." The definitive authority, a book, A Pickleball Player's Mental Health, eighth edition, contains several chapters on the psychosis of excessive lobbing.

"OK, I guess... "

"Bob, let's start out more simply. When do you lob?"

"Uh, OK, let me see. I guess if I am in a highly defensive position, then a lob seems like the best way to reset the point."

"What defensive positions are those?"

"If I get a service return that is really hard and deep, then I might lob."

"Does this happen often?"

"It varies. The better players hit better service returns. I guess that's where it happens the most..."

"Do you have trouble with ground strokes as a rule?"

"No, I'm OK there. It's just some of them are really deep in the court."

"Does your partner lob from that situation?"

"Hmm, I guess not. They would tend to drop the ball or drive it back, rather than lob."

"Are your partners better at ground strokes than you are?"

"No, probably about the same."

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

"Yet you are lobbing and they are not. How does that make you feel?"

"I know there are people that don't like lobs. So when I do it, I think that I'm not doing as well as I could..."

"Tell me about your court positions for serving."

"I am probably closer to the center line than a side line. My aim is pretty much the center of the service area."

"And of course behind the baseline. After you serve, where are you?"

"Yeah, behind the baseline, of course! I'll usually hit and let my momentum move me into the court a step or so."

"Do you always step in?"

"Hmm, usually, I guess. It seems to be the better play," Bob shrugs a bit.

"What else could you do besides moving into the court?"

"Oh, hit and stay back, or even move back a step. And, for sure, get into a ready position."

"If you moved back a step or two, would you better placed to hit a drive or drop shot, or even a lob?"

"Yes, I guess so. But if I get a short return, it could be a problem."

"Who returns short returns?"

"Beginners and intermediate players tend to return short. Also mishits are usually short."

"Do good players hit a lot of short balls?"

"They are less likely to, but everyone does it."

"Suppose after serving, you step back. If the shot is short, you move up and drive or drop. If it's deep, you are well placed to return it. Would that work?"

"Yes, that's probably a better strategy."

"When you watch a service return, what clues tell you the ball might be short? It seems the short ball is the only problem if you stay back."

"I'll watch the wind up and shoulder turn of the player. Big windups will go deep. If the ball comes off the paddle at a crazy angle, that is probably a mishit, and those are short too and usually have a lot of spin. Finally, I like to listen to the contact of the ball on the paddle. If it's muted, then the ball is short. Loud and crisp and the ball is coming deep."

"Excellent analysis on the short shot detection, Bob. I think we made some progress today. If you stay back more when on the serving side you can drive and drop more and will not be a position where you have to lob. While we've not gotten into the lobbing as much as needed, we've identified a plan to move forward. How do you feel about that?"

"Yes, doctor, I see your point. While moving in on serves works against some players, staying back a bit will work against all of them. I'll see if I can get better at that. I feel pretty good about this and I'm excited to try this. I can see that I'll be able to play more sedately as I'll never be moving backwards for

## Pickleball Thoughts 2022

the third shot."

"Bob, pickleball is like life, we want to be on a forward path at all times. I'll see you next week."

## Wrap Up for 2022

It's early January 2023, and I've got to tell you I'm tired of proof reading! But not of pickleball. It's been a good year with the Tri Valley Pickleball Club coming on line and making a nice difference for the game. I found the local tournaments to be very interesting. Also the pickleball 101 classes via the park district in Livermore. I helped teach a bunch of those and it was fun and interesting to work with new players.

As I write, we are in the middle of five days of rain. It was nice in that it got this book completed, but I would rather be more physically active. One misses the sound of a pickleball after a while.

I'm looking forward to May Nissen (Livermore park) nets showing up at some point. It's a nice facility and will take some pressure off of the Downs. How this might distribute players and which ones is good question and I'm interested in how it will play out.

I want to thank all the players I've played with and talked with over the years. This game been a wonderful trip and I've found the people to be more important and enjoyable than the game. A real delight to talk and play with. I look forward to the next game!