

# **Pickleball Thoughts for Beginners**

Rich Hume

## Table of Contents

Pickleball Thoughts for Beginners.....	1
Introduction.....	3
Moving around the Court .....	5
More Court Movement .....	8
Make Sure These Two Shots are In the Court.....	10
Serves and Service Returns.....	10
How the Pros Dink.....	12
Paddle Up or Down? Yes! Basic Paddle Positioning.....	13
Crisscross or X Model of Who Takes the Ball.....	15
Dinking, Some Additional Thoughts.....	17
Paddle Grips and Spin .....	19
Their errors, My errors, Our Errors; A Game of Errors.....	22
New Technique for Service Returns.....	24
Rules of Thumb -- Hints for New Players.....	25
Who Hits it Harder.. And Why Hitting a Ball Hard is Bad .....	27
Another Take on Getting to the Net.....	28
Stop Going for Winners, a Guest Post from Scott.....	30
A Summary of Getting to the Net by the Serving Side.....	33
More on Paddle Movement.....	35
Movement When You are not Hitting the Ball.....	36
The GUP.....	38
Skill Timing, What You Need and When.....	41
X Factor Part II.....	45
Your Partner is the Server, What are Your Duties?.....	47
Stages of Understanding – Enlightenment .....	50
The Serving Stroke.....	53
Most shots are Dinks!.....	57
About Those Out Shots.....	59
They are different from you and me; Pros vs. Us.....	61
Allen and I Disagree – Service Returner Duties.....	62
Grip Pressure.....	66
Ground Stroke Technique.....	68
Beginner to Something Else.....	70
A Bit More on Dinks.....	72
Paddle Angles.....	74
The Power of Stopping (Your Feet).....	76
Thoughts on Volleys.....	78
Pickleball 201 – Getting to the Next Level.....	81

## Introduction

In this booklet, I've culled the posts from my blog, [pickleballthoughts.blogspot.com](http://pickleballthoughts.blogspot.com), the posts that are on that level that separates the casual observer from the player.

If you are new to the game or have played a bit, then here are some details about the game that should provide some insight into the rich underbelly of the game.

The game can be simple and then complex, then simple again and finally a game of a rich complexity that is quite rewarding. It's fun to play at any level. But if you are going to play with strangers and in a general game, there are some things and skills that are useful.

One of the fun parts of the game is playing well with a partner. And that requires that you know what you are doing and expected to do. I've tried to write about some of those things. But I will confess that if it didn't catch my interest, then it's not here.

I'm expecting that you've been on the court and we have some basic vocabulary – there isn't a lot – in common.

There is a lot of information here. As you incorporate it, it would probably be useful to review on occasion.

If you master all of this, then I would refer you to the main blog and its content, where you will find these posts and another 100 or so that will provide more detail and esoteric topics.

Let me talk about the order of posts. They are in the same order as they were written. I've thought about collecting them, but concluded that that would be a bad idea. No one wants to read three posts in a row about moving your feet. But if several posts later another post that provides some movement information, ought to help retention

and a deeper understanding. So I left it all in place in the order that things meant something to me. My play is a lot better than those early days of playing with some friends. There is a lot of information here that would have been welcome a couple of years ago.

My game and The Game are still evolving. The pros are pushing the paradigms of classical play with serving, court movement and speed. As new players come into the game from different backgrounds, they will change the game.

I favor a classical game that rewards patience, ball placement, and guile over a power banging game. You will find numerous styles as you play the game. You are getting my version of what is proper!

On a technical level, the content is pretty good. It's stood the test of time. However, I am no pro, and you will probably run into differing opinions in re various topics. That's all good. As an engineer once said to me, "if there are multiple correct ways to do something, then it's an art and not a science."

Welcome to art and science of Pickleball!

Rich Hume, January 2023

## **Moving around the Court**

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

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

We have two topics:

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

Allow me to add some commentary.

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

Of course this is a bit more nuanced and like a lot of stuff that will

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

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

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

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

My suggestion is to be a step behind the baseline after the serve is hit. Watch the return carefully, listen to it, then decide where you are going to move - up hopefully, sideways and on a rare occasion

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

I hope this helps!

## **More Court Movement**

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

More on these topics another time.

## **Make Sure These Two Shots are In the Court**

### ***Serves and Service Returns***

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

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

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

Most of the pros will return a serve with a modest cut spin. That will help keep the ball in the court and will help keep the ball from bouncing too high. A low spinney return will also require the

serving side to lift the ball, which might allow you to score an easy point as it comes over the net. You are going to be at the KL when it comes across, right?

## How the Pros Dink

The pros are different than you and I...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **Paddle Up or Down? Yes! Basic Paddle Positioning**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

dragon shot, or return a modest dink."

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

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

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

## **Crisscross or X Model of Who Takes the Ball**

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

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

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

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

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

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

return.

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

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

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

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



## **Dinking, Some Additional Thoughts**

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

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

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

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

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

Here is the link to the video:

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

How to win points...

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

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

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

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

## **Paddle Grips and Spin**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Spin, what is it good for? Absolutely everything!

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

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

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

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

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

Case History...

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

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

## **Their errors, My errors, Our Errors; A Game of Errors**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **New Technique for Service Returns**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



## **Rules of Thumb -- Hints for New Players**

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

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

1) The ball slows down quickly, you have more time than you think to hit a shot. Good players have developed a small pause before impact to improve their timing. If you come from other racket/paddle sports you probably react too quickly. Enjoy the shot, relish it, and hit it in its proper time. Being too quick results in a pulled shot, too late and it goes right, straight is what you want. (Assumes a right handed player.)

2) Get closer to the ball than you think you should. This is a lot like the first point. The ball slows quickly and doesn't skip, it tends to sit up a bit shorter than you may be used to. Don't let it bounce too far in front of you. Foot movement is the mark of a good player.

3) Strangely hit balls may have a lot of spin -- so look for strange jumps to the sides or towards the net - they probably do not have top spin on them. Like point 2, get close enough to handle the strange bounce.

4) It's a simple game, but you need to realize what's happening, e.g., if a player winds up and likes to cut ball, if it's high at all, it's going

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **Who Hits it Harder... And Why Hitting a Ball Hard is Bad**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Player 1: "Hmm..."

## **Another Take on Getting to the Net**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

opportunity," every shot makes someone happy!

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **Stop Going for Winners, a Guest Post from Scott**

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

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

1. Always get your serve in. 3/4 deep is fine with plenty of clearance over the net. You can maybe try something fancy when up 9-0 but not at 8-9, or 0-0. The serve should be treated as simply a way for the rally to start.
2. Always get your return in. Send up a moon ball 3/4 deep and get to the net. You never should go for a winner or flirt with the sidelines. I like to return in the middle of the court and watch my opponents sometimes fight over it and make an error, plus a lot of times the ball hits the center line and does the Livermore skid!
3. When at the baseline stop killing the ball and watching it fly out. If you want to hit it hard go 3/4 pace and hit it down the middle or at a body, but avoid going for the sidelines. Most shots from the baseline should be hit softly into the kitchen so you can get to the net.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



## **A Summary of Getting to the Net by the Serving Side**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

from the baseline.

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

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

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

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

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

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

## More on Paddle Movement

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

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

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

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

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

## **Movement When You are not Hitting the Ball**

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

-----

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

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

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

Here are some examples:

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

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

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

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

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

## 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.

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.



## **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 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, 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.

## **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.

## **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? (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.

## **Stages of Understanding – Enlightenment**

"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 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..."

----

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.

## **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 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...

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!



## **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!)

## **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.

## **They are different from you and me; Pros vs. Us**

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.

## **Allen and I Disagree – Service Returner Duties**

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.

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-7DI1Y>



I'm open to any discussion...

## **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.

## **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)

## **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!

## **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. :-)

## **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.

## **The Power of Stopping (Your Feet)**

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.

## 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 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. ;-))



## **Pickleball 201 – Getting to the Next Level**

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.)

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.

---

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.

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!

---

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.