

Pickleball Doubles Strategies

Purpose

The purpose of this article is to share with you the winning strategies that have helped me win in the game of pickleball. I'm sure that there are many other approaches but these techniques seemed to work for me and perhaps may work for you as well. It is not intended to be a comprehensive tutorial on how to play the game. There are several excellent published books that delve deeply into that area. This is strictly intended as a "quick" reference guide.

The Serve

How many times have you heard "just get the ball into the court"? Well, they're right. Forget the spins and trick shots unless you're very proficient. Instead focus on just getting the ball in play. Make the serve receiver move if possible. If your opponent has a weak back hand then exploit that weakness, but always, always just get your serve in and preferably the deeper the better!

Service Return

Returning the ball to the center is always good because it makes your opponents move and guess who's going to hit the ball. If at all possible return the ball so it bounces within a foot of the baseline. Never hit a short return! Keep them back and follow your return to the net.

The Third Shot

In my opinion, the game really starts with the third shot. I believe the player returning the service return has five shot opportunities each with its own complexity, level of difficulty and benefits. They all have an advantage depending upon the level of skill of your opponent. Choose wisely.

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1 Down the Line

A low probability of success and it's the high point of the net.

2 Drilling the net person

Test your competition and you may just surprise them. Again, a low probability of success with higher skill level players.

3 The Lob

I don't recommend this shot with higher skill level players, however, it works as a nice surprise shot. I would only use it when I'm significantly ahead in points. It's a defensive shot and you need to be on the offense.

4 Middle Drop Shot

A low shot over the net and into the middle of the court. I would use this shot most of the time. If successful, follow it up to the net. Your partner should watch the return as well and, if it's good, follow you up to the net and be ready for net play. He or she should not just run up to the net without watching the return. Always work your way up to the net together.

5 Side Drop Shot

A very tough shot to achieve - but effective! You're hitting the ball from the service return to the backhand side of your opponent where it just drops over the net. You'll both need to follow it up to the net together to be successful.

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Keep the Ball in Play

Mark Friedenberg comments in his book “The Official Pickleball Handbook” that 75% of all shots are won on errors. Do I need to say more... just keep the ball in play any way you can. AND, don’t try a kill shot on your first opportunity unless it’s just perfect. Be patient and just get the ball back, preferably deep in the middle, while you wait for that perfect put-away! Your opponent may just hit the ball into the net.

Opponents Weaknesses & Their Paddle Position

On most occasions, your opponent will “telegraph” where they are going to hit the ball with the angle of their paddle and perhaps their body just before they hit the ball. It happens quickly. Cover that area.

Example: During warm-ups you can get an indication of your opponent’s potential weaknesses so that you can exploit them in the game. If they never hit a backhand shot guess what. Also, when he/she returns a serve, if they tend to slide more to their backhand side then guess what. I’d serve to their backhand all day long and hit there as well during play.

Watch for tendencies. If your opponent always hits the same shot to the same location...then cover it. The opposite holds true as well. You need to vary your shots!

Don’t Play Catch

Too many players are hitting the ball back (horizontally) to their opponent while at the net. AND, the ball is coming right back! To win the point you should be hitting the ball at a down angle into the middle of the court at your opponent’s feet. If you’re hitting to your opponent and its coming back to you then you’re doing something wrong and may well lose that point.

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Anticipate / “Open” Alleys / Angles

Always assume that the ball will be hit back to you. Be ready. Anticipate your opponent's returns. If you hit a particular shot, where do you think he/she will return the ballTHEN COVER that area. Hit for the open alleys. Make your opponents move. Don't play catch! Hitting angles wins points.

Move Your Feet

Have you ever watched the top tennis players and how they glide around the court? How they are always moving from side to side and front to back. That's not by accident. Their feet are always in motion positioning their body to hit the next shot. The same should be true with the game of pickleball. Keep those feet moving even when you're at the non-volley line getting ready to hit that next shot. Planting your feet at the kitchen line is a no-no!

Your Body & Paddle Positions

I believe the game is won when all four players are at the net. Therefore you ask, what's so important when you're at the net. How about your reaction time for a start? If you agree, then keeping that paddle up and in front of you ready for a quick response to hit the ball is a key. It takes much too long to hit the ball when your paddle is either at your side or down below your waist. Try keeping the paddle up right in front of your face. Sounds funny but give it a try.