Pickleball: from basic rules to advanced strategies and tactics

By Daniel Caissie

November 2016

Document prepared in collaboration with:

Pickleball NB

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Acknowledgments

Pickleball is a fun game that can be played by people of all ages. This game is not only good for getting excellent exercise and maintaining an active lifestyle, but it also promotes important social values and ethics. Pickleball can be played indoors and outdoors, and is being played in both large and small communities. I am particularly grateful to players in my area (Shediac and the Greater Moncton area, Canada) who have promoted this game (namely Michel Legault and Jean-Pierre Boudreau) and especially Paul Babineau (Grande-Digue) who introduced me to pickleball. I thank Gilles Doucet who provided valuable comments and suggestions on a draft version of the present document.

To all fellow pickleball players, I express much appreciation and a sincere thank you!
1.0 Introduction

Pickleball has become one of the fastest growing sports in the USA, in Canada and many other parts of the world. It is a racquet sport that combines elements of tennis, badminton, and table tennis. Although pickleball is a very active sport, it generally requires less mobility than some other sports (e.g., tennis), because it’s played on a smaller court (i.e., badminton size court). As such, this game is very well adapted to older players, and game strategies are such that older players can be very competitive against younger players, especially when playing doubles. *Pickleball is often played as a control oriented sport rather than a power oriented sport (doubles)*. As such, players who execute precision shots (rather than power shots) can be as competitive which makes this game so interesting and popular. These game characteristics have also made pickleball attractive for players of all ages and it’s often played among different age groups (make it a fun cross-generational game!). It is played in many clubs as open play or recreational play (often as a pick-up sport) where people gather and play with different players almost every game. It is the social aspect of the game, among others, that has made this sport as popular as it is today. Pickleball can also be used as a mean of improving other racquet sports. In fact, it has been shown that the skill sets learned in one racquet sports can easily be transferred to other racquet sports (*Mitchell and Oslin, 1999*). Accordingly, many very good pickleball players come from a tennis background. This means that encouraging young and energetic players to play tennis (as well as other racquet sports) is good for pickleball, as they eventually cross over, hopefully soon than later!

The game of pickleball was invented in the summer of 1965 by Joel Pritchard on Bainbridge Island near Seattle Washington (USA) with the help of two friends (Bill Bell and Barney McCallum) (*Anon., 2016*). Upon coming home from a game of golf one day, they were greeted by kids at the Pritchard’s house complaining that they were bored and wanted to play something. The adults provided the kids with wooden paddles (presumably ping pong paddles) and a wiffle ball, and were told to go play outside on the badminton court. That is essentially how the game started! Over the years the game has become very popular and is presently being played in many countries around the world. Where does the name “pickleball” comes
from? In fact, there is some debate over the origin of the name pickleball (Anon., 2016). Some have reported that the name comes from the Pritchard family dog’s named “Pickle”, namely this is the story told by Barney McCallum when interviewed on different occasions. However, the Pritchard’s have reported that the dog only came after the invention of the game. According to Joel Pritchard and his wife Joan, the origin of the name pickleball would have come from pickle boat in crew (where oarsmen were chosen from leftovers of other boats). By this definition, the name pickleball would have been based on the fact that the game comes from a combination of other sports. Joel Pritchard reported that when the media got a hold of the dog story, they ran with it. Up to this day, the dog story seems to be the most reported story as to the origin of the name of game.

The present document was prepared for both players who are new at the game and for players wishing to learn more about the game, especially strategies in doubles and singles. This document was initially prepared as notes on the game by the author and eventually evolved into the present document. How to best read this document? This document is best read as you would for a research document, i.e., read through the entire document initially to get the flavor of the document (i.e., overall information), and then read some sections more than once to have a better understanding of its content (strategies/techniques, etc.), as it may contain a lot of information to be digested in only one read. This document covers slightly more aspects of doubles play, as it is more widely played in clubs around the country. As such, this document covers some equipment information, basic rules, game strategies as well as various shots associated with the game. It is important to note that the skill level and the abilities of each player will influence which sections or part of this document may be of any value to you. There are players who will just want to learn the basic rules and then play the game. However, if you are like me, a new game brings new challenges, and I always thrive on improving not only my abilities to play the game but also my understanding on how the game is truly being played, at the highest level. As a researcher and professor, I often remind students not to believe all of what they read. This applies to this document as well! It’s good to have a critical mind,
question the methods and the approaches, i.e., discover new things by experimenting, try different things and see if it works. You will decide what works best for you!

As in any sports, it is important to properly warmup before playing (and after play), especially for more mature players, to avoid potential injuries. Some would suggest that older players should not only stretch and exercise before and after play but rather on a daily basis, to prevent some common injuries/conditions. In fact, many conditions (e.g., plantar fascia; adhesive capsulitis (frozen shoulder); Achilles tendonitis; lateral epicondylitis (tennis elbow), etc.) can develop not only by playing sports but also by simply getting old. A daily routine of simple exercises and stretches is often suggested by physiotherapist to recover from / and to prevent the recurrence of such conditions.

Proper stroke techniques and practicing drills can significantly improve your game and these aspects of the game are not fully covered in this document. For more in-depth material on the game, readers are encourage to read other books on the subject, namely the book by Leach (2013) and the USA Pickleball Association and Littlewood (2015). These two books contain a wealth of information on techniques, drills and much more (including stretching exercises).
2.0 Pickleball terminology, equipment and basic information

2.1 Pickleball terminology

Here are some common terms that are used in pickleball, in alphabetical order:

**Around-the-post** (shot): A ball that bounces and goes outside the limit of the court (i.e., beyond the sidelines) and is returned around the post and lands in-play in the opponent’s court. The ball does not need to go over the net when returned around the post.

**Backcourt**: The area of the court close to the baseline, in the back of the court.

**Backhand shot**: A shot which is hit from the opposite side of your body of the hand you’re holding your paddle.

**Backspin** (on the ball): Spin put on the ball where the top of the ball is rotating towards you as the ball travels away from you (i.e., the ball is rotating counter clockwise when viewed from the side and the ball is moving left to right).

**Ball or Ball-in**: A call that players make when a ball from an adjacent court comes in your court and you need to stop the play.

**Baseline**: The lines that defines both ends of the court.

**Carry** (shot): A shot where the ball is being carried during the swing/movement or the ball hits the paddle more than once during the movement.

**Centerline**: The line that divides the service area of the court in two serving courts.

**Crosscourt**: The opposite side of the court where you are.

**Dink** (shot): A soft shot at the net, generally initiated from or volleyed or from a bounce into the non-volley zone (NVZ) area, and the ball is hit softly so that it falls within your opponent’s NVZ area. Players generally dink across (player in front of you) or crosscourt.

**Double bounce rule**: Rule that requires the ball to bounce twice after the serve (once on the service receiving team side and then once on the serving team side) before the ball can be hit as a volley (i.e., hit in the air before the ball has a chance to bounce).

**Doubles play**: A game being played by 4 players, two on each side (e.g., men’s doubles, women doubles or mixe doubles).

**Drive** (shot): A hard/fast shot.
Drop shot: A shot executed with the objective that the ball falls just over the net and lands within your opponent’s non-volley zone area. Also, a shot that drops short of the opponent’s position.

Foot fault: When one foot (or both of your feet) touches the non-volley zone line when executing a volley shot, or when a players momentum carries him/her into the non-volley zone area after a volley.

Grip: The type of hand grip players use to you hold their paddle, e.g., the continental grip.

Groundstroke (shot): Hitting the ball after it has bounced.

Half volley (shot): A shot where the ball is hit very close to the ground, i.e., the ball is hit immediately after the bounce (at approximately 6 inches off the ground). The half volley is generally used when the ball bounces very close to your feet.

High percentage shot: A shot which is hit in your opponent’s court, not close to the sidelines or to the baseline, in order to maximize your chances of have the ball in-play. (see also low percentage shot)

Let: When the ball hits the net during a serve and lands in-play in the proper service court on your opponent side. Also, when the play is stopped for any reason (e.g., another ball falls in your court) and the serving team replays the serve.

Lob (shot): A high arcing shot, generally over the head of your opponents, which lands deep into your opponent’s backcourt. A lob shot can be an offensive or a defensive shot.

Low percentage shot: A shot which is directed toward the sidelines or baseline where there is a good chance that the ball could be out-of-bound. (see also high percentage shot)

Net fall: When the ball hits the net and just falls over (i.e., falls very close to the net), generally make it almost impossible to return.

Net game: When all four players are at the NVZ line and players are executing shots close to the net (i.e., dink shots, drop volleys or volleys).

Non-volley zone: Surface area in front of the net where you cannot volley the ball while in this zone. To play the ball, when touching this surface, you must let the ball bounce first.

Non-volley zone line: Line which defines the non-volley zone, and which is 7 ft from the net.

Open play: When player are playing just for fun, same as recreational play (as oppose to tournament play).
**Passing shot:** A shot which is out of reach of your opponents, and land in-play (winning rally for your team).

**Punch shot:** A volley shot that is executed with a punching motion (either from a forehand, but most often executed from a backhand), generally applied when a fast ball is coming towards you. This shot does not have backswing or a follow-through.

**Poach:** Poaching is when you take a shot which is clearly directed at your teammate, and you cross over in front of your teammate to play the ball.

**Put away shot:** An offensive shot in which your opponents have no chances of returning. As such, a put away is a winning shot which finishes the rally!

**Rally:** The exchange of different shots between two teams (or two players) which ends by a fault or a point.

**Ready position:** The best body position to take the next incoming shot, where both feet are approximately shoulder width apart.

**Recreational play:** When players are playing for fun, same as open play (as oppose to tournament play).

**Return of serve:** The second shot in a rally, i.e., the shot following the serve.

**Shadowing:** When players move together (approximately same distance apart and same distance from the net), as if they were connected.

**Sidelines:** Lines defining both right and left extremity of the court.

**Side out:** When the service is transferred from the serving team to their opponents, after the serving team has used their two serving opportunities.

**Smash (shot):** An overhead shot where the ball is hit as high as possible, so that the trajectory of the ball is fast and downward into your opponents’ court.

**Split step:** Getting into a ready position from a short jump and landing both feet approximately shoulder width apart, in order to move into any directions more explosively.

**Stacking:** When players are assuming a different court position during the serve and/or the return of service in order to take advantage of strengths and weaknesses in players (e.g. left-handed player playing with a right-handed player, etc.).

**Straight-on shot:** A shot hit in front of you where the ball is hit in a direction parallel with the sidelines.
**Shot to the middle**: A shot which is directed towards the middle of the court, i.e. towards the centre line of the court, or towards the middle of players. A shot to the middle of the court is considered a high percentage shot.

**Singles play**: When two players are playing against one another, i.e., one player on each side.

**Topspin** (on the ball): Spin put on the ball where the top of the ball is rotating away from you as the ball travels away from you (i.e., the ball is rotating clockwise when viewed from the side and the ball is moving left to right).

**Tournament play**: Games which are played during an organised tournament.

**Third shot**: The third shot after the serve (i.e., the shot following the return of serve). The third shot is executed by the serving team.

**Unforced error**: A mistake that made by players which results in a fault (i.e., hit the ball in the net, send the ball out-of-bound, etc.) which is not a direct action of your opponents’ skills or offensive play.

**Volley** (shot): When the ball is hit in the air and the ball did not get a chance to bounce before it was hit.

### 2.2 The court

Pickleball is often played on a badminton court (indoor), on a tennis court (outside, where pickleball court lines are added in a different color) or on a court specially made for the game (i.e., dedicated pickleball court). The court is 20 × 44 feet (6.10 m x 13.41 m) for both doubles and singles (i.e., the outside lines of a badminton court). A pickleball court is shown below (Figure 1) with dimensions and lines are defined as follows (French names in *italic*):

1. **Baselines**: lines in the back of the court (*line de fond*)
2. **Sidelines**: lines defining both right and left extremity of the court (*lignes de côté*)
3. **Centerlines**: lines which divide the service court in two sections (right and left side, at the end of each court) (*ligne centrale*)
4. **Non-volley zone**: (also known as the *kitchen*) surface area in front of the net where you cannot volley the ball while in this zone. To play the ball, when touching this zone, you must let the ball bounce first (*zone de non-volée*)

5. **Non-volley zone line**: line which defines the *non-volley zone*, which is 7 ft (2.13 m) from the net (*ligne de non-volée*). Note that the non-volley zone line is also part of the non-volley zone

6. **Net**: the net divides the court in two sections. The net is 36 inches (91 cm) at the posts and 34 inches (86 cm) at the center of the court (*le filet*).

![Figure 1](image-url)  
*Figure 1.* Pickleball court identifying a) corresponding lines and the non-volley zone area, and b) the different dimensions of the court

As shown in Figure 1b, the non-volley zone extends to 7 ft (2.13 m) from the net including the non-volley zone line (see inset; Figure 1b). As such, the 7 ft is measured to the outside of the non-volley zone line. If you are playing on the regular badminton court, you should be aware
the non-volley zone line is only at 6.5 ft (1.98 m), so on a badminton court you are slight closer to the net (at the non-volley zone line).

2.3 High percentage vs. low percentage shots

We need to properly understand the differences between a high percentage and low percentage shot in association with the court’s dimension, as these terms are often used in pickleball. A high percentage shot is a shot which is directed towards the mid-section of the court and not too far back where you minimise your chances of hitting a ball out-of-bound (green area; Figure 2).
In contrast, a low percentage shot is the shot which is directed towards the sidelines or baseline, i.e., within approximately the 2 ft (0.6m) from the edge of the court (red area; Figure 2). Low percentage shots are more difficult to return by your opponents, but are equally more difficult to make because they often end-up out-of-bound. Most players (both advanced and novice players) will generally aim for high percentage shots during a game in order to limit their unforced errors.

2.4 Balls and paddles

In pickleball, different types of balls are generally used when playing indoor vs. outdoor. For outdoor play, here are examples of manufactures of balls available: Dura, Onix and TOP. For indoor play, similar types of manufactures are available including Dura, Onix, Jugs and PickleballNow. All types of balls may not meet the International Federation of Pickleball (IFP) specifications, which are required for tournament play. Balls generally have the following characteristics (Dollard, 2016): 1) type of material and hardness, 2) the process of making the ball (one piece or two pieces molded together), 3) number of holes, hole size and pattern (minimum of 26 and a maximum of 40 circular holes), 4) the diameter (between 2.874 inches and 2.972 inches; between 73mm and 75.5mm), 5) the weight (between 0.78 ounces and 0.935 ounces; between 22g and 26.5g), 6) bounce height (should bounce between 30-34 inches (76.2-86.4cm) when dropped from a height of 78 inches (1.981m), and 7) color. One of the most important considerations in the selection of balls is indoor vs. outdoor balls and the color of the balls. For example, indoor and outdoor balls have a different hardness and will therefore bounce differently on these different types of surfaces. Also, certain color of balls blend better with the type of background, such as a gymnasium wall/curtain or the outdoor surrounding. So it is best to choose a color and the type of balls that is most suitable for each situation.

Even that pickleball is sometimes labelled as a racquet sport, it uses a paddle (i.e., a solid hitting surface area) as oppose to a racquet which has strings (e.g., tennis, badminton, squash, etc.). When it comes to the selection of a paddle, there are generally five things to consider: 1) the
price, 2) the core material, 3) the surface material, 4) the weight, and 5) the handle size (circumference of the handle).

The price of a paddle can vary significantly if you buy a wooden vs. a composite material paddle; however, if you buy a good paddle the price tends to be somewhat similar. The dimension of paddle is such that the combined length and width should not exceed 24 inches (61 cm; Figure 3).

![Figure 3. Length and width of a pickleball paddle (length + width ≤ 24 inches)](image)

Paddles are generally made of composite material where the core can be made of a different material than the surface. For instance, the core material can include fiberglass, aluminum or carbon fiber. The surface of the paddle is generally made of fiberglass, aluminum of graphite. The International Federation of Pickleball (IFP) provides a list of acceptable paddles on their website; however, paddles bought in sporting goods stores or online purchases are generally acceptable. Figure 4 shows a few examples of such paddles.
The weight of the paddle is also important, and generally ranges between 6 oz and 9 oz (170 g to 255 g). A lighter paddle generally provides better control whereas a heavier paddle provides less control but more power. For some players, it is important to try out different paddles and find out what feel good for them. The handle size or grip size is generally between 4 inches to 4 ½ inches (10.2 cm – 11.4 cm) and the paddle is usually selected based on the size of your hand (larger hand with large handle size); however, this is also something you may want to test out and see how it feels when you hit the ball. Note that the far left paddle has white tape at the top end of the hand (rather than black, other paddles; Figure 4). Using colored tape, is good way to differentiate your paddle from others, especially when many players have the same type of paddle.

Figure 4. Photo of a few types of paddles available sporting goods stores or online purchases
How you hold your paddle can make a significant different on how you execute your shots. Therefore, it is important to have a good hand grip. For instance, there are different types of hand grip (see Paranto, 2016) and the most common hand grip use, not only in pickleball but also in many other racquet sports, is the so-called continental grip. The continental grip is illustrated in Figure 5a where your thumb and index finger forms a V intersecting the top left corner of the handle of your paddle (Figures 5b and 5c). When using this grip, if you extend your harm straight, your paddle is at a slight angle, as illustrated in Figure 5. If you are a new player, it is strongly recommended to adopt and use this grip, because it is well adapted for most shots, e.g., serving, volleys, forehand and backhand shots, smash, lobs, etc. In fact, this is the most natural grip used to execute almost all shots in pickleball without the need to change your grip. If you are not currently using this grip, try it, as it may improve your shots, and ultimately improve your game.

Figure 5. Example of the continental grip when holding a pickleball paddle; a) general grip; b) and c) illustration of thumb and index finger forming a V that intersects with the top left corner of the handle
2.5 **Height of the ball when executing a shot**

When hitting the ball, it makes a difference if the ball is higher, lower or approximately the same height as the top of the net. This will ultimately determine the type of shots you will be able to execute (offensive vs. defensive). The height at which you hit the ball will also determine the angle of the paddle that should be used when hitting the ball. For instance, if you hit the ball at the same height as the net (see ball position B; Figure 6), then the paddle will most likely be in a flat face position (Figure 7a), if you want to keep your shot low at net. At this height you can hit the ball hard or soft depending on the type of shot you want to execute. If you hit the ball lower than the height of the net, then you need to bring the ball up in order for the ball to cross over the net (see ball position A; Figure 6). This will require you to use an open face paddle (Figure 7b) when hitting the ball. This will most likely result in a defensive shot (e.g., a drop shot at the net or a lob shot), and a small error can result in a ball return too high, which may give your opponent the opportunity to smash. If a ball is hit higher than the net (see ball positions C; Figure 6), you are in an offensive position, the higher the ball the better chance for a smash. In this situation, the ball will be hit with a close face paddle (Figure 7c).

*Figure 6. Height of the ball at contact during a shot*
Figure 7. Paddle face position when hitting the ball a) flat face; b) open face and c) close face

The height of the ball as well as the paddle face position will be discussed further in this document when describing the different type of shots that are used during a game.

2.6 Topspin vs. backspin on the ball

There will be a time when you will become a better player with more precision shots and you will want to experience or bring something different to your game, like putting some spin on the ball (even if it’s just for the fun of it!). Notably, experimenting with spin in pickleball should not occur for the first time when you are playing in your most important tournament and the scores are 9-9. When experimenting with spin on the ball, there are few things you should be aware, such as the affects that the spin has on the ball, i.e., on the overall trajectory (the flight) as well as the corresponding bounce. For example when putting topspin on the ball, the rotation of the ball will be clockwise (when the ball is travelling left to right; Figure 8a). Hitting a ball with some topspin will bring the ball downward during its flight (trajectory) compared to a ball’s trajectory that would be hit with no spin. Topspin has the effect of displacing air around the ball creating a high/low pressure on top/bottom of the ball, thus creating a so-called Magnus effect which modifies its trajectory.
Figure 8. Example of the effect that a) topspin and b) backspin has on the bounce of ball

A topspin shot will result in a lower bounce (does not bounce as high) compared to a ball which is hit flat (no spin). In contrast, putting backspin on the ball (rotation of the ball counter-clockwise when the ball is traveling left to right) will bring the ball up during its flight (trajectory) compared to a ball that is hit with no spin. The backspin will also result in the ball to have a slightly higher bounce height compared to a ball which is hit flat (no spin; Figure 8b).

2.7 The ready position and split step

When you are waiting for the ball to be return by your opponents, it’s best to take a so-called ready position where both feet are side-by-side about the same distance apart as your shoulders. This is the best position to be in to take any shots and to move in many directions. The split step is very close to the ready position, but here is the difference. When you assume a ready position, you have your feet apart (approximately shoulder width apart) and you get in this position from a walking motion. In contrast when you split step, you generally put one foot forward as you slightly jump (about 1 inch off the ground) into position and then land on your feet into a ready position. The split step enables you to move in a more explosion fashion in any directions to better take year next shot. So anywhere you may be on the court, when you
opponent makes a shot, you should split step, as this is your best position to take the next incoming ball. More precisely you want to split step when you opponents have just hit the ball (at the point of release of the ball from their paddle), so that as you hit the ground you can spring into the direction you want. The split step in pickleball is the same as in tennis; therefore there are numerous videos available on youtube showing this in tennis (see for yourself!).

If you are at the non-volley zone line, the ready position is similar to above; however, feet can be slightly wider apart as shown in Figure 9. This slightly different ready position is the best position to take volley shots without a forward movement (which would bring you in the NVZ and result in a foot fault). While at the NVZ line, both team members move laterally (from left to right or vice versa) and they move together (not to provide a large opening between them). When moving from left to right, starting from the ready position (Figure 10a), a player would move their right foot to the right as shown in Figure 10b (arrow showing direction of movement), giving a slightly spread apart feet. Then the left foot is brought back to the ready position (Figure 10c).

Figure 9. Example of ready position when players are at the non-volley zone line (Photo courtesy of Julia Doucet)
Figure 10. Footwork movement at the NVZ line when moving from left to right: a) ready position b) then moving the right foot to slightly spread apart feet, and c) move the left foot back to the ready position

The team position where both players try to maintain a constant distance between them (i.e., without a large opening between players) while moving at the net is known as shadowing. Both team members are side-by-side, at equal distance, and slightly to the left of their bounce shot (i.e., bounce on their opponent's side) to favor a forehand shot. The above shadowing position was described when players are at the net; however, players generally try to shadow each other anywhere on the court, as much as possible. Players that shadow well, anywhere on the court, have a strong court position. When players are not shadowing well, it can result in large openings between them or if one player is farther from the net than the other, then it gives your opponent the opportunity to hit to this player and keeping this player back.

2.8 Communication on the court

Communication between players before a game is very important, to establish you game plan, and talk about other important issues, e.g., are you planning on hitting shots to the middle, what will be your third shot approach, etc.? Communication on the court during a game is equally important and the list below is some of the more common communication statements used by players; however, you and your partner can establish many more as needed:
**YOU or YOURS**: meaning you take this shot (unless the shot is obviously your partner’s)

**MINE or GOT IT**: meaning that you will take this shot (unless the shot is obviously your shot)

**NO or OUT**: meaning the ball is out-of-bound. Notably, it’s best to use **NO** rather than **OUT** for this call, as calling the ball **OUT** could be confused with your line call

**BOUNCE IT**: meaning that your partner should bounce the ball before hitting it, as it could out-of-bound

**SWITCH**: meaning that you and your partner should change courts (left and right)

**STAY or WAIT**: meaning that we should stay at the back of the court before moving forward together, as your shot could be too high and your team could be facing a smash

**BACK UP**: meaning that your shot is going high and the return may come as the smash (both you and your partner need to back up, near the baseline)
3.0 Basic rules

The basic rules of playing doubles and singles are essentially the same; however, the game strategies are somewhat different. For a full detail description of the most rules, readers are encouraged to visit the International Federation of Pickleball (IFP) web site (www.ipickleball.org), for the most up to date version. As most are playing doubles, a greater focus will be put on this aspect of the game within this section, i.e., description of scores and player position. Nevertheless, a few comments will also be provided on singles play later in the document (section 5).

3.1 Service court

When playing doubles, the game starts with the first team serving the ball. In this example player 1 in black (Figure 11) is serving to player 1 in blue (i.e., the opposing team). The serve is made diagonally (i.e., crosscourt) and must land on the opposite diagonal service court (Figure 11). As such, in this example, the player 1 (black) will serve from the right service area (even court) to the diagonal court (even court of the receiving players). The serve must be underhand and teams can only score points when serving. Each team member has the opportunity to score points; however, after two faults the serve is transferred to the opposing team (with the exception of the beginning of a new game where the first serving team is only allowed one fault).

In the example below, player 1 (black) would be serving to player 1 (blue), and if a point is made, then the player 1 (black) will move to the odd court and serve to player 2 (blue; odd court). Alternatively, if player 1 (black) makes a fault on the serve or this team loses the rally, then player 2 (black) would be executing the next serve (2nd server) to player 2 (blue; odd court). Essentially, all serves are crosscourt and players move from one court to the adjacent court only when making points, and remain on their court when making a fault.
Figure 11. Pickleball court identifying the serving and receiving courts. Player 1 (black) is serving crosscourt to player 1 (blue)

Note that during a game, the player on the even court always serves first when the serve is transferred to this team (server 1; but could be player 1 or 2). The teammate (i.e., player on the odd court during the first serve), only serve after a fault is made by this team (otherwise points are made). When a second fault is made by the serving team (a fault when server 2 was serving) then the call becomes a side out and the other team gets to serves. When the serving team wins a rally, a point is made, and the serving player will serve again, on the adjacent court. For example, if the server was on the even court, then the next serve will be on the odd court, etc.
3.2 Calling points and game scores

*It is generally considered a good practice to call your scores (aloud) before serving whereas the opposing team acknowledges the scores.* This forces both teams to take note of the scores before each serve. The first serve of a new game is called 0-0-2 or 0-0-start (meaning that only one fault is allowed to the starting team). Scores are called as follow. Assuming the game is currently 3 points for your team, 7 points for the opposing team and your team is serving its first serve. Then you would call the points as: 3-7-1, meaning your team has 3 points, your opponent has 7 points and your team is on the first serve. If your team makes a point, then the call becomes, 4-7-1. If your team then makes a fault, then your teammate (2nd server) will be serving next and the call before the serve will be: 4-7-2, meaning that it is your team’s second service. If a fault is made then the opposing team gets to serve. As mentioned above, this is termed a side out: meaning that the serve is transfer to the opposing team. In this example, the call before your opponent’s serve becomes: 7-4-1, and so on...

*The game continues until the first team reaches 11 points to win. The winning team also needs to win by 2 points* (i.e., by a margin of 2 points), so games may go beyond 11 points. Note that the game point can be called: Game-8-1 or Game-8-2 depending on the score of your opponent; however, most players would say 10-8-1 or 10-8-2.

It is important to remember, that the player who serves first on your team at the beginning of a new game (being on the even court; right side) will always be on the right-side court when the scores are even (0, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10) and will be on the left-side court for odd scores (1, 3, 5, 7, 9). The opposite applies for your teammate which starts a new game of the left-side court.

3.3 Service fault

When serving, the ball needs to hit the opponent court pass the non-volley zone (NVZ) line. Touching the NVZ line on a serve will result in a fault, as the line is part of the NVZ (see Figure 1b). If the ball touches the net and lands in-play in the opponent’s service court then the serving player can serve again (this is called a let, i.e., a replay). Following a service let, the
serving player can serve again until he/she gets the ball in-play or results in a service fault. A rally that must be replayed (without penalty) is also called at let.

3.4 Double-bounce rule

When serving, the ball needs to bounce two times (one bounce on the receiving team side and one bounce on the serving player’s side), before the ball can be hit as a volley (i.e., a mid-air shot without a bounce). This is called the double-bounce rule, which means that each team must play their first ball from a bounce. After the first two bounces, the ball can be played as either a volley or after a bounce (your choice!). For new players, we can sometimes call these bounces aloud until they get accustomed to the double-bounce rule (e.g., first bounce, second bounce or 1, 2).

3.5 Non-volley zone rule

Players of both teams will eventually advance to the NVZ line; however you cannot volley a ball while touching or being inside the non-volley zone. Note that the non-volley zone is not a three-dimensional space, but rather a surface that you cannot touch while volleying a ball. Volleysing is not permitted within this zone to prevent players from smashing from a position too close to the net. Therefore, if you are touching the non-volley zone surface (including the line), then you must let the ball bounce first in the non-volley zone before hitting it. It is a fault, if the player’s momentum causes him/her to steps on the non-volley zone (including the NVZ line) when volleying a ball. A player may legally be in the non-volley zone any time other than when volleying a ball.

In Figure 12 below, a) is not a foot fault; however, b) and c) are foot faults, and should be called by players or the referee. When a referee is not present, then the team players making the foot fault (you or your teammate) should be calling the foot fault. Usually it is easier for your teammate to be on the watch for your foot fault rather than to opposing team. If the team
making foot faults are not calling them, then the opposing team should politely remind them of their missed foot fault call.

Figure 12. Foot faults at the non-volley zone line; a) not a fault; b) and c) are a foot fault
4.0 Pickleball strategies in doubles

4.1 Strategies in doubles

This section describes overall strategies when playing doubles whereas singles play strategies will be described in section 5. *When playing doubles, the objective is to bring your team to the net as quickly as possible while keeping your opponent in the back of their court.* Being at the net (at the NVZ line) provides a distinct advantage to your team and a disadvantage to the opposing team when they are in the back of their court.

For example, Figure 13a shows the distance both players can easily cover at the non-volley zone line (13.2 ft; 4.0 m) compared to the distance in the back of the court (20 ft; 6.1 m). In fact, when players are at the NVZ line they only have to cover 66% of the distance (13.2/20 * 100), when their opponents are hitting hard shot, directed towards the backcourt (Figure 13a; Zone A). Obviously, if your opponents are hitting from their backcourt a soft shot in your forecourt, such as a drop shot at the net or in the NVZ area (Figure 13a; Zone B); you and your partner will have a good chance to take these shots. Notably, the same distance applies when you are at the NVZ line, and your opponents are hitting hard shots from the either backcourt corners (Figure 13b). For instance, Figure 13b shows the distance covered when your opponents are hitting a hard shot from your left side of court (i.e., 13.2 ft; 4.0 m or 66% of the court width), but the same distance would apply for a right-sided shot. The only advantage players have in the back of the court is when they are trying to defend against a smash. If you send a ball too high to your opponents, stay in the backcourt or move back, as this is the best position to defend against a smash or a high overhead shot. Remember, if you end-up in the back of the court, you will need to work your way back at the NVZ line in subsequent shots (generally done through drop shots at the net; discussed below).
4.2 Serving strategy

**Shot no. 1 (the serve; Blue Team):**

*The first shot of a rally is the serve* and it is best to avoid any service faults. A miss serve tends to discourage your teammate and encourage your opponents. Therefore, the server generally aims for the middle section of the opponent’s crosscourt (Figure 14) to make sure the ball is in-play. The serving player should be behind the service line (baseline), and players generally position themselves close to the centreline (Figure 14a; blue player 1; Figure 14b blue player 2). The serving player’s position can vary depending on the type of serves, the angle you wish to send the ball as well as some other preferences (some prefer more the middle of the serving court while others prefer one side). The target areas identified in Figure 14 are the safest when aiming for a 100% success in your serves. The movement of the serve should be an underhand movement so that the contact with the ball is made below waist level (waist is defined as the navel level). Also, when hitting the ball, the highest point of the paddle head would also be below the wrist.
Different types of serves can be used, e.g. fast, high, low, power serve, etc.; however, most players agree that it is better to have a simple serve that minimizes service faults, rather than having a complicated serve which ends-up as a fault most of the time. When serving, the ball does not need to be low at the net because a bounce is required from the opposing team. Avoid low percentage serves (e.g., shots too close to the net, to close to sidelines or the baseline), as for every point you will make, you will most likely lose a lot more. Advanced players generally have a 100% success in serves (no fault on the serve), as points are not generally not made on serves (unlike tennis where you have two serving opportunities; points or aces are often made on serves). A power serve (fast serve) has no real advantage in doubles play, because good players can equally return such a serve. However, it is often within the character and style of some players to serve faster than others. Some players will say that it is best to have a deep serve; however, the definition of a deep serve lies in the ability of the server. A deep serve is OK provided that you never miss, as your objective is to have 100% of your deep serves in-play. Nonetheless, you will note that many advanced players do not necessarily use a fast or deep serve, as they simply serve to put the ball in-play.
If you are at the receiving end of a serve, your position on the court can also be important, if you prefer hitting a forehand shot (or a backhand shot). Note the position of the team receiving the serve (Figure 14a; black player 1). This player is close to the centerline of the court (assuming a right-handed player). This is generally a good position for a right-handed player to maximize his/her chance of using a forehand shot for the return of serve. This position also has the advantage of being closer to the centreline where a player can more clearly see centreline out-of-bound balls. In Figure 14b (black player 2), the player generally assumes a position closer to the sideline when returning the serve, again to maximize the chance of hitting a forehand shot. This player still wants to be able to reach for a ball close to the centreline of the court (notably, this would be a low percentage serve for the other team and a well-deserved point, i.e., lucky shot!). More skilled players will use a backhand shot when returning the serve, as this give them a better court position.

Figure 15 illustrates the trajectory of different types of serves that are deep in the opposing court. The corresponding velocities (36-50 ft/s or 11-15.2 m/s), angles (13° to 50°) and maximum height (at apex; $y_{\text{apex}}$, 4-14 ft or 1.2-4.3 m) are also shown on this figure. Note that the velocities are directly proportional to the force of impact on the ball, so a higher velocity means that you hit the ball with more force. All serves are assumed to be from the baseline of the serving team and the ball lands in the backcourt, 2 ft (0.610 m) from the baseline of the opposing team. Details of calculations are based on ballistic trajectories, i.e., on physics (Caissie 2016).
Notably, the power, high and lob serves are more difficult to execute, as these serves require either a faster/low initial velocity or a high/lower angle compared to the normal serve (Figure 15). A normal serve is generally executed at an angle close to 25° and reaches a height of approximately over 6 ft (6.4 ft or 1.95 m in Figure 15). It should also be noted that the time required for a ball to reach the other end of the court (time of the trajectory) varies significantly between the different type of serves, i.e., from 0.9 second (power serve), 1.2 s (normal serve) to 1.8 s (lob serve). Among these serves, the normal serve is obviously the easiest to execute and with the greatest percentage of success.

Figure 16 illustrates different angles that can be used with a single velocity serve (same impact force); in this case an initial velocity of 36 ft/s (or 11 m/s) was used. This figure shows that from this initial velocity, many different angles can be used ranging from 20° to 67° (to show all possibilities) for the ball to be in-play (i.e., beyond the NVZ line and not exceed the distance of the baseline). At angles lower than 20° the ball will not make it over the net at this velocity and at angles higher than 67° the ball will land in the NVZ (a service fault). Also shown in this figure is the maximum height of the ball (at apex), as illustrated by the grey ball for each trajectory. For a low angle shot (20°), the apex was at approximately 13 ft (3.96 m) from the server, and
this serve will land just beyond the NVZ line on the opponent side. The same applies for very high angle shots (over 50°, which would most likely not be used as serves, as it would be difficult to execute). A ball hit at 45° angle will have its apex at the maximum distance from the server (at 20.2 ft or 6.16 m) and the closest distance to the net (Figure 16). Notably, balls hit at a 45° angle shot will land at the maximum distance from the server, i.e., the farthest distance in the opponent’s backcourt, in this case at 42.4 ft (12.89 m) from the server. In pickleball, as well as in any other sports, understanding a bit of the physics behind shots can be very valuable in the overall understanding of the game.

![Diagram](image)

*Figure 16. Different types of serves from a single initial velocity (36 ft/s) but with various angles, and showing corresponding trajectory, maximum height (apex) and maximum distance*

### 4.3 Service return strategy

**Shot no. 2 (service return shot; Black Team; Figure 17). The second shot of a rally is the return of serve.** When executing the return of serve, it is best to avoid any service return faults (same as the serve). Similar to the serve, as the ball needs to bounce once before the opposing team
hits the ball, *then a simple return of serve shot is preferred*. In other words, try not to miss any return of serves! *Make sure you are behind the baseline, so that the ball bounces in front of you,* as shots that bounce too close to you (or at your feet) are difficult to return.

A high percentage return of serve shot is when players (*Black Team*) aim for the middle of the opponent’s court, not too far back, but slightly to the left (assuming that both blue players are right-handed; Figure 17). This ball will hit the court close to opponent’s feet and has many advantages:

a) This shot, if well executed, can force a right-handed opponent (blue player) hit a backhanded shot

b) This shot will cross the net at the lowest part of the net, which makes it an easier return shot

c) This shot often causes confusion among opponents

*Figure 17. Service return strategies in doubles*
The service return shot (Black Team) does not need to be fast or low at the net (e.g. a power shot or a hard drive shot), because a bounce is required by the opposing team. However, try to avoid shots that would land too close to the net which will give your opponents (Blue Team) an easy access to the net and/or an easy third shot (see below). The objective is to prevent the opposing team (Blue Team), in this case the serving team, having access to the net for as long as possible. So a deep return of serve is good, provided that the ball is in-play. As long as your opponents are in the back of the court, try keeping them THERE with shots that are as safe as possible, as they will eventually make a mistake.

After the return serve shot is made, the player making the shot (i.e., making the service return) should go directly to the non-volley zone line (the other player should already be there; Black Team; Figure 18). In the case of Figure 18a, player 1 (Black) should immediately move the net (similarly for player 2, Black; Figure 18b).

Notably, the most common mistake made by novice players is that players do not proceed immediately to the non-volley zone line following the return of serve (as being at the NVZ line can be somewhat intimidating at first, especially for new players). If they do not go immediately to the non-volley zone line, then this puts this team (e.g., Black Team; Figure 18) into a distinct disadvantage where a player is still in the back of the court while the other is at the net. In such a case, the opposing team (Blue Team; Figure 18) will most often return the ball to the player in the back of the court and thus the Blue Team may have an easier access to the net. This is why the return serve shot (second shot) should be a follow through shot (moving forward as you hit the ball) to make sure you go to net as quickly as possible.

It is important to note that the team executing the return of serve (Black Team; Figure 18) should ALWAYS establish control of the net first, and as such this team will be the first team to assume an offensive position. Failing to accomplish this will put your team in a distinct disadvantage after only the second shot! Getting to the net first allows you and your partner to see each other (as you are side-by-side), have a good clear view of the whole opponent’s court.
And most importantly, you want to make it difficult for the serving team (Blue Team; Figure 18) to also gain access to the net by making their third shot as difficult/challenging as possible, as this team is still in the back of the court (at the baseline) and you want to keep them there. Essentially at this time, the Black Team should have formed a wall of two players at the NVZ line which they are trying to defend and keep their opponents back!

A common mistake by novice players is to systematically use a hard/fast shot for the return serve, which often ends up as fault (ball in the net or out-of-play, i.e. unforced error). Also, a hard/fast service return shot gives your team less time to take your position at the net (NVZ line) because the ball will travel faster to your opponents and they will most likely return it fast as well (as seen above a fast/hard shot can travel in half the time compared to a high trajectory shot; Figure 15). Therefore, to give you more time to get to the net when executing your return serve, it is best to use a slightly higher trajectory shot (especially for less mobile players), because as the ball hits the ground (on your opponents side), you should have enough time to run to the NVZ line!

**Figure 18.** Service return shot made by the Black Team and player advancing immediately to the NVZ line
4.4 The third shot strategies

The first two shots should be easy (see above), even for novice players, as a bounce is required on each side. Many advanced players make the first two shots as safely as possible in order not the make any mistakes (faults) on both the serve and return of serve, as points are rarely made on these shots (especially at high level play). In fact, advanced players will rarely miss these shots! Hence, the third shot becomes one of the most important shot in pickleball, as this shot will determine if the serving team can also establish their position at the net or remain in a defensive position (i.e., in the back of the court). The other team (receiving or non-serving team) should already be at the net if the return of serve was well executed (see above), and therefore this team is already in an offensive position.

**Shot no. 3 or the so-called third shot is executed by the serving team (Blue Team; Figure 19), usually from mid to backcourt.** There are different strategies used for the third shot (as describe below) however, the most effective third shot is a drop shot at the net (i.e., ball landing within the non-volley zone, see option A; Figure 20), because the opposing team (Black Team; Figure 19) is already at the net and Blue Team wants to establish their position at the net as well.

For the Blue Team to get access to the net, Option A (Figure 20; i.e., drop shot at the net where the ball lands in the non-volley zone of their opponents) is the best option, but also the most difficult. When you are executing a third shot drop shot (also known as the baseline dink shot), the maximum height of the ball (apex) will be on your side court and you want the ball to drop in your opponents’ NVZ area (Figure 20; Option A). When executing a third shot drop shot successfully, your team will generally have enough time to reach the net before your opponent has time to take their next shot (as they will likely need to execute their shot from a bounce and this gives your slightly more time). Also, your opponent will need to hit up on the ball, thus giving your team a slightly easier shot for the next shot.
If a third shot drop shot (Option A) this is too difficult (or you miss often), then try a stronger and slightly lower shot at the net (Option B) or use a fast/hard shot (Option C; Figure 20). These shots will not land in the NVZ of the opposing team and will likely be hit as a volley by your opponents, giving you less time to react (then stay back, don’t advance too quickly!). Your opponents will likely return these shots (Option B and C) as volleys, fast volleys or even a smash if the ball is too high. On rare occasions players will use a lob shot for their third shot (not shown in Figure 20); however, the success of the third shot lob is generally very low, unless your opponents are not very mobile or injured (I have seen this tournament play!).

**Figure 19.** Third shot strategies for the serving team (Blue Team) to also gain access at the net

In general, when Option B is used, your opponents will not be able to carry out much of an offensive shot (or a smash), especially if they have to hit the ball below the height of the net (your opponents need to hit the up on the ball). This means that your next shot could be an easier drop shot than the previous one. As such, your objective is to proceed towards the net in small steps and in successive drop shots that you will need to execute either from a bounce.
or from a volley as you proceed forward. *The general idea for the third shot is to proceed towards the net in one shot or in multiple shots, i.e., in one or successive attempts.*

Some advanced players may use a fast/hard shot for a third shot (Option C), as these players are good at moving quickly towards the net, and then hoping for an easier drop shot (or drop volley) for their next shot (or maybe a smash!). The ideal of using a fast/hard third shot is that your opponent will have less control on their shot (or no control), and your next shot will be an easy drop shot or even a smash if the receiving team fails to properly control the ball. Most advanced players will not consistently use fast/hard shots for every third shot as they want to keep these shots as an element of surprise to the opposing team, and potentially gain a point in the process. If a fast/hard shot is used too often for the third shot, then good opponents will neutralise these shots with also a fast return shot (deep in the court or at opponents’ feet) or with a drop shot at the net (which is very difficult to return as your opponents are most likely very far back in the court).

*Figure 20. The third shot strategy with different options; A) drop shot at the net; B) third shot not landing within the NVZ area, but also not too high at the net; C) hard/fast shot towards your opponents*

Notably, the team executing the third shot (i.e., the serving team) needs to access the quality and the type of their third shot before proceeding too quickly towards the net (NVZ line),
regardless of the option (A, B or C; Figure 20). At this point, the team executing the third shot has two options: a) stay back and wait for the return and then try another drop shot or fast shot at the net (with the objective of eventually moving towards the net in successive attempts) or b) move directly towards the net where you may need to take your next shot as volley (even as a fast volley). If your third shot is too high, it is best to say in the back of the court. Then try again for another attempt at a better drop shot. If your third shot is too high and you proceed too quickly to the net, you may be facing a fast volley or even a smash for your next shot while you are moving towards the net (a difficult and sometimes impossible shot to take!).

A good approach when executing your third shot is that the player making the third shot communicates to his/her teammate when to move (or not) towards the net. For example, the player making the third shot (you or your teammate) has a better initial assessment of how good is his/her third shot. The shadowing concept can also be used here by the player who is not making the third shot (i.e., follow your teammate moving up or not, after he/she has made the third shot). For example, if the player making the third shot stays backcourt, then the teammate also stays backcourt (most likely a missed third shot that will end-up too high). If the player making the third shot proceeds towards the net, then the teammate should follow as well as (proceed at a similar pace forward). Essentially, the third shot is most effective, when the teammate (not making the third shot) uses his/her peripheral vision to follow the player who hits the ball and shadows his/her movement towards the net.

What if one of your opponents did not move at the NVZ line (at the net), as you are ready to execute your third shot (i.e., one player is still in the back of the court)? Not likely if they know how to play pickleball! In this case, if one or two of your opponents are still in the back of the court, then you should hit your third shot to the opponents farther from the net (hit the ball at the player which is at the greatest distant from the net without putting the ball out-of-bound). This will force your opponents to stay in the backcourt (potentially force them to take a backhand shot or a mistake), while your team has an easy access to the net.
4.5 Beyond the third shot

Beyond the third shot, many other shots can be used (dink, smash, lob, etc.) and the players’ position on the court will be very important. The following sections will describe some of these shots and players’ position. If the third shot is a successful drop shot at net (see above), usually both teams will be at the net. Then dink shots (soft net shots) are used until one team makes a mistake (the ball gets too high), after which shots normally become fast volley shots until one team misses. Why are both teams at times dinking for a long period before making a move? In pickleball, statistics show that in over 60% of the time, the team that initiate the fast volley shots first, tend to lose the rally. Therefore, it is a matter of how good your team is at dinking compared to the other team or how good your team is at getting out of the dinking game and ultimately winning the fast volley competition.

Dink shots are executed in the middle court and sides or where you will see openings. The most important thing about dinking is to be as patient as you can! This is generally the “game of chess” part of pickleball. It important to dink at different locations (hit shots straight across, i.e., in front of you; crosscourt, middle court, etc.). Don’t always hit the same shot, so not to be too predictable; however, most players prefer hit crosscourt dink shots because they are safer. Also, some teams will dink consistently to a weaker player on the opposing team (i.e., the weaker player in terms of dinking ability or sometime the less confident player – this is the mental part of winning games).

Different dink shots will move your opponents around (especially going from straight across dinks to crosscourt dinks), and hopefully creating openings that you can hit through. The objective is for your opponents to make an error before you do. A dink shot to the middle of the court has the advantage that your opponents can get confused as who should play the ball. Dinking straight across is the hardest dink shot, because the net is relatively high and the length of your shot is shorter (compared to a crosscourt dink). However, this can be an effective shot, especially if the return comes higher than expected as most players are more comfortable dinking crosscourt (again because of the longer distance the ball travels). It is best to dink
safely and softly (be patient), but seize the opportunity to make a body shot, a fast volley shot or a smash, if you have the chance. If an opening is created, then use it! Some players will also use their offensive lob shot after a few dinks shots (see below), especially if your opponent moves forward too quickly. The offensive lob is more effective with older players, as young players tend to take these shots more easily. The offensive lob is rarely used but using it during dink shots is the best opportunity, especially if you are good with lobs and you have a good advantage in points (or far behind and have not much more to lose!).

4.6 Shadowing

Normally during dink shots, team players move together (about 8-10 feet apart, i.e., within reach distance) as a function of where the ball hits the ground on the opposing team (see Figure 21). As mentioned previously, this is known as shadowing. As such, shadowing is when team players move together (approximately same distance apart and same distance from the net), as if they were connected. This is strong position in pickleball (a type of wall formed by players). Both team members move forward/backward and laterally (side-by-side) together (not to provide an opening between them). Shadowing applies anywhere on the court (e.g., backcourt, forecourt, etc.), but is especially important when players are at the net dinking. Figure 21 illustrates the shadowing position at the net in relation to a bounded ball when dinking. In Figure 21a, both players should protect their sidelines shots (balls going in the A and C direction) as well as the middle (B); however, in Figure 21b and 21c, the player closer to the sideline generally protects the sideline shots whereas the player in the middle protect against balls going to the middle. Shadowing at the net and elsewhere on the court takes a lot of practice; however, when players a shadowing well they have an advantage over those who do not!
4.7 The lob shot

The lob is a high shot which lands deep into your opponent’s backcourt (Figure 22). This shot is not often used in pickleball because it’s very difficult to make. There are two kinds of lobs, the offensive lob and the defensive lob; however, they both have the same objective, i.e., force your opponents from the non-volley zone line (strong position) to the back of the court (weaker position). The defensive lob is used whenever your team is in a difficult position and you need time to recover and reposition yourself on the court. A well-executed lob should give you this opportunity. The offensive lob is often used following dinking shots (see above) that are not going anywhere, and your opponents may move forward too quickly, then lob! In this case, the lob shot is used as a surprise shot. The sideline offensive lob gives your opponents less time to react than the crosscourt lob because of the comparative distances the ball needs to travel (Figure 22). It is worth noting that the effectiveness of an offensive lob is highly dependent on how well it is executed and the mobility/ability of your opponents to return your lob shot. Remember, the lob is not often used because the margin of errors when using this shot is narrow. If your opponent can hit your lob with an overhead shot (or worst with a smash), your
lob was not be very effective. If your lob is too deep, many of these lobs end-up being out-of-bound (fault). Executing a good deep lob is difficult; however when successful, it will generally force your opponents to their backcourt and they will generally need to bounce the ball before they take their shot (when this occur, you have a good offensive lob!). Lobs can be very effective against players which are less mobile on the court or against a shorter player (they are generally not very effective against 6'-4” players or young players!).

4.8 Defending against a lob shot

*The best return of a lob shot is with an overhead shot*, if you are quick enough. With an overhead shot you can place the ball almost anywhere on the court (e.g., smash, a mid-court overhead shot, and another lob, etc.). Generally the return of lob with an overhead shot will be taken by the player who is being lobed. However, there are times where the lob is so well-executed that your team does not time to hit it with an overhead shot; then it is the best to let the ball bounce first, as this gives your team more time to react (also the ball could be out!). Under this situation if you are being lobed, it is generally best for your partner to return the shot, rather than you (Figure 23). Here is how it’s done. In Figure 23a, player 1 (*Blue*) is being
lobed. Player 2 (*Blue*) will say (MINE + SWITCH) and player 1 will stay put for a second while player 2 moves towards the back of the court to take the shot. Notably, player 2 (*Blue*) can also observed the trajectory of ball, as he/she moves towards the backcourt and it is much easier for this player to turn around and run for the ball (Figure 23a). While player 2 runs for the ball, player 1 takes his/her position on the court (Figure 23b). There is a good chance that player 2 (*Blue*) will let the ball bounce before making the shot for two reasons, 1) the ball could be out-of-bound and 2) this will give him/her extra time before making the shot. *The best return shot for a lob* (by player 2; *Blue*) *after the bounce (as a lob shot has a relatively high bounce) is a drop shot at the net* (similar to the third shot drop shot), which would give the *Blue Team* a much easier access to the net.

![Figure 23. Defending against a well-executed sideline lob shot](image)

### 4.9 The overhead smash

The overhead smash is probably the most offensive shot in pickleball, as it is very difficult to return by the opposing team. When executing a smash, the player tries to hit the ball as high as possible, so that the trajectory of the ball is fast and downward into the opponents’ court.
Many players will try to *kill* the ball while executing a smash; however, this often results in the ball ending-up either in the net or out-of-bound. It’s OK to have some power on a smash; however, your smash can be as effective with less power, where ball placement is used rather than power (e.g., positioning the ball at one opponent’s feet or into the backcourt). A smash which is not deep in the court (directed towards the forecourt) will tend to have a higher bounce, and therefore giving a better chance to your opponents to return such smash.

The question then becomes, what is the most effective way of defending against a well-executed smash? As soon as you see that you or your partner has missed his/her shot, which will likely end-up as a smash, backup immediately (as far as you can). In fact, the backcourt/baseline is your best position to defend against a smash. You will return the smash as best you can, often resulting into another smash by your opponent; however, if you get a good control on the ball, then a drop shot at the net is your best shot to bring your team back at the net.

**4.10 The volley and half volley**

*The volley is shot hit while the ball is still the air* (without the ball having a chance to bounce first; Figure 24). When hitting a volley it matters if the ball is higher or lower than the height of net (Figure 6). For instance, if you hit a volley where the ball is lower than the height of the net, then your shot will be done with an open face paddle in order for the ball to have an upward movement/trajectory. You cannot hit these balls with to too much force, and the ball needs to go up and then down to make over the net. As such, these volleys are generally not considered offensive shots. Alternative, if the ball is hit at a height higher than the top of the net, then a more forceful shot is possible (with a higher velocity). In this case, the ball is hit with a closed face paddle and generally takes a fast downward movement. These volleys are offensive shots. The drop volley is when you hit the ball, as a volley, but with a soft hit so that the ball just crosses over the net (and hopefully lands into the NVZ). *Mastering volleys and especially drop*
Volleys is a very important aspect of pickleball because these types of shot are often used during games; especially when you are close to the net.

![Diagram of volleys](image-url)

**Figure 24. Different types of volley shots; volley, drop volley and half volley**

Controlling volleys and drop volleys when you are too close to the net is difficult, but players who do, have a distinct advantage. Also, if you get into a fast volley contest following a dinking period at the net, it’s important to know when to slightly back up (only the length of a step) from the NVZ to give you a bit more time to take the next fast volley and return it as either a drop volley or another fast volley.

Most players try avoiding a swinging motion when carrying out a volley shot, especially if the ball is coming fast at you. It’s better to meet the ball and provide a slight pushing/punching motion upon contact. This gives you a better control of both the direction of the ball and the force/velocity upon impact, i.e. a better control of the ball when leaving the paddle. If you swing at a fast incoming ball, you will tend to either miss the ball or don’t have much control of the direction it will take. Note, if the shot is coming really fast at you, just make contact with the ball as if you were blocking the shot. If the ball is fast and at chest level, then duck the ball, as it will most likely go out-of-bound. After each volley, always assume a good ready position with your paddle at chest height (especially at the net) because the next ball could also be coming fast or faster than the previous one.
Remember it’s much more difficult to hit a shot while you are moving, than when you are not, so if you can, try to be in a ready position and not moving when hitting your next shot. This applied not only to volleys, but also to other shots. Moreover, it’s even more difficult to hit a shot if you are moving away from the net (moving backward).

The half volley is a very difficult shot in pickleball, as it is returned from a bounce but the ball is hit very low off the ground (Figure 24). The idea is to meet the ball just after the bounce and give the ball a push. When your opponents are hitting a ball close to your feet, the half volley is your best chance at returning this shot.
5.0 Strategies in singles

The major difference between singles and doubles play is that in singles play there is only one player on each side (i.e., for the same size court as in doubles play). As such, each player needs to be in good physical condition because players are covering more surface area during a game. Players also need to be very fast on their feet, have good footwork (during / after each shot) and execute precision shots in targeted areas (generally towards sidelines). The basic rules in singles play are the same as in doubles, i.e., the double bounce rule, non-volley zone rule, you can only make points while serving, the game is played to 11 points and you need to win by a margin of two points, etc. (see above for details). However, as only two players are part of the game, the serving player will be on the right side of the court for all even scores (and serving crosscourt) whereas the serving player will be on the left side of the court for all odd scores. After each side out (exchange of serve), players will be serving either on the right or left side of the court depending on their scores.

When serving in singles, players often use similar types of serves than in double (i.e., make sure you get the ball in), but a deep serve is always more effective (only if it is not out!). The serve is generally made from a position close to the centre of the court (or a positon that you can easily access the centre quickly), otherwise you are giving potential openings to your opponent. You especially do not want to open-up your backhand side of the court too much, as this is generally a weaker position in singles play for most players. After each shot, players should (as much as possible) come back to the centre of the court to take the next shot that could be on either sides. This requires a disciplined footwork, so that you can reach incoming balls on both sides and be able to come back to the centre of the court after each shot. Don’t be a spectator of your shots and plays, by standing in place for a few seconds, always be on the move and take your position at the centre of the court immediately after your shot. We tend to be spectators of our good shots, to then lose the rally!

Similar to doubles play, the player executing the service return shot has an advantage because this player has access to the net first. Some singles player tends to stay at the baseline (back of
the court) and play from the baseline; however, going at immediately to the net is a stronger position. As such, after the return of serve, go to the NVZ line as quickly as possible, as you cover more of the court from this position (Figure 13). When at the NVZ line you need good anticipation (being potentially more to one side at times) depending on the bounce of your shot, because the return shot may come directly at you. Being in the center of the court is the best place to take incoming balls from either sides; however, being slightly to one side based on your shot’s bounce is a gamble that players sometime take. This can come with good results if your opponent is not using crosscourt shots often. In other words, it’s good to shadow your bounces but remain slightly closer to centre of court, in case of a crosscourt shot.

Generally, players in singles will use fast drives shots (hard shots) that are low at the net so that their opponent does not have much time to react. Remember, if your opponent is good and gets these shots it is likely that your opponent will return a fast hard shot as well, and you will also have less time to react. Players will generally execute more groundstroke shots (rather than volleys) when playing singles; however, if you are able to hit a volley shot coming at you, this will further reduce your opponent’s reaction time. As such, a volley shot in singles with a good ball placement on the court is very effective. A passing shot is a shot executed by your opponent which you try to hit, but is out-of-reach and the ball lands in your court. Every player aims at executing good passing shot in singles, as these shots will win you games. Essentially players in singles tend to play fast and low shot at the net, so that their opponent has less chance of providing a good return. Players in singles will also vary their type of shots, by changing their shot’s speed, put some spin on the ball while other times not, etc. These tactics of changing different characteristics of your shots all have the objective of throwing off your opponent.

In addition to varying speed and shots characteristics, many players will also try to make their opponent move on the court by changing directions of their shots. This has many advantages! For example, if your opponent is hitting shots on the move they will likely miss or provide you with a poor return. Also, keeping your opponent on the move will demand more energy, and
your opponent may get tired quicker than you, which can be in your advantage if you are playing longer games (e.g., best of three games). In singles, players will also try hitting deep balls into their opponent’s court (however, not so deep that the ball ends-up out-of-bound), because using different depths can also be an effective strategy (generally no net shots). Rarely play net shots, unless you think it may be your last shot, as you are otherwise inviting your opponent at the net and this is a dangerous position to be in. Also, if you are in the backcourt and using a net shot (make sure you can also get to the net), otherwise you’re asking for trouble!

If you know of your opponent weakness, it’s time to use it (e.g. backhand shot is the most obvious one, but there could be others). When possible players will try to direct shots at their opponent’s backhand because most players are weaker on their backhand. Also, players will try to aim their shots towards the sidelines without being too close where the ball will risk of going out-of-bound. If you are good at executing shots towards sideline, then try moving your opponent from one side of the court to the other, then hit on the same side if you think they are anticipating you next shot. Your opponent’s return shots and footwork will determine how effective this strategy will work for you.

What works well in terms of ball placement for you? For example, when you are taking a backhand shot (Blue player; Figure 25a), it is sometimes easier to have a direct shot or down the line shot (Option A, a straight across shot (paralleled to the sideline), especially if the ball is not too close to the sidelines). Players can also use a crosscourt shot (option B); however, this shot can be slightly more difficult because it is an angled shot. Nevertheless, crosscourt shots generally give you more distance to hit which can be an advantage. The most difficult shot is option C, where you are shooting at a slight angle towards the sideline, especially from a backhand shot perspective. Similarly, if you need to return a ball which is close to the sideline using a forehand shot (Blue player; Figure 25b); then a slightly angled shot (Option A) or a crosscourt shot (Option B) may be easier and safer. Option C is this case could be a more
difficult shot (even with a forehand shot) because the ball is closer to the sideline. Practice these shots and see how good you are in executing them!

Here is a tip that I find work relatively well to practice shots in singles. If you are playing on a badminton court, use the badminton singles sidelines (as targets) while playing some your games to establish balls that are in-play and out-of-bound. This is a form of *play practice* which is described in more details below. The objective is to aim for the singles play badminton lines, and when the ball is close to these lines; you have executed are good shot (even when the ball is out). In fact, when your ball is just out, i.e., landing in the corridor between singles and doubles in badminton line, your shot is perfect! Practice this modified game and try to bring this mental image of the badminton singles line as your targets into a full pickleball court and you should have good results.

Figure 25. Sidelines and crosscourt shots in singles play
6.0 Advanced strategies and tactics (doubles)

6.1 Advanced tactics

In pickleball there are techniques that could be considered unfriendly, especially if you are new at the game. *Fakes, poaching, and body shots are examples of such techniques and shots.* For instance, *a fake is when a player makes a move in one direction to potentially intercept a ball or make a shot, but retreats back into position.* The fake is made to distract your opponents just before they get a chance to hit their shot, and potentially result in a weaker shot, or better yet a missed shot that is return right at you. A classic example of a fake is on the return of serve as illustrated in Figure 26 assuming that the player 1 (*Black Team*) was a weaker player (less mobile, for example).

*Figure 26. Example of a fake by the player 2 (black) by moving at the center of the court and then back to its initial position (left court)*

Here the *Blue Team* makes the serve (shot no. 1; player 1) where the player 1 (*Black Team*) makes the return of serve (shot no. 2; Figure 26a). If is fair to assume that the *Blue Team* will target their third shot towards the weaker player 1 (*Black Team*), as this player may not get to
the NVZ line in time. As a fake, player 2 (Black Team) moves in the centre of the court (Figure 26b), as if he/she was going to take the next shot. This fake could confuse the player 2 (Blue Team) who will carry out the third shot and has already targeted the weaker player 1 on the opposing team. Such a fake could result in a miss third shot by the Blue Team. As in many advance tactics, it is best not to use these too often as they will become ineffective if you become too predictable (you want to use them as an element of surprise).

Poaching is another technique used in pickleball; however, you should discuss this technique with your partner before using it, as some players could be offended by their teammate poaching. Poaching occurs when a player clearly takes the shot of his/her teammate before they have a chance to take their own shot (cutting-off your partner to take their shot). Poaching occurs most often when your opponents are clearly sending the ball only to one player (e.g., presumably a weaker player). Then the player being cut-out from the play could fake or poach in an attempt to level out the playing game. As mentioned above, if you are planning to poach during a game, make sure your partner is comfortable with this technique. Also, this is not a technique that is generally used when playing for fun, but opponents sending the ball only to one player (presumably the weaker player) is also not exactly fair play (but often practiced!).

A body shot is a shot directed at one of your opponent body with the hope that the ball will hit this player without him/her having the chance to hit the ball. Body shots are not generally use during fun play, because is not a technique generally practice and they are somewhat difficult to make. However, body shots do happen accidentally while playing for fun, so if they occur it’s best to apologize to your opponent after a hit. Even in tournament play, if you execute a successful body shot, you should also apologize to your opponent for the hit. Please don’t try turning a smash into a body shot! When you are clearly in a good smashing position and you see that one of your opponents is still at the NVZ line, go for a softer hit and a good ball placement directed away from that player, i.e., make sure to prevent a smash body shot (which is extremely dangerous!). Please take note that these advanced strategies are part of the
game and should be primarily used during tournament play. When playing in open or recreational play, all four players should share equal opportunity to play the ball and to attempt different type of shots.

6.2 Stacking

There are times where players in your team will choose to play a stacking game, because of certain strengths in players, because one player is left-handed while the other is right-handed or just for the fun of it. For instance, if a left-handed player plays with a right-handed player, then it makes sense for these players to playing a stacking game regardless of their strengths and weaknesses. In fact, stacking can be an advantage for these players where both can maximize their forehand shots (e.g. right-handed player always play on the left court and the left-handed player always play on the right court). Other situations can occur where one player is stronger on backhand shots, one player has more mobility than the other or if a player wishes to cover a greater area of the court. These are all good reasons for playing a stacking game. When playing a stacking game, each player generally plays on the same side of the court for the whole game (but there are variations of the full stacking game where players only stack during certain times, e.g. during serves only or during specific return of serve, for instance).

Here is a simple version on how to stack and remember on which side of the court you should be at all times. For example, decide who is going to play on the even or right court for the whole game (e.g., left-handed player) and make sure that this person starts the game on the even court. As such, you will be stacking (i.e., taking a different position on the court than during a normal game) only when your team has odd scores (odd points) and you will play a normal game position for even scores.

In the following figures we will assume that only the Blue Team is stacking. For instance, when playing a stacking game, if your team (Blue Team) is serving and you have an even score (point) then take a normal game position on the court (Figure 27). You play as you would in any other normal game, i.e., player 1 serves from the right court (Figures 27a) as the first server and
player 2 served from the left court as the second server (Figure 27b). Figure 27 shows examples of points associated with these positions (e.g., 6-5-1; Figure 27a and 8-5-2; Figure 27b).

![Blue team is serving with a even score, e.g., 6-5-1(a) or 8-5-2(b)](image)

**Figure 27.** Blue team is playing a stacking game and their points are even when they are serving (i.e., serve at your regular normal game positions)

If the Blue Team is receiving the serve and their score is even, then they also take a regular/normal game position on the court. Figures 28a and 28b illustrate the position of each player when receiving the serve. Note that the player not receiving the serve would take his/her position at the NVZ line. In this example, the scores are assumed to be 7-4-1 (Figure 28a) and 5-8-2 (Figure 28b), with the Black Team serving.
Blue team is receiving with an even score, e.g., 7-4-1(a) or 5-8-2(b)

However, you will modify your position when your team is playing a stacking game and your score is an odd number. For example, if the Blue Team is serving then the court position for each player will be as illustrated in Figures 29a and 29b, where player 1 and 2 are side-by-side during the serve, i.e., right-handed player to the left and left-handed player on the right. In Figure 29a, player 2 makes the serve from the right court with player 1 on his/her right side, then player 2 immediately moves to the left court behind the baseline after the serve whereas player 1 takes the right court behind the baseline, both being in a good position to take the third shot. Assuming this position on the court provides a better chance for both players to be hitting a forehanded shot for the third shot.
Blue team is serving with an odd score: 5-4-1(a) or 7-4-2(b)

Figure 29. Blue team is playing a stacking game and their points are odd when they are serving (i.e., player 1 take position on the right side of player 2 when player 2 is serving as in a) and vice versa when players 1 is serving as in b)

Alternatively, if the Blue Team is receiving the serve and this team has an odd score, then your position will as illustrated in Figures 30a and 30b. Note here that the player not receiving the serve will be outside the court, next to the sideline just above the NVZ line. In Figure 30a, player 1 (Blue Team) takes position on the right side of the court next to the sideline while player 2 receives the serve from the Black Team. Then both players move immediately to the NVZ line after the return of serve and assume the position on the court as shown by the grey arrows. Similarly, when player 1 (Blue Team) receives the serve, player 2 (Blue Team) is positioned outside the court (on the left side of the sideline) until the serve is return, upon which both players assume their position at the NVZ line (grey lines; Figure 30b).
Blue team is receiving with an odd score: 4-9-1(a) or 4-5-2(b)

Note that the stacking position described above, each player will always play on the same side of the court for the whole game.

There are cases where you may choose to stack for only specific points / positions. For instance, some players only stack during the serves (and not when receiving the serve, also referenced as a 50% stack). Under this scenario Figures 27, 28 and 29 will apply; however, when the Blue Team will be receiving the serve (and their score is odd), they will play a normal game position (this team would not take the position identified in Figure 30 but rather the position they would take if they were not stacking). Some teams with a player having some mobility issues many choose to play a 75% stack, which means that Figure 24, 25 and 26 would
apply; however, only Figure 30a (or Figure 30b only) would apply when receiving the serve. We can notice that in Figure 30a, player 2 (Blue Team) has a longer distance to travel to make it to the NVZ line after the return of serve. If this player has a mobility issue then is the better not to stack (when this player is receiving the serve), so that this player will move straight ahead to the NVZ line (rather than using the longer diagonal distance). The same applies to Figure 30b for player 1 (Blue Team). Under such conditions, the Blue Team may or may not choose to stack when receiving the serve depending on who is receiving the serve, and how long they have to travel to make it to the NVZ line.

6.3 Practicing drills vs. playing

Many pickleball players will practice drills, techniques and review tactics in order to improve their game; however, for other players, they simply want to play pickleball and have fun. Playing pickleball only in game situation is generally what occurs in most open play clubs. For some players, even learning court positioning is not that important to them. For these players, it will be difficult to appreciate the true aspects of the game and most importantly to improve their shots and skill level. Moreover, if you have read this far into this document, you are probably not one of these players. Nevertheless, it’s understandable that most pickleball players will not have the objective of being a 5.0 player (i.e., a top players competing in national and international tournaments). These top players generally spend many hours of the week practicing drills, so that when it’s time to execute certain shots under extreme stress and pressure they will be able do it. For other players, they spend most of their time playing games. The present document will not cover drills in details, only a few examples, i.e. those that are considered basic but almost essential for new players. Readers are referred to other publications (e.g., Leach, 2013; USA Pickleball Association and Littlewood, 2015) where more in-depth drills and various shot techniques are presented.

One of the simplest drills taught in many racquet sports is to hit the ball in the air, as illustrated in Figure 31a. This is an individual drill which consists of hitting the ball using forehand shots (the ball goes up and down), using backhand shots and then alternate between the forehand
and backhand shots. Carry out as many hits as possible. This drill can be done almost anywhere, and only a paddle and a ball are required. The second drill which is also very popular among new players is to hit shots against a wall. This drill can be carried out with a bounce on the ground (or floor) or without a bounce (i.e., hit as a volley directly on the wall; Figure 31b). These are two simple drills that can significantly improve your eye-hand coordination as well as your reflex, but as mentioned above there are many more drills than can be used both individually, with partners, and within a pickleball court environment.

Figure 31. Drills for practicing to hit the ball and improve your eye-hand coordination; a) in the air (using forehand, backhand shots, and alternate between the two) and b) hit balls against a wall with or without a bounce

In addition to individual or group drills, which are common at the entry level of a sport, players can also practice within a game environment or “practice while playing” (see below), i.e., making sure you focus on executing certain shots or strategies while you are playing. However, there is another way of practicing while playing games in a more focused environment, and this is when using the concept of “play practice”. These concepts of practicing while playing and play practice will be described below in more details, as it could be very useful for pickleball clubs where players are only playing games (i.e., not dedicating time for drills or other type of improving techniques).
6.4 Practicing while playing game

Practicing while playing should be an important part of your game, especially if you want to improve your skills. *The idea with this technique is to focus on certain aspects of the game, could be a specific shots or a strategy, and then focus on practicing this shot or strategy while playing* (e.g., during open play games). For example, if you choose to practice your third shot drop shot, then every time you get to execute a third shot, you focus on making this shot a drop shot. This is a technique used during open play games, when winning is not that important (it’s not something you would do during tournament play). You may practice a specific shot during a single game; however, it’s best if you practice during many games, so that you can truly get a good practice at your specific shot or strategy (this way it will become more natural and better imprinted in your game). A another good example would be that during a whole evening of play you would focus on bringing your paddle up after each dink shot you will be executing. The objective here is to not focus on too many techniques at once; otherwise it will get complicated and confusing.

Players sometimes complain that open play games are not very challenging as they often play with weaker players; however these are the perfect opportunities to practice while playing because missing shots may not be as obvious. If you choose to practice while playing, should you explain this to your partner? It depends! Some partners will be open for you to use this technique during their playing time with you. However, if you are playing with someone who hates to lose, then it may not be such a good idea to explain your mode of play, as they may not like it. Practicing while playing is often a hidden technique that we can use to improve our game when the stakes are not high (e.g., open play game). If you are playing with other players that see the advantage drills, but do not necessarily want to drill all the time, the concept of play practice (as described below) can be another way of improving your techniques and shots.
6.5 The play practice concept

The play practice concept has been introduced over a decade ago with the objective of playing a modified version of the game, so that players can improve certain aspects of the game in a playing environment (Launder, 2001). **Play practice is therefore design to focus on improving specific technical skills or shots or simply highlight some important tactical aspect of the game.** This approach does replace practicing repetitious drills which are sometime required to improve certain techniques (e.g., specific shots) and drills remain an important aspect of improving your game. However, play practice can be used in many racquet sports; such as pickleball to create a learning environment while having fun playing the game (Harvey and van der Mars, 2010).

The concept of play practice has essentially three main objectives (Launder, 2001): 1) shaping play, 2) focusing play and 3) enhancing play. The first objective, shaping play, consist of modifying the rules of the game (e.g., providing bonus points for certain shots or target areas or use of play restriction such as forcing players to use certain type of shots, etc.). The second objective is focusing play where the modified version of the game has the objective of focusing on a certain tactic or part of the game (e.g., use only backhand shots). The third objective of play practice is enhancing play which means that by playing a modified version of the game, players will ultimately improve a certain aspect of the game without necessarily being fully aware of it. Examples are provided below.

**Example 1:** Here we will explore two different types of play practice scenarios in pickleball to better illustrate and understand the concept. For example, a very simple modified version of the game is to play a rally point scoring system for serves and providing an extra point to your opponent if you miss a return of serves. This means that when a team misses a serve, this provides a point to their opponent. Also, when a team misses a return serve, then this provides an extra point to their opponent. The objective of this game modification is to enhance the importance of both serves and return serves which should not be missed. By highlighting the importance of the serve and return of serve through play practice, player will most likely modify (simplify) their serve and return of serve so that these shots are not missed.
**Example 2:** Here is an example where players would like to improve their third shot drop shot and dinking abilities. The modified version of the game would look like this. Players would serve and return the serve, as played in a normal game; however, the third shot **HAS** to be a drop shot into the kitchen (non-volley zone area; NVZ) or at least an attempt, and then the play continues with dinking shots. When the serving team lands a third shot in the kitchen, then the serving team automatic gets a point. If the third shot does not land in the kitchen, although the serving team has made an attempt, the play continues but no bonus point is made. Essentially, the forth shot and beyond need to land in the kitchen, i.e., the court is reduced to the NVZ area (exceptions are made for around-the-post shots which could land anywhere on the court).

**Example 3:** The second example consists of only two players wishing to practice doubles play techniques (rather than playing singles). In this example, players can serve and return the serve as they would normally in doubles; however, the third shot needs to be a drop shot into the NVZ area. If the third shot lands into the NVZ area, then this player makes a point; otherwise it becomes a side-out and the opposing player get to serve. In this version, players would play a normal game to 11 points while practicing techniques required in doubles play.
7.0 Tournament play and rating system

As players become better, they will often seek new challenges, and one such challenge is to participate in tournament play. Tournaments will provide you with the opportunity to play among the best players in your category (both within your age group and skill level). Tournament play will also inform you how well you play under pressure which is good to improve your skills. When planning to participate in a tournament, you should be aware of a few things, namely the tournament format (e.g., single elimination, double elimination, round robin play, etc.), the tournament rules as well as the different tournament categories (singles, doubles, etc.).

Generally tournaments are divided in the following categories, i.e., 1) age groups 2) gender and 2) skill levels. For instance, the gender category includes men (singles and doubles), women (singles and doubles) as well as mixed doubles. The age groups generally have the following categories: 19+, 35+, 50+, 60+, etc., where 19+ means players that are 19 years of age and older. In doubles play, the younger of the two players will determine the age category. For example, if the 21 years old player has a 55 years old teammate, then they will need to play in the 19+ age category. When playing in tournaments within the age group category, there are no distinctions made based on skill levels. However, players also have the opportunity to play within skill levels in many tournaments. *In pickleball, skill levels are rated from 1.0 to 5.0 (where the highest number represents the best players).* In tournaments, you generally have the following skill level categories (3.0, 3.5, 4.0, 4.5, 5.0) as well as an open category which means that all the best players of different skills and age categories can play. The objective of having skill levels in tournaments is so that players of similar abilities can compete together.

How do you determine your skill level? If you are participating in a tournament for the first time, then you can do a self-assessment of your skill level based comparing yourself with other rated players or used the International Federation of Pickleball (IFP) Rating Descriptions (see appendix A). Self-rating assessment is however subject to the tournament director’s approval. Assuming you thing you are a 4.0 player, then you enter into that category; however, the
tournament director has the final decision on rating level. If you do not win a single game at that level within the tournament, then you can be downgraded to a 3.5 player (next level down), again subject to approval. A number of players have been officially rated (not the above self-rating system), based on the level that they played within the tournament and their performances (more details are available at: http://www.usapa.org/ratings-usapa/).

References


Dolland, W., 2016. The evolution of the ball and how it’s going to impact your game. Pickleball Magazine, vol. 1, no. 3 (June), pp.23-25.


Important links

International Federation of Pickleball (IFP):  [www.ipickleball.org](http://www.ipickleball.org)

Joe Baker (pickleball instructional videos):  [https://www.youtube.com/user/moshunpics](https://www.youtube.com/user/moshunpics)

Pickleball Canada:  [www.pickleballcanada.org](http://www.pickleballcanada.org)

Pickleball Channel:  [www.pickleballchannel.com](http://www.pickleballchannel.com)

The Federation of Pickleball Inc. of New Brunswick / La fédération de pickleball inc. du Nouveau-Brunswick:  [www.gmpickleball.wixsite.com/pfinb](http://www.gmpickleball.wixsite.com/pfinb)

USA Pickleball Association (USAPA):  [www.usapa.org](http://www.usapa.org)
Appendix A

International Federation of Pickleball (IFP)

Rating Descriptions


Revised November 1, 2012

The IFP Rating System has been created to help describe differences in the various skill levels.

Rating Description

1.0

- New and have only minimal knowledge of the game and the rules.

1.5

- Limited to some rallies.
- Learning how to serve.
- Developing a forehand.
- Fails to return easy balls frequently and occasionally misses the ball entirely.
-Played a few games and is learning the court lines, scoring, and some basic rules of the game.

2.0

- Sustains a short rally with players of equal ability.
- Demonstrating the basic shot strokes – forehand, backhand, volley, overhead and the serve, but has obvious weaknesses in most strokes.
- Familiar with court positioning in doubles play.

2.5

- Makes longer lasting slow-paced rallies.
- Makes most easy volleys and uses some backhands, but needs more work on developing shot strokes.
- Beginning to approach the non-volley zone to hit volleys.
- Aware of the “soft game.”
• Knowledge of the rules has improved.
• Court coverage is weak but improving.

3.0

• More consistent on the serve and service return and when returning medium-paced balls.
• Demonstrates improved skills with all the basic shot strokes and shot placement but lacks control when trying for direction, depth, or power on their shots.
• Beginning to attempt lobs and dinks with little success and doesn’t fully understand when and why they should be used.

3.5

• Demonstrates improved stroke dependability with directional control on most medium-paced balls and some faster-paced balls.
• Demonstrates improved control when trying for direction, depth and power on their shots.
• Needs to develop variety with their shots.
• Exhibits some aggressive net play.
• Beginning to anticipate opponent’s shots.
• Learning about the importance of strategy and teamwork in doubles.

4.0

• Consistent and dependable strokes, including directional control and depth on both forehand and backhand shots.
• Reliable serves, lobs, overheads, approach shots and volleys and can use spin shots with some success.
• Occasionally can force errors when serving.
• Rallies may be lost due to impatience.
• Uses the dink shot and drop shots to slow down or change the pace of the game.
• Demonstrates 3rd shot strategies – drop shots, lobs, and fast-paced ground strokes.
• Aggressive net play and teamwork in doubles is evident.
• Fully understands the rules of the game and can play by them.

4.5

• Beginning to master the use of power and spin, can successfully execute all shots, can control the depth of their shots, and can handle pace.
• Beginning to master the dink shots and drop shots and their importance to the game.
• Beginning to master 3rd shot choices.
• Displays sound footwork and moves well enough to get to the non-volley zone whenever required.
• Understands strategy and can adjust style of play and game plan according to the opponent’s strengths and weaknesses and court position.
• Serves with power and accuracy and can also vary the speed and spin of the serve.
• Understands the importance of “keeping the ball in play” and the effect of making errors.
• Making good choices in shot selection.
• Anticipates the opponent’s shots resulting in good court positioning.

5.0

• Mastered all the skills – all shot types, touch, spin, serves, with control and can use them as weapons.
• Excellent shot anticipation, extremely accurate shot placement and regularly hit winning shots.
• Forces opponents into making errors by “keeping the ball in play.”
• Mastered the dink and drop shots.
• Mastered the 3rd shot choices and strategies.
• Uses soft shots, dinks and lobs to set up offensive situations.
• Mastered pickleball strategies and can vary strategies and styles of play in competitive or tournament matches.
• Dependable in stressful situations as in tournament match play.
• Athletic ability, quickness, agility, and raw athleticism are also qualities that are sometimes what separates the top players from those near the top.