

The Club Doubles Game

MATRIX



When I see all four players standing well inside the service box sharing a single ball to “warm-up” with no apparent rhyme or reason in sight, I know the sign post just ahead says: “Doubles Troubles in Clubland.”

Dysfunctional warm-up habits notwithstanding, the fact remains that the vast majority of league players in Charlotte County — well over 1,000 strong — or anywhere in the US for that matter, play doubles almost exclusively. Yet, strikingly, many of these devoted players — including some 4.0s and even a few 4.5s — have not fully grasped the fundamentals of net positioning, strategy, tactics and shot selection.

That reminds me of doubles mensa Martina Navratilova’s comments about Venus and Serena Williams’ doubles play earlier in their careers, alluding to their consistently out of synch court positioning that was completely overcome by overwhelming power. Shock and awe trumps all.

Unfortunately, since you’re not partnering with them, or the Bryan twins who play text book doubles, playing smart, efficient doubles becomes a necessity in your world.

Unlike pros, club players are especially prone to unforced error, low percentage, overly ambitious quick strike tactics or a somewhat unwillingness to methodically engage the opposition, often impatiently perceiving imminent failure at the third or fourth ball struck.

Still, at any level, the bottom line remains being the last team to successfully hit the ball in the court, which wins the point every single time.

Zen master Shunru Suzuki put it this way: “In the beginners’ mind there are many possibilities; in the expert’s mind there are few.” Okay, so you’re not a beginner, but take heed anyway.

Make them play. Heck, let them play. Put the onus on them to blink first and adopt an undermining, panicked mind set. Matches that are among relative equals — 3.5s playing against other 3.5s — are, at the end of the day, almost never won. They are lost. Gifts.

Once the afraid-to-lose mind set takes hold — didn’t Rafael Nadal himself say, “I do not fear losing, I only fear the fear of losing” — it’s not unusual to witness moon ball play, complete net avoidance and no-man’s land court positioning that’s somewhere between the middle of nowhere and the end of the line. Four players playing singles.

John McEnroe’s one-time take on the ugliness of non-engaging, pitter patter doubles players in a Nike “Ask Mac” ad remains an all-time classic: “If they arrested people for being annoying on the tennis court, they’d be looking at doing 15 to life.”

An old friend, a nationally ranked super senior doubles player, once became so seriously irritated at the play of four of his not so nationally ranked buddies — all of whom were playing at the baseline launching lob after lob after lob — he stood up and very colorfully exhorted in their direction, “For blank’s sake, hit the blank, blank ball. That’s what they make ‘em for!”

The core of successful club doubles development can be distilled into four axioms:

1) Acquire the ability to consistently deliver deep, cross-court groundies with enough pace to be unpoachable.

- 2) Maintain a high first-serve percentage rate (60-70 percent) by taking some pace off with effective placement.
- 3) Continually shift back and forth at the net from an offensive position to a defensive position.
- 4) Visualize every shot struck from the first ball in the warm-up.



diagonal within close proximity of the service line near the "T" to defend the middle of the court from a net opponent's possible cross on your partner. This is an absolute positional necessity.

Deep penetrating groundstrokes rule the day, including negating effective lobbing! Determined by a combination of ball speed, spin and, most important of all, the margin to the net clearance that is mostly responsible for depth of shot. They handcuff opponents, leading to either short ball responses that one can come in and munch on, low risk poaching opportunities for net partners to take full advantage of and salivating lobs in your wheelhouse.

In a recent doubles friendly with three 4.0s, I challenged the opponents with consistent, deep, penetrating forehands and backhands directly at their back court position. My partner at the net had a field day, poaching practically at will and thanking me for setting him up and making his day. Match over.

Low first-serve percentage (30-40 percent) results in both a proven statistical disadvantage and a less obvious but equally demoralizing psychological impediment. Advantage receiver. Hall of Fame golfer Jack Nicklaus used to say, "If you're putting badly it goes through your whole bag." It then follows, if you're serving badly, it adversely affects your entire game.

One of the revealing and match-determining stats on the pro tour, along with the obvious unforced errors, is percentage of second serves won. Better to not place yourself in repeated second serve situations by consistently going for too much on the first. The results won't be pretty.

A prudent approach to bumping up your first serve success and reducing your second serve liability is to adopt the "2 to make 1" tactic. Instead of going big on the first, then tapping in a Great Aunt Agatha second serve, dial-in a three-quarter speed delivery that's still good enough and manageable. If you can't consistently make one out of two at three-quarters, without backing off on the second when needed, then it's time to spend some time actually practicing the most important shot in the game.

Maintaining an offensive net position in the middle of the service box when the opposing back courter has the ball, or when they're returning a serve, provides viable opportunities to cut the ball off. But then, when unable to poach, immediately shift to a defensive position by going back on the

Back and forth all day long. Offense to defense, defense to offense. After all, isn't playing the net — half the time spent on court — what distinguishes doubles from singles?

Just being in constant motion in and around the net will not only make you a better volleyer, it will also create a net presence that will absolutely impact the opposing team in a big way. Points for free.

Last, but by no means least, visualization is an immensely powerful tool in tennis. All professional and accomplished players visualize. They "see" task success in their minds-eye, versus thinking about, fretting about, the possibility of failure or being afraid of making errors. Picturing a successful shot — both directionally and marginally over the net — immediately upon recognizing your opponent's shot will not only make your existing game considerably better, it will also make you a better ball striker by always having crystal clear shot making goals.

Over there somewhere, hoping, is a performance disaster in the making.

I'm forever bringing up Rod Laver, the greatest player of all-time who captured the Grand Slam two times seven years apart, to remind sometimes frustrated students of his right-on-the-mark analysis of the challenge: "It's a simple game; it's just not easy."

So keep your doubles game simple. Forget the high difficulty, low risk "glory shots," an apropos label I recently heard members using in good natured ribbing after an opponent attempted a delusional down-the-line, running backhand passing shot, off-balance in full stretch, with the net man waiting.

Doubles can be tricky, and certainly there's more to playing it well than I have offered here. But adopting these four core principles will both shore up your game and open other doors you didn't know were there. 🎾

