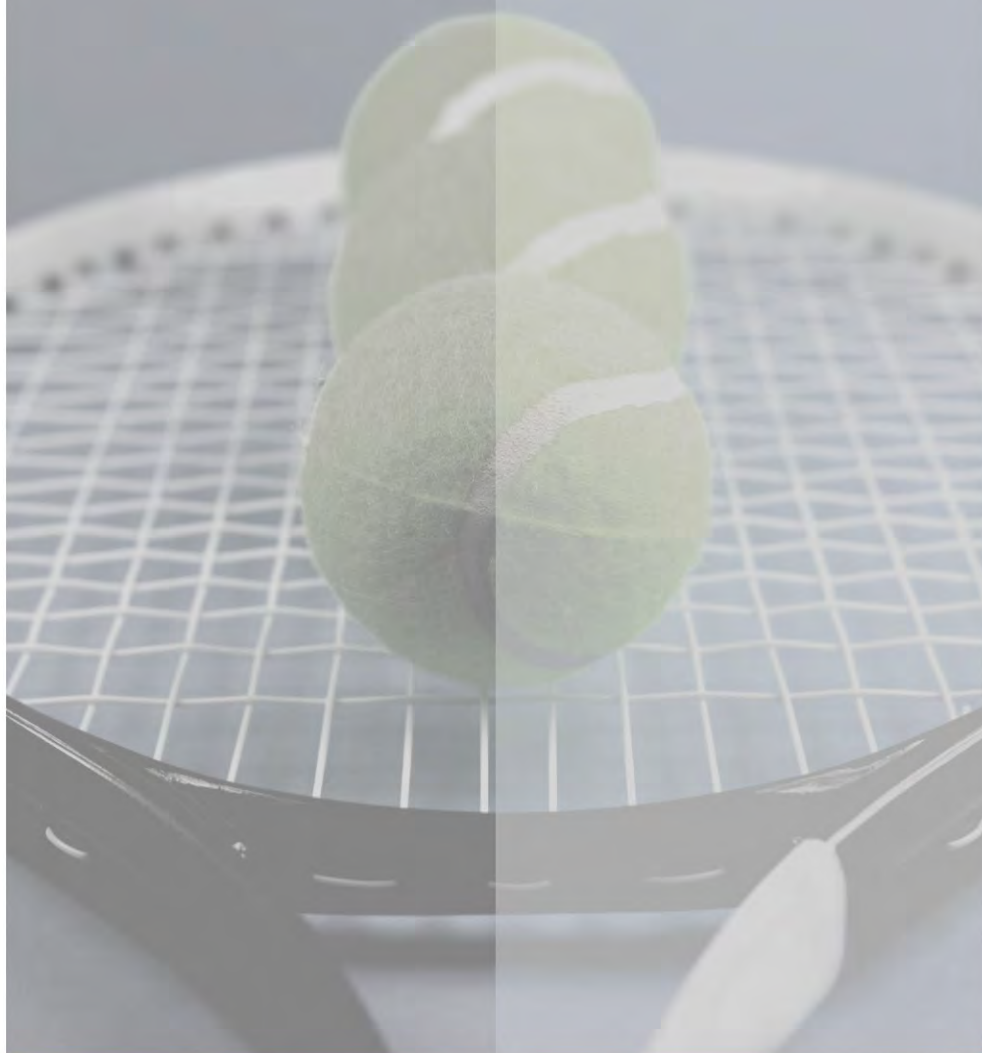




Doubles Domination



May 2010 Edition



Contents

Contents:

Chapter 1: Basic Positioning Theory

Chapter 2: Standard Formations

Chapter 3: Horizontal and Vertical Shading

Chapter 4: Offense, Defense, and Shot Selection

Chapter 5: Poaching, Disruption and Distraction

Chapter 6: Alternative Starting Positions

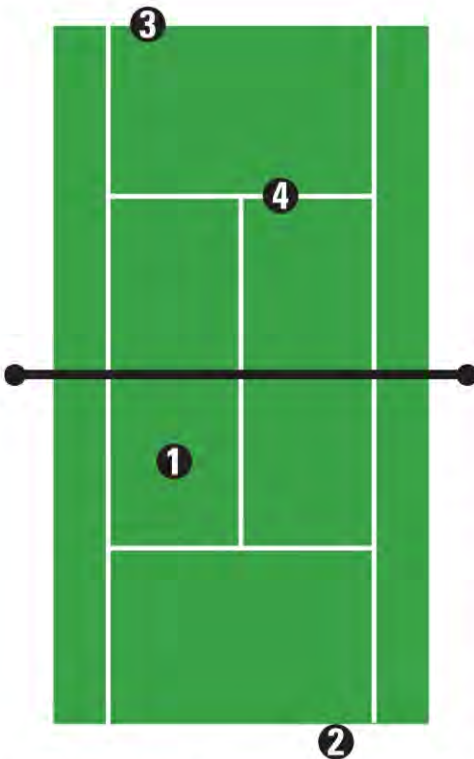
Chapter 7: Communication and Partner Strategy



Basic Positioning Theory

Basic Positioning Theory

Where to position yourself on the court before a doubles point starts may not always be extremely obvious. Please refer to the court diagrams as well as the written descriptions below to find out where the best place to start each point is in a "standard" doubles position. Later on in this e-book we will be discussing when and how to deviate from this basic set up, but for now it's very important to understand the initial where and why for each player. Keep in mind that deviating from the standard positions in doubles can be a very smart thing to do, it's just a matter of making these moves for the correct reason and that the pros and cons have been properly weighed. If you're a beginner to the game of doubles then I strongly suggest you begin each point exactly where the basic positions are. Once you build up an awareness of how doubles points work and an understanding of individual opponents then you can begin experimenting with alternative spots to start each point.



The "standard" starting position for all four players in a doubles point. The server is #2 and returner #3

Server

The server in doubles should place himself a little further wide of the center mark than in singles. This is because once the serve has been put in play the server is most responsible for covering the side of the court that they served from. In other words, if the server makes their serve from the deuce side of the court then they must be prepared to cover that half of the court immediately after hitting their serve. Starting from close to the center of the baseline would mean that a sharply angled return of serve cross court would find an open court unless the server was extremely quick to get there. In general you want to try and place yourself between the possible shots that could land on your own half of the court as the server.

Something else to keep in mind is that varying your serving position on the baseline may open up opportunities for different serving angles of attack against the returning player as well. The farther out wide you serve from, the more angle is available from your serve. The more towards the middle of the court you position yourself the easier it is to hit a serve directly down the middle of the court. Varying your position in this way can give you easier access to an opponents weakness as they try to return your serve, it can also more easily set up your partner at the net as they try to intercept the return. Just keep in mind that the more you deviate from a "standard" serving position the more open court you are leaving for the returner and also the more obvious you're potentially making your intentions.

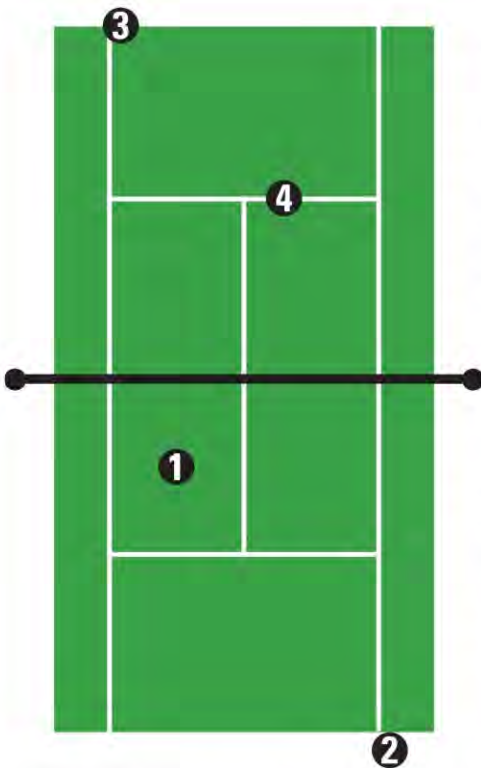
Returner

As you prepare to return serve you should begin by placing yourself in the middle of the possible service angles from your opponent. If the server is standing in a standard doubles serving position this means that you should be closer to the singles sideline than you are to the center of the baseline. Keep in mind that if the server changes his or her

BASIC POSITIONING THEORY

position on the baseline then you should also be shifting to the right or to the left to account for the changing angles available to the server. As an example, if you're returning on the ad side of the court and the server changes their starting position to stand more towards the alley (your right) then you should reply by changing your own position more towards the left. This is because by moving where they serve from to a wider position their serve will more naturally be angled out to your left.

It's important to note that you can deviate from this guideline if either your forehand or backhand return of serve is much stronger. If you're a righty and returning on the deuce half of the court with a very strong forehand you may want to experiment with positioning yourself more towards the center of the court in an attempt to hit as many forehands as possible. Of course this leaves an opening for the server out wide against you and they may try to exploit this. If quickness is a strength of yours then leaving this space open may not be a big concern for you at all, in which case go right ahead and jockey for as many forehands as possible. You may also find that certain opponents are unskilled at hitting certain places in your service box. Change the position that you return from to try and take advantage of this, dare them to attempt a serve that they dislike.



When the server slides wider along the baseline (#2) the returner should as well to adjust for angles

Another element of preparing to return the serve is a "drop step" and "split step". These two moves help build a rhythm between the returner and the server as well as activate the feet of the returner and get them moving forward into the court. You will see virtually every modern tennis pro on TV use some variant of a drop and split step as they prepare to return a high powered serve. Even if you're not facing 140mph making these two moves can really help your body be aware and prepared to hit the best return possible. A drop step is simply a single step forwards towards the net. After taking the drop step most pros go right into a split step which puts them in a wide ready position on the balls of their feet. The drop step gets their momentum traveling forward in preparation to move towards the ball, and the split step gives them a wide and balanced stance to push off of to the right or to the left. When using these footwork elements you will want to place yourself one or two steps back from where you actually want to make contact with the serve from.

Servers' partner

When playing with a good server being their partner at the net can be an extremely fun position to be in. The standard position for the servers partner to be in is right in the middle of the service box directly across from the person preparing to return serve. If you're already an experienced doubles player then I strongly suggest that you take advantage of a drop step and split step exactly as described in the return of serve players section. Begin about a step inside of the service line in a ready position. Immediately after the serve has been hit, take a step forwards and then make a split step to prepare your feet and body.

BASIC POSITIONING THEORY

The result will be active feet that are ready to pounce on the return and a nice wide stance to push off of in any direction. I recommend this as opposed to simply standing in the middle of the box and making your split step as the returner hits their return of serve, it will result in more activity from you and more disruption to the returner.

Returners partner

The partner of the returner has a very important job for their team: guard the middle of the court in case the return of serve isn't that great. If the returner is unable to successfully hit their first shot past the net player on the other side (server's partner) then the easiest place for that player to finish the point is typically right down the center of the court between the returner and returners partner. This means that in preparation to begin the point the returner's partner should be pinched over towards the center of the court to begin with in case the returner is unable to hit an effective shot. They should also be back a bit farther than the partner of the serving player, right around the service line is typically best. If, on the other hand, the returner successfully hits a strong return of serve cross court past the net player then the returners partner should immediately move forwards and towards the center of the service box on their half of the court. More on this later as we discuss "shading".

Another important reason to begin in this position is for the purpose of helping the returner call "out" serves. When concentrating on hitting a good return of serve it's often difficult to call serves that may be bouncing past the service line, especially if the server has a particularly fast serve. The returners partner has a perfect vantage point since they are standing right on top of the service line and should not be bashful at all about making an "out" call, especially on serves that land long past the service line.



Standard Formations: Strengths and Weaknesses

One up-One Back

This is the position on the doubles court that everybody learns first. Unfortunately, it's often times a safety blanket for lower level players: they get comfortable playing from this position and never want to leave it! While you may feel most comfortable playing from this position in your doubles points I'm going to do my best to show you why it definitely has it's draw backs. It's not that teams can never be successful keeping one person at the net and one person at the baseline, however to continue advancing your game to higher and higher levels it's very important to be comfortable having both players up at the net so as to pressure your opponents more and finish points more quickly.

By far the most common reasoning that I hear for sticking with this position is that an opposing team lobs a lot. The rationale is that the player who stays back on the baseline can cover all of those lobs, and the player who stays up at the net can play clean up and try to put the ball away whenever possible. On paper this sounds great, and it can even work out well this way quite often. However there are three main reasons why playing this way is not the best thing you can do for your chances of winning:

1. You give your opponents a constant way out. When you remain in a one-up one-back position with your partner during a doubles point you allow your opponents to have their cake and eat it too. When they're in a defensive position on the court and need to dump the ball somewhere safe all they have to do is get it to the half of the court where the back person resides on your team. By doing this they have all of the time that it takes for the ball to travel over to your side of the court, bounce, come back up again, and then get struck by you or your partner. On the other hand, when your opponents have an easy shot and are able to attack they have a sitting duck at the net just begging to be hit at in order to end the point. Of course, if both sides of the net are playing this strategy then the scales even out, but it's important to understand that by leaving a player back at the baseline you're giving your opponents the best of both worlds, both offensive and defensive.

2. You're promoting passive, defensive doubles. We've all seen doubles points played like the following: the serve goes in play, returner hits cross court, server hits a ground stroke cross court again, returner hits a ground stroke cross court again. Meanwhile both net players are literally standing in the middle of their service boxes swiveling their heads back and forth, back and forth. If you're the server or the returner do something about this! You have to start learning how to confidently move forwards towards the net in order to join your partner and choke off your opponents by pressuring them and attacking. Maybe you've always played back at the baseline after you serve. That's fine! Let me just encourage you to finally make up your mind to work on something different. It's time that you learn how to improve your position during the

Standard Formations: Strengths and Weaknesses

point rather than staying stagnant and passive.

3. You're never going to have everything covered anyway! I find that amateur doubles players often seem to think that by staying one-up one-back they have the whole court covered. This is absolutely wrong! By sticking with this basic position with your partner you're leaving three main options wide open for your opponents:

The first one is an angle away from the baseline player or any other shortly hit shot. When the server or returner stays back at the baseline there's almost 40 feet of space between them and the net. That's four stories of room! A well angled volley or ground stroke can easily penetrate that space and travel off the court before the baseline player can get to it and hit an effective shot. Another way your opponents can use all this space is by hitting a drop shot, low ground stroke, or any other shanked/poorly hit shot that doesn't travel very deep into the court.

The second open spot is between the baseline player and the net player. While there may not be four stories of room in this instance there is still quite a bit, definitely big enough that a well placed shot can travel between these two players untouched. This is as compared to both players being up at the net or both being back at the baseline, the accuracy and power needed to hit cleanly between two players that are together is much greater.

The last open spot is over the net players head. That's right, the lob can still be effective! While keeping a player back on the baseline may seem easier than moving back for a well hit lob, I often see the baseline player stand there and just watch a nice lob land for a winner without going for it anyway.

Double up

Having both players at the net is the most aggressive position in doubles. By putting both yourself and your partner at the net you gain many advantages including:

1. You take time away from your opponents. The closer you get to the net before you hit your next shot the less time your opponent has to react to your shot. This can allow you to rush your opponents in terms of their position, shot selection, and strategy. By taking the initiative of closing in you make your opponents play on your time table.

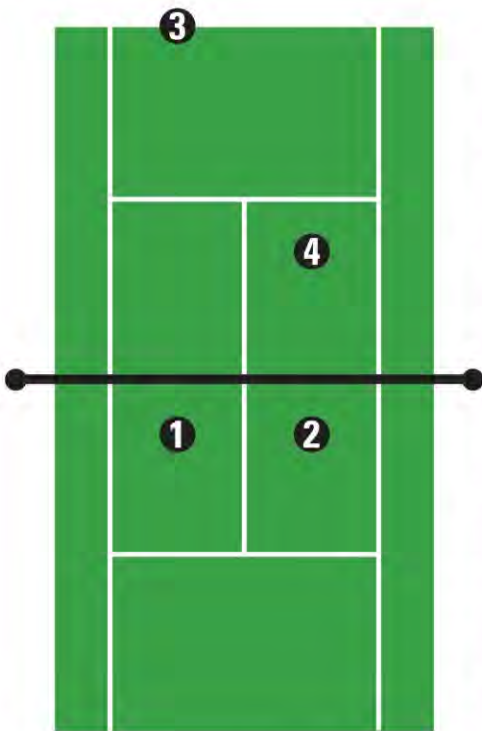
2. Greater access to angles. As you get closer to the net you have the ability to create greater and greater angles. If you have good touch and feel this can be a huge advantage.

3. Greater access to your opponents feet. As you get closer to the net you can more easily "see" your opponents feet which means that you

Standard Formations: Strengths and Weaknesses

can more easily hit directly at them. When you're on the baseline and your opponents are at the net you literally have to hit the ball upwards, and then have it drop back down again to make them hit a low volley or half volley. When you're all the way up at the net you can literally hit directly at your opponents feet.

So what about the lob? This is definitely the #1 question asked when tennis pros begin to tout the benefits of having both players at the net to their students. The reality is this: there is no one position that you can play your doubles points in which will allow you and your partner to cover the entire court effectively. Please let me repeat that for emphasis in a slightly different way. No matter what position you and your partner put yourselves in there is always going to be a possible shot that your opponents can hit to beat you. The question that remains is this: what type of shot do you want your opponents to have to hit in order to win? When you play one up and one back doubles you give your opponents a wide range of possibilities as I laid out earlier. They can beat you with a drive, angle, an easy volley at your partner, drop shot, or lob. All of those choices are open. When both players get to the net they cover so much more of the court, it makes the drop shot, angle, drive, and volley at your partner much more difficult shots to set up and execute. This still leaves the lob as an open possibility, but with some practice on your footwork and overhead this should be exactly the type of shot you want to see in doubles: high, slow, and defensive.



Don't overplay your position at the net!

Another note about closing into the net against teams who love to lob. What I am absolutely not condoning is that you bum-rush into the net full speed ahead without ever thinking about covering behind you, this is a big mistake. Moving into the net as a team should not be an all or nothing proposal. In other words, don't think that "playing the net" means you run full speed ahead until you're arms length from the net and then just stand there. On the other hand, the first time a lob goes over your head for a winner don't abandon ship completely and give up on the tactic! There are so many different ways to manage your position on the court. Very, very rarely is tennis strategy and tactics black and white, it's important to be able to find that right balance of aggression with your positioning for each and every team that you play.

It may sound like I telling you to only play double up in your doubles points and nothing else. After all, I've certainly been lopsided in my pros and cons having to do with the one-up one-back and double up doubles positions. I'm simply trying to convey the point that if you currently play most of your doubles points staying in the same position that you started the point in there are so many more opportunities for you. It's extremely important that you become competent in many different formations and ways to play doubles points so that you don't become pigeon holed tactically. As you continue reading I will map these opportunities out for you clearly and concisely so that as you continue playing you will see and understand how many options there are when

Standard Formations: Strengths and Weaknesses

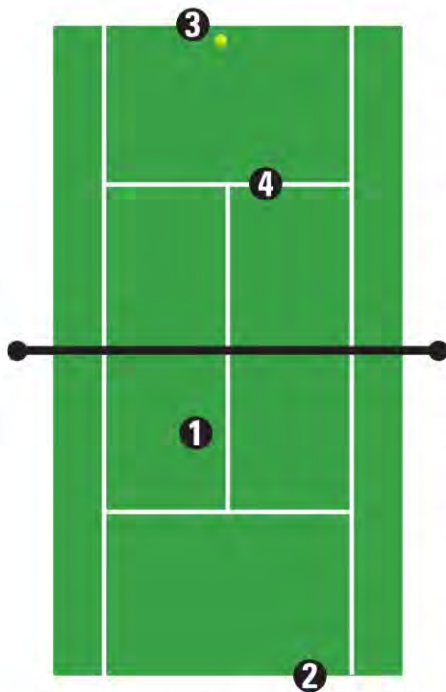
it comes to playing good, solid, fundamental doubles points.

Before we move on to the next section of this e-book I want to let you know that there are still three more options when it comes to positioning yourself in doubles. The two I have discussed so far are no the end all-be all by any means. By the time you're finished reading this you will know exactly which of the five options makes the most sense in certain situations and against certain opponents. Before we get that far we'll be talking about other doubles tactics first

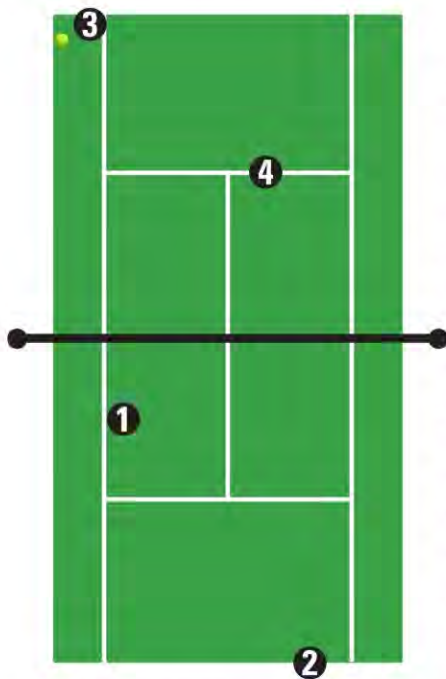


Horizontal and Vertical Shading

HORIZONTAL AND VERTICAL SHADING



A correct "shaded" position for the servers partner (#1) after a serve hit down the middle



A correct "shaded" position for the servers partner (#1) after a serve hit out wide

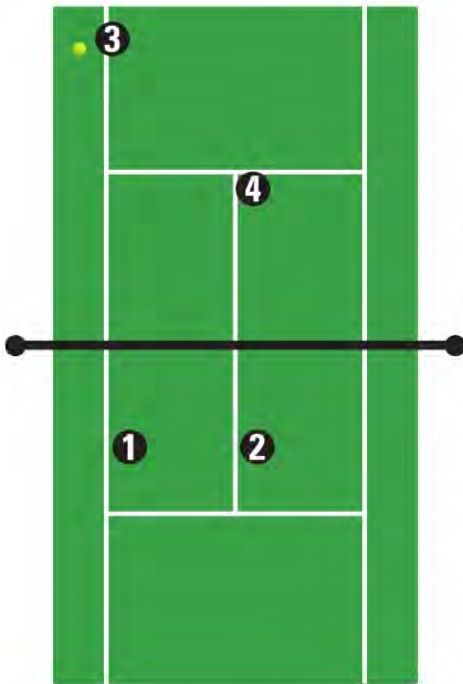
The concept of "shading" is very simple: when you're at the net you want to follow the direction of the ball with your positioning on the court at all times. This is to put both you and your partner in the optimal place to cover the possible shots from your opponents at all times. Very often club level players will begin each point in "their spot" on the court and simply play from there, never making adjustments for the varying angles and opportunities that open up for your opponents depending on where the ball goes. There are two different types of shading, below I will describe them both.

Horizontal shading

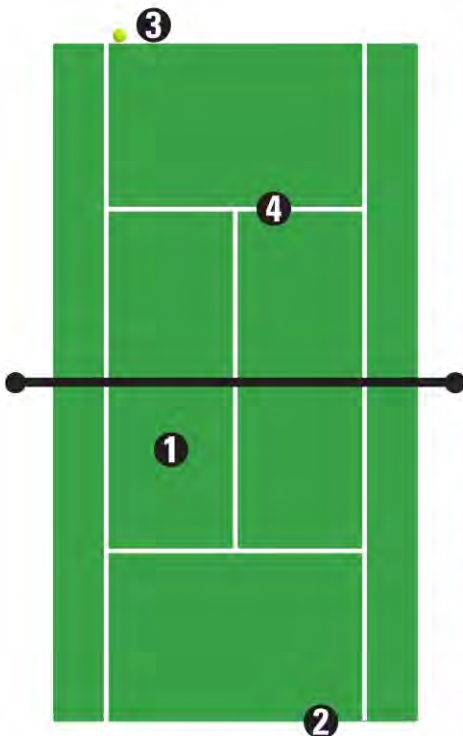
Horizontal refers to right and left. As the net player, when the ball travels past your position and off to your left, you should respond by moving your body towards the left as well. Same goes for the right. The reason for this is simple: the most likely direction for your opponents to hit the ball is always relatively straight. Is a huge angle away from you possible? Yes, it's always possible. However, creating a big angle and keeping the ball in play is always a more difficult shot than simply hitting the ball straight ahead. For this reason it's your job as the net player to position yourself in such a way that you will intercept the most number of shots possible that come off your opponents rackets. There is never going to be one place to stand in order to get to everything, however by placing yourself strategically on the court you can severely limit their options to only a few that are very difficult.

Let's take a look at an example of this. You're playing the net and your partner is serving on the deuce side. Your partner's serve travels into the box right down the middle. Where do you go? If you began the point by placing yourself right in the middle of the service box than you should shift a few feet to your right and split step. This leaves a bit more of the alley open, however since your partner hit a serve right down the middle of the court your opponent no longer has a straight shot down the alley, in order to hit it cleanly past you they would have to actually hit an angle well inside the baseline. Is this possible? Sure it is. However if they're stretched out at all from your partners good serve this will be a very difficult shot, low percentage to say the least, we're going to give that to them. Now lets say that the returner hits a good return cross court, passing you to your right where your partner just served from. Your partner reaches the ball and hits a nice angle cross court, past you and off to the left. Time to shift over! If you don't shift over to your left then the returner is going to have a wide open shot right down your alley after moving well over to their right to cover your partners angle. Since after the previous shot you ended up right around the middle of the court you've got a pretty good ways to go. If the angle your partner hit was sharp you should end up around the singles sideline, over 10 feet away. You place yourself there and the returner gets to their shot, hitting it down the alley. Since you positioned yourself well you're right there for it and block a volley between the returner and

HORIZONTAL AND VERTICAL SHADING



Both net players shaded correctly in response to a wide shot to their opponents



Player #1 shades forwards in response to a shot that makes it past player #4

his partner. After hitting that volley make sure to slide back to the right again just in case one of them get it. This sliding left and right should be constantly happening if you're up at the net. Very rarely will there be a shot that warrants no movement at all from side to side. If you go onto the internet and watch some doubles points played by the pros you'll see exactly what I'm talking about, tons of movement! Amateur players tend to get stuck in one spot, definitely don't let that happen to you.

What about when both players are at the net? They should move together! If a ball is struck at an angle off to the left then the player on the ad side should be around the singles sideline and the player on the deuce side should be around the center service line. You're probably thinking "but this leaves the angle open!". You're right, it does, a tiny triangle of court inside of the service line and back cross court. There are two other main options that the baseline player has to hit a passing shot: down the alley and down the middle. Good doubles players cover those big targets first, leaving the little one if the baseline player would like to try it.

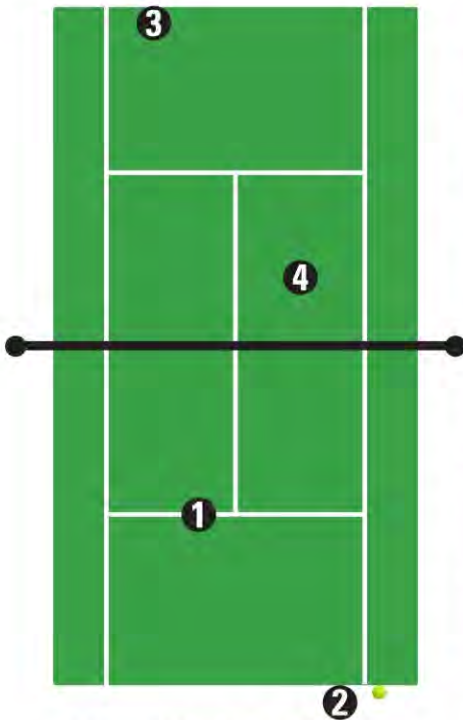
An exception to this rule would be if a particular opponent actually favors that sharp angle passing shot. Once in a while you'll come up against a person or team who loves to try lower percentage shots, and on this particular day seems to make them routinely! If that is the case then by all means make the adjustment to cover that lower percentage shot, just make sure to discuss this with your partner so that no huge spaces of court are left open in the process.

Vertical Shading

This is a concept that I haven't seen taught to club level players until pretty recently. Vertical shading is something that I've done for years in my own doubles play but wasn't really aware of until it was pointed out to me by a colleague. This positioning technique is so important, and will put you in a better position on the court than before you tried it, I promise you. It applies mostly to one up-one back situations but it's principles can be applied to any situation on a doubles court.

I'm sure you've already guessed what it is based on the definition of horizontal shading. Vertical shading is the same idea, but involves moving forwards and backwards with the ball as opposed to right and left. The principle is this: when the ball travels past you and past the net player diagonal from you, then you should be moving forwards. This puts you in a position of attack which you should be trying to do since the ball is on its way to a defensively positioned person on the baseline. If that baseline player manages to get it past you again and back to your partner behind you, then you should be scooting back up in order to defend in case your partner doesn't hit a great shot and it's intercepted by your opponent up at the net.

HORIZONTAL AND VERTICAL SHADING



Player #1 shades back to play defense after the ball gets past them to their partner on the baseline

This theory applies to more than just the standard one up-one back position as well. Basically any time the ball passes you and you identify that the shot hit to your opponents will put them in a defensive position you should be closing in for the kill. Conversely every time the ball passes you and you identify that your partner is going to be hitting from a defensive position you should be backing up again.

Exactly how much difference in court position are we talking? On average probably 6-8 feet, nothing too huge, but definitely enough that after a set of doubles you should feel it! If you're not already taking advantage of vertical shading then you'll probably find yourself a few seconds behind the action at first. Don't get frustrated, this is totally normal. It takes most players many tries before they're naturally flowing up and back with the ball as it travels from side to side. If you practice this then over time you will find yourself anticipating shots that you never could have before since you used to just stand there and watch the ball travel back and forth. Maybe you already knew how to shade right and left, but if you're not moving up and back with the ball as well you'll be either missing out on opportunities at the net or just standing there as an opponent attacks right at you.

One quick note about those pesky teams who love to lob. Don't be a sucker and close way into the net against a particular player who loves to hit lobs, it just isn't smart. Getting close to the net gives you all kinds of advantages, but if your opponent makes a repeatable pattern out of trying to hit the ball over you then you absolutely need to pay close attention to it and react accordingly throughout the match. Does this mean that you shouldn't be moving up and back with the ball? No, it simply means that you should shift your placement on the court back a few feet farther than you might normally. In over words, if your vertical shading normally travels back and forth between the middle of the service box and back to the service line, you might want to take both of those points and shift them back three feet to account for a player who lobs a lot. Still getting lobbed over? Don't give up on the net, just make another adjustment until you're able to comfortably field those overheads and make the net person across from you pay.

Shading in review

Hopefully after this section you can see that you should always be moving somewhere in doubles. Always. For every single place that the ball can land you should be moving someplace different in response. As I mentioned a second ago, this should be hard work! If you head out onto the court and play two sets of doubles without getting a great work out you're probably not following these fundamental positioning theories.



Offense, Defense, and Shot Selection

Now that we've talked in some detail about where to stand initially and how to move during points in doubles let's talk a little bit about where to actually aim your shots. Where you try to hit each shot during a point should be dependent on several things. While certain rules usually apply, you will find yourself having to make important decisions on the fly based on your observations about your opponents and based on your own position on the court, strengths, and weaknesses. This section will be split up into two main parts: offensive opportunities and defensive situations.

Offensive Opportunities

This is the part of doubles that is the most fun, attacking! However, if you're not wise about when and exactly how to attack you will quickly give away many more points than you end up taking from your opponents. So when should you attack exactly? Below are three main criteria that should help you decide if it's the right time or not.

The ball is high. The height that you make contact with the ball at is an extremely important variable when deciding your shot selection in doubles. In general the higher you're making contact with the ball the more of an opportunity you have to put the screws to your opponents. The higher you make contact, the more you're able to have a direct line of sight right at your intended target. This is extremely important because it means you will no longer have to lift the ball up before it starts clearing the net, it's clear of it already! Start paying close attention to where you're making contact with ground strokes, volleys, an overheads. If your contact point is well above the height of the net then you should be thinking about attacking.

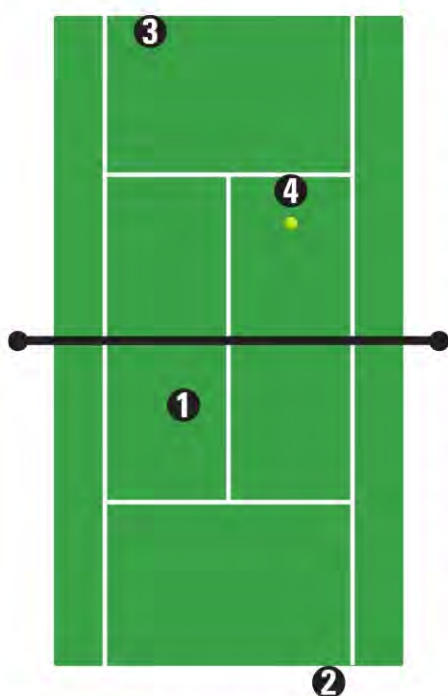
You're close to the net. The other big consideration to think about when deciding if you should attack or not is exactly how close you are to the net. The closer you are to the net the less time your opponents will have to react if you do decide to attack towards them or away from them. An aggressively hit shot 30 feet from the net will have much less effect than the exact same shot struck from 5 feet from the net, the difference between these two shots is massive. In fact, you may find that when you are far away from the net you will have to hit a shot pretty aggressively just to neutralize the amount of time that you're giving your opponents to react to your shot selection.

Combination's of height and court positioning. This is where the rubber really meets the road when it comes to deciding whether or not to attack in a point of doubles. There's a sort of ratio between how high you're making contact and exactly how close you are to the net and to your opponents. A shot struck 4 feet off the ground from 40 feet away from the net is going to be pretty difficult to hit a winner with. However, a shot struck 4 feet off the ground and 10 feet from the net is much easier to finish the point with. It's important to keep in mind your own strengths

and weaknesses as well. For example, if your forehand ground stroke is much better than your backhand ground stroke, you should attack only shots that are much easier if you're hitting a backhand. On the other hand, you may be able to attack with your forehand from just about anywhere on the court, even if the ball is relatively low and far away. Everybody needs to be realistic and objective when it comes to deciding exactly which shots in their arsenal are prudent to attack with from different positions on the court. This may sound a little wishy-washy but it's absolutely the truth, everybody has different strengths and different weaknesses. It's your job to identify them, and then use them at the proper time based on where you are on the court and how easy of a shot you're been given.

Shot selection on offensive shots

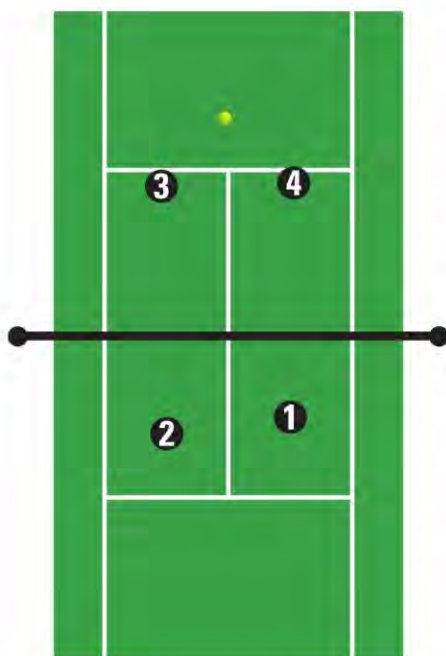
So once you've identified your opportunity to attack where should you aim? There are definitely some solid guidelines here that everybody should follow. Which option you select will be based on where your opponents are on the court and your ability to execute certain shots. Below are three main options to use when you're able to be offensive.



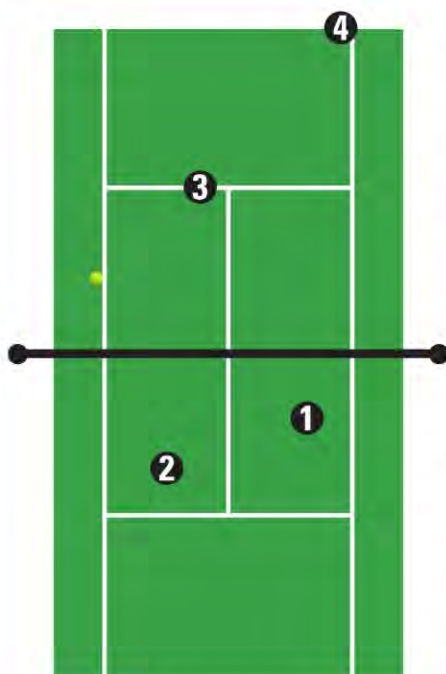
A great target to hit for player #1 when aiming a high, easy volley is at the feet of player #4

Aim low towards the person closest to you. This needs to be your bread and butter, every good doubles player is looking for opportunities to hit this target over and over again during every match they play. Often times this target is overlooked by club players because they have been told it's faux pas to "aim" at your opponents. It's very important to distinguish between what I'm suggesting here and actually trying to hit the people you're playing against. I'm not saying at all that you should be trying to tag the bad guys, but rather that you should be aiming in their direction and down at their feet. Why? Because it's an extremely difficult shot to hit back, simple as that. When you pick out the person who's closer to you and hit right at their feet you're selecting the person with the least amount of time to react to your shot. By hitting it low to them you're forcing them to hit a shot that travels back up again in order to avoid the net. That means that even if they do get it back to your half of the court chances are you're going to have another opportunity attack as a result of your well placed shot. Not only is this target effective, but it's usually the easiest one to hit. Often times the net player in doubles points will get an incredibly easy shot, only to dump it into the net or miss it wide or long due to overplaying the shot. These types of unforced errors are incredibly deflating since the team who lost the point must have done something well leading up to the erroneous shot since it was such a sitter. Don't make the mistake of trying to paint the lines when you get an easy volley or overhead at the net, simply pick out the person who's closest and hit a firm shot right down at their shoe strings. I promise you they won't like it, especially after you've made a pattern out of it and they know it's coming. After several times they may actually just start getting out of the way and giving you the point!

OFFENSE, DEFENSE, AND SHOT SELECTION



Great target placement for player #1 when aiming down the middle. Don't risk hitting close to the baseline!



Rather than continuing to hit back to the baseline player or at the net player try a sharp angle volley when in a situation like player #1

Down the middle. This is an excellent option when both of your opponents are up at the net and you're getting ready to hit an easy, sitter volley or overhead. When this is the case make sure to avoid the common mistake of aiming the shot not only between your opponents but back close to the baseline as well. Not only is it completely unnecessary to risk putting the ball close to the line, but if one of your opponents ends up getting a racket on the ball it's going to be much higher for them anyway. Place the shot firmly between them, and down towards their feet in case one of them anticipates your shot or you don't aim it quite as well as you'd like. That way even if they do get their strings on it they're forced to have to hit the ball back up into the air again where you can attack. Once situation where I don't like the down the middle target used is when your opponents are one up-one back. Very, very often a net player will aim for the middle of the court in this situation only to have their put away shot leak right towards the baseline player. What's wrong with this? You've given your opponents a new lease on life by directing your kill shot towards the person with the most possible amount of time to get it back! That's definitely not good tactics, but I see this mistake incredibly often. A very important rule of thumb is to never attack towards a baseline player in doubles unless you're going to just murder the shot, otherwise you're giving your opponents a great chance at simply blocking a lob back up into the air and buying some time to get back into the point. Don't give them that luxury!

Angle the ball off the court. This shot takes quite a bit more skill and control than the first two options I laid out. Why? Because the more of an angle you try to hit the less amount of court you have to work with. This means that the sharper of an angle you attempt, the better touch of the ball you need to have in order to be consistent. Already have great hands? Excellent, you should definitely be looking for opportunities to volley the ball off the court at a sharp angle away from your opponents. The best time to do this is after you have served and volleyed or returned and volleyed and your opponent diagonal from you has stayed back at the baseline. This gives you a ton of open court between your opponent and the net to direct a soft, angled volley which breaks the sideline well before it gets to the baseline. If you're lucky enough to receive an easy, high volley you may not even have to be soft with it. Go ahead and close your racket face enough to volley the ball directly at your target if this is the case. Just make sure to not attempt hitting a sharp angle volley with much pace if you're making contact with it at net height or below. You'll find that your shots will start drifting wide, or hitting the net if you try to close the racket face very much to adjust. Be smart about when and how to use this attacking shot!

Defensive Situations

Understanding when to play a high percentage, defensive or neutral type shot is just as important as knowing when to attack and pressure your opponents. Players who only have "one speed" on the court are a huge liability to their team due to the large amounts of unforced errors

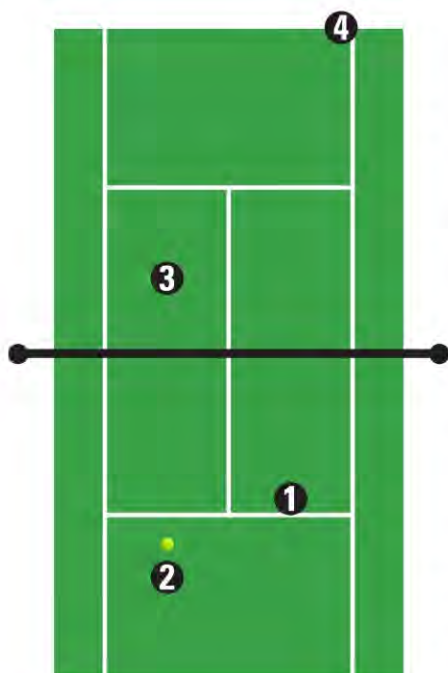
OFFENSE, DEFENSE, AND SHOT SELECTION

they will make. Below are the three main situations that you will find yourself in that are defensive in nature as well as how you should be aiming these shots.

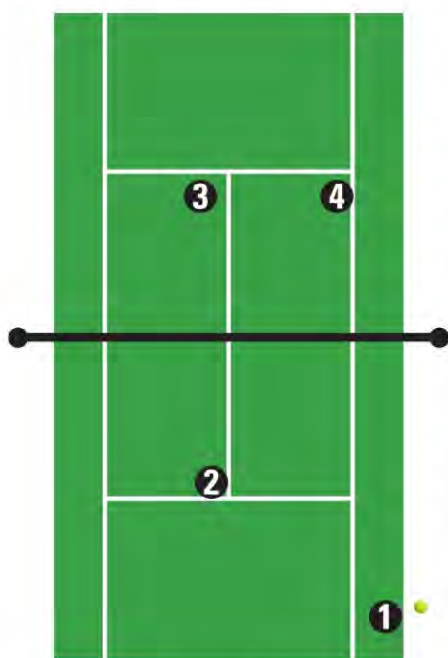
The ball is low. This situation will occur most often when you're at the net or on your way up to the net, but it's not unheard of to have a low ground stroke as well. Making a low half volley, volley, or ground stroke is tricky business because you're not able to hit the ball as hard or firmly as you may like. If you try to hit these shots with any force at all the result will often be a shot that travels up into the air, higher than is ideal. Why is this? Because from a low contact point the ball must be hit upwards in order to clear the net and have any chance of making the shot. The combination of hitting the ball upwards and hitting it with force will either give your opponents a high shot, which we definitely don't want, or the ball will simply travel too far to stay in play. Of course if you're able to impart large amounts of topspin on your ground strokes it is still possible to hit a low shot with power without causing it to float up or travel too far. Volley or half volleys on the other hand are a very tricky business when made contact with down low. This is why making contact below your knees is a defensive situation by definition, there's just not any way around it. If you don't respect this shot and pick your target wisely you'll end up either setting up your opponents or making too many errors.

You're far away from the net. Remember that huge fuss I made about not staying in a one up-one back position? This is why! The farther you position yourself away from the net the more of a defensive position you're in. Does that mean that all ground strokes will be defensive in nature, and it's impossible to win? No, absolutely not. I'm simply making a relative statement. The closer you are to the net the easier it becomes to attack, therefore, the farther away you get the tougher it is to attack. Hate to volley? Then you'd better start working on it so that you can take full advantage of the net and all of it's benefits. When you're making contact behind the baseline two main things are working against you, both of which we've already discussed in different parts of this e-book. The first element you have to overcome is time. Since you're far away from your opponents they're going to have more time to react to your shot. The second element to overcome is the lifting of the ball. When hitting a ground stroke from the baseline you're going to have to hit it upwards at least a little bit most of the time. Of course we've all seen the pros crush shots from behind the baseline seemingly directly at their targets, but for most of us we're going to need at least a little bit of lift to clear that net. Too much lift and we've given our opponents a chance to hit back down towards us. Too little lift and we error into the net. When trying to hit just the perfect shot from 40 feet away a lot can go wrong. I'll repeat again, this doesn't mean you'll always lose with this strategy, and if your ground strokes are much better than your volleys currently you may want to stay back there, but other adjustments with your partner will be smart which we will get to later.

OFFENSE, DEFENSE, AND SHOT SELECTION



When in a situation like player #2 avoid player #3 at all costs! Play it safe back to player #4



Try a safe target first and simply aim right over the center of the net

There are many other obviously defensive situations that we can all come up with. Getting jammed up by a shot, getting pulled way off the court by an angle, and having to turn your back to the net and retreat for a well hit lob are all examples of situations where you and your partner are in a whole lot of trouble. What really separates the men from the boys is not whether or not we get put into defensive situations, we all will have to deal with it, but rather how we respond to those situations and manage them. With some practice and strategical intelligence all of us can start winning more points during doubles play. Next up we'll talk about exactly where to aim these difficult shots!

Defensive Shot Selection

Exactly where to aim a defensive shot is highly situational, however there are several rules of thumb that will help you decide exactly where is best to place the ball next time you're in trouble.

Away from the person closest to you. Remember a few sections back when I talked about attacking towards the person closest to you? Well the opposite also applies. When you're in deep trouble in the middle of a doubles point it's very important to be aware of your opponents' position on their side of the court. If it's at all possible to direct your defensive shot away from the person that's closest to you then that will be your best bet the vast majority of the time. By getting the ball away from this person you're giving yourself two advantages. First of all you're buying you and your partner more time to get ready for the next shot since it's going to take the ball a longer amount of time to travel to them. This is really maximized if the opponent furthest from you is all the way back in a baseline position since they're going to have to wait for the ball to bounce before playing their next shot. Hopefully one of your opponents is all the way back there so that you have the luxury of this extra time. Secondly, the person who's further away from you will give you more physical room to aim to. We talked earlier about how aiming low to your opponents can be very advantageous. Well, the person who's furthest from you gives you the most amount of room to make this happen without the shot having to be so delicately hit. Obviously if the person furthest away from you is behind the baseline then we're going to just play for any volley to that half of the court. However, if your choices are somebody inside the service line, and somebody who's standing in no mans land then an absolutely ideal defensive shot would be at the feet of the person in no mans land. You could attempt to place it at the feet of the closer person as well, but in a defensive situation this shot becomes quite low percentage.

Across the middle. Just like in singles, across the middle of the net is always a great high percentage play. This is the case for several reasons. Firstly the net is always lowest in the center. This is especially true in doubles since the net gets higher and higher as it gets closer to the net post. Any extra room you can give yourself definitely helps out. Secondly aiming over the center of the net can give you some

extra court to work with. Of course if you're way off the court and aiming right over the middle of the net then a pretty wide angle is created, which no longer gives you "extra" court space. However if you're inside the doubles boundaries and hitting over the middle then chances are your shot will be landing right over the "meat" of the court. The longest distance to aim for will always be from baseline corner to baseline corner, in a defensive situation extra room can definitely be welcomed, especially if you're throwing up a lob!

The last main option for playing a defensive shot, and the most drastic, is to simply play a lob. If you're really in trouble and happen to be outdoors, play it up into the air as high as is comfortable for you, or, if your position is only moderately defensive you can try to place the lob cleanly over an opponent who's at the net. More defensive lobs should definitely be placed cross court so as to make the best use of the court, however down the line or up the middle can be effective as well.

Use all three of these defensive options together, and in this order if possible. If you have a reasonable chance to direct and aim the shot in question then shoot direct it towards the half of the court where an opponent is furthest away. If you can get it low to him or her then ever better, this is a best case scenario and the #1 priority. Remember that cross court will give you some extra space to hit to, however if cross court leads you to a waiting net person, especially if they're the closest to the net, then avoid them if possible. In an all out emergency just throw the ball up into the air and try to regain control of the point.



Poaching, Disruption and Distraction

If you're a risk taker and thrill seeker then poaching in doubles is definitely for you. Poaching is often times a measured risk, sometimes the person poaching will actually make their move before knowing where the ball will be going. When it works out to plan this can be extremely fun and gratifying, but often times club level players never break out of their shell and experience it. Hopefully after reading through this section you'll have the confidence to give it a try!

Poaching has two main purposes in doubles. The first is to try and intercept the ball as close to the net as possible. I've already described exactly why closer is better in doubles. Armed with this understanding it's clear to see that the more often a team can make contact with the ball close to the net the better. Poaching is a way to maximize this tactic and often times means trying to anticipate where the ball will be going before it's even hit. The second purpose of poaching is to disrupt the balance and comfort level of your opponents. Once your opponents know that you and your partner are willing to throw yourselves out of a standard position to try and intercept the ball a veil of uneasiness and uncertainty will be thrown over their game plan. Low level doubles is extremely predictable. Most players understand that the net player is in a place of power, and the side of the court with a baseline player on it is safe. Therefore it's very common to see long cross court rallies with both net players watching the ball travel back and forth. If this is you then it's time to start being more aggressive with your feet! As an aside, it's worth mentioning that these players usually know nothing about horizontal and vertical shading which we've already discussed in this e-book. If you follow those guidelines and principles you'll already be well on your way to being an expert poacher, however many times players still need a little kick in the pants to actually make that move out towards the ball crossing in front of them. Once you start showing your willingness to do this your opponents will have to try new tactics. This is a good thing! Get them off their game plan, throw a wrench in things. I promise they won't like it.

When to poach

When it comes to poaching timing is everything. This is a sneaky play, a cloak and dagger move, if you go at the wrong time you'll get burned. Below are the three main times that you'll want to use this tactic.

The first situation that you'll want to use the poach in is in the middle of a point after identifying that your partner has just hit a great shot. How do you know that your partner has hit a great shot? That depends on where your opponents are and where the ball is traveling. Pretty much any shot hit to the feet of your opponents is a great time to poach and cut the ball off. If your opponent is serving and volleying right in front of you and your opponent hits a great return that travels low over the net, once you see that server start to bend down and prepare for the low shot you know that you've got an opportunity. Once you start paying attention to

your opponents eyes, racket, legs, and balance on a regular basis you can pick out your best chances pretty quickly. This all starts with the willingness to actually go for the ball!

The next situation to pay attention for is patterns of play that you can anticipate. Once you get to a level where everybody on the court has a good understand of what a "smart" and "dumb" shot to attempt is you can use your opponents "smart" shots against them but cutting them off as they aim there. An example of this would be a return of serve. Everybody is always told "return the serve cross court!". Well, since your opponent knows cross court is smart, and you know that they know that this is the right place to aim, why not beat them to it and make your move? This is a relatively advanced tactic to use, not because it needs complicated techniques or amazing athleticism, but more so because lower level players don't have the guts to actually go for a ball that's traveling to their partner's side of the court. In fact, many times lower level players will reprimand their partners for trying to poach and then missing the volley. Shame on them! You should always love to see your partner taking initiative and trying to make an aggressive play for the team. On the other hand, if one crosses and misses the volley three times in a row then something is going to have to change. Just be aware that every opponent will have certain shots and targets that they will use over and over again, look for them so that you can exploit these patterns.

The third main way that you will want to use a poach is within a planned play by you and your partner. This is when the two of you talk before a point even starts and work out a plan of attack. This might be something like the following. "Ok, I'm going to serve down the T to this guy's backhand, you poach". Great, excellent plan. More than likely the backhand is weaker for this player. By serving there and then planning on the net person poaching you're placing a ton of pressure on the return of serve. In this instance the server's partner would cross over to the servers side of the court and then the server would cover down the alley. This is a planned poach.

Timing of the poach

When to actually make your move to poach at the net is much more an art form than it is a science, however some general guidelines will definitely get those of you started who aren't already using this tactic. The best time to make your move is after your opponent has committed to a target and has started their forward movement towards the ball but before they actually make contact with it. If you wait until after they've struck the ball to make your move then you're too late and will be playing catch up over and over again. This is probably the most common mistake that players make when first trying to poach. They want to wait and make sure of where the ball is going before they themselves commit to their poaching strategy. This will usually leave you a step or two behind the ball, or you'll get to it but just barely enough

POACHING, DISRUPTION AND DISTRACTION

to touch the ball, not with enough control to actually be a positive influence on the point for your team. You're going to have to experiment with different timings, don't be bashful and don't feel badly if this doesn't work out the very first time you try it. The idea here is to catch your opponent in the act, if you leave too soon they'll have enough time to change their target and catch you instead. Too late and you missed your chance. Keep practicing!

Direction of the poach

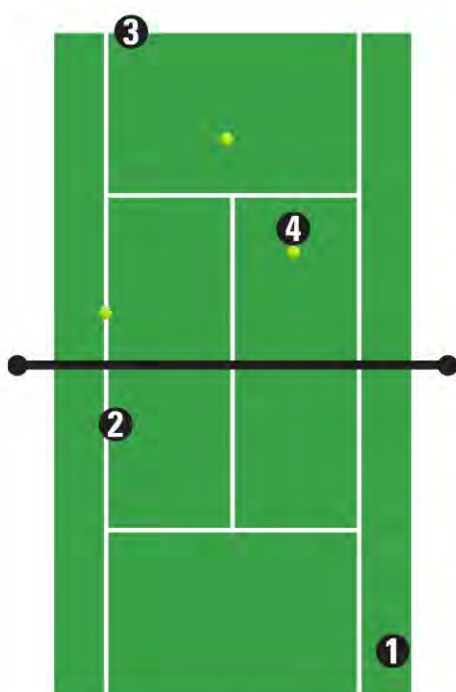
Please do not move parallel to the net when you poach! This is an extremely common mistake and one that will inhibit your effectiveness as you cross for the ball at the net. Most of the time when you poach the ball is traveling at least slightly away from you. There's a baseline player in front of you, you're at the net, and they're trying to hit past you cross court. If you make your move and travel straight to the side then the angle that they're hitting the ball at will cause it to continue getting farther and farther away from you as time goes on. The better way to cut the ball off is to move your body forwards and to the side. You should move yourself towards the net at an angle so that you intercept the ball along its path, rather than trying to catch up with it to hit your volley. I strongly recommend that you practice this specifically without a ball. Split step, and make three quick explosive steps at a 45 degree angle towards the net. Do this over and over so that you learn the feel of moving in this direction. When your opponent hits that return of serves it's going to feel like the fastest way to get to the ball will be straight to the side, don't make that mistake!

Where to aim the poach

POACHTARGET So you've anticipated your opponents cross court return, waited to make your move until the perfect time, moved your feet towards the ball at an angle, and now you're about to intercept the ball. Exciting! Now where should you aim this shot? You don't want to go through all of this practice and trouble just to dump the ball into the net or outside of the court. Well, given the scenario I was just describing, your momentum is carrying you towards the net and towards the center of the court. If you're the server's partner then that means the other net player is directly across from your position, cross court. As you make your move to cut off the return your body will be moving towards the net and towards the center of the court, directly towards the other net player. How convenient! Since we know that the number one put away target for a volley is at the feet of the opponent closest to you anyway this becomes a great target. All of your momentum is carrying you right towards them, go ahead and just go with the flow. Other targets may include cutting the volley back cross court for a sharp angle, angling the ball off past the net player in the direction you're moving, or directing the volley between the net player and returner. These can all be effective choices as well, but present a bit more difficulty in making the shot. Practice them all to give yourself choices in the middle of your match play as you start to poach more.

The fake poach

Now we're going to start getting even trickier with our positioning at the net. Remember that one of the main reasons to poach is to upset your opponents normal game plan and to make them uncomfortable. Once you've successfully poached several times and they see that you're going to be a problem up there just the slightest hint of you moving for a poach can throw them off their game. This is exactly what you want! You can purposefully use this to your advantage by faking towards the center of the court to draw a down the line shot out of your opponents, and then "staying home" to have their shot go right to you. I can't even tell you how much fun this is when it works, and how frustrating it is when you fall for it. There are two keys to a good fake poach. The first is actually having successfully poached in the first place, hopefully several times, otherwise your opponents won't give any respect to your fake and will just go cross court even if they do see you fake. Secondly, timing is key here. You want to perform your fake just a tad bit earlier than you would an actual poach, the idea is to actually let your opponent start to move on purpose in hopes of them changing their target and going down the line. How big of a move this takes to sucker them into a down the line attempt varies from player to player as does exactly how early you should move. Either way you want to make sure that you have enough time to recover and move back to where you came from so that you can cover your alley if they take the bait. If they do you should take the volley and direct it either between your two opponents or at the feet of the net player across from you most of the time. I've used a drop volley in this situation effectively as well, but that can be a pretty tricky shot.



After a fake poach draws a down the line return player #2 has these main target options

Is this gamesmanship? Not really, I see it as more of a tactical maneuver. What you should not be doing is waving your arms in the air, or your racket, or doing anything for the sole purpose of distracting your opponent. Making a fake move for the purpose of baiting your opponent's target is perfectly fine and a strategy that high level doubles teams use all the time.

Sticking with it

So what happens if as you become more active at the net your opponents start to beat you down the line? You should be welcoming this to a certain extent. When I play doubles I'm extremely active, constantly trying to disrupt my opponents. Having an opposing player catch me by going down the alley for a winner is just part of this strategy. When this happens you must realize that you caused them to change their mind and attempt a lower percentage shot. The first time they make it I say good for them, nice shot. The second and third times, fine. However if it begins to be a pattern of your poaching getting caught more often than it converts into a point for you then you simply must start to respect their tactical adjustment, start to stay home more often until they get back into a pattern of hitting away from you cross court. I'm simply making this point because it's not uncommon for me to see a

POACHING, DISRUPTION AND DISTRACTION

returner attempt a down the line return when the net player is crossing on the other side of the court, miss the alley shot, and have the net player bashfully never try to poach again for the rest of the match. Don't do this! Keep the pressure on, make your opponents prove that they can consistently beat you down the line before giving up on the strategy.



Alternative Starting Positions

ALTERNATIVE STARTING POSITIONS

Every doubles player should experience the fun and excitement of using multiple formations in their matches. So far we've discussed the standard formations of one up-one back as well as both players up at the net. Simply getting both players at the net is almost always the first step for a doubles team, however there are an additional three ways to position yourself and your partner in order to try and gain an advantage over your opponents.

When to use an alternative formation

The first reason why you may want to use a different formation on the court is simply because standard formations aren't working for you and your partner. Simply put, you should never stick with a losing game plan. This sounds incredibly obvious, but when was the last time you and your partner threw a totally different look at your opponents once it became obvious that your opponents were out playing you? Very few club level players change up their formations during a match and I suspect it's mainly because they don't know how to perform the three alternative formations that are available, or why they should be used. If you're winning your match or even if it's relatively close through out sticking with what you're comfortable with is perfectly fine, but once you're down two breaks or more in a set you should strongly consider trying something completely different.

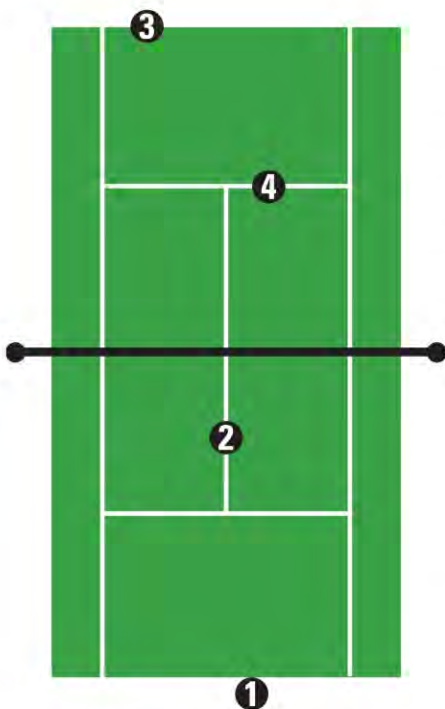
The second reason to mix up your positions on the court is to exploit the weaknesses of your opponents. By purposefully setting up the starting position of both you and your partner it can become much easier to isolate and really make uncomfortable a certain shot of your opponents or series of shots.

The last reason why you may want to try using a different formation during your doubles match is to take advantage of your unique strengths as a team. In a few minute we'll get into exactly how to put these plays together but considerations would be if if you or your partner has a significantly better forehand volley than backhand, or if either of you is particularly good at hitting a certain part of the service box with your serve. You should go into a match with this knowledge already so that you can set yourselves up as often as possible.

I formation

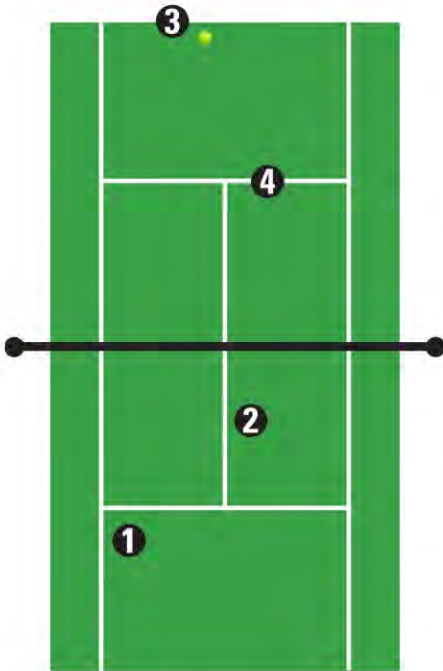
The I formation is aptly named for the starting position of both players being pretty much right in the middle of the court. The net player is in either a squat or lunge right over the center service line and the server shifts all the way over to the center of the baseline, without crossing over the center mark of course. From this starting position there are so many possibilities, but certain patterns are most beneficial.

There are basically two main variables when it comes to the I formation: the placement of the serve and the direction of the net players

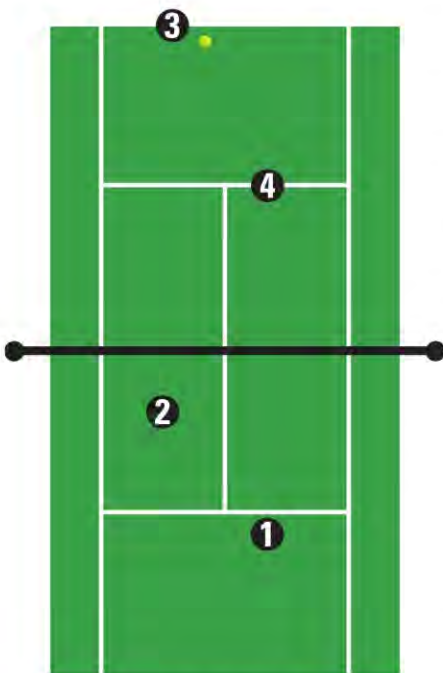


Standard starting positions when using the I formation

ALTERNATIVE STARTING POSITIONS



When using the I formation your best bet is to serve down the T, have the net player cover cross court, and the server cover down the line



Another option is to have the servers partner cover down the line and the server cover cross court as a change up

movement. Certain options make the most amount of sense which we will discuss. When you're starting off in the I formation serve placement should be down the middle the majority of the time. The reason for this is because we want the net player to cover as much court as possible without having to move large distances. When the net player starts right in the center of the court and the serve goes right down the center of the court that net player can take one or two steps to either direction and cover just about the entire half of the court easily. This is as opposed to going out wide with the net player starting in the middle which leaves open a down the line return of serve to an open court. This isn't to say that an out wide serve can never work, but the serve had better be quite good, or placed there as a change up to catch the returner off guard. The net player should most often cover cross court, which ends up being just a little bit to the side of the center line and with a well placed serve takes up a great deal of court. If he covered down the line he would have to travel quite a bit farther in order to actually get the alley covered, covering cross court just about puts him just in the right spot with only a very, very sharp angled return of serve able to get past him. And so with the I formation this general pattern should be followed: serve down the T and net player covers cross court. This leaves the server to cover down the alley on the other side of the court which definitely takes some quickness if a good return is hit.

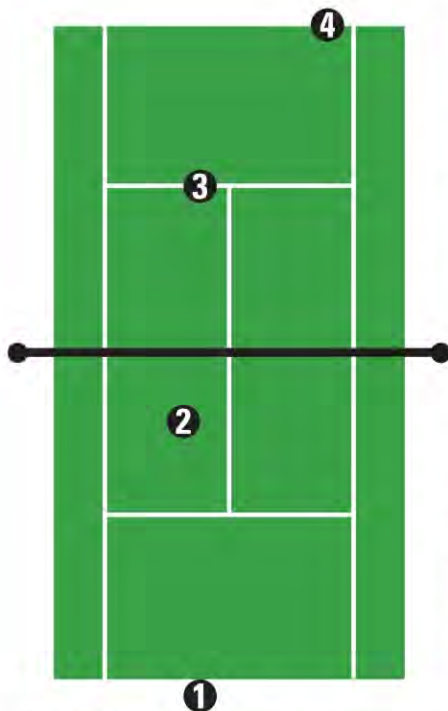
When should you use the I formation? Try it out when a returner on a certain side or both sides are hitting extremely good cross court returns of serve, good enough that the server is struggling making a play at them or cannot handle repeated low volleys or half volleys. Since the net player is obviously all the way up there already it often results in an easier shot, plus the net player is directly in front of you when cutting off a cross court return. Another great time to use this tactic is when the ground stroke which is hit after a T serve is very weak for the returner. An example of this would be a T serve on the deuce side to a righty returner. A T serve would go to this players backhand return after which the net player would pop up and take a step to his or her right which would put them in position to cover both cross court and down the middle. If the returner doesn't have a great backhand then the net player can often times have a field day being able to put away volley after volley. If the returner hits a few solid returns down the alley have the net player switch it up and cut to his or her left just to keep your opponents guessing.

The I formation definitely is not meant for teams who don't communicate very well, who don't have confident serves, or can't cover a decent amount of court pretty quickly. However with some practice this tactic can become a lot of fun for both players and can really keep your opponents guessing.

Australian Formation

The Australian formation is much more straight forward than the I

ALTERNATIVE STARTING POSITIONS



Standard starting positions when using the Australian formation

and isn't used nearly as often, however it can still be useful against certain opponents. In an Aussie formation the server stands very close to the center of the baseline, just like in an I formation. The difference between the Aussie and I formation is in where the net player is positioned. Rather than crouching down low directly over the center of the court the server's partner puts themselves inside the opposite service box that they normally would. For example, playing from the Aussie formation on the deuce side would have the server just to the right of the center mark on the baseline and his or her partner inside the deuce side service box in a regular ready position, often times just to the right side of the center service line. What this does is force the returner to try the more difficult down the line return on a consistent basis, you would want to do this if the person returning your serves is killing you and your partner with their cross court shots.

Serve placement isn't quite as crucial as in the I formation because you're not asking the net player to get up and quickly cover one half of the court or another, however serving down the middle is still going to be your best bet as it will keep the ball most in front of your waiting net player.

When should you use this strategy? Much like the I formation you should put this into effect when you're getting beaten consistently by a returner that has a strong cross court shot. By doing this you effectively force the returner to attempt a down the line return of serve with the net player covering everything else.

Double Back

This is hands down the simplest way of adjusting your position on the court when things aren't going your way, however I almost never see it used by club players. While this is a shame, I definitely understand it. In my past career as a doubles player in college I rarely used it as well, mostly due to stubbornness in my strategical thinking. Don't make this mistake! Listed below are the top three situations in which you will want to consider this position on the court.

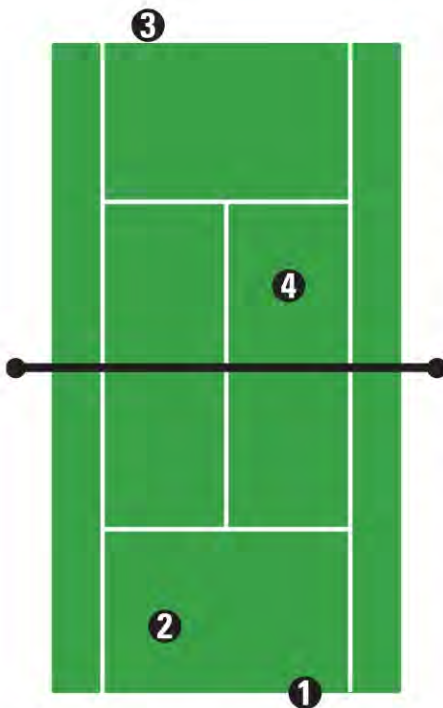
1. Your opponents are consistently winning the battle for the net. Playing and watching a doubles match in which all four players closing aggressively into the net is a very exciting thing. However, if as you attempt this strategy from both the serving and returning position you start losing consistently something definitely needs to change. Are you opponents always getting to the net first and finishing the points immediately in their favor? It's probably time to make a change and double back may be a good choice.

2. Your opponents lob a lot and your overhead is not effective. When students tell me that they had difficulty with an opponent because their lobs were amazing the first thing I always tell them is "time to work on your overhead!". Taking the ball out of the air should almost always be

ALTERNATIVE STARTING POSITIONS

your first choice during doubles points, however there may be a certain day or opponent that makes your overhead completely ineffective. Maybe on a certain side the sun is exactly in the right spot to be directly in your eyes, or the technique of your overhead has broken down and you have no confidence in it and your opponents continue to lob you after picking up on it. In situations like these it's wise to make a change in strategy rather than trying to be a hero and stick it out which will usually result in a loss.

3. Either you or your partner aren't able to challenge your opponents with the return of serve. This is the most common reason why professional players use the double back position. If one way or another you just cannot hit a great return of serve then it may be time to head for the proverbial hills. Maybe one or both of your opponents has a huge serve and is placing it extremely well. Maybe you or your partner are just having a poor day with their groundstrokes and has to resort to slicing or blocking their returns back all match. In either situation the partner of the server is going to consistently be getting opportunities to attack immediately after the return of serve and will probably be aiming their strike directly at the returners partner. Don't allow them to continue using your net player for target practice, get him or her out of there!



Standard starting positions when using double back as the returning team

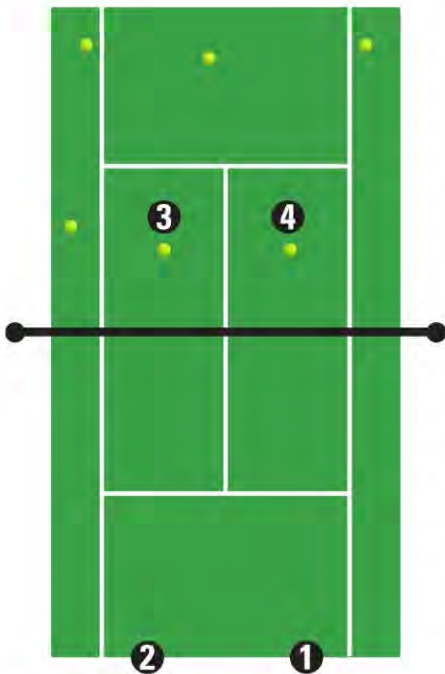
Now that we have a clear idea of when to use double back let's talk about exactly how to implement it. What double back should not be is both players literally standing back on the baseline or behind it, at least not initially. A correctly set up double back starting position should have the returners partner right around the middle of no-mans land to be able to react to a variety of shots. You're probably saying to yourself "Well wait a minute! Every pro I've ever had a lesson from has told me to never stand in no-mans land!". That's correct, I absolutely do not want you to keep this position during the point, it's an awful place to be unless you have a very good reason to be there. What you should do as the returners partner is begin half way between the service line and baseline to check out exactly what happens with your partner's return. Hopefully they're able to hit a reasonable shot cross court and past the net player. If this is the case then you've got your opportunity to get right back on offense again by moving forwards towards the net to pressure your opponents. If on the other hand the serve is too good for your partner to handle effectively then you should take a couple quick steps back and split step as soon as you identify it so that the net player doesn't crush an overhead or high volley right at your feet. What this allows you to do is not play in such an "all or nothing" way. We don't want to completely give up hope and abandon the net unless it's absolutely necessary. From this position if your partner doesn't hit a great shot then you can go back and play defense, if he does then you can close in and hopefully take the point.

If your partner's return of serve doesn't cut the mustard and you back up all the way to the baseline with your partner then you'll have to win with

ALTERNATIVE STARTING POSITIONS

one of three main strategies.

Hitting aggressive ground strokes. One thing is for sure: once both of your opponents are at the net and both you and your partner are back at the baseline you can't play just any old shot. Your opponents are both in a position of power, able to hit directly at your side of the court and put the ball away. Feeding them easy shots is just not going to cut it unless you want to count on them making enough unforced errors to give you the win. This means that you and your partner absolutely have to try and challenge those net players by hitting solid shots from the baseline. A wide range of targets can be effective: down the middle, down the alley, sharp cross court, dipping low to the feet of either player, or really hard directly at one of them. Any of these options can be effective and you should spend time in practice trying all of them so that when you get into this situation you can have the confidence to pressure your attacking opponents. While you should definitely feel like a good shot is necessary in this situation make sure to not overdo it and simply give the match away by making too many unforced errors. Be willing to set the point up by hitting several well placed shots in a row, if your opponents have good hands and cover the net well you'll definitely have to work for it. If one good shot from you or your partner results in a short, weak volley reply then be fully prepared to keep the pressure on by moving in to try and finish the point.



Options for player #1 when stuck back at the baseline and both opponents are at the net

Play a good defensive shot and follow it up to the net. Our top strategy as a doubles play may be to get close to the net and attack, however that doesn't mean a well placed defensive shot isn't sometimes needed to get us into that position. Make sure to practice your lobs, once you get pushed back away from the net by your opponents this shot can get you out of all kinds of trouble. The important part of using the lob from a double back (or one up-one back) position is being able to identify when you've hit an effective one so that you can take full advantage of it. Once that lob goes up into the air shift your focus to your opponents immediately to check out how easy or difficult of a time they're going to have with it. Are they backpedaling awkwardly? Are they moving back behind the service line with their racket already stretched up in an attempt to barely touch your lob? Have both players turned around and started running back to the baseline after the ball has gone over their heads? If so then this is your chance to take over the point again! Please don't waste it, start moving forward immediately after identifying these or other signs of duress from either opponent trying to field your lob.

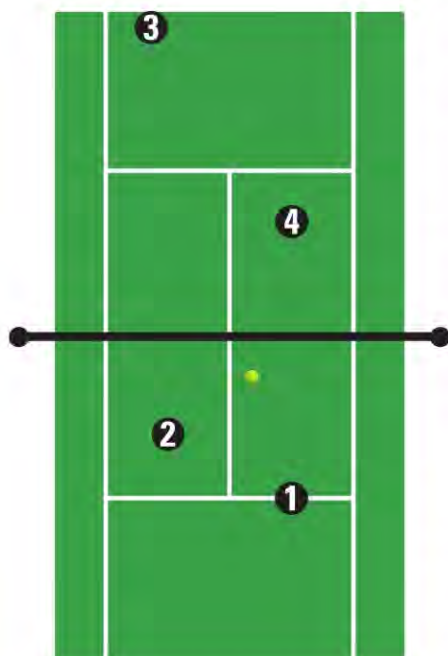
Mix up offense and defense. High level doubles players are able to mix up and combine different amounts of offense and defense when placed back in a high pressure spot behind the baseline. Don't get too predictable. If you always lob when pinned back away from the net then over time your opponents will see it coming and be able to put themselves in a better and better position to hit solid overheads. If you

ALTERNATIVE STARTING POSITIONS

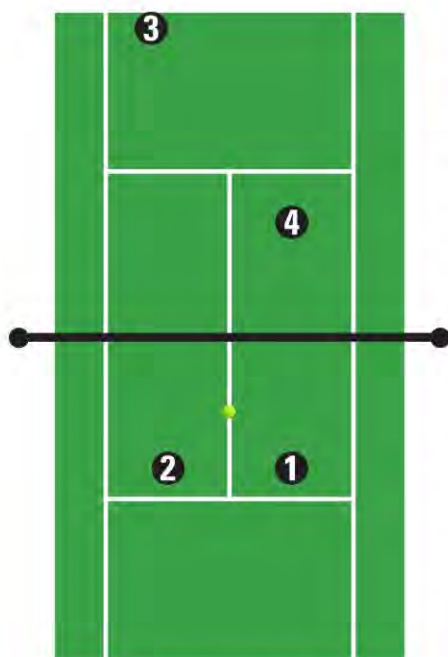
always drive the ball strongly in an attempt to pass them then don't be surprised if they keep moving closer and closer to put your shots away. Obviously if either offense or defense continues to work and get you points then just stick with that, however as you play better opponents you will have to try and catch them off guard with different "looks" after they've both gotten up to the net and you're in a defensive position. Try to keep them off balance and uncertain without sacrificing too many points by making unforced errors.



Communication and Partner Strategy



Player #2 should absolutely be trying to make a play at this shot!



*So who should take this shot?
Answer: whoever gets there first*

Good doubles players talk a lot to each other. They talk during points, between points, and during change overs, there really isn't a point in time that successful teams are not letting each other know exactly what's going on. Contrast this with beginner players who literally say nothing to each other besides "nice try" and you can begin to see how big of a difference there is between levels of play. Being a solid doubles team is just like any other successful relationship, if you can't talk with each other often about important things it's extremely hard to work together as a cohesive unit. Let's talk about how to be on the same page with your partner at all times during a doubles match. First we will review the main times during point play that you'll want to be talking with your partner.

Shots down the middle

Ever hear the phrase "down the middle solves the riddle"? I can't remember the first time I heard it but it has definitely stuck with me as a doubles strategy rule of thumb. Because the middle is a great spot to aim in doubles you and your partner must be able to cover it effectively, no question about it. Even though it's one of the most common targets in doubles there are so many misconceptions and misunderstandings about how to cover this part of the court with your partner. Let's first talk about how not to cover the center: by trying to figure out who's forehand is positioned there. Do most people have a stronger forehand volley than backhand one? Yes, but this should absolutely not be the primary consideration when trying to figure out who takes a ball traveling between you and your partner. Why? Well first of all remembering who's forehand is in the middle and who's isn't on the fly is an awful lot of mental effort, and if you actually tried to remember it and either go or not go for certain shots based on that information you'd be frozen solid in your position from the distraction of it more times than not. In the middle of a quick exchange at the net there just simply isn't enough time to consider this and act based on it. The second reason why you shouldn't be worried about it is because it simply isn't nearly as important as who is closer to the net. If you're closer to the net than your partner and are able to reach a shot within reason than you should absolutely be going for it. What about communication during this time? If you and your partner are staggered and separated by 10 feet or more then there's not much reason to really talk about it, the player who is farther back in the court will have a front row seat to see their partner make the move and cut off the volley. However, if both of you are in similar positions on the court with the ball traveling between you then talking immediately can definitely clear up some unneeded errors. The key word in that sentence is "immediately", you and your partner must both start making this a habit, even if it seems incredibly obvious to both of you who is going to get to the ball first.

A few other pointers about this situation. If you're both positioned at the same depth on the court and the ball is traveling

directly between you and your partner then who should take it? The best answer to this question is "whoever can get to it first". High level doubles players in this situation will both make a quick break for the ball and work it out on the way there, usually one player or the other is going to either be quicker or have a faster reaction to the shot and will therefore get there first. It's important to note that the scenario I'm describing is one where there is very little time to react to the shot, and therefore very little time to actually verbally communicate. Therefore let your feet do the talking! Make a move towards the ball immediately and try to get there first, both of you should do this every time. If you and your partner stand there and try to figure out who's forehand it is you can forget about being in the best position possible to hit this volley. Also, if you assume that your partner will be getting this shot because it's six inches closer to him or her and they stand there because it's your forehand in the middle then you've both just wasted a point for no good reason! Get in the habit of moving right away, every time, try to be the first one there. What if both of you close hard for the ball and get to it at virtually the same time? The worst thing that can possibly happen is that your rackets hit each other as you both try to make a play at the volley. Much better this than the opposite mistake of doing nothing. I've won countless doubles points while clashing rackets with my partners, every good doubles player does it from time to time, please don't apologize for it and think it's a bad thing!

One last thing about shots down the middle. So far I've discussed largely shot's that don't leave you or your partner much time to react, but what if it's a real sitter and both of you are hustling for the ball? In this situation things like who's forehand is in the middle can become a very important consideration. If you and your partner are both the same distance from the ball and it's sitting up in the air then communication becomes paramount. As before both of you (yes, both of you!) should make initial moves towards the oncoming ball, with the intent of making a play at it if you arrive there first. However, on the way there you and your partner should be actively talking it out with each other, please do not assume! At this point it becomes a game of knowing who has the best weapons or tools to finish the point most effectively and consistently. Does your partner have an awesome angle backhand volley and your overhead has been shaky today? Let him know immediately: "yours!". Are you a bit farther away from the ball but it's on your forehand side and your overhead has been on fire? Call him off right away: "mine!" or "I've got it!". Two things are really important as you do this. First of all you must communicate as early as possible, as soon as you have a feeling one way or the other about who should be taking it. Secondly, communicate loudly and assertively, don't sound wishy-washy or unsure of yourself. Either you or your partner must take charge here as soon as possible otherwise confusion will take over very quickly. These are all common sense things and yet are only done correctly most of the time by high level players. Start practicing this with your regular partner and anybody else that you play with immediately. It

might seem bossy at first but in the long run I promise your partners will appreciate the good communication.

Last bit of information about these often tricky situations: what should you do if a weak shot is hit down the middle, both you and your partner have a great initial break towards the ball, and communicate early but the talking doesn't make it clear who's going to take it on the first try? In other words, you both start to sprint towards the ball and call out "mine!" in chorus? Well, if both of you called this out early enough, started moving immediately, and the ball is moving slowly enough then it's quite possible to have the chance to retry your efforts at being clear about who's shot it actually is. Go ahead and make a second attempt at calling for the shot, or back off and tell your partner "ok! take it!". This might seem silly and as if there's not possibly time enough to actually converse back and forth, but honestly I've successfully navigated such situations many, many times. Of course if both of you wait until the last second to start talking then this is never possible, so please make sure to make talking early a habit as soon as possible! Of course there will be those funny instances where you and your partner do everything correctly, but just can't seem to get things straight in time, but much better than assuming away about who's shot it is and allowing easy shots to become difficult ones or even winners for no good reason.

Lobs

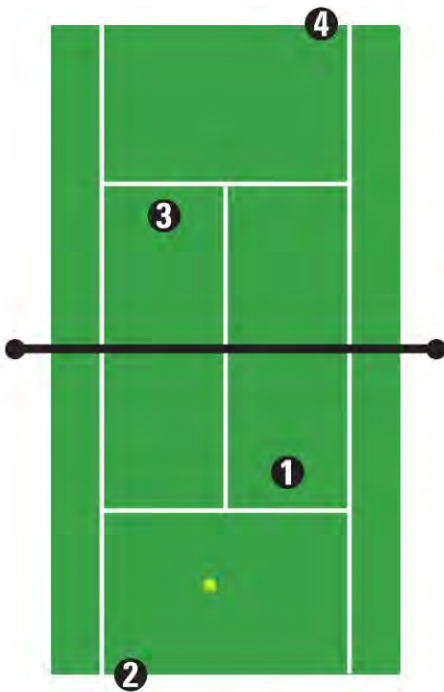
Ah, the lob. Bane of the existence of so many recreational level doubles players. It's a shame, really. After all the lob is the highest, slowest, most defensive shot in tennis. This isn't to say that the lob can't be used very effectively in a legitimate way, or that it's a cheap shot to hit. I'm simply pointing out that if you should be able to make a play at any shot in tennis consistently it should really be the lob. We're not going to talk about technique on how to hit an overhead here, but rather how to communicate effectively with your partner so that you can avoid silly errors that often occur during doubles points.

So who should take the lob? The short answer to that question is: "Whoever can most easily make a play at the ball while retaining the best court positioning possible". It's important to understand here that much like all other tennis strategy there are a lot of variables involved, and while we can learn general rules of thumb it is never black and white as far as one person always taking the ball in "X" situation and the other player always taking the ball in "Y" scenario. Let's take a look at two specific situations that you and your partner will be lobbed in and what your options are.

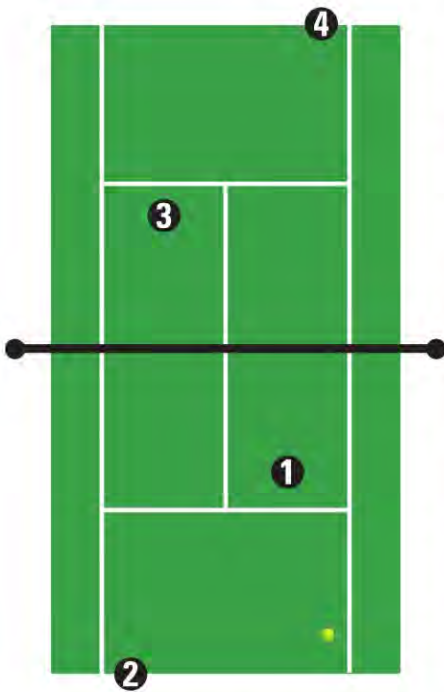
One-Up One-Back

The first situation that you or your partner will be lobbed in is a one up-one back scenario. The first person getting lobbed that comes to mind is obviously the net person, but lobs can travel cross court from back player to back player as well if neither is brave enough to come

COMMUNICATION AND PARTNER STRATEGY



Have player #1 take this lob as an overhead if possible



*Who should take this lob?
Answer: whoever can cover it the
easiest. Communicate!*

forwards to the net. So who should take the lob in this situation? It all depends on exactly how good of a position you and your partner are able to put yourselves in. If it's at all possible take this shot out of the air it should be done. Why? Because the whole purpose behind your opponents lobbing was to throw you into a defensive position and to give themselves time to improve their own places on the court. When you allow a lob to bounce you're giving your opponents a free amount of time to do whatever they like on the court. Not only this but by allowing the lob to bounce you or your partner have to travel farther and farther away from the net to finally hit the ball back, which again is a plus for your opponents. Don't give your opponents these advantages if you don't have to, take the ball out of the air whenever it's possible! So which player can take the ball out of the air most easily? That depends on where the ball is headed and exactly where you and your partner are on the court. If you're the net player and aren't any closer than the service line, with the lob landing right over the top of you, then obviously this shot is yours. What if the ball is traveling right over the middle of the court and either person can cover it? The rule of thumb here is that the person closest to the net should take the shot as often as possible, unless it's just not comfortable at all for them to do so. The reason for this is that the person closer to the net is in a stronger position, a place that's easier to attack towards your opponents. The closer you get to the net the more of the opposing side you can see, and therefore all kinds of put away shots become possible. This means that you should hit an overhead instead of a volley whenever possible as well, the higher contact point gives you more of a chance to attack! A lot of you may not be comfortable hitting your overhead, or may actually dislike it all together. Please, start spending time working on it in practice as often as possible. If you truly want to become the best doubles player possible you're going to want that overhead as confident as possible. High level doubles points very, very rarely end with a winning lob. This is partially because high level players move and communicate very well and also because their overheads are deadly from anywhere on the court.

So what if the lob is exceptionally well hit and try as he might, the net player just can't get a racket on it before it bounces. This is exactly what the lobbing team was hoping for, you and your partner are really in a tough spot now. Much like the easy ball come directly down the middle with both players up at the net there is no definite rule for who should take the shot, but one thing is for sure: both players absolutely have to make an initial move towards the ball and start communicating immediately. These two areas are where most errors will be made, either one of the players assuming that the other will have the shot or both players making a move towards the ball without talking at all and mass confusion breaking out when they both get there and nobody knows what's going on. Avoid these two amateur mistakes at all costs! Once you've both made your move towards the ball and you're talking things out, try your best to find out who's going to have a better angle to

angle to hit this shot back from. This is usually really obvious, but not always.

If you're the net player who's turned around and ran back for the lob make sure that you're not running directly under the ball as it comes down to bounce, circle around the ball either to the left or to the right so that it can be hit from as comfortable a position as possible, as a ground stroke ideally. Running directly at the ball results in you facing it as it comes down and having to try an over the shoulder type shot which is extremely tough to make much less hit in such a way that it challenges your opponents (who should now be at the net if they're smart). If you can get to the side of the ball but it's still slightly behind you definitely play a high, defensive lob aiming over the center of the court. Buy yourself some time and play it safe, this is no time for heroics and crazy low percentage shots. If you're fast enough or the lob was high enough to not only get around it to the side of your body but you're also behind it as it comes down from the bounce you can actually play a drive or topspin ground stroke. Where you aim this depends on the position of your opponents. If one of them is still back at the baseline then you have a nice safe opening on that half of the court. If they're both up at the net then pick the person who's further away to aim at, trying not to give him or her a high volley to put away. Of course you can always lob this shot as well if both net players are solid and able to put volleys away easily, pick the person who's closest to you and try your best to do what they just did to you.

If you're the back person and are covering back behind your partner who was at the net the ball should most likely be setting up to be to the side of your body automatically as you move yourself over to that half of the court. Yell to your partner to "switch" sides and then drive the ball towards the person furthest away from you, or lob the person who's closest. Much like the net player coming back if you can barely get to the shot or if you're out of position playing a high, defensive lob is always a great option. Stay in the point and try to regain control of it.

Double up-lob.

When both players are at the net and a lob goes up things can get kind of tricky. Very much like other situations that we've discussed deciding who takes the ball depends on a lot of variables. If the lob is easy and clearly to one player or the other then obviously that person should take it, always out of the air if possible. If it's unclear who is better positioned to take the lob then follow the same general guidelines as the easy volley down the middle of the court: both players should make a move towards the ball, talk it out, and then decide who should take it based on who gets in position faster or who really feels like they have the best play at it (communicated to his or her partner verbally). I've been in many situations where both my partner and I had our forehands in the middle of the court (I'm left handed). When a lob goes up I've very often called my partner off of it even if they're closer to the ball than I am

because my overhead was feeling particularly good that day, it's typically one of my most confident shots. These are the types of considerations that you should be aware of and take into account when a lob goes up over both you and your partner.

What if it's a difficult lob? Much like in previous situations early movement and good communication is absolutely vital. Hopefully as you both hustle towards the ball it becomes obvious who is better positioned to take the shot. If it's not obvious then continue to talk and tell each other who you think should take it. Words like "mine" and "yours" should be used early and loudly, make sure to communicate as clearly as possible. Much like before, taking the ball out of the air is preferable in this situation, even if it means hitting a difficult or uncomfortable overhead or high volley. I often tell students that I'd much rather have them take the ball out of the air in a tough position than let it bounce and hit it from behind the baseline in a comfortable one (which is awfully tough to do anyway). Don't give your opponents the time that it would take to let the ball bounce, nor give them the court real estate by running all the way back to the baseline. Also like before move around the ball in a half circle so as to make contact at the side of your body, rather than running directly back at it where an over the shoulder type shot would be needed.

Switching

When a good enough lob is hit that one player must cross over to the other half of the court to cover behind his or her partner you should usually "switch" with them, meaning that they also cross the center of the court to go to the side that you just left behind. This is not always necessary when covering behind your partner, sometimes only a step or two across the center of the court is needed to cover a lob hit over them after which you can simply go back to your own side of the court. However, when you find yourself moving completely over to their side of the court it isn't practical to move all the way back again after playing the shot behind your partner, plus it's quite possible that they will become an obstacle for your shot once you get there. Whether or not a switch is needed is a judgment call that should be made as early as possible, and just like calling who should take an overhead should be communicated loudly and clearly. Simply yelling "switch" is definitely enough, letting your partner know that you won't be making the trek back to your original side. The person who is covering behind their partner is responsible for calling the switch as they need to make the judgment call about whether or not they will have enough time to get back to their own side.

After a weak lob

Another great time to talk on the court is after hitting a weak lob into the air, one that will certainly be hit aggressively towards your partner who is at the net. Since the ball is coming off your racket you will definitely have the first indication of how good or bad your lob is going to be. If you

feel immediately that the shot was hit off center, or if it's obvious that it wasn't struck firmly enough to travel over your opponents head letting your partner know about it right away is definitely a great thing to do. If you don't alert them to the poor shot they will certainly become an easy target as they stay in their position close to the net. Letting them know immediately can give them a few extra seconds to scoot back towards the baseline in order to give themselves some extra time to react to the oncoming attack.

Talking On The Court

Watch college or professional doubles and you'll see huge amounts of communication between points. Just like any other successful partnership in life, whether it be business, marital, or social, doubles partners have to continue to talk to each other through out every state of a match to be able to effectively plan for the present and future. I have definitely watched many recreational level tennis matches in which a doubles team literally didn't talk to each other at all, or even worse played through a whole match with obvious tension between them almost as if there were two different singles players out there, no cohesiveness at all. Here are some tips and pointers to improve your communication with your partner.

How Often To Talk

When it comes down to it every individual player and every doubles team is going to need communication at different intervals. Some players really want to feel connected with their partner during a match and will thrive on constant interaction with them. Others will feel very content sticking to themselves for the most part, with a little meeting every game or two. I strongly suggest that you find a doubles partner to play with that fits your personality in this area, somebody that you genuinely enjoy spending time with on the court and vice versa.

When you watch professional doubles on TV or in person you will typically see some kind of interaction between every single point. Usually this consists of a quick hand slap and a word of encouragement, other times a mini strategy session is in order and both players will stand still with hands over mouths for secrecy as they formulate a game plan for the next point or series of points. If you're unsure what your ideal frequency of communication is on the court as a player then go ahead and begin interacting in at least some small way between every point and back down from there until you feel as though you've reached a comfortable level between yourself and your partner. I would strongly encourage you to error on the side of over communication and supporting your partner more often than they actually need, this would certainly be preferable than the opposite side of the spectrum.

What To Talk About

It's extremely important to you and your partner put your heads together

and have frequent chats about what both of your opponents are doing well and doing poorly. What their strengths and weaknesses are should mold your tactics as the match continues on and without having a clear picture of what these are will probably result in a poor or unchanging strategy by you and your partner. During competitive match play I begin talking about this before the match even starts as we casually warm up on the court. If you watch a lot of tennis then I'm sure you can quickly pick things out such as a big serve, poor overhead technique, or slow footwork. Please do not keep these things to yourself! Talk to your partner pointing these qualities out about the person that you're warming up with and get a similar report from them. If as the match progresses it turns out your initial impression was incorrect, or one or both players start performing differently then hopefully that line of communication has remained open.

So you've been a great doubles partner and have noticed several weaknesses in the game of your opponents, maybe one or two shots each that the opposite team doesn't handle particularly well. What exactly do you do with this information? Start putting together a battle plan as soon as possible! Taking this vital information and formulating planned plays with your partner is how top level doubles teams operate, if you and your partner don't do this then you're quite simply leaving points on the table. Basically you want to find out which shots or series of shots your opponents dislike hitting the most, and then strategize and choose your tactics in such a way that they have to hit those shots as often as possible.

Some doubles teams like to use signals before each point to let each other know if they're poaching or staying, and also what target they plan on aiming for with their serve. Signals are great, but physically talking these things out between every point is a bit more fail safe and promotes good teamwork. Make sure to have a reason why you're calling for the series of decisions that you're about to put into play. Has a certain pattern been working over and over again? Suggest to your partner that you run that play again. Are your opponents starting to catch on to the pattern of shots that you've used many times during the match? Time to mix things up and give them a different look, making them adjust their game plan all over again. These are things that you should literally be talking about with your partner after each point. I'm not suggesting that these conversations take five minutes, in fact it should only really take 5 or 10 seconds at the very most, a quick opinion about what play should be run with a possible interjection or suggestion from the other player is all you need. Once you're both in agreement on what tactic to use in the coming point head out for battle and stick with it!

One of the most important things that you can possibly do in terms of communication in doubles is to encourage and support your partner no matter what is happening during your match. Just about the worst thing that you could do is show any sign of disappointment after they miss or

to reprimand them after making a choice on the court that you didn't feel was the smartest play. Rather than be negative, be positive to help get their spirits right back up again after a poor miss, or to suggest to them in an upbeat way what they should try doing next time they find themselves in that situation. Very often players appreciate and enjoy physical gestures of confidence and support as well. While playing in college I always got a boost out of slapping hands with my partner in between points, even after points that we lost due to a poor shot as a way to get picked back up again emotionally. Of course everybody is different when it comes to exactly how outgoing they are, some players would rather be left alone to do their own thing and concentrate on their game, I strongly suggest that you pay close attention to your partner to try and learn what they appreciate and don't appreciate on the court between points during a match.