

Beginner Through Intermediate Pickleball Strategies

By
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Play Steady: The team with the most unforced errors loses. Not the team with the fewest winners.

Never Miss Your Serve because you are hitting too hard, an especially important part of the game. Your opponents only need a pulse to win the point if you miss the serve. Give them a chance to lose. Also, your partner will lose confidence in you if you keep missing your serve.

After serving, step back one step behind the baseline. There are two reasons for this. (1) The ball must land in front of you not at your feet. (2) It will be easier to see if your opponents return is going to be out. If your opponent has the ability to hit a drop shot, be prepared to quickly run forward.

Placement is more important than power.

Keep the ball as low as possible for every hit, unless you must make a defensive lob.

Place the ball at the opponent's feet or bounce the ball right beside your opponent. He must hit the ball up, which quickly puts him on

the defensive and you on the offensive. The team which must hit the ball up most of the time will lose. Keep the ball at your opponent's feet no matter where he is on the court.

Only hit the ball as hard as you can control the placement. Do not sacrifice placement for power. Hit $\frac{3}{4}$ winners unless you get a put away shot for a full power winner.

When serving, keep the ball deep to the opponent's backhand. Serve fast only if you never miss your serve.

When your serve is returned, try to place a soft shot in the no volley zone (kitchen). Do not try to overpower your opponent with a very fast passing shot, unless you are an advanced player and you feel you can win more than half the points in this manner. Both opponents are already at net, and it would be a very low percentage shot. A low soft shot is important because it gives you time to get to the net and not be on the defensive. More points are won when returning serve because the first team that gets to the net usually wins the point. If you can win 6 out of 10 points with any other strategy, go for it.

When an opponent is planted at the net and you can't make a shot at his feet, the next best place to hit it is at the right hip pocket of a right-handed player. This is a very difficult shot to return.

When making a lob, lob over your opponent's backhand side.

The safest place on the court to bounce the ball is soft, low and in the middle of the no volley zone. With this placement, your opponent may hesitate, thinking that his partner will hit the ball. Hit the ball soft so your opponents will have no pace to work with. This is the highest percentage shot.

Patience is a virtue in pickleball

Do not try to win the point from the baseline. Just hit the ball softly and bounce the ball in the no volley zone and follow it to net.

Pick a good time to move forward, not when your opponent has an easy shot. Every second that you are playing, your goal should be to get to the net on a minimum of one step forward and split step at every touch of the ball by your opponent. Split step is when both feet are side by side and shoulder width apart.

When at the net be patient. Keep hitting the ball soft back into the no volley zone until your opponents make the mistake of hitting the ball too high. Do not go for the kill unless the ball is at least 12" above the net. Eighty-Five percent of your shots should be volleys standing within 12 inches of the no volley zone. Do not try a tough angle shot until you have drawn your opponents out of position. Keep

blasting the high balls at your opponents' feet until they miss it. Never try an angle shot or difficult shot when the ball is below the net. Be defensive. Try a lob when your opponent least expects. It is also a very effective shot.

Return of Service

Never try for a pure winner. Do not make an unforced error. Keep the ball deep, slow and low to the opponent's backhand. Slow to give you plenty of time to set up at the no volley zone line.

Change spin occasionally (top or underspin). It will cause some opponents to make mistakes at times.

Once in a great while, when ahead, hit fast return of serve for a change up when you feel your opponents will least expect it.

Place the return down the middle, slightly closer to the back hand player. Both opponents may think the other will take the shot.

Wait for the serve 12" or more behind the baseline so that the ball will bounce in front of you, not at your feet for a difficult shot. If your opponent has a very fast and deep serve, you may have to wait about 3 feet behind baseline.

Have a mental note in your mind of players who do hit soft, short serves. Watch the face of the server's paddle and be ready to sprint in and split your feet for the short return.

If one opponent is weaker than the other, hit the return to weakest opponent's backhand until you get ahead a few points.

When the better of your two opponents least expects it, hit a shot to him deep to his backhand. The element of surprise can help.

How to Play Net

Never step into the no volley zone with both feet. If a ball should bounce close to the net in the NVZ, keep one foot planted outside the NVZ line and lunge forward like a sword fighter. Tip the ball over the net into your opponents' NVZ and quickly recover with both feet outside your NVZ line. If a player steps into the NVZ with both feet, it will take twice as long to get back out. A player cannot touch the ball in the air when any part of his body is in the NVZ. Good footwork at the net in this situation can shorten the

time a player is in a vulnerable position.

The team that plays from the baseline exposes their feet to their opponents and will lose to a team as good as or better than they are.

Make sure that your opponents are worried that you may poach. You are not doing the job if you are not giving head and shoulder fakes at the net. Occasionally poach just to make your fakes seem believable.

If your partner is drawn out of the court on his side, you must move over to protect his area until he can get back into the court. If you think that you are playing an intelligent opponent, then give a head and shoulder fake, giving the impression that you are moving to cover for your partner. Don't move from your position, however, and your opponent will probably put the ball on your paddle.

If you hit a very high short lob from up close to net and you are exceptionally fast on your feet, then the percentages play is to drop back to the baseline and play your opponent's overhead. If you are not able to quickly retreat to the baseline, then hold your position at the net with your paddle in the ready position and on your toes. If the ball is hit at your feet while you are backpedaling and only halfway to the baseline, it is almost impossible to return. Do not leave your position at the net unless you are 100% confident that you can retreat to the baseline with enough time to prepare for your opponent's overhead.

If the ball is lobbed over your head at the net, your partner should yell "I got it" and run behind you. At the same time, you should switch sides of the court. If you feel you can make an excellent overhead, call off your partner early.

If a ball is hit straight over your head and your partner isn't running back to help you, then run back parallel to the ball so when you get to the ball, you can hit a deep forehand lob. Do not turn 180 degrees and run straight back after the ball, because you will not be in a good position to hit the ball when you get to it.

Never hit an overhead shot unless the ball is high enough. You should hit the ball at the highest point you can reach on the center of your paddle or you must take a volley shot.

When hitting an overhead point, point your shoulder and your finger of your left hand up at ball until just before you contact ball. Keep your head up until ball is long gone. Pronate your wrist and paddle just before you contact ball for a more disguised and powerful overhead. Hit at opponents' feet wherever they are standing.

If your opponent is moving away from the net near the baseline or your opponent never comes to the net, these are the times to try drop volleys if you have a good drop volley.

Most drop volleys are placed near the post on the side of the court from which your opponent had just retreated to the baseline to return your team's lob shot. If you feel his partner has been anticipating your drop volley, don't place your drop volley by the post, place it half way back from the net and baseline so that the net person must run away from the net to play the ball. It is much more difficult to hit a shot when moving quickly away from net than towards the net. Many times the player who just ran way back for the lob will recover and get in the way of his partner trying to help him out.

If you feel an opponent is anticipating your shot by watching the face of your paddle and moving before you make contact, then have your paddle face straight ahead and then at the last second, go cross court before your opponent has time to react. Do not have your paddle "read" cross court then try and surprise your opponent and go down line because paddle must be brought back first and the extra time it takes gives your opponent more time to react to your fake.

Be prepared early. If you hit a fast volley to your opponent, you must prepare your paddle face for the next shot faster. The faster you hit, the faster you must prepare.

If you are playing a former racquet ball player (who very quickly flicks his paddle at the ball), you must prepare your ready position even earlier or you will be late punching your volleys or ground strokes.

Give your partner a second opinion on whether a ball is in or out. Do it early enough to give him time to back away from it.

Be patient and wait for a ball that is 12" or higher over the net before trying to hit a winner. Always go for your opponents' feet, no matter where they are on the court. Foot shots are much safer than angle shots.

Only try angle shots if you get a sitter and feel that you are 150% sure that you won't make an unforced error. A sitter is an easy shot.

If you are playing properly, eighty-five percent of all your shots and your partner's shots should be volleys no further back than 12" from the no volley zone. Ground strokes are only used when returning a serve, hitting the return of your serve, or if opponent lobs and pulls you away from the no velley zone line. Get back to NVZ line as fast as you possibly can.

Do not hit shots down sideline unless:

Your opponents poach.

Your team is favored to win.

Your team has a good lead.

You have an easy ball to hit.

You want to keep your opponents honest when they are close to center court.

Your opponent's backhand is to the outside of the court and he is the weaker player.

A soft ball down the line is just as good, if not better, and if you can bounce the ball beside your opponent and be ready to jump on a ball hit 12" above the net.

If you make contact on a shot outside the sideline, try a shot around the post deep to the baseline corner, or put up a very high lob to give yourself time to recover. If you don't think that you will be able to recover, try to finish point with pure winner.

If you are stretched out to your limit when volleying, always go down the line in the direction that you are stepping. The shot will have more power and be more consistent. A good example would be the same as in softball, when a pitcher pitches the ball to the outside corner of the plate, the right-handed batter has a better chance of hitting the ball to right field.

Every once in a while, change the spin and speed of all your shots. The element of surprise will pay dividends.

Get back to the ready position (See "Volley Tips") quickly after every ground stroke and especially volleys with your paddle way out in front of your body.

When volleying, keep elbow in tight in front of your hip with paddle head above wrist for better ball control. Never drop the head of the paddle on low shots. You must keep skin wrinkles on your wrist at point of contact.

Try and keep your head and eyes behind ball at ball height when hitting a volley.

Bend your knees on all low shots. Your back knee should almost be touching the ground. Stay down all the way through your shot and keep your head down and eyes looking at ball contact point long after ball has been hit.

Do not swing at your volleys unless you are an advanced player and feel you can make more than half your swinging volleys. Punch them unless your opponent hits a very fast volley or overhead at close range at you. Then just set the height and angle of your paddle and block the shot low to your opponent's feet. Beginner pickleball players have a tendency to swing at their volleys and punch the ground strokes which should be just the opposite. There is not enough time to swing at most volleys and you lose your consistency when you swing and not punch the shot

by extending your arm from the elbow.

When you punch your ground strokes, you lose power and control.
Stroke your ground strokes for better placement and power.

Anticipating out balls

Try to anticipate when your opponents are about to hit an out of bound balls. Know when to expect an out of bounds ball before your opponents even touch the ball.

Things to take into consideration when anticipating an out ball from your opponent.

1. Is the wind at your opponent's back?
2. Is your opponent swinging real fast at the ball and is his contact point below net?
3. Is your opponent making a difficult shot on the full gallop?
4. Is he a very inconsistent player?
5. Is it a very hard and low percentage shot for you to try and return?
If so let it go. It may go out.
6. Keep an ear open for yell of "no" from your partner when he thinks the ball is out.

Hitting your opponents out balls builds confidence in your opponents and a good player will make an adjustment after realizing he has just hit an out ball. You will probably lose future points without him being penalized for hitting an out ball.

If you should play someone who always tries to hit everything, even your out balls then hit at that person much faster than you normally would. You have nothing to lose.

Be aware of where you are on the court at all times. This will help you to decide whether to hit or not to hit a ball.

If you stop hitting your opponents out balls your percentage of wins will rise immediately.

Sometimes the best shot is no shot at all. When playing with a much better partner than yourself, let your partner take as many shots as he possible can, especially if he yells, "I have it." Chances are good you are probably going to get the lion's

share of all the hits anyway. So the more your partner touches the ball, the better chance you will win.

There should be only positive communication between you and your partner. "Good try" "I have it" "Switch" "Yours" and "Bounce it" are as examples. Never say anything negative to your partner if he isn't doing well because it will just make things worse. It shows you are not a confident player, and you are looking for an excuse to lose.

The second to last shot before the end of a point by you or your partner usually decides if your team either wins or loses the point. If you do not keep your shot low enough or placed well enough and your opponent slams a shot at your partner and he misses, the shot, then the point was lost by you. Sometimes the point could have been lost by the third or fourth to last shot because the team never could recover from being put on the defensive earlier in the point.

Keep a book in your mind about the people that you play regularly. Know what they are good at and also know their weaknesses. Many players always make certain shots in particular situations, and if you can anticipate these shots, you will have an edge. For example, some players, when running in for a ball that bounces near the post in the no volley zone, always try a cross court topspin shot to the other post.

When your team is a heavy favorite, play a whole game without being interested about winning and concentrate on just placing every single ball at your opponent's feet or beside them. Practice not going for winners and being patient. No matter where your opponents are on the court, go for their feet. It is a safe shot, and it will steady your game and pay dividends.

Ready Position

A common mistake made while moving forward to net is not having your paddle in proper ready position. Many players have their paddles at their knees or below the net, not up and out in front of the body.

At the point when the ball contacts your opponents' paddle, you should be in your ready position: elbows and paddle out in front of your body, feet at shoulder width apart, side by side on your toes, not your heels, ready to move left or right. Never be moving at the point of contact of your opponent's paddle on the ball. No matter where you are on the court, stop and get into your ready position. Never sacrifice being ready, for positioning on the court. If you are not prepared early and properly to hit a ball, it doesn't matter where you are on court. You probably won't hit the ball properly.

Volley Tips

Use the continental grip. The point of the "V" between your thumb and index finger should be placed on top of the handle of the paddle when the face of the paddle is perpendicular to the ground.

When you are waiting for the ball, you should be in the "ready position." Your elbows should be out in front of your body, your feet should be shoulder width apart, and you should be on your toes. The head of your paddle should be higher than your wrist. You should see wrinkles on your wrist. Never drop the head of your paddle and let those wrinkles disappear. The angle of the face of the paddle should be slightly open (1 o'clock to 7 o'clock).

When you strike the ball, you should point your front shoulder in the direction you want the ball to go and open or close the face of the paddle to set the angle of the paddle. Keep a firm wrist and extend your arm from only the elbow joint, using a jab motion. Setting the angle of the paddle and the jab motion are two completely separate motions. First aim the paddle early. Then jab from the elbow joint.

Keep the butt of the paddle level to the ground all the way through the jab. (Adjust only the angle of the face of the paddle).

Always make contact with the ball as far out in front of your body as you possibly can for more power and more control of placement.

At the exact point of contact with the ball make a sound to yourself. This will help prevent you from making one of the biggest mistakes made while playing pickleball, not watching the ball hit the paddle.

After the point of contact, keep your eyes focused on the contact point during your follow through.

Return to the ready position quickly after each volley.

The harder you hit your volley the faster you must return to the ready position.

Never let the face of the paddle of your paddle drop below your wrist on low volleys. Bend your knees so that your back knee is almost touching the ground. Your fist or the butt of the paddle must almost touch the ground. Keep you head and body down all the way through the follow through. Stay down; don't come up too soon.

If you don't have time to step to the ball, at least turn your upper body and point your front shoulder in the direction you want the ball to go. If you don't have time to turn your shoulders, then from the ready position keep a stationary wrist with paddle parallel to the net and block the fast shot over the net.

Keep your volley low to your opponent's feet or bounce the ball on the court exactly beside him.

Hitting your right handed opponent's right hip pocket is not as good as hitting his

feet or hitting exactly beside him, but it is very effective.

Hitting down the middle is a high percentage shot and is much safer than a wide angle shot.

After each volley move forward one step toward the no volley zone. Stay about 12 inches from the no volley zone line so that you have space to step to the ball when volleying.

Always allow for error never aim for the line itself.

No matter where you are on the court, always split step, putting your feet side by side and shoulder width apart, at the point of your opponent's contact with the ball. This allows you to move in either direction equally well. Do not sacrifice being balanced and ready for position on the court.

Step toward the post in either direction and cross step when the ball is hit out of your reach. Do not move your back foot and lose your position on the court. Cross stepping makes you a foot taller and gives you a wider range of coverage.

A side step first combined with a cross step is sometimes necessary and effective.

Keep your elbows high when hitting the ball down the sideline.

Follow through a little shorter for a straight volley down the sideline.

When stretched to your limit to the right, volley down the right sideline. Go with the pitch.

On a cross court volley make contact a little farther out in front of you.

Use a drop volley if your opponent stays at the baseline.

At the point of contact on a touch shot squeeze your pinky middle finger and ring finger. This will help you keep a firm wrist.

On the back hand volley keep your knuckles lined up with the paddle face in the direction you want the ball to go and keep the handle slightly ahead of the paddle.

Make your opponent hit the ball to you. Make a head and shoulder fake in one direction and hold your position on the court. Your opponent will think that you are going to move down the net and he will hit the ball to you. Occasionally you will have to poach to make your fakes believable.

You must use an aggressive jab when volleying a ball with a heavy spin.

One of the most common mistakes players make is swinging at their volleys and punching their ground strokes. It should be the other way around.

The difference between an overhead and a volley is the height at which the ball is when you make contact with it. If the ball is below the highest point at which you

can reach it with the center of your paddle, you should use a volley shot. If it is above that point, you should hit an overhead shot. On too low a shot you will not be able to fully extend your arm and will probably put the ball in the net.

Be the Best Player You Can Be

Find someone of your ability that appreciates the importance of practicing.

If you want to play your best, you must know the importance of practice, as well as playing the game.

A player should learn proper footwork to become a better player. Learn to cross step, side step and split step. Good footwork makes for easier court coverage, wider range, and better balance and shots.

You must practice a soft game at the net until you are so confident that you think that you could do it perfect for five minutes if needed.

Break the game down into segments.

Ground strokes, corner to corner and down the line.

Volleys: One player at the net and the other at the baseline. Volley balls hit from different angles. Both players volley and practice short game.

One player lobs the ball to player at net who hits overhead shots from different angles. Play points out using one-half doubles court. Go from corner to corner, not keeping score without serving and then with serving. Points should not be counted because a player tends to try to win by doing only the things that he does well, rather than practicing things he doesn't do well.

After practicing for a long period of time, play a singles match using only half of the doubles court and keeping score. Try to move your opponent around the court and out of position with ball placement and the other strategies presented earlier.

After practicing the whole game in segments, the game becomes an extension of practice and you play better Pickle Ball.

If you cannot make a specific shot at least six out of ten times, do not try this shot in a game until in practice you can make it consistently. Four out of ten tries is just enough to lose the game. Shot selection at key times in the game is very important. Know the shots that you are very consistent with and use them at key times in the game. Give your opponents a chance to lose. Don't beat them to it.

All strokes taken with your pickleball paddle are technically the same as all the tennis strokes with one exception, the serve. The only differences between the two

are the feel of the ball on the paddle and the distance from your hand to the contact point of the ball on the paddle. .A person wanting to improve his pickleball strokes should read tennis books and magazines and become a student of the game.

Miscellaneous Tips

Determine if your opponents are left-handed before the start of the game so that you won't be hitting to their strength.

Hit a few high lobs before game to evaluate direction of wind and speed. During every second of an important game, keep the wind direction in mind. It will give you points. Steady your game by playing the wind to your advantage. Beginner and intermediate players would hit less out balls if they hit into the wind. Advanced players are better qualified to play the wind. It is always better to be hitting into the wind. It can help you and hurt you, but mostly help you over the whole game especially during a fast wind.

The easiest grip to use is the Continental Grip (See "Volley Tips"). This grip is halfway between the Eastern Forehand Grip and the Eastern Backhand Grip. A player never has to change his grip on the paddle. The volley, serving, overhead and ground strokes are all the same using the Continental Grip.

Most Pickle Ball players only keep one hand on the paddle when making their shots. A player can have much greater control hitting the ball if he uses two hands to steady the paddle before hitting the ball.

If you have a wet grip problem on hot, humid days, wear a wrist band and buy some tennis overgrips for your paddle handle. Gamma Pro Wrap overgrips are about \$1.00 each, shipping included. Check back pages of tennis magazines for telephone numbers of suppliers.

Be Fair

Before starting each game, let your partner know that you don't mind his overruling any call you make as long as he is 100% sure you were wrong. If one person on a team feels a ball was in and the other doesn't, then the point goes to the other team. If your feelings about the score or whether the ball is in or out are different from the other three players on the court, then right or wrong, you should concede.

Have Fun!

It is only a game.

The reader is free to share any of the contents of this book with fellow pickleball players. Any use of any part of this book for profit of any kind is not permitted without the express written consent of Mr. Richard Movsessian.

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