

Doubles Strategy: The Net is Your Friend

Most of the professional tennis you see on TV is singles, and you can learn a lot from watching these matches, but the majority of recreational tennis players play doubles. The game of singles is very different from the game of doubles and mixed. The fact that you are a very good singles player does not mean you will automatically be a great doubles player.

Doubles is a game of teamwork and strategy in a race to control the net. If you want to hang around the baseline in doubles, you will be mildly successful if you have a great lob and passing shots. As you improve and advance through the higher levels, your baseline game will not win you as many matches as a good net game.

The great doubles players of all time have superb volleys, making each shot look effortless. Think about that when you hit a volley. Does it look effortless? The answer for most players is "no". We try to do too much with the volley, and end up taking a big swing that sends the ball to the fence or in the bottom of the net. The key to better volleys is to keep it simple, with little or no backswing. Always remember that the closer you are to net, the shorter your backswing should be.

Execution of the volley is also simple. Keep a firm wrist and punch through the ball. You don't need to jump or fall backwards, and you don't want to lay your wrist back because this makes it harder to control the ball. Remember that you can use your opponents power when hitting back a volley, so you don't have to generate your own. The best places to go, depending on your opponents position, are deep and down the middle, or an angle out wide.

Positioning in doubles is also key, especially at net. You need to be aware of where your partner is, and where your opponents are. You can play both up, both back, and one up one back. Most good doubles teams will use these formations multiple times in just one point because they are always adjusting. If you keep your opponents deep, then you can close in on the net. If you give your opponents a mid-court ball, then you may want to back off the net a few steps. In either case, you must always be prepared to move back for a lob.

The more you play net in doubles, the more comfortable you will become. **A key to winning at the net is having good anticipation and being balanced so that you can move in any direction.** Your position on the doubles court is not fixed, and should move with the ball. As the net person, you are responsible for 75% of the points on your partner's serve. Most players are good enough to hit their returns crosscourt, so that means you will have to move to the ball. If they consistently hit a floater, be aggressive and poach to take that ball out of the air for a winner.

As you learn to be more aggressive at net, don't be afraid to make mistakes. Even if you hit long or wide, your opponents will remember that you were there for the shot and it will force them to think about it. That can make all the difference in some matches, just the fact that you are a presence at net.

Doubles is a great game for social and competitive players. Regardless of your playing ability, most all of the action happens at net, which is where you should be if you want to win.

Tennis Doubles Strategy

I will describe two aspects of tennis: the theoretical ideal, and the actual, because the ideal strategy and the best practical or actual strategy are not always the same, particularly in doubles. A strategy that is great for great players may actually be a terrible strategy for players who are not as capable. So beware of general advice about doubles strategy, including what I say here. You have to find what works for you, which may not be what works for top pros.

The reasons I am describing both kinds of strategies are:

- (1) so you will see you need to think for yourselves on the court, and not just blindly follow principles or instructions that really should not apply to your own game,
- (2) so you will recognize when your opponents are blindly following such principles and thus know what to do to outplay them, and
- (3) so that you will see that as your game and tennis skills (and those of your opponents) improve, you will need to change your strategies accordingly.

Even in singles, even at the very highest level, strategy in tennis can be important. Arthur Ashe beat Jimmy Connors in the finals at Wimbledon one year though Ashe was a real underdog. Connors hit really strong, deep shots to the corners against everyone, and that was really difficult to beat. Connors was the dominant player in tennis at that time. Ashe played a strategy Connors had not been faced with previously, and that he could not adjust to during the match. Ashe hit lots of balls with very little depth or pace, and Connors ended up not being able to drive the ball with his usual stroke and keep it in. He hit lots of balls long, and he hit lots of balls into the top of the net because he was having to hit from a lot closer to the net than he was used to and because he had a very flat stroke.

However, at the highest levels of tennis, **while strategy is still potentially important**, as in the above Ashe-Connors match, **often it will take a back seat to power and reflex if one side really outmatches the other**, or if both (sets of) opponents have such power and reflexes that the game is more or less defensive on both sides with neither having time or enough control to execute anything they plan. But at the high school level, unless you are just totally outclassed by your opponents' ability, strategy should matter almost as much, if not more, than skill, particularly in doubles.

Theoretically in tennis, singles and doubles, **the server controls the point**(1) from the very beginning, and theoretically should be able to win every point by serving an ace. That, of course,

doesn't happen, even with the best players. Still, with really good players, the server is normally expected to win almost every game because a good serve, even if not an outright ace or service winner, usually puts the returner at such a disadvantage that the server should be able to stay in control of the point long enough to be able finally to put the ball away. That is why at the pro level, service "breaks" are so important; just losing one service game in a set will often be enough to cost you the set. However, as the skills of the players on each side are less, the less important "breaks" are, since they may be as common, or even more common, than the number of times one holds serve. **But the idea is to strive to be a player who can control most points, especially when you are serving.**

In singles, the ideal offensive point, other than an outright ace or service winner(2), is 1) serve, followed by 2) mediocre or weak return, that 3) the server then puts away as s/he comes in. On grass courts, such as Wimbledon, this is a very common course of a point because on grass good returns are very hard to hit well against a good serve. The next most ideal offensive point is 1) serve, followed by 2) a pretty decent return but one that the server can still control well enough to hit a strong approach shot(3) as s/he comes to the net, so that 3) the returner hits back a shot that 4) the server can then put away at the net. This is also fairly common on grass courts, and is somewhat common on hard courts. Clay courts slow the ball down enough on the bounce that they tend to allow the returner to neutralize the initial advantage of the server and make the point depend on the relative skill of the players in their ground strokes.

In singles, the ideal defensive point is to drill the serve back for an outright winner. The second most ideal defensive play is to return the serve in such a way that the returner now has taken control of the play and has put the server on the defensive, thus allowing the returner to get better and better position until s/he can put the point away. The third best thing to do is to return the serve, or any subsequent shot, in such a way that makes both players have about equal advantage for the rest of the point, thus robbing the server of his/her initial quite strong advantage.

In doubles, the way this sort of thing works is even more important **because having four people on the court cuts down on the number of "safe" places there are to hit returns, and tends to make "control of the point" more crucial**, because unsafe returns leave control in the hands of the opponent. So let me describe the ideal doubles points, and then go on from there to discuss actual or practical doubles points and strategies.

The ideal offensive doubles point is still, of course, a service ace or a service winner. Great serve, point over. There is a potential problem with this approach as a doubles pursuit in particular, however, which I will describe in a moment.

The second most ideal offensive point (and perhaps the one actually best pursued in most doubles matches) is a good serve that the returner hits back fairly weakly for the partner of the server to

then easily put away, either by crunching it or by angling it in a way that neither opponent can get to it.

The third most ideal offensive point is a serve that, though it is returned fairly safely, still leaves "control" in the hands of the serving team. A typical sequence you will see in the pros is 1) serve, 2) return to the server as s/he comes in, 3) good approach shot by the server in reply, keeping the original returner back, or causing him/her to hit a weak enough shot that either the server or the server's partner can put away from near the net.

Conversely, **the best defensive play**, apart from a return hit for a winner, which, with any kind of a decent serve hit at you, is not easy to do because there aren't as many unguarded or "ungettable" places on the court in doubles as there are in singles, **is to hit a return that is hard for the serving team to hit back very strongly, thus letting one's partner hit their return for a winner.** The third best defensive play is to **hit a return that at least puts the serving team on the defensive and gives the returning team "control" of the point.** The fourth best defensive play is to hit a return or subsequent shot that at least neutralizes control of the point and puts both teams on an equal advantage for the remainder of the point.

The problem that I mentioned with a serving mentality in doubles that pursues aces or service winners on the first serve is that, unless one is really a good server, one will serve a lot of faults that way. This is not a problem if you have a good second serve, but if you hit a weak second serve after faulting on the first serve, you and your partner will likely lose the offensive advantage right away, because they will jump all over your weak second serves. Therefore the better offensive advantage may be not to try for as many aces as you just try for solid, safe, pressuring first serves that allow one's partner to make put aways off the return. In other words, **serve in such a way that you use your partner as a resource, instead of trying to do everything yourself by serving aces which just get you into trouble when they end up as faults.**

Of course, if you are such a good server that you can serve a lot of aces, or at least keep the ball in on a hard serve, or if you have a great second serve, go for the aces on the first serve. **What you don't want to do is to put yourself in a position to have to hit a lot of second serves if you hit very weak second serves. Tennis, particularly doubles, is a game of geometric angles and probabilities, and the way probability works is that it is often better to try to make a safe shot that applies a little pressure than to go for a risky shot that might look great, and be a winner if it is in, but which is not very likely to be in. In many cases you will win a higher percentage of points if you make solid, less risky shots, which apply pressure than if you try for winners that you are less likely to keep in.** (There are exceptions to this, as I say later -- depending on the score at the time, and depending on whether you are making a shot more to mess with your opponent's mind, so they can't see a pattern, than to win a particular point.)

One of the worst offensive things to do in singles or doubles, but particularly in doubles, **is to hit a lot of first serves out, then toss up weak second serves** that a returner can just jump all over to hit back for winners or to hit back strong enough to take control of, or dictate, the rest of the play of the point.

This last comment brings me to what I want to say about "actual" doubles, as opposed to theoretically ideal doubles. **Doubles is a team sport; two players who work together will usually beat two players who don't work together as a team, even if the latter are each better individual players than the ones who work together as a team.**

At the men's professional level in particular, the top doubles' teams seldom have players who are ranked very high in singles. There are exceptions, and in the women's game, often at least one of the doubles' players is also a great singles player. But even in the pro women's game, two players who can work well together will often beat two players who are individually better than they are but who don't work as well as a team.

But the concept of doubles as a coordinated, team, sport is particularly important at the lower levels of play.

The easiest way to see this is in the case of a weak (usually second) serve. If you let your partner stand at the net and you hit a weak second serve that allows the returner to tee off on it halfway to the net, your partner is dead meat. If you know you are going to hit a weak second serve, or that you always hit weak second serves, you need to let your partner know that ahead of time so s/he doesn't learn it the hard way after you have lost a couple of points and made him/her get hit with a bullet shot. You need to let your partner know to play back, unless they just have lightning reflexes and perfect skills at the net.

Similarly, if you let your partner know where you intend to serve the ball, it will help him/her position him/herself better. For example, if you want to kick a serve in the deuce court, way out to the left, your partner will probably want to position her/himself more to the left, to guard the line a bit more, and to be on the lookout to angle a net shot more to the diagonal of the court between the two players. If you intend to try to serve toward the middle of the court, your partner may want to guard more for returns likely to be back down the middle and to think about angling them off to the sideline of the returner who will be near the middle of the court.

If you are returning serve, it is often helpful to let your partner know where you are going to try to return the serve if you can, so that s/he can get optimal position on any likely follow-up shot. For example, if you are returning serve in the deuce court and intend to try to hit it down the (right) line because the server's partner tends to "poach" or "cheat" toward the center (that is, cut across into or near his partner's side in anticipation of a return's coming there), your partner will probably want to watch for a shot coming back from the netperson that is more toward the center

of the court. If you are going to try to hit a service return to the server's feet, near the center line, your partner will want to guard the spot the server is most likely to hit that shot back. If you intend to hit screamers right at someone at the net, your partner will look for weak returns close to that person. There are lots of places in doubles where, if you and your partner know what the other is going to do, you can position yourself more optimally.

So one of the important aspects in choosing up partners to play competitive doubles with is someone with whom you can get along well and communicate with well. If you don't like to communicate or coordinate plans with others, doubles may not be a good game for you, unless you and your partner just have extraordinary individual talent and your opponents do not play very well.

(A point of psychology: it is usually not good to upset your partner by being accusatory when s/he misses a shot. S/he probably did not miss it on purpose. Everybody misses shots. If you or your partner never missed a shot, you could be playing the pro circuit already. You need to get over your partner's mistakes, and you need to get over your own mistakes. Some people just go ahead and apologize once before the start of the match for all the mistakes they are going to make. Don't be saying how sorry you are for each one as it happens; that can be annoying to your partner. If you feel the need to say something or to gesture something to let them know you are upset with yourself, you can say "Aggg!" or "Shoot" or "Nuts" or whatever, but don't grovel. The exception to not upsetting your partner is that rare case where you feel they are just not concentrating in general and need to shape up and get their mind on the game. You might say that in a nice way at first, and then escalate if you have to. Sometimes making them a bit angry will help them play better, but that is a very risky thing to do both for the match and for your relationship, so unless you are absolutely sure you need to try to do that, don't. Strong encouragement is usually better than sarcasm or accusation. Remember, you are trying to make them play better, not wanting to destroy their game altogether.(4))

Of course, insofar as the other team is able to keep your partner from executing his/her plan, or insofar as your partner is generally unable to execute intended shots, knowing your partner's intentions may be of little use, but I am assuming that there will be many cases where your partner will be able to execute at least close to what s/he intends to do.

Which brings me to another fundamental point -- perhaps the most fundamental point at non-pro levels of tennis: **you need to conform your strategy to your own individual and team relative strengths and your opponents' relative weaknesses.**

For example, if neither of you can play net well at all(5), and miss almost every point that you play at the net because your opponents have pretty decent ground strokes, then either or both of you being at the net is probably a terrible mistake and a terrible game plan. A girl and I used to play men's double teams in the evenings at Wald Park when the lights were put up in the wrong

place (like they are at most of the Hoover public courts -- lighting up one side, outside rim, of the ball, instead of lighting the front of the ball coming toward you). The girl and I both had pretty strong ground strokes, and the lighting was so bad at the net, that there was almost no advantage to playing net. But the men would invariably come to the net because they thought that was the advantageous place to be. Perhaps normally it would be, but they hit such weak serves and ground strokes that could be handled, that we just played back, virtually inviting them to the net, and when they came in, we hit hard shots right at them, that they almost always missed. That only made them come in sooner on the next point, with the same result. They just thought they weren't ready soon enough at the net, instead of realizing they didn't have the reflexes to play net under those lighting conditions.

Theoretically, or with great players, both partners' being at the net is the strongest offensive position because it cuts off the most angles your opponents have to hit into your court and because it gives you the most angles to work with and them the least time to react to your shots, but, in real life, particularly with intermediate or novice players, it may not be the best when both of you are at the net. So if you know ahead of time that you are weak at the net, or if you find out in the course of a match that you are being eaten up at the net by your opponents even though you thought you were pretty decent at the net, but they are real strong, don't play net automatically. Only go into the net on strong approach shots. If you can drive them back and/or out of position to where they are likely to hit weak shots back near the net or not very deep, then if you both go into the net at that time, you will have a pretty decent chance at winning the point.

Normally, if you are not both going to be at the net, then it is usually better for you both to be back, staying parallel to the net with each other, going in to the net simultaneously as a team, rather than just one of you going in. You can signal or say to your partner "go in" (if you don't say it too loud while your opponent is getting ready to hit a shot) or you should go in if you see your partner going in. Sometimes you may start out at the net and your partner will be back, and you get into one of those kinds of points where they keep your partner back, unable to get into the net. In such cases, if you can, it is often better to also go back so you are parallel to the net with your partner. Once in a while, a point will start where you end up getting stuck at the net while your partner is playing back, and you don't have an opportunity to get back with your partner; but you generally don't want to stay in that position if you have any way of avoiding it, because that leaves too many open places on the court for your opponents to hit to, and it essentially makes the person playing back be playing singles against two people while their partner at the net is a useless spectator.

Some Specifics

So now, suppose you can play parallel with each other, and suppose you are fairly evenly matched with your opponents when you do play strategy, the question is what specifically should you do, or be looking for. The following are meant as suggestions, with the reasons given; if you find they work for you, great; but if they don't, try something else. Or invent something with your

partner -- all the time in practice trying to improve your skills so that opponent's strategies are less likely to be effective against you, and so that you can better execute shots and/or strategies the next time you compete.

The following are not in any particular order of importance:

1) **Try to notice patterns your opponents seem wedded to, and try not to fall into such patterns yourself** -- unless you want to fake them out by making them notice an apparent pattern that you then change at a crucial time. For example, in singles or doubles, you can hit serves, say, to their backhand after backhand after backhand, and then wide to their forehand when they seem to be leaning toward their backhand on the next serve. This sort of thing makes tennis as much a mind game sometimes as it is a skill game. If you can destroy your opponent's confidence, that can be an advantage for you in terms of momentum, and your own confidence.

2) Normally when you are parallel to the net you **will want to move in tandem to the left, center, or right of your side of the court**, as the ball you or your partner have just hit goes toward the left, center, or right. That is, when you pull your opponents out to the left, you will normally both want to play a bit more to the left of your part of the court to cut off the angles they have, and to leave the least amount of gap they can likely hit into. That is, if you are playing on the left side of the court, you will want to move near or into the doubles lane, and your partner should move near or just over the center line. **This cuts off almost any likely angle that your opponent could use to hit the ball back over the net (low) without either of you being able to hit it.** Similarly right, and center.

Conversely, if your opponents don't move toward the direction of the ball, or they don't move in tandem to the left, center, or right of their respective sides of their court, **look for the appropriate gaps they leave.** Obviously if they are both toward their respective sidelines, the center will be more open. If they both play toward the center, there may be good angles and gaps to hit to the sidelines. If you are hitting a ball from the right side of your court near the doubles lane, and they are both centered in their courts, you should have a pretty good angle to go down the line on them, particularly if you are near the forecourt or if you are angled wide outside the doubles boundaries.

3) **Don't forget to lob, at least some times**, if both opponents are near the net. Lobs accomplish a number of purposes even if you cannot hit "offensive" lobs for winners, but can only hit defensive lobs to keep the ball in play and keep them from hitting a winner at the net. **Lobs may keep them back on a future point**, if they can't be sure the net is a good place to be. Plus, it is my view that it is more taxing for most players to have to run in and back, in and back, then it is for them to run side to side. Players that can run side to side all day long often cannot be drawn in and lobbed back, drawn in and lobbed back for nearly as long a time without becoming tired.

Lobs are particularly effective if your opponents will have the sun in their eyes at the time. There is even a book by the great tennis player and coach Harry Hopman, Lobbing Into the Sun.

Try not to hit short lobs, however, particularly if your opponents have good overheads. They will kill you. **Practice being able to hit deep lobs over net players' heads and racquets.** Practice hitting lobs deep while you are running too, because often you will need to lob when you are running to get to a ball and your opponents have closed from the net. **If you can learn to hit topspin lobs, that will be great because topspin lobs can often change even a defensive lob into an offensive one.**

When you lob, **try to hit the lob over their backhand sides, because a high backhand shot is one of the most difficult for anyone to hit in tennis;** it is especially difficult for them to put any pace on it.

If you are playing any left-handers, notice that and think about what that means in terms of where there forehand side is and where there backhand side, because you may have to make yourself remember which is their forehand and which is their backhand side, since it will be the opposite of what you are used to. It is really frustrating to hit to their forehand side by mistake when you thought you were giving them a difficult backhand shot to hit.

4) **Try to figure out your opponents' shot weaknesses.** Does one or both of them have weak backhands, forehands, overheads, running shots, approach shots, returns of short balls, etc.? **Let your partner know what you learn. Play to those weaknesses** until and unless they can adjust for them.

5) See **how they react to shots down the center between them.** If neither of them moves, you can probably do that half the day or all day. If that is not a weakness of theirs, don't do it much. Conversely, **when shots go up the middle between you and your partner, my view is that both of you should swing at it,** unless you have practiced this situation so much that one of you always automatically takes this shot. Clashing racquets is okay. You just are not allowed to both hit the ball, but it is unlikely your swings will arrive at exactly the same time. So, if in doubt about who will take the shot up the middle, both of you should swing.

6) **When I play against a doubles team for the first time, I personally almost always hit my first return of the match back down the line, rather than back toward the server, if I have any sort of opportunity to do that with the ball that is served to me. I do that because almost every opponent believes the serve will be returned toward the server, since that is often the most pragmatic shot.** If I win the point, the server's partner will almost never "cheat" toward the center again, and that then opens up the center for me. If I lose the point, but only barely, by hitting the ball out, s/he is still not likely to poach or encroach toward the center again. So even a missed shot can be effective psychologically, and that can be important later in the match. If you

see the server's partner leaning or cheating toward the center, you don't even have to hit a down-the-line shot very hard in order to pass them; you can just guide it gently down the line and they won't be able to react. That will give you an even greater chance of keeping it in. If they don't cheat or lean toward the center, I will usually try to crunch the first serve down the line, or lob it over their head down the line. Even if the first serve comes to me near the center line, if the server's partner leaves me any sort of gap to the outside, I will angle for that. If not, then I will take the normal shot, which is to angle toward the server's side line, so that the server has to stretch to reach it. **The main thing is not to start returning everything up the middle, because they will start jumping all over those middle balls at the net.** My view is to **make them have uncertainty as to where to play from the very beginning.**

7) **Don't ever intentionally hit a short serve, or any short ball, while your partner is playing net in front of where it is going to drop -- unless your opponents are playing so far back that it is a highly effective drop shot they can barely reach.** If you just hit a weak short shot, when you didn't have to, that they can jump all over, you have simply given them target practice at your partner and have turned him or her into cannon fodder. On the serve, either have your partner come back, or, if it is not a crucial point, go ahead and hit a harder serve for your second serve. Especially if the returner is stepping up, anticipating a short second serve. That will make them think twice about your second serves from then on anyway -- especially if you get it in and they can't handle it very well.

8) **If you intend to "poach" into (or across) the center when your partner is serving, in order to cut off the opponent's return of that serve, let your partner know before s/he serves,** so s/he can run to cover the side of the court you vacate, instead of leaving it open because you both start to the same side of the court.

9) Try to **coordinate where you intend your serve or return of serve to go,** so that, as I wrote earlier, your partner can stand in the place most likely to deal effectively with any return of your shot that the opponents might hit.

10) The usual initial player positions you see in doubles are the server and the returner standing back, with their partners standing in closer to the net, at whatever distance they feel they can handle whatever might come their way. This particular distance from the net of the "net person" will vary with the speed of their partner's serve or their partner's likely return. **If your partner is really good, you can stand a bit closer to the net than if your partner is not real strong. If your partner is really weak, I wouldn't play net at all to begin with, but would move back even with your partner, coming in only on a strong approach shot.**

Normally the partner of the server will be close to the net, while the partner of the returner will initially stand back near the service line (in what in almost any other circumstance would be "no man's land" and the worst place to play). There are a number of reasons for standing here at first

when your partner is returning serve: (1) it allows you better to make the call of whether the serve is a fault by being long -- and in doubles where there are no linesmen, it is normally the returner's partner who is to call faults, particularly ones that are long, as opposed to wide. Either player can call any fault, but the idea is for the returner to be concentrating on the shot and let the partner call the faults. (2) More importantly, your standing by the service line will give your partner more open court to hit the serve back to, and that may make all the difference between his/her hitting a good return or a poor one. (3) It gives you a chance to return any shot that the server's partner at the net might hit that is not an outright put-away. If you are at the net and s/he barely gets a racquet on the return of serve, the ball will still likely go behind you and be difficult for you to handle, but if you start at the service line, you can hit almost any shot they hit from the net, unless they just crunch your partner's return. The important thing to remember, however, is not to stay back at the service line. **If your partner "clears" the server's partner at the net, move on up to the net immediately if that is where you are going to play. You only stay back near the service line for your partner's return of serve. Once that return has been made, then move either in closer to the net or back to the baseline.**

In the above initial starting position, the server (unless his partner poaches) usually follows up his/her serve to the net on the same side of the court from which s/he served.

(The returner of serve will then usually try to hit the serve back deep at the server or at his/her feet either to try to keep the server away from the net or to make him/her hit a weak shot that the returner's partner can put away. Another usual return attempt is to hit the ball wide toward the line on the server's side so that the server has to lunge at it and hit a weak return. The third possible return is to go down the line on the side of the server's partner, especially if that partner poaches or cheats in toward the center of the court. Finally, one can sometimes lob the ball over the head of the server's partner, particularly if one can hit an effective topspin lob. Topspin lobs are great because they dip inside the baseline and then kick hard toward the fence; they are extremely difficult to hit back, but they are also difficult to execute in the first place.)

However, there are other positions possible also. I think it is called "Australian" (though the name is not important) when the partner of the server stands at the net on the same side of the court as the server, with the server than moving forward diagonally after serving, so that the server changes sides of the court as well as moving toward the net. Sometimes this helps the server be able to hit the serve wherever s/he wants to without having to work around his/her own partner or worry about hitting his/her partner in the back or the ear.

One of the initial player positions I like to use when serving in the deuce court, because I like to spin the ball wide to the outside, is to have my partner start out way to the left, either in the doubles' lane itself or even out of bounds altogether (if I am going to kick it way left and short as a surprise drop shot), and then to move in as s/he sees where exactly the ball hits. This gives me

plenty of room as the server and gives my partner an early jump on cutting off any possible angle the returner might shoot for. There is no rule about where the partner of either the returner or the server has to stand -- in or out of bounds, as long as they are not in the opponents' court. They can start out anywhere they want to, from front to back or from side to side. They can even stand in a place that blocks the vision of the returner; it is the returner's problem to adjust to that.

And, as I said earlier, you can both start out side by side in the back court. No one needs to stand at the net to begin with, or any time. (In the 1972 Wimbledon doubles finals, Stan Smith, who had won the singles that year, was teamed with Jimmy Connors, who was a young and rising star in singles. They were playing two Australians who had won the doubles twelve thousand times, and as good as Connors and Smith were individually, they were being killed by the two Australians. Smith finally told Connors to play back, and they hit lobs that the Australians kept smashing, that they then lobbed back, etc. Smith and Connors still lost big, but at least that way the points took a few seconds longer. Playing from the backcourt did not really help them in that case, but it was the logical and legal strategy to try, given the way they were being pounded at the net. **At the high school level, both of you playing back until a good approach shot is made, can often be a strong plan.**)

11) When you coordinate plans before a point, make sure your opponents don't hear or see your signals. (Of course, if you want to get really tricky, you can agree to do the opposite of what you say, and then say something just loud enough that allows your opponents to think they have accidentally heard you, but that starts to become borderline unsportsmanlike.) The usual method is for you to talk with each other in the back court with both of you having your backs to the net. Or the net person may call the signals by turning his back to the opponents and making some sort of gesture in front of himself that the server can nod agreement to or can waive off till s/he gets a signal s/he likes.

12) If you and your partner use opposite hands (i.e., one of you is right-handed and the other left-handed), try to be sure you set up your service games so that neither one of you is having to serve looking into the sun. If you are not opposite-handed, try to let the person who will not be bothered by the sun as much on their serve be the one who serves from the sun field.

13) **It is my view that in doubles most people misname which is the "backhand" side and which is the "forehand" side. If you are right-handed and prefer to hit forehands, it seems to me that the left hand court (the ad court) will give you more right-handed forehands than will the deuce court, which most people, mistakenly I believe, call the forehand side.** If you are right-handed and play in the ad court, every ball up the middle will be to your forehand, whereas if you play in the right side, only balls hit wide will be to your forehand, and I think you are going to get more balls hit up the middle than you will get hit wide, unless you poach toward the middle of the court. Anyway, don't automatically assume the right side is a right-hander's "forehand side" and that the left court is his/her "backhand side".

14) In doubles you sometimes have the opportunity to hit the ball around the net post instead of over the net. That is perfectly legal, and makes an almost unreturnable shot if you keep it real low. E.g., if they pull you way out to the right, short, and you can hit the ball into their court by going to the side of the net post, take the shot that way, and keep it low. It will hardly bounce enough for them to be able to hit it at all. You just have to land your ball in their court, the same as if it had gone over the net.

Finally, tennis is a game, not only of strength, but of positioning. If you divide your opponent's side of the court into four quarters -- left, right, up, and back-- most people in singles can only cover two or three of those places at any one time even if they are fairly well-centered. If you can move them around a bit, you may get them into a position that they cannot cover more than one section of the court. The usual idea, short of being able to hit aces and strong winners just from sheer power, is to move your opponents out of position before they can move you out of position. In doubles, this is a bit more difficult because there are fewer places that cannot be covered. Still, if you play for positioning and maintaining control of the point so that you have the advantage in determining positioning, you will win more points. That means you do not necessarily have to hit balls hard. A well-placed lighter or shorter shot, even on the serve -- as long as it is not a "sitter" that they can just rip, can often be just as effective as a hard, strong, deep shot; it all depends on where your opponents are and what they can or cannot easily cover. Keep positioning in mind as much as you keep anything else in mind.

Article written by:
Rick Garlikov

1. **The notion of "control of the point" is, I think, extremely important.** "Control of the point" means that you can likely do almost anything you plan to with a given shot because you have time to hit the ball where you want to and the way you want to, putting your opponent in the position to have to react just as best they can -- where they are playing more on the defensive and are not likely to be able put you on the defensive during the point. When you are about to serve, you have control of the point, and depending on how good your serve and their return is -- in terms of pace, placement, and angles, you will either maintain control of the point or will have lost it. **Being in control of the point means being able to dictate the play of that point -- the positioning, pace, etc. -- being able to act on offense rather than just to react on defense.** The more times during a point that you have control of the point, the more likely you are to win that point. **That is why it is very important that you try to hit shots that have a purpose, instead of just hitting the ball back over the net and hoping your opponent will hit it out or into the net. You want your shots to be such that you are always applying pressure to your opponent in order to make his/her returns more difficult or impossible.** The server is theoretically always in control of the point from the beginning. **The idea is to have the skills and the strategies that don't relinquish that control when you are serving;** and that neutralize that control when you are returning serve. (Return to text.)

2. A service "winner" is a serve that the opponent barely gets his/her racquet on, but cannot hit back because the serve is too good; aces refer to shots the returner cannot even touch with his/her racquet. Service winners do not normally refer to unforced errors where a return is hit out or into the net, but should have been controlled. (Return to text.)

3. A strong approach shot is a shot you make that is so good it allows you to approach the net with justified confidence that your opponent will have to hit a weak return, often to the net. Normally this will be a shot that is deep and/or angled into their court and that they have to run hard to, or stretch way out for, to hit back. A weak approach shot is a shot you make in order to come into the net, but hit it to a place they can blast it or do almost anything they want to do with it in order to lob you, pass you, or drill you, so that your being at the net is a liability rather than a plus. A weak approach shot you make is one that you should not go into the net on. A strong approach shot you make is one that, if you can even halfway decently play shots at the net, you ought to follow up by going to the net. **If you hit a shot deep to an opponent's backhand that they will have to lunge at to hit back, chances are they will hit it short, and you should be up near the net waiting to put it away.** If you stay back after such a shot, they may even win the point by hitting a weak shot that barely clears the net and that you cannot even get to. At the very

least, if you stay back, you may allow them to get back to the center of the court, whereas if you are at the net and they are deep and off to one side, you have a good angle for a put away, even if you are not great at hitting net shots very well. (Return to text.)

4. A word here about behavior or sportsmanship in general. Playing a sport is something like reading a novel or watching a movie --you have to be almost totally involved in it while you are doing it-- but not so totally involved that you don't notice your room or the theater is on fire or that you act badly for others around you because you forget about them and their feelings. The idea, I believe, in any sport is to have "controlled aggression" and to want to win as hard as you can within the bounds of fairness and decency, and remembering as soon as a point or a match is over that, as important as it was for you while you were playing it, it is not the most important thing in life. I believe that winning (or losing) honorably is far more important than winning because winning a rat race just makes you the number one rat, and nobody really admires you or respects you if you are a tennis champion if you are also a real jerk. And if you end up not being a champion, but just being a jerk, that is really terrible.

And winning honorably means not just playing fair, but in tennis in particular, which is supposed to be a game for decent, honorable people, it means being a good sport and being decent between the points. That doesn't mean being a pansy and letting others cheat or make obviously bad calls or act petulantly. But it means addressing those things, if they should happen, reasonably and firmly, not meanly or overly emotionally. It also means not throwing tantrums about your own performance or gloating after shots. In doubles this is particularly important not only from a decency standpoint, but from a psychological standpoint, because gloating or fretting can affect your partner's concentration as much as it can affect your opponents'. Most people don't like playing with or against someone who gloats (as opposed to just being excited) or who frets and acts petulantly because things don't go their way. The idea in tennis or sports is to win by outplaying the opponent in terms of strategy and ability, not to win by inappropriate actions that have nothing to do with actual play.

5. I strongly urge everyone to use protective eye-wear while playing tennis, particularly doubles, and particularly if you are going to play at the net. A tennis ball hitting you in the eye can blind you. Wilson makes an inexpensive set of goggles that can be found at K-Mart. Jumbo Sports has a number of different racquet sport goggles that are probably better and that are not that much more expensive. If you wear prescription lenses, you should get a pair of prescription sports goggles, such as Rec-Specs. Admittedly none of these things will enhance your appearance, but they can save your eyesight, and they might make you feel a bit more confident at the net if you are worried about being hit by a ball. (Return to text.)

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