

Practice Tip

Beginning a point is easy to practice. It takes only two people, perhaps you and your partner. One player serves and the other returns as if it were a doubles game. Concentrate on just these first two shots until you achieve the success you're looking for: a high percentage of well-placed first serves that land in and consistency in making returns of all types. To make this practice fun, serve one full game and keep track of how many times you get your first serve into the service box. The receiver should keep track of her number of successful returns. At the end of one game, switch roles just like in a match. To add difficulty, count only the serves that land in the inside third of the service box and returns that land crosscourt behind the service line.

Playing the Middle of the Point

Here is where the fun begins. If both the server and receiver are successful, the point becomes exciting. Now you can apply the principles of court positioning explained earlier. Once that becomes automatic, you can focus on choosing the right shot to hit. Study the next strategic principles carefully because they are the key to good doubles play and amazing points.

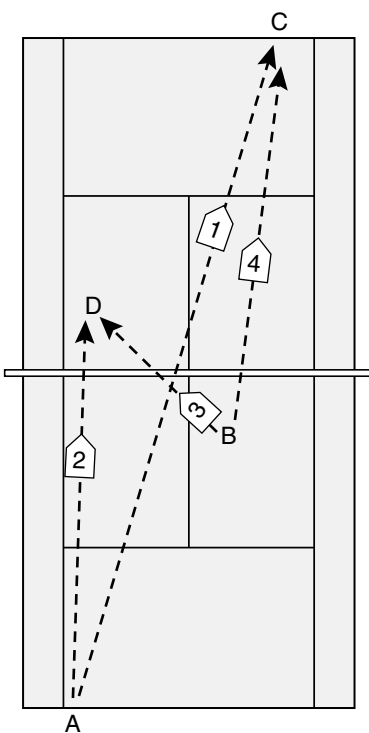


Figure 4.7 Deep-to-deep, short-to-short principle.

Deep to Deep, Short to Short

Assume both teams are in a one-up, one-back formation. In this formation, a good strategy is to apply the deep-to-deep, short-to-short principle (figure 4.7). This principle has three rules:

- Always play the ball deep to deep (shot 1).
- Hit short to short (shot 3) when you can hit the ball aggressively at your opponent's feet while in the short position.
- Aim short to deep (shot 4) if you are playing a ball defensively.

Of course, the unspoken and critical rule is to never hit deep to short (shot 2). That sets up the net player for a winning shot.

So why do so many players still try to hit a deep-to-short shot? Against a player

who is fearful of playing a strong drive or has poor volley skills, hitting a deep-to-short shot may work. Some players may have experienced success with this shot. However, take our word for it, hitting at the net player may work at a beginning level, but by the time you reach the 3.0 level of skill, it is usually a terrible idea.



STROKE DOCTOR

If you are intimidated at the net when an opponent hits a hard drive at you, learn to defend yourself:

- During a point, expect every ball to come to you. Be especially alert and keep your racket in front.
- Keep your eye on the ball as your opponent hits it.
- Protect yourself from head to knees with your backhand volley. If you can get your racket face in front of you to deflect the oncoming shot, you will be safe and probably volley a winner.
- The most common mistake net players make on a shot hit right at them is to swing at the ball. It is better to just get the racket face in front of the oncoming ball.

Inside and Outside Balls

For the player at the net position, an inside ball is hit toward the center of the court, while an outside ball is played from the side closer to the sideline. In general, the strategic rule is to play inside balls back down the middle and play outside balls crosscourt (figure 4.8).

The reason for this is because a ball hit over the lowest part of the net (the middle) to the largest court angle has the highest chance of success and lowest risk. Of course, if you can close in to the net, the possible angles for shots become more attractive and less risky. If you are balanced and have an easy outside ball to play, you have our permission to play the ball straight down the line with an offensive volley.

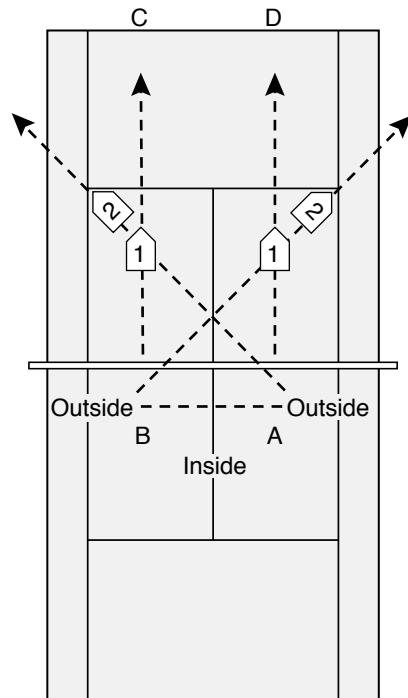


Figure 4.8 Inside and outside balls. Hit inside balls down the middle. Hit outside balls across the court.

Practice Tip

You will need four players to practice playing the middle of the point. Ignore the serve and return and begin by having the receiver feed the ball to the serving team. Play out points using the principles outlined in this chapter. First work on the deep-to-deep and short-to-short principle and evaluate your success. Then focus on where you direct inside and outside balls and again evaluate the result.

Aim Points

Think of the court as four quadrants. Those are the targets on which you want your shot to land. In doubles play, those four quadrants, plus a shot right down the middle, are the only places you ever have to hit the ball to win almost any point (figure 4.9). Notice that we haven't included the alleys as part of your targets. That's because the alleys provide your margin of error. If you miss your target by a few feet and it lands in the alley, fine. But if you aim for the alley (or even worse, a line) and miss by a few feet, your shot may be out.

Forget what the announcers say on television about professional players aiming shots for the line. They rarely do because they have learned the hard way to give themselves a decent margin of error. If they realize that fact, shouldn't we do the same?

If you follow the rule to aim points, it may take a shot or two longer to win the point. You'll be known as a smart, steady player, and you'll win a lot. The only downside is that you likely won't hit quite as many amazing winners that skip off the line. Oh well, that's the price of percentage tennis.

Shot Choice

The principles of good shot selection are common sense and are pretty clear:

- Hit your best, most effective shot whenever you can.
- Make your opponents hit their weakest shots as often as you can.
- Choose your shot, based on your court position (figure 4.10).

When in the backcourt (A1), lift the ball and apply spin for control. When in the midcourt (A2), hit the ball more on a straight line with less spin so that it penetrates through the court. When in the frontcourt (A3), contact the ball at the highest point you can and angle it downward.

If you are off balance, out of position, or deep behind the baseline, play a safe shot. A defensive lob is usually a good choice in these emergencies.

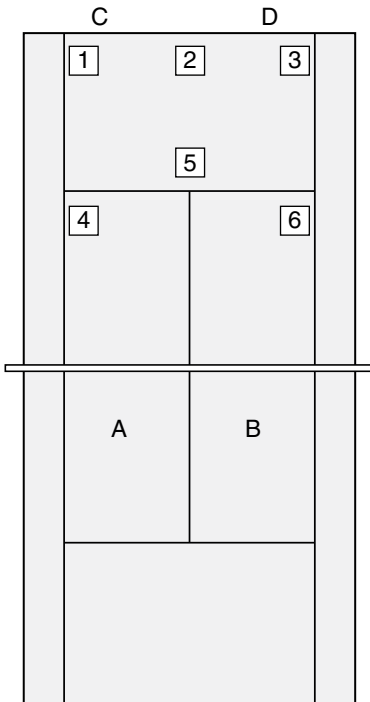


Figure 4.9 Aim points from the net position.

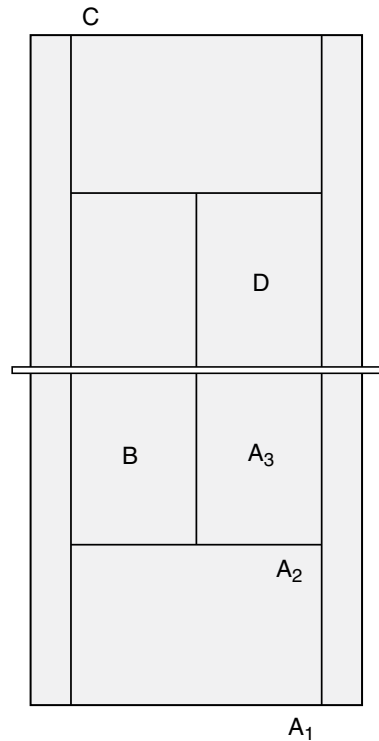


Figure 4.10 Shot selection based on court position. A1: flight up with topspin. A2: flight straight with little spin. A3: flight down with backspin.

If you are balanced and confident, play the ball more aggressively and apply spin for control. If you are in the backcourt and playing against net players, try to force them to hit a weak volley and then put away the next shot. Resist the temptation to try to win the point outright on your first shot. If your opponents have made two successful volleys and the ball is still in play, they will be looking to move closer to the net to make the next volley a winner. Lob the next shot to catch them moving in.

Ending the Point

Not many points last more than a couple of shots. Usually, one player makes a poor choice of shot or chooses the right shot but executes it badly. More points end on errors than on winning shots, but you still need to practice and know how to hit winners in doubles.