

FIGURE 2.10 Using the left-handed crosscourt return against the wide serve hit from the deuce court.

Left-Handed Return

The right-handed server will often try to expose the left-handed returner by hitting her first serve out wide from the deuce court. The server will try to pull the returner out of the court using a slice serve that naturally moves to the backhand side. However, returning the backhand crosscourt from this position can often prove more effective because many right-handers prefer to move around the ball when hitting aggressive forehands rather than move to the ball (as opposed to the left-hander's preference).

In this situation, left-handed returners with a strong running forehand often lure their opponents into a counterpunching trap when receiving the wide serve to the backhand from the deuce court. By returning crosscourt, the returner tempts the server to hit her second shot down the line into the space. This pattern sets up the returner's favourite running forehand to hit as her second shot! Figure 2.10 shows how this pattern works.

The Aggressive Second Serve Return

Waiting for the kill is extinct now. Now you have to take advantage of every ball you have.

—Nick Bollettieri, tennis coach whose tennis academy has helped develop nine World Number 1 players

Statistics prove that the female server will generally lose more than half of the second serve points she plays. Table 2.1 illustrates that at Wimbledon, from 2000 to 2006, the server continually won far fewer than 50 percent of her second serve points. Indeed, in all four Grand Slams of 2006, the server was shown to win an average of only 41 percent. These figures clearly show that the second serve return represents an excellent opportunity for the returner to dominate the server immediately. She simply cannot afford to miss the chance to attack if the serve is weak because this may be her only guaranteed short ball of the rally! She should view this shot in the same way as she views her own first serve—as a chance

Table 2.1 Percentage of Second Serve Points Won in Women's Singles at Wimbledon

Year	1st Round	2nd Round	3rd Round	4th Round	Q/Final	S/Final	Final	Total
2000	45	46	48	45	43	35	35	42%
2001	45	46	44	47	36	44	43	44%
2002	45	46	43	48	50	50	45	47%
2003	44	47	46	42	44	41	34	43%
2004	46	47	41	43	49	45	52	46%
2005	39	39	40	39	44	43	41	41%
2006	41	41	40	37	39	36	56	41%

Based on statistics from the IBM Wimbledon Information System, courtesy of IBM.

to act rather than react. Of the four possible ways to start a rally, these two shots represent the best chance to attack.

Because not many female players vary their serve's spin, pace, or direction, it is very common to see the same type of second serve being hit throughout a match. This allows the returner to quickly get used to how the serve moves and where it goes. Her ability to anticipate the serve early in a match means that the returner can start to use her return as the first shot in one of the aggressive patterns of play outlined in the coming sections.

Return and Groundstroke Attack

I love to see the girls pressure the second serve by using early, aggressive groundstrokes hit down the line.

—Amy Jensen, Three-Time NCAA Doubles Champion

The return and groundstroke attack is often used against a weak second serve hit out wide from either side that creates a natural space for the returner to hit into. The returner hits the return aggressively, either cross-court or down the line, from inside the baseline, allowing the server very little time to recover from her serving position. The returner maintains control of the court by hitting an aggressive second shot, also from inside the baseline, into the opposite space she hit the first return into, increasing the time pressure on her opponent. This lack of time is the key to this tactic's success, which explains why many second shot winners are hit well within the lines. The server simply cannot reach the ball in time. To execute this

tactic well, a player must be able to return the serve and hit her second shot from on or inside the baseline, usually hitting the ball at, or just after, the top of its bounce. Many players on the WTA Tour are now deliberately returning aggressively to the *forehand* side of the server more often than the backhand side. This is because the server will usually have to move her grip more to hit a forehand after serving than to hit a backhand.

Figures 2.11 and 2.12 show how the returner can powerfully combine her first two shots against the wide second serve. In figure 2.11 a second serve has been hit out wide from the deuce court. The returner hits an aggressive crosscourt return, which forces the server to hit down the line under pressure (her contact point is too late to be able to hit crosscourt). The returner then hits her second shot crosscourt into the opposite space that has been created. Note how both the return and second shot have been hit from inside the baseline. The returner could hit her return down the line from this serve instead. In this case she would maintain her dominance by hitting her second shot into the opposite space again, either crosscourt or down the line, depending on where the server's second shot

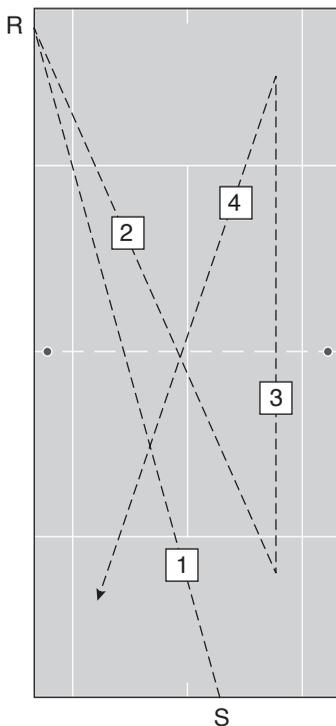


FIGURE 2.11 Hitting the crosscourt return against the wide second serve hit from the deuce court.

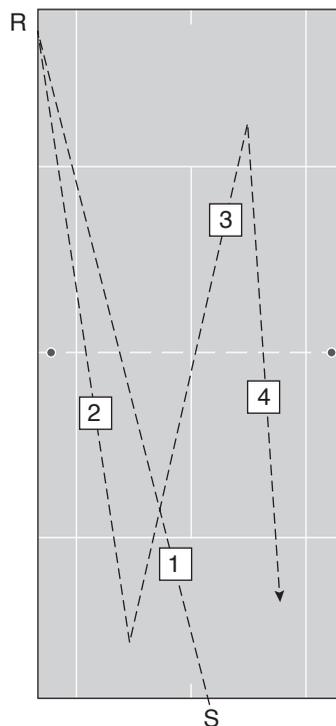


FIGURE 2.12 The down-the-line return played against the wide second serve hit from the deuce court.

has been played. In figure 2.12 the returner has hit down the line against the second serve hit wide from the deuce court. This time the server has been able to defend crosscourt, so the returner hits her second shot down the line into the opposite space. Again, the returner's second shot is hit from well inside the baseline. The same patterns can also be played against the wide serve hit from the advantage court.

When returning second serves that are hit down the middle from either the deuce or advantage court, play-

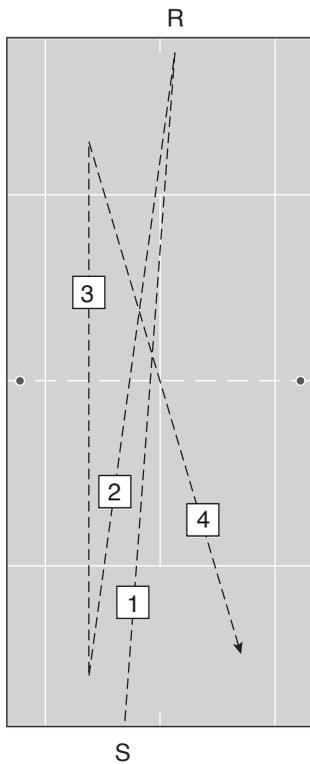


FIGURE 2.13 The middle return played against a second serve hit down the middle from the advantage court.

ers have fewer angles to work with. As a result, an aggressive middle return can be used to set up an opening for the returner's second shot. This middle return is hit with just as much aggression and with the same early court position, but is hit right back at the server. The returner's goal is to put the server under so much time and pace pressure that an error is forced or a space is opened up for the second shot. Figure 2.13 illustrates this tactic. A similar pattern could also develop from the deuce court.

Using the return and groundstroke attack early in a match can strongly influence the way an opponent plays and feels. It gives the returner the chance to dominate tactically by exerting time and pace pressure. These two forms of pressure may force an opponent to take some pace off her first serve to prevent the returner from facing many second serves. (If this happens, there is no reason the returner shouldn't pressure the first serve in the same way as well!) It also gives the returner the chance to threaten psychologically by taking up an intimidating playing position on or

inside the baseline. This is an important point because the returning stance is perhaps the most noticeable position a player will take up during a match; the server literally looks directly at the returner before serving.

To practice returning from an aggressive court position, see drill 2.5 on page 76.



In doubles, this aggressive groundstroke return, hit from inside the baseline, is often played down the line—straight at the server's partner. Figure 2.14 shows how the returning team can take control of the court by returning down the line against the second serve hit wide from the advantage court. This tactic is used from both sides of the court and is most effective when played as the returner's first or second shot of

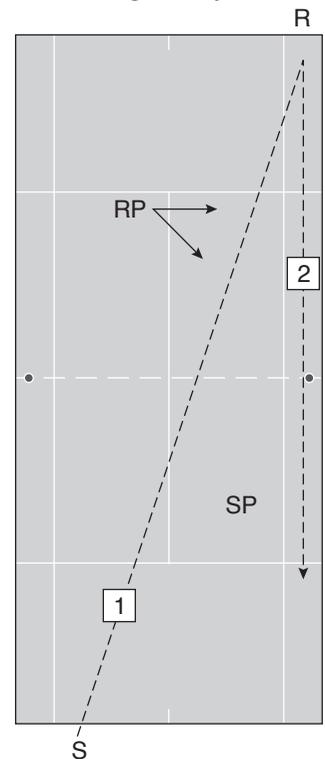


FIGURE 2.14 The aggressive return hit down the line against the wide serve from the advantage court in doubles.

the rally because it prevents the serving team from settling into a rhythm. It is used in particular against a server whose strength lies in hitting crosscourt groundstrokes and also against a server's partner who has a weak volley. The returner's partner must know in advance that the returner is going to hit down the line because this will allow her to cover the middle part of the court in anticipation of a defensive volley. The returner continues to attack with aggressive groundstrokes hit either crosscourt or down the line until she forces an error or her partner can intercept with a winning volley.

To practice the tactics discussed in this section, see drill 2.6 on page 77.

Return and Baseline Control

Often during a match the returner will want to maintain her dominance over the server without having a planned shot to hit after an aggressive return—usually when the opponent has defended deep down the middle of the court. Instead, she will try to prevent the server from regaining a neutral position by hitting a sequence of dominating shots that continually increase the pressure on her opponent. She will look to finish the point only after a short ball or after a natural space has opened up.



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Dominating with the second serve return is a crucial tactic in women's tennis.