

Pickleball Fire



NBA Hall of
Famer
Rick Barry

PROFILES

- NBA Legend Rick Barry on Pickleball
- Pro Megan Hall's Serious Health Scare
- How Pickleball Changed Scott Golden's Life
- Rob Nunnery's Pro Journey

Industry

- Software for Tournaments & Other Events
- Leagues for Juniors

INSTRUCTION

- Helle Sparre on How to Beat Bangers
- How to Hit a Roll Volley with Joey Farias
- Should You Switch Hands?
- Targeting Your Serve with DJ Howard
- Doubles Communication
- How to Hit an Overhead
- What You Can Learn from Skeet Shooting to Improve Your Focus in Pickleball

CONTENTS

04: PRO MEGAN HALL BACK ON THE COURT

05: SHOULD YOU SWITCH HANDS?

06: HOW PICKLEBALL CHANGED SCOTT GOLDEN'S LIFE

08: THE GROWTH OF JUNIORS PICKLEBALL

10: HOW TO BEAT BANGERS

12: ROB NUNNERY: THE CHALLENGES OF BECOMING A PRO

14: FOCUS AND ANTICIPATION

16: PROFILE: NBA LEGEND RICK BARRY

17: PRO TIP: TARGETING YOUR SERVE

18: HOW POKER CAN HELP YOUR GAME

19: PICKLEBALL IS MY ACHILLES HEEL

22: BE THAT PERSON WHO KILLS OVERHEADS

24: COMMUNICATION: THE KEY TO PLAYING DOUBLES

25: HOW TO HIT A ROLL VOLLEY

26: PICKLEBALL BRACKETS: SOFTWARE TO MANAGE EVENTS

FROM THE PUBLISHER

It seems like it's been a really long time since the last issue of the Pickleball Fire Magazine was published. In fact, it's only been two months so we are right on schedule with our every other month publication calendar. I guess a lot has happened since then. Due to the improving COVID-19 pandemic I have been able to play plenty of Pickleball and I hope you have too.

Plus, I even flew out to Los Angeles to see my brother. I happened to interview Kyle Yates while I was out there and he mentioned he was playing in a tournament in San Clemente. As a result, I took the train down south to see the Pro Pickleball Association (PPA) tournament which was the first time I saw the professionals play in person. It was incredible to see them play and the venue was top notch with a great stadium court setting which included three courts. The mens and womens doubles finals were played on Sunday and the crowds were definitely out to cheer on the matches. I'm really looking forward to more of these incredible events and hope to attend the New Jersey Open in August too. 2022 looks like a great year for Pickleball as the PPA currently has 20 events scheduled (one international) and the Association of Pickleball Professionals has 31 events (including five international tournaments) currently scheduled.

I definitely recommend attending a professional event to see the game at its best and to support the sport.

Pickleball Fire

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Pro Megan Hall: Back on the Court After a Serious Health Scare

Megan Hall had to stop playing competitive tennis because of a wrist injury. So, she started playing Pickleball two years ago because the paddle was lighter. She quickly found success playing at the professional level even winning a bronze medal in singles at an APP tour event in Hilton Head in 2020. Megan was well on her way in professional Pickleball until the spring of 2021 when tragedy struck. Megan said, "I went through a very difficult time where I basically, for lack of better words, I basically died on the Pickleball court while I was playing Pickleball."

At the time of this interview, Megan had only been back on the court for two weeks. While she said she felt slow on the court, Megan is interested in seeing if her health will allow her to get back to playing professionally. Before Megan's heart issue, she had wanted to see even if she could compete at the professional level. Megan and Scott Golden played a few tournaments together and found they were successful at the 5.0 level. Still there is a big jump to playing with top-level pros. Megan said, "I wanted to try and see if I could play pro and what that would be like, what that level would be like. And even if I got killed, what work I would have to do to get to that level and compete at that level. So I started to play a couple of singles tournaments and I also started training with him, more drilling cross court dinks and third shots and taking it a little bit more seriously and started playing pro tournaments."

While Megan loves to play singles, she is only working on her doubles game at this point due to her medical situation. She says many professionals don't want to play singles because it is too much work. That's because you always have to get one more ball back so you have to be really fit to play singles. It's unclear as to whether Megan will be able to play singles at the professional level again. But, the great thing is that she is even back on the Pickleball court again and enjoying life.



"My heart stopped several times and they luckily brought me back. And I spent the next week in the hospital and had a defibrillator slash pacemaker put in and I've just been recovering from that."

Should You Switch Hands?

You've seen other players on the court switching the paddle from one hand to another when hitting their shots. Even some of the professionals do it such as Rick Witsken, but in what situations should you do this and is this a good idea?

Rick, a senior professional, is a right handed player and he switches the paddle from his right to left hand in certain situations. While he is not ambidextrous, his athletic ability allows him to use his left hand so this skill extends his reach and provides a fairly unique advantage in both singles and doubles.

Rick gave a couple of examples of when he used this technique during the U.S. Open. He said, "When they lobbed down the middle over Scott (Moore), actually more over my backhand, I switched to the left hand and you can see it on the live stream. I hit two forehand left-handed overhands...I remember playing Tyson McGuffin in singles in the quarter finals two years ago at the U.S. Open. And, I remember switching to my left hand so many times, because obviously he hits the ball on a dime and if I'm not using my left hand extension, I'm getting passed. So against him, I used it a lot."

While sometimes Rick doesn't switch hands at all during a match, it's something he can do if

needed. In fact, Rick also teaches some of his students to use this technique if they lack mobility or have ambidextrous tendencies. Many players without a racket sport background also prefer to switch hands since hitting a forehand is more comfortable for them.

The biggest disadvantage of switching hands is that you won't have enough time to do this during fast exchanges at the kitchen line. That's why the technique really should only be used in situations where you have time to hit the ball but need a little bit more reach.

Switching hands can confuse your opponent but it can also confuse your partner. As an example, if you and your partner are right-hand dominant, the player on the left hand side of the court is usually in a better position to hit a ball down the middle. But if you switch your hands, both you and your partner may go for the same ball, causing the ball to be mishit. If you are using this technique but find your partner is too often going for the same ball then it probably isn't worth doing.

Still, switching hands like Rick does is worth a try if you need more reach, don't have a racket sports background, or have ambidextrous tendencies.



How Pickleball Changed Scott Golden's Life



Four years ago Scott Golden was looking for a fresh start, but he never expected a chance encounter with Pickleball would change his life. Scott said, " I was 32 years old. What I had known for the last eight years was changing. And so I was kind of searching and reevaluating my whole life and what I wanted to do for the second half of my life. I thought about going back to school to become a coach maybe and thought about going back to school to do some other things. And one night I actually went to our local park in Pelham, Alabama. And I stumbled on a gentleman who had a Pickleball Tutor machine."

Scott was invited to hit and did some simple dinking over the net for about 20 minutes. He then played for the next three days, being on the court as much as possible. Scott also began to live stream the game even though he admits he didn't really know what he was talking about at the time. Needless to say, he was addicted to the sport.

Scott competed against recreational players for the next five months and then he started playing in tournaments. Despite not having a racket sports background, Scott set a goal to become a 5.0 player in one year. To have a shot at reaching this milestone, Scott played two to three times per day sometimes for 14 hours per day. He also had to find tougher competition, so some days he would drive up to four hours to go to Nashville or Atlanta. As a result of the commitment, Scott accomplished his goal of becoming a 5.0 player in one year.

Scott was traveling every weekend and spending \$1,200- \$1,500 on travel, hotel, and food. Money was pretty tight but he set his sights on going to the U.S. Open in 2018 despite his girlfriend not wanting him to go.

Scott said, "She was trying to talk me out of going. And I remember just saying, nope, something's going to break for me in my career with this."

Scott definitely got his big break at the tournament when he met Riley Burgess of Monarch Sports which is owned by Dicks Sporting Goods. It was the pivotal moment for Scott's Pickleball career as everything changed after that. Scott said, " I didn't know the details at that time, but now in 2021 looking back at that situation I'm so thankful that I didn't give up on that dream, that I didn't talk myself out of going."

The result of the U.S. Open experience is that Scott is sponsored by Monarch and even has a signature paddle. He also put his live streaming skills to good use as he is a professional commentator for the sport too. Scott said, "I have two passions. One passion that I have is competing. I'm 36 years old but I still love to compete at a high level. But I also have a passion for growing the sport at a grassroots level. I want as many people that I can influence with my platform that I have currently. I try to expose people to Pickleball because I just know how it has changed my life."

The Growth of Juniors Pickleball Via Instruction, Leagues, and Tournaments



Addam Shand has a background in running sports programs for children. So, it wasn't surprising that after just a few months of playing Pickleball, he started the first juniors league in Southwest Florida. This was because he recently had moved to Florida and his community had Pickleball courts, but he never saw kids playing the game. So, he took his two children onto the court to see what they thought of Pickleball. Addam said, "My nine year old is much more academic focused and I wanted to see what her reaction would be to the sport. And maybe there was a reason why kids don't play. I got out there. I just started hitting with them and my older child, who's not as athletic, really took a liking to it."

Addam did some research, searching for classes and leagues for his daughter, but he could only find one-on-one instruction. That wasn't what he was looking for since he wanted his daughter to have social interaction with other kids. So, Addam sent out an email to his community to see if any children wanted to try out Pickleball. As it turns out they did so Addam then teamed up with professionals in the area who could give proper instruction. He also partnered with

Selkirk sports to provide a paddle to each child who signs up for the league and attends the first day of class. Then Head Penn Pickleball donated balls and became the official ball of the league.

The league runs for 11 weeks and includes three categories of learning the game, playing, and competing in tournaments. The participants even get Pickleball homework a couple of times per week such as hitting the ball on the paddle 20 or 30 times. Another example is what Addam calls dribbling. It involves hitting the ball downward so the ball hits your paddle and then a line on the ground. You walk forward and backwards. It's fun for the kids plus it improves eye-hand coordination. Addam said, "When I first thought about this, I thought to myself, no, kid's going to do homework for Pickleball. And the reality is they all do it because they want to get better and they want to learn because once that child holds that paddle and hits the ball, the first time they're hooked. It's just getting them to the court."

The best way to get the kids to the court is to educate the parents on what Pickleball is. He does this by hosting free events for the parents

to try the game. He even has unofficial get togethers called beer and pickle where adults can learn more about the game.

As part of Addam's research for the league, he found other pockets in the country with junior programs. So, Addam is coming together with others to create uniformity in what the kids are learning each week. The idea is to have district, state, and national tournaments for them to compete in much like other sports such as baseball or softball. Addam said, "I want to bring it back to my daughter again. My family's had a lot of success in sports. And what's really interesting to me is that every child deserves an opportunity to play sports. It doesn't matter if they're the best athletes or not the best athletes. There's so many life benefits that come out of sports. And that's really my motivation is to help children. Let my oldest daughter have those opportunities...I want to make sure other kids have that opportunity."

To learn more about junior Pickleball leagues, go to <http://mypbleague.com/>



How to Beat Bangers

If you've spent much time on the Pickleball court, you've probably played against someone who is called a "banger". According to Pickleball pro Helle Sparre, a banger is someone who drives the ball hard in situations where there are better alternatives. The most common time bangers hit the ball hard is when they are the serving team and back at the baseline. The receiving team, on the other hand, should be at the kitchen line. So, it is the receiving team who bears the brunt of the banger hitting the ball hard.

How to Beat Bangers at the Beginning and Intermediate Levels

The question then is how to you beat bangers at the beginning and intermediate levels as this style of play can often be a winning strategy? First, you need to know the hard shot is coming to you. If a player is taking a large back swing from the baseline, it's going to be a hard shot. If your opponent has a history of hitting hard balls then it is likely you will get another one since they have a one-dimensional game.

Once you know a hard drive is coming at you as the receiving team, you need to make sure you are ready to return the hard shot. The best way to do this is to be at the kitchen line and prepare to hit a backhand. Helle said, "You need to shield yourself and think of a backhand. So backhand covers a lot of the body. 80% of your body can be covered with a backhand." When preparing to hit the backhand, be sure to keep your paddle up. If your paddle is too low then you will be hitting up on the ball and it may fly out of the court. Keep your paddle high and don't get too low in your stance as ideally you want to hit down on the ball.

The backhand you hit should be a punch volley so the ball lands near the kitchen line and stays low. You want to make sure that you don't hit the ball so deep in the court that the banger can volley it. The shot you hit ideally should be one you hit straight in front of you rather than cross court. This is because you give the banging team less time to react.

How to Beat Bangers at the 4.0 Level

As you move up in skill level to the 4.0 level or above you do have some other shots you can hit against bangers. One thing you can do when hitting down on the ball when doing a punch volley is to tilt the face of your paddle up a bit so you are cutting the ball. This will also help to keep the ball low. Another alternative is to hit a soft shot in the kitchen. However, Helle does not recommend this for lower level players as the ball will likely go too high and allow the opponent to attack.

Playing against bangers can be scary at first because of the pace of the ball. However, you really are in control as the receiving team because both players are at the net. Just be sure to hit a punch volley that stays low. If the banger runs forward to hit another hard shot, it is likely going out of the court so if it is high, let it fly.



Helle Sparre





Rob Nunnery: The Challenges of Becoming a Pickleball Pro

Adam Franklin of Franklin sports. One month later Rob was documenting his journey of going from a brand new player to a professional Pickleball player. The first few posts were published on Pickleball Portal and the more recent ones are on Franklin's website as Rob is now sponsored by Franklin.

Rob said, "It's been interesting even to go back and read some of those first blog posts. It's like, wow, it's cool to see how far you've come. I think that goes with anything that you do. I'm a big proponent of documenting progress in anything that you're learning just purely because you can go back and see how far you've come and actually appreciate the progress. There's days now when I'm really frustrated. I'm like, why am I not better? And then I can read back a little bit. I'm like, well you've actually come really, really far. So you should be kind of proud of yourself."

Rob has definitely had some challenges in his professional Pickleball journey. Between the COVID-19 pandemic impacting things in 2020 and Rob tearing the meniscus in his knee in March of the same year, 2021 is really Rob's first year on the professional tour. Rob sited the tournaments in Red Rock, Utah and Delray Beach, Florida as him having fourth place finishes in doubles. So, the results are starting to improve for him.

Rob, said, however, that there are other challenges. One of them is finding doubles partners. He said, "Being my first year it's kind of just trying to piece together a schedule that you can find partners that you can mesh with. But honestly, a lot of the top pros are kind of locked in a year in advance. So that's the biggest battle is trying to come in and make a name for yourself and show people that you can play. And, well also be just being a good person and being somebody that's fun to play with and just trying to build rapport and build connections with other pros and hopefully get those better partners and good partners moving forward."

While Rob played college tennis 14 years ago, he is finding the highest levels of Pickleball competition are very different than in tennis. He said he has found many good friends in the sports which is surprising. That's because tennis was so competitive. You didn't socialize off the court unless it was your doubles partner. But people in Pickleball want to hang out off the court.

Rob is definitely enjoying playing at the highest levels of Pickleball as a 35-year-old. But, he believes he has so much room to improve on things such as his footwork, nutrition, and off court training. He said, "I feel like I still could be more disciplined in some areas off the court with nutrition and just getting in better shape. So I've been really focused on just purely Pickleball, but I think I need to round out things to maximize my potential. I really need to do some stuff off court, just take care of my body more, to get more fit. And I think if I do those things, then my goal is to be as good as I can get. But, be like a consistent top five player is where I want to be then really in the next year or so."

With hard work Rob should make it there and he will be able to look back on his journey as he continues to document his professional career.

The Freestyle Boys Podcast

Rob has also teamed up with #1 rated Pickleball professional Ben Johns. Rob and Ben co-host the Freestyle Boys podcast which covers professional Pickleball tournaments and controversial issues in the sport.





Skeet Shootin Anticipation

by Randy

Before I started shooting skeet I didn't understand the difference between soft and hard (or center) focus. Soft focus I now know is, for example, when we drive a car. Our field of vision is large. We see the car in front of us, and the road and scenery. Soft focus can be sustained for hours at a time. Hard focus, by contrast, is when—please don't do this when you are driving—we read one letter or number on a license plate in front of us. According to Hall of Fame skeet shooter Paul Giambrone, hard focus on a moving target can be sustained only for a second or so. Skeet shooters, before calling for the target, soft focus and have a wide field of vision. As soon as the target emerges from the house, shooters semihard focus and track the target. Then, just before pulling the trigger, they hard focus on the front of the target.

Dr. Wayne F. Martin writes in his book, *An Insight To Sports*, "A champion is one who understands vision and how to use it. ... Precise centering or zeroing in on the point of impact of any target is defined as completing the visual act."

Michael A. Peters, OD writes in his book, *See to Play*, "Elite athletes see better. ... They have the ability to change focus faster. ... Their anticipation is better."

What does all this have to do with pickleball?

When playing pickleball we are often 14 feet from our opponents and returning balls coming at us at about 40 mph. We don't, therefore, always have time to see where the ball is going and to then react. So, what can we do? Like successful NFL quarterbacks, we must anticipate. Quarterbacks study films before games and learn their upcoming opponent's defensive tendencies. During the game, quarterbacks read the defense by using wide (soft) focus, watch the defensive backs, and then anticipate which receiver will probably be open. Finally, quarterbacks select a target, hard focus, and throw.

In pickleball it is certainly helpful if we have studied our opponents and know their tendencies. Unfortunately, we usually can't dial up films of our opponents' recent games. And even if we could, we still should read our opponents during the game. (True, many high-level players are skilled at deception, at using inside-out swings and changing hitting directions at the last second; so sometimes we will read incorrectly, but as our reading skills improve so will our anticipation.

Here are some of the well-known anticipation signs.

1. A long backswing and a turning of the hips and shoulders are usually a sign of a drive or a groundstroke with pace. Also, the shoulders will usually point to the direction of the drive.

2. A shoulder-high paddle position before contact is, as Michelle Esquivel teaches, a sign of a smash. A knee-high or lower paddle position is a sign of a dink or a drop shot.

3. A paddle above the ball before contact is probably a sign of backspin. A paddle below the ball is probably a sign of topspin.

4. A ball hit to my opponent diagonally across from me, according to Helle Sparre, is a sign I must cover the middle. A ball hit directly across from me is a sign I must cover the sideline.



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5. A ball driven from below the net is, as Tony Roig points out, a sign of a ball that might be going out.

6. A ball that I or my partner return too high is a sign of a slam coming back.

7. The angle of our opponent's paddle when it strikes the ball is our last and usually most important sign of where the ball is going.

Finally, when at the NVZ Line I always anticipate a fastball coming back.

So how do soft and hard focus apply to pickleball? When reading our opponents we soft focus and have a wide field of vision. As the ball is hit we narrow our focus to semi hard and watch our opponent's paddle. When the ball leaves the paddle we hard focus on the middle of the ball. This will help us hit the ball in our paddle's sweet spot, and also prevent mishits and drives into the net. Luckily, there are many eye exercises we can do to improve our hard focus.

Here are some I use:

1. I write letters on a foam ball. I hit the ball against a wall and read the letters just before my paddle contacts the ball.

2. I write letters on a pickleball, then hang the ball eye-level on a string from a light fixture. (To get the letters to stay on I lightly sand the ball then paint it with a primer.) Keeping my head still, I slap the ball back and forth and read the letters. Also, I find it helpful to spin the ball. That way, I don't keep reading the same letters.

3. I watch eye-exercise videos.

4. I practice squash. The ball is so small I am forced to hard focus on it.

In closing, learning to hard focus on a moving object takes practice, lots of practice, so please don't get discouraged.



Profile: NBA Legend Rick Barry

You may recognize the name Rick Barry if you are a fan of the National Basketball Association (NBA). The 77-year-old had a successful professional basketball career as he won an NBA championship, was the NBA Finals MVP, and is in the Hall of Fame. Recently, Rick took up the sport of Pickleball to satisfy his competitive spirit. He said, "Playing is fine. And I was playing every day this week, but there's nothing comparable to being in a tournament where you're actually competing. And that's what I love. That's the thing I miss most when I had to retire is having that little adrenaline rush, the little butterflies in the stomach, knowing you're out there to compete. I just love to compete and so this is what Pickleball is now providing me with that opportunity on a fairly consistent basis."

In asking Rick about what found challenging about Pickleball he quipped "trying to win". But he is actually very serious about the sport. Before the April 2021 U.S. Open Pickleball tournament, Rick said his goal was to win a national championship which he did. He entered three events, earning a gold in mixed doubles 4.0 70+ with his partner Linda Bruder and silver in men's doubles with his partner Gregg Brents.

Rick attributes his success in Pickleball to his athleticism and learning how to place the ball. While Rick was six foot seven during his professional basketball career, he said he has shrunk due to a bad bicycle accident. Still, he has a tremendous advantage at the kitchen line due to his long arms and fast reaction time. Rick said, "I still have a good reaction to different things and I'm getting



better learning how to do it. You don't have to hit everything hard although I'll tell you a lot of people are really getting into the power game now...But I also learned that it's more about placement. If you can place the ball in the right spot, you can create a lot of problems for people and you don't always have to hit it hard. In fact, a lot of times when you hit it hard, you get yourself in trouble."

While Rick is still improving his Pickleball game, he already has set more goals for the future. Rick said, "And so I'm really excited about

what the future holds and hopefully God will be kind enough to allow me to stay healthy enough to continue to do this." And Rick hopes to be playing Pickleball still in his 90's and winning a title in his age group. Then after his Pickleball career is over he plans to be fly fishing in Alaska when he is one-hundred years old.

Rick's three tips to be successful at Pickleball

1. Don't try to hit aces
2. Hit a deep serve return
3. Get to the kitchen line

Pro Tip: Targeting Your Serve

While professional player DJ Howard calls himself the “technique guy”, he doesn't emphasize this idea when teaching new players. In fact, he helps students by focusing on what they should accomplish with the ball. This idea even extends to serving where the focus is on what they are trying to accomplish with the ball. He said, “They want to envision a target in X location. And I want them to envision the trajectory required to get the ball to that specific target. Then that frees up their body to be able to try to execute the stroke and do it in a way that they're comfortable with. They won't be perfect at it, but I like to allow them to try to see if they can get the ball to that location first because then they can develop their own style and I can give them feedback on technique if necessary.”

When working on the serve, DJ places targets on the court so players can visualize where they should hit the ball. Otherwise, it's like hitting the ball into a vast open space. By using targets, you get better feedback as to how close you are serving to a specific area of the court. If you are serving short of the target three times in a row, then you need to make an adjustment.

DJ likes to ask his students questions when they need to re-calibrate. For example, he might ask how do you shift the ball to right when you are serving if it is consistently going left? Students then have the opportunity to give a variety of correct answers. He said, “It might be they need to just turn their hand a little bit. It might mean they turn their stance completely. It might mean they shouldn't be swiveling their hip too quickly through the stroke. So there are a number of solutions, but I would like them to feel what that solution is and come up with

the answer themselves rather than me just telling them one particular option.” DJ likes to place targets on the court for serving in aggressive positions. So, rather than placing them in the center of the service box, he puts them deep in the court often near the corners. But he will also position a target right beyond the kitchen line and near the sideline. DJ will place the targets in aggressive positions regardless of the skill level of his students. The reason for this is because it teaches them to be less afraid of risk if they are within six inches of the target. Even if the ball goes long or wide, it is still a successful result if they are close to the target. The advantage of this type of mindset is that at higher levels of play you have to be willing to take more risk if you expect to be successful.

One of the new provisional rules for 2021 allows players to hit a drop serve where the ball bounces on the ground before making contact with the paddle. While few players use this technique, DJ likes to offer it as an option to his students. He said, “I think it is a good option for a lot of people, especially newer players. They feel more comfortable with it. So I encourage each individual to try it out and see what they think. Some people are going to like it better. Some may not like it as well, but you don't have to use it exclusively. That's the nice thing about it is maybe use it 25% of the time. Maybe use it 75% of the time. You still have other options.”

Regardless of the type of serve you are using, remember it's more about hitting targets rather than technique. If you are serving within six inches of the target then consider it a success and don't worry about technique.



How Poker Can Help Your Pickleball Game

Like many people, professional player Kyle McKenzie competed in tennis before Pickleball. But what's unusual about his story is that he also played poker for a living in his early 20's. Kyle said he had always been a tactician at heart so poker was a great fit for his interests and he applies many of the ideas from poker to Pickleball.

One poker style that he thinks of as being similar to Pickleball is the idea of frequently folding your hand. This is a very patient style of poker where you often choose not to play the hand because it isn't strong enough to win in most situations. The patience needed to fold in poker is similar to the patience it takes to play long dink rallies during a doubles Pickleball game. You mainly see this style at higher levels of play because these players know the fewer mistakes you make, the more likely you are to win the game.

Kyle said, "When people found out that I played poker they'd always say oh, you like to gamble and yeah not really. I just really like to win. And so I think patience was really a reflection of that. I didn't know if I was the smartest poker player because as you get to the higher levels of professional play there's a lot of former MIT students and people who really understand math and algorithms and have a really just high level of intelligence. And so to me, I felt like patience was an equalizer. It was the best way to avoid making mistakes."

In delving deeper into the idea of patience in Pickleball, Kyle discussed two types of dinks. While many will just think of the forehand and backhand dink, he breaks up dinking into two categories: the lift dink and the push

dink. The lift dink is more defensive in nature and refers to having more margin for error. So, you are hitting the ball higher over with net with the goal of making the ball land in the kitchen. Kyle said, "Often times what you're inherently giving up with the lift dink is you're putting more ball shape and more air under the ball. You are vulnerable to a good attacking player potentially initiating an attack off the bounce."

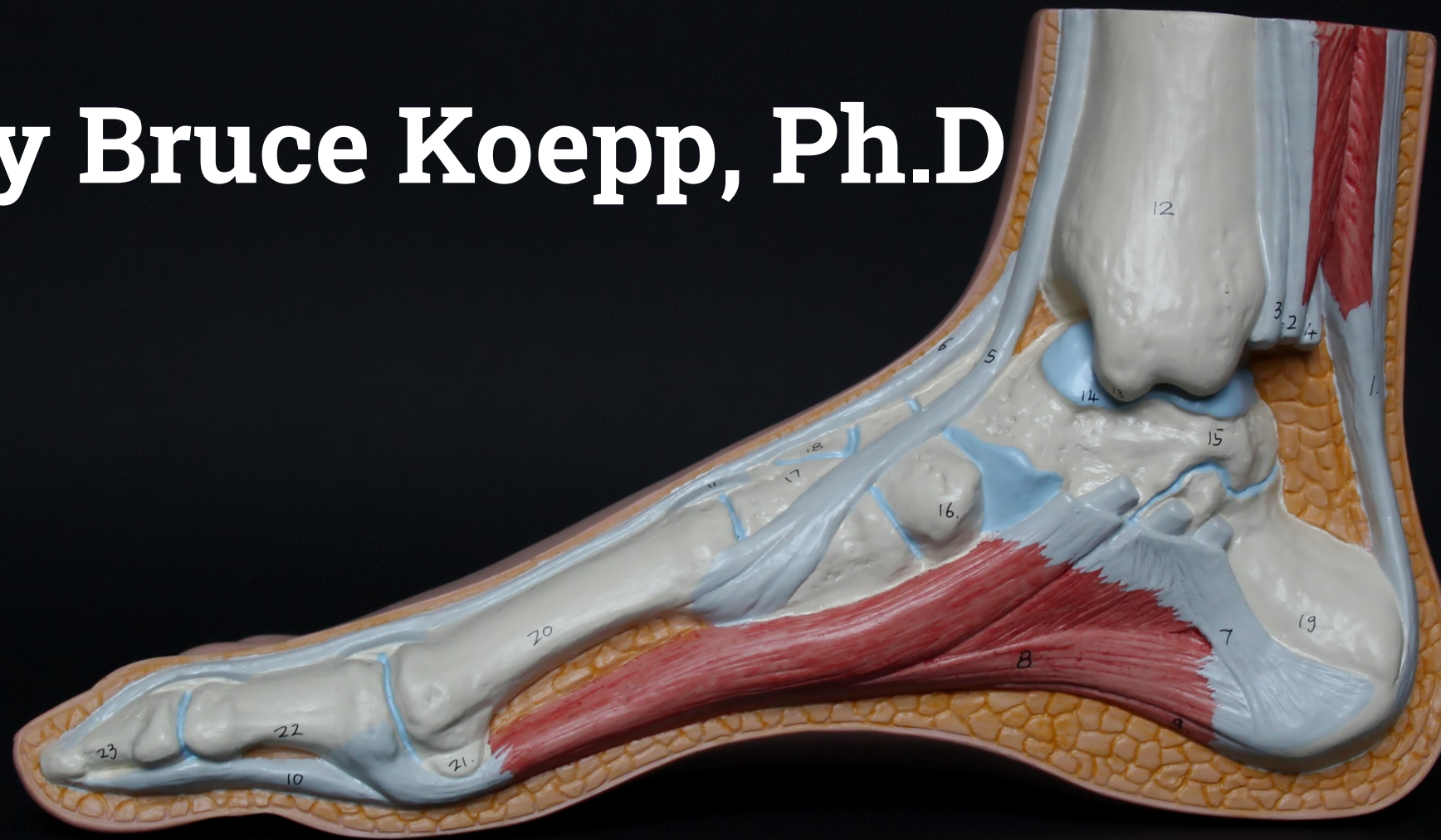
A push dink is one where your opponent hits you a lift dink and you can be more offensive with it. Kyle said, "the push dink is a shot that's used where you're acknowledging yourself for taking a little bit more risk. But the goal of the shot is to put your opponent under a little bit more pressure by playing a more linear ball near their feet, maybe making it a little bit more awkward for them. Maybe there's some indecision about whether they should take the ball out of the air or take the ball off the bounce." When talking about playing a more linear ball, the idea is to hit more of a line drive which goes closer to the net.

Kyle said the goal he has when teaching the dink shot it for his students to understand what is happening during the long dink rallies that professionals have. He said, "You're watching these long dinking exchanges especially at the pro level, you're not just looking at this dink exchange is going on for a long time. But you're able to see which team is in control with the push dink and which team is lifting and trying to get back to neutral with that lifting." At higher levels of play, the team with control can switch two or three times during one point. But it's okay to not be in control. You just need to be patient, like in poker, and get back to neutral before taking control again.



Pickleball is My Achilles Heel

by Bruce Koepp, Ph.D



Have any of these scenarios happened to you?

Situation #1.

You've been looking forward to the first hike of the season. Snack, backpack, and single-track. An hour into a treacherous climb you stumble over some tree roots and suddenly it feels as if a stick is kicked up into you calf. What the heck?

Situation #2.

Sunny day. Picnic in the park. No yellow jackets circling the fruit salad yet. Tossing a frisbee. Minding your own business when, out of nowhere, someone's mutt takes a nip at the back of your leg. Hey!

Situation #3.

Family reunion at Uncle Wilber's farm. Aunt Marie brings out a tray of sandwiches and homemade brownies. You're way beyond denial, playing touch football with long-lost cousins. It's fourth down and forever. Do or die. The play is called in the huddle and you hustle out, all the time scoffing at the gangly teenage nephew lined up opposite you. Two steps left, then right. I'll be wide open. Out of the blue, it sounds as if Aunt Marie snaps the picnic tablecloth into the wind. Cousin Harold drops back to pass. Ahh sh*t!

In each case, you drop to the ground as your calf muscle sorely spasms.

If any of these circumstances make you squirm, then pickleballers unite. I'm about to offer expert truisms on Achilles tendon tear, repair, and rehab. Why an expert, you say? All I can tell you is I'm grateful that I don't have a third leg because within a period of four years, I ruptured each one, and the setting for each crime was the pickleball court.

Information on this injury is as bountiful as unforced net serves into a Class Three hurricane. Reading about it is painless. The realization is proportionately psychotic. There's a grim reminder on my i-phone. I've always been athletic and was looking for a cross-training sport aside from biking or running. At first, I approached it as exercise and gave it little serious attention. My first experiences were mediocre at best and soon, my skill level plateaued. But a pair of new court shoes and a pricey paddle were just what the doctor ordered. Within months, I was banging, attacking, and dinking like the pros. Unfortunately, Dirty Harry put it pithily, "You're a legend in your own mind". To my dismay, I was being whipped by players of all shapes and ages. A unilateral decision was made. No more embarrassment.

Continued on Next Page

Rupture #1

The first rupture occurred around Christmas 2016 as I floundered in no-man's land. SNAP! It felt like Situation #2: A tiny dog had just nipped me. I quickly turned to take a swipe. Low and behold, the worst-case glowered like your partner watching a whiff on a token lob to your forehand. An MRI confirmed the diagnosis and a week later I went in for reparative surgery. This was followed by a splint the size of a small tree limb and an Ace bandage for eight weeks. I borrowed two pair of crutches from friends and placed one inside the front door and the other at the top of the stairs. I also purchased a collapsible four-wheeler walker from Amazon, the kind with a padded seat and handy pouch to carry things like books or extra ice packs. That beast was exclusively utilized for misadventures around the yard. By the way, those handbrakes were a humbling lifesaver on several occasions.

The initial post-operative pain and discomfort were excruciating. Like being unable to dodge a head shot, I tried to tough it out deprived of a prescription. I was immobile and confined to three rooms in the house: the living room, the kitchen, and the bathroom. A prisoner without escape. I implemented R.I.C.E: Rest, ice, compression, and elevation to no avail and crossed off the days until that first follow-up orthopedic appointment in four weeks. Despite the discomfort, I began to hobble on my heel from sofa to La Z Boy chair. That surgeon was crazy. I was far ahead of the predicted three to four-month recovery period. Reality check. As a result of standing, the swelling magnified to a point that I'd milk the excess fluid out of my swollen skin several times a day. But the worst was at night. Without Advil or a powerful prescription within my reach, it was as if I was mere target practice up the NVZ river without a paddle.

Reconnecting soft tissues with sutures in an outstretched tendon is an arduous process, especially on the nerves. Initial injury begets inflammation and hemorrhage. Surgery begets edema. Edema never seems to go away leading to stiffness and unremitting pins and needles. You get the picture. A vicious circle with no easy way out.

Rupture #2

Turn the page to the summer of 2020, staying in place, COVID19, social distancing, etc. The second rupture materialized while standing at the baseline. My opponent was tormenting me with underspin. In the back of my mind, a deceiving crosscourt shot should neutralize him. Fully aware of how that first injury took the sails out of me, the yellow caution flag was stamped in my memory as if it was game point. Don't blow it now. I crouched in a ready position to deliver the down the line kill shot and 'POP'.

As you already know, this sport requires a different set of skills to master. My footwork and footspeed were okay, but I was failing the final exam of patience. With meager success of my dinks and third shot drops, I over-strategized and 'voila'. Afterwards, I required help to stand and hobbled off the court disheartened.

In my defense, I'm lithe for my age and come from a tennis background. With a myriad of drills, I'd reached a senior 4.0 level. After the first rehab, Pickleball 101 was a combination of willpower, crotchety fortitude, constant stretching, circadian exercise, proper hydration, and orneriness until I had two functional legs. Of course, this included another new pair of state-of-the-art court shoes! The learning curve was stamped into my head like attacking the opponent's chicken wing. Unfortunately, the poaching gods were stacked against me.

I learned that ruptured Achilles tendons during athletic events are not that uncommon, especially in males. The small muscle groups in the forefoot and around the ankle will defer to calf and quad muscles during certain physical activities where an explosive step is required and herein lies the problem. Overcompensation and underusage can lead to strain, tears, or even worse. Let's not forget age. All those geezers in knee braces on the other side of the net. Maybe I should pay more attention.

I'm the worst patient anyone would want. Just ask my wife. On more than one juncture I awoke from a fitful sleep with her leaning over me, a pillow tightly gripped in her fists. Even wearing dark glasses and a mask, I knew it was her... It's summer and I could only sit on a lawn chair with my leg propped up, day after day, week after week, losing the game of independence. Poor me.

Any rewards seemed few and far between like winning two points in a row before side out. But I thoroughly enjoyed browsing the book titled, Pickleball: Food for Thought by Phil Dunmeyer. So much of it made sense. Those snippets of wisdom. That subtle sarcasm. It was as if the book was written to describe my numerous misgivings. I only needed another chance to prove myself. The road to survival had already been traveled. Why not take advantage and pound the dents out of my wounded pride? Here are personal reflections on how to live to tell the tale at the journey's end. Like being skunked in the first round, is there any redeeming value? In no order, the top twenty-one reasons to beat temporary injurious insanity. Please enjoy. Better luck to us all in 2021! Be sure to stop and say hi if we meet on the court.

Advice for Dealing with Injuries

- Trapped in a roomful of bickering relatives at the Thanksgiving table is mere semblance to the post-operative pain.
- If you have prescription medication, use it. Two choices: relentless torture or a couple days of constipation?
- This isn't a dream. That bulging-blue, scaly-sutured wound is real. Stop wishing that you could wake up.
- From a sofa's viewpoint, there are far too many reality and game shows on TV. Maybe euthanasia is a good idea.
- After all the instructional videos I watched, Pickleball Central should offer scholarships.
- Crazy ballers who create off season practice space in their garages have never witnessed a true crime scene.
- Like Hannibal Lecter, you will become morbidly fixated on other people's Achilles tendons.
- Crutches and orthopedic boots are your new friends. In time, the treadmill, bicycle trainer, elliptical machine, stretch tubes, and balance discs will be your BFF's.
- The repaired lower limb will elephantine to twice the size without compression socks. Friends will begin to address you as Dumbo.
- A red tint on your toes is not complementary. It means that your ace bandage is too tight. Rewrap now!
- Kangaroo hopping on the good foot is a bad idea unless it's to the bathroom.
- The calf muscle and the heel fat pad have become atrophic over the lengthy recovery period. Protect them by imagining that you're at a public beach and wear spongy flipflops while taking a shower.
- Before contemplating amputation, massage the hell out of the foot once again with a syrupy hand lotion.
- After witnessing the result of a compression sock, give thanks that it hasn't been on your brain instead.
- This isn't Kansas anymore, Toto. It'll be at least twelve weeks before there's even a glimpse of a split-step Oz rainbow.
- Empathize with sympathy givers, obey your physical therapist, and stop acting so pathetic.
- Avoid the bathroom scale for three months. Discouragement is directly proportional to the number of margaritas imbibed.
- You can't hustle to the kitchen line before you relearn to walk to the court even if it seems impossible to fathom ever balancing on two feet again at the bench.
- Find a mismatched old loafer to wear on the repaired foot as an attention-getting fashion statement.
- Explain the accident as 'method acting' for the leading role in the movie My Left Foot. That should quiet the curiosity seekers...
- Practice mental maintenance. Save manic panic for the pickleball court.

I welcome comments. Please contact me on my writer's web site at: softeditionsbr@gmail.com. I'll be baaaahhk! Thanks again.

Dr. Bruce

Be that Person who Kills Overheads

By M. L. Johnson, Ed.D., Ph.D.

Your dink is working and, frustrated, your opponent lofts a high lob. Sliding sideward to your baseline, you crack a 70 mph smash to the opposite baseline – end of rally.

This story doesn't have to be fiction. If you can get under the opponent's lob, an overhead stroke should be used. If you can throw a baseball overhand from above your head, you can develop a respectable overhead attack. The preferred stroke descriptor for the tennis-type overhead stroke type depends upon your athletic history; as tennis players would call it "a slam," badminton players would call it a "smash," and volleyball players would call it a "spike." Thus, having played more badminton than tennis, the overhead power stroke will herein be referred to as a "smash." High volleys and smashes have a common target – the baseline area. As in tennis, when a volleyed or smashed ball hits the court surface it slows down. Thus, deeper airborne responses present opponents with fewer response options. And, targeting the opponent's baseline area helps prevent shots being driven downward into the net.

Due to anatomical constraints and a short preparation time, the angular acceleration force imparted from a well-timed forehand volley would seldom exceed 20 mph. However, by optimizing sequential momentum transfer, overhead strokes can generate significant paddle speed. Examples in sports with longer implements incl

shoulder joint but true overhead strokes are whole-body acceleration summations transferred to the forearm. If you have not seen an elite level smash execution, go to "AylexTV: How to Smash" (from YouTube) to see what could be the next level for pickleball strokes – the same overhead mechanics for tennis, badminton and pickleball.

When I started developing my tennis serve and badminton overhead, the standard descriptor was to "reach up and snap your wrist" – wrist flexion. Thus, since wrist flexion appeared to propel the racket forward, I religiously worked to develop a large forearm – to no avail. Then, research identified the real stroke mechanics. Jim Poole (1970) conducted a high analysis of four international badminton players – measuring angles between the segments of the upper extremity to calculate angular velocities and converting the angular velocities into linear velocities. Data was then analyzed to determine the most important musculoskeletal contribution for each stroke. He found that all four subjects employed forearm rotation (pronation) at the stroke apex and that inward rotation of the forearm (pronation) was the most important contributor to the force of a forehand smash – contributing 86-92 percent of final racket head velocity.

I conducted a follow-up study to assess the relative articulation speed of forearm pronation versus wrist

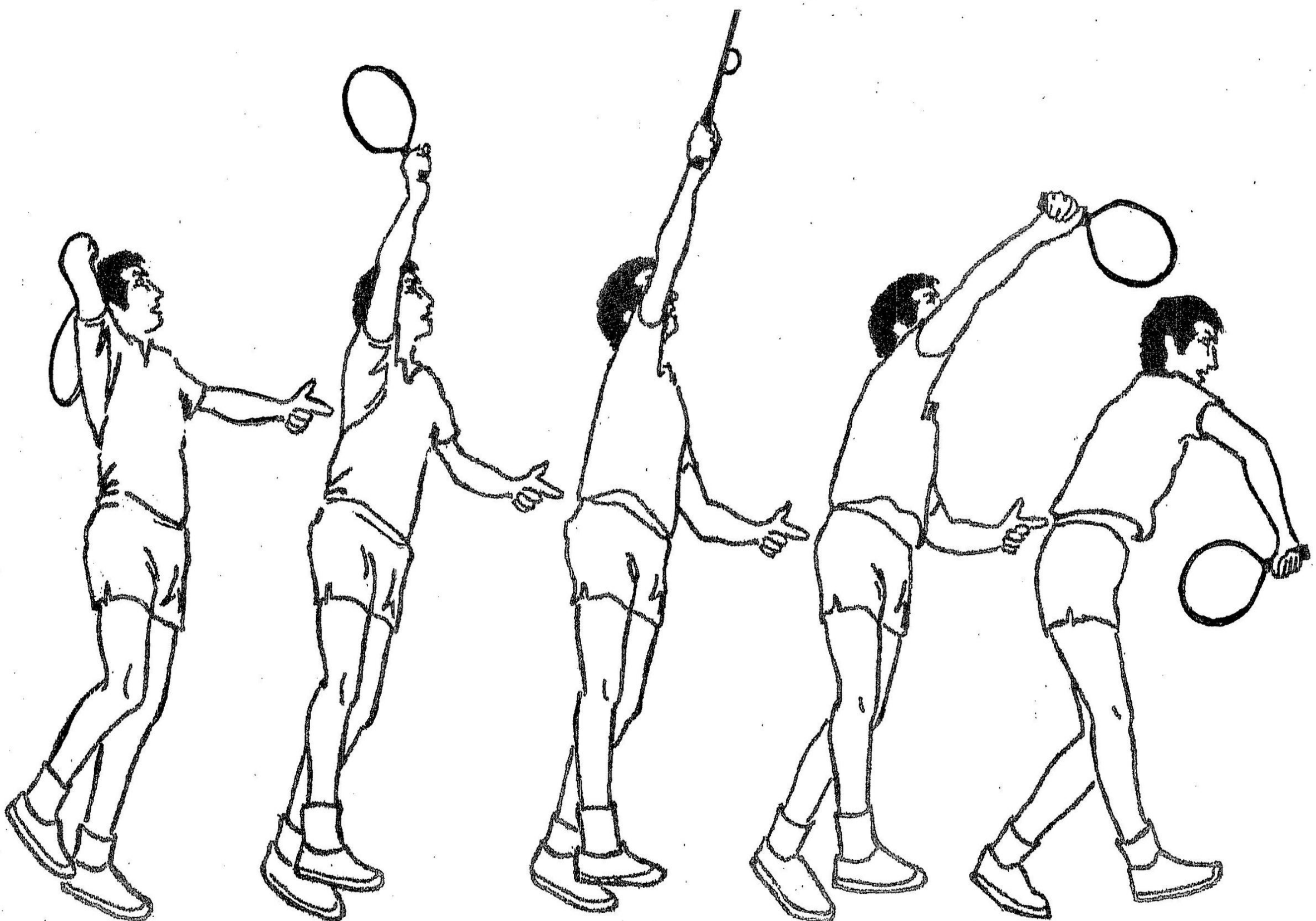


Figure 1. The stroke sequence for the pickleball smash. The arm is fully extended at ball contact and stays straight into paddle deceleration.

flexion. The data showed that pronation was faster for every subject and that pronation was in the magnitude of ten times faster than wrist flexion. Thus, my wrist flexion strength development exercise increased grip strength but not racket head velocity. But this is not to say that targeted exercises cannot facilitate racket/paddle performance – they can with the correct exercises. Remember that the paddle represents inertia/resistance and muscles can be strengthened to overcome resistance. And, the pronator quadratus and the pronator teres, attached to the radius and ulna bones, rotate the forearm inwardly – from palm-up to palm-down. See internet sources for “How to strengthen forearm pronation.”

To simplify, your overhead power stroke is really just a ball throwing action. It is like Aroldis Chapman's 106 mph fastball pitch – but with a paddle rather than a baseball. However, initially practicing to throw overhand with a baseball develops the basis of a sound smash. The action sequence starts with a slight inward hip turn, followed with raising and medially rotating the arm, and finally inwardly rotating the forearm. The smash sequence is shown in Figure 1 to the left.

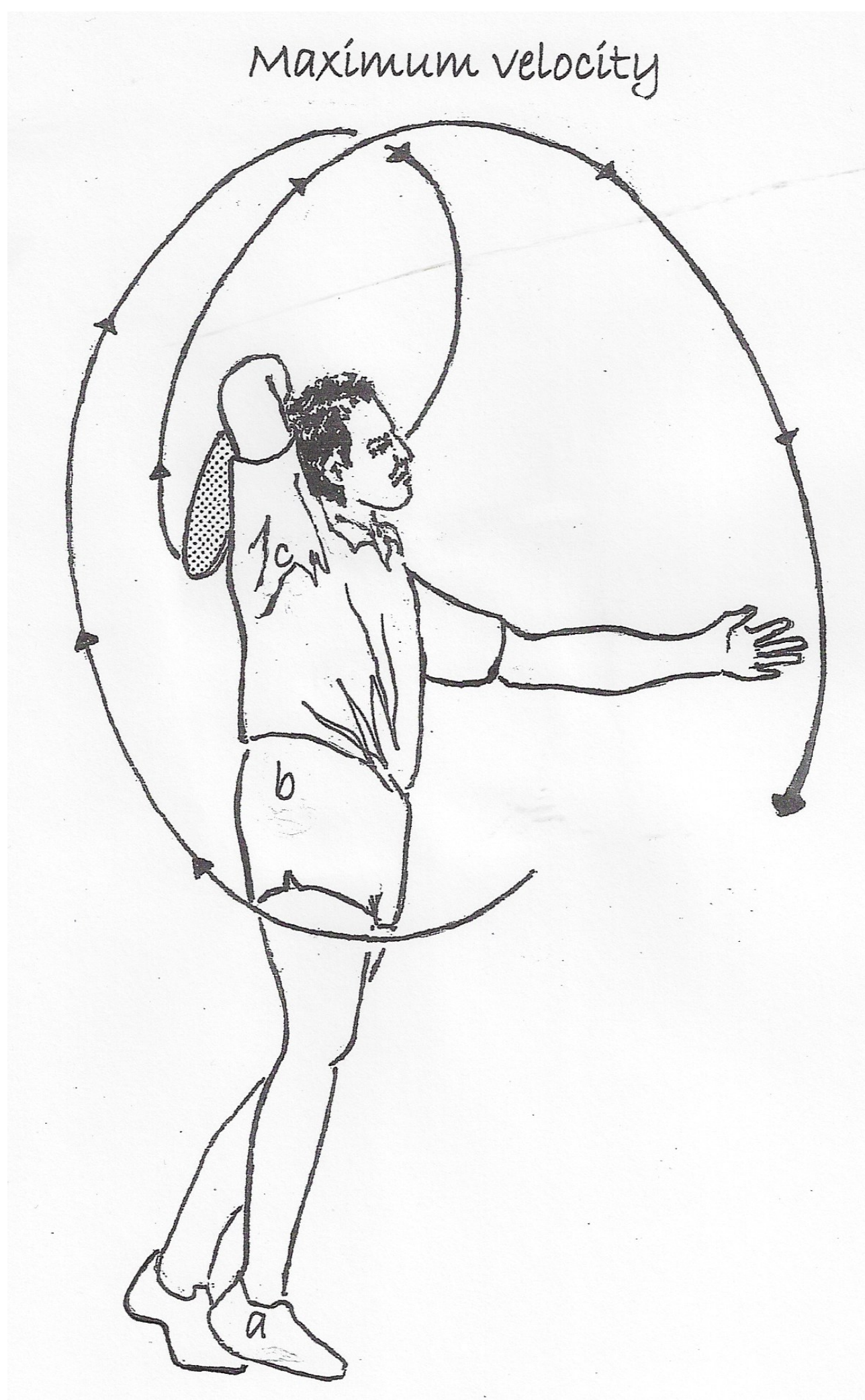


Figure 2. Lengthening the lever arm to increase angular momentum. The three critical biomechanics levers are: a) upper arm rotation at the shoulder joint; b) arm extension from the elbow; and c) forearm rotation (pronation).

Stroke development details are as follows. Generating power in an overhead stroke enlists the same biomechanics are similar to throwing a ball – particularly throwing a deep football pass or pitching a baseball.

Grip/Stance – Facing the sideline, use a continental or flat forehand drive grip and shuffle sideward back under the lobbed ball. This is a full-body stroke in which there is little consequence of hitting too hard. Get ready to crush the ball!

Backswing – Face the forehand sideline and rest the paddle's head on your shoulder. To get good alignment, point your non-dominant arm directly to the oncoming ball. If the paddle is resting on your shoulder and you are facing the sideline, your elbow will be horizontal and pointed to the sideline.

Stroke – To summarize, as the ball nears the contact zone directly overhead pull the paddle head sharply down your back to elicit a triceps stretch reflex. Next, lean slightly forward, slightly rotate your hip toward the oncoming ball, and quickly extend your arm to full height. STOP your hand at full upward extension and inwardly rotate your paddle (pronation) to sharply contact the ball. After ball contact, continue pushing upward and forward into paddle deceleration. Though the AylexTV video recommends pulling the racket forward and down, he is actually shown leading his racket head into the deceleration phase. As shown in Figure 2, the maximum paddle velocity zone is slightly forward of the body. There is a critical sequence in which the arm is fully flexed at the elbow and then extended fully at the stroke apex – where the hand is STOPPED and force is transferred to the paddle head. Figure 2 is from a light tracing photograph, where lights were attached to the elbow, the hand and the paddle tip. This is a casting motion similar to that seen in fly fishing – where the hand is stopped or in retrograde to accelerate the rod tip. If it is easier to remember, think of initially pointing the paddle edge as you cast upward and that will help to execute the final forearm movement pronation. Generally, the greater the range of motion, the greater the resultant momentum/force. Since you should have at least 180 degrees of motion range for forehand smashing, you should be able to produce effective strokes.

Key points – The important points for the pickleball smash are as follows;

- a) slide sideward to a point behind the anticipated contact point,
- b) face the sideline,
- c) sequentially build force with inward hip rotation, upper arm rotation (medial rotation),
- d) extend your arm to a point directly overhead and stop its forward movement, and e) throw your paddle head into the ball using forearm rotation (pronation).

To read more on Pickleball from M.L. Johnson click here, <https://americanpresspublishers.com/JohnsonMPickleball.html>



Communication: The Key to Playing Doubles

If you walk by any Pickleball court, most often you will see people playing doubles. In fact, it is rare to see many singles games going on during recreational play. Even at the professional level of Pickleball, most players prefer doubles and many don't even play singles. While doubles is the most popular form of Pickleball, it can definitely present some challenges when playing with a partner. In talking with Pickleball coach Jason Grigg, he spoke about the key to doubles. "I think number one it is communication, right? So it's working on having some of that communication or even talking before you go out and play like who's going to take more of the middle."

And communicating with your partner should occur not only before a game, but also in between rallies and even during a point. Like Jason said, it's always good to talk about who is going to take balls down the middle before a game. In competitive matches a team may decide the stronger player will take this shot. In other cases it could be the person who is on a diagonal from their opponent hitting the ball. And often in recreational games, the strategy is for the player hitting the forehand to take the ball hit down the middle. As you can see, there are many scenarios and these can all be discussed before your start the game.

Even if you have talked strategy before a game, you may find it is not working. So, communicating in between rallies is also important. As an example, you may have decided your partner, who is the stronger player,

will take balls down the middle. However, your partner may be having an off day so take the time to discuss this between points and perhaps change your strategy.

As you watch higher level players, they also have non-verbal communication occurring just before the start of the point. In fact, they use hand signals behind their back to let their partner know whether they will be staying on their side or switching. Jason said, "So for example, my partner will be on the left side of me and I'll be returning on the right. And then my partner gives me the open hand that he's going to switch over to the right side of the court, and then I'm going to move in behind him." If a player has a closed hand or is making a fist, then they are communicating to their partner not to switch.

At higher levels of play in Pickleball, you will even see players talking to each other during a rally. A common scenario is when the serving team is hitting a third shot drop. If the player making the shot feels it is going too high or long when it comes off their paddle, they will say something to their partner. This then allows the team to be patient moving forward since their opponent may be able to attack.

As you can see, playing doubles has some challenges but having an open line of communication with your partner is critical. Even when playing in recreational games, you should at least discuss some basic strategy before the game.

How to Hit a Roll Volley

When professional player Joey Farias first started playing Pickleball, he was still using a volley technique from tennis where you slice the ball. The problem with that is the ball can float because you don't have strings to be able to put enough spin on the ball and control it. But Joey quickly learned from one of the top players at the time, the importance of putting top spin on the ball so he could hit what is called a forehand roll. Joey said, "I had never seen somebody put so much top spin on balls in terms of rolling balls. I was still hitting tennis volleys, mainly slicing shots when we were first starting. Seeing the way he was able to hit what looked like ping pong shots from the kitchen line, that's definitely been a big influence or was a big influence in my game early on."

Joey said when he teaches the roll volley, he has his students focus more on hitting the back of the ball up in a brushing motion. The mistake people make when first hitting the shot is trying to hit the ball too forward. Joey elaborated, "Since my hands reaching out and the ball only has time to do one of two things that you're trying to make it do, whether it's go forward or go up. And since I'm putting spin, I know that the bottom won't go forward and drop as well on its own with the

natural swing. So I think that's where players kind of go wrong when they're first starting. It is they're trying to hit the ball too forward. They see the target that they want to hit and they go for that." The result of this is that the ball stays too low and doesn't cross the net especially when hitting the ball from below the net.

In asking Joey about how the top spin in tennis differs from the roll volley in Pickleball, he said in tennis you are extending your follow through. Tennis players are taught to think about hitting three or four balls. But in Pickleball, you're really just trying to hit one ball. The idea is to make contact and then go straight up like a ping pong shot.

Whether you should hit a volley or let it bounce depends on where you are going to make contact with the ball in the air and how the shot was hit to you. If the ball is slower like off the third shot drop, it makes sense to let the ball bounce before hitting it. This is because you have more options and you can control the ball better. However, if the ball is coming faster, then it makes sense to hit the ball out of the air. Joey said, it's really about your options. And the roll volley is another option to keep in your arsenal when at the kitchen line.



Pickleball Brackets: Tournament and Club Software to Manage All of Your Events and Activities

As Pickleball has grown, so to have the options for software to run many aspects of the sport. Jason Santerre put his programming background to good use to create Pickleball Brackets, an online platform to run tournaments and leagues. He talked about getting started, "It was more of a hobby thing at first and so I wrote it on and off for about two years. And within that two years, I took a break for like six months. I was like I'm not going to do this. I don't feel like it. And then I decided, I'm going to get back into it again."

The First Two Years

The result of Jason's hard work was a system which he gave away the first year so it could be fully tested by tournament directors and players. He then wanted to make sure he could accommodate many tournament formats like double elimination, single elimination, round robins, blind draws, scrambles, etc. So, the second year he gave customers 50% off.

Going Live

Then the third year, he went live with the full tournament software which is scalable so it can handle any size tournament. Jason commented, "We've built a system that that can work off any size and it doesn't really matter if your tournament's got 10,000 players or a hundred players. We have tournaments that will run in our software that have 50 players and we've got some that are 400, 500, 600. But we can go as high as you want. Software should be built in such a way where it handles load. And so our servers will increase or decrease automatically based on the bandwidth that's being consumed."

Automation

The biggest advantage of using tournament software rather than pencil and paper is Pickleball Brackets offers lots of automation for event directors. In fact, Jason listens closely to what tournament directors need and then he automates many of their requests if he thinks it will benefit others. He said, "We calculate all the stats for you live. So every single time you enter a score, instantly everything gets the updated stats live. So you always know the head-to-head breakdown, the point differential, the wins, the losses. Everything is completely automated and it's live instantly." The software also has an automated email marketing system so you can schedule all emails well in advance and they are sent out automatically based on the tournament directors schedule.

Other Options

Not only does Pickleball Brackets offer software for tournaments, but also for other activities which need to be managed such as leagues and clubs. Options for leagues include ladders as well as scrambles so the system offers a lot of flexibility for how you want to run events. You can also have your club in the system where you can set up any type of fee plan whether it is annual, lifetime, or seasonal. Then members will get an email notification to renew once their plan is close to ending.

The Future

Jason also has new projects he is working on. One of them is a complete referee management system that integrates fully with Pickleball Brackets. He is also developing a club reservation system so managers can rent out courts or ball machines and then also have schedules for instructors. All of these can be paid for in advance online.

It's clear that as the game of Pickleball grows so to do the options for software to run the sport. The great thing about Pickleball Brackets is Jason continues to develop the software which is fully integrated as the game itself grows.



PICKLEBALL FIRE PODCAST



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