

Pickleball Fire



Corrine Carr

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A Pickleball scene has been filmed for the upcoming HBO Mini Series, "The White House Plumbers" starring Woody Harrelson, Justin Theroux, Domhnall Gleeson, Lena Headey and Kathleen Turner.

The Pickleball scene features Gordon G.G. Gebert (Creator of the Slam Master Pickleball Practice/Training Paddle), Sandra Bellardino, Eileen MacAvery Kane and Jeffrey Levine in 1970's Pickleball makeup and attire.

Woody Harrelson celebrated his 60th birthday on set and among his gifts he received a Slam Master Pickleball Practice/Training Paddle. Woody plays Pickleball in his leisure time.

Pickleball Fire

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How to Play Great Defense With Pro Player John Sperling

A few years back John Sperling was the tennis director at a club in Ocala, Florida and while he knew about the game of Pickleball he kept avoiding it. He didn't want to play the sport with the funny name, but one member of the club kept asking John and he finally did. Now he is one of the top senior professionals in Pickleball and he attributes this largely to his defensive mind set. John said, "I'm more on the defensive side than the offensive side. So for me it's seeing the game differently. There's an old adage of offense wins games, but defense wins championships. And I believe that to this day. I mean I've been down in games 9-3, 9-4, and I just tell my partner, stick with it, just play the defense. We'll get to the offense."

With this philosophy John and his partners have worked their way back into matches by letting their opponent's make the errors. The idea is to get one more ball back to put pressure on the players on the other side of the net. This is also what he teaches his students. You don't have to win every point even though most players think they have to do something to win. In other words, it's okay for your competition to lose a couple of points without you being offensive.

John learned to play great defense as a college tennis player. Apparently he oftentimes was hit by the ball so his coach suggested he take a kinesiology class to learn how the body moves. John wrote every paper in the course related to tennis so this quickly helped him to improve his defense on the court. He said, "So for me, it just became second nature. I almost know what you're going to do before you do. Pickleball has a little bit of variety to it where you can kind of get some misdirections and all that. But pretty much everyone is pretty true as they can't go anywhere without their hips. So if you can understand where the body goes, then you're ahead of the game on that. And so one thing I always tell my students is to look



for visual cues. Shoulders, turn, head down, all these little things that kind of gives you an advantage."

Besides looking for visual cues to help improve your defense, John also recommends tracking the ball with your body. He says he doesn't lunge for balls. Instead he makes sure he always hits the ball out in front of himself. You should also be watching your opponent's patterns. This is especially helpful for those who are not as mobile on the court or as athletic as other players. John said, "It's not how quick you are and how athletic you are. Those are all great attributes to have. I mean don't get me wrong, but just knowing the pattern of your opponent is probably a much better tool to have in your arsenal because you start to understand what they will do." So if your opponent hits their overhead to the same spot every time, when it's 8-8 in the third game of the match you know where the ball is going. Sometimes you may guess wrong, but more often than not the competition won't deviate in their pattern of where they hit their overhead.

John said the mark of a really great defensive player is to recognize those patterns and then use that knowledge when you play. So be like John and work to develop this skill to improve your game.

Pickleball Boot Camp: What It's Like

Coach Russell Elefterion wanted to become a better Pickleball player. So, he decided to start running boot camps where he brings professional Pickleball players to Montreat, North Carolina through his company Suncoast Pickleball. As a result, his game improved along with the camp participants. So what exactly is a Pickleball boot camp and how is different from others camps or clinics?

Most camps are two or three days and run between nine in the morning and three or four in the afternoon. After those hours, you don't see the other participants or instructors for the most part. The Suncoast Pickleball boot camp goes from Sunday through Friday and everyone is busy from 7:30 a.m. to 9 p.m. Mornings and afternoons are spent with the professionals where you will drill and also put into practice what you learned by playing games. At night a whole variety of activities are available. Russell said, "We have Texas holdem, trivia contests. I teach some line dancing. We have bands come in... The camp was so long and people were complaining that I kept them busy so long, so I gave them a day off. So now they go into Black Mountain on Thursday for dinner on their own and enjoy some alone time."

The boot camp has one professional instructor for every eight campers and there are usually 64 students. The groups are divided into eight so you can have people with similar skill levels drilling and playing together. You have a chance to work with all eight professionals as you will work with an instructor for three hours and then rotate. The camps for 2021 have some of the top names in Pickleball such as Michelle Esquivel, John Sperling, Gigi LeMaster, and Steve Parento and they are already sold out. Russell is planning to offer camps in both May and September of 2022 next year. Camp prices range from \$699 to \$1999 in 2021 depending on whether you stay at the resort and/or eat meals there. The cost also varies based on whether you need a single or couples rate.



Here are three of the top tips Coach Russell received from the professionals who have taught at the boot camp.

Tip #1 from Brian Staub

When your team is in a situation where one of you need to hit an overhead, there is a correct way to both place this shot and cover the next one in the rally. The person hitting the overhead should aim at the feet of their opponent. This way the point may end immediately or your competition may get the ball but hit a weak shot back. So, when your partner is hitting the overhead, be sure to move into the middle of the court and clean up the point as your partner moves back up to the non-volley zone line.

Tip #2 from John Sperling

While many people think the best way to return serve is to hit the ball down the middle so as to create confusion between partners, that is not necessarily true. The best shot to hit on the return of serve is to place the ball to the person straight in front of you rather than going cross court. Your return partner at the net can then move toward the middle to cover the gap and take away drives down the center of the court. This will then force your opponent to hit a third shot drop which you can be ready for since it should go toward the person coming to the net.

Tip #3 from Dave Weinbach

When you serve, your momentum can often carry you into the court. Be sure to move back behind the baseline if this happens. Otherwise you become a target for your opponent and if they hit the ball deep in the court, you are out of position to hit the third shot. It's much easier to move forward to hit the third shot than to be falling backward trying to hit it because the serve return is deep and you are out of position. So how far back behind the baseline should you be? If you have tough competition, the serving team should stay three or four feet behind the baseline. You can move up a bit more if the serve returns are not coming that deep or hard but still be sure to stay behind the baseline.

[Suncoast Pickleball Website](#)

Shea Underwood Goes From College Kicker to Pickleball



Shea Underwood dreamt of being a kicker in the NFL when he was on the football team at Georgia Tech. But after backing up two kickers who went onto the NFL, he realized his football dream wasn't going to come true. Shea said, "Around the end of 2019, I realized that this thing I worked for the past six years of my life was kind of coming to a close and I needed something to fill that void. So it just so happened that I'm from Hiawassee, Georgia, which is the home to what I call a Pickleball unicorn. And that unicorn is 14 dedicated Pickleball courts, right by a gorgeous lake with mountains all around it. It's absolutely beautiful. And the local dentist in our town, Dr. Moss, he invited me out to play."

That invitation came at the right moment as now Shea is working on a new dream, to become a professional Pickleball player. Shea started his journey as a 3.0 or 3.5 player, but he didn't play a tournament until he reached the 4.0 level. So in his first tournament, he played mixed doubles with Lilly Hooper and they reached the podium, earning a bronze medal. Shea had plans to play many tournaments this summer, but realized he wasn't going to get much better playing those events. So, he withdrew from all tournaments to focus on drilling. Shea said,

"When you think about high school, when you're playing a sport, how many days a week do you practice? Probably if you're playing football you're practicing four days a week. You're doing a film review on Sundays, and you're thinking about it on a Saturday. You play the game on Friday. When we go and play Pickleball, we're playing five days a week. And that's it. That's all we do."

Shea has committed to a new schedule for the next few months. He will drill on weekdays and then play recreationally on the weekends. His plan is to not go back to tournament play until he reaches that 5.0 professional level. He wants to leave no doubt that he's done everything possible to achieve his professional goal. At the time of the interview, he was a 4.5 tournament player.

So, what is it going to take for Shea to move up to the 5.0 level? It's really a combination of working on technique and having a game plan in matches. Shea says he has rated himself on 15 different shots and he wants to get to an A plus level on all of them. An example of this is hitting an overhead. Since he did not have a tennis background, it took him a long time to be able to consistently hit that shot. Once he gets to that A plus mark, Shea believes he will be ready to compete as a professional. However, it is a challenge to find a practice partner who is really willing to put in the time like Shea is doing.

Then there is the game plan and developing a system. Shea said, "When you really start to dig into it, there's this whole inner game of why do I hit a cross-court dink? Why do I hit a third shot drop to my opponent's backhand? And that's the kind of thing that really takes you from that 4.0-4.5 to the 5.0 level."

Shea said every year he sits down on his birthday and writes a list of goals for the next 12 months. Pickleball is one of them. He said, "So on February 6th, 2021, I sat down and made a goal that by my 24th birthday, I would become a 5.0 Pickleball player, like certified. And what are we now? Nine months away from that. So that's kind of like the deadline. February 6th, 2022. Lynn, if we talk again, I better be a 5.0, otherwise I've done something wrong."

Pro Corrine Carr on How to Hit and Practice the Block Volley



The block volley is a key shot to master when players are at the non-volley zone line. If your opponent hits the ball hard at your body, players have a tendency to fire it back at the competition because they are being attacked. However, that's not always the best shot if the ball stays low. Professional Pickleball player Corrine Carr discussed the shot, "So I think a huge part of this is just training your mind to maybe calm down and block instead of attacking your opponent back. And really the technique is to put the paddle out. It sounds easy but put the paddle out. You want to make contact with the ball and let the ball bounce off your paddle and hopefully back over into the kitchen."

No Need to Swing

Be sure when you hit the block volley to open up the face of the paddle so that ball bounces up. Remember you are hitting this shot when the ball is low so you want to make sure it goes over the net. Because the ball is coming to you at a fast pace, you don't even need to swing. Just make sure you put your paddle where the ball is going and make solid contact. While the block volley seems like an easy shot to hit, Corrine says many players make the mistake of swinging. They think they are just blocking the ball, but in fact they are swinging so the key is to just make sure the ball bounces off the paddle without moving the racket.

The Right Grip

When hitting the block volley, you should be using a continental grip or some call it the hammer grip. The edge of your paddle should come down between your thumb and index finger. You should also use a loose grip. Think about your grip in terms of the pressure you put on the handle of the paddle with one being a grip so loose someone could knock the paddle of your hand and ten is holding the grip so tight it hurts. Corrine said to use a pressure of four so it's a soft grip, but make sure the paddle does not move in your hand when hitting the block volley.

Use Your Backhand

Most block volleys you hit should be with your backhand. Corrine estimates you can cover 80% of your body with the backhand so you should only be using a forehand when the ball comes to your right shoulder if you are right handed. She said it's a good idea to favor your backhand when you are in a ready position. However, make sure you avoid the "chicken wing" shot where you use your backhand when the ball is near your dominant hand's shoulder. In this case, you should be hitting a forehand.

So now you know the technique for hitting a block volley, what is the best way to practice the skill?

Here are three drills.

#1 Quick Hands

Corrine suggests starting with a quick hands drill where you and your partner are at the kitchen line hitting controlled yet fast volleys to each other. She said this forces you to have your hands up and be ready which is what you need to successfully hit a block volley.

#2 Double Hit

After the quick hands drill, stay in the same position near the non-volley zone line. Then hit the ball up to yourself and then back across the net. Corrine said, "So you're hitting the ball twice and basically it teaches you to soften your grip because this is hard to do if you have a death grip. So soften your grip, and then it kind of makes you think about the angle of your paddle. You have to open it a little bit, well a lot actually to hit it up to yourself. And also when doing this you're meeting the ball out in front of your body. So again, it's kind of reinforcing some of the things you need to do when you're actually blocking."

#3 Blocking Only

In the last drill, the two players are again positioned at the kitchen line. One player is the attacker and the other is the blocker. The key is for the blocker to only hit a block volley and not to be offensive.



Corrine said, "What it does is it forces the blocker to get in the blocking mentality. So when the ball's coming hard at you instead of automatically going into attack mode, you have to think I can only block."



J Gizmo Hall: Standing Out On and Off the Court

J Hall, better known as Gizmo, has a familiar story of how he first started playing Pickleball. As he was shooting baskets in the gymnasium on his day off from being a paramedic, he heard an unusual sound and peeked around the corner. Of course a couple of older ladies asked him if he wanted to play. Gizmo politely declined but the next time he was in the gym, the same ladies put a paddle in his hand and this led him to becoming a Pickleball professional a year later. What is different about Gizmo's story is the challenges he faced growing up in the inner city.

Gizmo didn't know anything about Pickleball when he was in high school. But he now wonders as a 31-year-old what his life would have been like if he was introduced to the game in high school. He said, "I wish I had somebody when I was younger to tell me no matter what you do, just stay out of the way... I didn't know what I wanted to do. So I ended up running with people who I won't even say they knew what they wanted to do. But it wasn't, looking back in hindsight always 20/20, necessarily the right things to do. So if I could have had a hobby or something that occupied enough of my time to where I could have just stayed out of the way, and not gotten in trouble until I actually locked in on what my purpose in this life was. I think I could have been a lot further than I am now."

Gizmo has definitely come a long way, but in high school it was a struggle even in athletics. He was the only senior on the junior varsity team because he was not good enough for the varsity. As a result of this experience, he said he suffered from depression and now thinks finding Pickleball earlier in his life would have helped.

The Pickleball Farm

Nowadays Gizmo does not care if he ever wins another medal in Pickleball. What he does care about is introducing Pickleball to an entirely different demographic. He would like to see the sport in middle school, high school, and eventually college where athletes can earn a scholarship. Gizmo is so serious about his goals he and his wife purchased a 10 acre farm over two years ago. It is a working farm in Virginia that is also a 501(c)(3) non profit which donates crops to families in need. The farm is also a place where kids can come to learn about farming, fishing, raising animals, and of course Pickleball.

Gizmo said, "I know my purpose on this earth is to help people. That's kind of what I do. That's what makes me whole. That's what completes me. That's wholeheartedly what I feel that I was placed on this earth for so that's why I chose to join the fire department and become a paramedic because I was

helping a lot of people... I loved it, but the amount of people that I could help by traveling state to state doing Pickleball and eventually going country to country, introducing Pickleball to different demographics, the amount of lives that I can be able to potentially reach and maybe help change paths in comparison to the amount of people that I would come into contact with as a paramedic."

Gizmo has not been able to have as many people come to the Pickleball farm as he would like due to the COVID-19 pandemic. But when they do the animals are always a favorite of the guests. Gizmo says each of the animals has their own personality such as Hurricane Charlotte, a pig pushing 600 pounds. She is considered the official product tester, but anytime Charlotte gets out she breaks things due to her size. Also there is Mr. Pickles, a turkey, who is the head greeter. Gizmo said she was hand-raised by a woman and now likes people better than other turkeys.

His Nickname

Then there is Gizmo's namesake, a mini donkey. He said, "So Gizmo actually was a childhood nickname. Friend used to tease me. They actually said that I used to resemble the gremlin. So it kind of stuck with me through my childhood. And I ended up naming my first dog Gizmo. And it is currently the name of my mini donkey as well. So it kind of turned a negative into a positive and just something that never went away."

The other thing that is never going to go away for Gizmo is playing in Pickleball tournaments and teaching free clinics for the kids. And you'll know it is Gizmo when you see his colorful outfits on the court. He said, "We all hit the same ball over the same net and we're all doing the same thing. My thing is I just want to stand out in whatever I do. And it's funny when people walk by me, they're like, man, you're really bright today. And the first thing out of my mouth is, man, I'm just trying to fit in or I'm just trying to fly under the radar. And that immediately gets a smile."

Gizmo also recently hosted a free pizza and Pickleball party when he was at the Atlanta Open event. So each time he goes to a tournament, he either wants to have a free children's clinic or go to a juvenile detention center and speak to the kids. He said about his visits to the juvenile detention center, "I go there to just show them that, you're not forgotten about. You may have made a mistake. I get that. I made tons of mistakes in my life, but it's not over. And you know, don't give up."

The great thing too is that Gizmo never gave up either and he found his purpose in life.

How to Get Back into Pickleball After Taking Time Off

According to the Sports & Fitness Industry Association, 60% of core (play 8 or more times per year) Pickleball players are 55 and over. That means we are likely to spend periods of time away from the court due to injuries or other aches and pains. Once we feel good again, we are ready to rush back to our favorite game. But according to certified trainer CJ Johnson, who was recently on the Pickleball Fire podcast, we need to ease back into playing.

However, many players return to the court after a few weeks and play for a few hours. CJ said, "So if you're coming back to the game, it's so easy to go out and play because we haven't seen our friends in a long time. All of a sudden you're out there for three hours. That's the equivalent of deciding I'm a distance runner today and next week I'm going to run a marathon. I think we can all logically look at the running analogy and say you're probably going to get hurt."

According to CJ, if you are going from running a 5k to a marathon, you need to build yourself up. Pickleball is no different. But players coming back to the game tend to think, let's just play three games. If games are 20 minutes that means you are spending one hour on the court. That's a lot of time if you are just starting back after a lay off. CJ suggests if you are in good shape play two games or if you are in really good shape play three. But that should be your limit regardless of your overall fitness level. Otherwise, it is likely you will suffer an injury.



CJ had a break from Pickleball during the COVID-19 pandemic as they were not playing Pickleball indoors during the winter in Lake Tahoe. So, while she spent over 100 days a year on the slopes skiing and was in great shape, she was careful when she was able to play Pickleball in the spring. CJ said, "I went to drill my first day out. I said an hour, that's the max that we're going to do. I made a plan how to break it up so that I was drilling different skills to hit on different areas of the body. At 50 minutes, five, zero, I was looking down at my watch going it's about time to be done. And I'm in great shape. Like I said, I ski a hundred days a year and I'm really into strength training and working out...And I was ready to be done in less than an hour."

Professional Pickleball player Megan Hall, who had a serious health scare, was also out of Pickleball for a couple of months. When she came back she said she felt so slow on the court. Even CJ felt like she had clown shoes on when she came back from her lay off. CJ said, "Unfortunately the research shows that diminishing returns happen within a very short time. So the minute we stop doing something physically, and that doesn't mean that your Pickleball skills are going to completely deteriorate and go away, your accuracy is going to go away...And it's just when you're not training those muscles, you get diminishing returns. So it's much easier to continue doing something, even if you're only doing it for short periods of time, than it is to take long layoffs."

So, heed CJ's advice and if you have a long lay off from the game of Pickleball, limit your play when you get back on the court so as to avoid injuries.

CJ Johnson is well known in the Pickleball world as a coach and influencer. She recently hosted the virtual Pickleball Summit which included over 30 of the top Pickleball coaches and experts who shared the latest in techniques, strategies, equipment, mental training, fitness and more. Click below to find out more information on how you can access the Pickleball Summit.



Improve Your Flexibility & Game

When we think of improving our Pickleball game, we usually focus on becoming more consistent as we hit dinks, third shot drops, and serve returns. However, increasing your flexibility can be just as important to your game. Stretch coach Brad Walker, a former professional triathlete, said about Pickleball, "There's a lot of quick dynamic type movement, a lot of side to side movement, quick rushing forward and backward and so forth. And that puts quite particular demands on the athlete. So, flexibility in being able to react quickly, being able to reach up high, or reach down low to the ball is really important. So, flexibility plays a huge role in that. Just by increasing your flexibility, increasing your range of motion, and just increasing your ability to move freely on the court is a big advantage"

Just as improving your serve or serve return is a long-term project, it is the same for increasing your flexibility. Brad likens it to any other aspect of health and fitness, but the great thing about working on your flexibility is it can help reduce aches and pains in muscles and joints plus it can help prevent injuries. The best way to become more flexible is to stretch on a regular basis. This means you should do it before a game, between games if you are sitting out for awhile, after playing, and at night. According to Brad, here are the do's and don'ts of stretching?

1. Do the right stretch at the right time. This means you should perform dynamic stretching before you play and static stretching afterward. Dynamic stretching involves exercises that are done with movement such as arm swings, legs swings, or trunk rotations. You can even perform dynamic stretching while you are waiting in between games or matches. Static stretching focuses on one muscle group and holding a position for 15 or 20 seconds. A good example of this is standing up, leaning over, and reaching for your toes.

2. Make sure to stretch very gently. Brad says a common mistake is for players to do too much during the warm up or cool down. In fact, you don't want to be pushing the stretch to the point it becomes painful. Go slow and be gentle with your stretches.

3. Don't hold your breath when stretching. While you may not even be aware you are doing this, it is key for you to breath deeply to help your body relax. It also helps to provide oxygen to your muscles and soft tissues which enhances your flexibility.

4. Don't do the same stretch over and over again. You should focus on multiple muscle groups rather than just the one where you may feel tight. You can spend more time on the areas where you are stiff or sore, but don't neglect the rest of your body.

5. If you have an injury, avoid stretching that area. This is especially true in the case of a muscle strain or sprain. The injured area is already damaged so you can cause the injury to become worse by stretching.

While it is important to stretch for a few minutes before and after playing, the way you really improve flexibility is to stretch at other times also. Brad said, "Improving your flexibility and then stretching after your game is more about helping you recover and get over your Pickleball game. If you want to really improve your flexibility, then it is important to dedicate some other time to stretching where you can hold the stretches for a little bit longer. You could do a little bit more stretching. You can go deeper into the stretch. So, it's really important to set aside some time to work on your stretching to improve your flexibility." Brad suggests stretching late at night before you go to bed. Take 30 minutes or more when you are sitting in front of the television to do some stretches. This not only benefits your flexibility and range of motion, but can also help you sleep better."



It's funny that Kyle Yates, who is in his mid twenties, feels old in the Pickleball world.

"I feel old compared to most of these players that really just picked up the sport just a year or two or three ago. And I've been playing for about 10 years now. So although I am young, I feel old in the sport of Pickleball."

Kyle started indoors on a wood floor where they used badminton lines and lowered the net to play Pickleball with wooden paddles. He didn't really take the sport seriously at first, but enjoyed playing with his uncle.

While Kyle didn't believe Pickleball was a legitimate sport, he quickly excelled at the game. So he turned to Youtube and found Pickleball tournaments in Arizona. He decided to practice, then enter some tournaments, and was able to hold his own against the best players in the world. Then in 2016, at the inaugural U.S. Open Pickleball championships, he won the men's doubles professional event with partner Dave Weinbach. For Kyle, that's when he realized there was some potential to make a living with the sport. Later that year he put college on hold and decided to focus on Pickleball full time. Kyle said, "I really wanted to focus on traveling and practicing and playing more...2017 I had a really good year. 2018 I had a really good year. But then, again, I was one of the first, young athletic players to really take it seriously and do it full time. And nowadays there's probably 20 to 30 good players doing that."

Pickleball is important not only to Kyle, but to many of the Yates family members. In fact, they have a family tournament at Christmas time with 12 or 13 participants. Kyle is the champion, as you would expect, for three years running. He has also partnered with his uncle, mom, sister, and brother-in-law to win tournament gold at the 5.0 level. Kyle said his favorite moment in Pickleball was winning gold on the stadium court with his sister as his mom watched court side.

When Kyle was asked about not just his favorite Pickleball moment, but his greatest accomplishment he said, "That's a great question. I mean what comes to mind is just tournament wins. But I'd like to think that I've made more of an impact in the sport other than just winning some tournaments. I have met a lot of really cool people and it's a funny sport where it's intimate enough where you have people who can still come up and talk to you and stuff. And I get a lot of people coming up to me and just saying I love watching you play and I think that means more to me than just winning some tournaments."

The other reason why Kyle may feel "old" in Pickleball is because he has already accomplished so much in the sport not just at the professional level, but in the

Kyle Yates: The



e Old Guy at 26



business aspect of the game. Kyle has partnered with Randy Sussman to start PB 1965, a Pickleball apparel company. He also teaches Pickleball all over the country through the Yates Pickleball Academy. He has worked with a couple of well known players including professionals Ben Johns, who is the number one men's player in the world, and 14-year-old Anna Leigh Waters. Kyle is working with a couple of other players currently, but he says it will definitely be hard to outshine those two especially since the game is becoming so competitive at the top level.

Kyle said, "At the top levels, it's just unbelievable how good these players are. I mean you have high quality athletes, but people who have just dedicated to do full-time Pickleball. There are players right now that are finally winning medals at the pro level that have been grinding for well over a year, year and a half. And they're finally starting to win some medals. Every year the bracket gets deeper and deeper talent and everyone just keeps getting better. And you're seeing newer people jump on the scene that have been training in secret. It's tough. I mean I tell people the skill level is beyond where the sport is really at. And what I mean by that is the players right now are at that elite level, but the sport is still trying to catch up."

Needless to say, the sport of Pickleball has come a long way since Kyle started playing ten years ago. But take it from the "old" guy, the game still has a long way to go in terms of better video, more spectators, and higher prize money.



How Fly Casting Can Help Your Third Shot Drop

By Randy Kadish

It is a well-known principle of fly casting that to form a tight loop and a powerful cast, a caster must move his or her hand, and therefore the rod tip, in a straight line, up until the final power snap at the end of the forward cast. To execute a long-distance cast—a cast of close to 100 feet—a caster must increase the length of the casting stroke yet still move the rod tip in a straight line. How does a fly caster do this?

By rotating their hips in sync with their casting arm: backward during the back cast, forward during the forward cast. To illustrate, let's hold a fishing rod (or long stick) as if we are about to make a cast. Without rotating, move the rod back and forth. The rod tip will move in a slight arc. Now repeat, but this time rotate. The rod tip will move in a straight line. No wonder Joan Wulff, the greatest woman fly caster of all time, advocated hip rotation during the cast.

What does this have to do with third shot drops?

A lot, I believe. Why? If we hit a drop shot, and the paddle, at contact, is too high and/or the face too open, the drop will go too high and get slammed back at us. Oy Vey!

Let's assume we are near the baseline and hitting a traditional, underhand third shot drop, and we are contacting the ball at knee level or lower. We probably want the drop shot to cross the near the non-volley zone line at a height of five to six feet. The paddle, therefore, should point to about seven o'clock at contact, and the ball should travel at about a 30-degree trajectory. (Of course, the paddle angle and the trajectory will vary whether the ball is rising or falling at contact.)

We have a problem! As we execute the shot and move our arm forward, the paddle face opens and now points to about eight o'clock. The result: the drop shot goes too high, and we cannot move up. How can we avoid this most dreadful catastrophe?

Let's do another experiment. Take a paddle and get into the ready position with our knees bent and our feet shoulder-width apart or a little wider. If we are right-handed, step forward with our left foot, then pretend to hit a drop shot. As soon as we feel shoulder resistance, stop. The paddle will be eye level or a little higher and the face completely open. Repeat, but this time rotate and finish with our weight on the front of our front foot. When we feel resistance, the paddle will be about shoulder level and the face slightly closed. Repeat again, but with our right foot forward. When we feel resistance, the paddle will be above eye level. The different finish positions are the difference between a too-high and an on-target drop shot. Based on the results of our experiments, I try to hit a drop shot by stepping forward with my left leg—I am right-handed—then rotating my hips.

To help ensure I fully rotate my hips and use my legs as much as my shoulder to generate power, I execute my drop shot and say to myself, "Rotate." (If I want to hit a lower, deeper drop shot, I point the paddle lower before the start of the hitting stroke.) Also, it is important that we don't bend our wrist or elbow, and that we hit with a light grip, and we keep our head down for a split second after contact.

But what if we must hit a ball that is well above our knee? If we hit an underhand drop shot, it will be almost impossible to maintain the seven o'clock paddle angle. The solution: turn our shoulders and hips so they point at the target, then execute a forehand or backhand drop, rotating our hips and finishing with our weight on the outside of our front foot.

Finally, it is important to read the spin and speed of the incoming ball. If it has backspin the ball will deflect down off the paddle, so I aim my trajectory a little higher. If the ball has pace I hit with less power.

So, if you are struggling to keep your drops shots lower—and so many of us are—try rotating your hips. Thankfully, we can practice hitting mechanics in our home without even hitting a ball.





Senior Pro Linda Thompson: An Admitted Banger

Senior professional Linda Thompson earned a nickname when she started playing Pickleball. She was called one of the Original Banger Sisters as coming from a tennis background she liked to hit the ball hard. Over time, however, she developed a well-rounded Pickleball game including dinks and drives which helped her to medal in the senior professional division at the 2021 U.S. Open. Linda said, "We lost to the gold medalists in the second round. But we had some good wins and there was definitely some strong teams."

Linda has played Pickleball for five years but before that she played tennis. She competed in junior tennis, played for Ohio State, and picked up the game of platform tennis in her late twenties. As a platform tennis player, Linda was ranked in the top eight in the country but injuries took her out of all forms of tennis. After her career

was over, Linda said she didn't do anything for eight years. Things really changed when she found Pickleball because the paddle and ball is very light so she could play the game even in tournaments.

Linda said, "I kind of miss platform tennis. I don't know if it was because that was a later thing for me. It's a very creative and fun game if you are somebody who has really good volleys, overheads, and spins... It's a really fun game, but it's much harder on your body." Linda certainly puts her platform tennis background to good use as she can hit shots which other Pickleball players are not expecting. This is especially true when hitting overheads because she can place the ball at unusual angles.

When Linda first started she was playing tennis on the Pickleball court. Still her power game was successful at the 4.0 and 4.5 level.

Once she was rated a 5.0, however, she had to work on her soft game. What is ironic now is that the professional competition is becoming more of an attacking game especially for the women. Linda said, "I was a banger before my time, and now everybody told me to stop banging and now everybody's playing the power game. I think you actually see it more on the women's side. When you watch the top pro men play, they get in a lot of dink rallies. They have firefights, their hands are all so fast. You might see some third shot drives, but for the most part, I feel like the men are hitting more drops and getting into dink rallies than the women."

The good news for Linda is that she can now hit third shot drives and drops. So if necessary she can play like her nickname as the Original Banger Sister.

You Can Make a Topspin Serve

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

Know how the pros keep hard serves in the court? They use topspin to get the ball deep near the opponent's baseline and yet keep it the court. And, you don't need a 5.0 ability to master the stroke!

If a ball travels forward and with downspin a high-pressure zone is formed on the upper-front pushing the ball downward and a partial vacuum is created below and behind the ball, pulling the trajectory sharply downward. In baseball or softball, the overspin pitch is called a "curveball" and in tennis it is called "topspin." Since tennis racket stringing resilience provides more dwell time than the hard pickleball paddle's face, the topspin

effect for the tennis serve, forehand and backhand groundstroke is much greater. However, a review of the "Jardim/Johns vs Tereschenko/Newman" (from YouTube) mixed doubles match reveals that all those players used some topspin for serving.

As nothing happens on the court until the serve is executed, do not rush into making a bad serve. Once you have developed some skill, with skill being defined as "relatively permanent neural circuitry," reduce environmental interferences by taking a deep breath and only serve after the exhale. Similarly, watch professional basketball players go through their free throw ritual of a) foot position, b) three bounces, c) deep breath, and d) shoot on the exhale. Develop your own pre-serve ritual - shrugging your shoulders and relaxing, timed with the exhale - gets you ready to serve.

To optimize force, directional accuracy, and consistency, the serving motion should a) have a long arc - accelerated from the backswing into contact and decelerated in the follow-through. The basic stroke is articulated almost entirely from the shoulder, with adjustment from the elbow. The wrist is locked and the related biomechanical principle is longer lever arms minimize angular errors. Thus, the wrist is hyperextended, as shown in Figure 1.

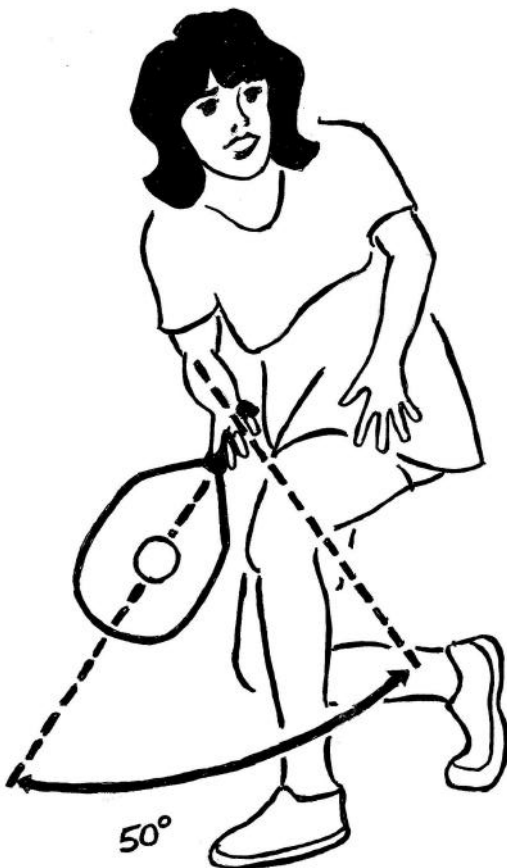


Figure 1. Hyperextension at the wrist provides a long lever arm articulated from the shoulder joint. Wrist flexion tilts the hand/fingers toward the forearm. Wrist extension positions the hand/fingers directly forward - spear like. Wrist hyperextension tilts the hand backwards toward the elbow. The critical factor for consistent pickleball serves and groundstrokes is to lead the end of the handle firmly through the stroke. Ball/paddle contact adjustment is primarily made by shoulder and elbow adjustments - never ever by wrist flexion.



Figure 2. Note the server has a slightly open stance, looks downward to the contact zone, leans forward, and leads the handle into the stroke. Opening the stance, by stepping back a few inches from the sideline with the forward foot, allows hip rotation into the stroke.



Figure 3. The topspin serve sequence. Extreme topspin can easily be imparted to a serve because the server can control the contact point. However, moderate topspin can also be imparted to drives, volleys, and dinks. Since the downward spin is being imparted, net clearance must be higher to reach the baseline.

Grip the handle firmly with your hand positioned downward behind the handle. Face the sideline net pole, with your left foot (non-dominant side) forward and extra weight positioned on your back foot. A bit of practice will ensure that you will never have to consciously think about ball-and-paddle timing during competition. Point your paddle downward! As you toss/drop the ball, pull the paddle backward well past your rear foot - the back foot staying in place for directional stability. Forward paddle acceleration is initiated from the shoulder joint; final positional adjustment is made from elbow flexion/extension, and the wrist is locked into hyperextension - as illustrated in Figure 2. A strong forward stroke slightly compresses the ball against the paddle face - increasing the dwell time. After the toss/drop, the paddle is quickly moved into the backswing and then stroked forward through the ball. Assume the upper body (the torso) is a coiled spring during the backswing. Though it may seem counter intuitive to begin the serve with a backward swing, doing so precipitates the torso stretch reflex that adds power and minimizes shoulder joint stress - as a stretched muscle fibers tend to rebound. Baseball/softball batters engage the stretch reflex by pulling the bat head backward before swinging forward. Work on the critical toss-to-contact timing to find your own toss rhythm.

The objective is to stroke through-the-ball and finish in an upward arc. Hyperextend the wrist/paddle from the backswing through the follow through, as that increases the ball/paddle dwell-time and creates a heavy contact. The critical difference between the flat drive serve and the topspin serve is that in order to impart topspin, the paddle must be brought sharply upward behind the ball on contact. The sequence drawings in Figure 3 show how the paddle is brought sharply upward and forward into the ball.

To read more on Pickleball from M.L. Johnson, click [here](#)

Two topspin example trajectories are shown in Figure 4. Overall competition strategy is to optimize your position advantage and minimize your opponent's options. Targeted serving is needed to neutralize receiver-side advantage. Since a short serve simply allows the returner to move within a few steps of the non-volley line, a strong topspin serve should pin the receiver back near the baseline. Since serving is your only opportunity to score points and the receiver must let the ball bounce before moving to the non-volley zone, there should be no excuses for net-faulting on the serve. If any serve occasionally bounces past the receiver's baseline, keep the stroke and move backward one or two steps for the next serves. If there is room, starting three to five feet behind the baseline allows you to hit a harder serve.

NOTE: Topspin for tennis forehand and backhand ground stroking is accomplished with the racket almost horizontal during contact - illegal positional contact for the pickleball serve. Thus, in order to be unquestionably legal, begin the topspin serve with the paddle pointed downward. Though you may make contact higher than with a drive serve, the paddle head will still be lower than your wrist and below your navel.

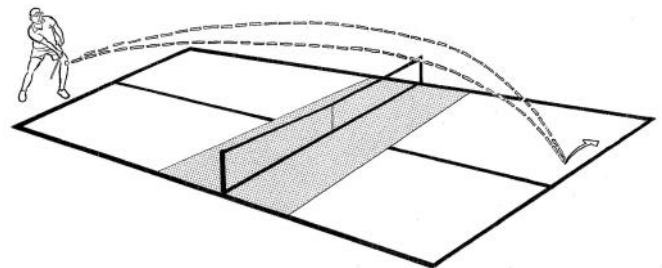


Figure 4. Trajectories for a moderate topspin serve and an extreme topspin serve. Since topspin drives the ball into the court surface, it will rebound much higher than a flat drive serve.

Pickleball Pros and Sisters: Andrea Koop and Maggie Remynse

Andrea Koop taught her sister Maggie Remynse to play Pickleball in 2017. At first Maggie didn't really like the sport because she was overwhelmed as a beginner playing with experienced players. But with encouragement from her sister, Maggie continued to play. So both players are now some of the top women's professionals in the game despite having careers outside of Pickleball and only playing about one tournament per month.

In fact, they both were on the podium at the Beer City Open in Grand Rapids in July of 2021. Andrea was the top seed, finishing first with her partner Callie Smith. Maggie finished with a bronze medal as she played with Michelle Esquivel. The sisters, however, did not meet each other during the tournament but they have played many times before both as partners and opponents.

Maggie talked about some of the challenges when playing in tournaments with her sister Andrea. Maggie said, "I think when you're related to them, you're way more comfortable with your partner, which can be a good thing, but it also can be a bad thing. When you don't live with someone or you didn't grow up with somebody or you're not as close, I think you kind of let the small stuff go when you're on the court...So we're not afraid necessarily to tell each other how we feel. And sometimes it's not the best place when you're in the middle of a match. You have to think about how that impacts you or your partner, which is also your sibling."

While Maggie and Andrea have partnered on the Pickleball court, they also have competed against each other and this brings a whole other set of challenges. Maggie said she likes playing against her older sister Andrea because it brings out the best in her game. Andrea said she doesn't think she has brought her "A" game yet when competing against her sister, but she is still out front in their head to head battles on the court. Still it is difficult because one player is celebrating while the other is dealing with a loss. Andrea said, "There's no winning. If I win, she still loses. And I don't like that. And like she said, I did not grow up playing against my sister, so I'm not used to it." Both sisters are former college tennis players who rarely played against each other in tournaments growing up due to differences in age and skill level.

While many professional Pickleball players are now focused on the sport full time, both Andrea and Maggie have careers outside of the game.

Andrea said, "I know at least for me that I don't consider Pickleball a career by any aspect of the imagination. Pickleball is my hobby and I have a lot of fun playing it. And I use it as my outlet, as a break from being a lawyer all day...So that's what Pickleball is to me. I don't consider it a career. And I think if I did the pressure and the expectations would be a whole lot different and maybe I wouldn't enjoy it as much."

While Maggie did spend some time as a college tennis coach and Pickleball coach at an athletic club, she choose not to focus on the sports as a career because she did not see it bringing her long-term fulfillment. Maggie said, "I'm happy with where I am in my personal life and my career getting to do both and getting to kind of balance those. It makes it more fun. I think Andrea has a good point in that I might not enjoy it as much if I felt the pressure of having to win to actually like pay the bills per se. I think in the end we've done a really good job of still staying very competitive with all these women that do it as a full-time job. I mean if you were to look at the list of like top 20 or so people, women who played Pickleball, Andrea and I are certainly in that list. I also think that we are the only ones within that list who actually don't play Pickleball full time."

But it's great that the sisters do play at least part time, trying to compete in one tournament per month on average. Because they live in two different states, they try to attend the same events to get to see each other and as Maggie said they cherish the time together.





Deb Harrison on the Hairpin Drop

More than likely you haven't heard of a hairpin drop unless you've played badminton. But it is a shot Deb Harrison, who has taught Pickleball for 10 years, likes her students to learn. So the question to answer is, what is a hairpin drop in Pickleball and when do you use it? The hairpin drop is a shot where the ball bounces close to the net. So if you are dinking, the ball should go over the net and land just a few inches from the net on the other side. Deb said, "My male partner who I usually I play with a lot, his name is Ted Meyer. And he said, Debbie, make the ball bounce, make the ball bounce. If it bounces, they can't attack you as easily." This is true even if you hit a hairpin drop and it bounces high. Since the ball has bounced near the net, it is hard to attack.

To practice the hairpin drop, Deb has her students start by standing in the non-volley zone. They then have to hit the ball high enough so it goes over the net and bounces near the net on the other side. The goal is for the ball to bounce as close as possible to the net. To do this, your paddle must hit underneath the ball. You should lift with your legs and shoulder, but be sure not to use your wrist. Once you get the hang of hitting the hairpin drop, move back to the non-volley zone line. You'll find you need to hit the ball a bit higher to get it over the net so it lands shallow in the non-volley zone.

The idea of the hairpin drop also applies to the third shot. You need to hit a third shot drop so

it doesn't go too deep in the court. According to Deb, "Most recently when I've been teaching the third shot drop, if I start with a hairpin, getting the importance of the ball going over the net and shallow in the court. It really helps when you move back a little bit. Hairpin, hairpin, hairpin from all the way back at the baseline which becomes a third shot drop. If they understand that you can't get deep on a third shot, the hairpin concept makes it clearer to them."

In other words, you've got to get the ball very close to the net even on the third shot in order for it to bounce before getting to your opponent. And this is especially true if you play against opponents who really lean into the kitchen while standing at the non-volley zone line.

Still remember the goal is to get the ball to bounce as close to the net as possible while making sure you get it over the net. Deb provided some guidance on the hitting the hairpin drop on the third shot. She said, "It's the depth of the ball not the height. You can if you're in back of the baseline, you can afford to keep the ball a little higher. When you start closing in, you've got to start getting lower and lower and lower, but you can afford to get that ball over the net a little higher from way back."

As you can see, the hairpin drop can be used from just about any position. So now even if you have never played badminton, you know what a hairpin drop is and how to use it on the Pickleball court.

The Three Pillars of Pickleball

By Tony Roig

You can approach pickleball in a variety of ways. The one that we think works the best is the Three Pillars of Pickleball™. To be a well-rounded pickleball player and, importantly, to fully enjoy the game, you need all three of these pillars:

You need to know the “hows” of pickleball. How to serve. How to move on the court. How to hit a volley. The Mechanical Pillar™.

You need to know the “whens” and “whys” of pickleball. Is this the right time for a punch volley? Would a drop or drive work better here? The Thinking Pillar™.

To really succeed as a pickleball player, you need to work on being a complete athlete. This includes stretching, balance, mobility and the all-too-often ignored mental side of the sport. The Athletic Pillar™.

Players who are working on their improvement generally spend a lot of their time on the Mechanical Pillar. They drill, take lessons and watch videos on how to hit the shots. This is good stuff. The mechanics of the game are a necessary component of playing your best.

But, standing alone, even the best shots will not get you far – and certainly not as far as you should go based on having the best shots.

A brief example to illustrate the point. You have developed the best third shot drop in the game. You can pinpoint third shot drops from anywhere to any spot inside the non-volley zone with accuracy and without ever missing.

You would certainly be the envy of the players in your group.

But what if you are playing against someone who does not make it all the way up to the non-volley-zone (NVZ) line after their return. Is the third shot drop the optimal shot then?

The answer is “no.” Why is your amazing third shot drop not the right shot then? Because, rather than helping you, your shot is actually helping your opponent (normally not what you are trying to do).

Your opponent is not making it up to the NVZ line on their own. When you hit the awesome third shot drop you are giving them no choice but to finish making it up to the NVZ line, thereby making their position stronger.

The best shot in this situation is to keep your opponent back, as far back as possible, while you and your partner move up to the NVZ line on your side of the court. That is knowing the when and why of the game – the Thinking Pillar.

The same applies to the Athletic Pillar. You can have the best shots in the world and also know when and why to hit them. But what if you lose focus when you are out on the court (the mental game) or you are constantly getting injured (impossible to hit a good third shot from the sideline).

Work on your shots. But also spend time working on seeing and understanding the game better. And also dedicate some of your time to yourself. By working on all Three Pillars of Pickleball, your game, your body, and your mind will be the better for it.

Be well and keep working at it.



Altaf Merchant: Taking Care of Business



Altaf Merchant calls himself a Pickleball ambassador, but at the age of 47 he plays the game at the highest level competing against some of the best professionals in the world. As an example, he received a bronze medal in the professional split age division at the U.S. Open held in April. Altaf said, "Occasionally I have a partner of mine that carries me to the podium and I win a few dollars. But there's some real professionals out there. I'm just a journeyman that has a good time on the weekend, giving the professionals a hard time when I play them."

Altaf started competing in 2017 and he said Pickleball was an "instant love" for him. This is not surprising given his college and professional tennis background. He was a national champion twice in India and played on the Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP) tour. But his professional tennis experience was exhilarating yet also demoralizing because of the sky-high level of competition. So, Altaf left the tour and ended up playing college tennis at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.

His experience with Pickleball, however, has been much different than the ATP tour. Altaf played the game the first few times, in his hometown of Owensboro Kentucky, with a wooden paddle that had a string on the end. But soon after that he became serious about the sport as just two months after being introduced to the game he had played in Nashville, Kansas City, Indianapolis, Evansville, and St. Louis. And most of these trips were not for tournaments but for practice.

Altaf says he drills four days per week and spends more money traveling to practice than to tournaments. He said, "'I'll get up in the morning at two o'clock, drive to Louisville, which is two hours away, get on a 5:00 a.m. flight to Chicago. John Cincola picks me up at the airport at seven, takes me to the court that we play at. We play from nine to four, Dave, John Cincola, myself and Zane. He'll drive me back to the airport...I'd get on a flight, fly back, get home at midnight."

In order to fit in practice, tournaments, and free clinics along with his full-time job and family, Altaf had to develop a very disciplined daily routine. He said, "I'm so structured in my day and that's the only way it works out. And I can tell you what I'm doing six weeks from now on a Wednesday morning at 10:20." It's no wonder Altaf is competing with the top professionals in the game and having a great deal of success due to his discipline on and off the court.

Daily Routine

3:00 a.m. Wake up

3:10 a.m. Coffee

3:25 a.m. Morning prayers

4:15 a.m. Six mile run

5:20 a.m. Leave for Pickleball practice

5:40 a.m. Drilling

7:15 a.m. Mcdonald's drive-through, take kids to school

8:10 a.m. Work

10:30 a.m. Yoga

12:00 p.m. Church

12:30 p.m. Work

3:00 p.m. Get kids from school, do activities with them

8:30 p.m. Bedtime

PICKLEBALL FIRE PODCAST



Pickleball Fire

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