Pickleball Strategy Guide

by Coach “Mo”

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Here is what Coach “Mo” says are 10 ways to guarantee that you will LOSE more Pickleball games than you WIN.

1. FREQUENTLY miss your serve.
2. FREQUENTLY miss your return of serve.
3. HELP your opponents by keeping their OUT balls in play.
4. When your opponent hits a very difficult FAST shot at you, try and hit a low percentage sharp angled shot for a winner rather than a DEFENSIVE shot.
5. Take away your PARTNER’S easy forehand shots, with your weaker backhand shots.
6. Get upset with your Excellent Pickleball partner who has SUCCESSFULLY jumped in front of you to win the point!
7. Do NOT keep the ball at your opponents feet as much as possible.
8. Do NOT play up to the No Volley Zone line.
9. Hit the ball TOO FAST for good placement, and do NOT give yourself enough leeway for error.
10. Take TOO MANY sharp angle shots rather than high percentage shots down the middle of the court that bounces between your opponents.

Ready Position

Get back to the ready position quickly after every ground stroke and especially volleys with your paddle way out in front of your body.

A common mistake made while moving forward to net is not having your paddle in proper ready position. Many players have their paddles at their knees or below the net, not up and out in front of the body.

At the point when the ball contacts your opponents’ paddle, you should be in your ready position: elbows and paddle out in front of your body, feet at shoulder width apart, side by side on your toes, not your heals, ready to move left or right. Never be moving at the point of contact of your opponent’s paddle on the ball. No matter where you are on the court, stop and get into your ready position. Never sacrifice being ready, for positioning on the court. If you are not prepared early and properly to hit a ball, it doesn’t matter where you are on court. You probably won’t hit the ball properly.

Return of Serve

Never try for a pure winner. Do not make an unforced error. Make your target spot five feet from the baseline and eight inches to left of center. This will keep the ball closer to the backhand of the player whose backhand is toward the middle of the court. The ball will travel over the low part of the net and give you a lot of leeway. Hit the ball slow to give you plenty of time to set up at the no volley zone line.

Change spin occasionally (top or under spin). It will cause some opponents to make mistakes at times.

Once in a great while, when ahead, hit fast return of serve for a change up when you feel your opponents will least expect it.

Place the return down the middle, slightly closer to the back hand player. Both opponents may think the other will take the shot.

Wait for the serve 12” or more behind the baseline so that the ball will bounce in front of you, not at your feet for a difficult shot. If your opponent has a very fast and deep serve, you may have to wait about 3 feet behind baseline.
Have a mental note in your mind of players who do hit soft, short serves. Watch the face of the server’s paddle and be ready to sprint in and split your feet for the short return.

If one opponent is weaker than the other, hit the return to weakest opponent’s backhand until you get ahead a few points.

When the better of your two opponents least expects it, hit a shot to him deep to his backhand. The element of surprise can help.

When your serve is returned, try to place a soft shot in the no volley zone. Do not try to overpower your opponent with a very fast passing shot, unless you are an advanced player and you feel you can win more than 80% of points in this manner. Both opponents are already at net, and it would be a very low percentage shot. A low soft shot is important because it gives you time to get to the net and not be on the defensive. More points are won when returning serve because the first team that gets to the net usually wins the point. If you can win 8 out of 10 points with any other strategy, go for it.

Footwork

Never step into the no volley zone with both feet. If a ball should bounce close to the net in the NVZ, keep one foot planted outside the NVZ line and lunge forward like a sword fighter. Tip the ball over the net into your opponents’ NVZ and quickly recover with both feet outside your NVZ line. If a player steps into the NVZ with both feet, it will take twice as long to get back out. A player cannot touch the ball in the air when any part of his body is in the NVZ. Good footwork at the net in this situation can shorten the time a player is in a vulnerable position.

No matter where you are on the court, always split step, putting your feet side by side and shoulder width apart, at the point of your opponent’s contact with the ball. This allows you to move in either direction equally well. Do not sacrifice being balanced and ready for position on the court.

Step toward the post in either direction and cross step when the ball is hit out of your reach. Do not move your back foot and lose your position on the court. Cross stepping makes you a foot taller and gives you a wider range of coverage.

A side step first combined with a cross step is sometimes necessary and effective.

Hitting Down Sideline

Do not hit shots down the sideline unless:

- Your opponents poach.
- Your team is favored to win.
- Your team has a good lead.
- You have an easy ball to hit.
- You want to keep your opponents honest when they are close to center court.
- Your opponent’s backhand is to the outside of the court and he is the weaker player.

A soft ball down the line is just as good, if not better, and if you can bounce the ball beside your opponent and be ready to jump on a ball hit 12" above the net.

If you make contact on a shot outside the sideline, try a shot around the post deep to the baseline corner, or put up a very high lob to give yourself time to recover. If you don’t think that you will be able to recover, try to finish point with pure winner.

If you are stretched out to your limit when volleying, always go down the line in the direction that you are stepping. The shot will have more power and be more consistent. A good example would be the same as in softball, when a pitcher pitches the ball to the outside corner of the plate, the right-handed batter has a better chance of hitting the ball to right field.

Keep your elbows high when hitting the ball down the sideline.

Follow through a little shorter for a straight volley down the sideline.

When stretched to your limit to the right, volley down the right sideline. Go with the pitch.

How to Practice

Find someone of your ability that appreciates the importance of practicing.

If you want to play your best, you must know the importance of practice, as well as playing the game.

A player should learn proper footwork to become a better player. Learn to cross step, side step and split step. Good footwork makes for easier court coverage, wider range, and better balance and shots.
You must practice a soft game at the net until you are so confident that you think that you could do it perfect for five minutes if needed.

Break the game down into segments.

Ground strokes, corner to corner and down the line.

Volleyes: One player at the net and the other at the baseline. Volley balls hit from different angles. Both players volley and practice short game.

One player lobs the ball to player at net who hits overhead shots from different angles. Play points out using one-half doubles court. Go from corner to corner, not keeping score without serving and then with serving. Points should not be counted because a player tends to try to win by doing only the things that he does well, rather than practicing things he doesn’t do well.

After practicing for a long period of time, play a singles match using only half of the doubles court and keeping score. Try to move your opponent around the court and out of position with ball placement and the other strategies presented earlier.

After practicing the whole game in segments, the game becomes an extension of practice and you play better Pickle Ball.

Poaching

Make sure that your opponents are worried that you may poach. You are not doing the job if you are not giving head and shoulder fakes at the net. Occasionally poach just to make your fakes seem believable.

Make your opponent hit the ball to you. Make a head and shoulder fake in one direction and hold your position on the court. Your opponent will think that you are going to move down the net and he will hit the ball to you. Occasionally you will have to poach to make your fakes believable.

If both players on the opposing team are much better than one of the players on the other team than the stronger player of that team must poach and fake like he is about to poach to level the playing field. Only if you are playing to win, not playing for fun and the opposing team is hitting all their balls to your partner.

An excellent poacher should poach as much as possible even if all four are of equal ability. His partner should not take this as a personal affront. It is proper play and good strategy. To poach is to cut off and hit the shot that your opponent hit to your partner.

Types of Poaching:

- Waiting at the net until you actually see an easy return from your opponent and move across court to cut the shot off for a winner.
- Player anticipates an easy return from his opponent and moves across the court to cut the shot off a split second before his opponent hits the ball.
- It is important to pick the proper time in the game to poach.
- Early in the game so that your team has time to recover in case you lose the point.
- When your team is way ahead or way behind.
- When you or your partner has just hit a very difficult shot at your opponents feet and you feel the opponent will be lucky just to return the ball without being accurate.

Reduce Unforced Errors

The safest place on the court to bounce the ball is soft, low and in the middle of the no volley zone. With this placement, your opponent may hesitate, thinking that his partner will hit the ball. Hit the ball soft so your opponents will have no pace to work with. This is the highest percentage shot.

When at the net be patient. Keep hitting the ball soft back into the no volley zone until your opponents make the mistake of hitting the ball too high. Do not go for the kill unless the ball is at least 12” above the net. Eighty-Five percent of your shots should be volleys standing within 12 inches of the no volley zone. Do not try a tough angle shot until you have drawn your opponents out of position. Keep blasting the high balls at your opponents’ feet until they miss it. Never try an angle shot or difficult shot when the ball is below the net. Be defensive. Try a lob when your opponent least expects. It is also a very effective shot.

Be prepared early. If you hit a fast volley to your opponent, you must prepare your paddle face for the next shot faster. The faster you hit, the faster you must prepare.
Be patient and wait for a ball that is 12" or higher over the net before trying to hit a winner. Always go for your opponents’ feet, no matter where they are on the court. Foot shots are much safer than angle shots.

Only try angle shots if you get a sitter and feel that you are 150% sure that you won’t make an unforced error. A sitter is an easy shot.

If you are playing properly, eighty-five percent of all your shots and your partner’s shots should be volleys no further back than 12" from the no volley zone. Ground strokes are only used when returning a serve, hitting the return of your serve, or if opponent lobs and pulls you away from the no volley zone line. Get back to NVZ line as fast as you possibly can.

Hitting down the middle is a high percentage shot and is much safer than a wide angle shot.

Always allow for error never aim for the line itself.

One of the most common mistakes players makes is swinging at their volleys and punching their ground strokes. It should be the other way around.

If you cannot make a specific shot at least eight out of ten times, do not try this shot in a game until in practice you can make it consistently. Four out of ten tries is just enough to lose the game. Shot selection at key times in the game is very important. Know the shots that you are very consistent with and use them at key times in the game. Give your opponents a chance to lose. Don’t beat them to it.

There is a time to try and hit a “Pure Winner”, a time to hit a “½ Winner”, and time to just keep the ball alive by blocking it back to your opponent.

1. Pure Winner – (as hard as you can hit the ball).

   a. When your partner is weaker than both of your opponents and you get a high ball. You must take advantage of your good opportunities.

   b. When you are the favorite team.

   c. When you have a decent lead in the game.

   d. When playing good competition; you make hay when the sun shines because you don’t get many good opportunities to go for it.

2. ½ Winner – (3/4 pace shot).

   a. When you are in control of point at the net and both opponents are at baseline and are very steady players.

   b. When a ball hit to you is not a high percentage shot.

   c. When you feel your team is steadier and better than your opponents.

   d. When your position on the court is not very good.

3. Just keep the ball alive by blocking the shot to opponent’s feet.

   a. When an exceptionally fast ball is hit to you be defensive by blocking it back rather than swing at it.

   Be Careful: A less difficult shot to hit may sometimes cause a player to miss a shot because it looked so easy that he thought it was impossible to miss. A player tends to over hit and not concentrate as much as when hitting a difficult shot and misses it.

   When it is very windy make shorter steps and keep adjusting your feet because the ball keeps moving around. Watch the ball closer than normal and make most of your shots down the middle of court.

   If you feel you can hit with extreme power all the time and still not sacrifice placement and consistency then you have to decide whether you are a great Pickleball player or kidding yourself. If you decide on the latter, take a little pace off your shots.

   When warming up before your Pickleball game hit a couple of high lobs to check out the wind direction and speed so you don’t lose a few point s during the game. Try not to look into the sun if possible. The sun can cause an error.

ERRORS:

- Poor Footwork
- No Follow Thru
- Impatience – don’t work the point.
- Predictability
**Know Your Opponents**

1. Do they try and hit every ball hit to them, even balls that would have gone out? If so, hit much faster at them then you normally would. You have nothing to lose.
2. Does your opponent stay at the baseline and not move forward to the net?
3. Does your opponent hit all there volleys on the same side of their paddle. If so, they are vulnerable if you hit low to the backhand.
4. Does your opponent handle fast balls well? If so, hit soft balls to them and vice versa.
5. Does your opponent have trouble returning under spin balls?
6. Does your opponent like to poach? Be ready to hit behind him.
7. If you do not know your opponent then keep the ball as low as possible and on the backhand side until you have a chance to make a book on him.
8. Which one of your opponents is the weaker player? A team is only as strong as its weakest player and the weakest player is only as strong as his weakest shot.
9. How fast are your opponents, then you will know whether to drop or lob.

**Mental Errors**

1. Improper shot selection
2. Hitting balls going out of bounds
3. Over hitting
4. Not enough patience
5. Not keeping track of wind
6. Not having a mental book on your opponents assets and deficits
7. Not communicating properly with your partner
8. Too predictable.

Mental errors are much easier to cure than technical errors when hitting the ball.

**Hitting Fast Balls**

Only hit the ball as fast as it takes to win the point. Start the match hitting at an average speed and keep adding a little pace until you are winning more points then you are losing. Every opponent is different. The faster you hit the ball the less precise your placement. If you can win more than 50% of your points blasting every ball, then go for it!

Be prepared for a faster bounce of the ball if the ball seems like it might hit the painted lines on the court.

**Anticipate Out Balls**

Try to anticipate when your opponents are about to hit an out of bound balls. Know when to expect an out of bounds ball before your opponents even touch the ball.

**Things to take into consideration when anticipating an out ball from your opponent:**

1. Is the wind at your opponent’s back?
2. Is your opponent swinging real fast at the ball and is his contact point below net?
3. Is your opponent making a difficult shot on the full gallop?
4. Is he a very inconsistent player?
5. Is it a very hard and low percentage shot for you to try and return? If so let it go. It may go out.

Keep an ear open for yell of "no" from your partner when he thinks the ball is out.

Hitting your opponents out balls builds confidence in your opponents and a good player will make an adjustment after realizing he has just hit an out ball. You will probably lose future points without him being penalized for hitting an out ball.

If you should play someone who always tries to hit everything, even your out balls then hit at that person much faster than you normally would. You have nothing to lose.

Be aware of where you are on the court at all times. This will help you to decide whether to hit or not to hit a ball.

If you stop hitting your opponents out balls your percentage of wins will rise immediately.

**Extra Strategies**

1. When you are learning to play Pickleball, never avoid hitting your backhand ground strokes or volleys. If you avoid hitting your backhand you will never master the stroke.
2. When playing during a windy day keep track of the wind speed and direction constantly because it does change at times. If you play the wind properly then it will build confidence in yourself, in that, the wind is bothering your opponent more than yourself.
3. When you are feeling a little tight during a match, don't hit tentatively or too slow. Hit at your normal
steady pace, but give yourself more leeway to hit your target until your confidence returns.

4. Make a mental book on your own attributes and deficits. Only hit shots that you feel are a high percentage for your own ability. Know what shots you can make more than 50% of the time. Do what you do well and practice the things that you don't do well then use them when you can make them 50% of the time.

5. Bounce up onto the balls of your feet, in the ready position, at the point of contact of the ball on your opponents paddle. A moving body reacts quicker than a stationary body.

6. If both backhands of your opponents are at the middle of the court, hit down the middle of the court.

7. If your shot makes your opponent take two steps or more your chance for winning the point increases immensely.

8. Don't back up to play a deep off the bounce, when you can hit the ball in the air. Always try and hit the ball with your weight going towards the net.

9. Make contact with the ball at the highest possible point in the air when volleying and waist high on the bounce for your ground stroke. It will be a higher percentage shot and open up more angles with less chance of putting balls into the net.

10. Give your opponents a lot of chances to miss and they will not let you down.

11. It is not how hard you hit the ball, but where.

12. Expect to win – Refuse to lose.

**Play Steady:** The team with the most unforced errors loses. Not the team with the fewest winners.

**Placement is more important than power!**

Keep the ball as low as possible for every hit, unless you must make a defensive lob.

Place the ball at the opponent's feet or bounce the ball right beside your opponent. He must hit the ball up, which quickly puts him on the defensive and you on the offensive. The team which must hit the ball up most of the time will lose. Keep the ball at your opponent's feet no matter where he is on the court.

Only hit the ball as hard as you can control the placement. Do not sacrifice placement for power. Hit ⅔ winners unless you get a put away shot for a full power winner.

When an opponent is planted at the net and you can't make a shot at his feet, the next best place to hit it is at the right hip pocket of a right-handed player. This is a very difficult shot to return.

**Patience is a virtue in Pickleball!**

Do not try to win the point from the baseline. Just hit the ball softly and bounce the ball in the no volley zone and follow it to net.

Pick a good time to move forward, not when your opponent has an easy shot. Every second that you are playing, your goal should be to get to the net on a minimum of one step forward and split step at every touch of the ball by your opponent. Split step is when both feet are side by side and shoulder width apart.

The team that plays from the baseline exposes their feet to their opponents and will lose to a team as good as or better than they are.

If your partner is drawn out of the court on his side, you must move over to protect his area until he can get back into the court. If you think that you are playing an intelligent opponent, then give a head and shoulder fake, giving the impression that you are moving to cover for your partner. Don't move from your position, however, and your opponent will probably put the ball on your paddle.

If you feel an opponent is anticipating your shot by watching the face of your paddle and moving before you make contact, then have your paddle face straight ahead and then at the last second, go cross court before your opponent has time to react. Do not have your paddle "read" cross court then try and surprise your opponent and go down line because paddle must be brought back first and the extra time it takes gives your opponent more time to react to your fake.

If you are playing a former racquet ball player (who very quickly flicks his paddle at the ball), you must prepare your ready position even earlier or you will be late punching your volleys or ground strokes.

Give your partner a second opinion on whether a ball is in or out. Do it early enough to give him time to back away from it.

Every once in a while, change the spin and speed of all your shots. The element of surprise will pay dividends.

Sometimes the best shot is no shot at all. When playing with a much better partner than yourself, let your partner take as many shots as he possible can, especially if he yells, "I have it." Chances are good you are probably going to get the lion's share of all
the hits anyway. So the more your partner touches the ball, the better chance you will win.

There should be only positive communication between you and your partner. "Good try" "I have it" "Switch" "Yours" and "Bounce it" are as examples. Never say anything negative to your partner if he isn't doing well because it will just make things worse. It shows you are not a confident player, and you are looking for an excuse to lose.

The second to last shot before the end of a point by you or your partner usually decides if your team either wins or loses the point. If you do not keep your shot low enough or placed well enough and your opponent slams a shot at your partner and he misses, the shot, then the point was lost by you. Sometimes the point could have been lost by the third or fourth to last shot because the team never could recover from being put on the defensive earlier in the point.

Keep a book in your mind about the people that you play regularly. Know what they are good at and also know their weaknesses. Many players always make certain shots in particular situations, and if you can anticipate these shots, you will have an edge. For example, some players, when running in for a ball that bounces near the post in the no volley zone, always try a cross court topspin shot to the other post.

When your team is a heavy favorite, play a whole game without being interested about winning and concentrate on just placing every single ball at your opponent's feet or beside them. Practice not going for winners and being patient. No matter where your opponents are on the court, go for their feet. It is a safe shot, and it will steady your game and pay dividends.

On a cross court volley make contact a little farther out in front of you.

All strokes taken with your Pickleball paddle are technically the same as all the tennis strokes with one exception, the serve. The only differences between the two are the feel of the ball on the paddle and the distance from your hand to the contact point of the ball on the paddle. A person wanting to improve his Pickleball strokes should read tennis books and magazines and become a student of the game.

Determine if your opponents are left-handed before the start of the game so that you won't be hitting to their strength.

Before starting each game, let your partner know that you don’t mind his overruling any call you make as long as he is 100% sure you were wrong. If one person on a team feels a ball was in and the other doesn’t, then the point goes to the other team. If your feelings about the score or whether the ball is in or out are different from the other three players on the court, then right or wrong, you should concede.

Never yell anything that may help your opponent. Think of the shot that you just hit that was wrong. Don’t yell because your opponent may hit your out ball if you do not bring his attention to that possibility that it may go out.

Learn all the proper tennis stroking techniques to help improve your pickle ball game.

If two players with the same natural ability play pickle ball any one uses the proper tennis technique, that player will be a steadier and better player.

If both players are self taught players then the one with the most athletic sense and ability will be the better player. Learn proper technique. It will give you an edge over your opponent.

A player should try not to have any bad out bursts after missing their shots. This type of reaction builds confidence in your opponents. Your partner will also lose confidence in you.

When two right hand players are playing together, the player facing the net on the left, who has his forehand to the middle of the court, takes the balls on his side of the court plus about 8 to 12 inches toward the center line.

When two left hand players are playing together, the player with his forehand toward the center of the court should take any ball on his side of the court plus any ball 8 to 12 inches to the left of center court.

When a right handed and a left handed player are playing together and both players back hands are to the middle of the court, the player facing the net on the on the left side should be considered the fore hand and cover his side plus 8 to 12 inches to the right of center court unless both players agree the other player has the stronger backhand.

If you like to hit with power and if your opponents cannot recognize when a ball is going out and they
hit every ball that they can get their paddles on, then it is to your advantage to have the heavy wind at your back.

When your opponents stop hitting you the ball intentionally every time you play, it means your partners are very weak or you have become a very good player. Feel good about it.

There is no right or wrong way to play Pickleball. You should do things that work for you. Some advanced players have their unconventional ways of playing Pickleball and because they have exceptional athletic ability, they are successful more than 50% of the time. Beginners with average ability would be more successful if they used conventional tennis strokes and strategy before they pick up bad habits and are not able to change.

A player should not be one dimensional; they should try to develop a complete game of hitting with placement as well as power. Develop a good lob and drop volley as well a good soft game. A player will not be predictable if he is able to have a variety in his Pickleball game.

If your partner is a much weaker player than you are and your opponents are hitting as many balls as possible to him, then a soft dink into the no volley zone is not to your advantage because it gives your opponent more time to hit another ball to your partner.

After hitting the ball toward your opponent follow the same line that the ball is traveling when advancing toward the no volley line. This will give you a good angle and position for your opponents return shot.

If your team should hit the ball close to the opponent’s right sideline and the ball will be a volley or ground stroke then you and your partner should divide the court into 3 equal thirds when you are waiting at the NVZ line for the return. The player on the right side of the court protects his side and the right 1/3 of the court. The other player protects the middle third of the court and you leave the far left third of the court open. A crosscourt shot is a low percentage, it’s a sharp angle and the ball must have a lot of top spin. Most players cannot make this shot consistently so protect down the line and you will win much more points than you lose.

The better you get at Pickleball the less balls will be hit to you so it becomes harder to win. The thing to do to try and get your opponents to hit more balls to you only if your partner is weaker than your opponents and is interested in winning:

A. Fake like you are going to poach but hold your spot and they will hit you the ball by mistake.
B. Really poach occasionally to get into the point but tell your partner before you do so he or she will be ready to switch sides and cover for you. This will make your fakes more believable.
C. When you get a ball you must make hay when the sun shines and hit with a little more pace than you normally do and hope for the best.

**Conclusion**

*Have Fun! It is only a game.*

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