

two on

How to make the most of team tennis

I've been maintaining for years that a chimpanzee could be trained to play singles. Doubles, however, is an entirely different animal, to say the very least.

Doubles is, simply put, complicated. Getting two players to work in perfect harmony offensively and defensively, and even in neutral rally situations, is a daunting task. Factor in styles of play, shot-making strengths and weaknesses, personalities, partner support issues, positioning and the myriad misperceptions regarding strategy and tactics and you have a Rubik's Cube on your hands.

One particular component of club doubles play consistently reveals itself as *the* #1 pitfall: the inability to play the net position fluidly, or continuously shifting back and forth between offensive and defensive court positions.

By isolating the net player on the serving team, an understanding of this dynamic can be fully appreciated. Initially, they are positioned *offensively* in the approximate middle of their service box, not hugging the singles sideline! From there they are well prepared to poach into the center of the court, on a forward diagonal, to intercept and wreak havoc with any cross court return that's vulnerable and reachable.

This position is also equally predisposed to both protecting against any down-the-line intrusions – you must slide towards the alley if the action is forced out wide – and moving back to comfortably handle all but the very best lob attempts as well.

However, when a successful cross court return is made by the receiver, the norm for a solid opponent, the netman is then required

to abandon the offensive position and retreat *back* towards the “T” on a slight diagonal – approximately two feet off the center service line – and square off to the opposing net player, now in a *defensive* position to defend the middle against *their* possible poach. Role reversal accomplished in a fleeting moment.

In the usual one-up, one-back point starting alignment, switching from offense to defense, then defense to offense, is a never-ending constant. Done well, formidable court positioning around the net is achieved, maximizing both attacking opportunities and defending necessities as partners in the backcourt engage in dueling ground stroke exchanges.

Another common failing is found in the often heard “switch” command, when the net player is lobbed over and the partner in back has to come to the rescue. Typically, the net player switches sides while remaining at the net, fully exposed, while their partner, also switching sides, attempts to run down the lob and extricate the team from the predicament. Not a good idea if the lob is a good one and difficult to handle, unless of course your partner is one of the Bryan brothers.

If the effectiveness of the lob is marginal, then the parallel-to-the-net switch is appropriate since the partner should be able to take care of business. Conversely, when the lob is immediately judged by the netman as representing real trouble for their partner – a quick glance back to evaluate is okay (see image) – they should then move back *towards the baseline* area vacated by their partner as quickly as possible. If the response is indeed a weak one, with



the opposing netman lurking and salivating, at least you and your partner are now both in a back defensive posture, eliminating an easy chance for the opponent to transform a doddering “parallel switcher” into Swiss cheese.

While we’re on the subject, particularly with regard to those who make the lob their “weapon” of choice, I recall a onetime Nike print ad campaign asking John McEnroe what his take was on those who choose to lob incessantly. Mac’s response: “If they arrested people for being annoying on the tennis court, they’d be looking at doing 15 to life.”

Yet these players are not uncommon, and typically, they are particularly adept at their “craft.” This results in thwarting attacking styles of play – coming in behind short balls or serving and volleying – and causes those who attempt to play “proper” traditional and aggressive doubles to mumble to each other in total frustration: “How could we lose to *them*?”

So, short of calling the sheriff, what can be done, strategically and tactically, to take these sorts out of their counter punching game? Bring them in! These folks are practically never a threat when at the net, and often find ways, either right at the start of a point or even in mid-point, to assume a totally defensive alignment with both players in the backcourt. A well executed drop shot, or even a mundane short chip forces them off the baseline and into the forecourt, thus eliminating the lob from the back and forcing them into an unwelcome shootout in and around the net.

Finally, when in the back of the court and faced with an

opponent who is on their way in to the net, visualize going low and right at their feet, handcuffing them in transition, forcing them into a weak volley and allowing for an alert partner at the net to move in quickly and pick off the weak response for an easy winner. Unfortunately, all goes wrong when the back courter does just that but the net partner hangs back at the service line, foolishly worrying about perfect lobs off of opponent’s shoe laces. With that maddeningly glass half-empty mindset, the opportunity to capitalize in a team effort is quickly lost, often repeatedly, and so is the match in a close encounter.

Okay, sure, there’s far more to this dizzying game of doubles. But two on two tennis becomes less frustrating – and more fun – with these few simple adjustments that, ideally, should be universal to all partners. 🏸