

# Doubles Fundamentals

Don't let the name of this first part fool you—you'll get no "bend your knees and watch the ball" stuff from me. There are plenty of folks more qualified than I to teach strokes. However, doubles strategy has a set of fundamentals, also, and for the league player, for the doubles enthusiast, for the weekend warrior whose strokes and mechanics became permanent fixtures long ago, these fundamentals will prove more valuable.

Much of these three short chapters have to do with whose role it is to maintain a rally and whose role it is to end a point. Yes, winning in doubles often comes down to knowing when not to go for winners.



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## One Up and One Back

**Y**ou know that racquet technology has gotten out of hand when tour-level doubles teams choose to play groundstrokes over volleys. First it was the serve-and-volley game that was overwhelmed by the power in today's game, and now it is the very foundation of doubles that might be doomed.

Fortunately, that is not the case at our level, and I remain strident that the best amateur doubles teams feature partnerships looking to seize control of the net.

That said, playing one up and one back is commonplace and completely viable in almost all levels of the game. While any baseline specialist might prefer staying back, it holds especially true for women. Practically all of my 8.0 and 9.0 partners hit groundstrokes until drawn in, and as I think back to the seasons in which our 10.0 mixed doubles teams were competing against the best teams in the country, more than half of my partners served and stayed back and almost all of them returned and stayed back. Ditto for our female opponents.

Please indulge the generalization: women players are just so incredibly steady. When I drill with strong women, I would get eaten for lunch if I did not allow myself to look for balls to approach on. And one of my favorite situations in mixed doubles is the times, however infrequent, in

which our male opponent finds himself in a baseline rally with my partner. I almost feel sympathy for him.

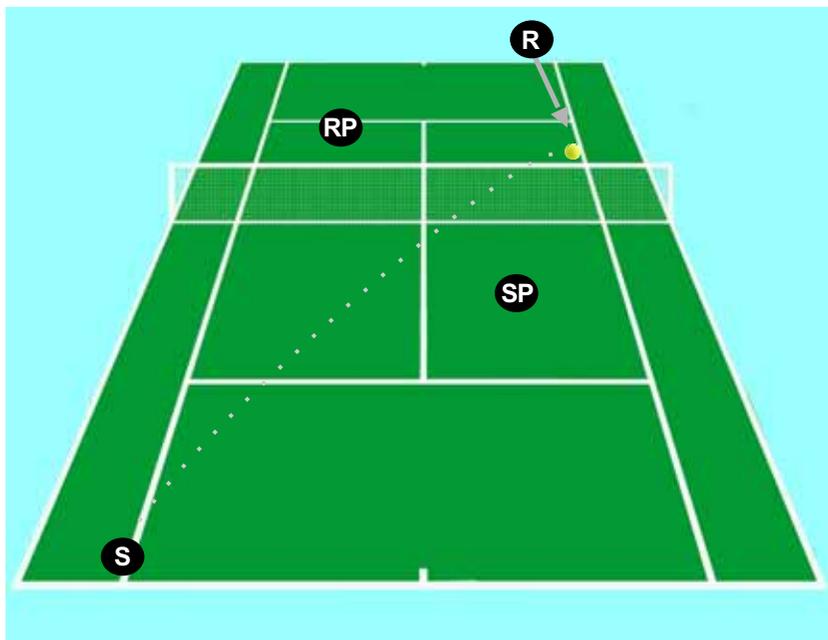
When you are engaged in a baseline rally with another woman, in women's or mixed doubles, the criterion is very simple: can you win the rally? Are you a better baseliner than your opponent? If you can answer yes, your course is clear: you bleed your opponent to death. Rally until the sun goes down. Frustration and impatience will often follow, your opponent will start attempting winners or inadvisable pass attempts down the line. Even if she lands a few of them, that's when you know you've got her.

You will likely have to stave off challenges from a strong net player in this scenario, particularly in mixed, and even more particularly if you are rallying deuce court to deuce court and facing a right-handed man with his forehand volley in the middle. You might have to keep him honest with lobs or pass attempts, but don't overreact. Don't freak out if he picks off one or two. Don't change tactics until he becomes a legitimate threat to your holding serve. We'll devote more discussion to the wisdom (or folly) of changing tactics in Chapter xx.

What if you can't answer yes? What if the woman you face is steadier or more forceful than you? Now it is your side that must change the course of the game and risk becoming the ones who play with frustration or impatience. Lobbing over the net person will only get you so far, as you are likely to find yourself still stuck in a rally with her—now a down-the-line rally, which will favor the stronger player even more. And can you really turn the pass attempt down the alley into a winning strategy? That's the tennis equivalent of drawing to an inside straight; the odds are just not with you.

I'm not suggesting you abandon all efforts to hit lobs and passes. You might discover that the woman covering the lob doesn't move laterally as well as she strokes. And down-the-line attempts do not have to be winners to be effective. You might find a net player whose reflex volleys are not what they used to be, and so instead of going for winners, you can choose the more forgiving target of hitting right at the net person.

All of this is part of the arsenal to defend against being out-rallied, but by far the best defense against the player who will beat you from the baseline is to move one or both of you off the baseline. Rare is the steady player who is equally comfortable at the net, and the low, short, sharp-angled stroke can be quite the equalizer. And in many cases, the attempt doesn't



### Short balls can kill

If you are being outrallied by a steady baseliner, just about any short ball that draws her to the net might produce a better result.

even have to be that good; a bad drop shot that lands near the service line and sits up will still serve to draw her in.

But I've got a better idea still. Don't be that player who is uncomfortable moving forward. Be the player who relishes an advance on the net, or at least has approached the net so many times in practice matches that you have reached a degree of comfort. If you believe that you are more comfortable at the net than she is, you will have completely neutralized her advantage. Even if it is not true. Let me restate that and refer you to Chapter xx where I extol the virtues of lying to yourself: even if there is no evidence to support the claim, if you make yourself believe that you can beat her in a net exchange, you can make it come true.

Improving your confidence at the net is the very best defense against the player who can out-rally you from the baseline. So how do you make that happen? It's too trite to answer "with lots of practice," but how you practice is key. Most of us practice by playing practice sets and matches,

and I hold no illusion that you will decide instead to go out and actively engage in a series of net-rushing drills. Your court time is precious, I know, and you want to play sets and matches. Therefore, you must impose your own set of rules on your practice sets. “Tonight, for these next two practice sets, I will follow every other serve to the net, approach on every short ball, and never stay at the service line (or worse, back off of it) when I am the receiver’s partner.”

Don’t try to comfort yourself with the belief that practice matches don’t count. You want them to count. You want there to be stakes associated with this. You want to try to win with these tactics, not just see how it feels. And if you lose, you want it to hurt. That is how you become more comfortable with a new tactic—by exposing it to pressure.

And in one of those rare times when I will write about form and technique, this change in tactic might necessitate a change in grip. Most baseliners who have trouble transitioning to the net do so because they can’t let go of their beloved western grip on the forehand or two-handed grip on the backhand. But you must. In order to become an accomplished forehand volleyer, you must move your first knuckle to the top, practice tucking in your elbow, and learn to knife your forehand volleys with underspin. Hitting backhand volleys with two hands is not impossible, but the same challenge exists: you must stop swinging and start punching.

And for a change this fundamental, you do need to start away from match conditions. You need to hit hundreds of balls with a new technique to develop sufficient muscle memory. Then you can take these new grips and techniques out for a test drive over practice sets. And when you do, resist the temptation to revert back at 4-5 30-30. Let me chart this out for you: on the continuum of benefits, with zero benefit being on the far left and maximum benefit being on the far right, here is where I would place the three possible outcomes:

Switching back to your old habits	Staying with your new game and losing	Staying with your new game and winning
<b>Zero benefit</b>		<b>Max benefit</b>

You'll know you have made great strides when you feel ready to implement your new move in a real match. And when that time comes, I hope you have the courage of conviction and determination to see it through, no matter the outcome. Many sports legends have said it and I'm certain that I will quote them more than once across these pages: learning how to win has a lot to do with how you handle losing.