



All About Partnerships

If the world were perfect, your USTA team would be comprised of people with the ideal mix of personality, temperament, and playing style. Team chemistry would be overflowing, and for every new player brought aboard, the perfect partner for that player would be found.

Isn't there an app for this??

In our less-than-perfect world, we have to work a bit harder at finding a good partner and being a good partner. Developing the right brew of style and substance takes time, patience, and experience, but it will be time and effort well spent, whether you are seeking a partner for yourself or whether you are a team captain trying to create the best combinations. A good partnership is a joy to behold, and I'm here to tell you that it is not just a roll of the dice. You can make it happen, and this part of the book explores how. Many of the thoughts here are written as much for team captains as for players.



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Matching Playing Styles

Let's continue our dating analogy: Becoming a successful partnership in tennis requires more than swiping left or right on Tinder. As tempting as it might be, it's not enough to watch a dude with a huge serve or a gal with an amazing backhand and proclaim that you have found your partner. Apart from chemistry and personality, what makes for a good match?

Do opposites attract?

As in life itself, some of the best partnerships I have seen have matched up players with completely different styles, and that is often my first criterion when sizing up opponents or evaluating potential partnerships.

Let's take the guy with the huge serve and monster forehand. What happens if you pair him with another big hitter? When they're on, watch out, you could get hurt as their opponents. But if they go off the rails, who puts them back? This is why I like to see big hitters teamed with players with good hands, as each of them can effectively end points for the other and they will be more likely to create a balance of intensity.

I am certainly in the latter category here—all hands and feet, no power—and some of my favorite partners have been guys who can put a

hurt on the ball. The critical quality is actually more specific than big hitting: can they force guys to hit up from the front court? If they have to hit up, I can hit down. That's a pretty simple formula that has worked for decades: my partner makes them hit up so I can hit down.

On the ladies' side, a similar dynamic can exist between a steady baseliner and a partner who is comfortable moving at the net. As a strong groundstroker, you might be able to hold your own against most opponents, but imagine how effective it would be if your opponent were able to cross and pick off a few of those crosscourts? Now your opponent has to worry about being bled to death and think about your partner at the net.

It happened on court

Proof that quality trumps quantity, in the 2012 Australian Open, the team of Sania Mirza and Elena Vesnina upset the No. 2 seeds Lisa Raymond and Liezel Huber, winning a third-set tiebreaker, 8-6. At 7-7 in that breaker, Mirza was eight or nine strokes into an intense rally when Vesnina crossed. Apologies to historians if I have these partners mixed up—I channel surfed to the Tennis Channel just in time to watch the last 15 minutes and I didn't know either player. Her winning volley was notable for two reasons: 1) it was astonishingly easy, and that was because 2) according to the announcers, it was the only poach she attempted in the entire third set.

This fascinated me—so much so, in fact, that I went to the tournament's website in hopes of watching a press conference or reading more about this. And sure enough, in the transcript of an interview, a journalist asked Vesnina (again, I think it was Vesnina; it might have been Mirza) why she waited so long into the match to move at the net.

Her reply, translated to English: "If I had done it earlier, it wouldn't have been as effective."

Talk about your good timing! This is about as opposite as you can get from my own kamikaze approach to net play that I share in Chapter 7. She saved this move until the point where she needed it the most. After two hours of relative passivity, her opponents were completely unprepared for the move.

Brilliant.

Ask now what your partner can do for you...

The final thoughts of this chapter go to Jon Toney, one of my playing editors, who offers a wonderfully-different take on the question of effective partnerships.

The question for me about my partner is not what type of player I'm looking for in a partner but what type of player I need to be. It starts with being more selfless. Singles is all about selfishness, but doubles is about selflessness. Look at John McEnroe: frequently a self-absorbed jerk in singles, but a great team player in doubles.

Selflessness extends to strategy, as well. Can my serve and return set my partners up for winners? And what to say when they set me up? "Great shot, partner!" Might come the comment from my partner, to which I invariably respond, "Great job setting me up."

Finally, we win or lose as a team. If we find ourselves explaining losses with "Jon was a bit off today, or Rick was not at his best today," then we are off track as a partnership. When my partner and I lose a close match, no matter how well I played, there are always some shots I'd like to have over. And sometimes losing simply meant my opponents played better.

A bit like life itself, if I'm thinking about how I can make things better for my partner, then I'm a pretty decent partner. If instead I'm obsessed with searching for and finding the best possible partner, I would do well with some earnest introspection.