



Real Tennis - The Doubles Game

STRATEGY & TACTICS

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General Considerations

Although one may think of Doubles as an attacking game and even though it is invariably played at a much faster pace than Singles, it is in fact essentially a defensive game. Because there are two players available at each end of the court to cover the corners and openings, it is far more difficult to make Chases, or hit outright winners in Doubles. Therefore players tend to up the pace and play more aggressively in an attempt to engineer openings or induce errors. In these circumstances, the team that is likely to triumph is the one that can consistently keep the ball in play by good retrieving and avoiding errors, as well as by organising itself more effectively through strategic positioning, good teamwork and understanding.

Although the game is generally played at a much faster pace, this does not mean that there is no place for the slow ball in Doubles. The slow ball is generally more difficult to attack and attempts to do so often lead to players making mistakes. Similarly, players often get into the rhythm of playing a fast game, which can be upset by subtle changes of pace. How often does one see a player retrieve a series of difficult forces and then “fluff” the first slower ball sent in his direction. And, how often do players get drawn into hitting successive balls progressively harder and harder until eventually they find the Penthouse, when interjection of a slower ball might be far more effective.

Because of the particular difficulty of hitting winners from the Hazard End, together with the greater array of winning areas available to the Servers, it is vitally important for players at the Hazard End to try to gain the Service End at the first opportunity. This means that, as well as looking for opportunities on the floor, Receivers need to attack the Galleries when possible and accept Hazard Chases whenever they are on offer.

Working as a Pair

Probably the most important characteristic of a successful Doubles pair is their ability to work together as a team. Here it is important for the players to have compatible personalities, mutual respect and an intimate knowledge of each other's playing strengths and weaknesses. With this knowledge they can plan in advance their specific roles in the Match, their positional strategies and which player is favourite to play the ball in particular circumstances.

Here understanding and communication are the key factors. Understanding can be intuitive, but generally comes from the experience of playing with a partner over time and learning how he will respond to specific situations. Good communication is always important, but in a new pairing, it is absolutely vital. The two players must communicate well together, especially by calling early and decisively; for instance, as to who should play the 50/50 ball. The call must be short and clear and, in my experience, it is usually better to call "you" or "yours" rather than "mine". If there is any doubt over who is best placed to play the ball, the player calling "me" often "fluffs" his shot. Other calls such as "in" or "up", for balls close to the Bandeau, and "play" or "leave" for balls close to Chase lines are always helpful for your partner, provided they are clear and made early.

Players also need to understand their partner's feelings and give moral support by praising successful shots, be they good, moderate or just lucky. Conversely, try to avoid criticising poor shots - your partner generally knows when he has made a mistake, so there is no need to aggravate his feelings with a negative comment or even by saying nothing. Instead, try to make a positive comment to boost his morale.

Concentration

Concentration is important in any game of Tennis. However, because one is not constantly involved in the action and may go several strokes without playing a shot, it is particularly important in Doubles to maintain concentration all the time. It is vital, in order not to get caught "cold", that you remain alert, stay on your toes and constantly keep moving off the ball.

Know the Court

As in Singles, if you are not familiar with the court, try to find out as much as possible about its playing characteristics and those of the balls in use, before going on court. If possible, watch the preceding matches to see which serves work, whether the balls are cutting down or bouncing off the back wall, how the Tambour plays and whether there is a big "Nick". Then use the knock-up to verify your findings.

Choice of Ends

Despite the strong advantage of holding the Service End, it may be better to forego this benefit at the start of the match in order to be able to choose whose Service to take. The decision on whether to Serve or Receive will depend largely on the knowledge you have of your opponents and the pros and cons of serving to, or more importantly receiving from particular players. Think very carefully before making this decision and do not underestimate the advantage of being at the Hazard End for the knock up. As the Servers normally feed the balls, you usually get a much better knock-up at the Receiving End, which can be absolutely vital in gaining the initiative right from the outset. Conversely, if you are at the Service end and you find that your opponents fail to return many balls, or favour returning to one or other player, then one of you may start the match cold and get off to a poor start.

It is important to try to be at the Hazard End at the end of each Set, so that you can choose who will receive Service in the next Set. If you are already at the Hazard End and trailing badly at the conclusion of a Set, it may be worth throwing a game in order to be able choose who will receive Service in the next Set. Likewise, it may be worth leaving a ball at the Service End to concede a moderate Chase in order to ensure you are at the Hazard End at the appropriate time.

If you have lost the Set, it is normally good practice to switch Receiver. Conversely, if you have won the Set, it is best to stay as you are unless there are strong reasons to change.

The Service

You should not necessarily be trying to win points outright with your Service. The principle aim is to serve defensively and to a length, in order to stop the Receiver playing an effective or aggressive return. The ideal serve is generally slow with spin. Its final bounce should normally be close to the edge of the Penthouse to make volleying difficult and generally it should be short and not quite reach the Back Wall on the floor. This type of serve is most easily achieved by serving from up the court, say between the Second and Last Gallery.

The actual choice of serve will depend on the characteristics of the court and the propensity of the Receiver to volley. However the serves which seem to be effective on most courts in Doubles are the “Bobble”, “Drag”, “Underarm Twist” and “Slow Railroad”.

Returning Service

The “Golden Rule” is to get the ball back into play at all costs. Do not attempt high-risk shots. Do not over hit and above all do not go for narrow margins over the net.

Nevertheless, the return of serve offers the best opportunity for you to take the initiative. Therefore, attack the serve whenever possible. Controlled aggression, either on the volley or off the floor is favoured. The “cross-court, or straight force” aimed at, or below the Dedans can be very effective. When volleying, make sure you are sideways on, play the ball well in front of you and don’t let it drop too low. Whatever you play, make sure the stroke is controlled. The ball in the net or on the Penthouse is to all intents and purposes a point lost.

Apart from inducing errors from your opponent, the principal aim of the service return is to gain the Service End, either by making a Chase or more likely by engineering opportunities to do so in the next few strokes. It is far more difficult to make short Chases on the return of Service in Doubles than in Singles. Thus, whereas the classic cut shot still has its place, especially in manoeuvring an opportunity, the best options for gaining Service are often the “straight low force” and the “short cross-court chip”. Occasionally, a weak serve may provide the opportunity to attack the Galleries and another option is to boast the ball off the Main Wall into the corner behind the “Gallery Man”.

Defending the Galleries

In order to help retain the Service, it is important for the Galleries at the Service End to be manned. The players must decide in advance who will defend the Galleries and who will play at the back. It is normal for the lower handicapped player to take the back of the court, leaving his partner to defend the Galleries. However, in a balanced pairing the players may alternate, with the Server going up to defend the Galleries. Even then, it may be advantageous for one player to defend the Galleries all the time, particularly if he is strong on the volley, or if his partner is a specialist “Back Court” player.

Except when playing off short Chases, the “Gallery Man” should stay forward and not be tempted to interfere with play at the back of the court. The principal role of the “Gallery Man” is to appear so solid on the volley that it is fruitless for his opponents to hit the ball anywhere near him. In this way, he can considerably reduce his opponents’ target area and consequently restrict the amount of ground his partner has to cover.

The main function of the “Gallery Man” is to intercept balls heading for the Galleries or “straight forces” hit too wide for his partner to reach. However, he should be sufficiently alert to get to “drop shots” played “cross-court” and should always be watching ready to pick up balls running out off the Bandeau, Penthouse or Back Wall. Here it is generally better for the “Gallery Man” to play the ball running out to prevent his partner being drawn out of position. If his partner is pulled forward to reach a ball, he should quickly move to the back of the court to provide cover.

While it is good practice to keep your eye on the ball throughout its path to the back of the court, you also need to be aware of your opponents' positions and to advise your partner where they are. It is particularly helpful to call "he's up", or "he's back" whenever the ball goes up on the Penthouse to indicate whether your opponents are defending the Grille or the Tambour.

As "Gallery Man", you will generally receive far fewer shots to play than your partner, but in order to make each shot counts you must be alert and constantly on the move, shadowing every ball. A good general position to take up on Service is just behind the Second Gallery line and one or two yards out from the Battery Wall. However, it may be advantageous to adjust this backwards or forwards, or in or out, depending on the type of Serve and the Receiver's propensity to hit Galleries or target the Dedans.

Be careful not to get drawn in too close to the Galleries, as if you are cramped for space, you will find it difficult to step into the ball and may end up playing square on. You may also find it helpful to move back or forward a yard or so from your preferred position, to prevent the net cord from obscuring the flight of the ball.

Once the Rest is in progress, move up towards the Door whenever the ball is played from under the Grille, and retreat to the Second or Last Gallery line when it is played from the Gallery side.

Depending on the quality of your partner's stroke, you may be able to move further out from the wall to be in position to intercept any weak returns. If the ball is played cross-court to behind you or boasted into that corner, move to a crouching position under the Galleries or jump onto the Gallery Ledge, to give your partner as much space as possible to play his preferred shot.

When defending the Galleries, hold the racket at head height and in front of the body; sway ready to turn either way, but with a slight bias towards the Galleries. Step into the ball and play a firm "block shot", sideways on, with little back swing and no follow through. The greater the forward movement from the legs and the further the racket is in front of the body at the point of impact, the better. This will naturally take the ball towards the Tambour, which should be your general target area.

Defending the Grille

When defending the Grille, take up your position 1-2 yards from the Back Wall and 2 yards out from the Main Wall. Stay in this position, or return to it, whenever the ball is played from the Main Wall side of the court, but move up in front of the Tambour, whenever it is played cross-court. Make sure you stand away from the Main Wall and do not get cramped for space in the Grille corner. You need room to play the ball hitting under the Grille as well as to enable you to step in to volley balls entering the Grille.

When in the Grille position, any ball hitting the Tambour is your partner's responsibility. It is helpful to give him advance warning of this by calling "you", if you think the ball may hit the Tambour. However, having done so, do not think that because you have made such a call, the ball will necessarily hit the Tambour; even if you are certain the ball will hit, always continue to shadow it, in case you are wrong.

Whenever you have the opportunity, allow the ball to go to the Back Wall, as this generally gives you a better opportunity to play an attacking shot. Only volley balls that you think will enter the Grille, or are of a length that may possibly hit the Nick. When volleying from this position, step in towards the wall and play a firm defensive shot with the racket in front of the body. If necessary boast balls close to the wall back into the Main Wall.

Occasionally, there can be merit in the players at the Receiving End switching sides. This can be particularly effective if one player is a strong volleyer, so that after returning Service, he would move quickly across to defend the Grille/Tambour and his partner would play the Gallery side of the court. If this tactic is adopted, the players need to decide in advance whether to switch all the time, or only on a prearranged set of circumstances, or signal. They also need to decide in advance who will cross in front and who behind the other player.

Defending the Tambour

Whenever the ball is played from the Gallery side or middle of the Service Court, move smartly up court to a position where you can defend the Tambour. On occasions, it may be appropriate to move up court when the ball is played from even closer to the Main Wall, but be careful not remain in front of the Tambour if the ball is played any less than 3-4 yards from the Main Wall. If you sense that the ball is going to be played from this area, quickly retreat to the Grille position to avoid being caught in “no man’s land”. When retreating, make sure you get right back and don’t end up level with or just behind the Tambour and obscure your partner’s view.

The normal position from which to defend the Tambour is around the Hazard 1-yard line, and 2 yards out from the Main Wall. However, on occasions you may wish to be more aggressive and move up to the Hazard Second Gallery line or even to Hazard the Door.

When defending the Tambour, hold the racket at head height in front of the body, ready to turn either way. Play a firm “block shot” sideways on, with the racket in front of the body, taking care not to swing at the ball. It is safest to play the ball back along the line of its approach, although the angled shot can be very effective, but only provided you get it over the Net. Your objective is to be so secure on the volley that your opponent either starts to over hit, or feels the need to experiment.

As when defending the Galleries, you should leave as many shots as possible for your partner. Your role is only to play balls that will hit the Tambour or will go firmly (not lobbed) into the Grille. Do not attempt to play anything above head height that is not heading for the Grille and do not play balls hitting the Main Wall that will not also hit the Tambour or enter the Grille.

Whenever you intend to leave the ball, it is helpful to indicate this to your partner by calling “you” as early as possible. When you do leave a ball, always turn and watch its path so that you can either get out of your partner’s way, or be ready to pick up any balls running out off the Bandeau or Back Wall. A good place to hide when avoiding your partner’s shot is to stand erect, tightly against the Main Wall and immediately in front of the Tambour.

Rallying from the Hazard End

Once you have returned Service, move towards the centre of the area bounded by the Service Court and the Half-Court Line. Your principle function here is to take the ball that is played down the Main Wall and is hitting the Tambour. You should assume that every ball played down the line will hit the Tambour and you should either chip it back from whence it came, or if the bounce is favourable, force it straight down the court. In addition to covering the Tambour, you need to be ready to play other shots at the back of the court and to be prepared to retrieve shots played cross-court for or under the Winning Gallery.

If the ball is being played from the Gallery side of the Court, it is best to move across towards the centre of the court and a yard or two from the Back Wall, ready to sweep any balls left by the “Tambour man”. For balls played from this area, it is also your responsibility to take balls lobbed for the Grille, or hit onto the Penthouse roof. The ball on the Penthouse provides a golden opportunity for you to take the initiative by hitting with heavy cut, forcing for the Galleries or forcing at or below the Dedans. Be careful, however, to retain control. Do not over hit. Make sure the ball clears the net and does not go up onto the Penthouse.

Rallying from the Service End

Whereas all out aggression tends to be the name of the game when playing from the Hazard End, the opportunities to win points are far greater from the Service End; so when playing at this end, control takes on more significance. It is also worth remembering that over hitting from the Service end often results in Hazard Chases being made, with the resultant loss of Service.

When playing down the Main Wall to the Grille/Tambour area be particularly careful not to over hit. You are playing over the high part of the net and, unless played with heavy topspin, any ball hit excessively hard down the line must be very accurate to enter the Grille. More often than not, the hard force played from here either hits the net, or goes up onto the Penthouse roof, thereby conceding the initiative to your opponents. Similarly, the ball hit very hard at the Tambour, although sometimes effective, is quite likely to rebound off the Battery Wall so as to give your opponents a simple return.

Instead the slow to moderate force for the Grille, boasted round the Tambour, is very effective, as it requires more racquet movement and better timing for your opponent to defend. Also, if you can play it, the chip to the base of the Tambour, which leaves your opponent guessing whether the ball will hit or go round the Tambour is particularly effective. Given room, the classic “cross-court cut shot” can be very telling, especially if the ball has bounced out and away from the Main Wall corner. Finally, do not forget that the Winning Gallery offers a good target to attack, whenever the ball runs out for an easy shot off the Back Wall.

The principal time to attack from the Service End is when you get an easy ball in the middle or Gallery side of the court. If your opponents have stayed back under the Grille, the base of the Tambour is the ideal target for this shot, played either as a direct hit, or preferably off the Main Wall. While, if your opponents have moved up in front of the Tambour, that is the time to test their mettle with a really explosive shot. Here, the hard “top-spun force” aimed straight at your opponent’s body is difficult to defend, as is the “dipping cut shot” aimed towards the Main Wall and slightly in front of him. Other good options are the lob for the Grille and the “cut shot” hit low and firmly to the left of the Grille.

Defending the Dedans

One of the key functions of the Back Court player is to defend the Dedans. Technically, the defence of the Dedans is exactly the same as in Singles. It is included here because of the greater use of the Dedans as a target in Doubles.

When playing at the back of the court, you may have several different types of force to contend with, including the aggressive shot hit below the Dedans. In all cases good footwork is important. You should always aim to be sideways on, keep your head still at the point of impact and play a compact shot.

The most difficult shot to defend is the force into the Dedans off the Main Wall. This invariably demands a defensive “block shot”, with the ball often directed back into the Main Wall. Another difficult ball to handle is the slower, high ball that requires more than just blocking. The tendency is to over swing at this ball, especially on the forehand side, and this often leads to racket errors. If the ball is dropping at the point of impact, you can avoid hitting across the line by playing the ball back along the same trajectory as its approach.

The most frequent errors made in playing low volleys come from dropping the racket head. Therefore when playing this shot, make sure the racket head is kept well above the wrist.

When volleying from the back of the court, always have a target area in mind. Generally, aim in the direction of the Tambour/Grille, at an elevation that will allow the ball to hit low on the Back Wall. Although your first priority is to get the ball back into play, try to avoid putting the ball back onto the Penthouse roof, as this just gives your opponents another chance to attack.

Attacking Chases

Any Chase shorter than 1 yard should be played for the Dedans, either as a force or a high lob. Other short Chases should be attacked with the classic “floor/Main Wall cut shot”. The important thing is to be positive with your shot and to try to make sure your opponents will have to attempt to play the ball back.

The approach to playing longer Chases will be dependent on their length, the type of serve and the position of the “Gallery man”. Try to avoid the classic “cross-court shot” as, unless it is played well, will provide your opponents with the opportunity to hit the Hazard Galleries. If the “Gallery man” is standing back, a “chip shot” into his backhand corner can be productive. While, if he is up the court, a “cross-court boast” into his back corner can be profitable.

If the Chase is worse than Second Gallery, the “short chip shot” can be employed. However, in order to get the ball short, make sure that the ball reaches its apex well before reaching the Net, so that it is already falling when passing the Net.

Once into the Rest, the Receiver will take any balls played down the Main Wall and hitting the Tambour, but in addition he must be ready to cover the “cross-court shot” under the Winning Gallery and also prepared to quickly move forward to defend the Hazard Galleries. Whenever he moves up to the Hazard Galleries, his partner should move across to cover the centre of the court and defend the Grille/Tambour area as he would when playing Singles.

Defending Chases at the Service End

When defending Chases, help your partner by calling “leave” or “play it”, depending on whether you think the ball will win or lose the Point.

When defending short Chases be positive yet safe, generally aiming the ball at the base of the Tambour, with a good clearance over the Net.

You can be more aggressive playing longer Chases, as it will be more difficult for your opponents to take the pace off the faster ball and play short. Remember also that any ball hit into the Hazard Galleries wins a point when playing off a Chase at the Service End, but be careful not to go high and give your opponent the chance of an easy shot off the Penthouse.

Defending Hazard Chases

Players generally feel they are expected to win the point if they are at the Receiving End and have a Hazard Chase to defend. This often leads them to over hit their return of Service, with the consequential loss of initiative. Whereas in Singles, the Hazard Chase may be easy to defend, it is far more difficult in Doubles because of the player stationed at the Galleries. Therefore, unless there is an obvious opening in the Galleries, it is far safer and more effective to play the point as you would when attacking a longish Chase at the Service End. The only difference being that when playing Hazard Chases, the classic “cross-court floor shot” is less risky because the Service pair do not have all the Hazard Galleries available to them.

Check List

General

Think carefully before deciding whether to serve or receive at the start of the match.
Try to gain the Service End and stay there. Except,
Try to be at the Hazard End at the conclusion of each Set.
Concentrate at all times; stay alert and constantly keep moving off the ball.
Serve defensively, generally aiming to keep the ball short.
Remember that slow moving balls are more difficult to force than fast balls.
Attack your opponent’s serve when possible, with controlled aggression.
Remember the Golden Rule is: “Get the ball back in play at all costs”.
Do not attempt high-risk shots; Do not go for narrow margins. Do not over hit.
Remember that winning opportunities generally have to be worked for patiently.
Help your partner by calling early and clearly.
Keep talking to your partner and encourage rather than criticise.
Remember to be positive when attacking short Chases.
Remember when playing off Chases that a ball hit into the Hazard Galleries wins the point and vice-versa. for Hazard Chases.
Remember that defending Hazard Chases is more difficult in Doubles than Singles.
Remember to move across court and sweep behind your partner, when he is up defending the Tambour.

Volleying

Prepare well by holding the racket at head height, in front of the body and ready to turn either way.
Remember the importance of good footwork.
Remember to be sideways on and try to keep your head still at the point of impact.
Play a firm, compact “block shot” with little back swing and no follow through.
Play the ball as far in front of the body as possible.
Do not over swing at slow balls.
Keep the racket head above the wrist when playing low volleys.

Defending the Galleries

Do not interfere with play at the back of the court, leave this area to your partner. Remember to move up court when the ball is played cross-court and to move back when it is played down the line.

Do not feel any urgent need to get into the game.

Leave any risky shots to your partner. In general, only intercept easy balls, balls heading for the Galleries or forces your partner cannot reach.

Watch what is happening behind you and be ready to pick up balls running out off the Back Wall, Bandeau or Penthouse Roof.

Defending the Tambour

Remember to move forward in front of the Tambour, when the ball is played cross-court and get right back to defend the Grille, when the ball is played down the line.

Leave any risky shots to your partner. In general, only play balls that will nick on the Back Wall, will hit the Tambour below head height, or will enter the Grille.

Do not play balls hitting the Main Wall that will not also hit the Tambour, or enter the Grille.

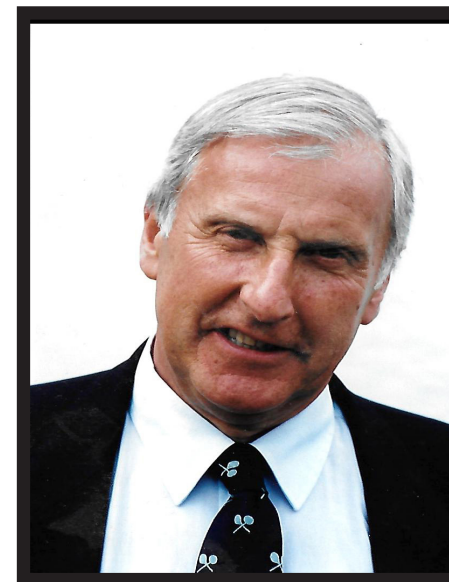
Watch what is happening behind you and be ready to pick up any balls running out off the Back Wall, Bandeau or Penthouse Roof that your partner cannot reach.

Defending the Grille

Do not get drawn in too close to the Side Wall. Give yourself room to get side on. Remember, any ball hitting the Tambour is your partner's responsibility.

Leave balls to hit the Back Wall whenever possible, only volley balls that will enter the Grille, or hit the Nick.

The Author



Colin Dean

Real Tennis Career and Achievements

Chairman - International Real Tennis Committee
Chairman - T&RA Tennis Committee
Member - T&RA Council
T&RA Representative - World Championship Committee
Vice President, Club Captain & Chairman - Hatfield House RTC
Member: Hatfield House RTC, MCC, Falkland Palace RTC, The Dedanists Society & The Jesters.
Represented UK in Cockram Trophy, Bostwick Cup & Danby Trophy
Winner: World Over 50s Singles Championship
2 x Winner: World Over 50s Doubles Championship
Winner: World Over 60s Doubles Championship
6 x Winner: British Over 50s Singles Championship
2 x Winner: British Over 50s Doubles Championship
2 x Winner: British Over 60s Doubles Championship
2 x Winner: British Mixed Doubles Championship



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The Dedanists -