

High Percentage Doubles Plays Cheatsheets

by Nicole Havlicek

(This is a companion resource to Nicole's presentation at the 2024 Pickleball Summit)

How these variables stack up will dictate what play you should run:

- What's the incoming shot, speed, spin & location?
- What's your contact point height? High or Low?
- How pressed (jammed/rushed/stretched) are you by the incoming shot? Can you hit a commanding shot or is a defensive shot required?
- Where are you in the court? Where's your partner? Where are your opponents?

Part 1: Intermediate Plays (Go-To Plays)

These plays show up quite often in a pickleball game or are relatively easy to generate. They are proven to be successful so it only comes down to executing them well time and time again.

Push Apart & Pounce Middle

- *Get your opponents separated by pushing one player to the side with a wide shot.*
- *A gap in the middle is created and you (or your partner) hit a hard shot through the middle gap.*
- **Pro Tip:** *If the pushed player is good at recovering you might have to push them out more than once. Be patient and rerun the play. Hit the middle finishing shot only when you see that they're going to be late to recover.*

Squeeze & Angle

- *Get your opponents squeezed together by hitting a shot through the middle.*
- *Gaps form on the outside of each player. Hit a firm yet more angled shot to one of those gaps.*
- **Pro Tip:** *It's ideal if, by the time you are hitting your shot, they have barely recovered from having been stretched to reach for your previous shot to the middle.*

Precision Pressure

- *This play relies entirely on accuracy.*
- *No hard shots. Only off speed shots (intentionally less than max speed) that are 60-75% of the player's max speed potential.*
- *Targets to use:*
 - *When they're deep, hit deep.*
 - *When they're on their way to the NVZ line, hit it at their feet.*
 - *When they're at the NVZ, keep them on the move by stretching them wide with precision shots near the sidelines.*
- **Pro Tip:** *Continuously hit the shot that would give them the most stretched contact point. Players tend to cough up errors or weak shots when stretched with off pace shots.*

Battering Ram

- *When higher contact points continue to come, keep your foot on the gas and drive, drive, drive! (relentless attack)*
- *Don't forget to continue CLOSING IN towards the NVZ line as you do so.*
- *If you stay back, a ball that could've been a high contact if you were closer to the NVZ may be a low contact when you're further back AND the more you're back in the court the LESS you can hit down into your opponent's court. The net is more in your way the further back you are in the court.*

Laser Precision Power

- *When you have a big weapon (often a forehand drive) USE IT and rip a drive low crossing the net when you have a shot that's just sitting there and you can step into it.*
- *LOW and HARD is the key.*
- *A weak reply or outright miss has a good chance of being the result.*

Work The Box

- *"The Box" is NOT the the same as the NVZ but it includes the NVZ. The area referred to as "The Box" extends about 1.5/2 feet beyond the NVZ line.*
- *The main idea behind the use of a larger area as your aggressive dinking zone is to emphasize that deep dinks are very useful so don't limit your dinks to the NVZ.*
- *When dinking deep, be sure there contact point will be low and/or pressed.*
- *Use a variety of dinks (topspin, underspin & sidespin) of varying speeds all around "The Box" to determine what your opponent's don't like. Then, give them A LOT of what they don't like while still mixing in other shots to remain unpredictable.*
- *The idea behind all of this is to generate weaker shots that can be attacked to finish the point.*

The Divorce

- *Sending a serve wide will give the returner a bad angle with which to head to the NVZ line.*
- *If they don't close the gap well and/or don't get all the way to the line PLUS hit a weak return, that opens the door for the server or server's partner to drive it through the middle.*
- *This same scenario could also arise deeper in the point whenever you have your opponents defensively, deeper in the court and spread apart.*

Off Pace Shoelace

- *When your team has both players up at the NVZ and they have two players back (or at least one of them is back), send the ball at a deeper player's feet (on the shoelaces).*
- *Low contact points deep in the court are difficult to handle. Routinely handling that shot well and hitting back an unattackable shot requires a high level of skill.*
- *Off pace shoelace shots are hit at less than max speed and putting a little bit of topspin on them is a good idea.*
- *Look for weak shots (higher contact point opportunity) that you can attack at max speed.*

Defender Pro

- *Improving your defense is a cheat code for making big jumps in levels.*
- *Shutting down some of your opponents best attacks sucks the life out of their confidence.*
- *You must be able to (at least at times) dig yourself out of defensive situation, neutralize and go back on offense and ultimately win the point. If you can't do this, you're of no real threat to an advanced player.*
- *Work relentlessly on the skill of sending back a shot with low speed that came in at high speed while making it unattackable by your opponents (drops, blocks & resets)*

The Deadliest Drop

- *The Topspin Drop reigns supreme when it comes to benefits.*
- *Benefits:*
 - *Good net clearance while still being able to keep the target of your shot short and low thanks to the bend down in trajectory while the ball is in flight.*
 - *The shot will hit the ground and bounce towards your opponent. It presses them while also cutting out the opportunity of your shot sitting up and becoming attackable.*
 - *The ball tugs a bit on the paddle of your opponent making the shot feel heavier.*
- *Has the optimal combination when compared to all other types of shots when it comes to giving you good margins to work with and being tough for your opponents to deal with.*

Part 2: Advanced Plays

These plays show up LESS often in a pickleball game and are harder to generate. They require a higher level of skill and are higher risk. If you execute a poor shot than the downside risks are high. These are great plays to experiment with and add to your game once you have the above Go-To Plays mastered.

Shake & Bake

- *Look for this opportunity anytime your team has both players back and they have both players up at or near the NVZ. It's a great way to turn the tables on them.*
- *One player on your team must be receiving a shot that they are comfortable hitting a low hard drive on with accuracy.*
- *It's best if the driving player takes their shot down the line but middle and crosscourt can work well especially if the receiving player has not made their way all the way up to the NVZ line yet.*
- *The driving player's partner should cut across (poach) on the next shot in anticipation of a weak (popped up) reply that will head middle or in the direction of the driving player. There's a good chance this will happen hence why this play is so effective.*

Classic Poach

- *"Shake & Bake" above is a specific type of poaching play.*
- *A poach is anytime you intercept a shot that was headed for your teammate because doing so will produce a high contact point for you from a position closer up in the court than your partner and you'll be able to hit an attacking shot.*
- *The key is that you must ANTICIPATE your opponent hitting to your partner and make your move BEFORE they make contact with the ball.*
- *They may hit behind you (into the space that you just left open) but your partner should cover that shot. They must be tuned in to what they need to do when you are poaching and vice versa.*
- *Occasionally they will anticipate your move and hit a winner. Don't worry about that. The probabilities are in your favor.*

Off Pace High Attack

- *A high and often bending attack with some topspin/sidespin that ideally aims to hit it past your opponents and land deep.*
- *If it doesn't get past them (often it won't and that's ok), then it at least forces them into a late contact even though it's high. If they're late, they're defensive and they can't punish you no matter what the height of the contact point.*
- *They'll often hit a weak reply and you can finish your attack on the subsequent shot/shots.*
- **Note:** *High downside risk because if you don't hit it with accuracy, of not only the target but the whole trajectory of your shot, then they will have a high and IN FRONT contact point with which to attack you.*

The Bait

- *To be used when you feel you have faster hands than your opponents or if you prefer counterattacking rather than hitting the initial speed up shot.*
- *Bait them into attacking you first by sending your dinks just high enough that they'll be too tempted not to attack but assuring that it will be the weakest possible attack.*
- *Often backhand attacks are weaker so send the bait dink to their backhand. Be sure to test both sides.*
- **Pro Tip:** *You must have strong reflexes for this to be effective. Train your hand speed and reaction time if you aim to use this play.*

Offensive Lob

- *This is an easy way to go from neutral in a dinking exchange to putting them on big defense, all with one shot.*
- *The lob needs to bounce behind them to be most effective.*
- *High downside risk if you hit a bad (too short/too low) lob. They will have an easy put away opportunity.*
- **Pro tip:** *It's best if you catch them by surprise so you can't do this too often or it becomes ineffective.*

The Drop Shot

- *When your team has both players up at the NVZ line and they have both players back, instead of hitting yet another attack that they are defending well, hit a soft drop volley that lands just beyond the net.*
- *One player will have to be quick to retrieve it. If they are able to retrieve it, they will be in the kitchen at which point you attack them from close up while they are busy trying to re-establish their feet behind the NVZ line.*
- *The downside risk is high if you hit a bad drop shot (too deep, bounces too high). They will have an attackable ball.*
- **Pro Tip:** *Just like the offensive lob, it's best if it's a surprise to them so you can't do this too often or it becomes ineffective.*