

# **Championship Doubles**

## **How To Improve Your Game**

### **How To Play Championship Doubles**

by Ruby Obert Having been inspired by 25 years of championship play, I decided to put to print what I think are the key ingredients for "top prize" handball with special emphasis on doubles. Court time limitations, plus the fact that the major part of my victories were in doubles, prompted me to write about this somewhat neglected area.

First, we should list some preliminary considerations, then general hints and strategy, followed by the specifics of one, three, and four-wall doubles.

#### **PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS**

Handball is a game of strategy, fortified by years of practice and conditioning. Here are my thoughts on developing a championship game.

- 1) Set aside definite days each week for playing.
- 2) Devote half of your time for practicing the basics, i.e. proper warmup, stance. foot position, underhand stroke, sidearm stroke and overhand stroke.
- 3) Use the remaining part of the session playing someone better than yourself.
- 4) In the first part of the session, after your basics, concentrate each week on a particular aspect of your game: These include kill shot, punch shot, back wall. pass shot, lob, ceiling shot, etc. It is important not to be haphazard in your practice. Try to concentrate on one aspect at a time.
- 5) Devote time to your offhand, too. First practice throwing the ball and starting to gain control of the shot rather than going for power.
- 6) Start your practice by standing near the short line, rather than farther back. You will get more control this way and not strain your arm.
- 7) Play as many different players as possible to take advantage of diverse styles, i.e. power hitters, retrievers, good servers, defensive players, etc.
- 8) Learn to pace yourself.
- 9) Study the warmup of your opponent. He will usually show his best shots and you can decide on what weakness to play. In your own warmup only practice a few basic shots. so as not to tip off your opponent.
- 10) Travel to different areas, attend handball exhibitions of the top players, learn the rules and pray for good health and referees who can see.

## **GENERAL HINTS AND STRATEGY**

Get into, and stay in shape!

Learn to pace yourself and to take time-outs at the right time. The stars of the first game (usually younger players) wilt under the physical and mental exhaustion of competitive play. This doesn't mean to play cool and leisurely. Show your opponent that you mean business but use only enough energy to get to 21 points. Gordy Pfeifer and Dennis Hofflander power the ball continuously, but if you don't possess the rubber-armed endurance of an Oscar Obert, few survive. Johnny Sloan, Naty Alvarado and Carl Obert are great examples of men who use court know-how rather than raw power to win.

Develop teamwork which can only be polished by continuous play among teams of different calibre and shot-making ability.

Discuss beforehand the known strengths and weaknesses of your opponents. Usually the right side player of an all righthanded team is the weakness. Play him continually and even if he looks good for a while the payoff will come. Remember though, that it may be of advantage to serve the stronger player. The theory here is that by keeping him in the back court, a kill or drive at his weak partner may be the key to victory.

In a lefty-righty combination, play the known weakness of the weaker player.

Remember, for your own team, keep in mind that there can be only one dominant player. If both players are trying to set up the play and end it with kills, etc. you'll find that the percentage of success decreases. This is probably the reason that two very successful singles players don't necessarily do well in doubles. Each is thinking of an individual game plan which doesn't account for his partners position. The essence of teamwork is to realize that with two righthanders, the left side man is the dominant player,- his partner is the supporting player, and each has a different role. The dominant player covers the center court with his strong hand, and his better left hand protects the vulnerable and difficult left wall. He should control the pace of the game and is the shotmaker. His job is to keep his team on the offensive.

The supporting player many times holds the key to victory. In theory your opponents will play the weaker man. So he must be alert and never miss. Most right side players admit they get the junk over there, and yet they must be consistent. This is where the real challenge lies.

It takes tremendous self discipline to not take shots which you probably could take, but, which would be better taken by your partner. Sometimes three or more years of practice together is required to learn the oft forgotten fundamental- the supporting player's role is to keep the opponents on the defensive. This is achieved with a variety of shots discussed separately later. Many times it is this ability to change the speed of the ball, coupled with his partners power, which throws off the timing of the opponents.

Voice signals play an important part in the doubles game. Not only does it warn a partner of trouble near the back wall, but also tells him that a better

shot may be had by his not hitting the ball.

Voice signals also have a role in encouraging your partner on to better play.

Choice of service is very important. Your partner may be able to help you on this because he observes the positions of the receiving team. In general, the serve should either get an ace (which is difficult in doubles) or, get a weak return.

Return of service is equally important. Returning the ball high in one-wall and to the ceiling and around the walls in three- and four-wall will buy time for your team to get into position.

Avoid playing in a pattern. Change your choice of serves and volleys to alter the rhythm of the game when necessary.

Don't hesitate to change a losing game plan, no matter what the score, keep playing, for many a lost cause has turned around.

Know the rules, i.e., order of service, staying in box, etc.

A key factor, often overlooked, is to cheer for your partner and to encourage him even if he misses a few.

#### FOUR-WALL

Serve -- The server's strategy in four-wall is to get an ace or a weak return that can be turned into a quick point.

If the receiver returns the service well, then the server's next shot may be a pass shot that doesn't reach the back wall.

Left side server usually hits a serve that either catches part of one or more walls before or after the service zone. He usually hits a hop between himself and the left wall, or a "Z" serve. Sometimes a hop to the right side receiver is also used. Most do not have the skill to hit a high lofting serve to the left.

The right side server should hit the left wall midway between the short line and the back wall, or a hop over the short line to the left.

Enough can't be said about changing the speed and placement of your serve.

I don't believe there's any classic return for a given serve so I suggest you find out where your strengths and weaknesses are, and develop skill to put your opponent on the defensive. Thus, a good return of serve.

Most times the left side retriever tries to hit the ceiling, or catch the front and side walls high, to buy time. The right side receiver usually tries to hit front and side walls on the fly about shoulder high to drive the server back or, to make him take a poor shot.

Because of poor percentage of success in doubles, I've rarely seen a kill off the service unless it was a real hanger. After all, if you miss it is a point against you.

Know the different shots and practice them continually in different directions and at different speeds. This will help you gain confidence and choose the right shot during the ensuing volley.

If you find that you are missing a certain shot change it for a while.

Always work on your weak hand because that is where the game is won or lost, especially on the volley.

### **ONE-WALL**

Serve -- The server's basic strategy in one-wall is to get an ace or a weak return that can be killed in front of himself, or his partner who enters the court in front of the receiver on his side.

If the receiver returns service well, then the server's next shot may be a placement to the left line or passing power up the middle.

Left side server usually should hit a low hard angle just over the short line or a serve to the long line with hops to the off-hand of the weaker player. Since a righthander usually plays left side in one-wall, the server may serve from center court and hit a ball with a hop either just over the short line or near the long line close to the left line.

There is mixed reaction as to whether a ball should be served high when the server has a fault. Since the server usually is more conservative on the second serve, I feel that the high serve gets the ball in play and can't be killed by the receiver if served properly.

The right side server either serves the ball with right or left hop just over the short line, either in front or behind himself. He may also serve to the long line, near the right line, to the receiver's off hand, or cross court to the left line.

Many times a serve to the long line between a left and righthander has scored points by confusing the receiver as to who should play the ball. It's even more effective with hops in both directions.

As a general rule, most serves are returned high and away from the server. Here the theory is that since the server is more alert being on the court, whereas his partner may enter only after the ball passes him, it is better to keep the ball away from the server.

Of course, if the receiver has control of the situation, he may decide to ram the ball at the server's feet or midsection. Only actual court observation will be the deciding factor: i.e., How did the server react before?

Never stand flatfooted! Be ready to move in or out, side to side. Stay on the balls of your feet and in motion as the server hits the ball. It's easier to keep in motion rather than losing a precious second when starting from a dead stop.

To sum it up -- Know your own skills and those of your partner, practice a lot, and before the game, discuss a game plan based on your opponent's skills.