

Doubles Court Coverage

COURT COVERAGE IN DOUBLES

By Pete Tyson Adapted to one-wall by Albert Apuzzi Jr.

Since a player is on offense only 50 percent of the time in singles and far less than 50 percent in doubles, it is crucial to know the different possibilities for court coverage and positioning when you are not hitting the ball. This is the most important area of effective teamwork in doubles.

Perhaps 60 to 80 percent of all the shots in a doubles game will be hit by someone other than you. The positions you take during this majority of the time are just as important as the positions you take when you are hitting the ball.

Before getting into the various positions involved in doubles, it is important to review "court" and "physical" positioning. The actual court positioning you take depends on where your opponent is when he is setting up to hit his shot, and the type of shot you are anticipating he is going to hit.

Thus, the first and most important aspect of physical positioning (what your body is doing) is to always watch the ball. If you're not watching the ball, how would you know how to position yourself? You won't!

Good players move before their opponent has hit the ball because they can tell where the ball is going by watching their opponent set up for his shot.

You will also find it much easier to stay tuned to the action if you are always on the move. You will be able to start your race to get into position for your shot or a retrieve if you are already moving when your opponent or partner is hitting the ball.

When playing the right side, you may feel like you never hit the ball. Speed in doubles can be defined as reaction time and quickness. You will be able to react and move faster if you are not standing still when the ball is about to be hit.

It has often been said that it's foolish to dive during singles. In doubles, although you would still rather not dive, you will find that it is occasionally necessary to leave your feet. Not only is play faster, but it is much harder to hit the ball out of the reach of two opponents.

Consequently, there are many times when you will have to react very quickly, and you just don't have the time to anticipate what your opponents are about to do. You will be caught off guard or leaning the wrong way more often and won't be able to get your feet moving.

It is not unusual to see good doubles players all over the floor, diving and striving to get up quickly before the ball is hit again. But the good thing is that there is someone to cover for you in doubles when you dive, and he'll try to keep the ball in play until you get back to your feet.

Another pointer for physical positioning in doubles is to draw your forearms up to parallel to the floor and try to keep them there. This will also help you be ready at all times for the faster pace and the hard-hit shots right at you. Because your opponents have less court to cover than they would in singles, they will be in set positions more often to power the ball. Drawing your forearms up parallel to the floor will enable you to react faster with your hands. Having the arms up will cut down on the time you need to swing at the ball.

Court Division

Now that you are watching and moving and have your hands ready, what should your court position be?

As in singles, this will depend on a number of factors, including where your opponent is and the type of shot he is attempting. It may also depend on where your partner is and if he is left-handed or right-handed.

This is a team sport. When it is your team's turn to make the return, which player should attempt the shot? To decide this, you must divide the court so each player knows his area of responsibility. Nothing in doubles is more important than this.

You and your partner must have a clear understanding of the court division and then try your utmost to take only those shots that come into your specific court area. If a player moves into his partner's territory to attempt a shot, there will be confusion as well as a part of the court left unprotected.

Naturally, you can't always stay within these limits and there are times when you must move over to cover for your partner. But for the most part, try to stay in your area of responsibility.

There are several acceptable methods of court division. A method used by many championship teams assumes both players are right-handed. Notice the court is divided down the center from the wall to the short line. From the short line to the long line, the dividing line veers to the right and then travels straight to the long line.

In this method of court division, the right-side player is responsible for the right half of the front court and the right third of the back court.

The only difference between this method and dividing the court right down the middle from the wall to the long line is the small alley, about 3 feet wide, to the right of center in the back half of the court. It's much easier for the left-side player, with his stronger right hand, to step over and play the shots in this alley than it is for the right-side player to back out of his territory and get his right hand on the shots in this alley. Certainly, the right-side player doesn't want to use his left hand on shots his partner can hit with his right hand in this alley.

Depth of court position

How deep you and your partner will position yourselves in the court will depend on the kind of shot your opponents are attempting. Your positioning will vary depending on whether your opponents are serving, attempting an offensive shot, attempting a defensive shot from a set position, attempting a defensive shot from a troubled position, or diving for one of your offensive shots in the front court.

When receiving service the players are positioned within a foot of the long line. Too often players will receive service from too far forward in the court, which cuts their reaction time and forces them to retreat to return service rather than step forward into their return. Some positioning adjustments may be necessary against some specific serves, but this is the basic alignment for a team consisting of two right-handers.

If the opponent tends to hit the ball very hard, position yourselves a little deeper in the court. If you position yourselves too close to the wall against a hard hitter, too many of his shots will be too hot to handle.

But if the opponent is a good shooter without handcuffing power, one player on your team might move up especially close to the wall, around the short line, to retrieve the kill that won't rebound as far or as fast off the wall.

There will also be times when your opponents have a setup so easy and close to the wall that one of them will have little difficulty executing a good kill shot. This is another case when one player on your team will overcommit and attempt to intimidate your opponent by moving up to or in front of the short line.

By doing this, your opponent will think that his kill attempt must be perfect. Quite often, he will change his mind and attempt a pass shot instead of the kill, or try to overpower you by driving the ball at the player who has overcommitted.

Of course, this is why you used the intimidating ploy of overcommitting. The partner who didn't overcommit must retreat to a position behind the short line in the center of the court to cover the pass.

This temporary division results in up-and-back positioning rather than the usual side-by-side. As soon as your team has returned the opponent's shot, hustle back into the side-by-side setup, which is more appropriate most of the time in one-wall.

When your opponents are about to hit a controlled defensive shot--when they have time to set up and hit a lift, or other such defensive shot.

This is an area of doubles when positioning errors occur regularly. Too often the right-side player will remain near the short line, though the opponent's shot is obviously going to end up deep in the court, perhaps in the right corner. Unless the right-side player takes a deeper position, he will have difficulty getting back fast enough to make the plays on the right side. Thus, his partner will have to cover for him and both players will be on the right side, leaving much of the left side open.

This positioning error won't happen if the right-side player keeps moving during the rallies, as he would in singles, and takes a position between the short and long lines on opponents' controlled defensive shots. The right-side player, in proper position, will easily be able to make the play on these defensive shots.

Some argue that the right-side player should stay at the short line to look for fly-kill opportunities, but these happen rarely when the opponents are in a controlled defensive position.

On the other hand, if you have put your opponents in a troubled or difficult position, the fly-kill opportunity is very real. This is when most fly-kill opportunities occur and should be exploited. This is another case for the up-and-back alignment. The partner who fly-kills the best on your team should maintain a position near the short line, looking for the easy opportunity to end the rally. His partner should retreat to a deeper position for protection.

If one of your opponents dives for a shot, you or your partner who is playing on the diving player's side of the court should follow him in to the wall. The player who follows the diving player will be able to retrieve any soft, low shots that happen so often in this situation. The player who didn't follow the diving player should retreat a little to cover the rest of the court.

Angles of court position

Notice that in most of the instances, the right-side player is very close to the actual dividing line of responsibility. This positioning will allow him to play almost every shot in his area of responsibility with his right hand. Right-side players who don't get off the sideline forced to use their left hands too many times. Remember, try to get your strong hand on the ball whenever possible.

The right-side player should ideally be in a position that any ball coming toward his left hand can be hit by his partner as the right-side player takes one step to the right to give his partner a clear shot. When playing the right side, it is very important that you keep your left hand out of the play and out of the way of your partner's right-handed attempts.

Unfortunately, this isn't as easy as it sounds. This is one of the things that makes playing the right side much more difficult than playing the left side, not physically, but mentally.

There will be many shots that will come within the right-side player's reach.