More Serving Strategies

How To Improve Your Game

.. More Serving Strategies

First written for 1-Wall by Howie Eisenberg

Throughout the years, a good number of instructional articles have appeared in ACE and HANDBALL Magazines. These articles have addressed various facets of the game of four-wall handball. Often the techniques and strategies have been relevant to one-wall as well. However, there never have been instructionals directed to one-wall play. The material that follows is the first of a series of instructionals directed to one-wall. In some instances they will have applicability to four-wall pay. It should be noted that some of the philosophies of play presented are subjective and are open to debate.

PREPARATION FOR THE SERVE

Hitting an effective serve starts with the preparation to hit the serve. This involves being as physically strong and as mentally ready as possible. There is a process that accomplishes both ends that has worked for me throughout the years. That is to pause for six to eight seconds once given the ball in the service box. What this does is allow me to partially recover from the anaerobic exertions of the previous point (catch your breath'), and to decide definitively on the choice of service for the situation.

Before adopting the 8-second pause, which, incidentally, was suggested to me by Jim Jacobs, I found that I frequently would change my mind about either the hook, the depth, or the direction while in the middle of my service motion. In one-wall, such "horse changing" in midstream often has an instant adverse result, i.e., serving the ball out of bounds and losing the service. In four-wall, the resultant serve may go straighter or deeper than intended, providing the defensive player with a set-up.

CHOICE OF SERVE - GENERAL PHILOSOPHY

The choice of serve depends upon a number of factors, including the particular abilities of the server, e.g., ability to hit serves low and just over the short line, to hit angles, and to hit hooks. Also, the defensive capabilities of the receiver should come into play, e.g., speed, off-hand, ability to return a hook, etc. Finally, the situation must be taken into consideration, e.g., fault or no fault, condition of the server and receiver, success of the previous sequence of serves.

Note that there was no mention of the score as a factor in the selection of the serve. It is my firm contention that there is an optimal shot for a particular situation, regardless of score, and the serve is no exception.

Deception can be of value, but is probably the most overrated, and frequently counter-productive ploy in handball. Attempting to hit the ball one way while the feet, arm or head are positioned the other way can result in a weak or missed shot, or worse, an injury. The element of surprise on the serve is far less important than hitting a serve that works. If a serve has been effective two or three times in succession, there is not any special need to change that serve! Hitting the same serve over and over again can put one in a "groove." The serve is hit from the same position, at the same height, with the same swing, to the same spot on the court. If the serve is a great serve, it is either not going to be returned or elicit a weak return. Changing the serve for deception may result in losing the groove.

Eventually an opponent may overplay the serve and obtain the offensive advantage. The basic philosophy is that you do what works until it doesn't work. While going with the same serve once too often can result in the server being put out, changing an effective serve can result in not running a string of anywhere from two to 21 points.

POSITION OF THE SERVER

Disregarding hooks, simple principles of physics and trigonometry (angle of incidence equals angle of reflection) show that a serve hit from the short line 16 feet from the front wall will reach a point at the long line (34 feet from the front wall) over a lateral range of 31 feet, although the width of the court is just 20 feet. The closer the server is to a side line, the greater the possible angle to the opposite side line and the lesser the angle becomes to the near side line. For a receiver to bisect the possible range of a ball served from one side line or the other, he has to stand five feet from the opposite side line. While taking such a position optimizes the receiver's opportunity to reach and return the serve, it can leave the receiver's off-hand vulnerable to covering a wide expanse of court, either on the service return or the second shot. Considering most players' greater ability to hit angles to the opposite side of the court (righty from right to left and vice versa), and the fact that one's body legally blocks the ball, the most effective service position for a right-hander is within a foot of the right side line and for left-handers within a foot of the left side line. Of course, this assumes control great enough to place the ball in the one foot alley between the server's body and the side line. If a player does not possess such control, it is necessary for him to move towards the center of the court, leaving more space between him and the near side line.

LOCATION AND HOOKS

In one-wall, serves hit low, near the short line, or deep, near the long line, are the most difficult to retrieve. The preferred choices are thus a low angle to the far side line, a low serve down the near side line, or deep serves to the left, center or right.

Any serve can be made more effective by application of a natural or reverse hook. This is especially true in the case of deep serves since the receiver has less time to react to the hook. A natural hook hit by a right-hander, serving from right to left, or hit by a left-hander, serving from left to right, will have the effect of a greater angle. The same holds true for a right-hander serving reverses to the right or a left-hander serving reverses to the left.

Hitting a serve that hooks opposite to the direction of the ball, e.g., right-hander serves a reverse from the right to the

center or left side of the court, while partially offsetting the effect of the angle, can cause an opponent to overrun the ball, especially if he is not able to "read" hooks.

HEIGHT AND VELOCITY

It is my devout belief that the harder you hit the serve (all other things being equal), the harder it is to return. The height at which a serve is hit should be determined by the minimum height at which a serve can be hit parallel to the ground and still pass the short line. The quintessential "low server" was Kenny Davidoff, who sometimes would scrape his fingers on the concrete while hitting the lowest, hardest serve of all time. Although deception was minimized earlier, it is valuable to hit low and deep serves from the same height. This prevents an opponent from either moving forward or backward once the height of the swing "tips off" the depth of the serve. In order to hit a deep serve from a low position, it suffices to hit the ball in an upward trajectory. Depth of the serve can be controlled by hitting the ball higher on the front wall.

MECHANICS

In Australian three-wall, a server can run all the way to the front wall in executing a service. One-wall players don't have quite that luxury, but the "notch," nine feet behind the short line, provides an opportunity for gaining momentum and getting the whole body into the swing not available to four-wallers. The key to exploiting this facility is to start at the notch, bounce the ball forward and advance to the short line while striking the ball.

Within the guidelines of sufficient back swing, proper point of contact, and smooth follow through, all of which have been expounded upon in other instructionals, the service stroke is a very individual thing. A player's height, maneuverability, ball-throwing habits and other idiosyncrasies affect the way he swings at a ball. It is this swing which may, in the long run, determine absolute potential. But consideration of the points suggested here may help in developing that potential.