

Play Defense

How To Improve Your Game

Learn to Play Defense

by Terry Muck

"The floor will beat you every time." This sage advice comes our way, in one form or another, in almost every handball instructional. What it means, in case you're wondering, is that a player's continued use, or attempt, of low-percentage killshots will result in defeat. But, "The floor will beat you every time," means more to the advanced player than it does to the beginner. In fact, the more advanced, the more the statement means. At the highest levels of play, the ability to execute the shots is very even, and shot selection takes over as the determining factor in who wins and who loses.

So call this an advanced bit of instructional advice if you want. You can read it if you are a beginner, but please realize a higher priority for the beginner is shot technique. The beginner should learn to stroke the ball with solid fundamentals, to hit the kill, the pass and the serve. The beginner can worry over the agony of shot selection later. Now is the time to play and enjoy the relative freedom from the subtleties of choosing between offense or defense, kill or pass.

Since so many people, all the handball experts for that matter, talk about the importance of shot selection, there must be something to it. Furthermore, if you have any doubts of the importance, watching the pros will dispel them. The way handball is played at the highest level, shot selection is paramount.

Although the problem is often raised, solutions are rarely given. Usually, some vague advice recommends that you shoot good shots while on defense, and certain other good shots while on offense, or that you practice "percentage handball," whatever that means. The trouble with the advice most often given is that most of us don't know what "good" or "percentage" shots are, and no amount of explanation can teach us what is safe and what is risky.

Let's face it, most of us learn to play handball by simply playing. We find out what works and doesn't work by trial and error. We formed habits early in our playing careers. These habits were usually determined by our physical characteristics, so a big person learned to hit hard pass shots, while the short, quick person learned to be a shooter, and a person with a lot of stamina became a retriever. Those habits were reinforced with winning performances, and soon we had our "game."

So when someone tells you to use percentage shots, your mind says "Yes, that sounds logical and right," but when you get back on the court your old habits take over. The pressure of the game and the good feeling you get when you take your best shot removes the mental assent you gave to play percentage handball.

So how do you break out of these selfdefeating playing patterns? Try a new game: Determine before you start that in every rally you will hit five defensive shots before you attempt one offensive shot. When you are serving, start counting after the serve, because the serve is an offensive shot. Don't worry about what kind of defensive shot to take. For starters, just don't attempt to kill the ball. Consider every shot except the killshot to be a defensive shot. After attempting five defensive shots, start looking for the rally-ending kill opportunity.

Don't relax. Just because you are not killing the ball doesn't mean you are on vacation. You have to work just as hard to hit good defensive shots as you do to hit good offensive shots. Your opponent will soon catch on that you're not trying to kill much today, and he will start laying back for your passes and ceiling shots. Don't let this tempt you. Stick to your plan, it will just be better practice.

A couple of things will surely happen. You will find very few rallies last long enough for you to attempt a kill. Someone will err first. If you are hitting well-executed defensive shots, you will find your opponent will frequently hit the ball into the floor.

