

## Serving Strategies

How To Improve Your Game **Serving Strategies**

First written for 1-Wall by Albert Apuzzi

The serve is a one-wall handball player's greatest and deadliest weapon. This is so for several reasons: First the one-wall server is dealing with a short line much closer to the wall than is the case in three- and four-wall (16 feet versus 20 feet). As he faces the wall, the one-wall server has the short line in front of him, whereas the four-waller has the short line behind him. Thus, in the ideal case, a good one-wall serve has to travel 3 feet less than a good four-wall serve ( $16' + 16' = 32'$  as compared to  $15' + 20' = 35'$ ). This gives the one-waller an advantage, not only on the serve itself, but also on handling the receiver's return. In all forms of handball, an effective serve can yield both immediate points and weak returns which can be converted to points on the server's (or serving side's) next shot. As we all know you can't score a point unless you (or your side) is serving.

One-wall is a serve and shoot game of angles. A careful observer will note that the server's lead foot ends up practically on top of the short line. Even with practice you'll still commit an occasional foot fault, but it will be worth the edge you will gain on other service attempts. Being closer to the shortline, and thereby the wall, means that the serve needs to travel a shorter distance creating the following advantages:

A lower serve. If the velocity is kept constant the ball can be aimed lower because it needs to travel a shorter distance. A faster serve. Covering less distance at the same speed means that it takes less time to do so. Fewer short serves. If you start two inches closer to the short line balls that were two inches short would now be good. A greater angle on cross court serves. The short line was originally positioned at 13'9". Realization of the the sharp angles obtainable on the serve along with changes in the ball resulted in it being moved back first to 15', and it nows stands at 16'. Better positioning for the receiver's return of serve. Standing on the short line allows the server to cover the opponent's angles, kills, lifts, and passes by taking a step or two in the appropriate direction. Conservation of energy. If you don't believe me just move the shortline back 6 - 12 inches and try hitting the same serves.

## **Singles**

The best singles players serve from within a few feet of the side line. Righties are partial to the right side line and lefties to the left one. One reason for this is that as they strike the ball their hand is hidden from the receiver's view. When starting the serve, appear to be going up the line, a break of the wrist and the ball will be headed "a mile away" toward the opposite side of the court. Another reason is that they can hit the ball harder when they serve behind themselves thereby making their cross court offerings more devastating. Using a combination of cross court angles along with shots straight up the side line is extremely effective. Toss in an occasional deep one, throw in some hooks and your serve will be absolutely deadly. The third advantage is that you can legally hide the serve from the receiver's view. Since you'll have more problems with hinder serves on your attempts up the line it is often used to keep the opponent honest and the majority of serves will probably be cross court. In singles it is impossible to return a combination of successive shots hit strongly to opposite corners of the court. So when the serve gets returned weakly just swat it into a corner.

Serving with your back to the closest side line can also be quite effective. Doing this allows the server to keep a close watch on the opponent's last minute shifts in direction. Correct use of this tactic involves leading the receiver to believe that the ball will be hit cross court. At the last moment you can flick your wrist and pull the ball behind you. The greater your ability to make the receiver move in the wrong direction the fewer times the referee will call a hinder serve. One reason to use this service position is that it makes it extremely difficult for the receiver to find your opposite hand on his return of serve. Attempts to do so will often result in the return landing outside of the playing zone.

When you see a lefty and a righty paired up against each other you'll notice that the server may change his game around and increase the number of serves up the line to the off hand as opposed to using the cross court angle to the opponent's strong hand. If you keep a tab you'll notice that lefties go up the line more often than righties. Since lefties get to play righties on a constant basis they are more accustomed to returning the serve cross court to the server's off hand and the righty is more comfortable serving cross court because he is usually playing another righty and the serve would be to the opponent's off hand.

On the other side of the coin the righty's customary return up the left side line will be feeding the lefty's strength. By now you've probably realized that serving with your back to the closest side line is commonly

done when a lefty and a righty play against each other. You don't have to be an Einstein to see that a strong serve to the receiver's off hand will result in a hanger to your strong hand. Of course there is the rare chance that two lefties will face each other. A long time referee told me that you never know what might happen in this case.

## **Doubles**

Unlike three- and four-wall, the lefty (on a lefty-righty team) plays the right side. The advantages to choosing this formation are:

Players can limit court coverage with their off hands by standing closer to the side line. An opponent's attempt to find an off hand may result in the ball landing outside of the playing zone, thereby resulting in a loss of the rally for the side that made the final return.

Since the dominant hands of both teammates are in the center of the court players can increase court coverage by their strong hands by using the same strategy.

When positioned to strike the ball with your dominant hand you will be facing your partner and the view of each other's position and actions is facilitated.

When the return is down the center of the court the lefty-righty team can confuse their opposition by appearing that each player will strike the ball to a different area on the court. This forces the defensive team to cover additional court since they may be indecisive as to exactly which player will actually be hitting the ball. When I started playing doubles the veterans would tell me serve deep, with a hook, and go off the wall (use a fly shot). They were right, stick with the a serve near the long line. Since there are two receivers the angle serve will not be as effective when used by a left side player. The receiving side will shift and take advantage of the huge opening you've created by choosing this service position. The gap will be between the server and his partner or the side line, depending on which distance is greater.

There are some exceptions to this approach. The first exception is when a righty is serving from the right side. In this case the gap doesn't exist because your partner will be standing on the left line astraddle the service marker. The receiver will be pulled off the court, and forced to return the ball to your partner's right hand. At the same time an opening will have been created in the

center of the court. A drive up the middle will be a high percentage second shot virtually guaranteeing that a point is scored. When playing a lefty-righty team you'll need to be a little more careful, since the lefty plays the right side and his strong hand is in the center of the court. To keep the lefty honest you'll need to hit a few of your second shots to the right corner. Preferably in front of your partner. The second exception is when a righty is serving, from the left side, to a lefty, and vice versa. This can be successful for the following reasons:

Your partner, positioned astraddle the service marker, will help protect against possible passes up that side line.

The receiver is forced to return the serve back towards your strong hand.

If you are part of a lefty-righty team, you'll have the two strong hands in the middle, and therefore a choice as to who gets to hammer in the winner. In general, stay away from the side lines. It isn't worth losing your serve if the ball strays wide. Aiming for the short or long lines is less of a gamble since the penalty is only a fault. When serving try to hit deep to the supportive player's opposite hand. This will be the safest yet most effective serve you can use. If the team shifts to give added coverage, they will be creating an opening at one side of the court. When necessary serve to the opening. This forces them to stay honest and reopens the opportunity to go back to the original serve. There are times when the supportive player will be returning your serve effectively. These occasions call for a change of strategy. Start serving to the dominant player. He may not do a better job of handling the serve and will also have a much harder time getting back up front. Remember he'll be responsible for covering the majority of the court and this tactic will result in more court being inadequately defended against your team's follow up of his return of service. When playing a lefty-righty team a serve up the center can still be quite effective. An occasional low serve to the side lines will create the opening in the middle. Now when you serve up the center there will be two players hanging back to make the return. This means confusion between the receivers and lack of front court coverage. It isn't unusual to see teammates interfere with each others shot, or to see both receivers leave the ball for their partner. Your second serve Remember that you are getting up with a fault and your number one priority is putting the ball in play. At a minimum, this will put you in the rally and provide your opponent with a chance to foul up. Before serving, contemplate the progression of the match and determine the amount of risk you are willing to take. After doing your calculations you will probably decide to "take a little off" your next attempt. This means

playing it safer. stay away from the border of the receiving zone because a mishit can mean losing your serve. Aiming for the junction, a side line with the short or long line, doubles your chances of messing up. Keep in mind that a little less power means a lot more control. Lastly, a lousy serve will almost certainly cause your side to lose the rally. By now you are probably scratching your head and asking yourself "What options does this leave me with?". I suggest targeting the area three feet in front of the long line. This allows room for error and prevents the receiver from pouncing on the ball. In addition, a deep serve will often provide an easy follow up shot. Mixing it up Try different things. Change the speed, position, height, etc. of your deliveries to find what you and your opponent's strengths and weaknesses are. Control players can afford to use more of the court. Power players may find it necessary to stay away from the lines. Controlled power can be menacing, and is often just the right combination to make a champion. If nothing else mixing it up will prevent them from getting used to what you have. Don't let this advice throw you for a loop. Think about your strongest serve and which serve your opponent has the most trouble returning. If your strength goes to the receiver's weakness then you are really in business. Go in with more than one game plan and don't be afraid to change it.