

From The Picklehood.....January, 2022

Playing The Percentages - The First Three Shots In A Rally

I've often been asked what I think is the most important of the first three shots in a rally.... (1) the serve—Team 1; (2) the return of serve—Team 2; (3) the return of the return of serve—Team 1's second shot, correctly referred to as the third shot. Good question. Subject of many debates. All answers reasonable. So I ask you the same question but in a different way....of the three, which one is the most costly if not successfully executed? There are good arguments for the first two. You can rule out the third shot because we are talking about playing the percentages and the third shot will NEVER come into play unless each team executes their first shot.

With some thought, the answer, in my opinion, is pretty obvious....The **Return of Serve**. No rally scoring, right? The serving team can only score points. But the one very important factor in the returning team's favor is that the serving team is at a disadvantage because they have to stay back and play the ball off the bounce. You have a 20' x 22' area to land your return of serve. You not making them return the ball is a gift—to them!! You've handed the serving team a point. I repeat. You just handed them a point. They didn't even have to swing their paddles. So yes, in terms of importance, the FIRST shot by the receiving team is very important.

Now that we're past making sure the opponent's serve is returned, let's talk execution. What is the best return? The one that allows you to get as close to the net as possible before your shot is returned. Let's talk legs. Young ones get to the net faster. Older legs not so much. To insure that those of us who are members of the second leg category get to the *No Volley Zone* line on time, a SERVICE RETURN that allows us to do so must be the mindset.

I digress....when we lived on the Central Coast of California and played pickleball at Centennial Park in Paso Robles, I would occasionally take my stopwatch to the courts to time—guess what—service returns. I found that a good, low drive shot return, hit by a slightly better than average player, took approximately 2.0 seconds to go from your paddle to the opponent's and back to you (assuming you are at the net). A reasonable (not ridiculously high) lob return took about 3.25 seconds to do the same. Can you guess which return

allowed those of us who were in the aforementioned second leg category to get closer to the net and actually get set for the return? 1.25 seconds of extra time is a lot. You may get two extra steps and 4-5 more feet of coverage. And, more time to set yourself in the ready position. That reasonably lofted return of serve bouncing in the back third of the serving team's court is ideal. Both you and your partner are set at the NVZ (kitchen) line and your opponents must negotiate 15+ feet of air space to beat you. You've made them perform the lowest percentage shot of the 'big three' from deep on their side of the court. Statistics show that the team who gets to the NVZ line first wins almost two-thirds of rallies that last five shots or less. Yahtze!!

Hope this helps. It certainly has helped my game over the years. In conclusion, I would like to make one additional suggestion. Your time on the court needs to be fun. You need to play your game with whatever strokes you have to keep a rally going. You are there for exercise, camaraderie and improvement. If the first two are all that is important, that's OK. If improvement is also part of your plan, then also remember this is a game of **Placement, Patience** and **sometimes Power**. The soft game will give you exercise. The dink game will get you laughing. The third 'P' will give you fleeting satisfaction....if the ball clears the net and lands in. However, it is not a high percentage shot and isn't this what the game should be about? Keep the rallies going, keep everyone smiling and laughing and revel in the fact that at the end of the day you played your best, maybe won a few games and are already looking forward to the next day of play.

Jack Hodges
District Pickleball Ambassador State of Hawaii
Kaua'i Resident