

Bounce The Ball. December, 2021

Welcome to the picklehood. I have been tasked with a monthly column written to pique your interest, clarify rules (and updates), discuss strategy and, hopefully, improve your game. I look forward to sharing.

“Bounce The Ball” Backstory: I started playing pickleball exactly 10 years ago this month. Many of you have heard my story. Older sister, a pickleball player living in Arizona, told me in the early months of 2011 that I needed to give the game a try. “With your background in tennis, I think you will really like this game.” I played the ego card. “Pickleball? Who would name any real sport pickleball. Besides, we are in the midst of our college baseball season (I was coaching America’s greatest game) and I don’t have the time.” She was persistent. A phone call and email each month. Guaranteed. “Tried it yet.” My answer was always the same.... too busy, knee bothering me, shoulder has seen better days, etc. Lots of excuses. I really didn’t see any merit in playing the “fun game with the funny name.” Confession. I had done some research. At the end of the 2011 season, I decided to retire. I told big sister in an email. She responded immediately. Not congratulations on 42 years of teaching and coaching. Just one line.....”so what will be your excuse now for not trying pickleball?” That was June. I malingered, but finally decided to give the game a try that December. Wow!! Really. After my first game of pickleball, I called Stephanie (wife, not sister) and said, ‘I’m hooked.’”

That’s the backstory. Now let’s talk about this first column’s subject matter. However, I must digress.....near the end of my first month of play, I was pulled aside by the club’s best player and, at the time, the #1 ranked player in the U.S. in 60+ singles, men’s doubles and mixed doubles. That pretty much meant the best player in the country because ten years ago most everyone who played was 50+. He dominated in that age group as well. He was an awesome player and person. “Jack, tell me why you play this game.” “Exercise, fun, camaraderie, to improve and win more than I lose. Maybe even play in some tournaments.” “Good, he replied. Now here’s a bit of advice you need to take out to the court every day of social and tournament play. Play SOFTER and make sure EVERY shot you hit BOUNCES on your opponent’s side of the court.

That’s it!! Words of wisdom. The net’s not your friend (get it over). The sidelines and baseline....not your friend (keep the ball in play). Hit to the

middle and you won't miss wide. If you hit an elevated shot that goes over the net but doesn't bounce, you may lose the rally, but you still made your opponent have to hit it back. You didn't miss into the net, wide, or long. You didn't hand them a point or a side out. As you get better, you won't elevate as many shots and, hopefully, you will be sticking with the BOUNCE advice. Every shot. The drop, the dink, the drive, the lob. Remember, if you bounce the ball on your opponents' side, you've expanded the possibility of them making mistakes. The bounce forces choices. Dink straight back, opposite corner, down the middle, drive the ball, lob the ball. With choices comes more chance for error. If you drive the ball (elevate), it is just blocked back. Not much thinking. Force them to think. Force them to make choices. And all the while, playing softer (and smarter) gives you and your partner time to square up and reset.

I repeat. That's it. Simple advice shared with me ten years ago. Passed on to you. Thanks for checking in and reading a small bit of strategy related to 'America's second greatest game.' Sorry, I've been a baseball fan all my life!!!!

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