

The First Things to Know About Playing Doubles

*All men can see the tactics whereby I conquer,
but what none can see is the strategy out of which victory is evolved.*

—Sun Tzu *On The Art of War*

Tennis is chivalry's brainchild—singles, fantasy single combat; doubles, fantasy war. As fantasy warfare, doubles is a game *about* strategy.

Strategy is a systematic approach to winning by getting the upper hand. It's holistic. The word *strategy* comes from the Greek word for general, which is why the word *generalship* is a synonym for strategy.

The scope of tactics is narrow. Its purview covers one of many tasks in an operation. The purpose of tactics is to achieve the objectives designated by strategy. So, tactics flow from strategy like branches flow from the trunk of a tree.

To illustrate. Military strategists (generals) design the plan of an operation. They identify the strategic positions, designating them as strategic objectives to achieve or steadfastly defend. Often a strategic objective turns out to be a height of land, because possessing it is crucial. Taking it will be a key task in the operation. The strategists bring together and coordinate all the means at their disposal. These include land, air, and naval forces; trickery;

espionage; propaganda; and the various means of psychological warfare. The strategists also oversee logistics, and they command the series of large-scale maneuvers in their plan.

They assign the many tasks in the operation to tacticians. The tacticians see to the details of how to go about each task. Some tasks are directly involved in taking the strategic height of land. Others are indirectly involved. Just as an automobile has no unnecessary parts, an operation has no unnecessary tasks. Tacticians deploy and maneuver individual units during battle. Throwing these units into action amounts to delivering the army's strikes at the enemy.

In tennis too, tactics is delivering strokes, whereas strategy is playing points. Tactics govern individual maneuvers, such as one player's closing the net for a shot; strategy governs large-scale maneuvers involving both players on a team. The scheme a player plots between points for his or her next serve is tactics; the team's overall game plan is strategy.

Your Three Basic Formations

The three basic doubles formations are the Both-Up Formation, the Both-Back Formation, and the Up-and-Back Formation. Each corresponds to a strategy. For example, Both-Up Strategy is playing the Both-Up Formation strategically. Or oughta be.

Figure 1 shows two of these three basic formations. Team AB is in the Both-Up Formation, and team CD is in the Both-Back Formation. In these side-by-side formations partners position at about equal depth. If one hangs back or crowds the net, the team is really in a mini Up-and-Back Formation, either in their forecourt or backcourt. Which opens an angular hole between them.

The Both-Up Formation

The Both-Up Formation is strategically ideal. Its total offensiveness, however, makes it the most vulnerable formation. Its vulnerable area is the rear.

This formation is used two ways: continually or occasionally. That is, some doubles teams fight to get into the Both-Up Formation on every point, and some move into it only on occasion. Continual Both-Up play is called “Attacking Doubles” or “Both-Up style doubles” or sometimes just “Both-Up doubles.”

Much misunderstanding can be cleared with one short sentence: Occasional and continual Both-Up play are two very different games. Here are the skills you need for each:

- To succeed with continual Both-Up play (Attacking Doubles), both you and your partner must have *penetrating* volleys and *dependable* overheads; at least one of you should be able to jump for and smash lobs.

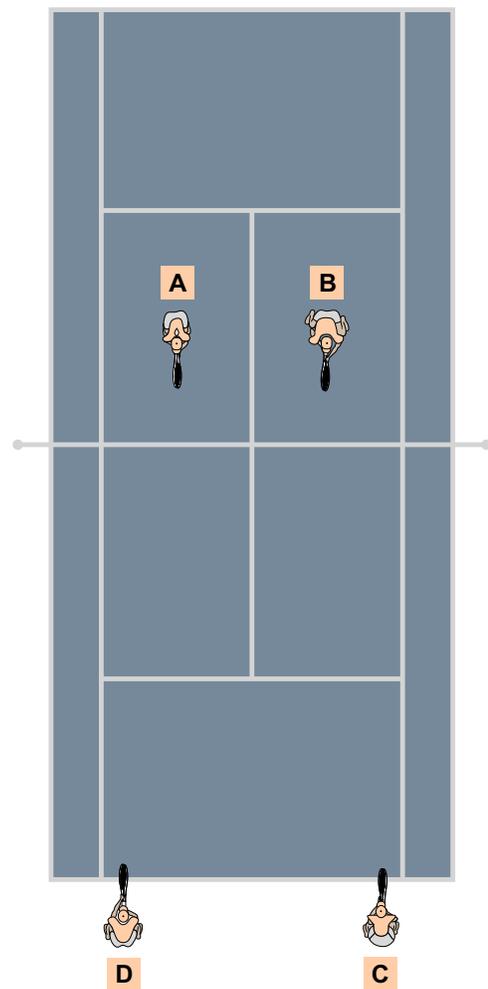


Figure 1: The Both-Up and Both-Back Formations

- To succeed with occasional Both-Up play, you need much less skill: both you and your partner must be able to *place* volleys, and at least one of you should have a *dependable* overhead.

Sometimes players uncomfortable with Attacking Doubles are urged too strongly to play it. Every sport has its purists those who think the game ought to be played some “right” way. But the object is to win the match, not the approval of judges. You do best if you play at the level you’re at.

That cuts both ways though. Often, capable but diffident players avoid the Both-Up Formation even when it’s called for. When it’s called for, your team doesn’t need a redoubtable net game.

Why? Because an occasion that calls for the Both-Up Formation also has your opponents on the defensive, hitting off the back foot. Off the back foot they hit you floaters, which are soft, high returns easy to volley. Even if one of these back-foot shots is a lob that gets over you, it's bound to be a high-flying defensive one. So you or your partner will have time to run back for it.

Therefore, when the Both-Up Formation is occasioned, most doubles teams can play it. It gives you great vantage points and angles.

How readily you jump into the Both-Up Formation depends on how good your team's net game is and how good your opponents are. Nevertheless, everybody needs to know how to play Both-Up, because sometimes you have no choice. Sometimes you're forced into the Both-Up Formation by a short shot or a drop-shot.

The Both-Back Formation

The Both-Back Formation is the one least used. And least understood. And most fascinating. Strategically, it's nothing to aim at. It's strictly defensive—tennis' version of the last-ditched stand. For that purpose, however, it's perfect. It's part formidable defense and part sting operation. It keeps a beleaguered team alive till they get an opening or a chance to go on the offensive. Both-Back Strategy makes it as difficult as possible for attackers to end the point except through . . .

- setting themselves up for the kill or
- hitting the ball out.

The Both-Back Formation covers less territory than either of the other two formations. Its vulnerable area is the wings.

To hang on through stormy weather, the Both-Back Formation was used extensively by the pros during doubles' Golden Age, before "open" (i.e., big-money) tennis in the 60's. Today, at the lower levels of the game, the Both-Back Formation is used too often. Conversely, at

higher levels it isn't used often enough. In an emergency, the patience of this strategy saves more points than blasting away to lay it all on the line with one low percentage shot.

It makes no sense for a team to be in the Both-Back Formation unless the opposition is in the Both-Up Formation. If you find yourselves Both-Back while your opponents are Both-Back or Up-and-Back, it's easy to correct the situation: while one of you hits (to an opposing back-player), the other takes the net. No special "approach shot" is necessary, because the one hitting it is not the one advancing on it. If the hitter wants to advance, s/he should say "let's go" to let the partner know that s/he is hitting an approach shot and that they should both advance on it.

Notice in *Figure 1* that Both-Back players position *inside* the singles sidelines. Whereas the back-player on an Up-and-Back team often positions *wide* of the singles sidelines. Why the difference? Because net players cover more territory than baseliners. In the Up-and-Back Formation, the baseliner has a partner at net who covers more than half the court. Therefore, Both-Back players must stay within the sidelines to keep from leaving an opening in the center.

The Up-and-Back Formation

Doubles strategy is based on the Up-and-Back Formation. In it you have a player at the net, with offensive firepower, and one at the baseline, to guard against the lob. This is the formation used most, especially in recreational play. Yet even in top-flight attacking doubles, both teams begin the point in the Up-and-Back Formation.

Figure 2 shows the two main variations: the normal Up-and-Back Formation and the Switched Position of the Up-and-Back Formation. The latter is ordinarily just the result of one team switching during the point. But because it is a great poaching formation, teams

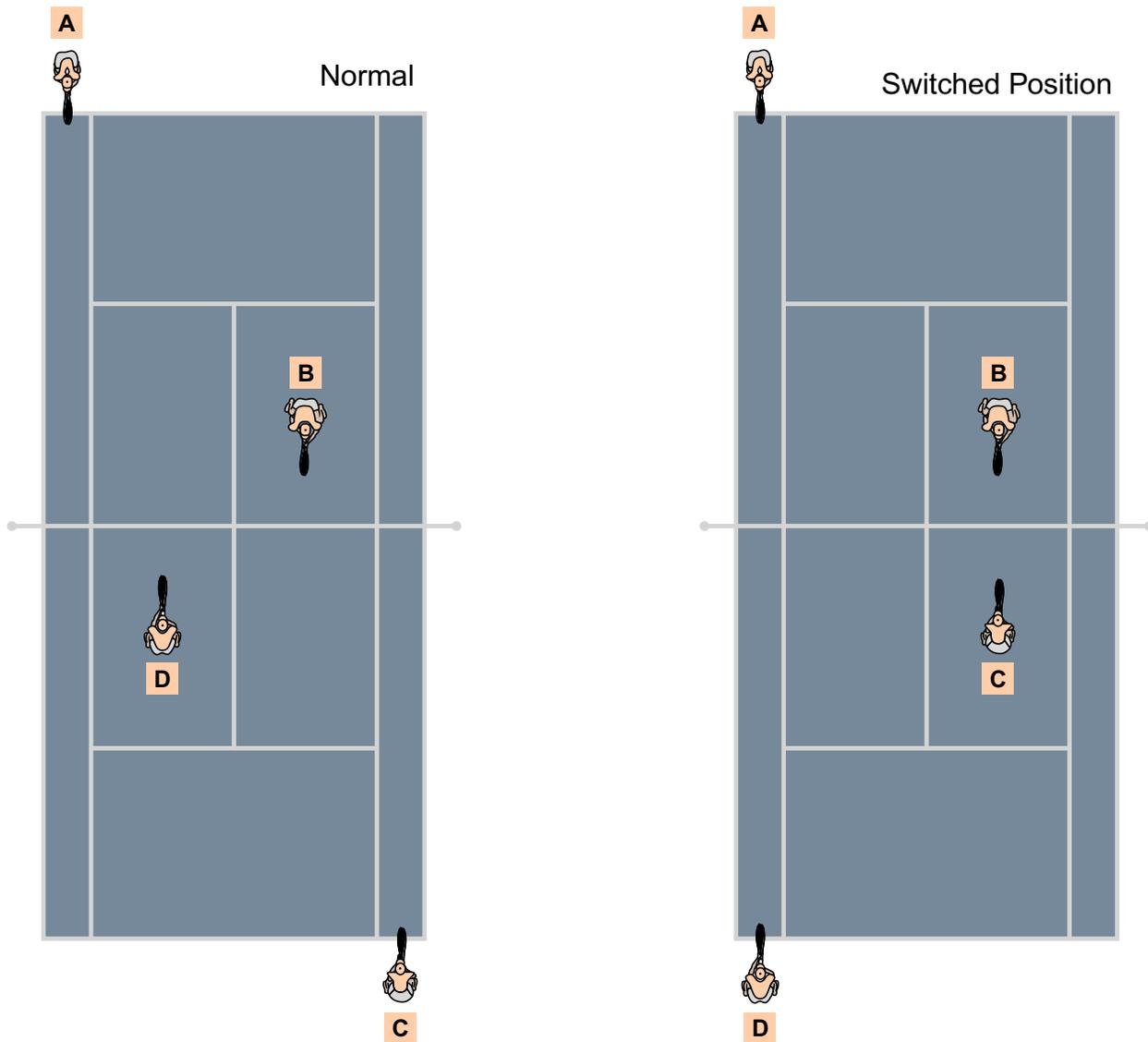


Figure 2: The Up-and-Back Formation

occasionally play Australian Doubles, in which the serving team lines up in the Switched Position.

In the normal Up-and-Back Formation, the net players are kitty-cornered from each other. In the Switched Position they front each other. *The situation is bad for whichever team must hit the next shot.* For, they run the risk of having it poached.

Again, notice that the baseliners set up *wide* of the singles sideline, whereas in the Both-Back Formation, they must try to remain *inside* the singles sidelines. (See *Figure 1.*) That's because net players cover more court than back-players.

So the baseliners in these diagrams have help in the center and therefore can afford to position wider.

The vulnerable area in the Up-and-Back Formation is the Hole, which is shown in *Figure 3*. Notice how much smaller it is when your net player (Player D) is back by the service line than when he or she is fully forward in the normal net-playing position. So, normally your net player is in a position to hit winners (mainly through the Hole in the opposing team's formation). But when the opposing net-player might get the next shot, your net player backs off (and fades toward the "T") to defend the Hole.

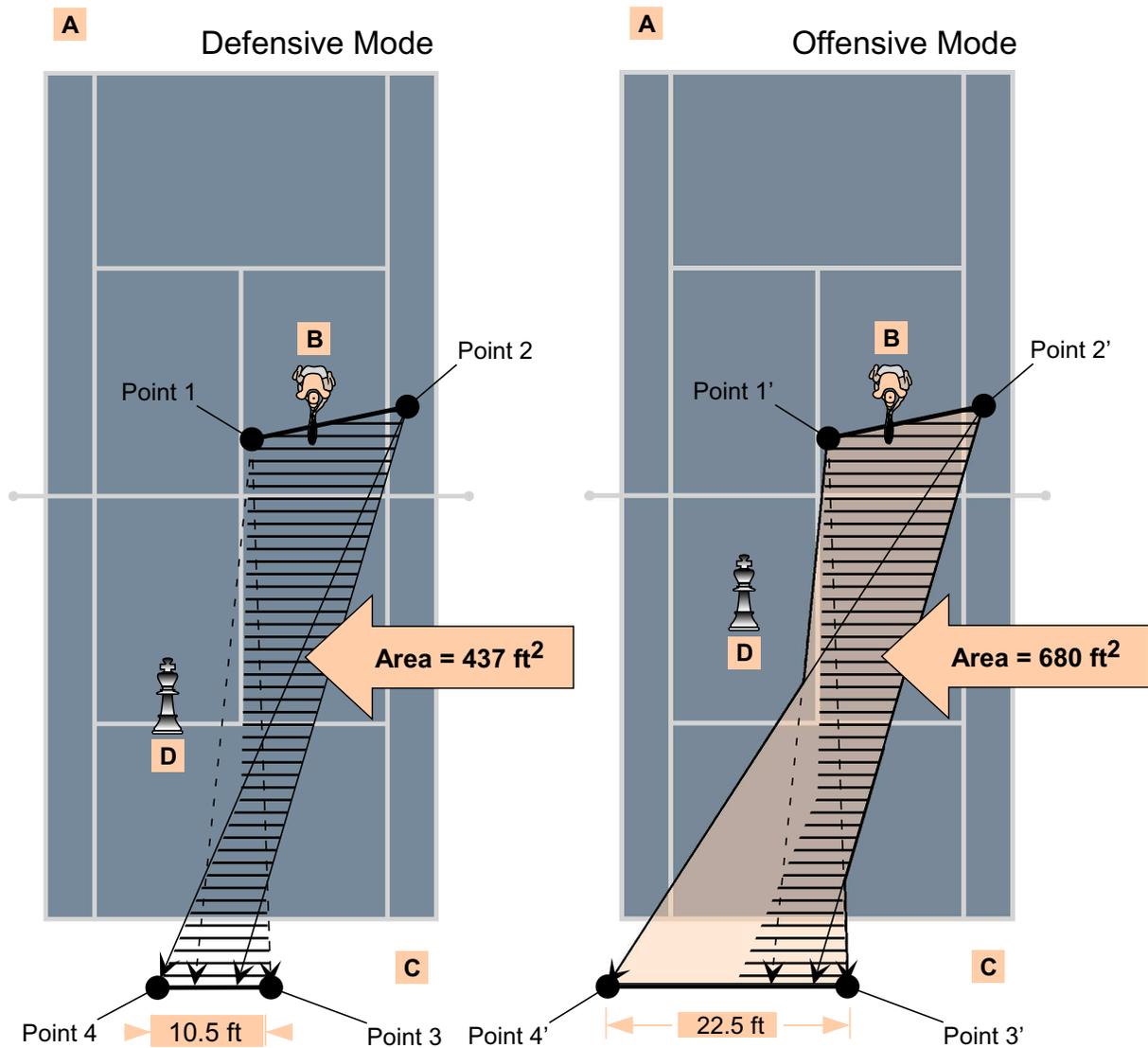


Figure 3: The Hole

The Both-Up Formation is pure offense, and the Both-Back Formation is pure defense, but the Up-and-Back Formation is versatile, because it has both an offensive and defensive mode.

The First Thing to Know About Playing Doubles

When both teams are in the Up-and-Back Formation, a point is a crosscourt rally between the two back-players. What do the up-players do? They wanna play too, so they look for a

chance to cut off one of these shots and volley it through the Hole.

Therefore, at net your job is twofold:

- While the opposing back-player hits, your job is to try to cut off the shot.
- While your back-partner hits, your job is to guard against the opposing up-player cutting off the shot.

You can't fulfill the second part of your mission if you don't see the opposing net player making their move on the ball. So, during a rally, your eyes click on one of your opponents, then the other, back and forth between them, like clockwork.

Eyework

1. While the ball's behind you (in your court, where your partner is playing it), watch the opposing net player.
2. While the ball's in front of you (in the opposition's court), watch the opponent hitting it—ordinarily the back-player.

The second step is no problem, because we naturally watch whoever's hitting the ball. For the same reason, however, the first step is a very common problem. *Looking back causes more lost points than any other mistake.*

Look at it this way: Your partner's shot is your partner's concern; your concern is whether the opposing net player will intercept it. So, while your partner hits, you watch that opposing up-player. Then you will know the instant he or she starts to make a move on the ball. You need that advance warning, for it gives you time to back off.

This is also a safety issue. Tennis is a safe sport if everybody on the court has a shield (racket), knows what's going on, and can see. We would stop playing immediately if an infant, dog, or blind person entered the court. Yet, in the vast majority of cases, when players get hit, it's only because they are as vulnerable as an unsuspecting and defenseless infant, dog, or blind person. How so? Because they get blindsided by a shot they don't see coming. Why? Because they aren't looking. Why? Because they looked back to watch their partner hit and don't get their head turned in time to see a volley from the opposing up-player.

A volley from the opposing up-player is a cut-off shot returned in less than one-third the usual time. Plus, it's from close range. We simply cannot turn the head that fast.

Kick the Habit

Fortunately, unlike most bad habits, the head-turning habit is the easy to break. For best results, get a foursome together and have the

back-players exchange crosscourt drives. Position yourself as the up-player for your team. Don't actually play or try to cut off shots. Think only of training your eyes. Shift them from one opponent to the other: up-player to back-player to up-player to back-player . . . as the ball goes back and forth.

Don't be discouraged when, at first, you get mixed up and out of sync. You'll catch yourself having head-jerks and looking at the up-player when you should be looking at the back-player. And vice versa. Your brain is just uninstalling the old program while it installs the new. The confusion will quickly clear, and soon your eyes will be doing the right thing automatically. It will take ten or fifteen minutes at most. Then reinforce your memory within twenty-four hours by repeating the practice the next day at the same time or earlier.

The Second Thing to Know About Playing Doubles

Let's start with three simple facts:

1. One in three tennis shots is so far off target that it misses the whole court. So tennis shots are scuds, not smart-bombs.
2. When you're at net, you're in the middle of the opposition's target zone.
3. The only purpose of every rule in any game is to ensure fair play. So the rules of tennis do not allow you to shrink the court your opposition must hit into. Therefore, your being in a spot does not take away their right to hit there.

So, even if it were fair to make your opponents responsible for your safety, it wouldn't be wise, because they can hit you even while trying their darnedest not to. So, as the old saying goes, *If you can't take the heat, stay out of the kitchen.* If you choose to position at net, especially anywhere near the Hole, you must be prepared for high-speed shots to come your way.

In the billions of hours of tennis I've watched, only three people got hit who weren't either looking off somewhere else or running backward when the ball arrived. The first mistake was covered in the previous section. The second is covered here.

Don't Run Backward

When you're at net and must get back because an opposing volleyer is about to wham the ball, don't run. Our bodies aren't designed for moving backward. You can't stop suddenly or plant a foot to change direction while backpedaling. Worse, balancing reflexes fire to combat your every move. (Which is why running backward is awkward.) While running backward you can't dodge, duck, hit, or even block a shot coming at you.

So *step* back instead, and set yourself for the shot. It is far better to be caught in too close but in the Ready Position than to be backpedaling when it arrives.

The Move

The opposing volleyer should hit down, of course, so that if you do get hit, it will be below the knee. But the shot can "get up" on him or her so it comes right at you. Especially if you're blocking the Hole you must be ready for this. (It's almost always an accident, but if you know it isn't, you have a right to take it personally.) Be alert and hold your racket up before you, both to protect yourself and to have a chance of getting strings on the ball. Usually being ready is enough.

But I always tell players, "If you ever get the feeling you're about to be hit, concede the point: Turn your back with a step toward the alley." That bears repeating: *Turn your back with a step toward the alley*. I call this the Move. It's a pivot turning your back to the shot as you step out of its way.

Conceding the point minimizes the event by taking some of the triumph out of it. Your only real chance is that the ball will go out, and if you get out of its way, it can. If you do get hit, it'll be in the back. But remember, the volleyer aims for the Hole, which is in the center, so stepping toward your alley takes you out of harm's way. Watch the pros; they do the Move all the time.

Learning the Move

Unfortunately, our genetic instincts move us hastily backward in the face of a threat. So you must train yourself to move sideways instead. Stand in the deuce court, pick up your left foot and step toward the right-hand alley with it. Then go over to the ad court. Pick up your right foot and step toward the left-hand alley with it. It will surprise you how fast the Move becomes automatic.

You may find that knowing the Move makes you fearless at net. That's because once you know you can get out of there in one second flat, there's nothing to be nervous about. So if you're a net player who inches backward during a point, the Move could be your cure. Soon you should find yourself standing in there boldly to play net, readier to move forward than back.

A Word About Anti-Tennis

Some social doubles players think that just because a player occupies a spot, the opposition should hit somewhere else. If that were true, a racket would be superfluous: just stand in the opposition's way. Defend the Hole by standing in it. Better yet, abuse the opposing hitter's goodwill and fear of infamy by doing so while looking off somewhere else: Then the danger of blind-siding you makes the opposing volleyer extremely nervous about aiming anywhere near you = at the Hole. This bit of dirty trickery is much easier than trying to return a shot to the Hole. Indeed, stand IN the service

box to make it immoral to hit a serve in. Much easier than trying to return a serve.

So much for that nonsense. In tennis you win by *making* shots, not by hindering your opponent's ability to make them. The Hindrance Rule penalizes a player for hindering the opposition with the fear of hitting him or her. That's because such play is unsporting and vitiates the game. The rules do everything possible to rule it out, which is why they put the responsibility for not getting hit on *you*.

Of course rules are no substitute for a sense of decency. Tennis ceases to be a game when players try to hit each other. That's just as unsporting.

The Third Thing to Know About Playing Doubles

Strategy is all about positioning. I had a blind Cairn Terrier better than Napoleon at it. For the prize of a carrot, she always outmaneuvered me to the refrigerator.

Standing still is the most common mistake in doubles net play. It stems from viewing the lines on the court as a positioning grid. They are not! Your positioning grid is the constantly changing situation, which depends on the teams' formations, whose court the ball is in, and the Angle of Return. Sounds more complicated than it is.

Good maneuvering at net is more important in the Up-and-Back Formation than in the Both-Up Formation. In fact, if you know how to play net when both teams are in the Up-and-Back Formation, you know how to play net.

Up-and-Back Net Play

The typical Up-and-Back point is a crosscourt rally between the two back-players. Meanwhile, the net players look for a chance to cut off a

shot and volley through the Hole. During the exchange, this is how you should maneuver at net:

1. While your partner hits, make way by stepping back at an angle toward your alley.
2. While the opposing back-player hits, front the shot by stepping forward at an angle toward the center line.

Step 1 widens your partner's hitting lane. *Step 2* narrows the opposing back-player's hitting lane. Front the shot, making the hitter choose between two narrow hitting lanes, one on either side of you.

Yes, dare your alley. Why? The best way to pressure people is to confront them with choices. (They fear making the "wrong" one.) True, you must be careful about your alley, because down-the-line shots arrive quicker and you have little hope of backup on that side. But don't park with one foot in your alley as if it would be a mortal sin to have one get past you on that side. It's quite the other way around: if you never get passed down your alley, you are not playing the net well. The match rides on what happens over the center, so make your presence a force to be reckoned with there. *Good net play wins many points without touching the ball.*

This basic footwork pattern combines with the basic eyework pattern.

Eyework and Footwork

1. When the ball enters your court and passes behind you, watch the opposing up-player, and make room for your partner's shot: step back at an angle toward your alley.
2. When the ball enters the opposition's court, passing into view in front of you, watch the opposing back-player, and front his or her shot: step forward at an angle toward the center line.

It's easier than it reads. *Figure 4* illustrates. The diagrams show the hitting lane, and the arrows tell you where to look.

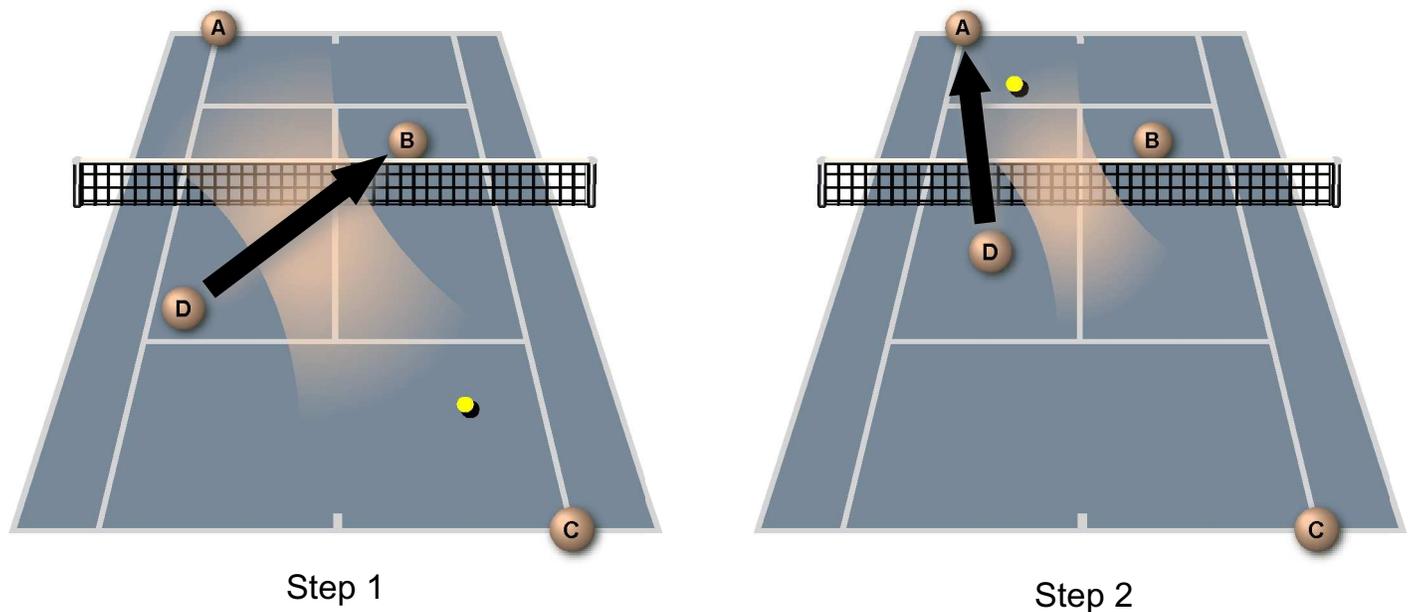


Figure 4: Eyework and Footwork at Net

Bottom line: Simply aim to stay *out* of your partner's way and *in* your opponent's way. It will surprise you how little practice it takes. Proper eyework and footwork quickly become habitual. When you've formed the habit, you'll be winning truckloads of points you used to lose.

Familiarity Breeds Better Vision

Like a computer, our brains cache visual information so it "loads" faster the next time we view it. We experience the result as instant recognition of familiar things and situations. We actually see them better, because the brain bypasses the time-consuming task of processing all the visual data and just refers to the already processed information in its cache. Perhaps more important, we have heightened awareness of familiar things, as our attention is drawn to them. An example is how a familiar face in a crowd jumps out of the background and grabs our focus.

To see how important familiarity is, think of what happens whenever we meet a new group

of people. Try as we may, we cannot remember their names. We cannot pick out distinguishing features. Teachers, for example, learn students' names by first associating them with something familiar—seats in the classroom. We simply do not recognize faces till we're familiar with them—till that cached image in our brain has all the details filled in. And that takes a while, for the brain performs this task in the background using resources that no other process needs at the moment. For example, twins used to work for me, and for the first several months nobody could tell them apart. Then, almost overnight, they suddenly didn't look that much alike to us anymore. Similarly, when high school kids look at organisms through a microscope, their sketches of what they see are blobs, no matter how geometrically shaped the critters are. They can't even distinguish between a focused and unfocused image. But after they've looked for a while, their drawings become accurate and beautifully detailed. Again, for example, when I was a lifeguard, people used to wonder how so few of us could guard more than two thousand crowded swimmers in open water. But it isn't hard: certain kinds of movement, which others see nothing in, jump out of the background and grab a lifeguard's attention. Similarly, when a general

and a private look at a battlefield, they don't see the same thing. The trained eye of the general is immediately drawn to the strategic features, whereas the private sees only the confusing whole.

What makes a good tennis player, especially in doubles, is a trained eye. *Many players just do not see an amazing amount of what's right before their eyes.* That's not because they're stupid. It's because—while the ball's coming—the brain is as busy as a computer running a virtual reality game! With similar results.

So, you can't be thinking and analyzing things while the ball's in play. Instead, you must recognize situations on sight and react to them on impulse. Much like an experienced driver reacts to avoid an automobile accident. Familiarize yourself with the strategic targets and features of the court, so that during play they jump out of the background and grab your focus.

How-to

Here are some suggestions on how to train your eye, so you can *see* what to do instead of trying to *remember* what to do. First, look closely at the court diagrams in *Operation Doubles*. Every time you sit down to read, re-view the diagrams of the part you read during your last sitting. It really helps to sketch them as you look. Then again, with your eyes closed. Also, watch doubles on TV or video whenever you can. Better yet, watch doubles in real space (from behind a baseline) whenever you can. And, don't keep score every time you play. Just hit now and then. Not keeping score takes a very real load off your mind so that it can absorb a lot more.