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## STRATEGY

**O**ne of the most common sentiments I heard repeated from the pickleball players and coaches I spoke with was some variation of “pickleball is easy to learn, but it’s a whole different story to actually get good.” It’s true—learning the basics of the game may not take much time, but becoming an adept player who handily wins matches and outwits opponents? That requires a serious amount of effort, both on the court and off.

That said, becoming better at pickleball doesn’t have to mean shelling out buckets of money for private lessons or traveling across the country to attend elite clinics. There are lots of at-home

exercises you can do alone (or with a partner) at no cost that can also help you on your path of becoming a stronger player.

## SIX GREAT PICKLEBALL DRILLS TO TRY OUT

Drills, a.k.a. exercises focused on specific skills, are crucial for players looking to move up in the ranks, as they force you to repeat a technique over and over until you have it down pat. That means not just doing the exercise for a few hours and moving on, but practicing it for days, or even weeks, at a time, until it's ingrained fully in your muscle memory.

“As a rule of thumb, I try to get players at every level to be flipping the ratio of drilling to playing,” said Morgan Evans, the CoachME founder. “It's very tempting to try to get all your practice by just playing the game, but unfortunately, it's a horribly inefficient way to get better at pickleball, especially for players that are taking it seriously.”

You can do drills by yourself, with a partner, or even just with a wall, depending on the technique you're trying to perfect; there are countless options you can try. Below are a few of the most popular drills used by pickleball players at all skill levels.

**Reflex Training.**<sup>1</sup> Stand at the Kitchen line, across from your partner. Have them dink back and forth until, without notice, they send a hard drive directly at you. Try to block the shot without letting it pop up in the air—it will train both your reflexes and your shot technique.

**Triangle Dinking.**<sup>2</sup> Pick three points on the court that, together, form a triangle. Try to hit each point exactly in sequence, and when you've gotten that, pick a different pattern and try that one instead. This drill will help your aim and your ball control.

**Target Hitting.**<sup>3</sup> This is an easy drill you can do without a partner. On a wall, use chalk or tape to note the height of a pickleball net (36 inches at the posts, 34 inches at the center). Then create a box (a.k.a. your target) right above that line. Stand back at least seven feet to simulate the non-volley zone and try to hit the ball in the target as consistently as possible. For a slightly more advanced version of this drill, try keeping the ball in the air after each hit, or switch back and forth between your forehand and backhand.

**Volley Battle.**<sup>4</sup> With a partner, hit the ball back and forth across the net, but don't let it hit the ground. See how long the two of you can keep

it up for, focusing on your foot speed and hand-eye coordination.

**Third Shot Drop Returns.** The third shot drop is one of the most crucial shots to learn in pickleball, so drilling can make a major impact on your ability to deliver it during a game. Stand at the baseline of the court, while your partner is at the Kitchen line. Have them dink balls to you and try to return them using that third shot drop, over and over again until you can do it in your sleep.

**Skinny Pickle.** If your priority is upping your speed and reflexes, another drill option is to play a full game on one side of the court, also known as “skinny pickle.”<sup>5</sup> It will be challenging and force you to move ultra-quickly, but that’s the whole point.

After you’ve mastered one drill, move on to the next until you’re a pickleball pro ready to take on any player who comes your way. “For the first five years that I played pickleball, I’d warm up for like, five minutes and then go play,” said Zane Navratil, the highly rated men’s singles player. “But when I started actually figuring out what I needed to work on, isolating that, and drilling instead of just playing . . . that’s what really helped my game.”

Even if becoming a professional like Navratil isn't in your plans anytime soon (or ever), there's no reason not to hone your skills as much as possible. After all, as fun as the game may be, the competition can still be fierce—and there's no shame in wanting to beat your opponent during a match! That is why I reached out to several of pickleball's most elite athletes to provide some of the tips and tricks that have helped them become stronger players over the years. Whether it's about the height to hold your paddle, the angle to hit your shots, or where to position yourself on the court, the following pieces of advice are meant to help players at *all* levels—beginner, intermediate, and advanced—majorly up their skills.

## FOUR CRUCIAL PREGAME TIPS

Before any game, casual or competitive, make sure to keep these four fundamentals in mind to ensure you start things off in the right mindset and ready to go.

- 1. always Warm up.** Because it's so fun to play, it's easy to forget that pickleball is an athletic sport like any other, requiring players to run around the court, dive for returns, and deliver shots with precise power and precision, often for hours at a time (if you're playing matches) and with few breaks between points. At that

rate, you're pretty much guaranteed to work up a sweat! To avoid losing steam on the court or, worse, getting injured, make sure to stretch and warm up before starting play. During breaks between games, too, take a few minutes to make sure everything's feeling loose and limber. Many pros recommend doing exercises like arm circles (stretching your arms out on each side, then rotating them both clockwise and counterclockwise several times) and hip rotations (raising your knee while in a standing position, then moving your foot to the side and then back, for each leg). Running (or jogging) is another good way to get in some pre-pickleball cardio, as is marching in place or doing high knees across the court.

- 2. Don't Forget to communicate.** Playing doubles? Then prepare to talk to your partner constantly throughout the game. For each shot that comes over the net, shout out if it's yours or theirs, and let them know if you're running over to their side of the court for any reason. Warn them, too, if a ball they're readying to hit looks like it'll land out of court, so they don't accidentally go for a dead ball.<sup>6</sup>
- 3. Treat Pickleball as Its own Sport.** Because so many pickleball players come from tennis

or other athletic backgrounds, they often treat the two games alike, thinking that the same tactics that helped them win in one sport will work just as well in the other. But in reality, that's not the case at all—and in fact, refusing to view pickleball as its own game can be a big mistake. “There are a lot of players I see who come from tennis, and so they step on the pickleball court and they just start playing tennis out there, but they never actually learn some of the pickleball skills that are really important to being a good player” like dinking and drop shots, said Jessie Irvine, the elite pickleball player and a former tennis champion. Often, she continued, tennis players who move to pickleball put too much power into their hits and too little effort into “the soft game,” leading to dead balls and missed returns. It's the same concept as in golf, Irvine said: “It doesn't matter how hard you can hit it. If it takes you ten putts to get into the hole, you're done.”

- 4. Have Fun.** I know, I know, it's a cliché—but remembering that even the toughest pickleball games are, well, games can do wonders for your playing abilities. “If you take it too serious, then you get uptight, you make stupid mistakes, you do things you normally wouldn't

do,” noted Chuck Swann, a Florida-based player who regularly competes in tournaments. Wanting to win is totally fine, but don’t let that singular focus trip you up in the heat of the moment.

## BASIC STRATEGIES FOR PLAYERS JUST STARTING OUT

In the summer of 2019, Jessie Irvine had only been playing pickleball for around eight months when Ben Johns, the top player on the men’s side, asked her to team up with him for the Tournament of Champions (TOC) in Brigham City, Utah. Johns’s normal partner for mixed doubles was unable to make it, so he needed a last-minute replacement—and he’d heard that Irvine was a skilled player who’d proven she could hold her own during previous competitions (the fact that she didn’t have any partner commitments herself yet, due to her newness to the game, definitely helped).

As honored and excited as Irvine was by the offer, she was also, as she recalled to me over a long phone call, “really nervous.” After all, Johns was—and is—one of the best pickleball players in the world, and she feared potentially letting him down on the court. But before their first match, the pro gave her one key piece of advice.

“He was like, ‘Jessie, Jessie, it’s really easy,’” Irvine recalled, imitating Johns’s trademark self-assurance.

“All you have to do is rate balls—if it’s below the net, hit it soft. If it’s above the net and shoulder height, then hit it hard, and hit it *really* hard.”

The seemingly simple tip ended up having such an impact that the duo won not only that match, but all the others they played during the tournament. At the end, Irvine and Johns walked away with gold medals—her first from one of the sport’s majors.

As their victory shows, pickleball strategies don’t have to be complicated to pay off. Below are seven other easy techniques that can make a big difference in your chances of winning a game.

- 1. always Be Ready.** One of the most important rules for all pickleball players is to keep yourself in a ready position with your knees bent, feet shoulder-width apart, and paddle positioned upward so you can return a hit as soon as it arrives. If you’ve played other sports before, this concept should hopefully feel natural. Irina Tereschenko, one of the top-ranked women’s pickleball players in the world, said that when she played a celebrity pickleball game against Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps and football star Larry

Fitzgerald, she was impressed by how well the NFL alum, in particular, remembered to stay in position. “He would keep his hands down and when the ball would come up, in a second he would just punch it,” recalled Tereschenko, adding that Fitzgerald was also nimble on his feet and skilled at following the ball. (Phelps, on the other hand, “is motivated now to maybe get a little more experience,” she said with a laugh.)

- 2. Don't Rush In.** Because pickleball can sometimes be a slow-paced game, it's normal for players looking to score a quick point to rush into a serve or return, often resulting in easy, avoidable mistakes. So, before even arriving on the court, remind yourself to be patient. “You'll still get anxious about speeding the ball up or trying to score a point fast, but it's about waiting for the opportunity to score,” said Tyson Apostol, a four-time *Survivor* contestant and cohost of *PicklePod*, a pickleball-themed podcast. The same sentiment, he continued, applies if your opponents have sped up the ball themselves, and it's your turn to respond. “Rather than take wild swings at it or try to keep the ball moving fast, slow it down and reset and try it

again when the opportunity presents itself,” said Apostol.

- 3. Focus on accuracy, not Power.**<sup>7</sup> As tempting as it is to hit the ball with all of your might every time, that’s not necessarily going to increase the speed of your shots, and in fact it can give your opponents an easier chance to score on their return. “If all [a player] can do is hit it hard, you’re just gonna be there ready to block it and slow it down,” explained Apostol. Instead, work on sending accurate, consistent shots, especially when you’re serving—because remember, if you botch a serve in pickleball, you don’t get another chance.
- 4. Send Your Shots Deep.** An easy way to mess with your opponent is to return shots toward the baseline, forcing them to run back and, soon after, rush back to the net. You can also try aiming shots at the middle of the court, an area where both of your opponents (when playing doubles) might not know who’s covering.
- 5. go for arcs, not lobs.** Lobs are undoubtedly fun shots, but they don’t always work, and perfecting the lob technique takes a lot of time and practice. Consider focusing your efforts instead on arcs, softer shots that go

high on your side of the court and then land right into your opponent's Kitchen.

- 6. Don't Wait for a Bounce.** A key tip that Joe Borrelli taught me during our one-on-one lesson is that while, yes, you *can* let the ball bounce before returning a hit, it's often smarter to avoid it when possible. The reason? When you back up to get behind the ball after a bounce, you're forced to change position, therefore wasting valuable time you could be spending thinking about how and where you're going to return the shot. Speaking of positioning—many players recommend standing as close to the Kitchen line as possible throughout a game unless you're serving, in which case you should stand back at the baseline.
- 7. Become an expert at Dinking.** Dinking, a.k.a. hitting the ball slowly and softly from the Kitchen line, may not be the most exciting or fanciest pickleball technique, but it *is* the most important. "Slowing the game down is essential," explained Apostol, because the longer the game, the more chances there are for your opponents to mess up. So, before trying to learn drop shots and drives, make sure you have dinking down pat. When lining

up for a shot, keep your knees bent, stabilize your elbow and wrist, and swing from your shoulder. This will ensure a solid dink that will keep the game alive and your opponents on the alert.

## FIVE MIDDLELEVEL STRATEGIES FOR PLAYERS READY TO GET COMPETITIVE

Once you've mastered the basics, it's time to work on fine-tuning your skills and perfecting shots that will leave your opponents in the wind.

### **1. aim for Your opponent's Backhand**

**(and Perfect Your own).** For most players, their backhand is a lot weaker than their forehand, so take advantage of this by sending shots that your opponent will be forced to return via backhand.<sup>8</sup> If they're right-handed, for instance, then aim for their left foot, which would require them to use backhand to return. This isn't to say, however, that you shouldn't also be working on strengthening your own backhand, as you don't want your opponents to catch on to your trick and send shots you struggle to return.

### **2. Finesse Your Drop Shots.** Drop shots<sup>9</sup> (also known as third shot drops, because they come

after a serve and return-serve) are tricky to perfect, but that's what makes them so deadly. They're best used when your opponents are at the non-volley line and you're near the baseline, because if you're the serving team, this positioning will give you a perfect opportunity to send the other team a soft, gentle shot that will land right in their Kitchen. And while they attempt to return the shot upward so it clears the net, you and your partner can run to your own Kitchen and get ready to respond to what's likely a soft, easy-to-return dink.

- 3. Don't overmove Your Wrist.** During my own pickleball lesson, I leaned heavily on my wrist to do all the action until Joe Borelli pointed out how ineffective that strategy was and corrected my form. As it turns out, many players—even higher-level athletes—have made the same mistake. When I spoke to Preston Bies, a spikeball champion and all-around athlete (including in pro-level pickleball), he told me that even he assumed that he'd get more topspin if he snapped his wrist right as he hit the ball, sort of like in tennis. Yet as he was quickly informed by some of the world's top pickleball players, that's not actually the case. "Something

that is always reminded to me by the all-pros is, let the paddle face do all the spin work and angle,” Bies said. “During the shot and post-shot, you shouldn’t flick the wrist too much. Really, your wrist shouldn’t be doing anything besides being manipulated prior to the shot.”

- 4. learn from other Players.** As you develop your own skills on the court, don’t forget to keep an eye on what your opponents and teammates are doing, as well. If you see a shot or technique you’re particularly impressed by, take some time afterward to think about how it was set up, what effort it required, and why it was used (you can always ask the person who did it for their tips and insight, as well, of course). Once you’ve gotten a good understanding of how the skill works, practice it frequently as a drill to refine your technique before eventually trying it out in a game or tournament. On that note . . .
- 5. Sign up for Tournaments.** If you’ve never done it before, the idea of playing pickleball in an actual tournament can sound pretty terrifying. But if you’re hoping to become a serious player, there’s no better way to do it than by throwing yourself right into a competition, since you’ll be surrounded by

other competitive athletes. Don't worry too much about winning at first; focus instead on getting as much experience, and exposure to other players, as possible.

## THREE STRATEGIES FOR PLAYERS LOOKING TO GO FROM GOOD TO GREAT

You play pickleball nearly every day, regularly win games against friends, and are now itching to show the world that you're the best player you can be. Here's how to get there.

- 1. Strengthen Your Defense.** Sending hard-to-return shots and perfecting your serve can get you far, but offensive strategy shouldn't be your only priority. "Where you separate a lot of these 4.5–5.0s to the pros," said Steve Deakin, the Canadian champ, "is what sort of defense you can come up with when you're caught midcourt." That may mean moving up to the Kitchen line so you have extra time to return a shot, or racing to another side of the court to prepare for where you think your opponents' hit might land. The more you play, the more you'll learn, and the better defensive player you'll become.

- 2. Work on Deception.** Similarly, a top pickleball player should always be brainstorming ways to misdirect their opponents and cause them to mess up, said Deakin. Before returning a shot, think carefully about where they might not be expecting it to land, or aim it at the player you think will be weakest upon return. Additionally, if you're known for using a particular technique or serve, consider switching things up before your next game. "People get used to your strategy and playing style," explained Tereschenko. "Try to think, 'What do I need to do to create more deception?'"
- 3. Play the Percentages.** The phrase "playing the percentages" means using data and experience to make a decision that has the strongest chance of success, and it can be applied to competitive pickleball. If you have a killer drop shot, say, use it as much as possible during a game to up your chances of winning points, rather than trying out other types of shots that may be exciting but not as reliable for you. Similarly, if you know you can return a shot with an easy dink rather than a more powerful hit, go for the former—the more complicated the shot, the more likely you'll accidentally make a mistake.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to all these strategies, you probably have some of your own that have served you well during games so far. Practice them, share them, and—if you're ready—show them off on the tournament court.