

DINKING STRATEGIES

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When I'm not playing on the tour, I truly enjoy meeting new people and running clinics around the country. My clinics often begin at the kitchen line where I talk about the fundamentals that apply to players of all levels, from 2.0 to 5.0 Pro.

WHERE TO STAND

When my clinics begin, I generally gather everyone around the kitchen and ask the question, "Where should you be standing when at the kitchen line?" I give three options:

1. Stand 10" behind the line.
2. Stand as close as possible to the line.
3. Stand two feet back from the line to give yourself time to react.

Generally, I'll receive several hands raised for each, but there is a right answer: Option 2... but it's not just good enough to be on the line, you also want to be leaning forward toward the kitchen. The reason it's important to be close and lean in is that it is much easier to attack a ball hit from your opponent that is hit a little higher or deeper into your kitchen.

The next question is, "Should players of all levels take this advice and lean into the kitchen?" The answer is a definite "Yes." Some players fear that an aggressive position at the net will put them in jeopardy of being lobbed over their head. While this is true, the risk/reward is well worth it. If you are leaning in, you have a strong advantage over your opponent who is not leaning in.

There are times when your opponent will throw up a lob. If you are prone to missing overheads, or if you have difficulty hitting deep lobs, you'll really want to pay attention to this next tip... Recognize the potential lob by watching your opponent's paddle before and during his/her impact with the ball. If you see an open-faced paddle, take a step back and get ready. If the opponent dinks the ball, get back in and reset the point.

GRIP PRESSURE

This is one of the most important parts of the game, yet it is often overlooked by many players. Grip pressure controls so much of your game.

Players choose paddles with different core and surface densities to maximize their feel, while being able to balance it with power. Softer paddles hold the ball a fraction of a second long on the paddle, giving more control and feel. Unfortunately, most players don't actively realize that altering their grip pressure is the best method for controlling a ball's direction and pace.

Whenever I instruct pickleball players on dinking, I always ask the question, "On a scale of 1 to 10, how tight do you hold your paddle at the kitchen line?" Nine times out of 10 the players are gripping way too tight. Players with a tight grip lose feel, sensitivity and control. This ultimately leads to less consistent shot-making.

On a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being the tightest) most players are 7 to 8. I teach between 3 and 4 on all soft shots (dinking and third-shot drops). If you do that, the ball will

stay on the paddle for a fraction of a second longer to give you more feel and consistency.

It's not hard to tell when your opponent is gripping too tightly on the paddle while dinking because the ball flies off the face like a rocket. I call these people drive-dinkers because they hit the ball low and hard. Sometimes these shots are effective, but the problem is that the margin for error is minimal. The shots often drift high across the middle and get picked off, or they wind up in the middle of the net.

The goal of loosening the grip pressure is to allow you to change from a solid shot to a higher and softer shot. Always remember that the mark of a good dink is that it should be un-attackable. Oh, and the same grip philosophy applies to the third-shot drop.

EXECUTING THE SHOT

Now that you know your positioning relative to the line and you begin to work on your grip pressure and feel, you'll want to start thinking about where to contact the ball. Ideally, we always want to make contact with the ball in front of our body. I call this area the "impact zone." We never want to get it to our side or behind us. With few exceptions, players who dink the ball from the sides of their bodies make way too many errors.

Then there's the issue with backswing and form. Many pickleballers are tennis converts. That being said, you'll often see long backswings from these players. People with large backswings tend to decelerate as they strike the ball. So much for touch. The way I teach dinking is that I want to see very little to no backswing at all. You want to have a "short, simple, repeatable motion." You should be able to repeat your dink form 99 out of 100 times. Remember, we are not trying to hit a winner. It is all about consistency.

OK, so now the ball is out in front of you and you're accelerating with a short dink form. So, how high do we want to hit the ball? To answer this one, I ask, "What happens to a pickleball when it loses its speed?" The answer is that it drops straight down. The reason this is important is because too many players aim their dinks 1-2 balls over the height of the net. If you do this, too often you will hit the ball short into the net. This violates Weinbach's First Rule of Pickleball: "RESPECT THE NET." In other words, never hit it there. We need to give ourselves margin for error over the net.

If we hit dinks properly, and they are soft, they will come down in the kitchen and are un-attackable. So, even if we clear the net by one to two feet, we're generally safe if the ball is soft. As I said earlier, you want the ball to bounce in the kitchen in front of your opponent so that it is un-attackable.

The focus for another article, I am often asked where to place the dinks. Generally speaking, most opponents' forehands are stronger than their backhands, so normally I dink toward the opposing players' backhands. This improves my percentages of an un-attackable response with every shot.

To take it one step further, I do not like to dink over the highest part of the net. I prefer to dink cross-court over the lowest part of the net. The other benefit to dinking cross-court is that you have a lot more room to work with, as opposed to dinking down the line, because the cross-court angle is so much longer.

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WHEN TO HIT IN THE AIR AND WHEN TO ATTACK

Players ask me, "When should I take the ball out of the air and when should I attack the dink?" The answer to the first question is that I prefer to take a ball out of the air whenever I can because it takes time away from my opponents. Many people are not comfortable taking low volleys – and that's fine. Don't feel pressured to do so, but take every ball out of the air that you can do comfortably.

Then there's the big question, "When do I attack?" The answer depends on a variety of factors such as your skill level, the quickness of your opponents, and even the reflexes of your partner. We'll leave this topic for another article, but I will offer this general advice: If you have to hit up on a ball to elevate it over the net, then you probably shouldn't be driving it. There are exceptions, but they usually have the credential of 5.0 after their names.

Remember, consistency is the key to dinking. Keep the mindset of patience and discipline, waiting for the right opportunity to attack.

DRILLING TIME

I'm sure you can search the internet and find many good dinking drills, but there is one in particular that helps me and my students. It is aptly titled "The Dinking Game." All four players line up at the kitchen and every ball must be dinked. In other words, no drives are allowed. A loss of point occurs when a ball lands outside the kitchen or in the net. We usually play to three points, then rotate. This works on consistency and allows us to get in the habit of leaning into the kitchen. Remember to take your time, focus on your grip and keep the ball out in front of you. •