

Tactical Intentions for Effective Doubles

A guide outlining key tactical intentions that can elevate your doubles game.

Doubles tennis is a game of coordination, strategy, and precision. To succeed, players must work together effectively while employing tactical intentions that maximize their chances of winning points. Here's a guide to help you and your partner enhance your doubles strategy.

1. Aggressive Positioning

Objective: Dominate the net and control the court.

- **Get to the Net:** Both players should look to advance to the net quickly after serving or returning, taking control of the point early.
- **Close the Gap:** Maintain a strong, aggressive position by staying close to your partner and cutting off angles for your opponents.
- **Pressure Opponents:** By being aggressive at the net, you can intimidate your opponents, forcing them into making mistakes or hitting difficult passing shots.
- **Cover the Court Efficiently:** Proper positioning allows you to cover the court more effectively, reducing the amount of space your opponents can target.

2. Communication

Objective: Work as a cohesive unit with your partner.

- **Constant Verbal Cues:** Communicate with your partner during every point, using clear and concise calls such as "mine," "yours," or "switch."
- **Pre-Point Strategy Discussions:** Before each point, discuss your intended tactics, such as where you plan to serve or whether you'll poach, ensuring you're both on the same page.
- **Non-Verbal Communication:** Use hand signals or other non-verbal cues to indicate your intentions, especially for poaching or serve-and-volley strategies.
- **Support Each Other:** Stay positive and supportive, helping to keep your partner focused and confident, especially during tough situations.

3. Look to Poach

Objective: Intercept and attack your opponents' shots.

- **Be Opportunistic:** Poach when you anticipate a weak return or when you see an opportunity to intercept a cross-court shot, adding pressure on your opponents.
- **Coordinate with Your Partner:** Poaching is most effective when both players are in sync, so ensure your partner knows when you plan to move.
- **Disguise Your Poach:** Don't give away your intentions too early; move at the last moment to surprise your opponents and increase your chances of success.
- **Practice Poaching Drills:** Regularly practice poaching in training sessions to improve your timing and ability to read your opponents' shots.

4. Attack the Middle of the Court

Objective: Exploit the space between your opponents.

- **Aim Between Opponents:** Hitting the ball down the middle of the court forces your opponents to decide who will take the shot, often leading to confusion or errors.
- **Target Weaknesses:** If one opponent struggles with volleys or communication, attacking the middle can amplify these weaknesses.
- **Neutralize Opponents' Aggressiveness:** Shots down the middle reduce the angles your opponents can use, making it harder for them to attack effectively.
- **Control the Point:** By focusing on the middle, you and your partner can maintain control of the rally and dictate the pace of the game.

5. Stay Out of No Man's Land

Objective: Avoid vulnerable positions on the court.

- **Avoid the Mid-Court Zone:** Stay out of the area between the baseline and the service line (known as "no man's land") where you're more likely to be caught off balance.
- **Move Forward or Back:** After hitting a shot, either move forward to the net or back to the baseline to ensure you're in a strong position to handle the next shot.
- **Recognize Transition Opportunities:** If you find yourself in no man's land, recognise the situation quickly and either continue to move forward or retreat to a more secure position.
- **Train Footwork:** Work on your footwork to improve your ability to move in and out of no man's land efficiently, allowing you to better position yourself during points.

6. Vary Your Serve and Return Formations

Objective: Keep your opponent's guessing and off balance.

- **Use Different Formations:** Incorporate the standard, Australian, and I-formation serves to disrupt your opponents' rhythm and force them to adapt.
- **Change Return Positions:** Occasionally alter your return position, such as standing closer to the baseline or moving forward, to keep your opponent's uncertain about your intentions.
- **Mix Up Serve Placement:** Vary your serve location (wide, body, T) to prevent your opponents from getting comfortable with their returns.
- **Incorporate Fake Moves:** Use fake poaches or sudden changes in your return stance to create confusion and potentially draw errors from your opponents.

7. High Percentage of 1st Serves and High Percentage of Returns Made

Objective: Maximize your chances of starting the point with an advantage.

- **Prioritize First Serve Accuracy:** Aim to hit a high percentage of first serves in play, even if it means reducing power slightly, to prevent giving your opponent's easy opportunities with second serves.
- **Consistency on Returns:** Focus on making a high percentage of first serve returns, and look to attack your opponent's second serve, to immediately put them under pressure.
- **Avoid Risky Shots:** On both serves and returns, prioritize accuracy and placement over power, aiming to initiate the point with a solid shot that sets up the rest of the rally.
- **Practice Under Pressure:** Simulate match conditions in practice to improve your ability to serve and return effectively under pressure.

By following these tactical intentions, doubles players can develop a more strategic and coordinated approach to matches. The emphasis on communication, positioning, and tactical variation ensures that you and your partner can work as a seamless team, maximizing your chances of victory.

Doubles Tactical Intentions: Sample Drills

Below are sample drills designed to help players practice and implement each of the tactical intentions discussed in the doubles guide.

1. Aggressive Positioning

Drill: Net Domination

Objective: Practice advancing to and controlling the net to dominate the court.

Setup:

- **Participants:** Four players (two pairs).
- **Court:** Full doubles court.
- **Equipment:** Tennis balls and racquets.

Instructions:

1. Begin with one pair serving while the other pair returns.
2. The serving pair's goal is to advance to the net as quickly as possible after the serve, with both players aiming to take control of the net.
3. The returning pair should attempt to keep the ball low and force the serving pair into tough volleys while also looking for opportunities to approach the net themselves.
4. The focus for both teams is to maintain a strong, aggressive position at the net, staying close together to cut off angles and cover the court efficiently.
5. Points won at the net with a volley, or a smash are worth 2 points instead of one
6. Rotate roles after a set number of points, ensuring both pairs practice aggressive net positioning.

Coaching Tip: Emphasise quick, coordinated movement to the net and maintaining proximity to your partner. Encourage players to apply pressure on their opponents by being assertive at the net, reducing the opponents' available angles and options.

2. Communication

Drill: Verbal and Non-Verbal Cues

Objective: Enhance on-court communication between doubles partners.

Setup:

- **Participants:** Four players (two pairs).
- **Court:** Full doubles court.
- **Equipment:** Tennis balls and racquets.

Instructions:

1. Before each point, partners should quickly discuss their plan, including where the serve or return will go and whether they'll poach.
2. During the point, players must use clear verbal cues such as "mine," "yours," or "switch" to communicate who will take the shot.
3. Incorporate non-verbal signals (e.g., hand signals behind the back) to indicate intentions for poaching or specific plays before the serve.
4. Rotate pairs regularly to practice communicating with different partners and adapt to various communication styles.

Another option is to play Dingles:

Instructions:

1. 4 players start on the baseline.
2. A singles rally is played by both pairs (either down the line or crosscourt on half a court)
3. When one singles rally ends, the second singles ball turns into a doubles point.
4. The pair who finish the singles rally first must call out doubles to let their partner know the point has turned into a doubles point.
5. A team wins a point only if they win both the singles and doubles point.

Coaching Tip: Stress the importance of constant, clear communication, both verbal and non-verbal, to ensure partners work as a cohesive unit. Encourage positive reinforcement and constructive feedback after each point to build trust and synergy.

3. Look to Poach

Drill: Poaching Practice

Objective: Improve the timing and effectiveness of poaching in doubles.

Setup:

- **Participants:** Four players (two pairs).
- **Court:** Full doubles court.
- **Equipment:** Tennis balls and racquets.

Instructions:

1. One pair serves while the other returns. The serving team's net player focuses on poaching.
2. The server should aim to place the ball in a way that sets up the net player to poach (e.g., down the T or into the body).
3. The net player watches for a weak or predictable return and moves to intercept with a volley, aiming to end the point or gain a significant advantage.
4. The poaching player should mix up their timing, sometimes moving early and sometimes waiting until the last moment to keep opponents guessing.
5. Serving team must attempt to poach at least twice per service game.
6. Rotate roles so that all players practice both serving, returning, and poaching.

Coaching Tip: Emphasize the importance of reading the opponent's return and coordinating with the server to time the poach effectively. Encourage players to disguise their movements to make the poach more successful.

4. Attack the Middle of the Court

Drill: Middle Targeting

Objective: Practice consistently targeting the middle of the court to create confusion and control the point.

Setup:

- **Participants:** Four players (two pairs).
- **Court:** Full doubles court.
- **Equipment:** Tennis balls and racquets.

Instructions:

1. Both pairs play out points with the specific goal of hitting as many shots as possible down the middle of the court, between the two opponents.
2. Players should aim for the space between the two opponents, forcing them to decide who will take the shot.
3. Emphasize the importance of depth and placement when targeting the middle, aiming to create confusion and errors.
4. The drill can be made competitive by awarding points only for shots that successfully target the middle, leading to a winning point.
5. Rotate servers and returners to ensure everyone practices attacking the middle from different positions.

Coaching Tip: Highlight the strategic advantage of hitting down the middle, which reduces angles for your opponents and can disrupt their communication and positioning. Encourage players to be patient and consistent in targeting this area, and also exploit angles in order to expose the middle of the court

5. Stay Out of No Man's Land

Drill: Positioning Awareness

Objective: Improve awareness and footwork to avoid getting stuck in the vulnerable mid-court zone.

Setup:

- **Participants:** Four players (two pairs).
- **Court:** Full doubles court.
- **Equipment:** Tennis balls, racquets, and cones or markers.

Instructions:

1. Place cones or markers 2-3 meters inside the baseline to indicate the “no man’s land” area.
2. Players rally with the goal of either staying at the baseline or moving up to the net after hitting a shot—never lingering in the “no man’s land.”
3. After each shot, players should move quickly to either the net or baseline, avoiding the mid-court zone.
4. The drill emphasizes recognizing when to advance to the net (after a strong shot or after receiving a short ball) and when to retreat to the baseline (after a defensive shot).
5. Rotate roles regularly to ensure all players practice avoiding the mid-court zone.

Coaching Tip: Focus on quick transitions and the importance of positioning. Players should be aware of their court positioning at all times, making decisive movements either forward or backward, never staying in the vulnerable mid-court area.

6. Vary Your Serve and Return Formations

Drill: Formation Variations

Objective: Practice using different serve and return formations to disrupt opponents' rhythm.

Setup:

- **Participants:** Four players (two pairs).
- **Court:** Full doubles court.
- **Equipment:** Tennis balls and racquets.

Instructions:

1. The serving team practices using different formations (standard, Australian, I-formation) to vary the serve and create uncertainty for the returning team.
2. The returning team should also experiment with different return positions, sometimes standing closer to the baseline or further back.
3. The focus is on coordination between the server and net player to create effective plays out of each formation.
4. The returning team should focus on adjusting to each formation, trying to neutralize the serve and create pressure.
5. Rotate roles to ensure all players practice both serving with different formations and returning against them.

Coaching Tip: Emphasize the importance of communication and coordination when using varied formations. Encourage the serving team to use these formations to gain a tactical advantage and keep the returning team off balance.

7. High Percentage of 1st Serves and Returns Made

Drill: Serve and Return Consistency

Objective: Improve consistency on first serves and returns to start each point with an advantage.

Setup:

- **Participants:** Four players (two pairs).
- **Court:** Full doubles court.
- **Equipment:** Tennis balls and racquets.

Instructions:

1. The server focuses on landing a high percentage of first serves, prioritizing accuracy over power.
2. The returner's goal is to get as many returns in play as possible, focusing on consistent, controlled shots rather than risky winners.
3. Track the percentage of first serves made and returns in play, aiming to improve these percentages throughout the drill.
4. The serving team should also practice serving to different locations (wide, body, T) while maintaining a high first-serve percentage.
5. The returning team should work on returning both first and second serves, focusing on getting the ball back in play with good depth.
6. Rotate roles so that each player practices serving, returning, and playing out points.
7. Bonus points could be allocated for a 1st serve + 1 to win the point, or a second serve return +1 to win the point.

Coaching Tip: Stress the importance of consistency over power on both serves and returns. Encourage players to focus on placing the ball well and setting up the point effectively from the very beginning.
