

Pickleball Essentials

by Ernie Jerome

**Warning: Pickleball can be addictive.
Indulge at your own risk.**

Essential Terminology

These are some terms that pertain to the court itself:

Baseline: The line at each end of the court, 22 feet from the net.

Sideline: The line at each side of the court. The sidelines are 20 feet apart.

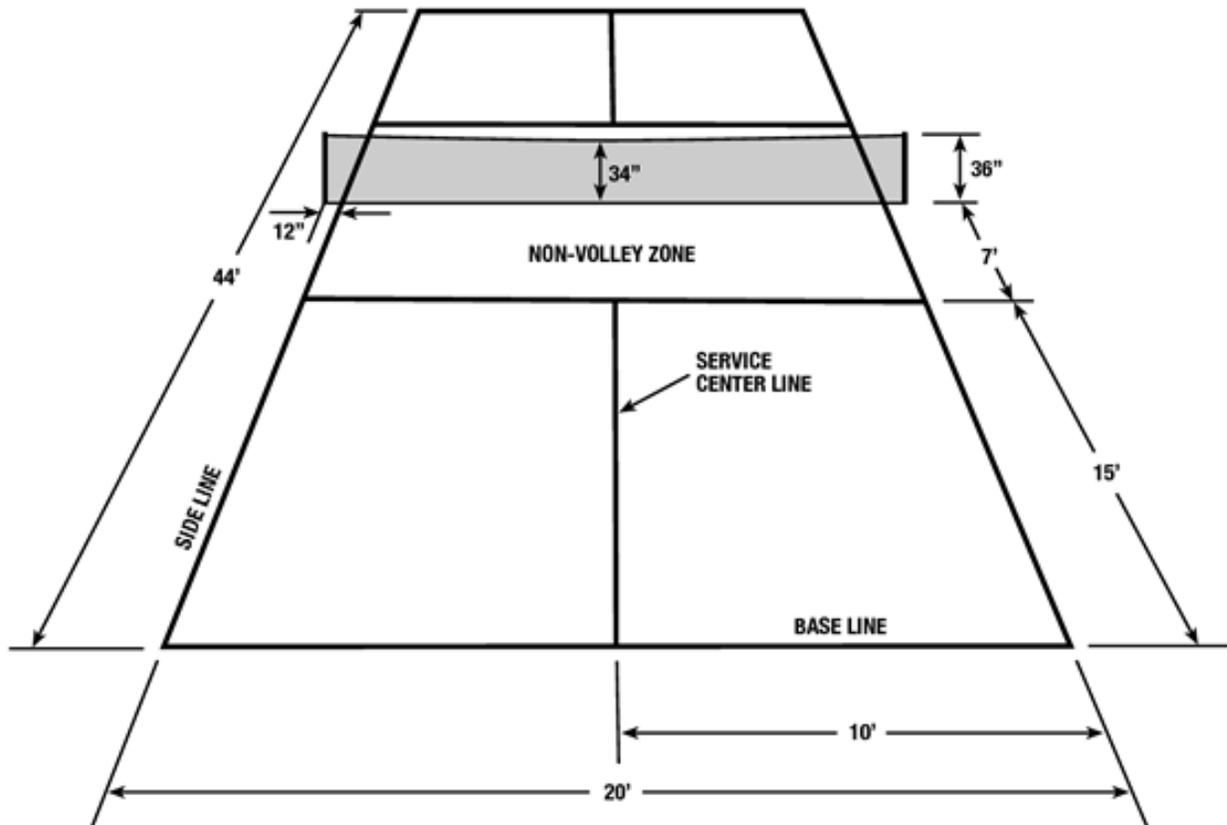


Figure 1: The Pickleball Court

Non-Volley Zone (NVZ): The 7-foot section of court on each side of the net. (Its name derives from the rule that a player may not volley the ball if any part of his body touches the NVZ.) The NVZ includes all lines—the portions of the Sidelines and the Non-Volley Line—bordering the zone. The slang term for the NVZ is "**The Kitchen**".

Centerline: The line bisecting the area between the Non-Volley Line and the Baseline.

Backcourt: The area near the baseline; the first 3 or 4 feet inside the court from the baseline.

Mid-court: The area between the NVZ Line and the backcourt.

Getting the (Doubles) Game Underway

The Serve:

- (1) The ball must be hit from behind the baseline to the diagonally opposite service area.
- (2) At the point of contact with the paddle, the ball must be below the server's waist level.
- (3) At the instant of contacting the ball, the entire head of the paddle must be below a horizontal line through the wrist joint.

The Return of Serve:

The player receiving the serve must let the ball bounce (once only) before hitting the ball back to any point on the opponents' side of the court.

Subsequent Shots:

Any subsequent shot may be volleyed (that is, hit before it bounces) or hit after one bounce (called a groundstroke) by either player of the pair. But there is a key rule that has no parallel in tennis. A player may not step into the Non-Volley Zone (NVZ) to hit a volley. Furthermore, it is a fault if a player hits a volley from outside the NVZ, but his/her follow-through or forward momentum results in any contact of the player or his/her equipment with the NVZ.

Important Consequences of These Basic Rules

Critical elements of pickleball play derive from the preceding rules. Let's watch competition between elite 5.0 players to illustrate these elements. The video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tXAb-gmzxzA> is a semi-final match from the 2013 USAPA Nationals that were actually held at Sun City Festival's Sage Courts. Pauses between rallies have been edited out so that play resumes very quickly after a rally ends.

- (1) **The Serve** First, focus for a few minutes on only the initial serve in each rally. Because the ball must be contacted below the waist, there is really no power serve in pickleball. Legitimate service "aces" are rare. In this elite pickleball match the serves are rather soft arching shots. If you were to keep a tally, you would find that the serving team wins a point on just 40%-45% of the rallies. Pickleball is unique among paddle and racquet sports in that the serving team is actually at a disadvantage.

(2) The Return of Serve Go back to the beginning of the video and focus on the second shot—the return of serve—in each rally. It can be hit back to any point in the serving team’s end of the court. Remember that the serving team must let the return of serve bounce before hitting the 3rd shot of the rally. Therefore, both players on the serving team (S1 and S2 in Figure 2 below) must remain near the baseline in case the return of serve bounces deep in the backcourt. Note the following:

- (i) Usually the return of serve is also a long soft arching shot that bounces in the backcourt.
- (ii) After hitting the return of serve, the player rushes forward to the NVZ line. In Figure 2, R1 is rushing to the NVZ while the yellow ball is on its trajectory. (His partner, R2, took a position at the NVZ line before the original serve.) Ideally, R1 should get to the NVZ and be at rest in a ready position by the time the ball (in yellow) is hit by an opponent for the 3rd shot of the rally. A long arching trajectory to a point deep in the opponents’ backcourt gives R1 extra time to get to the NVZ. As will be explained in the next section, R1 and R2 are then in an advantageous position.

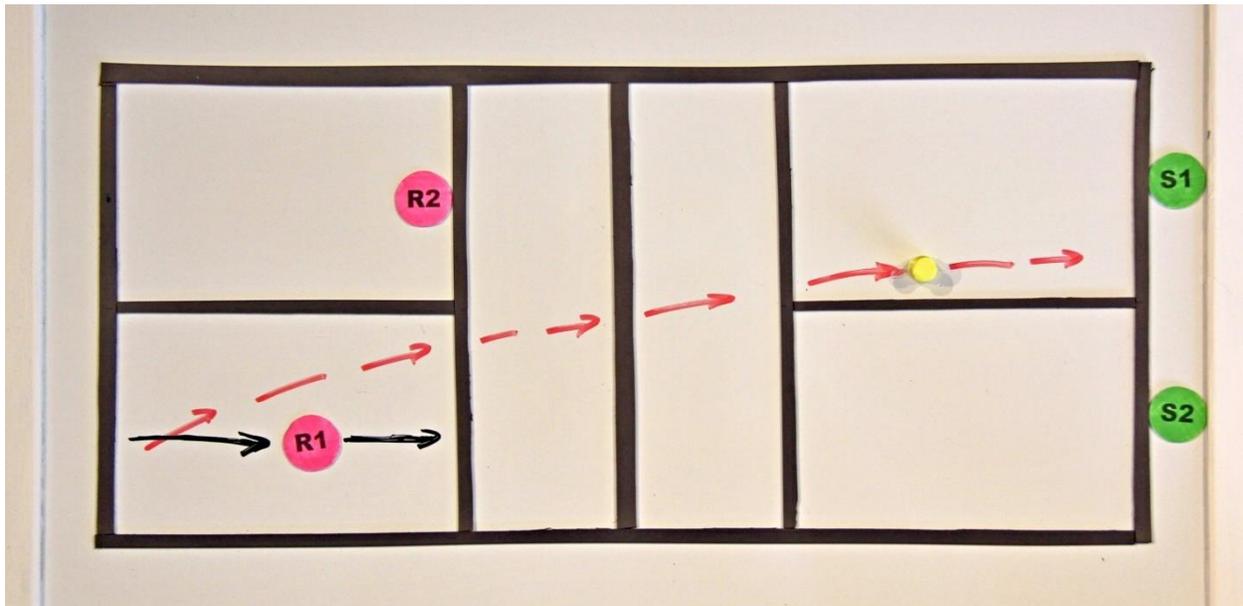


Figure 2: Movement During the Return of Serve by R1

(3) The Third Shot After the ball bounces deep in their backcourt, the team (in green) that originally served is at a distinct disadvantage if R1 and R2 are both at the NVZ. See Figure 3.

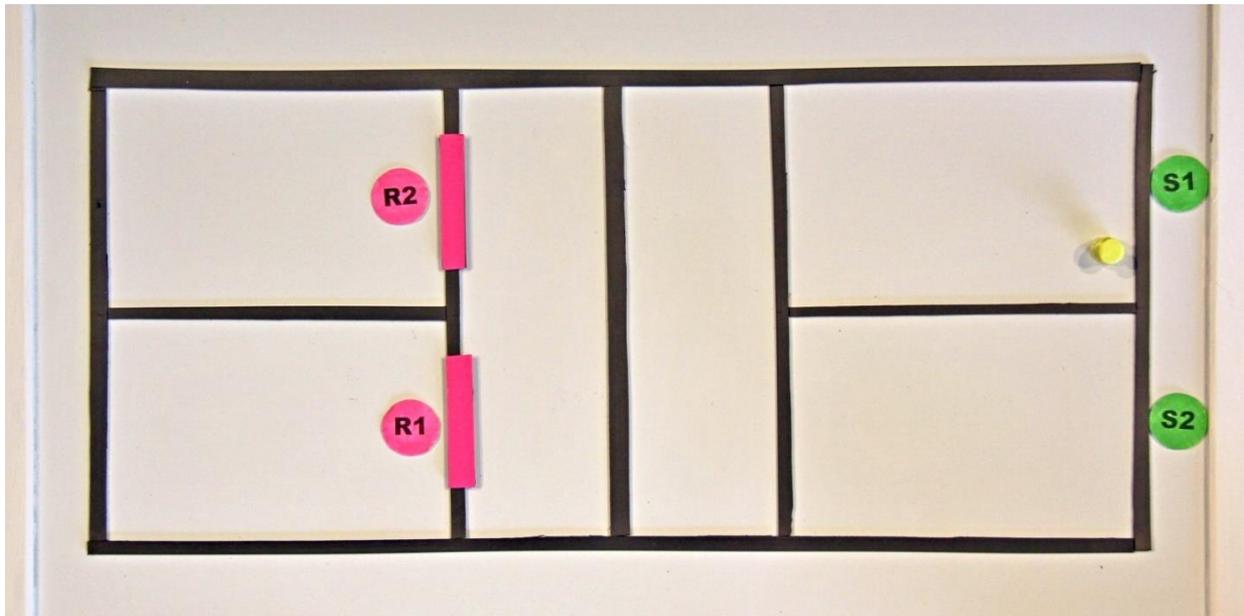


Figure 3: The Receiving Team in a Dominant Position Awaiting the Third Shot

An individual's arm-span is very close to his height. Add another 6 inches to the "sweet spot" of a paddle and you realize that R1 and R2 can each cover about 7 feet of the 10-foot half-court width with just a small side-step to the forehand side or single crossover-step to the backhand side. In Figure 3, the easily reached widths are represented proportionally as red strips.

For the 3rd shot of the rally, the green team has three options, two of which are problematic.

- An attempt to hit a hard groundstroke through one of the three gaps between or to the outside of R1 or R2 is a low percentage shot—there is little room for directional error in the horizontal. Furthermore, there is little room for angular error in the vertical (between hitting the ball into the net and hitting the ball out of bounds at the backcourt.)
- Lobbing the ball over the heads of R1 and R2 into their backcourt is a difficult low-percentage shot. Even if the ball will land in-bounds, good intermediate players can usually retreat to the ball and hit back an overhead smash likely ending the rally.

(Third option on next page ...)

- The most common and highest percentage 3rd shot by intermediate and advanced players is a soft shot (called a **drop shot**) that lands in the opponents' NVZ. Properly executed, the drop shot has two important benefits: (1) There is little opportunity for the opponents to hit back a winning 4th shot; and (2) It provides the team making the drop shot the opportunity to rush to the NVZ, thereby neutralizing the opponents' previous positional advantage.

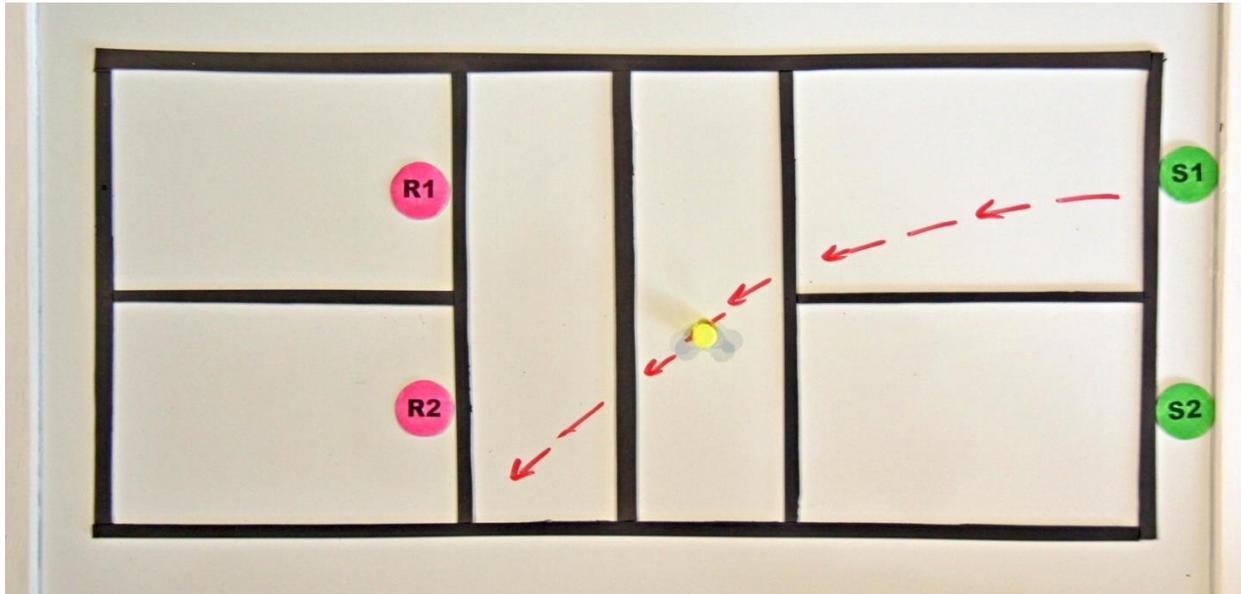


Figure 4: The Serving Team Executing a Drop Shot for the Third Shot of the Rally

Go back to the video again and focus on the 3rd shot of each rally. In most rallies, it's a drop shot. Both team-mates advance as far they can to the NVZ before the 4th shot comes back to them. It is a fundamental principle of movement and positioning in pickleball that teammates advance (and retreat if necessary) side-by-side. This requires a big adjustment by experienced tennis players who are accustomed to one-up/one-back positioning in tennis doubles.

(4) Subsequent Shots The 4th shot is usually the start of the “dinking” game in which the players continue to hit soft “touch” shots (called “dinks”) that land in the opponents' NVZ. This can go on for 10 or more shots—the players move their opponents side to side attempting to make an opponent hit the ball from an awkward position, resulting in a return shot that is “attackable”. The final point to “take home” from the video is that, at higher levels of play, the vast majority of shots in the game are dink shots.

To underscore the point that “dinks” are the most frequent and important shot in pickleball, we teach it and drill on it at the very beginning of our instructional program. Working on mechanics and drills for dink shots can be frustrating for the beginning player. (Bashing the ball back and forth might seem like more fun.) But the dinking game is crucial to improving your pickleball game. It's the great “leveller” between male & female and between young & old. Touch, execution, and strategy can readily prevail over strength and foot-speed. Dinking becomes fun as you learn to make your dink shots accurate, purposeful, and strategic.

Summary Let's summarize the main “take-home” points observed in the video featuring elite players.

- Serves need not be hard—“soft and deep” gets the job done.
- A deep arching return-of-serve enables that team to take up a dominating position at the NVZ.
- Normally the best 3rd shot is a drop-shot enabling the serving team to advance to its NVZ.
- Dinking is the most frequent type of shot in pickleball.
- Teammates move together—forward & back and left & right.
- None of these major elements of the game require significant strength or great speed of foot.

Sun City Festival Pickleball Club's Player Development Program

It can become problematic if beginning players play too long against other novice players without some mentoring or coaching. Flawed shot mechanics, poor shot selection, and improper movement/positioning will tend to become habitual, and then be difficult to correct later on. While certain shot selections and strategies may “work” when playing against novice players, they will prove to be largely ineffective against intermediate and better players.

Ideally, if you wish to develop your potential at pickleball, you should take lessons or obtain mentoring from experienced players soon after you take up the sport. The SCF Club's Player Development Program offers a sequence of modules, each involving four 1½-hour lessons (one per week for four weeks).