

Pickleball-

The Sun City Festival Way

Module 1: Beginning Pickleball Player's Guide

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

Preamble

So you've decided to join the tens of thousands playing North America's fastest growing sport. That's great! OK, OK, ... the sport has a goofy name. But look on the bright side—at least it isn't named “wussball”!

It's normal to be a little embarrassed when you first tell the folks back home that you have taken up ... ta da! ... “pickleball!”. If friends back home ask (while barely restraining a giggle): “What the hell is pickleball?”, you can refer them to the links:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6kPJDi4LF1o>

and

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WtJN8CV0t7U>

for the origin and history of the sport. The following link presents a condensed video illustrating the game in its modern form as played at an elite level.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tXAb-gmzxzA>

This game was a semi-final match from the 2013 USAPA Nationals that were actually held at Sun City Festival's Sage Courts!

“Why is pickleball so popular?” you wonder. “What's the big deal with pickleball?” your friends ask. Well, here's the scoop (in the context of doubles play).

- At a relatively low skill level, players are able to sustain multiple-shot rallies. (Contrast this with tennis where a 3- or 4-shot rally is a long one for novice doubles.) And at the end of a pickleball rally, it doesn't require a short hike to retrieve the ball!
- Strength and power are not nearly as significant as in tennis. Pickleball is much more of a “touch” game.
- Flat-out running speed is not as important as in tennis. In pickleball, it helps to be able to take a couple quick steps, but it is only in high-level play that you occasionally need to sprint several steps.
- As a consequence of the preceding two points, there is probably no other sport in which men vs. women and young vs. elderly compete on a more “level playing field”. This makes pickleball a great sport for family and social play.
- Similarly, players with some physical limitations are less disadvantaged in pickleball than they would be in most other head-to-head competitive sports.
- Pickleball is very good exercise, but it's not exhausting. It involves a lot of bending, reaching, and 2- or 3-step side-to-side and back-and-forward movements. If you warm up properly and play within your physical limitations, injuries are rare. Even if you are hit by the ball moving at high speed, it produces no more than a stinging feeling at the point of impact.
- News flash to golfers--it's inexpensive to play!
- Players of relatively modest natural athletic ability are able to attain quite a high level of play. Proper shot selection and player positioning are more important than raw athleticism or executing “killer” high-velocity shots.

Sun City Festival's Player Development Program

Q: What is the structure of the program?

A: For 2018-2019, the Pickleball Club has developed 4 training modules designed to help players progress from a beginning level to an intermediate level. In pickleball, players' skill levels are rated from 1.0 (raw beginner) to 5.0 (advanced/elite) in steps of 0.5.

This first module is intended to develop the skills that take a beginner to the 2.0 level. Subsequent modules are designed to develop the skills and strategies needed to advance from 2.0 to 2.5, 2.5 to 3.0, and 3.0 to 3.5.

Each module consists of four 1½-hour on-court sessions spread over four weeks (at the same time and location each week). Normally you will be in a group of 10 players on 2 courts with 2 coaches. When in actual doubles play, two of the ten players will stand aside at any one time, but will be rotated into the action so that all will have the same participation.

Q: This numerical ratings stuff seems pretty serious. Do I need to get involved in it if I just want to play for fun?

A: The vast majority of players agree that they have the most fun in a doubles game when the other three players have similar skills. It is one thing to challenge yourself by playing against others possessing somewhat greater skills, but a game involving, for example, 3.0 and 4.0 players, is usually unsatisfactory for **both** the 3.0 and the 4.0 players. Consequently, pickleball clubs in retirement communities usually structure open play, programs, competitions, and skills development sessions with the intent of having "even" competition. This is why it is advantageous for club members to have accurate skill-level ratings.

Most new players become quite enthusiastic about the sport and seek to improve their level of play. In recent years, quite explicit measurable criteria have been established for each official rating level. These criteria represent goals for players wishing to raise their play to the next level. Players experience a sense of personal accomplishment when they are recognized for achieving a new rating level.

Q: Can a beginning player become a 3.5 player in just 16 weeks (4 modules of 4 weeks each)?

A: That is unlikely (even if scheduling permits that possibility). In any module, you should not expect that just four 1½-hour sessions will, by themselves, raise your level of play by the full 0.5 increment. But the four lessons will make you aware of the skills and strategies you need to develop to gain the rating you seek. In club and private play, you should be intentional about incorporating those skills and strategies into your play. Ideally, the shot mechanics, positioning, and game strategies you learned become "second nature" or instinctive for you.

You may wish to repeat a module at a later offering. The SCF Pickleball Club would like to make that possible. But it will depend on the availability of volunteer coaches and the number of players wanting to take the module for the first time. The club feels that priority should be given to "first-timers" at each level. The signup process will likely give priority to such first-time registrants.

Q: How can I know for sure if I have really attained my desired skill rating?

A: Until 2016, the only way to obtain an “official” rating was to play in tournaments sanctioned by the USA Pickleball Association (USAPA). But less than 10% of players enter such tournaments. For the other 90+%, their home club may have had some sort of ratings committee to assess members’ skills. But even if there was consistency within a club, ratings standards varied from club-to-club. More often than not, players simply rated themselves by comparing their own play to that of others (whose nominal skill ratings were also likely to have been self-assessed). Needless to say, when four self- or club-rated 3.5 players from around the country come together on the same court at Festival, there can be a wide range in their actual skill levels.

Recognizing this lack of rigor and consistency in players’ ratings, a group of prominent pickleball instructors and players founded the International Pickleball Teaching Professional Association (IPTPA) in 2015. Its main goals are to establish uniform consistent standards for teaching pickleball skills and for rating the skills of players. The IPTPA sets standards for and trains both Certified Pickleball Teaching Professionals (CPTP) and Certified Rating Specialists (CRS). (See <https://iptpa.com/>)

Our four teaching modules have been intentionally designed to align with the IPTPA’s skills criteria for each skill level. A player able to demonstrate most of the skills and strategies listed for any of our modules will be able, we are confident, to pass the formal ratings assessment for that level conducted by a CRS from the IPTPA. In the spring of 2018, the SCF Pickleball Club offered less structured “prep” sessions for players interested in obtaining an official IPTPA rating. Over 50 of our Club members were assessed by a CRS. 85% of the candidates were successful in achieving their desired rating.

Skills and Competencies at the 2.0 Level

OK ... let's get started. Below are listed the skills and competencies a 2.0 player should possess.

Overall Objective of "Introduction to Pickleball" Lessons

- To bring the player's skills to the 2.0 Level

Individual Skills and Knowledge

A player at the 2.0 level:

- Knows the basic rules and scoring system;
- Knows where to stand depending on the score and which team is serving;
- Knows the in/out rules for line calls;
- Demonstrates a simple pendulum swing on forehand and backhand dink shots;
- Makes 40% of forehand and backhand dink shots;
- Demonstrates the proper ready position at the NVZ line;
- Makes 40% of forehand and backhand punch volleys (from the NVZ line);
- In preparation for a groundstroke (both forehand & backhand), player demonstrates footwork (including a final split-step) that will enable him/her to contact the ball at the start of its descent and at a point to the side of the body and forward of the front knee;
- When making a groundstroke, transfers weight from the back foot to the front foot while swinging the paddle through a shallow low-to-high arc;
- Serves (from both "deuce" & "ad" courts) with 50% success;
- Returns serves (from both "deuce" & "ad" courts) with 50% success.

Positioning and Game Strategy

In a doubles dinking game, the player:

- Avoids NVZ violations;
- Returns to the proper ready position after making a dink shot;
- Attempts both forward and cross-court dink shots.

In doubles match play, the player:

- Calls out the proper score before serving;
- Promptly advances to the NVZ line after returning a serve;
- Avoids NVZ violations when volleying;
- Makes proper in/out line calls in own half of the court.

Lesson 1: Dinking

At intermediate and higher levels of play, most rallies evolve to the “dinking game” with both teams at their NVZ making short soft shots intended to land in the opponents’ NVZ. (A separate document titled “Pickleball Essentials” presents a brief broad overview of key aspects of the sport of pickleball. If you have not already done so, you should soon read that document just to get a sense of the “big picture”.) We teach dinking first because:

1. Pickleball requires far more dink shots than any other shot, and
2. Most points are won (and lost) in the dinking component of the game.

Technique: Your coaches will demonstrate the **forehand dink shot**. Observe:

- The smooth easy pendulum swing from the shoulder with no flexing of the wrist (delivering more of a “push” than a “punch” to the ball);
- A dip of the knees while making the pendulum swing;
- Head down to see the paddle contact the ball;
- Return to the ready position—paddle at chest level with paddle’s face perpendicular to the net or slightly angled to the backhand; a slightly crouched position on balls of feet spaced at slightly more than shoulder width.

Note: 1. A player can step into the NVZ to hit an opponent’s short dink shot after it bounces. A player can step into the NVZ before the bounce in order to be in an optimal position to hit the ball after it bounces. Quickly step out of the NVZ and resume a ready position after the shot.

2. Don’t retreat from the NVZ line. If you are pushed back to reach a shot, quickly return to the NVZ line.
3. As your dinking improves, reduce the vertical distance by which your dink shot clears the net.

Drills: per coaches’ instructions.

Technique: Your coaches will demonstrate the **backhand dink shot** and **cross-court dink shots (forehand and backhand)**. The mechanics for the backhand dink are similar to those for the forehand dink, but foot movement, knee dip, and eye-on-the-ball at the instant of contact are more crucial.

Drills: per coaches’ instructions.

Game Play. The Dinking Game (No score-keeping this lesson—will cover in Lesson 3).

Doubles format. The coach starts the rally by tossing a ball into the NVZ from the sideline. Players must hit only dinks that land in the opponents’ NVZ. The rally ends when the ball is hit out-of-bounds or into the net. Players rotate every couple minutes.

Homework and Videos:

Watch the dinking videos to reinforce the mechanics and skills taught in this lesson. Arrange to get together with a partner to work on the drills utilized in this lesson and in the following videos.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c8XpasxBrrI>

Good for dinking basics.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mEI5l8aY3Ho>

Improving your dink shot.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vsyjY2qM4OM>

Dinking drills.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TK6fnPh90IU>

Additional dinking tips.

Lesson 2: Forehand Groundstroke; Serve; Return of Serve

Technique for the Forehand Groundstroke

“Groundstroke” simply refers to hitting a ball from the mid-court or backcourt after it bounces.

One key to an effective ground stroke is to anticipate the ball’s trajectory and be at the best location for striking the ball after it bounces. From the instant the ball leaves your opponent’s paddle, you should project the ball’s trajectory and start moving toward the optimal location. (In fact you can get an early clue about the ball’s direction and velocity from the direction and speed of the opponent’s swing.) As you move, watch the ball’s early flight and re-calibrate where you need to go. Ideally you should be “on location” by the time when the ball arrives.

The mechanics of the forehand groundstroke include:

- Prepare for the stroke by rotating your torso to the forehand side as you make the backswing.
- Step forward on slightly bent knees transferring weight from the back to the front foot as you swing forward on a shallow low-to-high arc.
- Contact should be on your forehand side at a point that is: (1) slightly ahead of your front knee and (2) near the start of the ball’s descent after the bounce.
- Follow through with the face of the paddle pointing toward the target.

Drills: per coaches’ instructions.

Rules for the Serve

The primary rules for serving the ball are:

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

Technique for the Serve

You are encouraged to use the mechanics of the forehand groundstroke for the serve. The only difference is that, with a short toss of the ball out from your body, you put the ball at the ideal contact spot for the forehand groundstroke.

Drills: per coaches' instructions.

Technique for the Return of Serve

When receiving the serve, you must let the ball bounce before hitting it back (as the 2nd shot of the rally). Therefore, you should stand on the baseline for soft servers, or a couple feet behind the baseline for hard servers. You should avoid having to take a step back or lean back to hit the return of serve.

You should prefer to take the return of serve on your forehand. (For virtually all players, forehand shots are stronger, more consistent, and more accurate than backhand shots.) By observing the server's paddle speed & direction and the early trajectory of the ball, judge where to move to be at the optimal location for a forehand groundstroke. If you react to these early cues, a backhand return of serve will be necessary only on serves hit sharply to your backhand side.

It's very important that, immediately after hitting the return of serve, you should rush to the NVZ line as quickly as possible. The rationale and importance of this movement will be explained by your coaches.

Drills: per coaches' instructions.

Homework and Videos:

Watch these videos to reinforce the mechanics and skills you learned in this lesson. Arrange to get together with a partner to work on the drills used in this lesson and in the videos.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fK4bFs6Rkdl>

The Underhand Serve

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wUaUegE-b6Q>

Pickleball Serving Rules

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YOASlInnqjq0>

Pickleball Serve-Legal and Effective

In preparation for Lesson 3, watch the following videos which explain the scoring in doubles pickleball.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zm1x05-kU-M> PB Scoring Made Easy

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YHMIvyyGqOI> PB Doubles Scoring Explained.

Lesson 3: Punch Volley; Scoring

A **punch volley** is most commonly employed when you are at the NVZ line and an opponent hits a firm shot from the mid- or backcourt that reaches you at a height between belly-button and eye level. With a punch volley, you hit a firm shot back to the feet of an opponent or through the gap between opponents. This prevents your opponents from advancing to their NVZ line and forces them to hit their next shot from a difficult location.

Punch Volley Technique

From the ready position,

- For a ball coming straight at you or somewhat to your backhand side, you first draw back your arm (bent about 90 degrees at the elbow) close to your body.
- Then you time a fast extension of the arm from the shoulder and elbow so that you contact the ball firmly 12-18 inches in front of your body. You direct the paddle face through the ball toward the target area. Your arm continues to a full extension on the follow-through.
- For a ball coming to your forehand side, maintain your elbow at a 90-degree bend and fairly tight to your body as you rotate your arm (mostly from the shoulder) to the forehand side. With little or no further backswing, hit the ball with a sharp short forward swing generated largely by rotating the upper arm at the shoulder.

Drills: per coaches' instructions.

Scoring:

Hopefully you have watched the two videos mentioned at the end of Lesson 2. They explain the scoring in doubles pickleball and the routine for the server calling out the score.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zm1x05-kU-M>

PB Scoring Made Easy

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YHMIvyyGqOI>

PB Doubles Scoring Explained.

Your coaches will review the rules and procedures for scoring as they take players through a hypothetical game scenario.

Doubles Match Play: In a regular game you will try to “put it all together”—serving, returning serve, following the return-of-serve to the NVZ line, volleying, dinking, and scorekeeping.

Homework and Videos:

Watch these videos to reinforce the mechanics and skills you learned in this lesson. Arrange to get together with a partner or a foursome to work on the drills used in this lesson and in the videos.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wj_E8XNRI1I

The Volley

<http://applecountrypickleball.blogspot.com/2015/12/the-basic-volley.html>

The Volley

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pIFnIVZyxI4>

Paddle Control in Volleying

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oDD2GY3ywlq>

Groundstroke Footwork

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BWwewEo76Dc>

Pickleball Groundstrokes

Lesson 4: Backhand Groundstroke; Dinking Game; Match Play

Technique for the Backhand Groundstroke

- Project the early trajectory of the opponent's shot. Quickly move to and be set at the optimal location for you to execute the remaining elements of the shot.
- Prepare for the stroke by rotating your torso to the backhand side as you dip your knees in a split step and make the backswing.
- Step forward transferring weight from the back to the front foot as you swing forward on a shallow low-to-high arc.
- Contact should be on your backhand side at a point that is: (1) ahead of your front knee and (2) near the start of the ball's descent after the bounce.
- Follow through with the face of the paddle pointing toward the target.

The minor mechanical differences from the forehand groundstroke are:

- (1) a somewhat greater dip/bending at the knees as you make the split step and backswing;
- (2) the point of contacting the ball is further forward of the front knee.

Drills: per coaches' instructions.

Dinking Game Two teams start at their NVZ lines. To be good, a shot must land in the opponents' NVZ. Each game is to 6 points (win by one), To serve the ball, the server can bounce the ball and then dink it off the bounce.

Match Play Finish out the lesson period with regular match play. Four players play three regular games to 7 (win by one point; otherwise normal scoring). Each game is played with a different partner. If there are five players in a group, play five games to 5 (win by one point). Play with a different partner each game. Each player sits out one game.

Concluding Comments: In social and club play, pick just one or two aspects of your game to work on each day until their proper execution becomes second nature to you. Then work on another one or two elements until they too become habitual.

Happy pickleballing! See you in Module 2