

Preamble

Advancing from level 3.0 to 3.5 has more to do with improving upon what has already been covered in Modules 1, 2, and 3 than with learning new “stuff”. That is,

- improving shot selection, accuracy, and consistency;
- reducing mistakes;
- developing patience;
- improving communication, teamwork, and strategic play;
- capitalizing upon opportunities and opponents' mistakes.

Skills and Competencies at the 3.5 Level

Overall Objective

- To raise the player's skills from the 3.0 level to the 3.5 level

Individual Skills and Shot Execution

With improved shot execution, a 3.5 level player:

- Makes at least 14 out of 20 dinks in the windshield wiper dinking exercise;
- Makes 70% of forehand and backhand drop shots from the transition area;
- Makes 60% of forehand and backhand drop shots from the baseline;
- Makes 70% of forehand and backhand punch volleys with depth and direction control;
- Executes 60% of overhead smash returns of lobs while demonstrating proper sideways turn and arm position;
- Serves and returns serves such that 80% bounce in the deep third of the court;
- Executes 60% of offensive lobs from the NVZ line.

Continued ...

Positioning and Game Strategy

In a doubles dinking game, a doubles team:

- Is able to dink consistently while changing shot direction from cross-court to down-the-line, both forehand & backhand;
- Shifts sideways as a team according to ball movement in order to better defend against down-the-line and between-player return dinks;
- Communicates on balls that both players can reach;
- Defers to the forehand on balls coming between partners;
- Maintains position close to the NVZ line except to retrieve lobs; volleys dinks that may be comfortably reached;
- Targets opponent's feet or backhand side;
- Demonstrates patience, moving opponents from side-to-side with cross-court shots to create openings and make returns more difficult;
- Takes advantage of opportunities to attack high dinks from opponents.

In doubles match play, a player:

- Consistently serves and returns serves deep (to the back third of the court);
- Employs a drop shot on at least 70% of third shots;
- Based on the early trajectory of own or a partner's third-shot drop attempt, either rushes to the NVZ line or remains in the backcourt to defend a punch volley or smash;
- Demonstrates improved control of the direction, depth, and height (at the net) of volleys and ground strokes (forehand and backhand);
- Normally hits the ball to the deeper opponent (preferably at his/her feet) if the opponents are at differing distances from the net;
- Demonstrates improved ability to react quickly and take advantage of attackable balls, especially at the NVZ line;
- Employs an offensive lob at opportune times when dinking;
- Communicates with partner on balls near the center line (deferring to the forehand);
- On balls that will land near the sideline or baseline on partner's side of the court, assists partner by shouting "Good!" or "Out!" or "Bounce it!" if it appears that the ball will land inbounds, out-of-bounds, or very close to the line, respectively;
- Demonstrates good court and position awareness by not hitting balls that would otherwise land out of bounds, and by not hitting balls that would better be taken by his/her partner.

Lesson 1: Strategic Dinking; Hitting & Defending the Offensive Lob

Strategic Dinking

The following elements of Strategic Dinking were presented in Module 3:

1. Cross-court dinking has four advantages over straight ahead dinking:
 - (i) It is more effective in forcing opponents to move sideways.
 - (ii) There is more tolerance of error (on both net clearance and length of the dink shot).
 - (iii) The net is almost 2 inches lower near center court than near the sidelines.
 - (iv) It is easier to place the dink shot closer to the net, cutting down the opponents' options for their next shot.
2. A dink shot directed low on an opponent's backhand side is tougher to return than one directed to his/her forehand side.
3. The smaller the net clearance of your dink shot, the more difficult the opponent's next shot will be. But don't get "too cute" because of the increasing probability that you hit the ball into the net.
4. If your directly opposite opponent holds his/her paddle low when in his/her "ready position", you can flick the ball at his/her torso (especially if you have been fed a dink that bounces quite high (20 to 30 inches).
5. From a dink to your forehand side, occasionally hit an offensive lob
6. Defensively:
 - Be in the "ready position";
 - Maintain position "tight" to the NVZ line;
 - Bend at the knees and volley incoming dink shots that can be reached comfortably;
 - Shift sideways synchronously with your partner when shading.

Regarding cross-court dink shots, if your diagonally opposite opponent's forehand is next to his/her sideline, it is better to hit a shorter cross-court shot to his/her backhand. A longer cross-court dink to the opponent's more versatile forehand gives him/her too many good options if your dink shot is sub-optimal. He/she can hit a down-the-line shot past against your partner's backhand, or a diagonal through-the-middle shot between you and your partner, or an offensive lob.

To develop a strong overall dinking game, the two most technically difficult elements to master are:

- (i) volleying incoming dink shots (that can be comfortably reached from the NVZ line) without your dink-volley return being attackable, and
- (ii) hitting offensive lobs (especially with the backhand) from the NVZ line.

The former requires your early decision (based on the speed & arc of the opponent's paddle and the ball's early trajectory) as to whether you will let the ball bounce. If you can contact your opponent's shot at a point at least 18 inches above ground and 18-to-24 inches in front of your body, you should choose to volley. The toughest dink shot to handle is one that bounces at your feet (especially on your backhand side). You can usually avoid it by volleying an incoming dink shot on such a trajectory.

Once you become proficient with the more basic elements of dink execution and strategy, you are encouraged in this module to intentionally work on these more difficult aspects of dinking.

Drills: per coaches' instructions.

Hitting & Defending the Offensive Lob

The mechanics and strategic use of the offensive lob were described in the Player's Guide for Module 3. Defending against offensive lobs requires excellent communication between partners. If the player over whom the ball is lobbed can get to the ball on her/his forehand side by taking just one or two steps back, s/he should shout "Mine!" or "Got it!", turn to her/his forehand side, and take one or two sliding steps to get in the position from which s/he can forcefully hit the ball about 1 foot in front of her/his body with an overhead smash.

Figure M-4.1 shows a more typical situation. Player P1 has hit a lob deep (dashed curve) into P4's backcourt. As soon as P3 and P4 recognize from the ball's early speed and trajectory that the lob will be deep, P4 should shout "Yours!" and/or P3 should shout "Mine!" or "Got it!" Both P4 and P3 promptly get "on the move". P3 should rush to a position (solid arrow) at which P3 can overtake the ball and hit the appropriate shot. If the lob was quite high, P3 may be able to move to a suitable position to hit an overhead smash before the ball bounces. Otherwise, P3 should anticipate the ball's bounce and "beat the ball" to a good position from which to hit a drop shot to the opponents' "kitchen" or a deep lob to their backcourt. [Meanwhile P4 has shifted sideways (solid arrow) to the position vacated by P3.] If P3 judges that her/his drop shot or deep lob is on target, s/he should rush to the NVZ line (upper arrow). But if P3's drop shot is too high or lob is too short, P3 should stay in the backcourt and shout "Back!" to warn her/his partner to retreat to the mid- or backcourt in anticipation of an opponent hitting back an overhead smash or a hard punch volley.

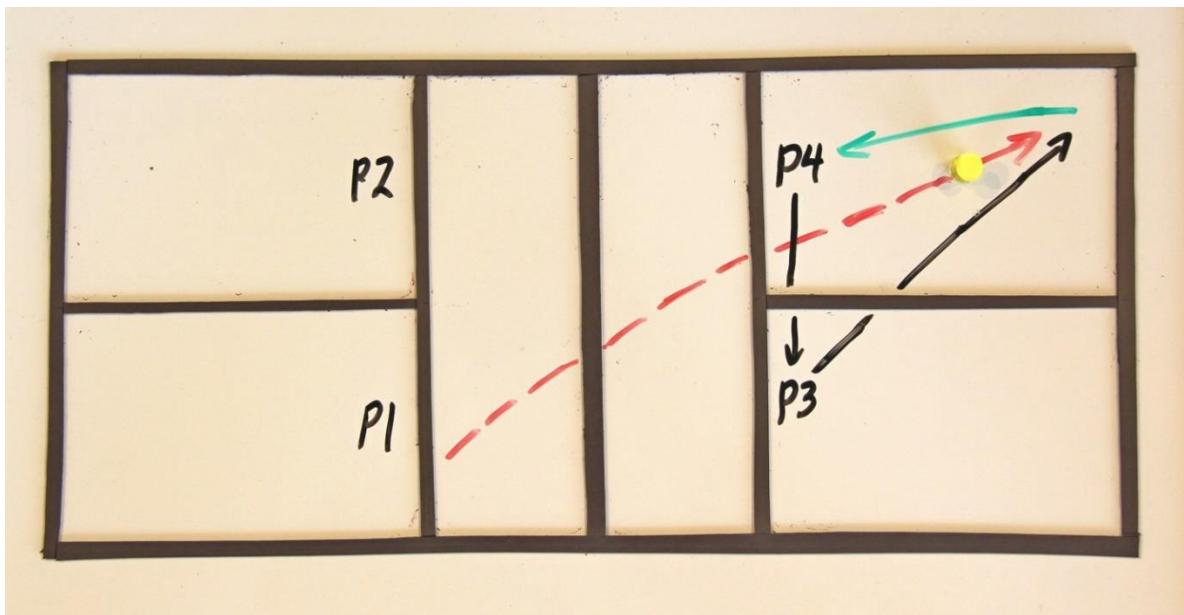


Figure M-4.1: Defending a Deep Lob

Cautionary Note: In social and Club play, most players assume they need to cover all lobs to their own side of the court. Consequently, one player doing the right thing (crossing over to cover a deep lob) while the other does the wrong thing (dropping back several steps) is a recipe for a collision resulting in one or both players being knocked to the ground. Both players need to be “on the same page”—come to an understanding at the outset of the game regarding communication and crossing over to defend lobs.

Drills: per coaches’ instructions.

Game Play: The Dinking Game—three dinks and then regular play.

Homework and Videos:

Use what you have learned from this lesson in your regular club play. Focus on just one or two new elements or tactics at a time and work on them until they become an instinctive part of your play.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gdv1kT0q0pQ>

Defending the Lob

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1NhvH07dwvQ>

Shot Options for Returning a Lob

Lesson 2: Drop Shots; Changing the Pace of the Ball

Your progression to higher skill ratings requires improving your consistency in the execution of **drop shots**, especially from your backcourt.

In earlier Modules, the primary emphasis was on hitting your drop shots so that the ball would bounce in the opponents' "kitchen". The effectiveness of your drop shot will be improved if you hit to an opponent's backhand side. This is illustrated in Figure M-4.2 below. It shows four right-handed players. The team P1/P2 is about to hit a third-shot drop. The preferred target areas are indicated.

The most effective drop shot is P2 hitting to P3's backhand (red arc) because the ball is moving away from P3's backhand as P3 attempts to hit the ball. But this drop shot has the risk of hitting the ball out-of-bounds. P2 does not face this risk if P2 hits to P4's backhand, but the shorter trajectory gives P1 and P2 less time to get to their NVZ line after making the drop shot.

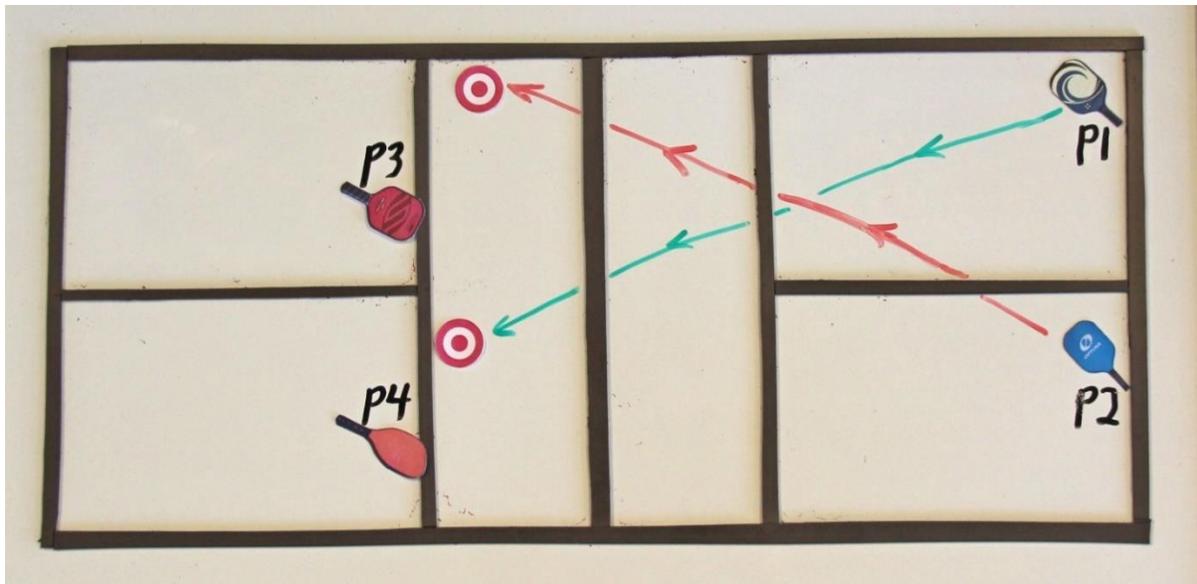


Figure M-4.2: Targeting Your Drop Shot

For P1, the preferred drop shot is to P4's backhand side (green arc) rather than to P3's backhand. The former carries no risk of hitting out-of-bounds, and its longer arc provides a little more time for P1 & P2 to get to the NVZ line.

Ideally, after executing a drop shot, both P1 and P2 should swiftly advance together to the NVZ line and be in a ready position before the instant an opponent hits a return shot. But P1 and P2 **SHOULD NOT AUTOMATICALLY** rush to the NVZ immediately after ball contact unless they are capable of something like a 90% success rate executing drop shots. If an attempted drop shot is too high and consequently attackable by P3 or P4, P1 and P2 will have virtually no defense against a smash or punch volley if they are close to their NVZ line.

So ... what to do? Suppose P1 is making the third shot of the rally. P2 should watch P1's shot mechanics (paddle arc, paddle speed) and the early trajectory of the ball to make a quick judgement on whether the shot will be too high and therefore attackable by

an opponent. If the shot appears to be too high, take no more than a step or two forward and prepare for the opponent's return shot. Otherwise, rush to the NVZ line.

The player hitting a drop shot is actually better able (than his/her partner) to make an early call on whether the drop shot attempt is likely to be good. In the current example, P1 gets a very good sense of the likelihood of his shot's success from the "feel" of his/her swing and contact with the ball. P1 can assist P2 by saying "Go!" if the shot is likely to be good, or "High!" if the shot is too high or too hard. P2 should rush forward on "Go!", but hold back on "High!".

If your opponents are a lefty/righty pair, then both of their backhands will be to the center on some rallies and to the sidelines on other rallies. You will need to make a mental note of the opponents' backhand sides at the beginning of each rally. Sometimes a lefty/righty pair will "stack"—that is, shift positions after the first or second shot of a rally so that both of their forehands are toward the center of the court.

Changing the Pace of the Ball

The term "pace" has a couple usages in pickleball. The "pace" of a shot refers to the speed of a shot. "Pace" can also refer to the tempo of shots in a rally—"high pace" in a rapid exchange of shots vs. "low pace" in a soft game (drop shots and dinking). Receiving a high-speed incoming shot and hitting it back with a substantially reduced speed is what we mean by "changing the pace of the ball".

It's inevitable that you and your partner will occasionally be put on the defensive in your backcourt or mid-court. Typically, it will occur when your attempted drop shot is too high, and an opponent firmly punches the ball back to you or your partner still in your backcourt. (Recall that a fundamental stratagem of pickleball is, whenever possible, to keep opponents in their backcourt because they are much more likely to hit back an attackable ball from that greater distance.) Now you are at a greater disadvantage than you were when you attempted a third-shot drop because:

- the incoming ball probably has a higher speed than the return of serve;
- you have less time to react; and
- you may have to volley the ball at a point a few inches above the ground.

Attempting to drive a forehand past your opponents is the worst option. They are likely to punch the ball hard to your backcourt (leaving you no better off) or, with a blocking volley, drop a difficult-to-get-to ball in your "kitchen".

If instead you choose to hit a deep lob from your backcourt, there is relatively little room for error between hitting the ball out of bounds and hitting a short lob giving your opponents an easy smash "kill" shot.

There is a third option which is the most difficult of the three, but if executed, the most effective. Basically, it is a matter of hitting the high-speed incoming ball softly enough to drop it in the opponents' kitchen. If you manage to execute the shot, you and your partner can rush to your NVZ line, thereby neutralizing the considerable advantage your opponents previously enjoyed. But unlike the third-shot drop where you usually have enough time to move to a comfortable hitting position, you might have to hit a groundstroke or a half-volley or a volley from a somewhat awkward position.

Concerning technique, you usually have little choice about the point where you contact the ball or the type of shot (volley or groundstroke) you use. What you need to do is “deaden” the ball’s speed to some extent by having little or no forward motion of the paddle as you contact the ball. Also, the looser your grip on the paddle, the slower will be the ball’s rebound off your paddle.

Paddle speed and grip firmness are the two variables you control to determine the “pace” of your return shot. It’s a matter of trying and failing (often miserably) dozens of times before you start to “get the hang of it”. With a lot of practice, it can become instinctive for you to “tune” these variables to the speed of the incoming ball.

Drills: per coaches’ instructions.

Homework and Videos:

Use what you have learned from this lesson in your regular club play. Focus on just one or two new elements or tactics at a time and work on them until they become an instinctive part of your play.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EHpSYw_MsG8 Taking Pace Off a Hard-Hit Ball

<http://www.pickleballchannel.com/PB411-Pace-Off-Ball-Scott-Moore>

Defending by Taking Pace Off the Ball

Lesson 3: Punch & Blocking Volleys; Defending Smashes

Punch and blocking volleys were covered in Lesson 3 of Module 3. (The following four paragraphs are copied from that Lesson.) As for all other shots, greater consistency, control, and accuracy are expected as you progress to higher skill ratings. That's why we return to them again in this lesson.

Punch Volleys; Drop or Blocking Volleys

A **volley** shot 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 level and eye level. Strategically, you should want to hit a punch volley or blocking volley to win the rally or at least make an opponent's next shot difficult.

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/or forces them to attempt to hit the ball from a difficult position.

Punch Volley Technique From a ready position at the NVZ line,

- If the ball is hit straight at you or somewhat to your backhand side, you first draw your arm (bent about 90 degrees at the elbow) back close to your body.
- Then you time a quick extension of the arm from the shoulder and elbow so that you contact the ball 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 hit to your forehand side, maintain your elbow at a 90-degree bend and fairly tight to your side 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.

Blocking Volley Technique Use a "soft paddle" to absorb enough of the ball's energy (from the opponent's hard shot) so that the ball drops softly into the opponents' kitchen. The opponents may not be able to get to the ball before its second bounce, or one of them can do so only by lunging for the ball. In the latter instance, the opponent often "pops up" the ball making it attackable by you or your partner.

Two elements are involved in making a "soft paddle". You relax your grip on the handle, making it much less firm than for a punch volley, and even less firm than for a long third-shot drop. Secondly, you draw the paddle back toward your body a small amount precisely timed so that the paddle face is moving in the same direction as the ball (but more slowly) just before the instant of contact.

If the opponent's shot comes from the backcourt, the volley can be either a soft blocking shot to the opponents' NVZ, or a moderately firm "punch" to the backcourt that keeps the opponents at a disadvantage deep in their end. If the shot comes from mid-court, the punch volley should be hard and directed at an opponent's feet or low in the gap between opponents.

Drills: per coaches' instructions.

Aside: Be clear on the distinction between the change-of-pace drop volley discussed in Lesson 2 and the punch volley & blocking volley revisited in this lesson. The punch volley and blocking volley are offensive shots normally hit from the NVZ line and intended to gain an advantage (if not win the rally) for the hitting team. The change-of-pace drop volley is a defensive/recovery shot usually hit from mid-court or backcourt to your opponents who are already at their NVZ. If executed, the drop volley can neutralize the opponents' positional advantage. Sometimes a drop volley will be your response to an opponent's punch volley.

Defending Smashes

Inevitably, you or your partner will hit a high shot that an opponent will attack with an overhead smash. This puts you in the realm of desperation pickleball.

If the opponent will be hitting the smash from mid-court or close to the NVZ line, both you and your partner should retreat (i) to give you more time to react to the smash and (ii) to give you a better chance of contacting the ball after it bounces.

In Lesson 1 you were discouraged from backpedaling to defend against offensive lobs. But the only realistic option against the smash is to backpedal--in the 2 seconds between your recognition of the high shot and the smashed ball arriving back, it is unrealistic for you to turn away from the opponent, retreat 2 or 3 steps, turn back, and then find the high-velocity ball somewhere in space between you and your opponent. Backpedaling is less risky if done while looking forward than while looking upward. Nonetheless, let "discretion be the better part of valor" and stay put if you have any problem backing up.

Particularly if you must stretch or lunge to contact the incoming smash below waist level, the most common shot is a deep lob. This shot gives you and your partner the best chance to recover from a "back-on-your-heels" defensive situation. Indeed, if the deep lob is well executed you can "turn the table", putting your opponents on the defensive if you and your partner can get back to your NVZ line while your opponents retreat to run down your lob.

Homework and Videos:

In your regular club play, use what you have learned from this lesson. Focus on just one or two new elements or tactics at a time and work on them until they become "second nature".

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FQa0N5TtSW0>

Blocking 2 Ways

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dLUiiy6b98>

Returning a Smash

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Llzd3xC1sk4>

Blocking a Smash

Lesson 4: Stacking; Sizing Up Opponents; Review

Stacking

Stacking refers to players switching sides on the court immediately after they serve or return serve. This is different than players switching sides during a rally to retrieve a lob or cover for a partner forced out of position. The former is usually a game-long strategy. The latter is a temporary situational tactic.

The most common stacking strategy is employed by lefty/righty pairs. If they change sides in the conventional way during a game, then sometimes both of their paddles are toward the centerline, and other times both paddles are toward the sideline. The latter orientation is generally (and rightly) regarded as a weakness because every shot by their opponents to center alley must be taken by a backhand, which is usually a player's weaker side.

To eliminate this weakness, when a player on a lefty/righty team must serve or receive serve from a side that puts his/her paddle toward the sideline, the two players switch sides immediately after they serve or return serve. Then both of their paddles are toward the centerline. To understand how they do this efficiently, a "video is worth a thousand words". Many videos on the topic include coverage of more exotic purposes and examples of stacking. Here is one that concentrates on the version discussed above. At the two-minute point, it shows clips from a game between two lefty/righty pairs—both employing stacking. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQ2SS3bDa8E>

When two righties or two lefties play as a team, the backhand defers to the forehand for balls within a foot or so of the centerline. But on a lefty/righty team, stacking or not, each player normally takes responsibility for all shots to his/her half of the court.

Sizing up Opponents

As your pickleball obsession and addiction starts to overpower you, you will want to take advantage of opponents' weaknesses. Here are some of the potential weaknesses to watch for (and exploit):

- How deep do they serve? Against a shallow server, you can take a position inside the baseline enabling you to hit sharper-angled tougher-to-handle returns of serve.
- How fast does your opponent move to their NVZ after his/her return of serve? A slow advance to the NVZ gives you a larger depth in which to drop your third shot. Better still, mentally project your opponent's forward motion and hit your shot so that the ball will arrive at the spot where his/her feet will be.
- Does either of your opponents back off the NVZ line to hit your longer dinks after they bounce? If so, keep pushing dinks to that opponent's feet.
- How good is their backhand dinking? Overall, which individual has the weaker dink game? In serious/tournament competition, that player will be "picked on".
- Does either opponent's paddle drop below waist level while engaged in dinking? If so, it is easier to lob over that person. Also, you can occasionally flick a dink shot at his/her torso. Even if he/she quickly raises his/her paddle to contact your shot, the upward movement often "pops up" the ball for you or your partner to attack.

- Does either opponent have a noticeably weak backhand? If so, hit more to that person's backhand.
- How effective are opponents at retreating to defend offensive lobs? Choose lobbing frequency accordingly.
- Are your opponents "bangers" who favor hard volleying and groundstrokes? If so, force them into the "soft" game with your drop shots and dinking.

Drills: per coaches' instructions.

Concluding Comments: Our lessons have covered quite a lot in a rather short time. You should now have the knowledge of what you should be able to do at the 3.5 skill level. But implementing all of it at game-speed can be another matter. Our final suggestion is to pick one weak shot or other aspect of your game and focus just on it for a few days. Work on it until proper execution becomes second nature. Then focus on another element of your game until it too becomes habitual, and so on.