

Pickleball-

The Sun City Festival Way

Module 2: Advancing from 2.0 to 2.5 Player's Guide

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

Preamble

It is expected that some who have been playing pickleball for a while will choose to enter our Club's player development series at this Module 2 level. For that reason the following Q&A section regarding our Player Development Program is repeated from Module 1.

Those who have taken Module 1 will see a number of similarities in the instructions, drills, and activities to those encountered in Module 1. This is partly because some participants have not taken Module 1—we want to be sure they are employing proper shot mechanics. In addition, progress through the skill ratings is much about becoming more proficient and strategic at the “same old” shots. Nonetheless, two new shots will be introduced in Module 2.

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 player. 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 2.0 player become a 3.5 player in just 12 weeks (3 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 2.5 Level

Overall Objective

- To raise the player's skills from the 2.0 level to the 2.5 level.

Individual Skills and Shot Execution

In addition to the skills specified in Module 1 for a 2.0 rating, a 2.5 level player:

- Demonstrates a simple pendulum swing on forehand and backhand dink shots;
- Demonstrates proper side-step movement while dinking at the NVZ line;
- Makes 50% of forehand down-the-line (i.e., within 2 feet of the line) dink shots;
- Makes 50% of forehand cross-court dink shots;
- Makes 50% of backhand down-the-line (i.e., within 2 feet of the line) dink shots;
- Makes 50% of backhand cross-court dink shots;
- Makes 40% of forehand 3rd-shot drop shots from the mid-court (transition) area;
- Makes 40% of backhand 3rd-shot drop shots from the mid-court area;
- Makes 50% of forehand punch volleys (from the NVZ line to at least mid-court depth);
- Makes 50% of backhand punch volleys (from the NVZ line to at least mid-court depth);
- Executes 20% of overhead returns of shallow lobs (to mid-court) while demonstrating the proper sideways turn (and retreat if needed);
- Serves (from both "deuce" & "ad" courts) such that 40% land in the deep $\frac{1}{3}$ of the court;
- Returns serves (from both "deuce" & "ad" courts) such that 40% land in the deep $\frac{1}{3}$ of the court.

Positioning and Game Strategy

In a doubles dinking game, the player:

- Steps in and out of the NVZ at the appropriate times;
- Demonstrates proper side-step movement to reach the ball;
- Returns to the proper ready position after making a dink shot;
- Attempts both forward and cross-court backhand dink shots;

In doubles match play, the player:

- Attempts deep (to back $\frac{1}{3}$ of court) serves and returns of serve.
- Promptly advances to the NVZ line after returning a serve, but stops the advance if the third shot of the rally comes back before s/he reaches NVZ line;
- Other than on the return of serve, advances and retreats side-by-side with partner;
- Attempts to anticipate and move to the best position to make a groundstroke or volley;
- Attempts third-shot drop from the back $\frac{1}{3}$ of the court;
- Communicates with partner on balls near the center line; defers to partner's forehand;
- Demonstrates court and position awareness by not hitting balls that would otherwise land out of bounds.

Lesson 1: Dinking; Introduction to the Drop Shot

At intermediate and higher levels of play, most rallies evolve to the “dinking game” with both teams at their NVZ lines making short soft shots intended to land in the opponents’ NVZ. (A separate online document titled “Pickleball Essentials” presents a brief 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.

Dinking Technique: Your coaches will demonstrate the forehand dink shot. Perform:

- A smooth easy pendulum swing 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 make contact with the ball;
- A return to the ready position—paddle at chest/shoulder level with paddle’s face perpendicular to the net or slightly angled to the backhand; a slightly crouched position on the balls of the feet spaced at slightly more than shoulder width.

Drills: per coaches’ instructions.

Your dinking drills will finish with “The Dinking Game” wherein players must hit only dinks that land in the opponents’ NVZ until the ball is hit out of bounds or into the net. Games to 5, win by 1. The server calls out the score and changes sides as in a normal game. Each player should:

- Return to the ready position after making a dink shot;
- Return quickly to the NVZ line if s/he moves off the line to hit the ball;
- Force opponents to move from side to-side by hitting cross-court dinks and by dinking to both their forehand and backhand sides;
- Communicate with her/his partner on shots landing near the (extension of the) center line. The player whose forehand is closer to the center line should take balls that will bounce near the center line. That player should say “mine” or “got it” as early as possible.

Drop Shot: A drop shot is a softly hit arching shot that lands in the opponents’ NVZ. It is the preferred shot for the third shot in a rally. Recall that after a fairly deep return of serve, the serving team is at a positional disadvantage—from deep in its end the serving team normally faces opponents ready and waiting at their NVZ line. A well-executed third-shot drop shot gives the serving team an opportunity to advance to their NVZ line, thereby neutralizing their opponents’ positional advantage.

Drop Shot Technique: Your coaches will demonstrate the drop shot.

The mechanics combine elements of the dink shot and the groundstroke. The body movement and positioning are similar to that for the groundstroke. But the swing itself is more like the straight-arm stiff-wrist pendulum swing for a dink shot.

- Move to the appropriate location and step forward to the ball ...
- making a pendulum swing so that ...
- you can contact the ball as it begins its descent after the bounce ...
- at a point that is a little to the side and in front of your leading knee.

In contrast to the faster pace and flatter trajectory of the forehand groundstroke, the pendulum swing enables you to hit a soft arching shot that: (i) has a higher probability of landing in the opponents' NVZ, and (ii) gives you and your partner more time to advance to your NVZ line after hitting the drop shot. The longer the drop shot you need to make, the greater the backswing before your pendulum swing, and the slightly higher speed and longer follow-through on your swing.

Cautionary note: Often a player is so eager to see if her/his drop shot is on a good trajectory for landing in the opponents' kitchen that s/he raises her/his head before contacting the ball. As you move to the spot to hit a drop shot, be aware from your peripheral vision of your distance from the net, and then keep your head down through the pendulum swing (actually seeing the paddle make contact with the ball).

Drills: per coaches' instructions.

Homework and Videos:

Watch the following videos to reinforce and extend what you learned in this lesson. Arrange to get together with a partner to work on the skills and drills introduced in this lesson and in the following videos.

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.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LudiKnT6WwY	Backhand Dink
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EapzBLduLz0	Dinking Game Drill
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EAUYwOu9iJ0	Basic Third Shot Drop
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QuekFbM_sjM	Drop Shot Drill (all distances)

Lesson 2: Groundstroke; Serve; Return of Serve

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

The key to an effective ground stroke is to anticipate the ball’s trajectory and be settled at the optimal position for striking the ball after it bounces. From the instant the ball leaves your opponent’s paddle, you should project the ball’s path 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 the location to where you should go. Ideally you should be settled “on location” when the ball arrives. Then your only motion should be the groundstroke mechanics.

The **mechanics of the forehand and backhand groundstrokes** are very similar.

- 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 **forehand/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 slightly low-to-high path.
- Contact should be on your **forehand/backhand** side at a point that is: (1) ahead of your front knee and (2) near the start of the ball’s descent after it bounces.
- Follow through with the face of the paddle pointing toward the target.

The minor differences are that, for the backhand groundstroke:

- (1) There is a somewhat deeper dip/bending at the knees as you make the split step and backswing.
- (2) The point of contact with the ball is somewhat further forward of the front knee.

Drills: per coaches’ instructions.

Serve and Return of Serve:

There are **two “cardinal sins” in pickleball**. They are (1) hitting your serve into the net or out of bounds, and (2) hitting your return of serve into the net or out of bounds. In pickleball a legitimate service “ace” is very rare. Similarly, it is very difficult to hit a rally-winning return of serve if the serve was reasonably good. If you seek pickleball glory by attempting to hit either a service ace or a return-of-serve winner, you are much more likely to commit a pickleball sin.

The primary rules for the serve 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.

Strategy and Technique for the Serve

If you watch a match between elite players, you will notice that most of them hit rather “soft” serves that land deep in the opponent’s backcourt. The reason for hitting serves deep is that it makes it difficult for the receiver to hit a hard-to-handle or rally-winning return of serve. With good serve mechanics and a moderate amount of practice, you should be able to consistently hit the same sort of soft deep serve.

Rather than treating the serve as a new type of shot, just make a minor change to the mechanics for the forehand groundstroke. With a short toss of the ball out from your body, you can send the ball to the ideal contact spot for the forehand groundstroke. The forward swing will be somewhat slower/easier than the usual forehand groundstroke, and on more of a low-to-high path to give the ball a lower-speed but higher trajectory.

Strategy and Technique for the Return of Serve

You must let the ball bounce before hitting the return of serve. Therefore, you should stand at 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 a return of serve.

You should prefer to take the return of serve with 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. A backhand return of serve should be necessary only on serves hit sharply to your backhand side.

If you hit a hard flat groundstroke from your backcourt as a return of serve, there is little room for error between hitting the ball into the net and hitting it beyond the opponents’ baseline. And unless one of your opponents has some sort of physical limitation, one of them can readily get to any groundstroke you hit inbounds.

Therefore, even elite players rarely attempt to hit “a winner” with their service return. The preferred approach is simply to hit a soft arching shot that bounces deep in the serving team’s backcourt. (Recall that they must let the ball bounce before hitting the third shot of the rally.) By hitting a soft arching deep return of serve, you can advance and join your partner at the NVZ line by the time your opponents hit the third shot of the rally. This gives you and your partner a positional advantage over your opponents who must hit the third shot from deep in their backcourt. Again, with a moderate amount of practice, you should be able to consistently hit a soft return of serve to your opponents’ backcourt.

Drills: per coaches’ instructions. At the 2.5 level, at least 40% of your serves and returns of serve should bounce in the deep half of your opponents’ court.

Homework and Videos:

Encourage the players to practise between lessons. The following URLs are included in the Player’s Guide. They provide follow-up reinforcement and ideas for drills.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oDD2GY3ywlq>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wUaUegE-b6Q>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fK4bFs6RkdI>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YOASInnqjq0>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ovaoROTczlY>

How to Hit Great Groundstrokes
Pickleball Serving Rules
The Underhand Serve
Pickleball Serve-Legal & Effective
Be at the NVZ--Mistakes & Benefits

Lesson 3: Punch Volley; Overhead; Drop Shot

Punch Volley Strategy

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 the top-of-the-net 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 position.

Punch Volley Technique

From the ready position,

- For a ball coming 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 12-24 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.

If the opponent's shot comes from the backcourt, the volley can be a **blocking volley**—a soft blocking shot that drops the ball in the opponents' NVZ, or a hard "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 firm and directed at an opponent's feet or low in the gap between opponents.

Drills: per coaches' instructions.

Overhead—What and When?

The "overhead" or "overhead smash" is a shot you use when an opponent lofts or lobs a ball over your or your partner's head, and you can comfortably get to the spot where you can take the ball in the air (before it bounces). During dinking play, an opponent may hit an *offensive* lob over your head with the intent that it land inbounds but still out of your reach. Or an opponent may, when put on the defensive by a well-hit well-placed shot by you or your partner, hit a high deep shot in an attempt to recover position and "get back in the rally".

Warning: Except for just one or two small steps, never "peddle backwards" (that is, never attempt to take several backward steps without turning away from facing the net) in an attempt to "get under" an opponent's lob—there is too high a risk of losing your balance, falling backward, and sustaining a nasty head injury.

Overhead (Smash) Technique

The procedure for “running down” a lob and hitting the overhead smash is:

- Judge from the ball’s early trajectory where it will land ;
- Turn to your forehand side (it might require more than a 180-degree turn) and run to the spot from which you can hit the descending ball ...
- ... while turned about 60-degrees (from facing the net to your forehand side) by swinging your fully extended arm and ...
- ... making contact with the ball at a point about one foot ahead of your forehand shoulder just after the peak of your overhead swing.
- Transfer weight from the back to the forward foot through your swing.
- Snap your wrist at the moment of contact giving the paddle face a downward angle and the ball a downward (rather than flat) trajectory.

Drills: per coaches’ instructions.

Drop Shot

The **drop shot** was introduced in Lesson 1. We return to it now because of its difficulty and importance. Recall that it is the most common third shot in a rally, enabling the team that originally served to advance to their NVZ line, thereby neutralizing the positional advantage their opponents previously held.

Homework and Videos:

Watch the following videos to reinforce and extend what you learned in this lesson. Arrange to get together with a partner to work on the skills and drills introduced in this lesson and in the following videos.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=44LOdN0KG00>

Pickleball Blocking Basics

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

Drop Shot Drill (all distances)

Lesson 4: Skill Assessment

In this 4th and final lesson of Module 2 we will approximate the assessment procedure that would be carried out by a Certified Rating Specialist (CRS) from the IPTPA.

The IPTPA skill assessment has three main components:

- ✓ Individual shot execution;
- ✓ Modified dinking game;
- ✓ Regular match play.

Individual Shot Execution Back on page 4, the list of “Individual Skills and Shot Execution” specified (as percentages) the proficiency you should have on various shots at the 2.5 level. For the first component of the testing, your coach will count and record the number of times you are successful on a pre-determined number of shot opportunities (specified on the Module 2 Scoresheet). Except for the serve, you will be “fed” balls by your coach.

Modified Dinking Game This component is intended to demonstrate your dinking skills in doubles competition.

Two teams start at their NVZ lines. The coach puts the ball into play for each rally by tossing it into the NVZ from the sideline. To be good, a shot must land in the opponents’ NVZ. The game is to 4 points with rally scoring (that is, a point is awarded to the winner of each rally).

Then you play two more games to 4—each game with a different partner. In an actual IPTPA Assessment, all players in a group of 4 players will be seeking the same rating. The CRS scores each player on both the proficiency of his/her dinking game and the total points his/her teams obtains in the 3 dinking games.

Regular Match Play This third component of the rating assessment allows you to demonstrate your skills, movement, and positioning in normal competitive doubles play. With a group of 4 players, you play 3 games to 7, each with a different partner.

In an actual IPTPA Assessment, the CRS scores each player on both the observed quality of his/her play and the total points his/her teams obtain in the 3 games.

Concluding Comments: Your coach will likely be willing to offer his/her opinion as to whether you are prepared to move on to Module 3 (Advancing from 2.5 to 3.0), and what aspect of your shot execution or game play needs the most work. (You will also have your actual scores from the first component of the assessment process.)

In social and club play, pick just one or two aspects of your game to work on 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 3