

# **Pickleball-**

## **The Sun City Festival Way**

### **Module 3: Advancing from 2.5 to 3.0 Player's Guide**

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## Preamble

Modules 1 and 2 (corresponding to pickleball skill ratings of 2.0 and 2.5) were mostly concerned with:

- the mechanics of various shots;
- basic movement and positioning of players;
- basic pickleball strategy.

Advancing to levels 3.0, 3.5, and 4.0 is more concerned with:

- 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 3.0 Level

### Overall Objective

- To raise the player's skills from the 2.5 level to the 3.0 level

### Individual Skills and Shot Execution

In addition to the skills specified in Modules 1 & 2 for 2.0 and 2.5 ratings, a 3.0 level player:

- Can consistently dink while changing direction from cross-court to down-the-line forehand & backhand;
- Makes 60% of forehand down-the-line (i.e., within 2 feet of the line) dink shots;
- Makes 60% of forehand cross-court dink shots;
- Makes 60% of backhand down-the-line (i.e., within 2 feet of the line) dink shots;
- Makes 60% of backhand cross-court dink shots;
- Makes 50% of forehand 3<sup>rd</sup>-shot drop shots from the transition area;
- Makes 50% of backhand 3<sup>rd</sup>-shot drop shots from the transition area;
- Makes 20% of forehand 3<sup>rd</sup>-shot drop shots from the baseline;
- Makes 20% of backhand 3<sup>rd</sup>-shot drop shots from the baseline;
- Makes 60% of forehand punch volleys (from the NVZ line to at least mid-court depth);
- Makes 60% of backhand punch volleys (from the NVZ line to at least mid-court depth);
- Executes 40% of overhead returns of lobs while demonstrating proper sideways turn and arm position;
- Serves (from both "deuce" & "ad" courts) such that 60% bounce in the deep  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the court;
- Returns serves (from both "deuce" & "ad" courts) such that 60% land in the deep  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the court;
- Executes 40% of offensive lobs from the NVZ line.

## **Positioning and Game Strategy**

In a doubles dinking game, a doubles team:

- 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;
- 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.

In doubles match play, a player:

- Consistently serves and returns serves deep (to the back  $\frac{1}{3}$  of court);
- Employs a drop shot on at least 50% of third shots;
- 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 a beginning ability to react quickly to 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 not hitting balls that would be better taken by his partner.

## **Lesson 1: Intentional Dinking; Offensive Lob**

The technique/mechanics for dinking were covered in Lesson 1 of Modules 1 and 2. It would be beneficial for you to review them before going out for Lesson 1 of this module.

Dinking at the 2.0 and 2.5 levels of play is primarily concerned with avoiding mistakes. That is, you are mainly trying to dink the ball back to the opponents' NVZ without hitting the ball into the net, or out of bounds, or "popping up" the ball where an opponent can smash back a rally-winning shot. This is a defensive and rather negative approach to dinking.

As you progress to the 3.0 and higher levels, you need to increasingly turn dinking into a positive offensive component of your game. That is, you should make dink shots that:

- Move your opponents side-to-side, forcing them to reach and/or hit their return shot while "on the move", or causing one of them to become "out of position";
- Are aimed at spots which make it more difficult for an opponent to hit a good return dink;
- Help you set up an **offensive lob** (introduced later in this lesson).

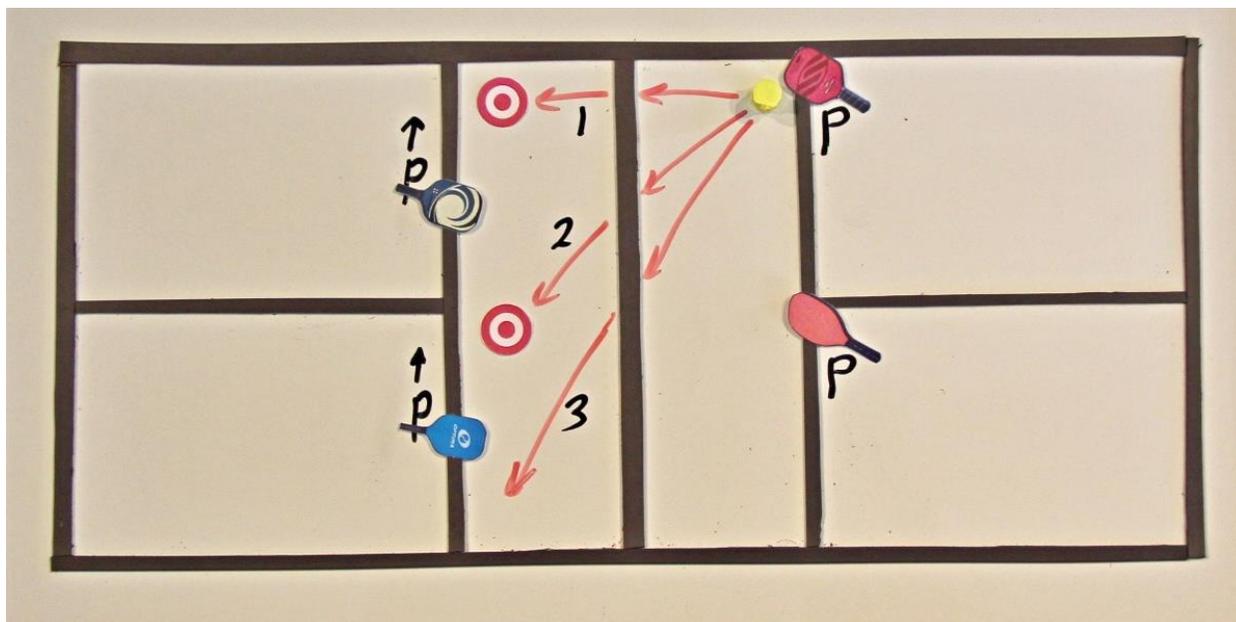
Well-placed dink shots on your part will be to little avail if you are not prepared for and fail to capitalize upon "attackable" balls hit back by an opponent. When you are at the NVZ line and engaged in dinking against your opponents, an **attackable ball** is a ball that you or your partner can readily reach and strike when it is at least 36 inches above the ground--think "belly-button or higher" for a player 5' 6" to 5' 11" tall. (Recall that the net's height is 34" at center court and 36" at the sidelines.) Balls taken at these heights can be hit back with force. For balls contacted between 36" and eye level, your "hard" return will usually be a forehand or backhand punch volley. Higher balls should be hit with overhead (forehand or backhand) smashes. The higher the point of contact (between 36" and full overhead extension of your arm), the better your angles and the more forcefully you can hit the ball.

### **Dinking Strategies**

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 room for 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 (which this lesson discusses next.)
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.

The following diagrams help us visualize some dinking strategies. Each “P” represents a player and the red targets indicate the target areas that will force an opponent to receive the dink shot on his/her backhand.

In Figure M-3.1, there are four right-handed players. The player at upper right is about to return a dink shot that was hit to his/her forehand side. Note that during the trajectory of the incoming ball, both players on the right side of the court shifted to their right to occupy the positions shown. Meanwhile, the pair on the left shift 3 or 4 feet to their left (as indicated by the black arrows) to defend against a return shot down-the-line or through-the-middle between them. This sideways shifting to guard against shots down-the-line or through-the-middle is known as “**shading**”. A pair should move together as though tied by a tether about 10-feet long.



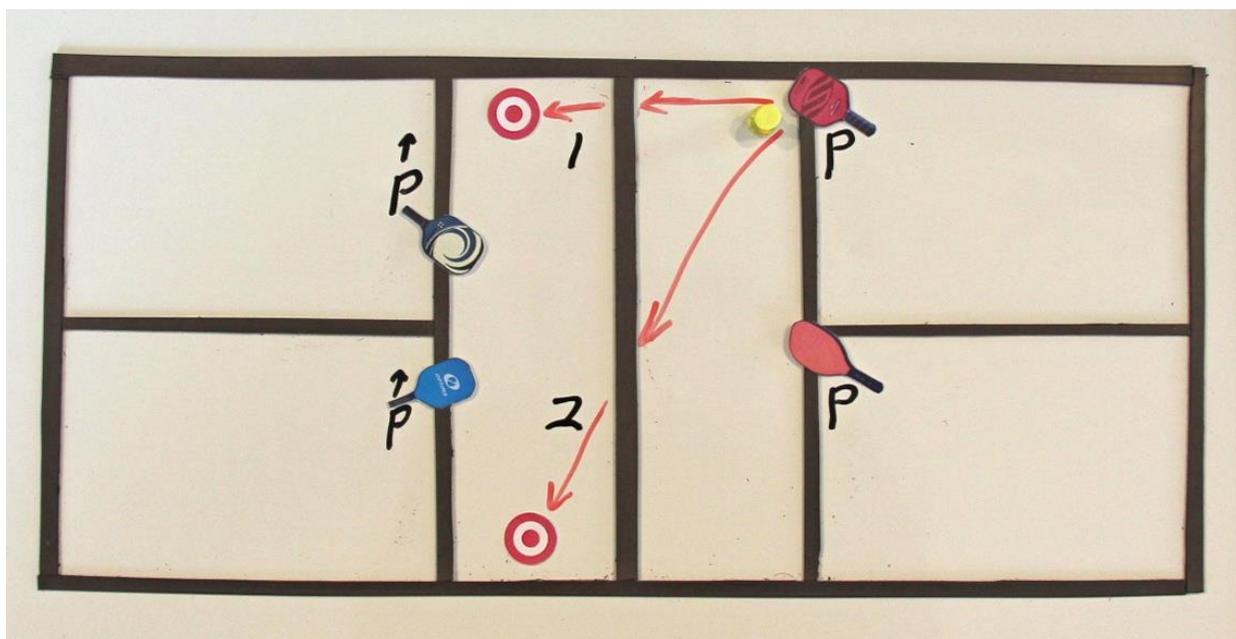
**Figure M-3.1:** Preferred Dink Shots

The three preferred dink shots for the player at upper right are indicated. Shots 1 and 2 are to locations forcing an opponent to take the shot on his/her backhand. Shot 1 is more difficult to make than Shot 2—it is a shorter shot over the highest part of the net. Of the three shots, Shot 1 has the highest risk of being “attackable” by the opponent or landing out of bounds at the sideline. Shot 3 is arguably the easiest and safest shot in terms of the having the lowest probability of hitting the net or being attackable by an opponent. Shot 3 also forces the opponents to shift several feet back to their right, perhaps causing the opponent to reach and mishit the ball while on the move. But Shot 3 does deliver the ball to the opponent’s forehand giving him/her more shot options (down-the-line, through-the-middle, cross-court, or offensive lob) employing the better accuracy and reliability of forehand shots.

Each preferred shot has its advantages and disadvantages. The best choice is often dictated by your opponents—the shot they seem to have the most difficulty handling. Nevertheless, in competitive play, you need to “mix up” your shots to “keep your opponents guessing”.

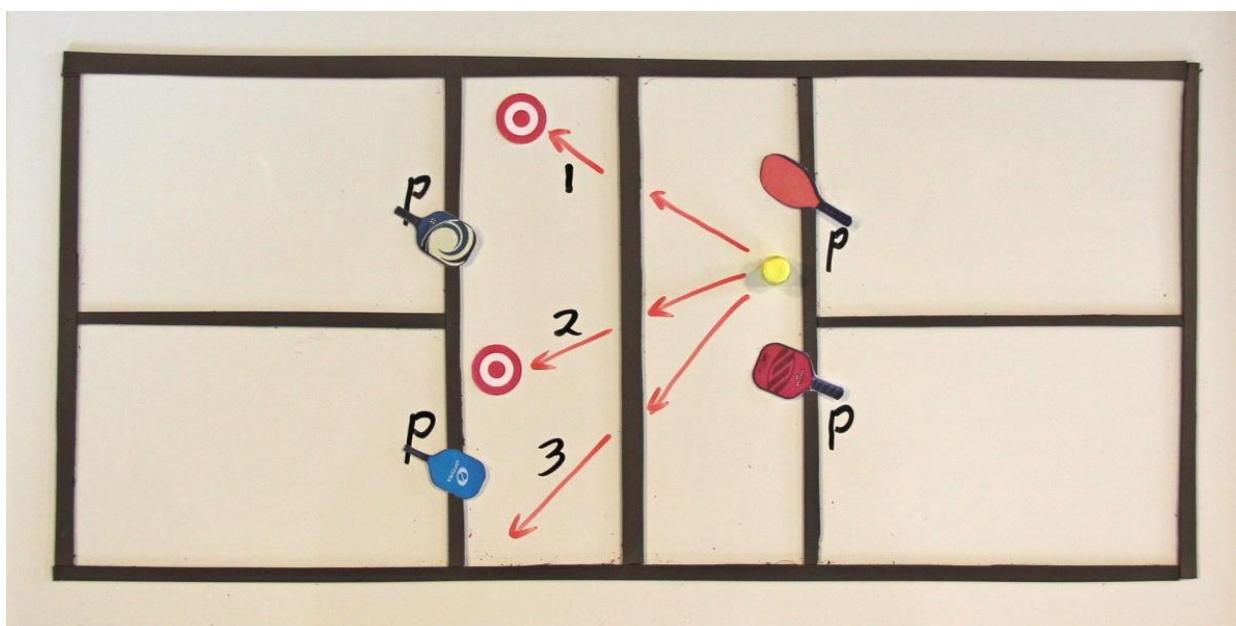
Regarding Shot 2, it will frequently happen that both players on the left side of the court can readily get to the ball. This is where communication between players is very important. The backhand should defer to the forehand. The forehand player should shout “mine” or “got it” as early as possible.

In Figure M-3.2, the opposing team is a lefty/righty pair. Now the target areas for the opponents' backhands are both near the sidelines. Here Shot 2 is clearly preferred over Shot 1—it is easier, safer, and still to an opponent's backhand.



**Figure M-3.2:** Preferred Dink Shots (vs. Lefty/Righty Pair)

In Figure M-3.3, the player at upper right is taking the incoming dink shot on his/her backhand. This makes the return dink shot more difficult, especially if it has bounced close to his/her feet. Shots 2 and 3 are made more difficult because the backhand paddle motion is not the natural cross-body movement for the backhand. (That's why the forehand player should take the shot if s/he can readily reach the ball.) Shot 1 is the easiest safest shot for most players.



**Figure M-3.3:** Preferred Dink Shots (Backhand Example)

At the beginning of a rally you should to make a mental note of your opponents' backhand sides. (This is relevant for most shots you will make, not just for dinking strategy.) Each time you or your opponents switch sides, you should think about what your preferred dink shot targets will be if you engage in dinking.

Be patient—your opponents will sometimes make a good dink shot against which your best choice may be just to survive by hitting back an unattackable ball anywhere in the NVZ. Wait to make your strategic shots on balls you can comfortably handle.

A dinking scenario you should avoid is a straight ahead “mano-a-mano” contest with you hitting backhand dinks along a sideline to your opponent’s forehand. The clear advantage is with the forehand player.

**Drills:** per coaches’ instructions.

### **The Offensive Lob**

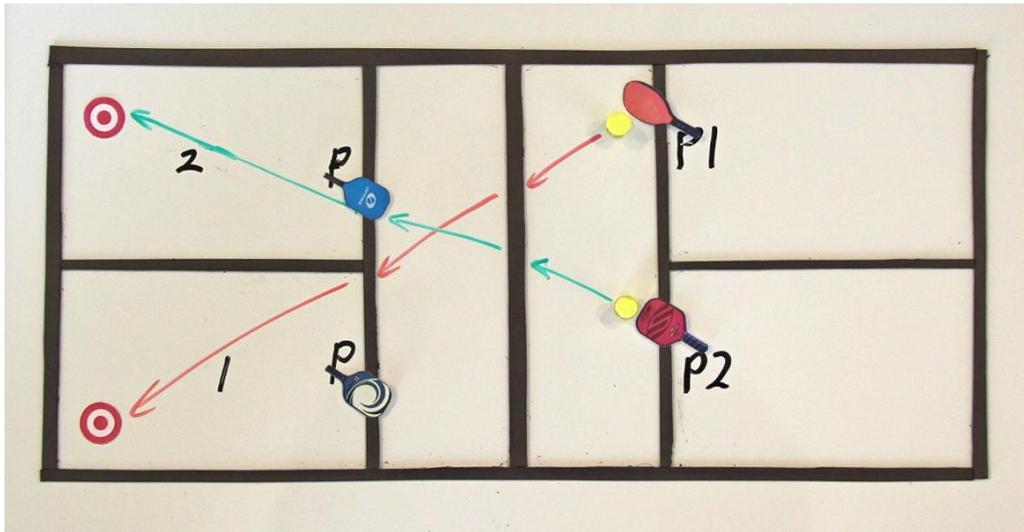
Probably the most difficult of the standard set of shots in pickleball is the offensive lob. At the 3.0 level, you should try to execute it only on your forehand side. The appropriate situation for an offensive lob is when:

- Your opponents are very close to the NVZ line;
- A dink shot has been hit to your forehand;
- You can contact the ball in your dinking “sweet spot”;
- You are in good balance and do not need to rush your shot.

The shot itself gives the ball a high arching trajectory above the reach of your opponents and bouncing deep in the backcourt. The shot mechanics are similar to those for a dink shot, but with a little longer backswing, a faster swing, and a longer follow-through to give the ball the added loft and distance.

Particularly for players who are ...uh ... past their “best-before dates”, it is difficult to run down the ball. (They should not try to back-peddle to get to the ball—the risk of falling backward is too great.) Even if a defender gets to the ball, his/her team is put on the defensive because he/she must now hit from his/her backcourt to the other team advantageously positioned at its NVZ line.

Figure M-3.4 shows the two preferred offensive lobs in a game among right-handed players. Diagonal lobs allow more “room for error” because of the greater distance to the baseline. Shot 1 from P1’s position is the most preferred because of its longer distance and its trajectory over the diagonally opposite opponent’s backhand shoulder (making it less likely that the opponent can reach up and intercept a low-trajectory lob). Offensive lob 2 passes over the forehead side of the diagonally opposite opponent, improving that opponent’s chance of intercepting a low-trajectory lob.



**Figure M-3.4:** Preferred Offensive Lobs

**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. Meet up with someone from this class to practise. The following URLs provide reinforcement and ideas for drills.

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mEI5l8aY3Ho&t=20s> Improve Your Dink Shot
- <http://primetimepickleball.com/dink-like-a-pro-dinking-drill-games-to-5-points-so-that-youre-on-point-at-the-nvz-line/> Dinking Game Drill
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YSKyY4jvyMI> Pickleball Lob
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nv-uBitJ52c> Offensive Lob Drill
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qdv1kT0q0pQ> Defending the Lob

## **Lesson 2: Drop Shots; Overhead Smash**

The mechanics of the **drop shot** and the **overhead smash** were presented in Module 2. At the 3.0 level, improved consistency is expected in the execution of drop shots and overhead smashes. In game play, you should be attempting drop shots on most third shots in rallies.

**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. Meet up with someone from this class to practise. The following URLs provide reinforcement and ideas for drills.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4n0wVXVO8o4> Third Shot Drill

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N3Xocq7oNy8> Returning the Third Shot Drop

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y3QNj6qjZCY> Improve Your Third Shot Drop

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OdjEBqih\\_2Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OdjEBqih_2Q) Keys to a Good Overhead Smash

### **Lesson 3: Ground Strokes; Volleying; Diagnosing and Correcting Errors**

The mechanics of the **forehand and backhand groundstrokes** were covered in Lesson 2 of Module 2. The techniques for the punch volley and the blocking volley were covered in Lesson 3 of Module 2.

A **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. Strategically, you should want to make either of the following shots to win the rally or at least make one of your 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 forces them to attempt to hit the ball from a difficult position.
- For a **blocking volley**, with a “soft” paddle you absorb enough of the ball's energy (from the opponent's hard shot) 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.

If the opponent's shot comes from the backcourt, the punch volley can be either 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.

#### **Diagnosing and Correcting Errors**

Many players seem to make one or another type of bad shot with frustrating frequency. Here we mention a few of them and suggest measures to correct them.

1. Entirely missing the ball; hitting the ball on the edge of your paddle; mishitting attackable balls. These can all be consequences of “taking your eye off the ball”. Without realizing it, we tend to take our eye off the ball too early because (i) we look up at the target area and (ii) we are so eager to see the result of our shot. It is a very subtle and insidious problem—we often think we are keeping our eye on the ball even when we fail to do so.

Here's the remedy: Intentionally sub-vocalize “Bop!” at the precise instant your paddle meets the ball. This forces you to watch the ball right to the nanosecond of contact! Whenever mishitting the ball becomes a problem, go back to this remedy.

2. When at the NVZ line, hitting attackable balls into the net. This one completely puzzles and frustrates some players (not to mention their partners). If you give it some thought, it “takes some doing” to hit a ball from a 6-foot height into a 34-inch high net just 7 feet away! But most of us do it at least occasionally.

The most common cause is making contact with the ball too far in front of our body. To drive home the point, pick up your paddle and bring your extended arm “over the top” stopping at a 45-degree angle. At that point the sweet spot on your paddle is about 2 feet in front of your body. But your paddle face is making a 45-degree angle with the ground! So if that is the point of contact between paddle and ball, the ball will be hit down at about a 45-degree angle below the horizontal. The ball quickly does the math and physics ... and heads for the net.

The remedy—a little more patience. Wait an additional fraction of a second to hit the ball at point closer to the plane of your body—something like 12 inches in front of your body. Also, don’t be so hyper-aggressive and eager to hit the world’s fastest hardest kill shot—your super-fast swing takes the paddle too far in front of your body at the instant of contact and drives the ball into the net.

3. Popping up balls that your opponents can attack. This tends to happen when you make a long stretch to the side or forward of your body in order to reach low balls (whether attempting dink shots, drop shots, or ground strokes). To illustrate, again take your paddle and extend your arm (to either your backhand or forehand side) as though attempting to contact a ball about 1 foot off the ground and 1 foot or so ahead of your body. Our human anatomy naturally causes the paddle face to be tilted upward. While our shot will need some loft, the angle of the paddle face often gives the ball too much arc.

Remedy: The problem can be substantially reduced by moving early and moving quickly to an optimal location such that you don’t have to make a long reach for the ball. Ideally you should contact with the ball at the optimal point specified in Modules 1 and 2 for the mechanics of your chosen shot.

4. Hitting attackable balls and smashes out-of-bounds beyond the baseline. Most golden-agers have lost some flexibility in their shoulders (and everywhere else). Consequently, when attempting to smash lobs or high attackable balls at the NVZ line, we often swing the paddle through a rather flat arc at or just above head level, rather than through a more pronounced arc made by swinging an extended arm “over the top”. A paddle’s flat arc imparts a flat trajectory to the ball, frequently driving the ball beyond the baseline. An over-the-top swing imparts more of a downward component to the ball’s trajectory, allowing it to be directed at the feet of an opponent. The remedy? Test-drive swinging over the top to get the “feel” (and pain?) of a proper overhead swing. If that’s problematic for you, you’ll have to “take some heat off” your approximation of the overhead smash.

#### **Homework and Videos:**

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

Pickleball Blocking Basics

## **Lesson 4: Skill Assessment**

In this 4<sup>th</sup> and final lesson of Module 3 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;
- ✓ Drop-shot game;
- ✓ Regular match play.

**Individual Shot Execution** Back on page 2, the list of “Individual Skills and Shot Execution” specified (as percentages) the proficiency you should have on various shots at the 3.0 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 3 Scoresheet). Your coach will do the feeding of balls.

### **Modified Play: Third-Shot Drop Game**

In this game, a rally begins with Team A at their NVZ line and Team B about 5 feet in from their baseline. The coach feeds the ball so that it bounces 2 or 3 feet in front of one of the Team B players who **must** hit a good drop shot. (Team B then advances to their NVZ line.) If the drop shot fails to land in Team A’s NVZ, it’s a point for Team A. Otherwise, the rally continues with no restrictions on shots. The coach hits to a different player to start each rally.

Time permitting, a group of four plays 3 games to 7 (rally scoring, win by 1). A group of five plays 4 games to 6 (win by 1). After each game, players rotate one position clockwise so that every game is with a different partner and no player sits out more than one game.

**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 4 (Advancing from 3.0 to 3.5), 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 one or two additional elements until they too become habitual.

Happy pickleballing! See you in Module 4 ....