

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 60% of forehand down-the-line 3rd-shot drop shots from transition area;
- Makes 60% of forehand cross-court 3rd-shot drop shots from transition area;
- Makes 60% of backhand down-the-line 3rd-shot drop shots from transition area;
- Makes 60% of backhand cross-court 3rd-shot drop shots from transition area;
- Makes 40% of forehand 3rd-shot drop shots from the baseline;
- Makes 40% of backhand 3rd-shot drop shots from the baseline;
- Makes 70% of forehand punch volleys with depth and direction control;
- Makes 70% of 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 (from both “deuce” & “ad” courts) such that 80% bounce in the deep 1/3 of the court;
- Returns serves (from both “deuce” & “ad” courts) such that 80% land in the deep 1/3 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;
- 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 70% of third shots;
- Based on the early trajectory of 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 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/her partner.

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

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

Strategic Dinking

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
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 on the early trajectory of the ball) 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 avoid it by volleying an incoming dink shot on such a trajectory.

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

Hitting & Defending the Offensive Lob

The mechanics and strategic use of the offensive lob were described on pages 7 and 8 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 contact 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 deep lob over P4. As soon as P3 and P4 recognize from the ball's early speed and trajectory (dashed red curve) 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 (black 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 proper 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 (black 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 (green arrow). But if P3's drop shot is too high or lob is too shot, P3 should stay in the backcourt and shout "Back!" to warn her/his partner to retreat to the mid- or backcourt in anticipation of the opponents hitting back an overhead smash or a hard punch volley.

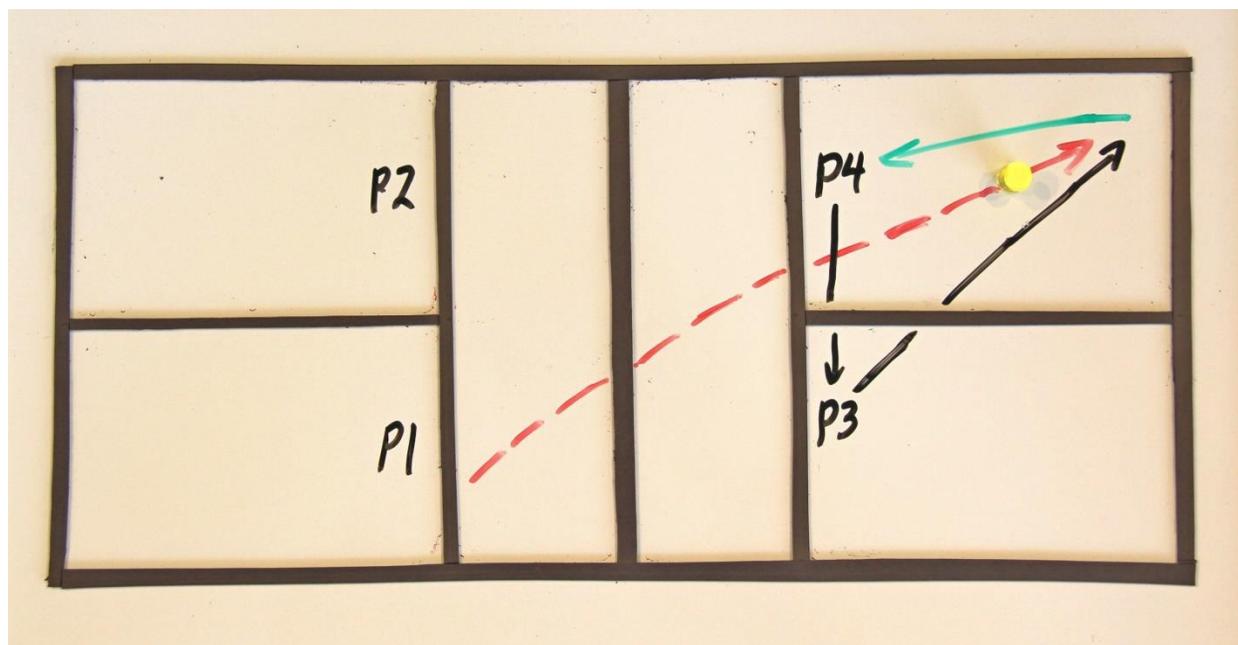


Figure M-4.1: Defending a Deep Lob

Cautionary Note: In social and Pickleball Club play, most players assume they need to cover all lobs to their 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.

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=qdv1kT0q0pQ>

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 risks 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.

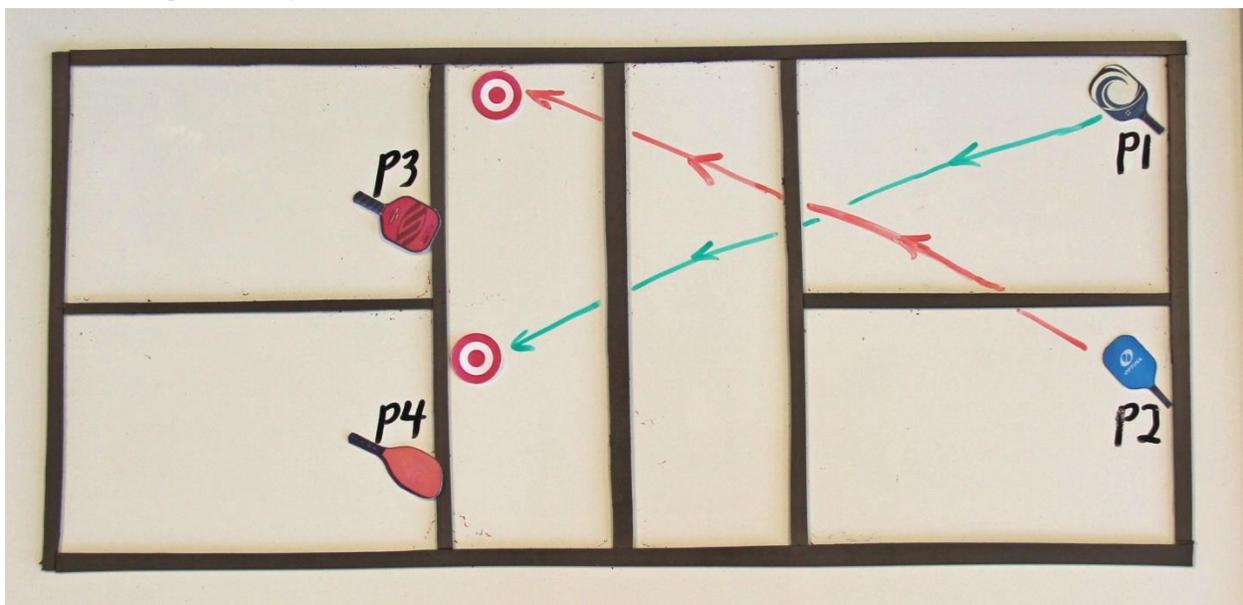


Figure M-4.2: Targeting Your Drop Shot

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 on an attempted drop shot 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 call 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 into the backcourt 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 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 swing and contact with the ball. P1 can assist P2 by saying "Go!" if the shot is likely to be good, or "High!" if his 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).

It will inevitably happen that you and your partner get "caught" and put on the defensive in your backcourt or mid-court. It will typically 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 your opponents in their backcourt because they are much more likely to hit back an attackable ball.) 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 ball you cannot get to 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. Even if you nicely execute a deep lob, good (3.5 and better) opponents can usually run it down and hit back an effective overhead smash.

There is a third option which is the most difficult of the three, but the most effective if you can develop it to modest proficiency. Basically, it is a matter of hitting a drop shot to the opponents’ kitchen. But unlike the third-shot drop shot where you usually have enough time to move to a comfortable hitting position, the idea here is to receive a high-speed ball and hit back a soft shot that land’s in the opponents’ kitchen. Since you will have little time to move and must contact the ball wherever it’s at, you might end up hitting a groundstroke or a half-volley or a volley. But if you manage to execute the shot, you and your partner can rush to your NVZ line, thereby neutralizing the great advantage your opponents previously enjoyed.

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”. There is not much to say about technique because 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 in every case is “deaden” the ball’s speed to some extent by having little or no forward motion of the paddle as you make contact with 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 shot. It’s a matter of trying and failing (often miserably) dozens of times before you start to “get the hang of it”. And after hundreds more attempts, it begins to become somewhat “second’ nature” for you to “tune” your 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; **Sizing Up Opponents**

Punch and blocking volleys were covered in Lesson 3 of Module 3. (The following four paragraphs are copied from that Lesson for your review.) 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.

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 your opponents' 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.

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 shot usually hit from mid-court or backcourt to your opponents 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 to (i) give you more time to react to the smash and (ii) 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—it is unrealistic (in the 2 seconds you have between recognizing the high shot and the smashed ball arriving back) for you to turn

away from the opponent, retreat 2 or 3 steps, turn back, and then find the high-velocity ball somewhere in the space between you and your opponent. Backpedaling is less risky if done while looking forward than looking upward. Nonetheless, let “discretion be the better part of valor” and stay put if you have any problem backing up.

Particularly if you have to stretch or lunge to contact the incoming smash below waist level, the most common shot attempted in response is a deep lob. This shot gives you and your partner the best chance to recover from a “back-on-your-heels” defensive posture. 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.

Sizing up Opponents

As your pickleball addiction and obsession 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 start inside the baseline and hit tougher-to-handle returns of serve.
- How fast do they move to their NVZ after their return of serve? Your third-shot drop should be to the side of the slower person—that gives you a greater margin of error and a better opportunity to push the third shot at his/her feet.
- Does either of your opponents back off the NVZ line to hit your deep dinks after they bounce? If so, keep pushing dinks to that opponent’s feet.
- How good is their backhand dinking? Overall, which individual is the weaker dinker? In serious/tournament competition, that player will get “picked on”.
- Does either opponent let his/her paddle drop below his/her waist 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 gets his/her paddle up soon enough to contact your shot, the ball will likely be “popped up” for you or your partner to smash.
- Does either opponent have a noticeably weak backhand? If so, hit more to that person’s backhand.
- How effective are they at retreating to defend offensive lobs?
- Are they “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.

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=FQa0N5TtSW0>

Blocking 2 Ways

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dLUiii6b98>

Returning a Smash

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

Blocking a Smash

Lesson 4: Skill Assessment

In this 4th and final lesson of Module 4 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 2, the list of “Individual Skills and Shot Execution” specified (as percentages) the proficiency you should have on various shots at the 3.5 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 4 Scoresheet). Your coach will do the feeding of balls.

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.

Closing Comment: This modular program for player development is being introduced and “court-tested” in the Fall 2018 and Winter 2019 pickleball seasons. No doubt there will be some sort of survey of participants in March or April of 2019 to obtain feedback and provide direction for revisions. Depending on the availability of volunteer coaches and feedback from participants, a Module 5 (Advancing from 3.5 to 4.0) may be added in the future.