

Third shot- what??!? Hold on- how about the first & second?!

The most emphasized shot in pickleball is the 3rd, however to get to the 3rd, there is the serve and the return of serve. Quite a bit can happen in those first 2 shots that determines what options for a 3rd you can play. My coaching tip is focused on the first 3 shots of the game to help create a little more clarity to get your points off to a good start.

1) Serve – an effective serve is so much more than just pace. Some ideas on improving your serve:

Vary your serve

Driving – this is like the fastball of baseball – give it your best rip

Lob – switch up the pace with a slow looper

Top Spin – struck to create more of a downwards dive towards your serve

Keys to a good serve are to keep your upper body loose, to engage your legs and core to load weight, create forward momentum, and to hit through the ball. You will want to keep the ball lower. Bonus points: observe where your opponent is standing- are they leaving a side more open? Perhaps this might be a situation where you can make your opponent a little more uncomfortable by forcing a return on their back hand side.

2) Return of Serve – the goal of the return of serve team is to get to the net as quickly as possible. A poor return creates chaos for your side- your teammate may try to protect the middle, in turn leaving the line open. An effective return of serve allows you and your partner to be set at the NVZ to control the net and be first to attack. A short return that bounces high is vulnerable to a variety of options for a 3rd shot that can allow the serving team to put pressure and induce errors.

It is important for a good return of serve to be deep. You are not aiming for the back line but the back quarter of the court (5-6 feet) thus leaving you some margin of error. A slower, deep return allows you more time to get to the NVZ to react to a 3rd that is coming your way. Other ideas are to hit it deep and into the middle to potentially create some confusion in communication or to a backhand side to force an awkward return.

3) Third shot – The decision to drive or drop is not straight forward. Some will say always drop. Some will say always drive as it could set up an easier 5th shot drop. Whatever you decide to do in the heat of a game, commit to an intention to either dropping or driving. However for the sake of this article, I have reduced the options to 3 types of shots to look for before making your decision on what type of 3rd to make:

- If the return is short and pops up, drive the ball into the open court- shots are more difficult if

players are moving and the pressure of the drive takes time and space away from your opponent. Drives must be lower and away from the other player already at the net or you leave yourself open to a poach.

- If the return is long and slow, drop the ball cross court. Carefully proceed through the transition zone depending on the quality of your drop.

- If the return is long, spiny and/or with pace, drive the ball. Returns of this type are difficult to control. Get the ball back to your opponent to keep the rally going!

In the end, have patience with yourselves as your game evolves. And please keep being kind to the people around you no matter your level or skill. See you on the courts!