**Pickleball Warm-up / Practice with a Purpose**

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Ask yourself the following questions and be honest with yourself.

**How do you** warm-up prior to your game? **Do you have** a practice/warm-up regimen? **How about** a pre-game strategy? **Do you adjust** your strategy during the game; if so, why? **Do you have** specific goals for warm-up other than getting loose? **How often** do you practice?

If you are serious about your game plan, play in tournaments or competitive matches take a moment to jot your answers down into your mind or piece of paper… if you do that you are likely to find how much you can improve your play with just some simple adjustments without taking any classes or clinics.

The overlying goal set for my partner and myself is simple: Practice, Drill, Warm-Up as you are playing a real game or to state it better:***Practice with a Purpose.***

***(At the end of this paper is a summarization.)***

**So, to the questions and proven recommendations for a better game:** **How do you Warm-Up, What’s Your Regimen?**

**Warm-up should include 2 parts and should be done separately.**

**Part 1:**

Warm-up prior to hitting any ball through stretching, bending, flexing, moving. Most injuries result from a lack of the above. Stretch your legs-back-arms, work your core, move your lower legs-arms-hips-torso, skipping with exaggerated arm and leg motion is a great exercise.

**Part 2 A: Start at mid-court**

Warm-up by hitting the ball off your paddle, this helps hand-eye coordination and better reflexes. Then move your warm-up by hitting the ball across the net with soft even paced hits, preferably for mid-court (between the base line and No Volley Zone). You can do this with a partner or as a foursome. ***Why at mid-court?*** It’s the place most people are trying to get out of as they move from the baseline to the NVZ (kitchen line); it is the spot most players feel uncomfortable in... it is sometimes called No-Man’s Land. Shots from there can either be drop shots, hard drives, or smashes. The best shot to take is to hit at your opponent’s feet. Practice winning or set-up shots from there, move your practice partner around, in fact make a game of it, it is a great drill…AND…you will be using it in a game.

**Part 2 B: Dinking with movement**

Why is this the 2nd phase of hitting, it’s because from mid-court you need to soften your hits…going from Mid-court to the Kitchen, dinks require more patience and softer/lower hits across the net.

If there are only two of you hit shots that move your partner around, aim at their feet and aim, at the most, 2 feet on either side of your partner.

The goal here is lower body movement, feet, legs, hips, using shuffle steps with knees bent. Set a goal of 20 shots without an error…if you can do 20 in row then 5 or 6 in a game situation is a piece of cake. Focus on cross court shots more than down the line. Cross-court shots require more movement.

**Part 2 C: Serve-Return and one other thing**

OK, how often does this happen? You enter the court, wave your legs and warms around, groan from those little movements and get maybe a half dozen hits from the NVZ and hear barely a minute later: ‘*OK, let’s start, are your ready Zero-Zero-Two’* Yeah, that never happens, said no-one in my lifetime.

Setup your regimen, drill, practice playing a shortened game of Serve-Return and more. If there are 4 players rotate the serve so everyone gets to serve-return and practice some shots.

Make it a game with points, mark a spot in front of both baselines about 2 feet in (use a piece of tape, a ball, hat, or anything to mark that spot) the goal is to get your serve deep into the 2-foot area, get the return deep in the opposing 2-foot area and keep score, 1 point for every success. Whoever gets to 11 first (or 5, pick a number) wins. It creates a challenge; it is part of your game, and it gets the game face on.

Add the one other thing: the 3rd shot…if the third shot lands in or near the kitchen add another point…add one more challenge to play the point out. TIME-OUT...this sounds like a real game…well yes, its real practice, with a purpose.

**Part 2 D: Is there more?**

Yep, how about hitting volleys and building faster reflexes?

I bet you are expecting me to suggest hitting volleys behind the No-Volley-Zone, because anything else would be a violation. My suggestion: violate the rule in drills and practice, stand in the kitchen and hit volleys. Why? the balls are coming quicker and you’re having to get ready faster, and your rection time is being practice at a faster pace.

Now step back behind the NVZ and do the same, you should see a better reaction time. Your mind has been trained to react quicker, and moving back seems to give you more time to react.

The cool thing about this drill is you can do it with a partner or by yourself against a wall, stand 8 to 10 feet away from a wall and hit against the wall. In a real game the closest you will be is 14 feet from your opponent...so drilling at a closer distance helps train your mind/body to react quicker and forces you to keep your paddle up.

The above can vary by length of time or focus on a particular set and take no more than 20 minutes…that is a good warm up length. You can shorten or lengthen your warm-up as time allows, so try it.

**What’s Your Strategy?**

I ask this question as often as I can when teaching, especially with people who have played more than 6 months and I get some fun answers such as: ‘get the ball over the net’, or ‘to make less errors’, or ‘to win’, or ‘we stack’...and other similar answers.

I will break game strategy down to three simple sections and within each, some very simple goals.

The three basic types of strategies are ‘Pre-Game/Pre-Point Strategy’, ‘In-Game/In Point Strategy’ and ‘Post-Game/Post-Point Strategy’. Overall…keep it simple and do not over think it.

**Pre-Game/Pre-Point Strategy:**

**This is a the simplest one:** Hit balls down the middle, Cover the middle, be patient the other team will gladly make the mistake, and most important communicate, more precisely, with your partner. So why those?

First: Hitting down the middle. The net is lower in the middle, you have more room for error (10 feet on either side of the middle) and you’re counting on your opponents don’t communicate with each other, after all, how many times do you see your opponents look at each other quizzingly and ask “I thought you had it”…what they had was no strategy.

You can develop your pre-point/pre-game strategy with some quite simple words: ‘I got the middle’ or ‘you got the middle’ or “I got forehand” anything along those lines…which leads us to the next part:

**In-Game/In-Point Strategy:**

The basic parts of this: Observe, Verbal Communication, and Non-verbal Communication.

**Observation** involves seeing/noting what your opponent does within the point. Is one player more likely to poach to cover a weaker partner, are there any weaknesses like dinks, drop-shots, backhands you can exploit, is there a tendency to overhit a ball based on your shots, are there any strengths that you are aware of, do the opponents move together as a team?

If you see opportunities **verbally communicate** them to your partner prior to the next point.

If playing against a hard hitter, give them soft shots because there is a tendency to overhit those shots by generating more power and harder swings…the result is more balls into the net or out past the baseline.

So, it follows that my partner and I discuss what we observe prior to the start of the next point.

Our **non-verbal communication** is now in affect as we focus on what we observe and what we just talked about…we focus on the weaker player, or more down the middle, or more softer shots, non-verbally so we don’t give our opponents a heads-up to our strategy.

**Post-Game/Post-Point Strategy:**

Post-Game or Post Point is simply a short discussion of what went right or what went wrong in the previous point, it may be as simple as telling your partner ‘That was a terrific shot’, or ‘you were there’, or ‘let’s go softer on them’, we look at each other when we talk and we never turn our back on our partner…keeping discussion or action positive.

**In Conclusion…How often do you Practice?**

I think the most embarrassing time came when I decided I wanted to teach the game. I had three coaches/instructors mentoring me in how to become a teacher. This question came up from one of them…How often to you practice? My answer was I don’t…oh boy, was that a wrong answer. The follow up was, then why do you think you can teach, get better, or enjoy the game more…well, I had no answer.

The advice, you should practice ten times more than you play…sounds excessive I know, but it hit home.

Simply look at any sport, use golf as an example…why are there putting greens and driving ranges, why are their exhibition games, why do the Arizona Cardinals get only one day off in the week…because they are practicing the 5 other days including game day where they practice even before game start.

The practice involves typical game situations, segments for the offense unit, the defense unit, the running backs, the receivers, the linebackers.

Of course, we are not getting million-dollar contracts in pickleball, but we are still competitive, even in fun matches, yes, we want to laugh and have fun, but by nature we are deeply satisfied when we win.

And it brings me back to what should practice be like, what is the goal? The answers are simple, we want to challenge ourselves, we want to play better that the last time we played, and we want to learn…practice is at the core of this, and if we practice with a goal, or purpose in mind we will reach being better faster.

I hope these points and recommendations become a part of your practice regimen. It has become a part of mine ever since, and my partner and I enjoy the competitive aspect of practice, its like a game within a game for us.

Please feel free to give me feedback or answer any questions you may have. There are more question and I have wanted to address the more common ones I have heard, and I am still learning.

**A Summary:**

1. Practice, warm-up, and drill with goals in mind
   1. Practice with a Purpose
2. Break down your drills to segments of the game
3. Play games in-between practice/drills to carry those segments into the game
4. Focus on your strengths and know your weaknesses
5. Work with and trust your partner
6. Have someone observe your drills and practices sessions, tell them your goals, and ask them if you are going in the right direction
7. Involve a coach if you need clarification or want to address specific aspects of the game.
8. Try to resist the temptation of substituting drills for practice games with the same opponents on your team…you will not learn anything.
   1. Look at practice segments/drills as a game and challenge. In doing so you will develop more focus for the game, and you will improve faster.
9. Do not stop asking questions and do not stop challenging yourself.

**Basic Drills**

Prior to drilling it is advisable to warm up and stretch out. Do this prior to and after drilling or playing.

When doing the drills make sure you are in a relaxed position, knees bent, slightly sitting, feet as wide as your shoulders, and paddle 12-18 inches out in front of you. Keep a slightly loose grip. Paddle follow through should be slow with the paddle face finishing above the net. Avoid tensing up (breathe and exhale between points).

**DRILLS:**

**Note: In practice drills I recommend starting mid-court. The reason is you will get more comfortable in hitting in the transition zone, and this is where you can create opportunities more often.**

1. Start mid-court and hit soft mid-court shots inline (across from) your drilling partner. Focus on placing the shot slightly off center so you and your partner move from side to side. Focus on footwork and do not plant yourself at mid-court. Make a goal of hitting 20-25 shots continuously.
2. Hit mid-court shots cross court, using forehand and backhand shots, again with a goal of 20-25 shots continuously. Switch sides so you are hitting both forehands and backhands.
3. With your foursome hit mid-court shots with only one ball, the first four shots should be soft and cooperative. After the fourth touch look for opportunities to move up. Target your shots at the opponents’ feet to create a mistake such as hitting into the net or setting a high shot so you can put it away. Play to five points and then rotate among yourselves. Try not to back up on your shots, take shots out of the air. Taking shots out of the air will allow you to return the shot much quicker and may put your opponent off guard forcing an error.
4. Follow steps 1, 2, and 3 with all shots from the NVZ Line…Dinking.
5. Drop Shot/yo-yo exercise:

Part 1: On one side of the net, you and your partner will be at the non-volley line and your drilling opponents will be at the baseline. You are feeding the ball to your opponent in a cooperative way so they can practice the drop shot. After about 10 shots you and your partner go back to the baseline and your opponents feed you.

Part 2: do the same as above with you moving up and your opponent moving back and reverse. Here you are drilling drop shots, approach shots in the transition zone and dinks. Try to keep this drill continuous.

1. Serve-Return-Drop Shot: Start with a serve to the opponent, the opponent returns, and you execute a drop shot (or 3rd shot). Rotate servers so everyone gets to serve, return, and drop shot. Do 3 or 4 complete rotations.
2. Add to this by approaching the net and playing out the point.

**Additional Drills:**

Volleying: Stand inside the NVZ and practice the volley shot (in a cooperative manner) with your opponent partner. Being inside the NVZ will help develop hand quickness. Remember to keep your paddle up, and shots are continuous, if they bounce into the kitchen keep the ball in play.

Now drill standing outside of the NVZ. You should notice you have more time to react, and the ball seems slower.

Volley shots should be punches and not full swings and certainly not across your body, keep the paddle and ball in front of you the entire time and try to keep the ball in play if possible.