

Pickleball Patterns - How To Use Them

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Compiled from peer-reviewed match-notation studies, USA Pickleball rules and pro-tour coaching content, and ball-flight physics research.

87%

POINTS END IN 8 SHOTS
OR FEWER

50.7%

WINNING SHOTS NEAR
NVZ LINE

65–80%

WIN RATE WHEN TEAM
CONTROLS NET

~40%

3.5-LEVEL POINTS LOST
TO UNFORCED ERRORS

SECTION 1

HOW POINTS ARE ACTUALLY WON

What peer-reviewed research says — every pattern in this report is doubles

METRIC	VALUE	SOURCE
Points ending in 8 shots or fewer	~87% (43% in 1–4, 44% in 5–8)	Notational analysis, PPA Tour, MDPI 2024
Winning/error shot location	50.7% from the zone nearest the NVZ line	Same study
3.5-level: unforced errors / missed returns	~40% — the single biggest category	Coach Roig US Open footage, The Dink
3.5-level: attacking a short return	~22%	Same analysis
Net-control win rate	~65–80% of points to the team at the net	ultimatecapper.com
3rd-shot-drive errors, sub-6.0 vs 6.0+	~3x more errors below 6.0	centercourtpickleball.com (DUPR)
Topspin serve: speed vs spin	54 mph flat vs. up to 65 mph at ~1,200 rpm	Scientific American

Read literally: your highest-leverage shot is a return of serve you don't miss, followed by getting both feet planted at the kitchen line. Everything below builds on that.

SECTION 2

DOUBLES POSITIONING FUNDAMENTALS

Who S1, S2, R1 and R2 are, and where they legally start

S1 (server): required position behind the baseline, correct box. **S2 (server's partner):** no required position, but realistically stays behind the baseline — the serving team hasn't earned net position yet. **R1 (returner):** required diagonal box. **R2 (returner's partner):** no return obligation, so typically claims the NVZ line before the point starts.

The serve always travels diagonally cross-court. As both teams advance, each player tends to stay in their starting lateral lane: S1 ends up across the net from R2, and S2 across from R1. This lane pairing drives the Triangle Effect (Section 17).

SECTION 3

THE GOLDEN RULE OF POSITIONING

Hit the middle, stay in your lane, anticipate the reply

Down the Middle: prioritize shots directly between opponents — it forces a communication decision and eliminates sharp-angle returns. **Lane Pairing:** whoever starts right stays right; whoever starts left stays left. Use the Triangle Effect (Section 17) to anticipate replies landing in your lane.

SECTION 4

COMMUNICATION PROTOCOL

Three calls every doubles team must establish before they play

CALL	WHEN TO USE	WHO TAKES PRIORITY
"Mine" / "Yours"	Any ball to the seam between partners	Forehand in the middle wins. Call at least one second before contact.
"Bounce"	Ball looks close to the sideline — leave it	Player closest to the landing spot calls it. Partner holds position.
"Switch"	One player pulled off-court (wide erne, hard angle)	Out-of-position player calls Switch while retreating; partner slides to center.

SECTION 5

DEFENSIVE RESETS — THE TRANSITION ZONE

Surviving no-man's land until you reach the kitchen line

When caught in the transition zone under pressure, the priority is taking pace off the ball, not hitting winners. **The Deaden Technique:** a soft backspin or open-face block that drops the ball into the opponent's kitchen. It neutralizes their power, forces them to hit upward, and buys time to advance to the NVZ line.

SECTION 6

SITUATIONAL AWARENESS — SCORE-BASED

DECISIONS

Adjusting aggression level based on the scoreboard

SCORE	STRATEGY	WHY
Trailing	High-percentage, deep, consistent shots	Reducing errors beats hero shots when behind.
Leading	Selective finishing moves (Erne, poach)	Lower-risk position to take calculated chances.
Neutral dink battle	Patience — never force an attack on a neutral ball	Trigger discipline is the highest-leverage skill at 3.5–4.5.

SECTION 7

COMMUNICATION DRILLS

Three drills to eliminate hesitation between partners

DRILL	SETUP	GOAL
Middle-Seam Call	Feeder hits 20 balls to the seam between partners.	Verbalize 'Mine' or 'Yours' at least one second before contact.
Out vs. Bounce	Partners rally with balls close to the sidelines.	Call 'Bounce' (in) or 'Out' before the ball lands.
Switch Transition	One player is pulled wide by a deliberate feed.	Out-of-position player calls 'Switch'; partner slides to center.

SECTION 8

THE PHYSICS BEHIND THE PATTERNS

The Magnus effect: why drops use backspin and put-aways use topspin

Spin bends the ball's flight and bounce through the **Magnus effect**: a spinning ball drags air around it, creating a pressure difference and a force perpendicular to the flight path.

↓	TOPSPIN — Forward rotation adds downward force to gravity. The ball dives sharply, lands in even when struck hard, and accelerates off the bounce. A ~1,200 rpm topspin serve can safely leave the paddle at 65 mph — well above the ~54 mph flat-serve ceiling.
↑	BACKSPIN / SLICE — Reverse rotation creates lift that partially cancels gravity. The ball floats and stays low off the bounce — exactly what makes a good drop un-attackable.



SIDESPIN — Bends the path laterally and skids the ball sideways off the bounce; used on serves and as a surprise in dinks and resets.

THE SPIN-MATCHUP RULE

Never return a slice with a slice

INCOMING: TOPSPIN

dips fast, accelerates

INCOMING: BACKSPIN / SLICE

floats, skids low off bounce

INCOMING: SIDESPIN

curves & kicks sideways



COUNTER WITH

BACKSPIN OR FLAT

COUNTER WITH

TOPSPIN OR FLAT

(NEVER slice on slice)

COUNTER WITH

READ CURVE EARLY

COUNTER FLAT

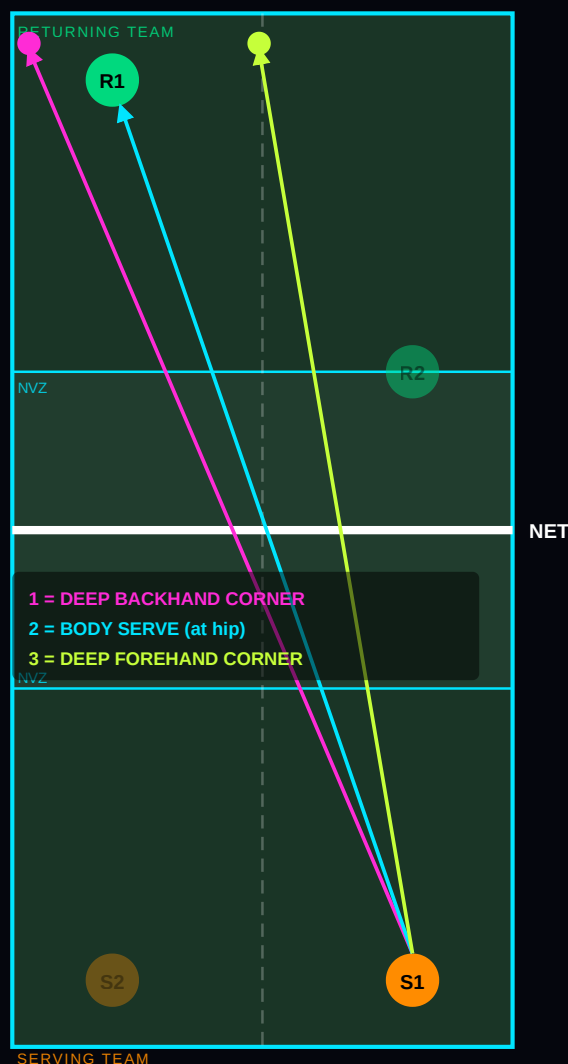
WHY: two slices compound the float — the ball sits up, easy target. Counter-spin resets the exchange in your favor.

Two underspin shots in a row compound the float instead of cancelling it, handing your opponent a sitting-up ball. Counter a slice with topspin or a flat block; counter a topspin drive with backspin to absorb pace rather than fight it.

SERVE PLACEMENT STRATEGY

Three targets, three different jobs

SERVE PLACEMENT – THREE TARGETS, THREE JOBS



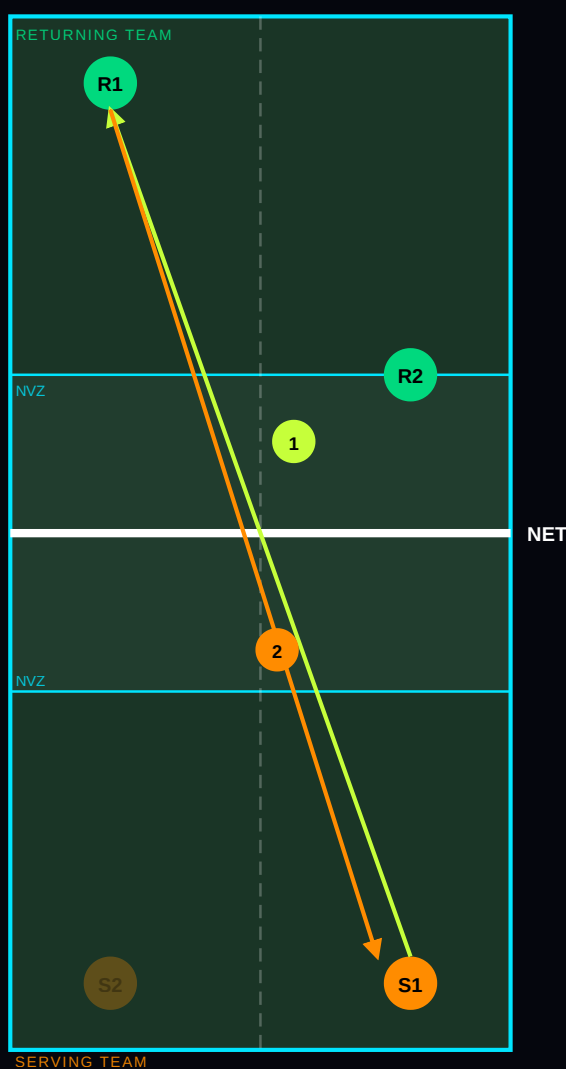
- 1 **DEEP BACKHAND CORNER (weak hand)** — the highest-percentage serve. Forces the hardest return in the game: a deep backhand from behind the baseline.
- 2 **BODY SERVE** — aimed straight at R1's hip, forcing a last-second forehand-or-backhand decision.
- 3 **DEEP FOREHAND CORNER (strong hand)** — the surprise mix-up that pulls a returner bracing for backhand out of position.

Run a 'serve test' early: try all three targets, watch which comes back weakest, then lean on it while mixing in the others.

SERVE-SIDE PATTERN — PHASE 1: SERVE & RETURN

The serving team's shortest route to a controlled point

SERVE-SIDE: PHASE 1 — SERVE & RETURN

**1**

S1 serves deep, flat/low spin, diagonally cross-court. S2 stays behind the baseline — the serving team hasn't earned net position yet.

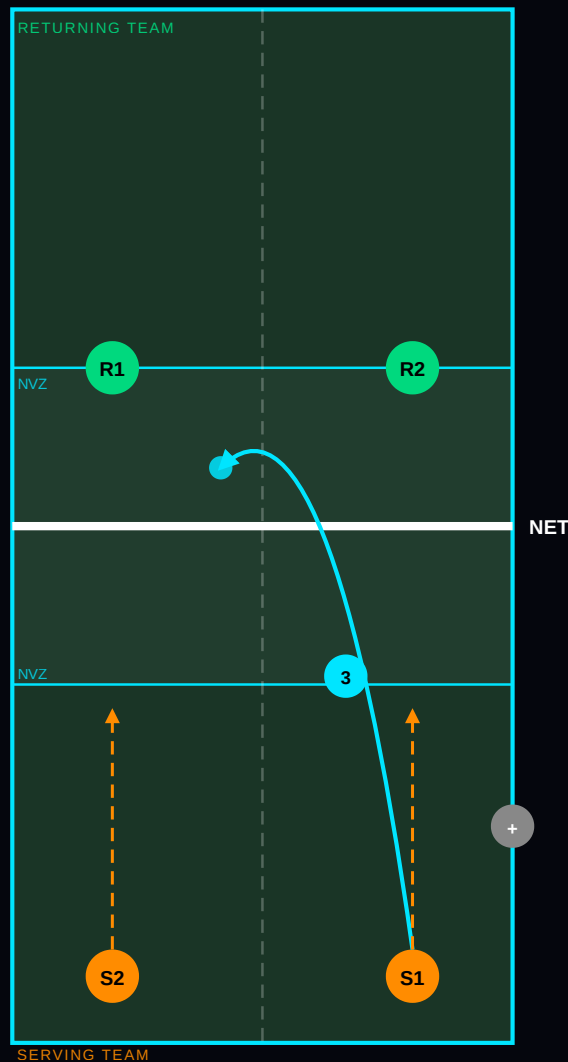
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R1 returns deep with topspin at S1's backhand, pinning the server back. R2 is already camped at the kitchen line.

SERVE-SIDE PATTERN — PHASE 2: DROP & ADVANCE

Buying the walk to the kitchen line — together

SERVE-SIDE: PHASE 2 — 3RD SHOT DROP & ADVANCE



3

3rd shot drop, hit with back-spin/slice so it dies in the kitchen instead of popping up.

+

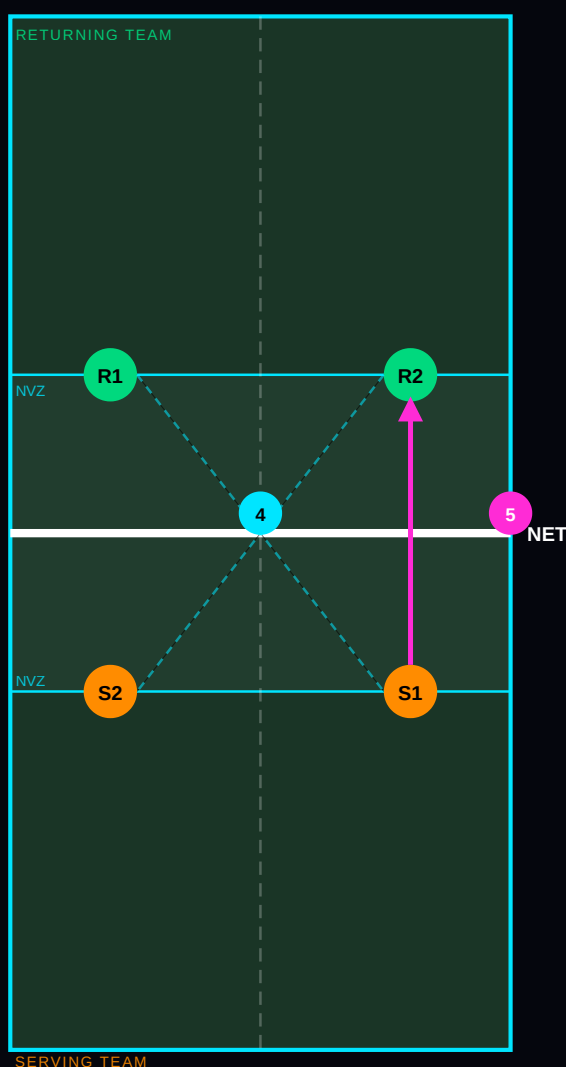
Cue for BOTH S1 and S2 to advance together to the NVZ line — the one moment the serving team earns net position.

Decision rule: if the return was short, skip the drop and drive it — that captures the ~22% of points won by attacking a short return.

SERVE-SIDE PATTERN — PHASE 3: DINK RALLY & ATTACK

Winning the shot-selection battle once all four players are at the net

SERVE-SIDE: PHASE 3 – DINK RALLY & ATTACK

**4**

All four players at the NVZ line. Cross-court dink rally, low net margin — both teams probe for a ball that sits up.

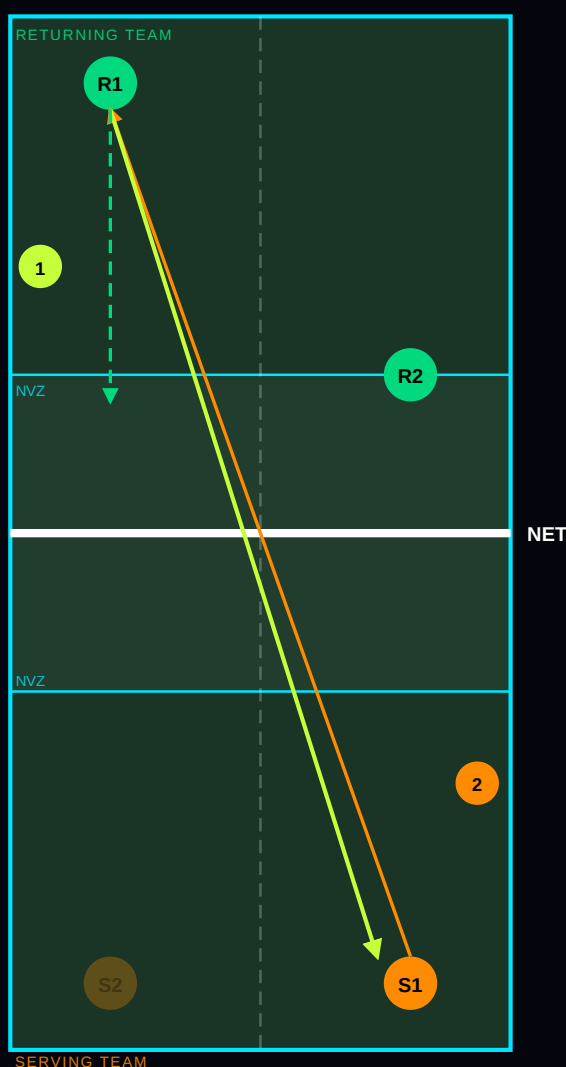
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Attack: top-spin speed-up to the body or feet the instant a dink floats high.

RETURN-SIDE PATTERN — PHASE 1: RETURN & RUSH

The returning team's one guaranteed head start

RETURN-SIDE: PHASE 1 — RETURN & RUSH



1

S1 serves. S2 stays back — the serving team is not yet entitled to the net.

2

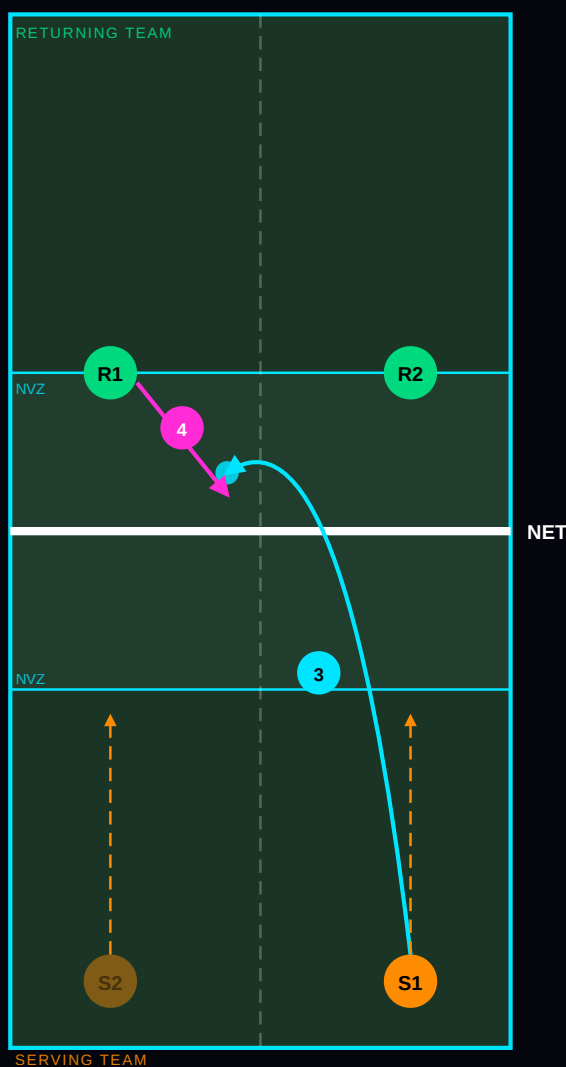
R1 returns deep with topspin at S1's backhand, then sprints straight to the NVZ line, joining R2 who started there.

S1 must hit one more shot (the third) before advancing, so the returning team reaches the net first — a mechanical advantage, not just hustle.

RETURN-SIDE PATTERN — PHASE 2: DROP & RESET

Surviving the transition without giving anything away

RETURN-SIDE: PHASE 2 – DROP & RESET



3

The server's drop arrives while the returning team is already set at the line. S1 and S2 advance behind it (faded).

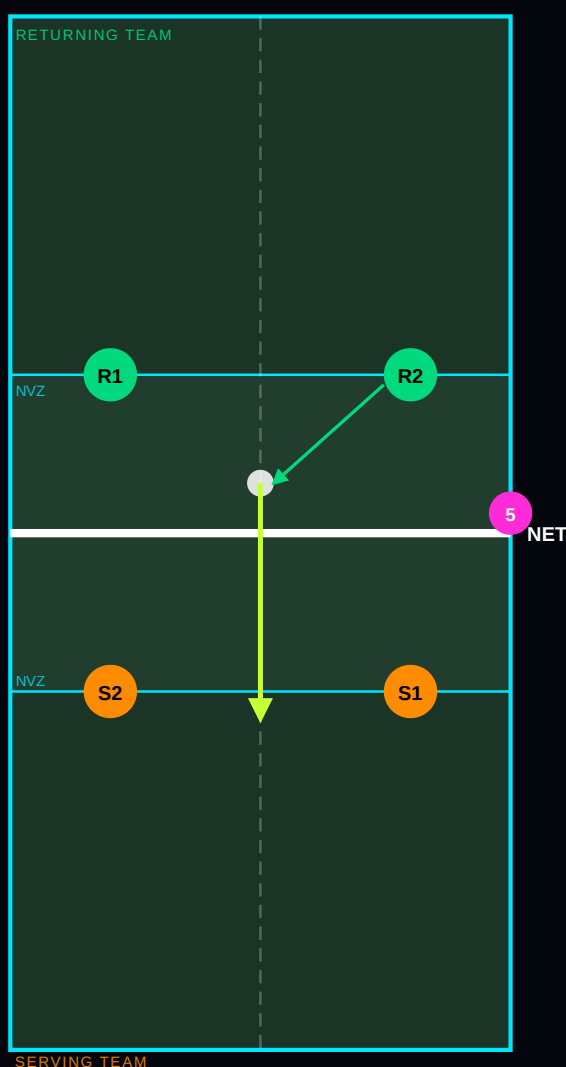
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Reset/block — a soft back-spin dink to neutral. No target, no risk, just survive the transition.

RETURN-SIDE PATTERN — PHASE 3: POACH & PUT-AWAY

Cashing in the net-control edge

RETURN-SIDE: PHASE 3 – POACH & PUT-AWAY



5

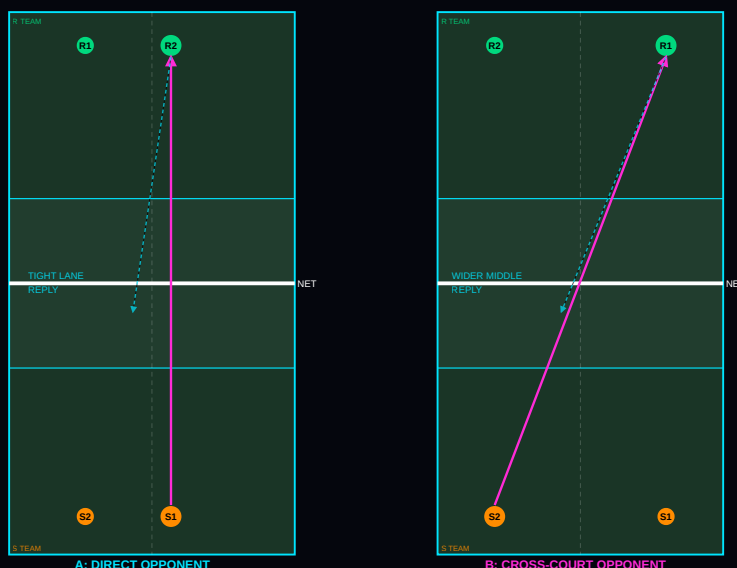
R2 reads a floated middle ball forced by the reset dink and cuts it off with a top-spin put-away down the seam.

Teams established at the net win roughly 65–80% of points; the fastest path to that edge is closing the positioning gap in one shot.

THE TRIANGLE EFFECT

Your target predicts the reply — direct opponent and cross-court opponent

THE TRIANGLE EFFECT — DIRECT VS. CROSS-COURT



A1 Panel A — DIRECT OPPONENT: S1 speeds up straight ahead, down the line, to R2 who shares S1's lane across the net.

A2 R2's rushed reply tends to stay in that same narrow lane — a tight, predictable triangle.

B1 Panel B — CROSS-COURT OPPONENT: S2 speeds up diagonally at R1, the opponent standing cross-court.

B2 A rushed cross-court reply tends to come back through the middle — a wider triangle either player must cover.

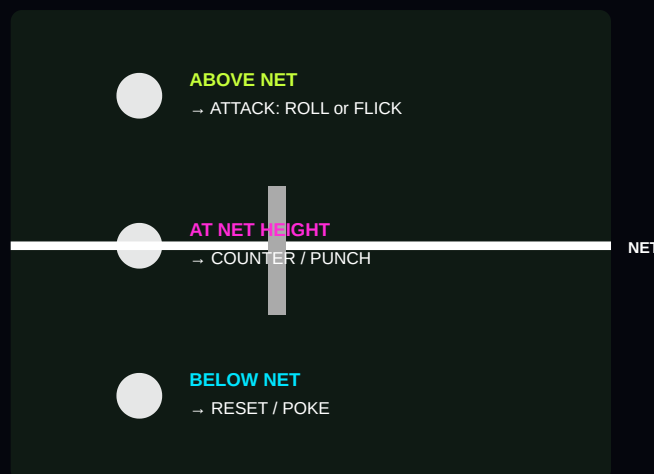
The principle (Pickleburner / Connor Koszuta): a player under pressure hits the highest-percentage, most natural shot available — so their reply is directionally predictable, and you can start moving toward it before it's hit.

SECTION 18

THE VOLLEY SELECTION LADDER — POKE, ROLL, FLICK

Shot choice is set by ball height relative to the net tape, not by feel

VOLLEY SELECTION LADDER — SHOT = BALL HEIGHT



1

BELOW NET — RESET / POKE: paddle sideways, loose grip, absorb pace; back-spin or open face lets the ball die into the kitchen. Never attack from here.

2

AT NET HEIGHT — COUNTER / PUNCH: compact wrist snap, elbow locked — the workhorse volley in kitchen hands battles.

3

ABOVE NET — ATTACK: the roll (shoulder-driven topspin, Ben Johns' signature) or the flick (wrist-snap, faster and more disguised — JW Johnson).

SECTION 19

KITCHEN LINE FOOTWORK

Inside foot, outside foot, and when it's okay to cross

1

SPLIT STEP: small hop landing on both feet, shoulder-width, the instant your opponent makes contact.

2

SHUFFLE: for routine lateral movement, slide leading with the outside foot. Never cross feet on the forehand side.

3

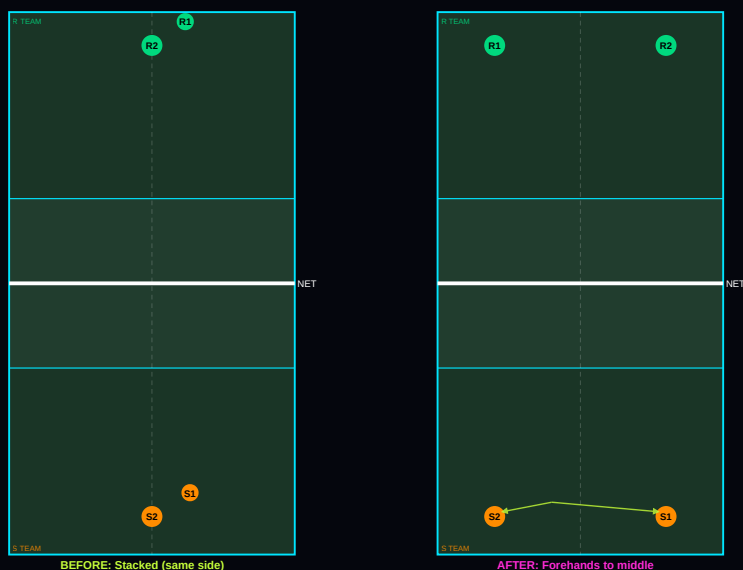
CROSSOVER STEP (backhand side only): dominant foot crosses over to extend reach on a short, wide dink.

Reset your stance after every single shot, and stay square to the ball rather than reaching.

POSITIONING MATH — STACKING

Manufacturing forehands in the middle before the point even starts

STACKING — BEFORE & AFTER THE SPLIT



1

BEFORE: both partners line up on the same side ('stacked right'), regardless of who serves or receives.

2

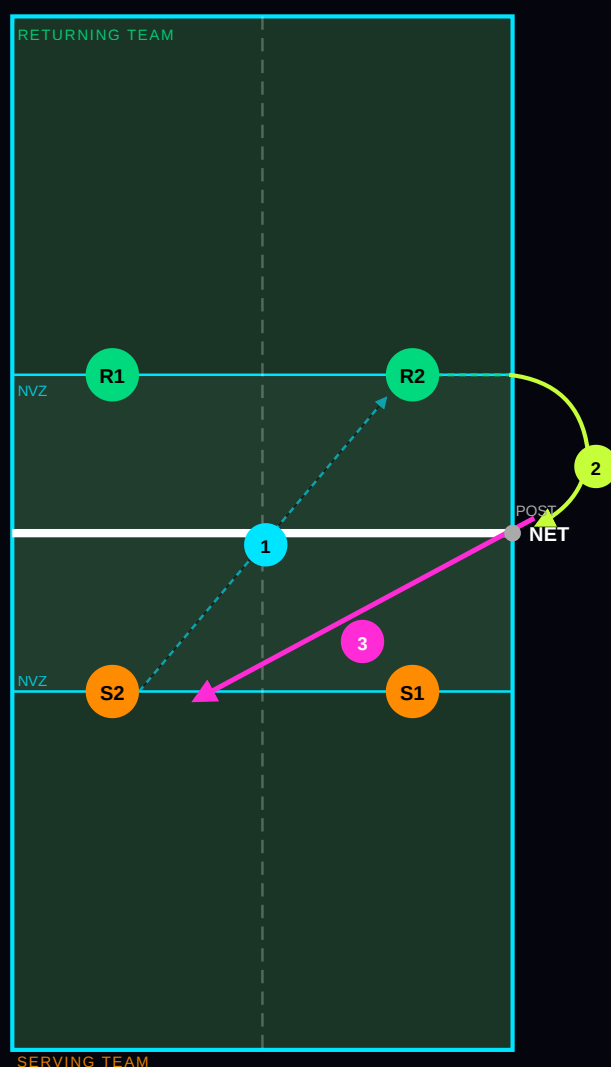
AFTER: the instant the ball is struck, each partner slides to their preferred half — strong forehand covers the middle seam.

*Only the server and receiver have fixed positions; the partner can stand anywhere until the ball is struck.
Tradeoff: a missed switch signal leaves a wide-open alley.*

FINISHING MOVE — THE ERNE (AND ITS COUSINS)

Ending the dink rally outright instead of waiting for an error

THE ERNE – AROUND THE POST VOLLEY



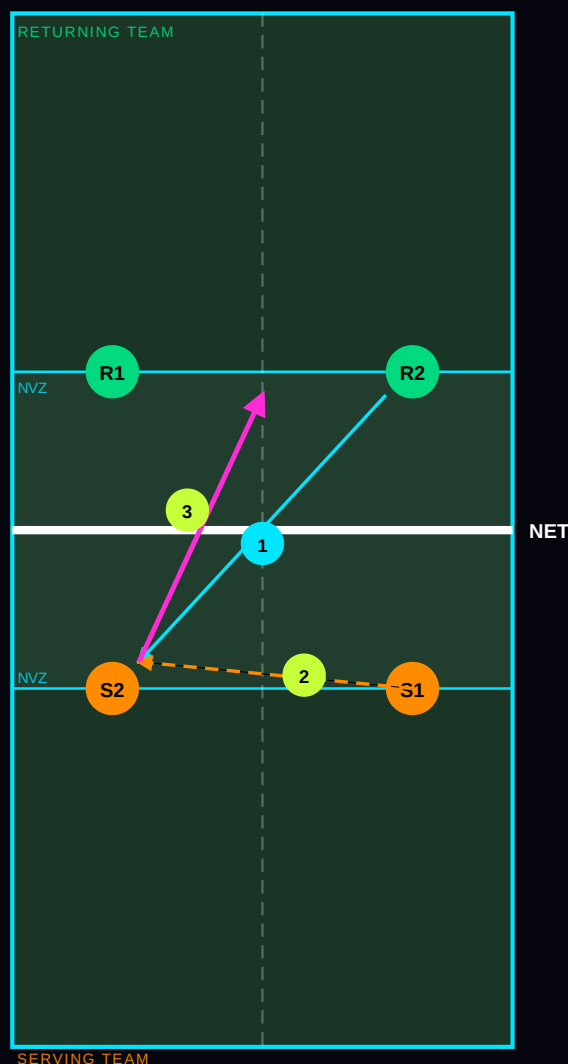
- 1** S2 works the dink cross-court to R2 repeatedly; one drifts wide toward R2's sideline — the tell that an erne is on.
- 2** R2 runs or jumps around the net post — feet landing outside the court and the kitchen's extension (legal) — and volleys before the bounce.
- 3** Put-away, taken early with no time for the serving team to react.

Bert: the same shot from your partner's side of the court — more coordination, since it empties your side momentarily. **Berne:** the counter — drive hard at a player committing to an erne before they set up. **Defense:** mix in straight-ahead dinks so a sideline camper leaves their own side open.

FINISHING MOVE — THE POACH

The lower-risk mirror option off the same dink rally

THE POACH — TAKING YOUR PARTNER'S BALL



1 S2's predictable, softly-hit reply telegraphs its direction — often forced by the previous shot.

2 S1 crosses over to take S2's ball instead — must be called or signaled in advance.

3 Finished from the stronger angle instead of leaving it to the assigned player.

Works best off a shot that forced a predictable response — e.g. a dink into the backhand corner, where the reply almost always comes back cross-court.

QUICK-REFERENCE CHEAT SHEET

SITUATION	SHOT	SPIN / MECHANICS	WHY
Middle seam between opponents	Middle attack	Topspin	Forces communication error; kills sharp angles
Transition zone (no-man's land)	Deaden / reset	Backspin / open face	Take pace off; survive to the NVZ line
Trailing on scoreboard	Deep, consistent	—	Reducing errors beats hero shots when behind
Leading on scoreboard	Finishing moves	—	Lower-risk spot for calculated chances
Serving, deep return	3rd shot drop	Backspin/slice	Floats, stays low — unattackable
Serving, short return	3rd shot drive	Flat/topspin	Catches them before the NVZ line
Returning serve	Deep return to backhand	Topspin or slice	Dips fast, pins server at baseline
Serve, standard target	Deep backhand corner	—	Weak hand — highest percentage
Serve, mix-up	Forehand corner / body	—	Surprise; body forces rushed decision
Incoming slice	Counter topspin or flat	NEVER slice-on-slice	Two slices = floaty sitter
Ball below net tape	Reset / poke	Open face or backspin	No leverage to attack safely
Ball at net tape	Counter / punch	Compact wrist snap	Workhorse of hands battles
Ball above net tape	Roll or flick	Brush-up topspin	Roll = control; flick = speed
Dink sits up	Speed-up	Topspin at body/feet	Dives down, no reaction time
Partner speeds up	Anticipate counter	—	Triangle Effect predicts the reply
Wide dink pulls defender	Erne	Flat volley	Taken pre-bounce — no defense
Predictable floated reply	Poach	Topspin	Better angle than assigned player
Small lateral movement	Shuffle step	—	Outside foot leads; never cross on forehand

SITUATION	SHOT	SPIN / MECHANICS	WHY
Short wide backhand dink	Crossover step	—	Only exception — extends backhand reach

SOURCES

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Below a 4.0 in Pickleball? Focus on These 2 Shots — The Dink Pickleball

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