

A PRACTICAL TENNIS STRATEGY COURSE

PLAY THE POINT

From basic decisions to advanced patterns

Plain language for an intermediate player

SEE THE SITUATION

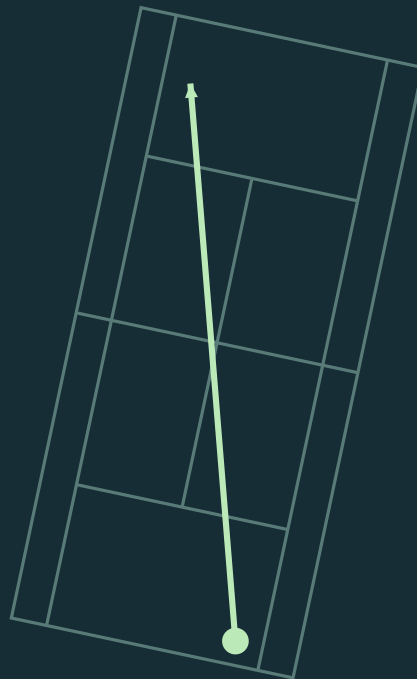
Choose a ball that improves your next shot.

32 lessons with practical examples

Court diagrams and annotated points

12 drills and an eight-week learning route

16 decision challenges with explained answers



Singles first. Doubles included. Built for learning and real match use.

September 2026 | Original teaching synthesis with linked coaching sources

Your course map

Learn the foundations in order. Then use the lesson codes to revisit the situation you need.

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Your first smarter match

You do not need every tactic at once. You need a dependable starting plan and a way to improve it.

What this workbook assumes

You can serve, keep a moderate rally going, and play a scored match. Your strokes sometimes break down under pressure. That is enough to begin. No rating, handedness, fitness level, or preferred style is assumed. The main course is singles; the doubles lessons build on it. Examples describe right-handed players only when stated.

Take this plan to your next match

On serve, choose a large target and expect another shot. On return, make the server play without giving away an easy attack. In a neutral rally, send a solid ball through a generous crosscourt or central target. Attack when you can arrive balanced and make comfortable contact. After every shot, move to cover the opponent's likely replies. Your opponent may make a good shot anyway. Judge the choice separately from that one result. A sensible shot can miss; a foolish one can get lucky.

Learn in a loop

Read one lesson. Explain its cue aloud without looking. Practise its decision with a partner. Play points where you use it without calling it out. Afterwards, record one situation you recognized well and one you missed. Return to the same lesson several days later. The weakest part of book learning is transfer: the ball arrives before you finish a paragraph in your head. Use one short cue during play and do the longer analysis between games or after the match.

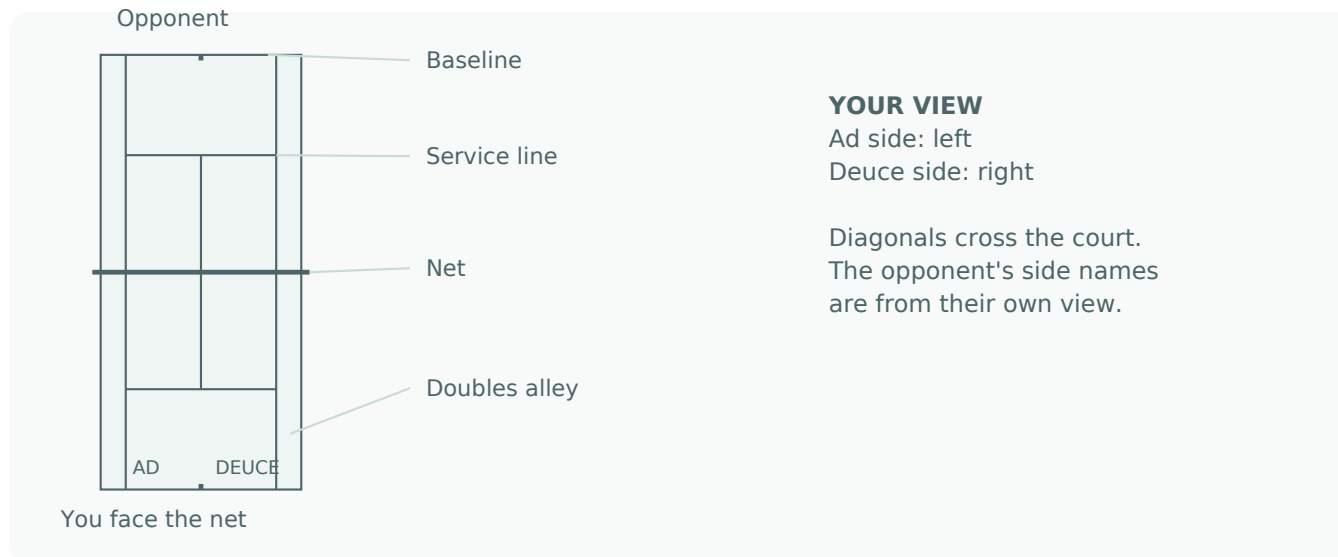
Your starting experiment

Play a normal set and record only double faults, missed returns, and attempted attacks from uncomfortable positions. These are observations, not a judgment of your ability. Choose the most frequent controllable problem for your first practice session. A partner or video can help because players often remember spectacular points better than ordinary ones.

Match cue: Choose a useful ball that you can actually hit today.

Read the court

Court words should describe a place you can picture immediately.



The locations

The baseline is the back boundary. The service line crosses each half closer to the net. Service boxes are the four smaller rectangles beside the net. The alleys are the side strips used for doubles rallies. They are outside the singles court. The service boxes stay the same in singles and doubles. [S01] Deuce court means your right-hand half when you face the net. Ad court means your left-hand half. Your opponent has the same names from their own perspective, so their deuce court appears on your left in this drawing.

The directions

Crosscourt means diagonally across. Down the line means roughly along the sideline on the same side of the drawing. Down the middle means toward the central part of the opposite court. Deep means near the opponent's baseline. Short means closer to the net. A target is an area you intend to hit. It is different from the boundary: the line tells you where an error becomes out, not where every good shot should land.

Picture it: A deep crosscourt ball travels diagonally and lands toward the far baseline.

The language of a point

Learn these words once. The later lessons use them in their everyday tennis sense.

Term	Plain meaning
Rally	The back-and-forth exchange after the serve is returned.
Groundstroke	A forehand or backhand struck after the ball bounces.
Volley / half-volley	A shot before the bounce / just after the bounce.
Topspin / slice	Forward rotation / a shot usually carrying backspin, sometimes with sidespin.
Lob / drop shot	A ball over a net player / a soft shot intended to bounce very short.
Approach shot	The shot you use while moving toward a net position.
Passing shot	A shot intended to get past someone at the net.
Winner	A legal shot the opponent cannot return before the second bounce.
Forced error	A miss strongly induced by the opponent's shot or pressure.
Unforced error	A miss on a reasonably manageable ball; the classification is subjective.
Recovery	Movement after your hit to prepare for the next reply.
Split step	A small readiness hop or settling action timed around the opponent's hit.
Serve + 1	Your first shot after your serve comes back.
Return + 1	Your next shot after your return comes back.
Poach	A doubles net player intercepts a ball otherwise headed toward the partner.

Strategy, tactic, pattern

A strategy is the overall plan: make the opponent hit low backhands while moving forward. A tactic is a specific choice: send a low slice short enough to bring them in. A pattern is a reusable sequence with conditions: deep to the backhand, read the reply, then approach if the reply is attackable. "Inside-out forehand" means a forehand played from the backhand side diagonally across. "Inside-in" sends that forehand roughly down the line. Neither automatically means a winner. Definitions are written for this workbook; the USTA glossary is a useful additional reference. [S02]

Decide what the ball allows

Your shot choice begins with the incoming ball and your position, before the score or your favorite shot.

Red: buy time

You are stretched, late, off balance, jammed, or forced far behind the baseline. Choose a target you can reach reliably and give yourself recovery time. Against a baseliner, a higher, deeper ball toward the middle or a generous crosscourt area often helps. Against a net player, a soft floating ball may be an easy volley; think low to the feet or a lob instead.

Yellow: build the point

You have a manageable ball but no clear advantage. Use reliable depth or shape toward a useful target. Make the opponent repeat a difficult task, without pretending every rally ball is an invitation to finish. A neutral ball can still be purposeful and firm.

Green: apply pressure

You arrive in time, have balance and comfortable contact, and can make the opponent's next shot harder. Attack through placement, earlier contact, angle, or a net approach. Maximum speed is only one option. Keep expecting a reply.

Short does not always mean green

A ball can land inside the service line yet stay extremely low, move away from you, or force you to sprint. That can be a defensive contact. A higher ball near the baseline may be an attacking opportunity for a player comfortable taking it early. Position helps you decide; it does not decide alone. The defensive, neutral, and offensive framework follows USTA ball-recognition guidance. The color labels and examples here are learning aids. [S03]

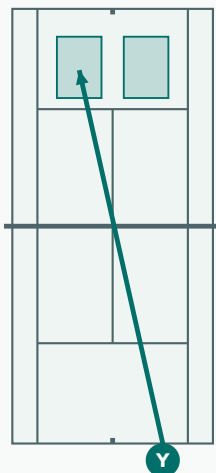
Try it

During a cooperative rally, say the state before your own contact. Your partner gives honest feedback after the rally. If you repeatedly call "green" while reaching, make your definition stricter. Progress to silently recognizing the same states during points.

Cue: Can I arrive, balance, and hit comfortably? If not, reduce the demand.

Give good shots room to miss

Aiming safely inside the court lets an ordinary miss still become a playable ball.



LARGE LANDING AREAS

Shaded regions are examples.
Leave space before the lines.

Use more clearance and margin
when the contact is difficult.

The arrow shows direction,
not the ball's height or bounce.

Start with generous targets

For neutral singles groundstrokes, try a landing area roughly 3-6 feet (1-2 m) inside the baseline and at least about 3 feet (1 m) inside the singles sideline. These are adjustable practice targets, not universal measurements of good tennis. Enlarge them when you are rushed or conditions are difficult. Use enough clearance above the net for your spin and speed. As an initial rally experiment, try roughly 3-5 feet (1-1.5 m) above the net. Keep the ball landing in, then adjust. A floating return into a doubles net player needs a different solution.

Depth has a cost too

Trying to land every ball on the baseline creates long errors. A slightly shorter, heavy or well-placed ball can be more useful than an attempted perfect-depth ball that misses. Judge the opponent's contact, not just the bounce location.

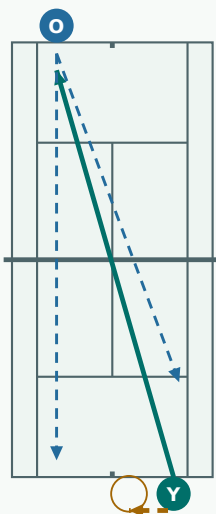
One example

You aim one foot from the sideline and miss sideways by two feet: out. You aim four feet inside and make the same error: in. The opponent may still reach it, but the point continues. A larger target is not a guarantee of safety; your trajectory and execution still matter.

Cue: Pick a landing area, not a painted line.

Recover to the replies

The center mark is a useful reference. Your recovery position changes with the shot you have just played.



AFTER A DEEP CROSSCOURT

Solid: your shot.
Blue dashed: possible replies.
Gold: illustrative recovery.

Recover toward the reply lanes, often a little on your hitting side of the center after this shot.

The spot is approximate, not fixed.

A moving home base

After a typical deep crosscourt shot, recover toward a position a little on your hitting side of the center mark. You are balancing the opponent's crosscourt and down-the-line replies. After you change down the line, you may need to move farther across because the opponent's crosscourt reply now threatens the other side. This is a practical approximation. The opponent's contact point, your ball's depth, available angles, and each player's speed can change the best position. Do not try to stand on a mathematically exact spot while the ball is moving.

Recover in depth too

If your shot leaves the opponent attacking comfortably, give yourself space behind the baseline when possible. If your shot forces a short or weak reply, move forward to meet it. Do not retreat automatically after creating an advantage.

Be ready when they strike

Start recovering promptly after your hit. As the opponent hits, settle into a split step so you can react either way. If you cannot reach the ideal position in time, get balanced where you are instead of sprinting blindly past the reply.

Cue: Where can their next ball go, and where can I cover it?

Change more than speed

A useful ball can trouble an opponent through its height, depth, spin, direction, or arrival time.

Height changes contact

A looping topspin ball can make a player hit above their preferred height. A low slice can make them bend and lift. Neither works merely because it looks different. Watch whether the opponent actually becomes less comfortable.

Depth changes space

A deep ball can keep a baseliner from stepping forward. A deliberately short ball can pull someone away from a comfortable baseline position. But a short ball that sits up may simply give them an attack. Short placement requires purpose and control.

Speed changes time

More speed can rush the opponent, but it also brings the reply back sooner. If you hit hard while badly out of position, you may leave yourself less time to recover. A slower, higher ball can buy time; taking a ball earlier can take time away without increasing racket speed.

Spin changes the flight and bounce

Topspin helps a ball dip and can produce a higher bounce. Slice often stays lower, depending on the surface, pace, and execution. Spin is useful when it supports your desired landing area and opponent contact. More spin is not automatically better.

Test one variable

Suppose the opponent's backhand survives a flat ball but lands short against a higher one. Keep your target similar and change height for several suitable opportunities. If the short reply repeats, you have a usable tactic. If you change speed, height, and direction together, you will not know which change mattered.

Common mistake

"I need to hit harder" becomes the answer to every problem. First ask whether you can make their next contact less comfortable with a simpler change. Sometimes the correct change is to hit a firmer, deeper ball because a passive one is being attacked.

Cue: What contact do I want the opponent to have?

Crosscourt first, with exceptions

Crosscourt is a strong default for neutral rallies. Changing direction needs a reason and enough control.

Why the default helps

A typical crosscourt groundstroke uses more court length than a comparable straight shot and passes nearer the lower center of the net. Repeating the incoming diagonal can also simplify the redirect. These advantages depend on your contact and target; a very sharp crosscourt angle can be risky.

When changing down the line makes sense

You have time and balance. The incoming ball is manageable. The new target attacks a real opening, a weaker stroke, or a recovery habit. You can cover the reply. A modest change well inside the sideline is often enough; you do not need the line itself.

When it is a poor choice

You are pulled outside the court, hitting late, or trying to redirect a heavy ball from an awkward height. A difficult change can create an error and, even when it lands in, expose you to the opponent's crosscourt attack.

Exceptions to repeating crosscourt

The opponent may be dominating that diagonal. Your crosscourt target may feed their best forehand. A down-the-line approach may give better net coverage. On a comfortable ball, a change toward the middle can also remove an angle without requiring a sideline target.

A usable decision

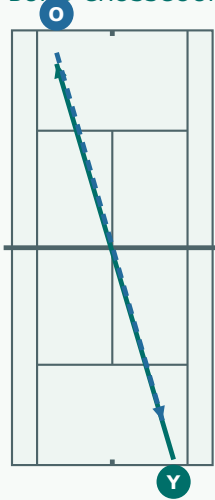
You are in a backhand crosscourt exchange. Your opponent's next ball is deep and heavy: continue or reset. Their following ball is shorter and you arrive comfortably: a controlled change becomes available. The trigger is the ball quality, not "I have hit three crosscourts, so now I must change."

Cue: Earn the change with position and contact.

Pattern: build, read, redirect

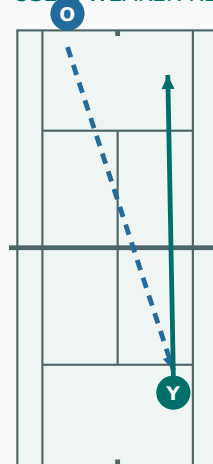
A pattern is a prepared answer to a likely reply. It is never a promise that the reply will arrive.

1 BUILD CROSSCOURT



If the reply is strong, repeat or reset.

2 USE A WEAKER REPLY



If you arrive balanced, use the other side.

Do not force it.

The starting pattern

Send a deep crosscourt ball with margin, then recover. If the reply is strong, repeat or reset. If it is shorter and comfortable, redirect into a large area on the other side. Recover or follow forward according to the quality of your attack.

Why it works

Make the opponent defend one side. A weaker reply gives you time to change their task. Build the opening before demanding the direction change.

Read the opponent's movement

If the opponent is already sprinting toward the open side, a firm shot behind them may be better. If they are balanced, the open area is usually simpler. Observe their movement rather than guessing.

The escape clause

If the reply is unexpectedly strong, cancel the attack and use a bigger target. Adapting successfully matters more than completing the planned sequence.

Cue: Build the opening; read it again before using it.

Pattern: your strength to their difficulty

The useful matchup is your reliable shot against their uncomfortable reply.

Find a matchup you can sustain

If your forehand to their backhand regularly forces a short reply, use that matchup when your position allows. But do not assume every backhand is weaker. A player may own an excellent backhand and dislike a running forehand. Their high backhand might be strong while their low backhand is vulnerable. Target a specific task: "backhand above shoulder height while moving backward" is more informative than "bad backhand."

Running around the backhand

A right-hander who moves left to hit a forehand can play inside-out toward the opponent's backhand side when the opponent is also right-handed. This can create repeated forehand pressure. It also leaves space on the hitter's forehand side. Use the run-around when there is time to get around the ball, contact comfortably, and recover. If the incoming ball is too wide or fast, taking your backhand is often the better choice. A forehand hit while falling off court is not necessarily your stronger shot.

Pin, then use the space

Keep the opponent working in one difficult area while your ball remains effective. When they begin leaning toward that area, a controlled change can use the space they leave. If they suddenly send a deep reply, abandon the planned change.

When the pattern fails

They start taking the ball early, create a better angle, or attack the space you vacate. Your own error rate may rise before their discomfort does. Adjust the target or use your backhand more often. A strategy that requires a shot you cannot repeat is too expensive.

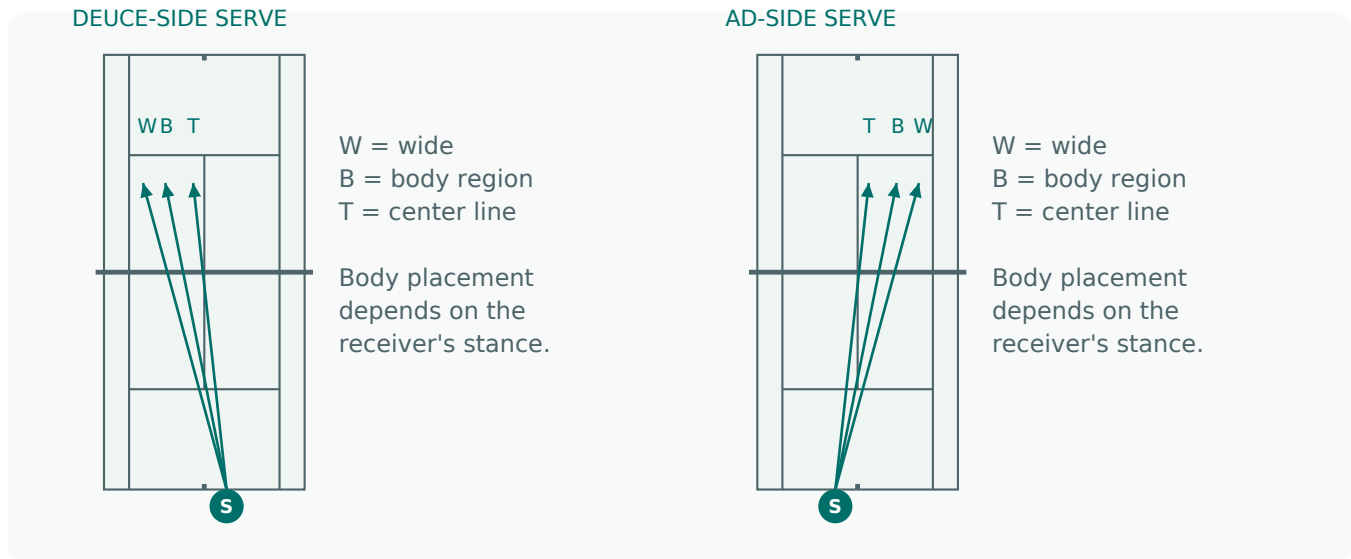
One small experiment

Across your next ten suitable forehand opportunities, record whether the pattern leaves you attacking, neutral, or defending. Do not count only the winners. Compare those contacts with normal backhand play before deciding to run around more often.

Cue: Favor the matchup that improves the next ball, not the stroke you like most.

Serve to a place and a purpose

A serve can open space, crowd the receiver, or restrict their return angles.



Wide, body, and T

Wide means toward the outside of the correct service box. It can pull the receiver off court, but also give them sharper return angles. A body serve goes toward the receiver's contact space; its best landing point changes with where they stand. A T serve goes toward the center service line and may limit the return angle. The diagram shows large placement regions, not exact body-serve destinations. You must serve diagonally into the correct box. The service box does not include the doubles alley. [S01]

Handedness matters

Against a right-handed receiver, wide on the deuce side commonly reaches the forehand; wide on the ad side commonly reaches the backhand. T placement reverses those matchups. Against a left-hander, the stroke labels reverse. Actual contact also depends on serve spin and receiver position.

Pick the next task

"Wide" is incomplete. "Wide enough to move them, then look for a comfortable first ball into space" is a plan. If their return comes back fast, use a neutral first ball instead. Practice each location with your ordinary serve before chasing more speed.

Cue: Where do I serve, and what reply am I preparing for?

L11

Your serve + 1 playbook

Plan the first groundstroke, but give the return permission to change your mind.

Play A: wide serve, then assess the space

Serve wide to move the receiver. Recover in time to read the return. If it comes back short and central, hit firmly into a generous open target. If the receiver has already rushed toward that space, consider playing behind them. If the return is deep or sharply angled, stabilize the rally instead. The wide serve is only useful when you can place it reliably and handle the return angle it creates. A tiny target at the service-box corner is unnecessary.

Play B: body serve, then pressure the weak reply

Aim to crowd the receiver's swing with a serve you control. If the reply floats short, step in and attack with placement. If the receiver makes space and returns well, use a normal rally ball. A body serve must be adapted to the receiver's stance, not aimed at a fixed painted spot.

Play C: T serve, then take court position

Serve toward the T to reduce the receiver's angle options. Prepare for a more central return, without assuming it must go there. If the reply permits, step inside the baseline and direct your next ball to the uncomfortable side. If it pins you back, recover and build again.

Choose a small menu

Have one dependable serve pattern from each side and one alternative. That is enough to begin. A large menu of unreliable serves creates confusion. Change the location or follow-up when the opponent shows a repeatable adjustment, not merely because the previous point was lost.

Practice link

In D04, count how often the serve plus your first shot leaves you attacking, neutral, or defending. An ace is welcome, but the learning objective is a playable advantage after the return.

Cue: Serve for the next ball; play the return you actually receive.

Protect the second serve without surrendering

A second serve needs margin and enough quality that the receiver cannot attack it without a decision.

Reliable does not mean timid

Choose spin and placement you can repeat with a committed motion. Simply slowing everything down can produce a short sitter and increase tension. Building a dependable spin serve may require technical coaching; no tactical slogan can substitute for the skill. Avoid aiming for the service line or sideline just to escape pressure. Begin with a larger landing area and work on consistent contact. The best choice may be body placement, a higher bounce, or the receiver's less effective return side.

When the returner steps forward

Do not panic and swing for an unfamiliar ace. Notice what they are covering. A reliable body serve may disrupt their forward movement. A practiced alternative location can make them move. If your second serve is currently attackable, prepare for defense after it rather than freezing behind the baseline.

A simple serve calculation

Imagine your first serve goes in 60% of the time, you win 65% of those points, and you win 45% of points after missing the first serve, including double faults. Overall service-point success is $0.60 \times 0.65 + 0.40 \times 0.45 = 57\%$. These are invented teaching numbers. They show why first-serve percentage alone cannot identify the best serve. A higher percentage can help, but a harmless serve may reduce the value of getting it in. Compare total points won and the quality of the next ball.

Train the situation you fear

Use D05: begin every point with a second serve. Keep a tally of faults and whether the return immediately puts you on defense. Improvement means fewer free points without turning every legal serve into an easy attack.

Cue: A confident motion to a sensible target.

Return the first serve intelligently

Against a genuinely strong serve, a useful return starts by denying a cheap point.

Choose your starting position

Stand where you can see the ball, react, and make controlled contact. Step farther back if pace overwhelms you and space permits. Move closer if the serve keeps pulling you very wide or bouncing awkwardly high, but only if you can handle the reduced time. Adjust in small steps and test the result. There is no universal correct distance behind the baseline. Serve speed, spin, court space, and your return style matter.

Use a compact response

Prepare early and keep the return movement manageable. Against pace, a controlled block or short swing may use the server's speed. You do not need a full rally backswing. Technique supports the tactic: get the ball to a useful area while staying balanced.

Pick a target that buys a start

In singles against a server staying back, a deep central return can limit their next angle. A generous crosscourt target is another option. Against a serve-and-volleyer, the same high return may give them an easy volley; aim low toward their feet or use a practiced lob. In doubles, a central return may run straight into the server's net partner. Start with a crosscourt lane that clears that player, or another deliberate solution.

Do not confuse first with fast

Some opponents have a slow first serve and a difficult spinning second serve. Respond to the actual ball. First and second serve are useful preparation categories, not a substitute for reading speed, spin, and placement. USTA distinguishes these return situations in its coaching resources. [S04]

Evaluate a block of returns

If you are consistently late, simplify the swing or change position. If you are making returns that sit up, improve trajectory or target before deciding to hit much harder. Count returns made and the server's next contact separately.

Cue: Read the serve, make clean contact, give the point a useful start.

Attack the second serve with a plan

Taking initiative can mean better position and placement. It does not require a return winner.

Scout the dependable serve

Watch what the server uses when they need to avoid a double fault. Do they favor one location or spin? USTA recommends studying that repeatable second serve. Treat the pattern as a clue, not a guarantee. [S05]

Move in only as far as you can handle

Against a shorter, slower second serve, step forward and take a comfortable ball early. Choose a large deep target toward the less effective side. You have taken time away even if the stroke is not exceptionally hard. A kicker is a topspin-heavy serve that bounces high. Against that or a serve that jams you, neutralizing it may be the correct outcome.

Plan return + 1

Return deep to an awkward contact area. Recover so you can use the next ball. If the server leaves a shorter reply, attack it. If they recover with a strong shot, play a neutral ball. The return is the first step of your pressure, not the entire point.

Punish the serve you can attack

A second serve landing short but staying low may require lifting over the net with margin. A shoulder-high kicker may be much harder to attack than the label "second serve" suggests. Trying to flatten either ball carelessly can donate the point.

When your aggression misses

Separate recognition from execution. Did you choose a reasonable ball and target but miss the stroke? Practise the stroke. Were you late, stretched, or aiming into a tiny opening? Change the decision. Repeated misses are information, even when a few returns look spectacular.

Practice link

Use D06 to compare a deep pressure return with your attempted outright winner. Play out every legal return. Compare total points and the next contact over several sessions; a handful of points can mislead.

Cue: Step in to control the rally, not to prove the serve was weak.

L15

What to do with the short ball

Your height at contact and your balance determine how much attack the short ball permits.

Comfortable and above net height

Move forward early, keep your feet organized, and hit into a large difficult area. You may use a sharper angle or firmer drive than from the baseline. You still need margin and recovery. Decide whether the ball's quality supports following to net.

Comfortable but below net height

The ball must travel upward to cross the net. Choose shape, controlled placement, or a low approach. A hard, flat attempt can find the net or sail long. You can create pressure with depth and position while accepting that the point needs another shot.

Short but difficult to reach

Get there first. If you are stretching or scraping a ball near the ground, a controlled lift, defensive slice, or occasional lob may be all that is available. The bounce location did not make the contact easy.

Three possible destinations

Use the open court when the opponent is far away and you have a generous target. Play behind a clearly recovering opponent when you can see their commitment. Approach toward the side that gives you good coverage and an awkward passing shot for them. The direction depends on their position and the ball, not a memorized order.

Finish the movement

After attacking, do not stop and admire the shot. If you follow in, move forward along a sensible coverage path and split as the opponent hits. If your attack is weak and they can pass comfortably, stop charging recklessly and prepare to defend.

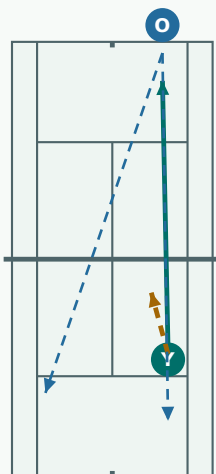
A frequent intermediate error

You rush the stroke because the ball looks easy. Arrive under control and choose a target before accelerating. Practice D07 with mixed short balls, including low awkward ones, so you learn to discriminate.

Cue: Short is an invitation to inspect, not an order to smash.

Approach and volley with coverage

Coming forward works when your approach makes the opponent's passing job difficult.



APPROACH, THEN COVER

Solid: approach down the line.
Gold dashed: forward movement.
Blue dashed: possible passes.

Split as the opponent hits.
Keep the first volley controlled
when contact is below the net.

Positions are illustrative.

Choose a reason to come in

Look for a short manageable ball, a reply you have forced weak, or an opponent whose pass is less effective than their rally. Simply running to net behind a soft central ball may give them a comfortable choice of pass or lob. USTA identifies geometry and position as central to successful approaches. [S06]

A useful directional default

A down-the-line approach often gives a simpler coverage path from a wide contact: follow it toward the same side and cover the likely passes. Crosscourt can work when it creates a substantially harder opponent contact, exploits a weakness, or uses a clear opening. Do not use either direction automatically.

The first volley is often a setup

If you volley below net height, aim for control and depth or a low central ball. If you meet a comfortable high volley, use the open space or a sharp angle. Move closer when time permits, but remain ready for a lob. Split around the opponent's contact even if you have not reached your ideal net position. A balanced volley from slightly farther back is better than running through the shot.

Cue: Make the pass difficult, cover it, then earn the finish.

L17

Pass, dip, or lob

Against a net player, you can win with two good decisions instead of one miraculous pass.

See their position

If the player is far from the net, a low ball can force them to volley upward. If they are very close, a lob may exploit the space behind. If they are stretched to one side, a controlled pass into a large opening may be available. Do not stare only at the sideline gaps. A dipping ball through the middle can deny the volleyer a strong angle and set up the next pass.

The two-shot pass

Send the first ball low enough to make the volley difficult. Recover forward if their reply is weak. Then pass using the space created by that volley. This works only if your first ball actually troubles them; a chest-high central ball can be a gift.

Crosscourt or down the line?

Crosscourt can offer a dipping angle but may travel through the volleyer's reach. Down the line can exploit a player leaning crosscourt but has less lateral margin. Choose the opening you can reach from your contact. When stretched, a reliable lob may offer a better chance than a tiny passing lane.

Defensive and attacking lobs

A defensive lob is high enough to buy time and should aim for depth. An attacking lob goes over the opponent with less extra time, often using topspin if you control it. Both require judging the opponent's reach, the wind, and available court space. A short lob is frequently an overhead opportunity for them.

What if they volley well?

Change their contact height, test overheads, or make them volley while moving. Do not keep hitting the same comfortable passing attempt harder and expect a different problem. If they are simply executing well, choose your best repeatable challenge and accept that some points are theirs.

Cue: Make the next volley awkward before demanding a clean pass.

Use touch shots for a reason

A drop shot, slice, or short angle is useful when it changes a task the opponent handles well.

The drop shot

Use it when you are balanced, the ball is manageable, and the opponent is well behind the baseline or moving away. From deep in your own court, the ball travels farther and gives them more time. Trying it while stretched adds another difficulty. Follow forward enough to cover their short reply, while respecting a lob. If they arrive comfortably and can attack, the drop shot did not achieve its purpose even if it landed in.

The slice

A controlled slice can lower contact, change pace, or give you time. Use depth when you need to keep an opponent back; use a deliberately shorter low slice to test their forward movement. A floating short slice with no plan can hand them the initiative.

The short angle

A manageable ball inside the baseline may let you pull the opponent sideways with a shorter crosscourt angle. The geometry is demanding: a very sharp angle has little landing space. Use spin and placement you have practised. Remember that opening their angle also opens possible replies against you.

Put deep and short together

First establish that your deeper ball moves the opponent back. If they begin defending from far behind the baseline, a suitable drop shot becomes more attractive. Once they stand closer, a deep ball may become effective again. You are responding to position rather than alternating shots on a schedule.

Avoid the novelty trap

A successful trick shot is memorable. Its failed attempts may be less memorable. Track whether the shot wins points or creates a favorable next ball across several appropriate opportunities. Keep it as a variation when it earns its place.

Cue: Use touch to exploit space you have actually created.

Scout without guessing a personality

Look for repeatable tennis problems. Labels such as "pusher" are only shortcuts.

In the warm-up

Notice preferred contact height, movement, and basic shot shape. Treat warm-up impressions as tentative. Players may warm up gently or avoid showing a weapon. Early match rallies are better evidence of what happens under real pressure.

In the opening games

Test a few sensible changes while still trying to win: a higher ball, a lower one, movement to each side, or a serve toward different regions. You are not sacrificing whole games for research. Use opportunities that fit your own reliable shots.

Write a specific hypothesis

Instead of "their backhand is bad," use "their backhand becomes short when contacted high and moving backward." Then test that situation again. If the opponent adjusts or the effect disappears, revise the hypothesis.

Watch the reply, not only the point result

Did they lose balance? Land short? Recover late? Or did they attack your supposedly safe ball? The reply can reveal why a tactic worked even when you missed the finish. A point won through an unrelated double fault tells you little about your rally plan.

Change one thing at a time

If you are losing neutral rallies, try a different height while keeping your main target stable. If you still lose the same way, change the target or court position. A complete tactical overhaul after two errors prevents you from learning anything.

A compact match note

"Plan A: high backhand. Evidence: four short replies on six suitable balls. Problem: when I land short, they step in. Adjustment: larger deep target; no forced line change." This is a working observation, not a statistically proven advantage.

Cue: What repeated contact problem can I create reliably?

Beat consistency with purposeful patience

A steady opponent earns their results. You need a better point pattern, not contempt for their style.

The retriever or "pusher"

They keep making you hit one more ball. Stop trying to end the point from poor positions. Use a reliable deep ball to build, then attack a genuinely comfortable reply. A well-chosen approach can force a pass instead of another comfortable baseline retrieval. Playing behind a recovering runner or drawing them forward can also change their task, as USTA coaching suggests. [S07] Test whether they are actually weaker there. Some retrievers have excellent touch and passing shots.

The moonballer

Their high balls may push you far back or above your preferred contact height. You can move back and play a high reply, take the ball earlier if trained to do so, or step in on a shorter bounce. Choose the option you can repeat. Swinging flat at a shoulder-high ball out of frustration is usually a poor trade. When you have moved them deep, a suitable short ball may expose forward movement. But an unreliable drop shot only solves their problem for them.

The quiet consistency trap

You decide to "outlast them" and produce shorter, softer balls while losing court position. Patience still needs useful depth, shape, or placement. If you are being pushed around, surviving another exchange is not evidence that the plan works.

What if they are fitter or steadier?

You may need to accept calculated attack on the right balls because endless neutral rallies favor them. That does not mean hitting harder from every position. Shorten points through a practiced serve pattern, earlier contact, or a better approach opportunity.

Practice link

Use D09 with a partner rewarded for consistency. Your task is to create and recognize an attackable ball before finishing, not to win the aesthetic contest.

Cue: Make them solve a different problem, then judge the reply.

Adapt to power, net play, and left-handers

These are starting hypotheses. The individual opponent decides whether they are useful.

Against a powerful baseliner

Take away comfortable contact. A deeper central ball may reduce their angles; a low slice or higher bouncing ball may disrupt their strike zone. Use a compact response when rushed. If you only float short balls, their power becomes easier to use. When they are erratic, give them a reasonable extra ball to hit. When they are accurate, merely hoping for an error may be insufficient. Look for earlier contact or a net opportunity that your skills support.

Against a frequent net attacker

Return low when possible, test the lob, and make them volley while moving. On their serve, prepare for the first volley rather than assuming a baseline rally. Do not shorten every return simply because you want it low: a ball with too little pace or poor placement can sit up.

Against a left-hander

Do not carry over automatic right-hander targets. A left-hander's forehand and backhand sides are reversed. Their slice serve can pull a right-handed receiver wide on the ad side, so test your receiving position and practice that contact. Their backhand is not necessarily weak. Identify their actual favorite rally pattern and the stroke you are feeding. Use body serves or varied placement if your usual target gives them a comfortable forehand.

Against a player with limited movement

Test movement in more than one direction, including forward and backward. Keep sufficient margin and respect their anticipation. Hitting a difficult sharp angle on every ball can create more of your errors than of their movement problems.

If none of the labels fits

Use the specific scouting method in L19. Many players combine strengths from several styles. The most valuable observation might be "excellent on the run but slow to reverse direction," which no broad label captures well.

Cue: Play the individual contact problem, not the stereotype.

Advanced: win time and court position

Advanced play often uses ordinary shots earlier and from better positions.

Taking the ball early

Contacting near or before the top of the bounce can shorten the opponent's recovery time. You may not need extra pace. The cost is less time to organize yourself and a more demanding contact. Practise it on predictable balls before using it under pressure. Use a compact preparation and a generous target. If you repeatedly arrive late, move back or choose a more manageable ball. Standing on the baseline does not create an advantage by itself.

Hold the baseline when you can

After a strong neutral shot, avoid unnecessary retreat. A slightly more forward position can help you catch the next shorter ball. When the opponent attacks, adjust backward if needed. Court position is a consequence of the exchange, not a badge of courage.

Take space after creating trouble

If your shot stretches the opponent, move in enough to use a likely weak reply. Keep reading their balance and racket preparation. Do not charge blindly because they are outside the sideline; a skilled player can still produce a strong crosscourt angle or lob.

Combine direction with movement

A comfortable ball played behind a recovering opponent can force a stop and reversal. It works best when you observe actual momentum. If the player has already stopped, the same shot may land near them. Watch before committing rather than guessing theatrically.

The advanced restraint

Sometimes the smartest attacking player sends one more neutral ball because the contact is not ready. Maintaining pressure without increasing error risk is a skill. Advanced means making the appropriate choice more often, not using a more spectacular choice every time.

Cue: Take their time away only when you still have enough of your own.

Advanced: choose the better gamble

The best target balances your chance of making the shot with what happens after it lands in.

A simple comparison

Suppose Shot A lands in 90% of the time, and you win 55% of the points in which it lands in. Its total point-winning chance is $0.90 \times 0.55 = 49.5\%$. Shot B lands in 75%, but you win 75% of points after it lands in: $0.75 \times 0.75 = 56.25\%$. These are invented probabilities, not measured tennis benchmarks. A miss is assumed to lose the point. The example shows why "always choose the safest shot" can fail: a very safe ball may leave you in a losing position.

The reverse error

If your aggressive shot lands in only half the time, its spectacular successful examples can mislead you. Include every attempt, not just the highlight reel. More power only helps if the total chance of winning improves.

Use observations, not imaginary precision

In real matches you will rarely know these probabilities. Compare clear patterns: are your attacks landing in often enough, and do they produce difficult replies? Does your safe shot stabilize the point or invite punishment? Small samples are noisy, and the opponent may change behavior.

Conditional plans

Prepare a plan with branches: if the serve produces a short return, step in; if it produces a deep return, build. If a backhand target starts producing strong replies, change height or choose a new target. A good pattern includes its cancellation condition.

Score is a pressure context

A break point does not automatically make the most passive shot optimal. Use your most trustworthy effective pattern, based on the ball and what is working today. The value of a point varies with the score, but extra importance alone does not prove you should change your shot selection.

Cue: Count the cost of missing and the cost of a weak successful shot.

Advanced: variation that earns its place

Repeat what works until the opponent gives you a reason to vary it.

Make a pattern recognizable

If a body serve repeatedly produces weak returns, keep using it enough to benefit. Eventually the receiver may move or shorten their swing to handle it. That response can make your practiced wide or T serve more useful. Variation has a purpose: make anticipation less comfortable, exploit an adjustment, or change a contact problem. Changing every shot for entertainment can destroy your own rhythm.

Disguise comes after reliability

Using similar preparation before different placements can delay the opponent's read. The priority is a consistent action you can execute. Complicated late changes that make you mishit are poor disguises. Build control first, then add uncertainty for the opponent.

What "hold the shot" really requires

When balanced with a comfortable ball and enough time, delaying the final directional commitment slightly can let you see an opponent lean. It does not mean waiting until you are late. A rushed player should choose a simple target earlier.

Avoid becoming predictable in the wrong way

A player who changes down the line after exactly three crosscourt balls advertises the change. A player who attacks only when the contact is good has a repeatable decision principle, but not a fixed shot count. Make the trigger the situation.

Repetition versus mixed choices

You do not need an arbitrary 50/50 split between locations. If one serve works much better and remains effective, favor it. Mix more when the opponent's anticipation reduces its value. Judge results over comparable situations, not one point in isolation.

A practical test

Keep one main pattern and one alternative for a set. After the set, identify whether the alternative exploited a real adjustment or merely interrupted your best tennis. Keep the variation that has a job.

Cue: Vary to answer their adjustment, not to escape your own impatience.

Pressure and the score

Important points call for clearer commitment to a useful plan, not an unfamiliar rescue shot.

Before a big point

Name a serve or return target and the first-ball plan. Keep the physical cue short: "high enough," "compact," or "balanced." Avoid conducting a technical lesson in your head while the ball is coming. On 30-40, you can still attack a comfortable short ball. The score did not turn that ball into a defensive one. Equally, a 40-0 lead does not make a difficult running winner a good choice if your objective is to win the game.

When ahead

Continue the patterns that earned the lead. Watch for the opponent changing position or becoming more aggressive. Protecting a lead by suddenly sending short passive balls can surrender control. Lower the target risk if needed while keeping useful shot quality.

When behind

Identify the recurring reason. If your returns keep missing, stabilize them. If you are getting trapped in a losing diagonal, change the pattern. If you are executing sensible choices and the opponent is playing well, a complete panic reset may be unnecessary.

Tiebreak essentials

In a standard seven-point tiebreak, win at least seven points with a two-point margin. The first server serves one point from the deuce side; players or teams then serve two points each, starting on the ad side. Change ends after each six points under the standard procedure. Other approved formats exist, so confirm your match format. [S01]

An error is information

A lucky net cord and a poor shot choice require different responses. Reset emotionally after either, but only change the tactical plan when the evidence supports it. USTA's resilience guidance emphasizes controlling your response and recommitting to the next action. [S08]

Cue: A clear target, an effective familiar pattern, then this ball.

Between points and between sets

Use the pauses to simplify the next decision, not to relive the previous point.

Before the match

Warm up movement and the strokes you expect to use. Identify your dependable serve locations and rally target for the day. Confirm the scoring format. Notice wind, sun, court space, and the opponent's basic preferences without treating every warm-up ball as decisive evidence.

Between points

Let the immediate reaction pass. Take a normal settling breath. State one factual observation if needed: "late on the return." Pick the next target and cue. Move into position ready to play within the match's timing rules. You do not need to feel perfectly calm to make a committed choice.

At a changeover

Ask: How are points starting? What repeatable reply am I creating? What is hurting me? Make one adjustment you can describe in a sentence. Example: "Their forehand likes my flat crosscourt ball; I will use more height and a deeper central target when neutral."

After a lost set

Separate the score from the pattern. Losing a set through repeated double faults needs a different response from losing long neutral rallies. Keep a useful pattern even if you lost a few close points. Change a repeated disadvantage even if the opponent donated enough errors to keep the score close.

After the match

Record one effective pattern, one repeated problem, and a practice decision. Be specific: "I attacked four low short balls flat and missed three" is actionable. "I need confidence" is too vague to plan a session.

Confidence you can use

Base confidence on a practiced response: "I know where to send this second serve." Winning a point is never guaranteed. Reducing the number of decisions you must invent under pressure makes execution easier to commit to.

Cue: Observe briefly. Choose clearly. Let the next point begin.

Wind, surfaces, and a difficult day

Adjust from the ball's actual behavior on your court.

Situation	Useful first adjustment	Watch the trade-off
Wind behind you	Add margin before the baseline; use controllable shape.	A shorter aim can become an attackable short ball.
Wind into you	Work to maintain depth; expect slower forward travel.	A soft ball may hang up for the opponent.
Crosswind	Aim farther from the side the wind carries the ball toward.	Gusts vary; small safe adjustments beat exact guesses.
Lower, quicker bounce	Prepare earlier; shorten the response when rushed.	Rushing forward without readiness still creates late contact.
Higher, slower bounce	Use shape and depth; expect one extra reply.	Do not let yourself be pushed back without a plan.
Sun affecting overheads	Choose positioning and lob responses that preserve sight.	Do not assume every overhead is an easy finish.

Surface names are only clues

Clay often encourages longer exchanges and higher bounces; grass often rewards lower, quicker patterns. Hard courts vary considerably. Ball condition, weather, and court construction can change the feel. Test the bounce and movement instead of importing a professional match's tactics wholesale.

When your favorite stroke is off

Give it a larger target and simpler direction. Use your dependable shot to stay in points while creating an easier contact for the struggling one. If the error keeps repeating, stop building a plan that requires that shot to be perfect today.

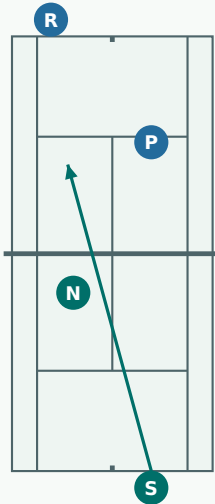
When tired

Recognize whether your recovery or contact quality is deteriorating. Simplify decisions and avoid unnecessary maximum-effort exchanges, but do not force unpractised winners merely to end points faster. Choose point-shortening patterns you already own.

Cue: Adapt to what the ball is doing here, today.

Doubles: position as a team

Two players must cover one evolving problem, with clear responsibility for the middle and the lob.



ONE UP, ONE BACK

S: server N: net partner
R: receiver P: receiver's partner

A starting snapshot for a serve from the deuce side.

React to the return quality.
Do not stay parked on these spots.
All positions are approximate.

Begin with useful positions

One player at net and one back is a common starting formation. The net player's exact depth and width depend on the serve or return, the opponents, and reaction time. The receiver's partner often begins around the service-line area, ready to move forward after a good return or defend after a weak one. These are starting areas, not fixed parking spaces. When your team creates a low or weak opponent contact, move forward together as practical. When your team floats a sitter, prepare to defend.

Move with the ball

When the ball goes wide, shift together toward that side enough to protect the likely lanes. Avoid leaving a huge middle gap. Do not both chase the same side so far that the opposite lane is undefended.

Own the middle explicitly

"Forehand takes the middle" is an incomplete rule. Reach, position, height, and who can contact forward matter. Agree on typical responsibilities and call early when it is unclear. At net, the player with the better forward contact often has the stronger play.

Cue: Cover the next reply together, not your personal half of the paint.

Doubles serve and return patterns

Build the first exchange around your partner's position as well as your own shot.

Serving team

Discuss location and whether the net player will stay, fake, or cross. A body or T serve may reduce the receiver's angle options and help a net player intercept, but only if your serve quality supports it. A wide serve can create an opening and also expose a sharp crosscourt return or line lane. After serving, prepare to cover the agreed side. Serve-and-volley is an option if your serve and first volley support it; do not make running forward an obligation when it produces a weak half-volley every time.

Returning team

A controlled crosscourt return can travel away from the opposing net player and make the server play. Keep the trajectory low enough or the placement far enough away to avoid an easy interception. "Crosscourt" by itself does not guarantee a safe lane. A lob over the net player can disrupt an aggressive formation if you control its height and depth. A down-the-line return is useful when the lane is truly open and the contact is manageable. Trying the line from a stretched contact against a stationary net player often gives away the point.

The receiver's partner reacts

A good low return may allow the partner to move forward and look for a weak volley. A floating return calls for defensive readiness and perhaps more space. Watching your partner hit without changing your own position misses half the job.

When a partner is under pressure

Use a simpler serve target, agree on clearer coverage, or consider two back temporarily if the net player keeps facing dangerous easy balls. USTA coaching encourages partners to discuss tactical options and supports moving back when the situation warrants it. [S09]

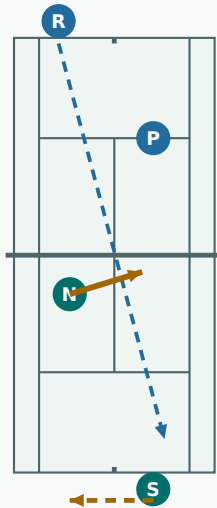
A starting team plan

"Body serve; net player stays unless a clearly reachable ball arrives." On return: "Crosscourt low; partner advances only if the return earns it." Build from this before adding complex switches.

Cue: Know the serve or return plan and the coverage after it.

Doubles: poaching with a plan

Poaching works through timing, a reachable ball, and agreed coverage.



PLANNED CROSS + COVER

Blue dashed: possible return.
Gold solid: net player crosses.
Gold dashed: server covers the side the partner leaves.

Agree on movement before serving.
A fake has a different plan.
Positions are illustrative.

Read-and-react poach

The net player sees a ball they can intercept with a balanced forward contact and moves across. The partner responds to the actual movement and any call. The opponent's contact position helps identify opportunities, a point emphasized in USTA poaching guidance. [S10]

Planned poach

Agree before the serve that the net player will cross and the server will cover the other side. Use a clear shared signal or verbal plan. Do not change to a different coverage silently after serving. Practise what both players do even when the return misses the intended interception lane.

Fake poach

Show movement toward the middle, then recover to the original lane. The aim is to affect the returner's choice without abandoning coverage. It needs different partner expectations from a committed cross. USTA describes this as the reverse or fake poach. [S11]

Before adding formations

Practise ordinary coverage first. L32 covers advanced formations and how to return against them.

Cue: A useful interception plus clear coverage beats motion for its own sake.

Doubles: lobs, low balls, and team decisions

The best team response depends on which partner can make a controlled contact.

When lobbed

The net player takes an overhead when they can turn, move, and reach it under control. If the lob passes them, call early so the partner can cover. Agree whether you will switch sides, and clear the partner's movement path. Avoid both chasing underneath the ball or blindly backpedaling. After a successful defensive lob, use its flight time to recover. If it lands short, prepare for an overhead instead of assuming the lob has solved the point.

When both opponents are at net

A low central ball can force an upward volley and reduce angles. A lob can push them back. A controlled pass is available when a lane is genuinely open. Hitting hard at chest height may give them a comfortable reaction volley.

When both opponents stay back

Use depth or a low volley to make them hit up, and close forward when time permits. Avoid retreating after every volley just because a lob is possible. Balance the immediate ball with overhead coverage. Make them prove they can lob accurately rather than guarding every possible shot equally.

Choosing receiving sides

Consider each player's return comfort, forehand and backhand reach, handedness, and ability to handle pressure points. There is no universal rule that the stronger player must take the ad side. In standard doubles, the receiving order stays fixed within the set; choose deliberately and confirm the format. [S01]

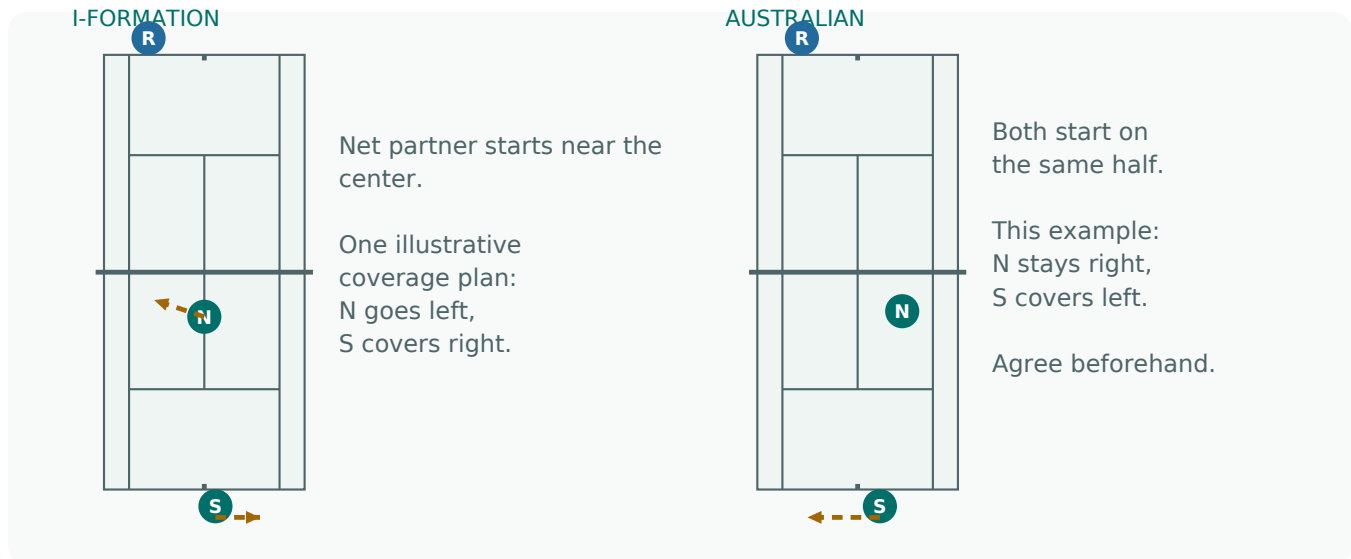
Communication that helps

Before a point, use actionable language: "T serve, I stay," or "If the lob clears me, call switch." After an error, avoid a stroke lecture. Ask whether the problem was the plan, coverage, or execution and choose one adjustment.

Cue: Early information prevents late collisions and open courts.

Advanced doubles formations

Change the receiver's picture only when your team understands the new coverage.



I-formation: delay the receiver's read

The server starts nearer the center; the net partner crouches near the center service line, below the serve's path. Agree on serve location and which side each partner will cover. The net player moves to the planned side, with the server covering the other. Do not improvise a crouched position in the serve's path without rehearsing it safely. Use it to disrupt a receiver who returns comfortably against your normal formation. The risk is confusion or a serve that gives the receiver time to pick the open lane.

Australian: challenge the habitual crosscourt

Server and net partner begin on the same lateral half. This changes the normal crosscourt return picture; the server must be ready to cover the opposite half according to the plan. It can test a receiver whose crosscourt return is much stronger than their line return. Clear line passing ability can punish poor coverage.

When receiving against either

Keep watching the serve. Choose a controlled target based on the net player's actual movement and your contact, rather than guessing before the toss. A reliable lob can be useful if the formation crowds the net. Use a manageable return first; a clever formation does not force you to attempt a tiny line winner.

Cue: Change the starting picture; keep the responsibilities clear.

LAB 1

Watch a singles point develop

These fictional examples show decisions as the advantage changes. The ending is not guaranteed.

Point A: patience creates the attack

You serve to a large T target. The return is deep through the middle. You cancel the planned forehand attack and play a firm neutral ball crosscourt. The opponent replies shorter. You arrive balanced inside the baseline and drive to a generous target on the other side. You follow forward, split, and meet a low volley. You send that volley deep instead of trying a sharp winner. The opponent finally sends a short lob, and you finish with a controlled overhead. The decisive skill appeared before the finish: you refused to force the first attack, then recognized the real opening. If the opponent had passed you, you would still review whether the approach and coverage were sound before condemning the whole plan.

Point B: defense earns a reset

The opponent pulls you wide to the forehand. You cannot plant comfortably. You lift a higher crosscourt ball with enough depth to keep them back. While it travels, you recover toward the likely reply lanes and settle before their contact. They send a solid ball deep to your backhand. You use a large central target and regain neutral court position. The point is still alive, and you have improved your position. If you had tried a hard running down-the-line winner on the first ball, you would have accepted a much smaller target and less recovery time. It might work occasionally, but that alone would not make it your dependable plan.

Your turn to analyze

For each shot in either point, name the state before contact. Then identify exactly what changed the state. "I won" is an outcome. "Their short reply gave me time to step in" explains the opportunity.

Learning cue: Rewind to the shot that created the finish.

Watch a doubles point develop

The ball matters, but so does the partner who is not hitting it.

Point C: a planned cross

The server and net partner agree on a body serve and a committed poach. The serve crowds the receiver, who sends a manageable crosscourt return. The net player moves forward and across into the interception while the server covers the other side. The volley goes low toward the opposing net player's feet. That player lifts a weak reply, and the serving team closes to finish. The plan succeeded because the serve helped create a reachable return and both teammates understood coverage. If the receiver had hit an excellent line return, the server would still be responsible for the agreed side. A lost point would not automatically prove that the planned movement was wrong.

Point D: defending a lob together

Your partner is at net; you are farther back. An opponent sends a lob that clearly clears your partner. Your partner calls early and moves out of your path. You move across, let the ball bounce when necessary, and send a high deep defensive lob. Your team switches into useful coverage, then settles before the opponent's overhead. If your lob is deep, the opponent may hit a less aggressive overhead or retreat. If it is short, both partners need defensive readiness. The word "lob" does not tell you whether you are safe; its actual depth does.

The communication test

Could you explain who covers each side after the first ball of these points? If not, simplify your team's plan before the match. A complex formation with uncertain responsibility can be worse than a familiar formation with clear reactions.

Learn from the non-hitter

When watching doubles, follow one player who is not receiving the next ball. Do they close after a low return, retreat after a sitter, or prepare to cover the lob? Their movement often reveals the tactical state before the next stroke does.

Learning cue: Track the partner without the ball.

D01-D03

Train recognition and rally decisions

Each drill has a decision to learn. The numerical goals are suggested practice settings, not rating standards.

D01. Name the state | 2 players | 10 minutes

Rally cooperatively through generous targets. Before your own hit, say "red," "yellow," or "green." After each rally, compare any disputed calls. Log 20 readable balls and aim to agree on at least 16 before adding speed. Easier: use predictable feeds or a slower ball. Harder: vary depth without announcing it. Transfer: play points silently and review three decisions afterwards.

D02. Depth with a job | 2 players | 12 minutes

Mark large safe landing areas behind the service line, with clear margin before the baseline. Rally crosscourt. Award one practice credit when your ball lands in the target and you recover ready for the reply. Do not claim the actual point until it ends. Aim for six useful target balls out of ten on each diagonal before making the area smaller. Easier: cooperative pace. Harder: play a normal point after the fourth contact. USTA's target-practice resource also uses depth beyond the service line. This scoring version is an original adaptation. [S12]

D03. Earn the direction change | 2 players | 12 minutes

Start crosscourt. Either player may change direction only when balanced with a manageable ball. A change from a clearly stretched or late contact loses a practice credit, regardless of whether it lands in. Play the rest of the point normally. Count ten changes and discuss how many had a sensible trigger. Easier: a partner deliberately feeds an occasional shorter ball. Harder: remove the rule, then review whether the choices remain good.

Keep the drill honest

Agree on the purpose before starting. An uncertain feed or subjective call should be discussed briefly, not argued like a tournament line call. If you can perform the drill but make the opposite choice in real points, spend more time on the transfer phase instead of endlessly improving the drill score.

Practice cue: Train a choice, then remove the prompt.

D04-D06

Train the beginning of points

Start from a real serve when possible. A feed cannot reproduce every return decision.

D04. Serve + 1 ledger | 2 players | 15 minutes

Choose one serve pattern from each side. Play the point out. At your first shot after the return, mark whether you were attacking, neutral, or defending. Also count double faults. Run 20 service points. A good session increases useful first-ball contacts without an increase in free points. Easier: returner sends a controlled deep reply. Harder: returner can attack and change position normally.

D05. Second-serve games | 2 players | 12 minutes

Every point begins with one second serve. A fault loses the point. Play games to seven with a two-point margin as a practice format, switching server between games. Record faults separately from returns that immediately force defense. Easier: begin with a large service target and cooperative returns. Harder: start the score at 4-4. Keep the same practiced serve motion under pressure; do not introduce a new serve technique mid-drill.

D06. Return, then build | 2 players | 15 minutes

The server alternates a challenging serve and a manageable serve at a pace both players can handle. The receiver chooses either a neutralizing return or a pressure return based on the actual ball. Play every return out. Record return-in rate and whether the next contact is favorable. Easier: announce the serve type. Harder: mix serves without announcing. Do not reward a return winner more than another point won through a good pattern.

What to compare

For serving, compare points won and the next-ball quality, not just aces or first-serve percentage. For returning, compare missed returns with the quality of the returns you make. Twenty points is a manageable practice sample, not enough to establish a precise true success probability. Look for repeated patterns across sessions.

Practice cue: Make the first exchange resemble a match.

D07-D09

Train attack, transition, and adaptation

Mix the feeds so the right answer changes.

D07. Short does not mean easy | 2 players | 12 minutes

A partner feeds mixed short balls: comfortable high, comfortable low, and awkward wide. Before contact, choose drive, controlled approach, or defensive response. Play the point out after each feed. Track ten decisions and whether the target fitted your balance and contact height. Easier: announce the feed. Harder: introduce the short ball during a neutral rally. A wrong-state winner does not erase the decision problem.

D08. Approach, split, first volley | 2 players | 15 minutes

Start with a manageable short feed. The attacker approaches to a declared large target, moves forward, and splits around the defender's contact. The defender can pass or lob within their control. Play out the point. Give separate practice credits for an appropriate approach and readiness for the first volley; keep the real point score separate. Easier: defender initially uses controlled low passes. Harder: allow any reply from the start.

D09. Solve the retriever | 2 players | 15 minutes

One player aims for consistent depth and retrieval. The other uses a chosen pattern to create a comfortable attack, then plays the point out. Swap roles after ten points. Count attacks created from good contact separately from rushed attempts. Easier: begin with a slightly shorter rally ball. Harder: the retriever may counterattack any poor ball. The attacking player must learn to reset when the opening disappears.

Do not practise the finish alone

Repeated easy put-aways can improve the stroke while leaving the tactical problem untouched. Keep enough random feeds that you must recognize when to attack. If you know in advance that every ball is green, you are practising execution more than selection.

Practice cue: Make the feed unpredictable enough to require judgment.

D10-D12

Train teamwork and pressure

Use constraints briefly, then return to normal tennis.

D10. Doubles coverage rehearsal | 4 players | 15 minutes

Before every serve, the serving pair state their plan quietly: stay, fake, or cross, plus serve location and coverage. The receiver returns under control, then everyone plays the point out. Afterward, identify any uncovered lane caused by confusion. Start with stay and planned cross; add fake once the distinction is clear. Harder: the returners choose any return and the server varies placement.

D11. Lob and switch | 4 players | 12 minutes

Start one up and one back. The opposing team mixes manageable passes with lobs. The defending pair call early, decide who can reach the lob, and recover into useful coverage. Stop and reset if movement becomes unsafe or both players chase the same path. Score clear responsibility and a controlled next shot separately from the point result. Harder: begin from a live rally so the lob is unexpected.

D12. Pressure with a plan | 2 or 4 players | 15 minutes

Play a standard tiebreak or the tiebreak format used in your competition. Before each point, quietly name your target and one first-ball intention. After the tiebreak, review two pressured decisions without replaying every error. Easier: use a practice game beginning at 30-30. Harder: repeat against a different style. Success is keeping useful decisions under score pressure, not merely winning one short game.

If you practise alone

Use serve-target sessions, shadow recovery after a simulated crosscourt or line change, and video study. A wall can build repeatability and allow target changes, but it cannot reproduce an opponent's moving position or normal flight time. Pair solo work with live points whenever possible.

Practice cue: If the rule helps, later remove it and keep the behavior.

PLAN

An eight-week learning route

Suggested rhythm: two focused 45-60 minute sessions and one scored match per week. Adapt the volume to your schedule.

Week	Main learning job	Practice and match focus
1	Recognize the ball; choose margin.	L03-L04; D01-D02. Track rushed attacks.
2	Recover; choose when to redirect.	L05-L08; D03. Review line-change decisions.
3	Start service points with a plan.	L10-L12; D04-D05. Track double faults and first-ball state.
4	Improve return decisions.	L13-L14; D06. Separate misses from weak made returns.
5	Use short balls and net position.	L15-L18; D07-D08. Read low versus high contact.
6	Solve a recurring opponent problem.	L19-L21; D09. Test one specific hypothesis.
7	Add time pressure or doubles teamwork.	L22-L24 or L28-L31; D10-D11 for doubles.
8	Compete and review.	L25-L27; D12. Repeat baseline observations and write a new plan.

A 60-minute session

Use about 8 minutes for movement and easy hitting, 12 for a controlled version of the skill, 18 for a decision drill, and 17 for points without the drill's prompts. Use the last 5 minutes to record what transferred. Adjust these example times as needed.

If you only have one weekly session

Alternate focused drills with match play and extend the route. Keep the same lesson for another week when the decision still disappears in real points.

What counts as progress?

You recognize more situations early. Your chosen targets fit your contact. Your patterns create easier next balls, and your match notes identify specific problems. Winning more matches may follow, but opponent quality and small samples make the score an imperfect weekly progress measure.

Learning cue: Advance when the decision transfers, not when the calendar changes.

TRACK

Measure what you can change

Use a few consistent definitions so your notes remain comparable.

Measure	How to record it	What it may reveal
Double faults	Count per service game or per total service points.	Free points lost at the start.
Returns made	Legal returns divided by return opportunities; exclude double faults and service lets. Count aces as missed opportunities.	Whether your return begins enough points.
Useful return	Made return that avoids an immediately comfortable attack; use the same judgment each match.	Quality beyond just getting it in.
Rushed attack	Attempted attack while late, stretched, or clearly off balance.	A shot-selection issue.
Pattern outcome	Attacking, neutral, or defending after the planned first exchange.	Whether the plan creates useful contacts.

Rate the decision and the execution separately

A sensible target can produce a miss, and a poor choice can get lucky. If good decisions repeatedly fail at the same contact, practise the stroke. If you aim at tiny targets while stretched, train selection.

A short review form

Match / opponent / date: _____

What I tried: _____

What reply it usually created: _____

A pattern I should keep: _____

A repeated problem and its likely cause: _____

Next session's drill and one cue: _____

Four wins from five attempts is promising, not proof. Compare similar contacts across matches. Use notes to design your next experiment, not to invent precise probabilities from one set.

Review cue: Record the situation, the choice, and the next contact.

Q01-Q06

What would you play?

Answer aloud before reading the answer key. Name your state, target, recovery, and the fact that could change your choice.

Q01. Pulled wide

In singles, you are stretched beyond the forehand sideline against an opponent staying near their baseline. Their other corner looks open. What is your first priority?

Q02. The tempting line change

You are rallying backhand crosscourt. The next ball is deep, heavy, and reaches you late. You have already hit four crosscourt shots. Should you change down the line now?

Q03. The low short ball

A ball bounces inside the service box. You reach it balanced, but the contact is below net height. What sort of attack is available?

Q04. The strong return

You serve wide intending to hit the next forehand into the open court. The return comes back fast and deep at your feet. What happens to your plan?

Q05. The repeatable second serve

The opponent has sent most second serves toward your backhand. On a pressure point they prepare to serve again. How should that observation affect your return?

Q06. The misleading backhand

You attacked an opponent's backhand repeatedly, but it has produced excellent deep replies. Their running forehand has landed short several times. What should you test next?

Write your decision, not a slogan

Choose two situations and complete: "Because the ball is _____ and I am _____, I will aim _____. After contact I will _____. I would change this if _____."

Study cue: The best answer includes the condition that would make it wrong.

Q07-Q12

What would you play?

These situations test whether you can adapt a default instead of repeating it blindly.

Q07. The close volleyer

You are balanced near the baseline and the opponent is very close to the net. The line gaps are small. What alternative deserves consideration?

Q08. The runner changes direction

You have a comfortable attacking ball. The opponent is already sprinting across toward the obvious open side. Where else could you place it, and what must you actually observe?

Q09. The doubles return

A strong first serve pulls you wide in doubles. The server's partner guards the middle. You normally return deep down the middle in singles. Is that still your default?

Q10. The planned poach

Your partner signals a committed cross after your serve. You serve, then see the receiver preparing down the line. Which side are you responsible for?

Q11. The lob over your partner

Your net partner cannot reach a lob under control. You are farther back and can cover it. What communication and movement are needed?

Q12. The short passive ball

You are ahead 5-3 and begin playing much softer to avoid errors. The opponent steps in and attacks repeatedly. What adjustment preserves margin without giving away initiative?

Compare a tempting alternative

For each answer, identify one attractive choice that is less suitable and explain its cost. If you can only name a shot but cannot explain why another shot is worse in this situation, revisit the relevant lesson.

Study cue: Think about the reply your shot gives them.

Q13-Q16

Advanced decision challenges

You are choosing under uncertainty. State your assumptions instead of pretending every answer is universal.

Q13. The "safer" shot

One shot lands in often but leaves the opponent attacking. Another misses somewhat more often but usually creates a strong advantage when it lands. What information do you need to compare them?

Q14. The rushing second-serve returner

The receiver stands well inside the baseline and attacks your slow second serve. You have a reliable body placement and a rarely practised wide serve. What should you test first?

Q15. The new wind

At one end, the wind is carrying your ordinary rally balls long. What first adjustment would you make? What would show that you have overcorrected?

Q16. The repeated successful serve

Your body serve keeps producing weak returns. You have used it several times and worry you are becoming predictable. Should you switch simply to be varied?

Build your own case

Describe a real point you lost. Start one or two shots before the final miss. Where did your state change? Was the problem recognition, target, contact execution, or recovery? Rewrite the point with one better decision, then name the drill that could train it.

Score and starting situation: _____

The shot that changed the point: _____

My choice and what it invited: _____

A better conditional choice: _____

What I need to practise: _____

A fair way to self-check

Give yourself one credit for a sensible state assessment, one for a realistic target, and one for appropriate recovery or partner coverage. This is a study aid, not a validated tennis rating. An alternative answer can deserve full credit if your assumptions and trade-offs fit the stated situation.

Study cue: Explain the decision well enough that you could coach it to a friend.

Answers to Q01-Q08

These are recommended starting decisions. A different answer can be sound if the actual ball or player skills justify it.

Q01. Buy time first

Choose a controlled higher, deeper crosscourt or central ball if you can execute it. Recover and settle before the next hit. The open corner does not remove the difficulty of your stretched contact. A reachable passing lane would matter more if the opponent had come to net. See L03 and L05.

Q02. Do not change because of the count

Stay on a manageable diagonal or reset toward a large target. A late, heavy contact is a poor trigger for a demanding redirect. Change when the ball and your balance support it. See L07.

Q03. Create pressure while lifting the ball

Use controlled shape or a low approach with margin. The ball needs to rise over the net, so a flat maximum-power finish is demanding. Follow only if your approach and coverage support it. See L15-L16.

Q04. Cancel the planned attack

Handle the deep return with a balanced neutral or defensive response. Serve + 1 is conditional. Trying to force the original forehand ignores the actual return. See L11.

Q05. Prepare, but keep reading

Expect the observed pattern enough to improve readiness. Make a modest position adjustment only if you can still cover an alternative. Do not commit so early that a different serve beats you before you react. See L14.

Q06. Test the running forehand

Use your reliable ball to create that specific movement. Do not replace "backhands are weak" with "forehands are weak." Keep watching which contact actually becomes difficult. See L19-L21.

Q07. Consider the lob

A controlled lob can exploit the space behind a very close net player. If it is not a shot you can control, a low dipper to force a difficult volley may be better. Wind, overhead reach, and contact quality matter. See L17.

Q08. Consider hitting behind

A large target behind their committed recovery can force a stop and reversal. Confirm they are actually moving that way. Against a balanced opponent, the open court may still be simpler. See L08 and L22.

Answers to Q09-Q16

The goal is a clear reason, not memorization of a single shot name.

Q09. Respect the net player

A controlled crosscourt return away from their reach is a useful start. A lob can be an alternative if manageable. The singles central target may feed the doubles net player, and a stretched line attempt has little margin. See L13 and L29.

Q10. Cover the side your partner leaves

With a committed planned cross, the server covers the opposite side as agreed. Anticipating a line return is part of that responsibility. Do not silently reverse the plan and leave both players covering one lane. See L30.

Q11. Call and clear the path

Use your team's early call and switch agreement. The net player moves out of your route, you cover the lob, and both recover for the next shot. If an overhead is no longer controlled, letting the ball bounce can be sensible. See L31.

Q12. Restore useful shot quality

Use bigger targets while maintaining sufficient depth, shape, or firmness to avoid a sitter. Keep attacking genuinely comfortable balls. If the opponent has improved, adjust the pattern rather than only your confidence. See L25.

Q13. Compare total point-winning value

You need the chance each shot lands in and the chance of eventually winning after it lands, evaluated in comparable situations. A high in-rate alone is insufficient. Use repeated observations and acknowledge uncertainty. See L23.

Q14. Test the reliable body option

It may crowd the forward receiver while staying inside your practiced skill set. If they handle it well, test another reliable location or shape. The rarely practised wide serve may cost more faults than it prevents attacks. See L12.

Q15. Increase the landing margin

Aim shorter within a still-useful deep area and use shape you control. If the ball now sits short and the opponent steps in easily, you have overcorrected or need a different trajectory. Check the other end independently. See L27.

Q16. Keep it while it works

Repetition is acceptable if it remains effective. Add a practiced variation when the receiver's anticipation or movement reduces the main serve's value. There is no required equal mix. See L24.

FIX

Diagnose the mistake you keep making

Look for the repeated cause before changing the whole game.

What keeps happening	Likely issue to check	First useful response
Net errors on neutral balls	Clearance, contact height, or late preparation.	Use more shape and a manageable pace; L04, D02.
Balls sailing long	Trajectory, target depth, contact, or wind.	Increase baseline margin; compare both ends; L27.
Missing line changes	Redirecting from difficult contact.	Earn the change; L07, D03.
Losing after a good wide shot	Recovery late or toward the wrong lane.	Cover the replies and split; L05.
Short balls missed flat	Contact below net height or rushed arrival.	Use lift and placement; L15, D07.
Passed immediately after approach	Approach too easy or coverage poor.	Improve the opponent's contact; L16, D08.
Many made returns but still dominated	Returns sit short or reach a comfortable attack zone.	Improve return quality; L13-L14, D06.
Losing to a steady retriever	Premature attack or passive rally pattern.	Create a specific awkward task; L20, D09.
Partner poaches and court opens	Unclear plan or missing switch coverage.	Agree on stay, fake, or cross; L30, D10.
Good practice, poor match choices	Decision not trained under live uncertainty.	Remove drill prompts; add D12.

When tactics are not the only problem

If a suitable decision repeatedly fails at the same contact, you may need technical feedback. If you read the ball correctly but cannot reach it, movement and positioning deserve attention. The categories can interact: standing too close may make a sound return idea technically impossible.

Fix cue: Find the earliest controllable problem in the point.

NOTES

Your personal playbook

Fill this in after several matches. Keep only patterns you can describe and execute.

My reliable starting patterns

Deuce-side serve and likely first ball: _____

Ad-side serve and likely first ball: _____

Second serve under pressure: _____

First-serve return target: _____

Second-serve return plan: _____

Neutral rally target and shape: _____

My trigger to attack: _____

My defensive reset: _____

My adjustments

Opponent contact I can usually trouble: _____

What would show that Plan A stopped working: _____

My practiced Plan B: _____

Doubles coverage agreement: _____

My one cue on a pressure point: _____

My next learning cycle

The repeated situation I want to improve: _____

Lesson to reread: _____ Drill to use: _____

What I will observe in points: _____

Review date or next match: _____

Keep the playbook small enough to use

A match plan that requires remembering twenty instructions is too large. This page records your options; before a match, choose only the relevant few. During a point, let the incoming ball and your balance guide the decision. Review the details when there is time to think.

Personal cue: A plan is useful when I can execute it and recognize when to change it.

Coaching foundations and further study

Sources checked September 7, 2026. Open the linked titles for the original material.

How to interpret the evidence

This is an original teaching synthesis, not an official USTA or ITF curriculum. Source markers identify specific supporting coaching concepts or rule facts. The diagrams, scenarios, drill scoring, practice thresholds, and eight-week sequence were created for this workbook. They are adjustable teaching tools, not experimentally validated prescriptions or a guaranteed route to a rating. Most tactical guidance is conditional coaching judgment. Confidence is high in the broad principles of matching risk to contact quality and organizing coverage. The best exact target, frequency, or position for you remains uncertain until tested in live play. Video or a coach observing your own points could change those recommendations.

S01. ITF: 2026 Rules of Tennis

Official rulebook. Rules 1, 5, 15, and 16 and approved alternative formats support the limited court, serve, receiving-order, and tiebreak facts used here. Competition-specific formats should be confirmed separately.

S02. USTA: Tennis Terms and Words to Know

Tennis glossary. Additional terminology reference. Workbook explanations are rewritten in plain language.

S03. Fred Viancos, USTA Texas: Ball Recognition

Think Like a Pro: The Simple Power of Ball Recognition, August 19, 2025. Supports identifying defensive, neutral, and offensive situations and practising recognition aloud.

S04. USTA: Returning First and Second Serves

Tennis strategy: Returning first and second serves, October 6, 2021. Further coaching resource on the different return situations. The written page introduces an embedded video; the detailed return plans in this workbook are original synthesis, not a transcript of that video.

S05. Lizanne Jinkerts, USTA: Return of Serve

Improve Your Game: Return of Serve, June 11, 2019. Supports observing the opponent's repeatable second serve, especially under pressure.

Further coaching resources

These links support selected concepts and provide places to continue studying.

S06. Ben Zaiser, USTA: Approaching the Net

Improve Your Game: Approaching the Net in Singles, March 16, 2020. The written introduction identifies geometry and court position as important. The workbook's detailed approach decisions are original coaching synthesis.

S07. Chris Michalowski, USTA: Runner-Pusher

Tactical Tennis: Beating a Runner-Pusher, May 9, 2017. Supports testing shots behind a recovering opponent and bringing a retriever forward.

S08. Dr. Larry Lauer, USTA: Resilience

Tennis Strategy: Resilience on the Court, January 1, 2017. Supports managing reactions to setbacks and choosing the next useful action.

S09. Brandi Bratek, USTA Texas: New Doubles Partner

Ask a coach: Competing with a new doubles partner, November 24, 2024. Supports discussing tactical options with a partner, including moving back when the net position is being exposed.

S10. Ben Zaiser, USTA: Poaching

Improve Your Game: Poaching in Doubles, December 6, 2019. Supports reading the opponent's contact position to identify interception opportunities.

S11. Ben Zaiser, USTA: The Reverse Poach

Improve Your Game: The Reverse Poach, May 13, 2019. Introduces the fake-poach concept. Embedded video details were not independently reviewed.

S12. USTA: Target Practice

Improve your tennis game: Target practice, March 25, 2021. Supports practice using depth beyond the service line. D02 uses a different, original scoring and transfer structure.