

## The Ten Commandments Of Doubles

Once again, I must thank one of my readers for this month's column topic. It does seem to me to be a well-timed subject.

Hopefully, each of you reading this is able to get out and play this wonderful game with greater frequency. If you are, I am hopeful that you are playing doubles in addition to playing singles.

Doubles can truly improve a player's singles game. I always have admired John McEnroe. When he was younger and playing on the ATP tour, he would compete in both singles and doubles. In major measure, I am certain that playing both of these helped him excel at each.



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Unfortunately, doubles on the pro tours do not attract as many stadium or TV fans as do singles. The reasons for this are myriad, and for those who have become doubles specialists, this trend has enabled them to travel and compete as pros. When, however, ranked singles players compete in doubles (as is frequently the case at Grand Slam events) there is certainly a crowd to watch.

June is Wimbledon month. This great game traces its roots back to the British Isles. The tradition of doubles play has certainly been preserved and fostered in this great event.

So with all of these in mind, I put forth what I perceive as the 10 commandments of doubles. Hopefully, these will stimulate some singles players to compete more frequently in doubles. I promise each of you that playing doubles is a great way to improve one's overall tennis skills...while having fun!!! I am certain that John McEnroe would agree.

### COMMANDMENT 1

**Doubles is clearly a game of control.** Singles can be a game of sheer power and speed. However, these two attributes are not the deciding factor in the game of doubles.

First, we all realize that doubles does not involve quite as much court movement for each player. As I write this, I realize how much my deteriorating knees prevent me from court movement. Clearly, it is just a matter of time before I am unlikely to be able to move to cover the singles court.

I suspect that this is part of the reason that so many senior players choose to play doubles. However, this is not to say that doubles competition is not athletically challenging and it can be very rigorous when played well.

The singles player who dominates with his or her groundstrokes is not likely to be as effective in doubles competition. In fact, it has been my experience that the "basher" is really at a disadvantage when competing in doubles.

If you are a singles player who lacks finesse, variety and control in your singles game, I strongly recommend that you consistently include doubles into your practice and tournament schedules.

### COMMANDMENT 2

**Sooner or later, the doubles player must get to the net.** In doubles, the best place for each player to be located is at the net prepared to volley and/or hit an overhead smash.

You cannot expect to play winning doubles when one of the team members is constantly staying back at the baseline. I see this all too frequently among recreational players. The geometry of the doubles court does not favor baseline play!

Yes, there are times when both members of a team should be back at the baseline. But, this is the exception to the rule. Any doubles team that concedes the net to its opponents is definitely going to find winning a difficult task.

The modern singles player is generally a baseline player. She or he will move side to side quite well, and probably possess some formidable groundstrokes. This type of singles player will need to learn to get to the net if she or he is playing doubles. A golden rule of doubles is: "The team that controls the net...controls the match."

Truthfully, it is that simple.

### **COMMANDMENT 3**

**Doubles involves using different groundstroke grips.** This is a simple principle, but many doubles players do not realize that their "singles" grips may put them at a disadvantage.

Western and semi-western forehand grips may be fine for returning serve, but once the point has started, it may be more useful to adopt an eastern forehand grip for any groundstrokes on this side. Similarly, two handed backhands are generally not as effective in the game of doubles. When playing doubles, the two handed player may have to adopt a grip more appropriate for one handed sliced backhands.

It is not true that singles players need to have completely new "software" regarding their groundstrokes when playing doubles. But, some modifications are probably going to be needed.

"Old school" players who hit everything with the same, continental grip are really at a great advantage when playing doubles. In fact, the old "connie forehand" has a viable place in doubles...in singles, it is usually a major liability.

If a player goes into a doubles match expecting to rely upon the modern, singles strokes; there is great deal of frustration that is likely to ensue. Even slight modifications in grips used when hitting groundstrokes can pay big dividends when competing in doubles.

These slight modifications can automatically induce the doubles player to hit with less pace and to encourage a greater emphasis upon ball placement. Remember that doubles is a game of control!

### **COMMANDMENT 4**

**In doubles, there is a greater need to "see" your opponents and their racquet faces.**

Vision in the game of doubles is a very different reality than when playing singles. Generally, you have less time to actually "see" the ball. Why? Well in part, doubles players are more frequently at the net. This means that the ball will travel less distance than is the case when playing singles.

I am not suggesting that doubles players do not need to clearly "see" the ball. However to do this, doubles players will invariably need to see the ball come off their opponent's racquet faces more carefully than when playing singles.

In addition, there are two opponents to watch. Each doubles player needs to "know" where both opponents are on the court. There is really only one way that this can be achieved...by using one's peripheral vision.

Each doubles player will need to become acclimated to "seeing the ball" while "knowing" where each opponent is located on the court. In singles, there is a greater security associated with where the opponent is at on the court at any given time.

When playing doubles, each player needs to "get his or her eyes on" in ways that are a bit different from what is required in singles play.

#### **COMMANDMENT 5**

**Doubles partners need to move as "one."** Viewers can always tell when doubles players are familiar with each other as partners. Invariably, they will move as a single unit.

When coaching tennis, I have actually tied a rope around the waist of two doubles partners. If this team is moving as one, the rope will always remain taut, but never result in either player being pulled off balance.

Good doubles teams move forward, backward and sideways as a "unit." If one moves to the right, the other moves to his or her right, in sync. The same is true with moving in or back.

A good doubles team always tries to arrive at positions where this "rope" would be parallel to the net. When serving, this is why one player rushes the net as the other is already in net position. One has to remember that the ideal position for a doubles team is to have both players at the net controlling play.

#### **COMMANDMENT 6**

**Flat and sliced strokes are generally preferred over topspin shots.** For many singles players, this is a very difficult concept to adopt.

In singles, the topspin groundstroke usually abounds. Groundstrokes are the norm in modern singles play. Topspin allows groundstrokes to be hit with greater pace.

Doubles, however, is a game of control...not pace. Groundstrokes are not the mainstay of doubles. In fact when playing doubles, one wants to minimize the number of groundstrokes that are struck. Volleys, half-volleys and overhead smashes are the "bread and butter" shots in doubles.

Given these realities, flat and sliced groundstrokes are preferred. Indeed, volleys in doubles are generally hit with more backspin, as well.

This spin "reorientation" can be a very difficult process for the accomplished singles player. However, if a singles player competes on grass or very fast indoor surfaces (like carpet), backspin strokes are absolutely necessary. On these surfaces, as is the case in doubles, the lower the ball bounces the better.

Here is another reason for the singles competitor to play doubles. Assuming that at times the singles player is going to be on a very fast and "skippy" surface, the spin lessons learned from doubles are exactly what are needed in such singles competition.

If you ever wondered why doubles specialists do well at Wimbledon, this is in part the reason.

#### **COMMANDMENT 7**

**In doubles, hit deep to deep and net to net.** This is a golden rule in doubles that many players do not understand.

When a doubles player is back near the baseline (even if she or he is intending on approaching the net), it is almost always best to hit one's shot to the opponent who is deepest on the other side of the net.

Similarly if a doubles player is at the net, a best location to place a volley is directly at an opponent who is at the net. When all four players are at the net, you see what I believe is the most exciting part of doubles: rapid volley exchanges.

On the pro level, there can be incredibly long and rapid exchanges of volleys among all four competitors. Reactions are everything when at the net in doubles.

Even if you are a doubles player who never approaches the net (not encouraged), this deep-deep, net-net rule applies. If you stay back by the baseline when playing doubles, about 80% of all your shots should be directed at the opponent who is deepest on the other side of the net.

If your opponents do not stay back, there is an obvious advantage that they have. In these situations, the opponents can both volley directly at your net partner, or they can easily volley at an angle away from your net partner and win the point outright.

I see many recreational doubles players who play in a one up, one back formation...whether they are serving or returning serve. If both teams play this formation, there is parity. If not, I assure you that the team that secures control of the net will invariably win the point.

Regrettably, singles players in the modern game are not usually comfortable volleying. So, they frequently may be seen playing this flawed one up, one back formation.

## **COMMANDMENT 8**

**When in doubt, hit the ball up the middle.** Let's be honest. In playing either singles or doubles, there are times when a player just doesn't know where it is best to place the ball.

In singles, the golden rule is to hit crosscourt more often than not. This is particularly true when you do not have any clear reason to hit down-the-line.

In doubles, the return of serve is almost always best hit crosscourt. Hitting at the net person will frequently result in the net opponent hitting an angled or drop volley for a clear winner.

However at any other time in the game, the centered reply is a good, if not best, option. Even when all four doubles players are at the net, hitting a volley in between your opponent (in the middle) is a potentially winning shot.

Hitting between your opponents can cause the opposing team to pause for a fraction of a second. Why? Each may not know whether the other is planning on taking your shot.

In addition, hitting between your opponents usually prevents them from hitting a reply at a severe angle. Often times, the "in between" will result in a weak reply that sits up and allows for a put away.

Hit deep to deep, net to net whenever you can. But, hit down the middle for a winner and/or when you are in doubt about where to place your shot.

## COMMANDMENT 9

**Don't be afraid to use the lob!** In doubles, the lob is actually a shot that should be used much more frequently than in singles.

In singles, we normally lob for defensive reasons...or because we realize that an opponent has closed the net too much. In this latter scenario, the offensive lob (hit with topspin) is a great option.

In doubles, using a lob for a return of serve can actually win you a point outright, and may keep your opponents "honest" when closing the net. When both opponents are at the net, a deep topspin lob that is hit to the center of the opponent's court can pay big dividends. In this latter case, the opponents will need to scramble back as a team. If they are able to hit a reply off of your lob, they will be back near their baseline. If you have closed the net, your team is now in the "driver's seat."

Of course whenever one is moving backwards in the game of tennis (singles or doubles), a high, deep, defensive lob (hit with backspin) may be the best option. Here again, hitting such a lob to the center of your opponents' court is usually the best placement.

## COMMANDMENT 10

**Communicate with your partner.** If a doubles team is slow, methodical and communicative with each other as they compete; they are rarely out of a match. This is why it is so important that doubles partners maintain positive communication!

When serving, the doubles team should decide in advance where the serve is to be placed, and whether the net person will attempt to "poach." Some teams will use hand signals for this. However, a brief discussion and agreement on these before getting into positions to begin the point may be the best methodology.

Positive communication and "forgiveness" are essential in effective doubles play. In reality, each player is going to make errors, regardless of skill or experience. Having a partner that is supportive and does not become critical is absolutely necessary if a team is going to prevail.

A basic strategy in doubles can be: "Hit to the weaker player." If one player is truly weak, this strategy may work. However in most situations, hitting to a "weaker" player only improves his or her play performance. Having a positive and supportive partner will facilitate this improvement on the part of the "weaker" player.

One way to turn around a losing doubles match is to adopt different court formations. Using the "I" formation or the "Australian" formation can change the look of a team, unsettle the opponents' momentum, and force different responses from your opponents. Here again, clear and positive communication is absolutely necessary, if these formations are to yield positive results.

The worst case scenario in doubles is when one partner tries to play every ball. Usually, this begins with some communication like; "Just stay out of my way and let me get to everything." Really, this is suggesting that one partner is not only useless, but is indeed, a liability. So, why is this team playing doubles?

Well, there you have it...my 10 Commandments for Doubles. Whether doubles is your cup of tea or not, there are clear benefits to playing this form of our wonderful game.

Hopefully, this month's column will find you wanting to seek out a doubles or mixed doubles partner and actively compete. I assure you that if your team follows these 10 principles, then in no time each of you will become *atennis overdog!*