Pickleball Drill Guide by Roger Wolfe

**Introduction** – The Pickleball Drill Guide contains information about specific Drills to help you develop more complex shots, court positioning, and body posture to automatically respond to certain opportunities during active play. It’s also a great way to warm up before play, and learn new strategies, and court management.

**Q.** What’s the fuss, why drills? Why can’t I just come out and play and get better?

**A.** The simple answer is that you might get better, but you’ll have to play hundreds of games to acquire the same skills you can develop in a few hours of Drill Practice.

**Purpose** – Drills help us develop “muscle memory” to control “fine muscle movement”. Let’s face it, if you’re not comfortable with hitting a shot you’re not good at……you won’t use it in a game, and that will put you at a disadvantage that your opponents will eventually discover. Drills not only help you acquire new shot development skills, it adds to your overall shot selection repertoire, helps train you to automatically cover the open court, and cover your opponent’s open shot. So, if you’re serious about competitive play, or just want to improve your game, **drilling is essential**.

**When** – Pick a time you and a partner, or 4 players can get together and drill for an hour prior to scheduled play. Drill after play. Drill during your sleep……the point is, without drilling you won’t develop shots that are more difficult to execute. Drilling is also a great way to warm up before play. I’d also encourage you to pick “Coach Mo’s” Pickleball Guide.

**Q.** How do I read the Drill Guide?

**A.** The Drill Guide contains information about the purpose of the drill, drill basics, and suggested MINIMUM skill level for attending a specific drill session. Bottom line, if you’re reasonably close to the minimum skill level, you’ll have a better chance of executing the drill. If you’re a full 1 pt below (per IFP Skill Guide) the suggested level, you’ll struggle with executing some of the more complex shot placements, and your drill mates may become frustrated. Stick with it, start with drills you can execute reasonably well, and move on to the next one. If your club offers Drill Sessions attend them, an instructor will be able to show you how to execute the drill. If you want more, then create your own drill team, and set up regular sessions.

Bottom line…..if you want to become a competitive player……..Drill your way to the top!

**Drill Definitions**

**Cross Court Dink** – Skill level 2.0. This drill is intended to stretch out your opponent’s defense and develop patience (for yourself and your partner). Keep dinking diagonally across the court until your opponent makes a mistake (allowing your or your partner SLAM the ball). Skilled players use this technique to look for weaknesses (court position, movement, forehand/backhand), exhibiting great patience in order to force and error (unforced error) or set up their partner for a slam.

Drill Execution – Have 4 players (2/side) stand at the NVZ in the ready position. Start by dropping the ball in the court and dinking toward the opponent’s diagonal. Vary the dink so that all 4 players are forced to hit forehand/backhand dinks. Options include playing an entire game in the NVZ (dink only). Have players rotate positions to ensure all players use both forehand/backhand strokes.

**Roving Cross Court Dink** – Skill Level 2.5. This drill develops mobility while dinking and emphasizes both forehand/backhand strokes in a continuous fashion.

Drill Execution – Variation of the Cross Court Dink. Have 2 players start near the NVZ, on opposite sides, and execute a dink. Slowly begin to maneuver the ball slightly in Front of the opposite player, causing both players to WALK DOWN the NVZ toward the opposite side of the court. Continue play by reversing position, now using the opposite stroke (forehand down one side, backhand down the return). Keep play going until the ball is missed and then start over.

**Dirty Dinking, skill level 3.0**. Use this opportunity to LULL an opponent into thinking that they are in a dinking contest…….when an opportunity presents itself, strike the dink hard, aiming at the backhand shoulder (or any part of body mass). This is extremely beneficial if your opponent is not guarding his torso after dinking (carries their paddle low). Use this opportunity to slightly extend the dink to your opponents shin area as well. This may result in an unexpected POP-UP (if so, slam it).

**Drill Execution** Have 2 players on opposite side of the net start dinking. Have one side execute a “dirty dink” while the opposite side defends it. Exchange roles. Vary dinking depth from the NVZ to opponents ankle area……..look for slam opportunities.

**Fast Hands Drill** – Skill Level 2.5. This drill is intended to improve your responsiveness to volleys while near the NVZ. The majority of these shots should be hit with the paddle in the backhand position, directly at your opponent’s mid-section. This shot emphasizes the value of a backhand slam (push) toward your opponent’s backhand tennis shoe (during a game). Advanced players will look for an opponent that carries their paddle “LOW” and drill them in the upper torso.

**Drill Execution** – Have 4 players stand at the NVZ line (2/side) and start by executing a medium paced volley directly across the net. Continue play by increasing the pace of the ball and changing directions (cross court). Keep the ball in play, by hitting directly to the mid-section of an opponent.

**LOB Drill** – Skill level 3.0. The LOB shot can be difficult to execute properly and contains some significant risks. The risks are: Short Lob (allows competition to slam the ball), Long Lob (out of bounds). The shot is used in the following conditions: Reversing an opponent’s momentum as they are running in after returning a serve, desperation shot (you are out of position and don’t want to return the ball directly to an opponent’s forehand), you are over matched in the dink game and you want to “change up” the pace.

**Lob Execution** – Use an underhanded stroke to “loft” the ball over an opponent’s head near the back of the line. The perfect LOB will be to the RIGHT corner of the ODD court (opponents backhand if right handed).

**Lob Retrieval** – Turn toward your dominant hand, run forwards toward the back line, stop and turn reacquiring the ball, and return the LOB to your opponent’s back line (return the favor). **DO NOT PACKPEDDLE**. Serious LIFE THREATNING INJURIES may occur if players backpeddle, fall, and have their heads accelerate into the concrete. Coaches, use discretion here, if participants are NOT competitive players, have difficulty moving, have injuries preventing turning and running…….drop the drill and simply have all players WATCH a LOB being retrieved by instructors. Make sure that LOBs executed in beginning levels of play are NOT retrieved, simply have them clap if the shot lands “in bounds”.

**Optional** – Skill Level 3.5. Advanced players will retrieve the drill and execute a drop shot, starting the process all over again. Both a return LOB and a Drop Lob are skills that will serve competitive players well.

**Transition Cross Court Dink** – Skill Level 3.0. This drill demonstrates maximum complexity (versatility) of the DINK. The drill is intended to help develop both the forehand/ backhand strokes, shot accuracy (placement), while being mobile. Mastering this drill dramatically improves your chances of acquiring an unforced error or capitalizing on your opponent’s lack of accuracy allowing you or your partner to either poach a slam, or slam the ball directly.

Drill Execution – Skill Level 3.0. Have 2 players assume the ready position near the NVZ at opposite corners. Start by dropping the ball into the NVZ and dinking CROSS court to your opponent. Slowly place the ball in front of your opponent, approaching each other in the middle, eventually passing each other. This forces each player to start with a forehand and switch to the backhand (as you pass). Continue play up and back in a continuous fashion until an error is created (net, out of bounds, out of the NVZ).

**Dink and Cover Drill** – Skill Level 3.0. This drill combines movement, court awareness and shot accuracy (Dink, and Slam) for both players. The drill is intended to develop a player’s sense of court awareness (where is the ball most likely going to be, where should I be, and where should I hit the ball), as well as patience (going for the kill to soon usually results in loss of point or rally).

Drill Execution – Have 2 players start (ready position) in opposite corners of the NVZ. Start by dropping the ball into the NVZ and executing 2 DINKS each. After the 2nd DINK, each player’s BACK COURT is OPEN for shots (slams). Use normal scoring and play until 11 points. The first 2 DINKS must be legal (in the NVZ), after that play opens up to each players backcourt, requiring each player to return a dink (set up shot), and covering their back court (preventing an open court shot). Variations allow a 4-person game to be played and is scored identical to regular game.

**Drop Shot Drill** – Skill Level 3.0. This shot is known as one of the most essential and most difficult shots to execute. The shot is intended to minimize an opponent’s favored position at the NVZ. When executed correctly it prevents an opponent from slamming the ball or hitting a ball with pace and accuracy. It usually requires a “return dink” to avoid a slam. This shot is a **TRANSITIONAL** shot and changes the pace of the game to a slower, more strategic pace, exhibiting patience and accuracy. The shot is alternately known as the 3rd shot drop shot and is commonly used by the service team to “drop” a ball into the opponent’s backhand, requiring a skillful return dink to avoid a slam.

**Drill Execution** – Have 2 (or 4) players start at opposite sides of the net at the NVZ. Start by dinking to each other (warm up) and then have ONE player slowly start backing up (a few feet each time), while returning (dropping) the ball into the NVZ. The ball should reach the apex of its ARC a few feet in front of the net, dropping into the opponents NVZ with **low energy** (no high bounces). Continue moving back until you are within a few feet of the back line, and then slowly come forward while still executing a drop shot until you are near the NVZ. The opposite player now begins to move backward executing the same series of shots.

**Reset Drop Shot** – Skill Level 3.5. This drill simulates being “trapped” in the back court by an errant (high) drop shot, which is slammed by the opponents. The drill is extremely valuable in that it teaches players trapped in the backcourt the necessary skill of returning a hard slam by dropping it into the kitchen. Once mastered, it also allows players to more confidently drop balls into the NVZ, even if they are higher than desired (it’s better to get it over the net and have a chance to reset the play, than to hit it into the net and have the volley end without any reset opportunities).

**Drill Execution** - Skill Level 3.5. Have one player stand at least ¾ way toward back court, the opposing player is on the opposing NVZ line. The drill begins with the back-court player attempting to drop the ball in the NVZ. The player standing near the NVZ essentially becomes the “backboard” and returns the ball with pace (when possible) into the back court. Both players try to gain the upper hand by executing shots (drop shot by hitting toward the NVZ, NVZ player attempting to place ball in back court with pace if possible, so that player cannot “reset” the play with a drop shot.

Players switch positions and repeat.

**Optional** – 3.5+ Players should recognize that there is a “**GOLDEN SECOND**”. A second when the opposing player is focused on striking the ball. This opportunity allows players to advance to a “**POACH**” position without the opponent realizing he has moved to another position. Vary the drill by occasionally advancing after a good reset drop shot……when the NVZ player is looking down at the ball (focused on hitting the ball). Play continues via dinking until one player misses.

**Cross Court Dink/Poach 3.0+**. This skill develops recognition of a “poaching” opportunity. Right handed players in the ODD court should recognize they are in the poach position when their partner is engaged in a cross-court dink. Poaching opportunities become apparent when partners correctly shadow each other and the ball, looking for a dink that’s just a little too high. Once you find one…….SLAM it!

**Drill Execution** – Have 4 players assume the ready position at the NVZ (opposing sides). Start with a cross court DINK. Any retrievable dink is allowed (they do not need to be in the NVZ). Receiving team’s partner should be aware of a poaching opportunity and **SHADOW** their partner. Opposing players should be wary of the **SHADOWING** partner, especially if the shadowing partner is in the “POACH” court (odd court for right handed players). Partners in a poaching position (odd court, the “poach” court) should look for an errant dink (too high, too far over the NVZ line) and slam the ball to the opponent’s backhand ankle, or backcourt. Play continues and can be scored like a normal game (essentially eliminating the serve and return of serve).

**Optional 3.0+**. Execute as above but allow ALL shots after 2 regulation dinks (in the NVZ). This opens up play to hard return shots (dirty dinks), lobs, or deeper volleys to the open court. Look for opportunities of players DO NOT shadow their partner or the ball.

**Hard Game Drill – Skill Level 3.0**. This drill helps players let a passing shot go out of bounds and reinforces NOT hitting an OUT ball. The drill also develops a response to the hard game (very hard shot, hit just over the net), by teaching the receiver to either let it go, or orient the return shot (deflecting the return shot) to the open court. Developing a **comfort level** with a low, hard shot is essential to avoid popping up the ball (hard can opener) for an opponent’s slam.

**Drill Execution** – Have players (2 per half court) take up positions as follows: Shooter (player hitting the hard-low shots) takes up a position ¾ court, receiver (deflector) takes up a position at the opposing NVZ line. Have the shooter hit 10 hard balls directly at the receiver, while the receiver **MOVES out of the way**, watching where the ball lands. This allows the receiver to get a feel for how high (“shoulder high, let it fly”) over the net the ball can be hit before it should be considered an “out ball”. Avoiding the impulse to hit an out ball is essential (it’s your point until you touch the ball). Repeat the exercise, but this time have the receiver use their “judgement” and DEFLECT (low energy) the balls to the opposite corner (toward the shooter, away from the poaching partner). This shot (deflection) should be low energy, loose paddle grip, and land in the opposite NVZ corner, if possible.

**“Soft” Can Opener** – Skill Level 3.5. This **PLAY,** when executed properly, presents the offensive (serving) teams with an opportunity to “surprise” POACH a drop shot return that is either too high or deep. It is best used when moderating its frequency (they never know when you plan to execute it). Alternately, it can be used to distract, or place **pressure** on the receiving team by being “in their face” early, constantly. This requires **advance partner communication** (“let’s apply some **soft** pressure”) which lets the offensive partner know to “drop” the 3rd shot cross court to the opponent’s backhand.

**Soft Can Opener Drill** – This drill requires 2 to 4 players positioned as follows: Server, Serve Partner (poacher), and receiver (essentially a backboard). Start by serving the ball to the receiver. Receiver returns the ball to either offensive partner. Offensive partner who receives the return **MUST execute a drop shot to the backhand** of the opposing player who has followed his return to the NVZ. The non drop shot partner must execute the following: Take up a position to watch partner’s drop shot to the backhand. If good, head toward the NVZ **EARLY** in anticipation of a POACH OPPORTUNITY (slam to the back court, or backhand ankle of opponent). If the drop shot is too high, remain in place and play as normal (stay with your partner).

**“Hard” Can Opener** – Skill Level 3.5. This drill is essentially the same as the “soft” can opener but is executed with a **HARD shot** directly at the opponent’s mid-section, or backhand side. Generally, more difficult with predetermined shot execution as follows: Instead of dropping the 3rd shot, execute a HARD return shot at the opponents mid-section or slightly toward backhand side, slightly over the net, while the partner heads in early looking for an errant (poor) deflection and executing a **surprise poach** (slam to the back court, or backhand ankle). Execution is generally **more difficult** than the “soft” poach, requiring quick hands, and a higher comfort level with hard returns. Play execution is determined by advance communication (lets go “hard/soft”).

**Bingo Drill/Game** – Skill Level 3.5 – Requires 4 payers. Drill/Game starts with 2 balls in play as follows:

Players 1 and 2 (same side), players 3 and 4 (opposite side). Players 1 and 2 start by dinking to players (3 and 4) across the net on a diagonal. Dinking continues until 1 player misses a return dink at which point they yell BINGO. Once Bingo is attained, the remaining ball is now in play with players 1 and 2 being a team against players 3 and 4 (opposite team). All shots are now permitted as in regular play (hard, soft, lobs, dinks etc).

**Bingo Drill/Game Purpose** – The drill is designed to develop peripheral vision, partner communication, and shot predictive skills.