

U.S. High School Pickleball Association[®] Coaching Workbook



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Too Many Players, Too Few Courts

Note: While this article is intended for coaches with extreme player/court situations, any coach who has more than four players per court (or a lack of courts for singles practice) will find useful suggestions for organizing team practices in this article.

If you're like many high school coaches, you don't have the luxury of practicing four to a court, much less having courts for daily singles matches.

Many coaches are not allowed to cut, or do not choose to do so, and are limited to as few as two courts, with dozens of players.

How can you run a MEANINGFUL practice with 30 players on two courts?

The short answer is: "Unfortunately, you can't."

The key word in the above question is "meaningful."

While some tennis educators will try to convince you that you can use station training, dead-ball drilling and other techniques to practice with more than a dozen students per court, the bottom line is that tennis players need to rally.

They need to practice like they're going to play, or they'll play like they practice.

If they aren't able to rally, your players won't learn to play competitive tennis. Furthermore, if kids are standing in lines waiting to hit one ball before returning to the end of the line during the course of a two-hour practice, they are likely to get bored, frustrated or just plain disgusted and quit the team.

While six players to a court is considered acceptable by commercial tennis teachers, even this requires an emphasis on dead-ball drilling -- not what happens in a match.

The good news is that with a little creative thinking, planning and scheduling, you can improve your practices and make them more effective and meaningful for your players even if you have a shortage of court time.

No Other Choice

You may be in a situation where your school runs tennis as a credit class and students must attend at regular times; you may have only 90 minutes for practice; or you may have to take all players and practice with them at the same time.

The emphasis of this article will focus on those situations where coaches have some leeway as to when players can practice.

In the above scenario, you can still try to manage your courts using dead-ball and live ball drills.

Two-on-two drills with handicaps or other match-play drills will at least allow your players to get some of the live-ball practice they need to learn how to play. Remember, with dead ball drills, players must hit three balls before going to the end of the line for any meaningful learning to take place.

Additionally, half of your players can work on conditioning for the first 30 minutes or practice, while the other half of your players work on conditioning the last 30 minutes of practice, allowing each half of your group to practice on less-congested courts.

Your conditioning will have to be well-planned, meaningful and enjoyable for your players each day. This means goal-oriented drills and conditioning targets. Fitness testing is a great way to keep kids motivated.

Scheduling

The key to running effective practices with many players and few courts has more to do with scheduling than with what type of drills and activities you do.

Do you really need to have all of your players attend a two- or three-hour practice, five days a week if it means that they'll have 10-15 hours of inappropriate practice?

Consider dividing your team into a varsity and junior varsity (if you haven't already). Do your junior varsity players need to practice at the same time your varsity player do?

Do they need to practice five days a week?

Below are three schedules for a team with 30 players and two courts. This schedule assumes that:

- #1 The team can be divided into Varsity and JV squads.
- #2 Players can practice at different times.*
- #3 All players are not required to attend practice every day.*

*If you have a program which requires that all students must attend the full practice each day, use charting as described earlier in this article.

These schedules guarantee varsity players four or five days of practice, and junior varsity players three days of practice. It's important that you sell your player, parents and AD on the fact that quality of practice is more important than quantity. Show them your pre-planned schedule so they can see that you are organized, and that players will be able to attend higher-quality practices.

Option A - Two, 90-minute practices (2.5 hours total)

	Mon. Ct. 1	Mon. Ct. 2	Tues. Ct. 1	Tues. Ct. 2	Wed. Ct. 1	Wed. Ct. 2	Thurs. Ct. 1	Thurs. Ct. 2	Fri. Ct. 1	Fri. Ct. 2
2:00-3:00*	V 1-6	V 7-12	V 1-6	V 7-12	V 1-4	V 5-8	V 9-12	V 1-4	V 5-8	V 9-12
3:00-3:30 (Offcourt Varsity Conditioning)										
3:00-4:00	JV 1-6	JV 7-12	JV 13-18	JV 1-6	JV 7-12	JV 13-18	JV 1-6	JV 7-12	JV 13-18	Open Court**
4:00-4:30 (Offcourt JV Conditioning***)										

*This scenario offers Varsity player four days of practice (two days of sixto a court; three days of 4 to a court). Coach could run five days of 6 to a court.

**Open court can be used for challenge or practice matches

***JV conditioning could take place from 2:30-3:00 to keep total practice time to two hours

Option B - Two, two-hour practices (3 hours total)

	Mon. Ct. 1	Mon. Ct. 2	Tues. Ct. 1	Tues. Ct. 2	Wed. Ct. 1	Wed. Ct. 2	Thurs. Ct. 1	Thurs. Ct. 2	Fri. Ct. 1	Fri. Ct. 2
2:00-3:30	V 1-6	V 7-12	V 1-6	V 7-12	V 1-4	V 5-8	V 9-12	V 1-4	V 5-8	V 9-12
3:00-3:30 (Offcourt JV Conditioning)										
3:30-4:00 (Offcourt Varsity Conditioning)										
3:30-5:00	JV 1-6	JV 7-12	JV 13-18	JV 1-6	JV 7-12	JV 13-18	JV 1-6	JV 7-12	JV 13-18	Open Court**

**Open court can be used for challenge or practice matches

Option C - Three, 60-minute practices (3 hours total)

2:00-3:00 – Varsity Practice Follow plan A or B above ; you may reduce varsity to 8 or 10 players
2:30-3:00 – JV Grp 1 Offcourt Conditioning*
3:00-3:30 – Varsity Offcourt Conditioning
3:00-4:00 – JV Group 1 Practice (10-12 players)
3:30-4:00 – JV Grp 2 Offcourt Conditioning*
4:00-5:00 – JV Group 2 Practice (10-12 players)

*JV conditioning can take place after each practice (total practice time 3.5 hours). JV Group 1 can condition after practice leaving total practice to 3 hours)

One- or Two-Handed Backhand?

Because of the power and spin it can generate—even for beginners—a two-handed backhand might be the best choice for a pickleball backhand.

Let's look at the pros and cons of each to help you guide your players to the best choice for each.

The Muscles Used

Because when you hit a backhand, your arm is on the same side of your body with which you make contact with the ball, you might think the backhand would be the easier stroke, since it is less awkward.

The forehand, coming from the far side of the body, takes a little more maneuvering to hit on the opposite side of the body.

The real reason why the forehand has always been an easier stroke to hit than the backhand is because a player uses larger muscles, including the pectorals, biceps and deltoids, while the backhand uses weaker muscles such as the triceps and lats.

It is also easier to open the hips on a forehand, which provide a great deal of mass for any shot.

What has this to do with our discussion of the backhand? The fact that top players today use a trailing-hand dominant, two-handed backhand, which makes it close to a left-handed forehand (for a righty).

Unlike the right-hand dominant (for right-handed players) two-handed backhand which uses the second (left) hand to give support to the paddle, a left-hand dominant backhand basically turns this shot into a left-handed forehand.

The left hand now accelerates the paddle, taking advantage of the same, large muscles used for the forehand, turning the backhand into a significant weapon, rather than simply a defensive shot.

For this reason, top experts agree, the two-handed backhand is a much better choice for almost all level players, including beginners and world-class players.

This is not to say that the one-handed backhand isn't a legitimate choice for any player. The realities of coordination, mechanics and physiology, however, allow most players to reach more of their potential and hit a much better shot using a two-handed backhand.

Disadvantages of a Two-Handed Backhand

The main argument against the two-handed backhand is that it limits the reach of the player using it.

A player using a two-handed backhand, opponents say, will have to stretch for wide balls, using a very defensive shot (one-handed backhand they do not normally use) when they are in trouble – exactly the time they need a strong shot. This is true.

However, proponents of the one-handed backhand argue that it's inappropriate to teach a player a stroke that is only more efficient to use during the 10 to 15 percent of shots when they are in trouble, rather than build a stroke that will allow them to play it offensively 85 to 90 percent of the time.

A one-handed backhand is necessary in order to develop slice, for use in defensive lobs, passing shots and approach shots. The backhand volley should also be played with one hand. Coaches should work with players who use two-handed backhands to develop a one-handed backhand, as well, for those situations.

Advantages of the Two-Handed Backhand

As stated earlier, the two-handed backhand allows players to use larger muscles and requires less coordination.

These factors lead to the backhand becoming an offensive weapon. Serve and volleyers will have a harder time against players with two-handed backhands since their returns are now much more effective. Passing shots are also made easier with two-hands, decreasing an all-court player's or serve and volleyer's effectiveness.

Balls which bounce high (shoulder level or higher) are more difficult to hit with a one-handed backhand, and require the player to use a slice shot to play these high balls. High balls to a player with a two-handed backhand, however, are right in their strike zone.

Summary

Many players prefer a two-handed backhand because of the ease and power this stroke provides over the one-handed stroke. This is true for all levels of play.

While certain shots (approach, volley, slice) are more effective with a one-handed backhand, the majority of strokes a player will hit in a pickleball match are better played with a two-handed backhand.

Managing the Time Between Points

According to a Google AI search, almost 80% of pickleball points last less than 15 seconds.

That means, most of the time your players are on the court, they are not hitting the ball or involved in a point. This is especially true at lower levels of play where rallies don't last very long.

So what are your players doing most of the time they are on the court? They are walking to picking up the ball, towel off, discussing the score, or switching sides.

Are you preparing your players for the large percentage of time during their matches they are not actually playing a point?

If pickleball is even 50 percent physical and 50 percent mental, it's critical that coaches help players work on the time they have between points to prepare for the next point they are going to play.

Successful players follow the same routines between points. Immediately after the point, whether they have won or lost it, players shift their paddle to their non-playing hand to allow their playing arm to relax.

Players then walk back to and past the baseline. The eyes of a champion focus on one of three areas between points: their paddle; their ground; their opponent.

Players who are looking into the stands, at the sky, at the referee or other things are not focused.

Top players quickly evaluate what happened good and bad during the last point without attaching any negatives to this evaluation or carrying it with them as baggage.

They then begin planning what they will do during the next point. For example, a player can also use the score to determine what an opponent is likely to do.

If the opponent is serving and is up by several points, your player can assume the opponent will go with their favorite serve and be more aggressive, depending on what patterns the opponent has shown during the match. If the opponent is down by several points, he or she is likely to play the point more conservatively.

Good players are able to act, rather than react, because they have used the time between points to prepare for the next point.

Take Adequate Time Between Points

Some players like to rush between points, taking as little as five or six seconds.

First, this is detrimental from a conditioning standpoint, especially if your players are playing singles.

Your body needs time to get rid of the anabolic wastes from your muscles which are produced as your body burns glycogen during points. These anabolic wastes, such as lactic acid, can lead to muscle fatigue and cramps.

Your body also needs time to replenish the muscles stores of ATP (the chemical responsible for muscle contractions).

Taking time also allows the body to cool itself down and lower the heart rate.

Second, rushing the next point does not let your player assess his or her situation, evaluate what happened the last point, plan the next point, and analyze what his or her opponent is likely to do the next point. Taking time allows your player to do all of these.

Your players don't have to stall between points to get ready for the next point. They just need to manage their time better, and that means developing a set routine they can use between each point.

Develop and Practice a Routine

Top sport psychologist, Dr. Jim Loehr, called it "The 16-Second Cure." Dr. Bryce Young advises players to "Prepare, Recover, Play."

However you manage your time between points, certain principles should be followed between every point.

Self-Talk

Many players talk to themselves between points. Some berate themselves, while others pump themselves up. If you player engages in negative self-talk, it's crucial that you help them realize this and see how damaging it is.

Having your players use positive self-talk to pump themselves up and prepare for the next point is a significant contribution you can make as a coach.

Practice Like You Play

Do your drills and workouts mirror the same work/rest ratio your players will experience during a match. Do you teach your players how to use their time between points to recover and prepare for the next point.

If not, you're missing a chance to help your players master a huge portion of the game of pickleball.

Teaching the Third-Shot Drop

One of the key tactics in pickleball is the third-shot drop.

After a serve (the first shot), the receiver waits for the return from the opponent (the second shot), then hits a drop shot into the kitchen (the third shot).

The following drill will help your players learn the technique of techniques and mechanics of the shot, allowing them to practice in a Game-Based environment with Guided Discovery from the coach (or a teammate) and lots of repetition (that provide feedback).

Step #1 – Demonstrate, or have two of your players who know how to execute this pattern, a third-shot drop sequence.

Explain why this tactic is important: it keeps your opponents from being able to return serve, rush the net, and hit a winning volley.

Demonstrate left-handed if you have left-handed players.

Step #2 – Let your players try the tactic. Set up in a normal singles or doubles formation, depending on how many players are doing the drill.

Let players practice, with the server or servers on the North side hitting an easy serve to the receiver on the South side and the receiver hitting an easy shot back beyond the opponent's (server's) kitchen line.

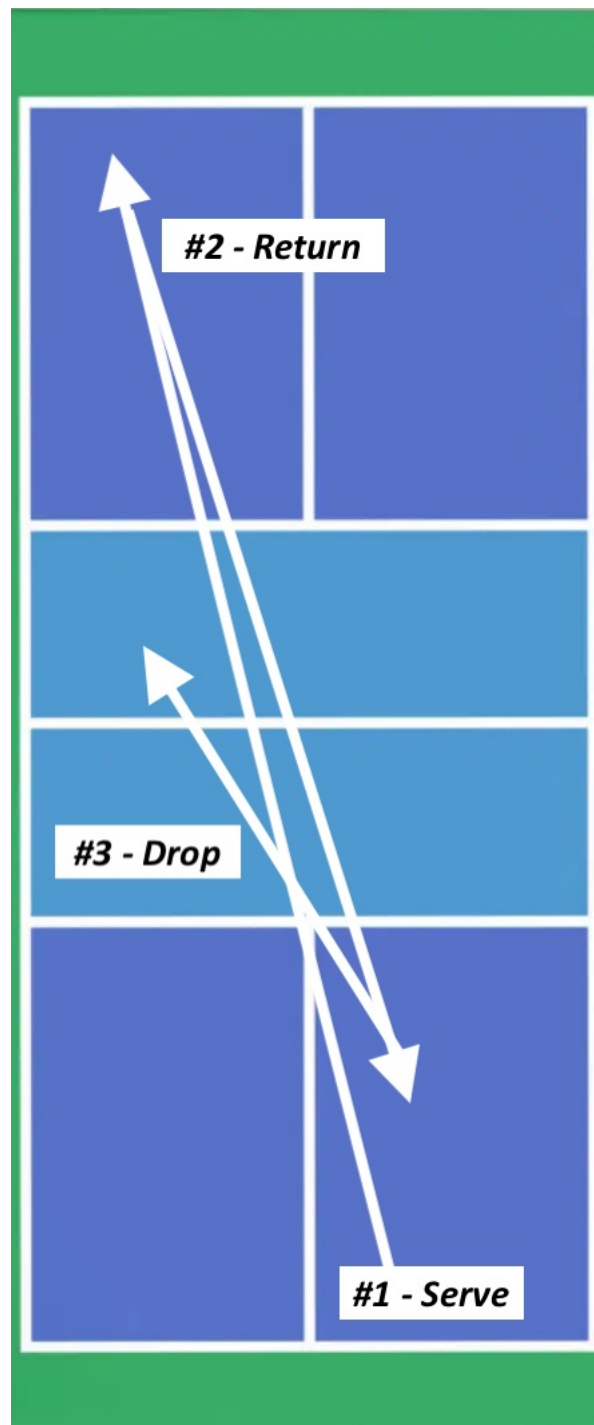
For this first rotation, the servers attempt to practice forehand drops. Tell right-handed players to line up closer to the center of the deuce court and left side of the ad court to make it easier and more likely to get forehands.

North side servers practice three times/points, returning drops crosscourt. Do NOT play out the point after the third-shot drop.

South side returners don't serve or practice drops, yet.

Step #3 – After the North side players (servers) practice three drops crosscourt, play three more points, with the North side server practicing three drops straight ahead (e.g., the server in the deuce court drops to the ad court, directly in front of her).

Step #4 – Players switch sides (not ends) of the court (deuce and ad), with the North side servers continuing to practice three forehand drops crosscourt, then three drops straight ahead, for a total of 12 practice drops before the South side receivers become the servers and practice their 12 attempts.



Step #6 – Repeat the 12-point rotation, with the North side players receiving and the South side players serving.

Step #7 – Repeat the two, 12-point rotations with backhand third-shot drops. Have players cheat to the middle and side of the court when serving.

Step #8 – As with every Game-Based drill, break for a learning circle to let the players discuss the best ways to hit a third-shot drop. Provide the answers you want them to have (regarding technique) if none of the players volunteer them.

Step #9 – Repeat the drill, using the same rotations, so the players can try again using their new technique tips.

If you wish, you can first bring out your basket and feed balls from the baseline to your players (crosscourt using forehand and backhand feeds if you're feeding from the middle of the court to simulate serve directions), letting them practice drops without having to serve.

Step #10 – Finish the practice playing out points (playing skinny singles crosscourt if you have more than two players on the court). Two crosscourt points can be played by four players at the same time.

Rotation Tip #1 – If you have six players per court, have the three players on each side of the court, with one player on deck at the back fence. After each six-shot rotation on one side of the court (deuce or ad), the third player rotates in clockwise and one of the original two players rotates out to the back fence.

Rotation Tip #2 – If you have eight players per court, have the four players on each side of the court, with two players on deck at the back fence. After each six-shot rotation on one side of the court (deuce or ad), the third and fourth players rotate in and the original two players rotate out to the back fence. The two players on deck switch sides (deuce and ad) and come back to the side they haven't played, yet.

Technique Tip #1 – Tell servers to stay back after the serve. If they come into the court and receive a deep return, they'll have to move backward and try their drop with their weight going backward.

Technique Tip #2 – Tell your players to keep their wrists firm or locked during the stroke in order to get better control. Have them use a fairly loose grip, rather than a death grip on the handle.

Technique Tip #3 – Tell your players to move the paddle forward by having them use their shoulder to drive the arm forward, rather than bending the arm at the elbow, flipping the paddle upward. Move forward, not upward.

Technique Tip #4 – Make sure your players are using a short swing, with no backswing, if possible. After the serve, if they are planning a drop, they should keep their paddles near their hip, moving the arm forward only for the drop—not taking a big backswing.

This might telegraph a drop, so have your players practice taking a backswing, then during the forward swing, stopping slightly at the hip, then hitting the drop with the shoulder push movement.

Technique Tip #4 – Have your players take the return on the rise, getting close to it and bumping it back with the short swing and shoulder-forward motion.

Technique Tip #5 – Make sure your players make contact well in front of their bodies, with their elbows in, close to their bodies.

Technique Tip #6 – Most groundstrokes are hit with a square or semi-open stance, with the weight on the leg opposite the paddle side (off the left leg for right-handers).

Have players practice both ways (with their weight on each leg) to see which works best for them.

Technique Tip #7 – If a player keeps hitting balls long or popping them up, have him practice purposely hitting balls into the net (near the top of the net). After three tries, have him try to add just a bit more height and depth.

This will help him move the apex of the ball back, eventually helping him hit balls short into the kitchen, in front of his opponents.