

Who Covers the Middle?

On The Court

11/26/22

Who covers the middle – I wish I could tell you that there is a hard fast rule, but like many things in Pickleball you will find the answer is often “it depends”. Well, this is another one – but there are definitely some more favorable options, so that is what we are going to talk about today.

Short Answer – whoever gets there first. Both of You. It’s better than loosing a ball down the middle without anyone making an attempt at the ball because you thought the other was going to take that ball. Communicate about the middle.

- **Forehand takes the middle** – not the best option, but it’s better than missing multiple balls down the middle of your court. What if there is a righty and a lefty – there may be no forehand in the middle. What if you are receiving a serve in the odd court and you get pulled out wide and the next shot comes down the middle when you are still recovering from your return of serve – you likely will miss that middle ball.

If your forehand is in the middle, that means that ANY shot down your line is on your backhand – it’s tough enough to get it if you are near the line, but if you are towards the middle there is no way you can cover that line with your backhand. You shouldn’t be in the middle trying to hit a ball that your partner can reach (you will give up a good 5’ of net)

- **Directionally** – based on geometry more so than backhand vs forehand. There will be different responsibilities because of angles. Whoever is diagonally from the ball is responsible for middle. When the ball is hit to your opponent’s middle – who ever hits that ball, the diagonal player is responsible for the middle on your side.

This takes away the places where they can hit hard (down the line and the middle of the court). If you hit hard cross court, chances are high that the ball will go out. Players hit down the middle because the net is lower, court is longer...so it’s a higher percentage shot – that is why you must figure out how to cover the middle.

If the ball is being hit in front of you – your job is to cover the line and your partner needs to slide over to cover the middle. This will leave a bit of an angle open, but high probability that if they hit hard to the angle, you just left open, the ball will go out – and if they make it, it's just a good shot!

What do you do if your opponent hits the difficult lower percentage shot in your corner you just left open? Try and hustle over, let the ball bounce, if the person opposite you doesn't look ready, you can try down their line, if they look ready, a soft gentle dink in the middle of their kitchen is likely best option.

Exception – if your partner is higher up in the court or can cut the ball off early, then can poach. But once you commit to poach, step in and poach the ball – changing your mind often leads to confusion with your partner.

- **Things that Cause Confusion in the Middle**

When the person on the right is looking to hit a forehand instead of a backhand, they will tend to crowd the middle. The person on the left who is suppose to cover the middle, now feels crowded and too close to you. So, if ball is hit in the middle when you're feeling crowded – who is going to take that ball?

To minimize some confusion – get that inside foot over the line to let your partner know you got middle – and communicate “I go”, “Me” etc. Once you play with someone for a while, you get more comfortable on how the two of you cover the middle.

- **When should you hit to the middle?** It depends (LOL) on your opponents and your skill level. Hitting to the middle doesn't mean literally in the middle of the court – but it means the area between your opponents.
 1. If you are a newbie (5/5) – aiming for the middle is an excellent strategy and it will decrease your unforced errors allowing you to stay in the rally.
 2. Beginner to Novice (4/5) to middle. Consistency but allows you to try some different shots.
 3. Novice (3.5 rating) (3/5) to middle. Hit to the middle when:
 - a. You want to involve your partner

- b. To construct a point
 - c. When you're off balance and need to keep ball in play
 - d. Don't hit 100% of your balls to the middle
4. Intermediate (4.0 rating) (2/5) to middle. At this level you should have strategies to create openings and keeping your opponents on the move. Hit to the middle when:
- a. You're in a cross-court dink rally and opponent diagonal to you moved wide to get a ball and didn't return to position
 - b. You're in a straight-on dink rally and your opponent's partner (diagonal to you) has not shifted to cover the middle.
 - c. Almost anytime there is more than about 6-7' between opponents' paddles.
5. Expert (4.5 + rating) (1/5) to middle. Very consistent and constructing points.