The Bayou Defense: Ten Steps to Club Doubles Dominance

Beau James Brock
The Bayou Defense
Ten Steps to Club Doubles Dominance

Beau James Brock*

Introduction

This article is intended to help club players from 2.5 all the way to 4.5. The ideas expressed focus on court positioning and mental tennis tips which will lead to countless victories regardless of the partner you are playing with and regardless of the opponents you face. Club and U.S.T.A. league tennis provide us all with the opportunity to truly enjoy the game of tennis on a fairly level playing field. The most important rule to follow in playing tennis at this level for those new to their local tennis community is that of sportsmanship. You will find out quickly that your tennis community is a small and close knit group. The more you play, the more you will discover how your reputation as a player and as a person has already traveled well beyond the courts you have graced. In order to have fun and enjoy the greatest game in the world, please be mindful that tennis matches are always followed by more matches, and this match you are in right now, is not the end of the world. Finally, whether you like it or not, you too are judged by the company you keep, and the partner you play with, if you want to win today and win tomorrow, you cannot play with a partner with an attitude or sportsmanship issues, the golden rule supercedes the rest of the ten Steps listed below. Mental baggage will drown you in every key third set when your ship is sinking, and there is no more room in your life boat.

We are all looking for another edge to help us win this match, that tournament, or the whole league. You certainly are, otherwise you would have passed this article right by and gone on to learn about how Monica Seles can drive her forehand from anywhere on the court. Here then are the ten steps of winning club doubles from the bayou state of Louisiana.

1st Step
Two Back Return of Serve

In the early 1900's, the Doherty brothers, a great doubles team, came up with what is now the standard doubles return of serve positional alignment of one back, one on the service line. The reasoning was that it positioned the partner who was not returning serve in a position to play some defense, but will quickly get him to the net where the point could be finished. This position has been questioned occasionally, and I want to help your game by suggesting the Dohertys were a lot better than most of us. Playing two back on the service return frees up the person making the return to hit the ball anywhere on the court without losing the point. This may sound ultraconservative, but remember, at the club level, many tennis points are won by making your opponents hit one more shot. When you play two
back, even up to 4.0 level, if the ball is returned right to the net man, many times that person will not be able to put the ball away. However, if the non-returner was standing on the service line, the ball would have been unplayable if struck in their direction. Also, if the server is following the serve, then he will most certainly volley the first ball at your partner sitting on the service line who is in a most precarious position on the court. By playing two back, one can return the ball well over the net, right back to the server approaching the net who can only volley it harmlessly to either of you who can hit a variety of shots from the baseline. From the two back position, the moment your side has an opening at the net, meaning both your opponents are not closing in, you should adjust and move up, ideally both of you, but at least one of you.

2nd Step
Kissin’ the Net When They Don’t Move

How many times have you watched a person serve the ball like a rocket and then sit on the baseline admiring their handiwork? Maybe your opponent has great confidence in their ground stokes, but the hole in their game is either approaching the net or volleying the ball. When the server fails to follow, and his partner never poaches, you should send your non-returning partner all the way to the net, and not just sit on the service line. Let’s remember the Doherty logic to begin with, one sits in on the service line because one is trying to seize the net quickly. The only reason to position yourself on the service line and not the net itself is to play defense. If your opponent concedes that they are not moving, you have the opportunity to hit the safest, most percentage return in tennis every time, the cross court drive. Why not hit that shot and position your partner all the way to the net, which places enormous psychological pressure on the server to pull your drive back cross court while staring the whole time at a net vulture. This will work wonders for your partner’s confidence at the net as well because they do not have to worry about footwork or speed in moving up to the net on the shot, merely laterally in an attempt to volley the next ball.

3rd Step
Signals

Oh no, signals will upset my serving rhythm. Too many people throw out the option of signaling in doubles because it “complicates” things. Actually, signaling will simplify your game and exponentially exasperate your opponents. I applaud all of you who immediately follow you serve to the net every time. You have read the tennis Bible and your orthodoxy is to be commended. However, most club players do not universally follow their serve to the net immediately whether because of lack of range, confidence or weakness of serve. How to still win friends and influence your opponents service return? In a word, your partner at the net should poach. Sure, my pro has been helping me poach, but my partner doesn’t like it because she can’t tell when I am really going. Signaling takes all the guess work out of your net game. Two signals are all that are needed. Go and stay can be
communicated with one finger and a closed fist behind your back. The key is to signal and acknowledge the signal prior to the server beginning service routine. Nothing can be as disconcerting to a beginner or intermediate player than adding something inside their service game, so just don’t do it. Communicate prior to the first bounce of the ball, prior to calling the score, or whatever your routine may be. After the signal, if poaching, then the net person must completely commit to go, completely, if that means leaving a bit early, and likewise, the server must move to cover the down the line return. Signals do not require a lot of movement or movement at all, but they do provide certainty as to where your net partner will be at all times, and will upset your opponents rhythm.

4th Step
Lob Return of Serve

When confronting an opponent who poaches on a regular basis, the best defense may be to simply go over their head. Those people you play where the server fails to rush in, but they do poach quite a bit can be mastered with a cross court lob return. This shot is a conservative one for which you have the deepest area of court to place the ball. It also will allow you time to get to the net with your partner, even playing that wild two back return position. If the ball falls short and the server rushes in, if you are in two back, then you still have a fighting chance to defend any attempted overhead.

5th Step
Smashing Every Ball at the Net

Why not? Have you been watching Andre slice that perfect drop shot, and think how neat that was and that you have the same touch? Has your local pro been teaching you to angle your volleys, and it has worked against most of your opponents? Well, a person can cover a lot more ground on a doubles court and too many times that drop shot you thought you hit comes back at you in the form of an on the run drive. Those can be unpleasant at the net to say the least. If you smash the ball instead, every chance you get, you finish points. Finishing with pinnace when you are hitting the easiest shots at the net will continue to serve you well through the match. Your opponents go back to the baseline muttering let’s not let that happen again. They begin to overcompensate and unforced errors are the result. Tell your partner to smash or “whap” everything at the net, if they miss, so what, the confidence you instill in them by granting this freedom is priceless.

6th Step
One Person in the Free Safety Position
If you or your partner has more range, this should be a tactic employed regularly. What does this mean you ask? Well, when both of you are heading for the net, how close are you getting to it? Are you both a racquet length away or are you content to sit on the service line and volley from there? This is an important positional question that you must honestly answer. Everyone strives to close with the net, but your speed or agility may not be what it once was. If one of you has a great deal more range than the other and you both volley at the same level of proficiency, consider following this Step. Basically, it is, both of you get to the net as soon as you can, but once both arrive at the net, the person with the range takes a step back, approximately a step and a half inside the service line, and that person is responsible for running down all the defensive lobs. Any short lobs should still be taken with an overhead by the appropriate partner, but this frees the person with the limited range from mental concerns over covering defensive lobs. Now, some people you play never lob, well then, don’t ever take a step off the net against them until they do lob. Crowd the net completely, racquet length away, and make them hit a shot they don’t feel comfortable hitting. The free safety concept is one that will help you when you are playing with a partner of a vastly different skill level, and will extenuate the positive part of each person’s game. This is because while the rangy partner goes back, the less mobile partner can either stay at the net or drop back defensively. If possible, the lob should be returned to an open side of the court, and this can be done all the time at lower levels because many players fail to close the net after hitting a good lob. The less mobile partner should not retreat if the opening is there for his partner to return the ball, and he will then remain in an offensive position at the net.

7th Step
Always Use Your Weapon of Choice

You have a go to shot. It should be used in matches whenever possible. Sure, you should improve your game through practice and drills, but when match play begins, use your weapon of choice. For many of us, it is our forehand cross court drive. It is the safest shot in tennis and hitting it is natural and will set up the rest of your game. Too many times I have witnessed in horror, a player waiting to return a push second serve in the middle of the box only to watch them hit a backhand return. If the player would have focused on his weapon of choice, in anticipation of the push serve, she could have easily taken a step over and set up her forehand. Always think about setting up opportunities to use your weapon of choice, it will demoralize your opponents and set up your partner.

8th Step
Life Begins at Deuce
Money points do exist in tennis. The greatest baseball players of all time only hit .300 meaning they were called out 7 out of 10 times, so why are you supposed to win every point. If you didn’t make mistakes, you would be a 5.0 instead of wherever you are rated at now. Has your pro told you in one breath, relax, and then in the same sentence, now focus! Confusing to the average bear, no doubt. You or your partner may get upset when a shot normally struck well ends up in the net. That’s normal for club players. Remember though, your mental outbursts are visible on the court to your opponent, why not channel that energy into complimenting their shot that put you in the wrong position to hit the ball rather than screaming at yourself. If British soldiers wore redcoats so their enemy could not detect the blood on their tunics, can’t you play a social game without revealing to your enemy your psychological scars? One way to mentally deal with missing points is to just tell yourself, life begins at deuce, if I miss one here or there, it doesn’t matter. If I never get to deuce, am down 40-Love, and get beat, then hell, I was never in that game anyway. Fables often explain important life lessons to us, do you remember the fox who decided he didn’t want those grapes after all? She won three Wimbedons in a row in the mid-fifties.

9th Step
Evaluate Your Opponents

These guys never lob. Never. They think that lobbing is cowardly play, not very cricket. Well, use that knowledge and adjust your game. If you are following these Steps, you are playing your own game, hitting your weapon of choice, and not worrying about missed shots. Your opponents have one weakness or several, again, if they didn’t, they’d be 5.0 players. If they leave openings at the net, hit to the openings, make them hit another shot. Some players you face have excellent drives as if they work with a ball machine every Monday and Friday so you have to adjust how you hit the ball and where. Make a deliberate effort to check for weaknesses everyone knows about like backhand inferiority or lack of mobility. Keep these mental notes stored for critical moments and share them with your partner. Some teams you play have no timing on overheads, why not lob them more, some people rush the net every time, but also run though every volley, don’t lob. At the club level, the most glaring void in doubles strategy is that teams refuse to poach. Mixed doubles have the most frequent examples of this stuck in mud strategy. When you realize no one is moving take the easiest shot, the cross court drive, and get to the net. Never let an opponents game dictate how you play, but take advantage of weaknesses and holes in their game.

10th Step
Never Give Up

Sometimes wild unbridled enthusiasm is all you have going for you. In tennis, a match can never be won with a single punch, don’t get knocked to the canvass simply because your opponents drove one overhead through your legs and through the fence. No match is over until your opponent has won two sets, that’s twelve games, that’s forty-eight uncontested points. At any time you can turn the match around. Remember and convince your partner that “momentum” in tennis should only extend in your mind to the end of the game you are playing. Each game is a new life, a new opportunity for success. The best players in the world can be ahead of their opponents only to find themselves accepting the runner up trophy for the tournament. This definitely happens at the club level every day even more frequently. Why, because everyone’s game breaks down at some point, otherwise they would be 5.0 or better. You have to believe that you can win the next point, the next game and so on. The more points you make your opponents “win,” as opposed to giving them points through your unforced errors, the more wear you place on their game. A good example in sport comes from baseball. Starting pitchers throw maybe six or seven innings these days. It is most commonly determined that their outing is based on the number of pitches they throw. Once they reach that pitch count, their effectiveness is greatly diminished, and they are taken out of the game. In tennis, many players ability to compete is greatly diminished physically or psychologically by having to continually hit winners in order to finish points. They may have done it for four games, but by the fifth they show fatigue or a mental weariness on the court, this is your opportunity to reverse the match.

Conclusion

Tennis is a game all about opportunity. It provides us opportunity for social interaction, for physical fitness, and for athletic achievement and excellence, but most of all, opportunity for all of us to enjoy with those in our community, on the bayou or in the Frozen North of Minnesota, a few hours of pleasure where all of life’s pressing issues should be stayed - for at least two to three sets.

* Beau James Brock is a U.S.T.A. 4.5 tennis player who resides in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Following the Bayou Defense stratagem, Mr. Brock, as a 4.0, successfully has won the following 21 doubles events:

Championships and Titles (partner listed by event) (21 individual doubles championships)
2009 Aquinas Classic 8.5 Division champion – team tennis event (Searles & Diel)
2008 Corporate Charity Challenge Tournament Mixed doubles Division I champion (Searles)
2007 Hilton Indoor American Diabetes Association - 4.0 Men Doubles champion (Brown)
2007 Kerri Castello Mobile St. Jude Challenge 8.0 Mixed champion – team mixed event (Searles)
2006 Southern Hills NWCTA City Circuit Tournament 8.0 Men doubles champion (Brown)
2006 Pierremont Oaks Super Bowl Team Tournament – Team Champion
2005 Diamondhead Summer NTRP Invitational 4.0 Men doubles champion (Austin)
2005 Sherwood Forest Country Club Ladder Champion (Debbie Boyd)
2005 Heart Fund Tournament 4.0 Men doubles champions (Austin)
2004 Sherwood Forest Country Club Invitational 4.0 Men doubles champion. (Austin)
2004 Shenandoah Country Club Invitational 4.0 Men doubles champion (Brown)
2004 Corporate Charity Challenge Tournament Mixed doubles Division I champion (Searles)
2004 Heart Fund Tournament 4.0 Men doubles champion. (Austin)
2003 Baton Rouge GBRCTA 4.0 Community Cup champion
2003 Green Acres Country Club NTRP Invitational 7.5 Mixed Doubles champion (Searles)
2003 Sherwood Forest Country Club Invitational 4.0 Men doubles champion (Austin)
2003 New Orleans Hilton Summer Sizzler Tournament 4.0 Men doubles champion (Brown)
2002 Baton Rouge GBRCTA 4.0 Community Cup champion
2002 Durham Autoplex Oak Knoll Tournament 4.0 Men doubles champion (Austin)
2002 Durham Autoplex Oak Knoll Tournament 7.5 Mixed doubles champion (Searles)
2002 Adopt-a-Pet Invitational 7.5 Combo doubles champion. (Molieri)
2002 Pierremont Member-Guest Invitational * Men doubles champion (Brown)
2002 Bocage Racquet Club NTRP Invitational 4.0 Men doubles champion. (Edmonds)
2002 BREC Gulf States Tournament Men's 4.0 Men doubles champion. (Indest)
2001 BREC Gulf States Tournament Men's 4.0 Men doubles champion (Brown)
2000 Aquatic Club of Baton Rouge Classic 7.5 Mixed doubles champion. (Donna Perle)
1999 Aquatic Club of Baton Rouge Classic 7.5 Mixed doubles champion (Weigand)