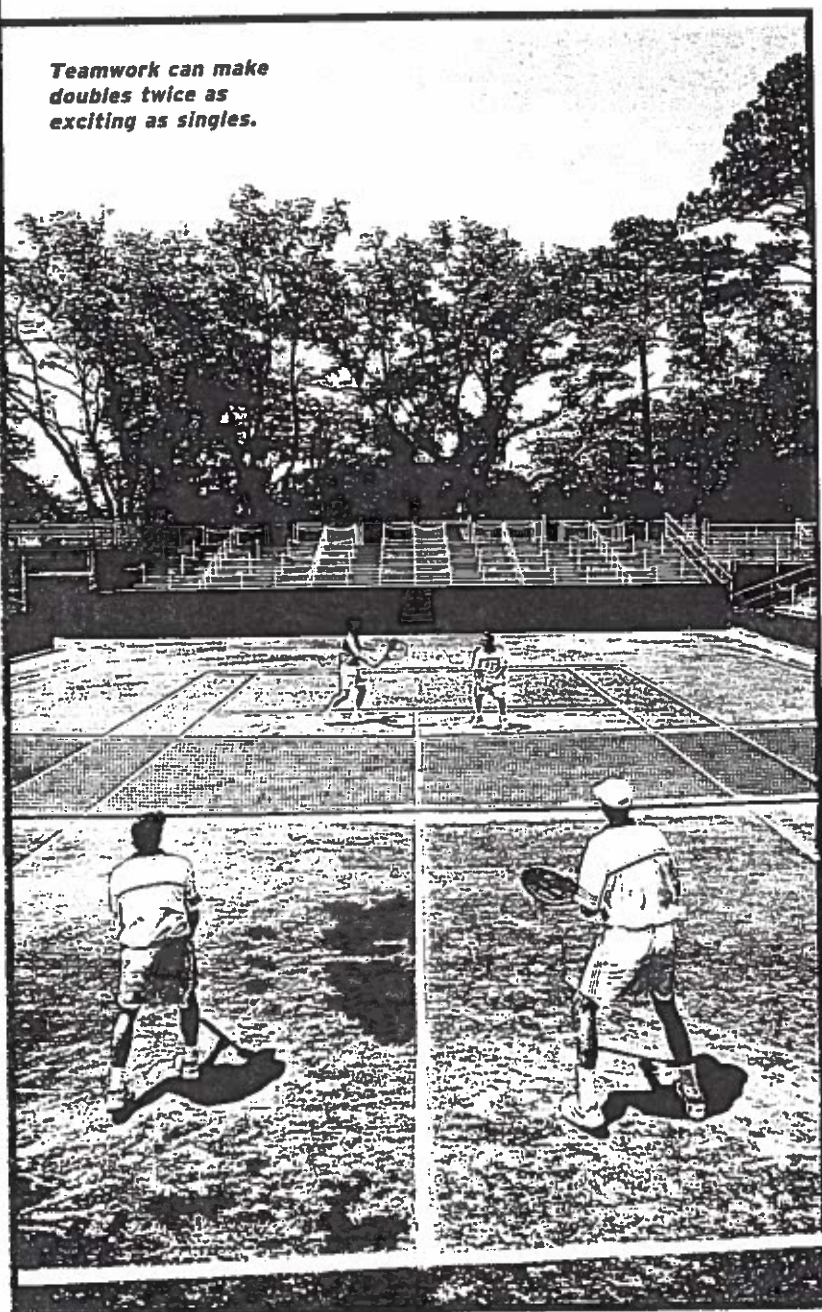


Doubles Duty

Each of the four players on a doubles court has a job to do. Do you know what yours is? By Stan Smith

Teamwork can make doubles twice as exciting as singles.



Doubles is a radically different game than singles. The court has different dimensions and the tactics and strategies are more complex. Club players often think doubles is only for people who can't keep up in a competitive game of singles. Not so. With four players attacking, teams crashing the net on just about every point, and the ball zipping around the court like a BB pellet, the action can be fast, furious, and fun.

To be a successful team, you and your partner need to be aware of your individual responsibilities. You must rely on each other. By knowing what your partner expects you to do, you can more readily set him up to win points. But you must also be aware that your job description will change once you go from being the server to the server's partner, and from the receiver to the receiver's partner. Fail to do your job during a doubles match and a team with lesser skills will pick you apart.

The server

OK, YOU'RE SERVING. AND AS THE PERSON who starts the point, it's your responsibility to set the tone for that particular game. *In doubles, it's absolutely essential that you get a high percentage of your first serves in the box.* By making a lot of first serves, your team can be aggressive, and your partner at the net will have more opportunities to pick off weak returns by poaching (crossing to the other side of the court to volley the return). Even when your partner doesn't poach, you won't be forced to play too many tough shots because the returner will be thinking—and playing—defensively.

The velocity and power of your serve isn't as important in doubles as it is in singles. In singles, sending a cannonball down the middle or hooking your opponent out wide opens the court and sets up your next shot. But in doubles you have a partner at the net, and setting him up for volleys should be your primary goal. If you put a little extra spin on your serve, the returner will probably have trouble hitting the ball back cleanly. And varying the location and the velocity of your first serve also makes it tough for the returner to establish a rhythm.

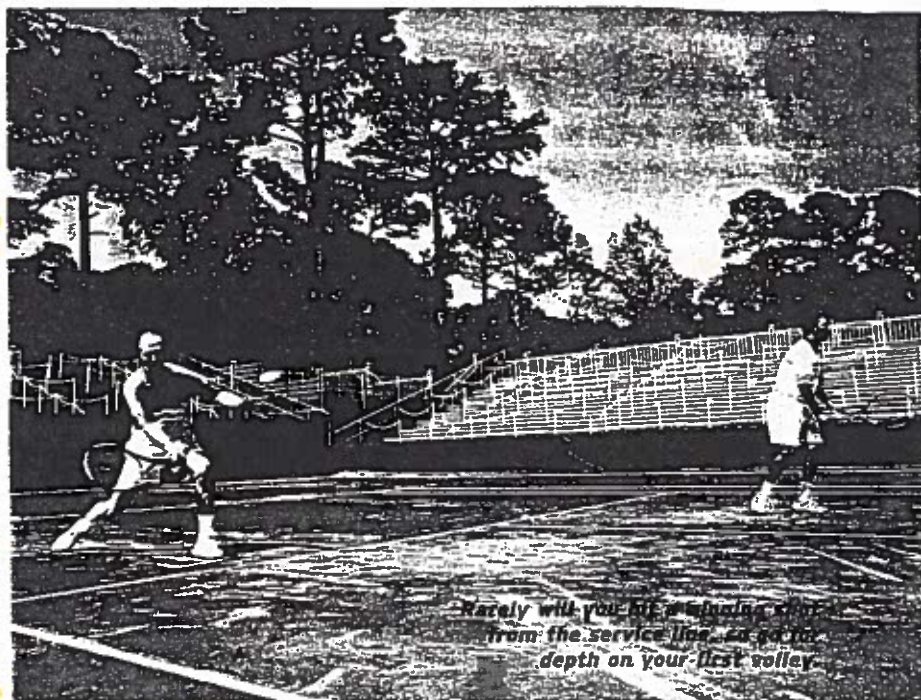
Not many club players—or professionals, for that matter—vary their position when they're serving in a doubles match, and that's a mistake. Serving from different spots on the court gives the receiver many different looks and can be a cause of confusion.

If, for example, the receiver doesn't adjust to your move toward the sideline, a simple serve out wide can set up your partner for an easy putaway volley. **You should also attempt to mix up your spins.**

Ideally, you'll want to follow your serve into the net.

Serving and volleying is the most aggressive way to play doubles. **After you hit your serve, your first two steps into the court need to be explosive and drive you forward. With the third step, you should start to slow yourself down and collect your balance.** At this point, you'll want to split-step, which will enable you to plant your feet and cut equally well in any direction as the ball comes off your opponent's racquet.

This all sounds good—in theory. The problem is that many beginner- and intermediate-level players aren't comfortable serving and volleying. They aren't confident in their ability to handle low volleys and to play shots on the short hop. If you're one of these players, it's OK to serve and come in after you've hit the receiver's return. What's not OK is to serve and



Rarely will you hit a winning shot from the service line, so get the depth on your first volley.

be passive: try taking the first short ball that comes your way and hit it as an approach shot, then follow it to the net.

When you're forced to play a volley from the service-line area, look to get the ball back deep. It's important to understand that this shot, **your team's initial volley, rarely wins the point outright.** Avoid the temptation to go for fancy angles or attempt a shot that you're incapable of making consistently. All you're trying to do is set your team up for a chance to finish the point on the next ball. **Nine times out of 10, this shot should be hit crosscourt, deep, and back to the returner.** Why? Because the returner's partner will be right there in front of you—and looking to pick off your volley or approach shot. If he crosses and you've got time to adjust your stroke, go ahead and knock the ball down his alley or into the area of the court he's just vacated.

notebook



quick tip

B-I-A

Anyone can become comfortable serving and volleying. I once gave a doubles clinic to a group of beginner women in Atlanta who, from their very first lesson, had been taught to attack the net. Because they worked on their volleys and overheads—and thought of doubles from the net back instead of the baseline forward—these women were well on their way to becoming outstanding doubles players.

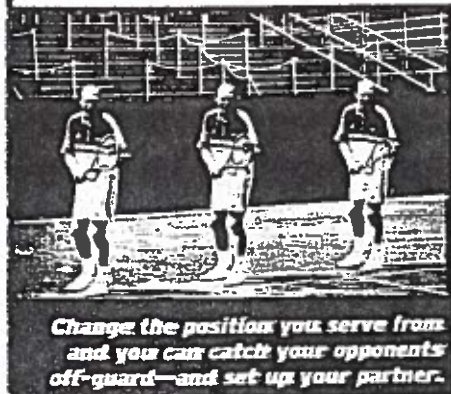
Key to skill levels

B Beginner (NTRP 1.0 to 2.5)

I Intermediate (3.0 to 4.0)

A Advanced (4.5 and above)

If you would like an official National Tennis Rating Program (NTRP) rating, inquire at your local club or call your sectional office of the U.S. Tennis Association. For a self-evaluation, you can find a description of the NTRP skill levels at our Web site, www.Tennis.com.



Change the position you serve from and you can catch your opponents off-guard—and set up your partner.

The server's partner

TOO MANY CLUB PLAYERS BECOME PASSIVE, TURNING into statues when it's their chance to be the server's partner. They stand there trying to look good. Don't be like them! **Assume the attitude that no poor return will go unpunished.** Volley and put away everything you can get your racquet on.

A key to reaching service returns is being in the correct position. Since most of your opponent's shots go over the middle of the net, **avoid the temptation to hug the sidelines.** Sacrifice some alley coverage and shade toward the middle of the court, especially early in the match. Keep looking forward, and **by focusing on your opponent's racquet face, you'll have**



With your back to the net, talk with your partner about how your team should play the next point.

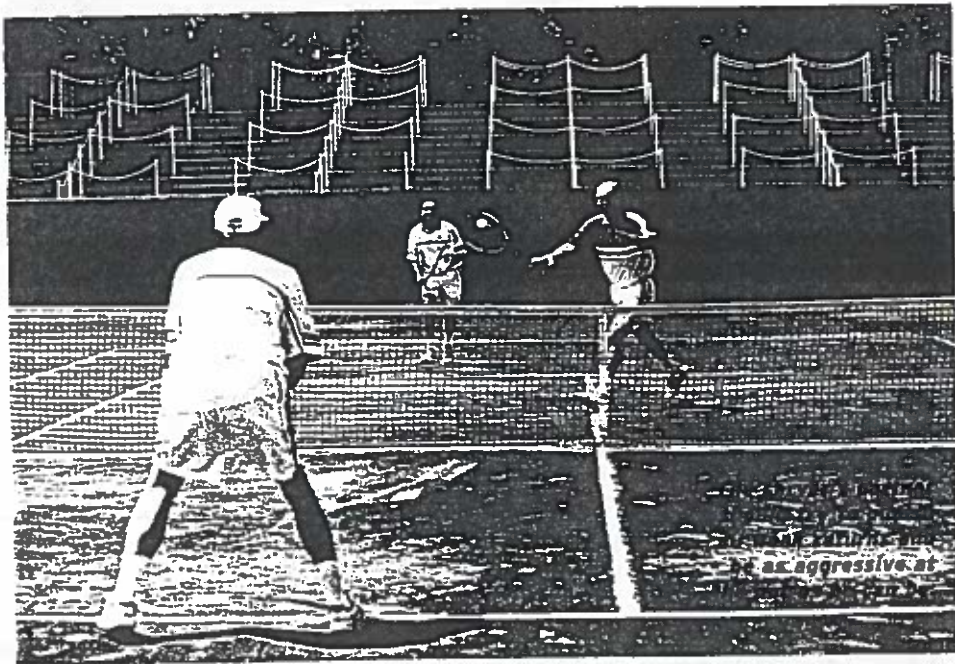
a much better chance of anticipating whether he's going to go down the line, cross-court, or lob.

Because the lob is a commonly utilized weapon in club-level doubles, it's a good idea to stand about halfway between the net and the service line. The old adage: "stand close enough

to the net so you can reach out and touch it with your racquet" can get you in trouble against an opponent who lobs effectively. You can squeeze more tightly to the net when you face a team or a player that seldom lobs, but it's better to start more conservatively; standing too far back is usually a smarter move than standing too far forward. Also, it's easier to move forward than it is to move backward.

The server may start the point, but it's the server's partner

Stan Smith won 61 career doubles championships, including five Grand Slam titles.



notebook



B-I-A

When poaching, try to hit the volley down the middle of the court or at the feet of the receiver's partner. Don't smash the ball straight down; that'll only make it bounce up high, especially on a hard court, and give the other team a chance to make a play on it.

Instead, punch the volley deep and put it away.



B-I-A

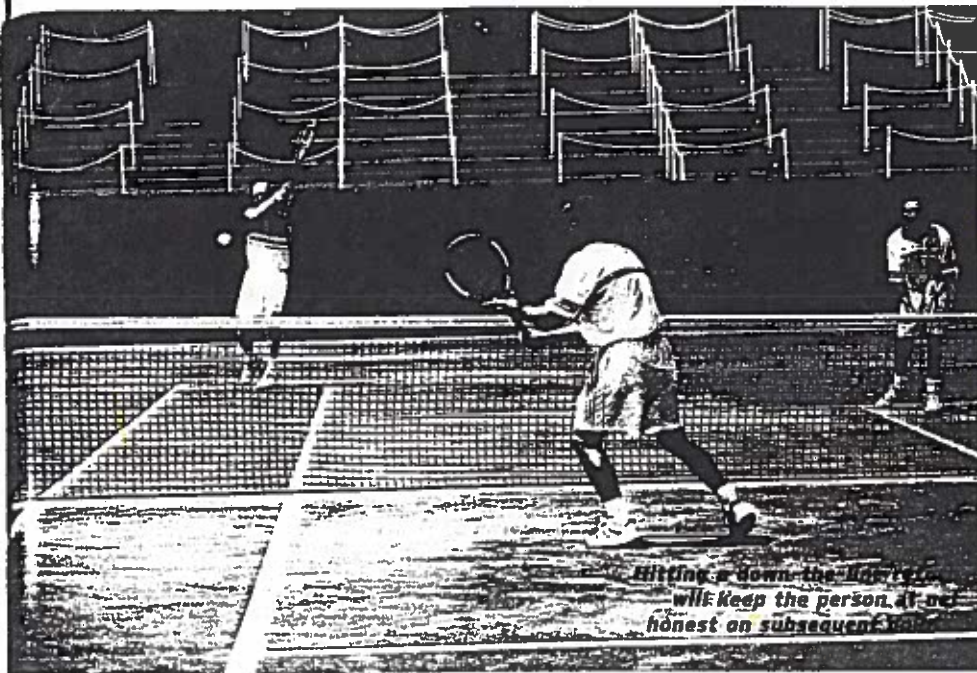
Starting in the deuce court (and assuming the same position you take when you're the server's partner), have someone feed you volleys that force you to cross over to the ad court. This will most accurately simulate the shot you have to make when you poach.

Next, have your partner feed you an overhead—another shot you'll need to master. Repeat the drill, beginning in the ad court and then crossing over to the deuce side.

who can most easily finish it. Therefore, the server needs to set him up at every opportunity. **The net player should talk to the server, and both players should agree on a plan before every point.** With his back to the returning team, the server's partner should tell the server where he thinks the serve should go, decide whether or not he'll poach, and, in general, encourage his partner when things are going well and keep his spirits up when they're not. In this respect, the relationship is similar to the one a catcher and a pitcher have in baseball.

The poach is an important facet of being the server's partner. **The key to poaching effectively is timing.** For most players, **the time to cross is just as the returner has finished his backswing and is bringing his racquet forward.** Leave too early and the returner will catch you out of the corner of his eye and go down your vacated alley. If you leave too late, you'll never catch up with his crosscourt return. Remember: The more you poach, the more you'll get a feel for when to go. Don't be afraid of getting burned a few times and losing points; you'll be planting a seed in your opponents' minds that you're going to be active.

Once you've told your partner that you're going to poach, you're committed to doing it. I've seen lots of club players signal to their partners that they're going to poach and then change their mind in the middle of the point. "I saw the ball was going down the alley," they tell me. I say to them, "OK, but that's not your shot anymore. It's your partner's ball because he's committed to backing you up." Stopping in the middle of a poach will only confuse the server and leave your team in an extremely vulnerable position. So follow through on your poaches, be aggressive, and have some faith in your partner's ability to cover the half of the court that you've left unoccupied.



Hitting down the line will keep the person at net honest on subsequent volleys.

willingness to go down his alley. Even if you miss the shot or he gets an opportunity to play a volley, at the beginner and intermediate levels, you may still surprise the net player and induce a mishit. And even if you miss the shot or he volleys it away for a winner, you'll have planted a seed in the other team's mind that you're willing to shoot the ball down the line and that they can't poach indiscriminately. When you're receiving a second serve, it's a good idea to use your most potent shot as often as you can. For most players, this means running around the backhand and nailing a big forehand. To reduce the area on your backhand side that'll be vulnerable to a serve, set up more to your left (if you're right-handed) or more to your right (if you're left-handed) or shift in that direction

The receiver

ABOVE ALL ELSE, THE PLAYER WHO'S RETURNING serve in doubles has to concentrate on getting the ball back into play. It sounds obvious, but too many players get wrapped up in the heat of battle and forget this essential detail. Against a hard-hitting server, position yourself far enough back so that you can handle the power, then create an imaginary line that cuts the service box into two equal portions; stand along this line and you'll reach the most serves. Be aware that the server can adjust his position along the baseline, and

that you'll need to react accordingly. The farther out the server stands, the closer to the doubles alley you'll have to play.

Most returns in doubles should be hit crosscourt and low. Keeping the ball low forces the incoming server to hit his volley up in order to clear the net, which is where

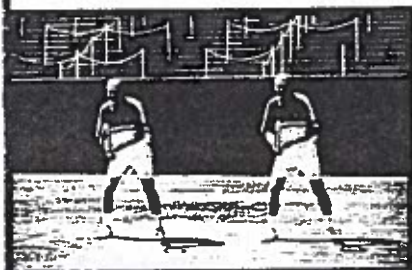
your partner should be waiting to pick it off. Don't fall into the trap of looking at the net person to see if he's going to poach, then making up your mind at the last second where you're going to hit the ball. The best returners determine where they're going before the serve is even struck. You may want two different targets—one for the forehand side and one for the backhand side—but changing your mind in the middle of your swing is a recipe for disaster. If you decide to go crosscourt and the server's partner poaches and wins the point with a volley, all you can say is "good shot." At least you've made him earn the point with a quality volley.

You owe it to your team to return down the line from time to time. To keep the server's partner from poaching too aggressively and too often, you have to make him respect your

as soon as the toss goes up. Either way, you'll get the server thinking about what you're doing instead of what he should be doing—namely, getting his ball into the court.

Against especially big hitters or proficient servers, the lob return is a good change of pace. Because you're not trying to win with a lob return (you're merely trying to get the ball back into play), don't aim too close to the sidelines. Be sure to watch the ball carefully, shorten your backswing, and block it high into the air, hitting it deep enough to effectively take the net player out of the point. The speed of the incoming serve should supply more than enough power, and a long follow-through will help you get the depth you need.

And don't forget to let your partner know that you're trying this shot. Otherwise, he might end up on the receiving end of an overhead that could be hazardous to his health.



Standing in different positions to receive and shifting to set up your best return are smart plays.

notebook



B-I-A

Go down the line early! In a 1972 Davis Cup match against Ilie Nastase and Ion Tiriac, both Erik Van Dillen and I knew that Nastase would be looking to poach to cover for Tiriac's lack of mobility, so we decided to hit every return in the first game down the alley. We won some points and we lost some points, and we eventually lost the game, but Nastase thought about this tactic for the remainder of the match, and when we raced to a 6-2, 6-0, 4-1 lead, we had our Romanian opponents shaking their heads. In effect, the match was won in the first game—even though we lost it!



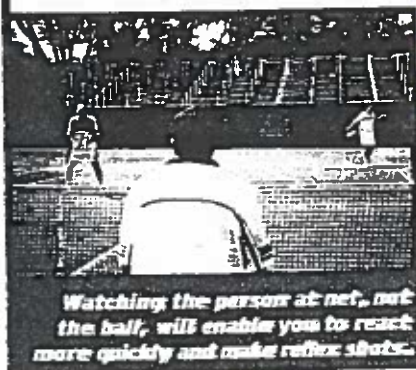
B-I-A

It's often said that doubles play helps your singles, and nowhere is that more true than on the return of serve. Playing doubles and learning how to vary your return locations and the times to be aggressive (and when not to be aggressive) will help you become a much better singles player. Professionals who are renowned for their doubles prowess, including Mark Woodforde, Todd Woodbridge, Natasha Zvereva, and Martina Hingis, are all great returners in doubles and singles.

The receiver's partner

THE KEY TO BEING EFFECTIVE AS THE RECEIVER'S partner is adjusting to the return. Ideally, you should start the point by standing on or just inside the service line. From this position, you ought to be able to make a play on some of the volleys that the server's partner may hit when he poaches or intercepts your partner's return. If the server's partner does his job well, you don't figure to get many of these shots back, but you'll have time to move and at least get your racquet on some of them. Starting from the service line will also enable you to attack the net quickly when the return isn't cut off by the person at net, and this is a good thing. After all, the net is where all doubles players eventually want to find themselves.

As the serve lands, help your partner determine whether the ball is in the box or not. But then, *instead of turning your head and watching your partner hit the return, focus on the server's partner, who'll be standing diagonally across from you.* His



Watching the person at net, not the ball, will enable you to react more quickly and make reflex shots.

reaction and movements will tell you everything you need to know. If you see the server's partner raise his racquet, put your frame in front of you, stay low, and just do your best—his volley is probably coming in your direction. But if the server's partner doesn't make a move to volley, the server is

going to have to play the ball, and you should move forward and watch him as he approaches the net. On low returns, which are almost always volleyed up and with less pace so they can clear the net, you'll have a chance to pick off the server's first shot. The server can be more aggressive on high returns, but you should still look to intercept his shot.

If your partner is consistently hitting good, low, crosscourt returns, be ready to poach. This aggressive play is common in the pro game, but a rarity at the club level. The trick is to tell your partner that you're going to cross in front of him on low returns and look to intercept the server's volley. If you know your partner can set you up with the return, and the server has been predictably going crosscourt, why not mix things up by moving forward and punching the volley right down the middle?

Against a tough server or an extremely aggressive net player, it may be smarter for the receiver's partner to start at the baseline. This formation is often called "two-back." It's a good way to play when your team can't consistently keep

the return away from the net player. With both you and the returner back along the baseline, there are no targets for the volleys to shoot for and fewer angles for putaways. Yes, it's a defensive style, but it beats losing point after point at the net. And just because you start the point from the baseline doesn't mean you should be satisfied with that position. Look to move into the net once the point has started and the return of serve has passed the server's partner. **S**

notebook



quick tip

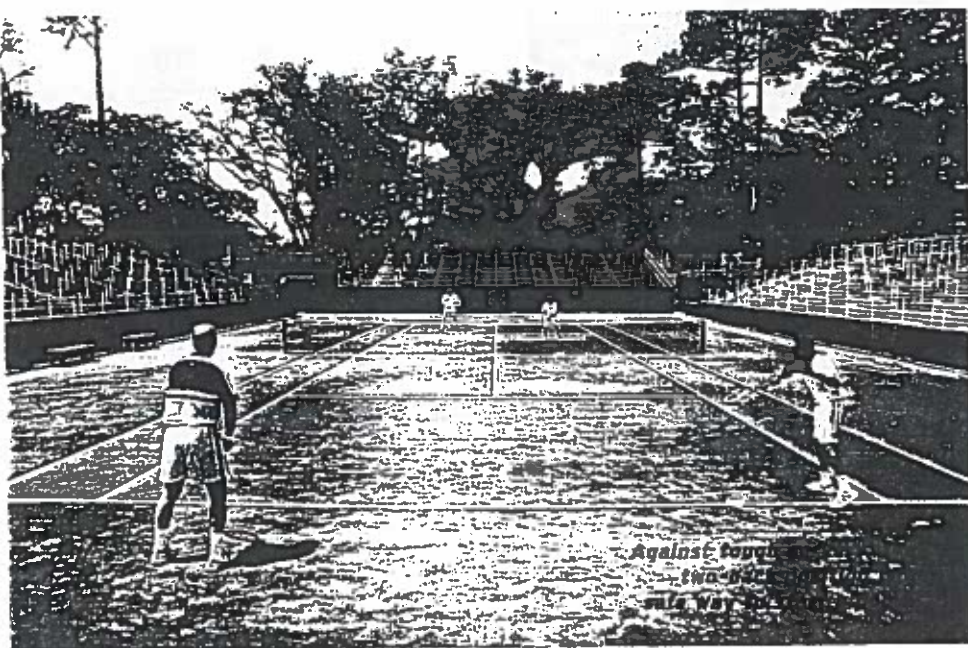
B-I-A

Not only does the receiver's partner need to react to the return, but he should also move with the serve. When your partner gets pulled out wide, slide to that side and cover the suddenly exposed middle. When the serve goes down the middle, taking a half step toward your alley gives the receiver more room to aim crosscourt, which is the preferred shot in this situation.



check list

1. The server needs to get in a high percentage of his first serves.
2. Serving and volleying is ideal, but for players who aren't comfortable with that style, coming to the net after attacking a short ball will also work well.
3. The server's partner shouldn't worry too much about the doubles alley; most of the action tends to be in the middle of the court.
4. When you're the server's partner, always look to play aggressively and to poach whenever possible.
5. On most returns of serve, the ideal shot will be low, crosscourt, and away from the server's partner.
6. The lob return works well against hard-hitting servers, net players with poor overheads, and slow-footed teams.
7. While the return of serve is being struck, the receiver's partner should focus on the other team's net person and react to his movements.
8. Once a low return passes the person at net, the receiver's partner should move forward and look to poach.



Against tough servers, it may be smarter for the receiver's partner to start at the baseline.