

THE FIRST FOUR

From entry level doubles players to players ranked outside of the top 30 in the world, there is a very common pattern and theme that occurs. At least 70% of rallies usually end in the first 4 shots. As players get better and better this percentage rate does start to decrease. So why is it that we spend so much time practicing our back court attack and our solid defence when we should be focusing more time on the first four shots of each rally. Let's look at these shots a little more closely and how we can improve them:

The serve – a good attacking serve should be skimming the net tape and start to drop immediately after passing it. The shuttle should fall on or just past the service line. In theory this should make it quite difficult for your opponent to attack it. However, quite often our opponents can attack it as the serve sits up too high. Try squashing an old shuttle on top of the net and practice serving at it, trying to knock it off the tape. This is a difficult task but can be mastered with hours of constant practice, giving you a serve that skims the tape. The shuttle should then be moved to different parts of the net which enable you to develop different angles on serve. The angle of serve is vitally important. Your stock serve should land right on the 'T' junction, making your opponent reach. Most of us serve directly to our opponent which is the shortest distance to their attacking return. By making them reach you may prevent this. This applies to hitting right out into the tramlines as well. Then you must learn to angle the shuttle across an opponent's body, cramping them up, confusing them whether to play a forehand or backhand return. Also by serving at certain angles we might be able to predict certain returns more easily as the receiver's options are now more limited, allowing the server to cut off the shuttle on the third shot. The same principles of angles apply to flick serves as well. Make sure our flicks are deceptive and are aimed at the centre line or wide in to the tramlines – not to the middle of the service court. Set targets at the back of the court and practice trying to hit them with your flick serve. Learn to make you opponent work hard for an attacking return.

The return of serve – a good return will have the shuttle travelling in a downward direction, trying to force the third shot up into the air. This can be done with net kills, flat soft pushes and tight net rolls. A player can also push or drive the shuttle hard but remember this will result in the opportunity for your opponents to hit the shuttle flat back at you. Our main aim is to return the shuttle so that it falls below the level of the net tape, usually to space or away from our opponents. So some key points in trying to do this successfully are as follows: meet the shuttle as high and as early as possible. This means to step forward and meet the shuttle on your racket leg if possible. Don't wait for the shuttle to come to you as it will begin to drop below the net further and further, forcing you to hit up. Your starting stance should be with your non racket foot forward so that you can step forward on to your racket foot. Make sure you start with your feet quite wide apart. This gives you a much more stable base and enables you to push off faster in both directions. When you step forward to meet the shuttle make sure you bend your knees and you have your racket head pointed up. This allows you to get under the shuttle and by having your racket in an upwards position allows you to hit the shuttle flatter, both hard and soft. The earlier we can meet the shuttle, the higher it is, the easier it is to hit it down!

3rd shot – This shot all depends on the type of return played to your side which in turn relies on how good the serve is. The third shot can be played by either the server or their partner standing directly behind them. The server needs to practice getting their racket pointed up immediately after the serve, looking at net killing / brushing any net rolls, blocking or net killing any push returns. So the server firstly needs to think about the angle of their serve and what the likely types of returns should be and then look to intercept the return. It is just like setting a trap for the receiver! The server's partner will be standing in an attacking position directly behind the server. They are there to play

back the hard flat returns and the soft pushes that get past the server. This shot can be made easy or hard once again depending on the quality of the serve. If the serve is too high and easy to attack, then the server's partner will be under a lot of pressure with the shuttle coming down sharply and hard at them. The third shot should not be played high into the air unless there is no other option. It should be played back flat (hard or soft) or downward if possible, preferably into space or in front of an opponent forcing them to play defensively into the air. This will depend on the quality of the serve though. To be able to do this well the server's partner should move their base up close behind the server. This will allow them to meet the shuttle higher and earlier meaning that they can hit down or cross the shuttle very quickly and effectively. However if the server is serving poorly or the receiver is attacking the return hard most of the time, the server's partner's base should drop back further behind the server, giving them more time to react to the return.

4th shot – this shot works on the same principles of the 3rd shot. We want to play the shot flat or down into space, not allowing our opponents to attack the shuttle and hopefully force them to defend and hit up into the air. After playing an attacking return, the receiver should be at the front court and looking to cut off the 3rd shot with a net kill, net roll or push. The receiver's partner will be covering the back court and once again should be looking at closing their base up reasonably close to the net player so that they can meet the shuttle as high and as early as possible. Obviously they still need to be able to cover the back court.

So by knowing the tactics, the shots required and what the role of each person is, we can successfully practice these so that we become far more effective in the first four shots of the rally. This in turn will create a lot more winning points for us!

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