Below is an outline of a typical coaching session. It is designed to be used as a reference document to remind individuals of what was covered on court. A group session has to cover all aspects of the sport and it is impossible to absorb and remember all of the information. This document should be used to reference each aspect of the session, skill by skill, topic by topic…after the event.

**GRIP.**

Continental grip is the ideal beginner grip and is the permanent grip for many players. Adjustment of the grip should only come with experience.

WHY continental?

This grip is used for both forehand and backhand and becomes more important, the closer a player gets to the NVZ as they simply will not have time to adjust.

The wrong grip restricts wrist movement especially at the net. The wrong grip may often result in a strong forehand, but the consequence will be a weak backhand causing backhand shots to pop up.

**Drill.**

Bounce ball on paddle, forehand… backhand. A bad grip will cause difficulties on the backhand side.

Volley with a partner…alternating forehand…backhand. Good exercise to ensure the grip is correct.

**FOOTWORK/STANCE.**

From the ‘ready position’, facing the incoming ball, a player should open their body by moving their feet. An open stance opens up the shoulders and hips to allow for a smooth and long backswing on either the forehand or backhand side. The feet are the key. If the feet don’t move, the hips wont rotate and so the swing will be restricted, affecting power, control and direction.

**POINT OF CONTACT.**

For ALL shots the ideal point of contact (where the paddle meets the ball) is out in front of the body. This applies to forehand/backhand drives…to volleys, smashes and dinks. When you strike the ball ‘out in front’ you are more likely to be in control of power (soft or hard) and direction.

These first three elements (Grip…Stance/footwork…Point of Contact) should be treated as a single topic. You can’t have one without the other. Master these and you are capable of sustained rallies and are ready to work on all other aspects of the game.

**Drill** (for all three of the above)

Self rally against the wall OR rally with a partner over a short distance eg cross court. Focus on opening the stance on both sides and striking the ball out in front.

For beginners, if necessary, have a partner throw the ball to the other player ensuring the ball bounces to either their forehand or backhand. It is important that the ball is thrown to a position that ensures the player’s point of contact is ‘out in front’.

**THE SERVE.**

Two types of serve.

1 Serving from the hand

2 Drop/bounce serve

1- Serving from the hand.

Ball must be struck below the waist/navel.

The paddle must be travelling in an upward arc at point of contact.

The head/edge of the paddle must be below the wrist on contact with the ball.

2 - Drop/bounce serve.

The ball can be dropped and struck after the bounce.

The ball cannot be thrown downwards or upwards. Ie you cannot add impetus to the ball.

This serve allows for a greater variety of serves such as side spin, top spin etc. However the ball is much lower at point of contact so allowances must be made.

In a drop serve the rules about striking below the waist and keeping paddle head below the wrist **do not apply**.

The ideal serve (at beginner/intermediate level) is deep into the opponent’s court. The further back you can force the receiver (they must allow the serve to bounce) the better. This puts pressure on their return of serve.

**RETURN OF SERVE.**

The return of serve must bounce on the other side of the net before the serving team can play the ball. In other words the serving team **cannot** **volley the return of serve**.

Ideally the return of serve should be played deep into opponents’ court pushing the serving side back.

Two reasons for a deep return of serve…

1- It keeps the opponents at the back of the court, limiting the selection of shots they can play effectively.

2 - It gives the returner time to get to the NVZ, putting this team in a dominant position. The returner’s partner should already be at the NVZ.

The return of serve does not need to be hit with power. A high slow ball helps the returner get to the NVZ. A return played with power may come back at pace, catching the returner of serve in the transition zone ( half way between baseline and NVZ).

**THIRD SHOT.**

In the third shot of the rally a player (serving team) has three options…based on the assumption that the team returning serve are now at the NVZ.

1- Drive with power.

2 - Lob.

3 - Dropshot.

1- Drive with power. This requires precision. The ball must stay low. Limited success when playing quality opponents.

2 - Lob. This is the easiest option but requires accuracy. The lob must be deep…close to the baseline. The risk with a lob is that if not beyond the opponents reach it will be smashed.

3 - Dropshot. The most difficult option but the most effective. This shot takes practice. The ball ideally must drop over the net and into the NVZ or very close to it. The idea is to prevent the opponents at the NVZ playing an attacking shot. It also allows the team playing the dropshot to follow the ball into their own NVZ.

There is a **fourth option**… If the serve returner fails to get to the NVZ, either choosing to stay at the baseline, or being slow to come forward…the ideal shot is back at that person. The target area is much larger.

NB. The third shot of every point is pivotal. Which shot option the third shot player chooses sets up how the point will be played out. Only with experience will players start to grasp how important this third shot can be. Every shot after the third determines how the rally will develop.

**Drill.**

To practice the serve, the return of serve and the third shot in a single drill.

4 players. Player 1 serves deep. Returner returns deep to the server’s partner. The partner plays the third shot, first as a drive, then as a lob and finally as a drop shot.

Repeat with players 2,3 and 4 serving. When all four have served and run the drill, partners swop places to repeat the entire exercise from a different side of the court.

**THE DINK.**

The dink is a critical shot in pickleball and comes about when all four players reach the NVZ. When all four players are at the NVZ, shot options are limited, and thus the need to master the Dink.

An effective dink limits the opponent’s options, potentially resulting in a return dink. Ineffective dinks, causing the ball to bounce higher than intended or allowing the opponent to reach in to volley, can result in the ball being attacked with pace.

It is important to practice the dink. The mechanics of the stroke are critical. A player must avoid flicking the wrist or flexing the elbow.

Although the Dink is largely a defensive shot it can be used effectively to put opponents under pressure. This involves varying the shots…from straight over the net to an angled dink, pulling the opponent wide and therefore outside their comfort zone.

**Drill**

4 players, 2 balls. Two players on forehand side practice dinks cross court. Two players on backhand side do the same. After 5 mins, change sides. Forehander becomes backhander.

4 players. Players 1 and 2 line up opposite each other and 3 and 4, the same.

Player 1 dinks to 2, 2 cross court to 3, 3 straight over net to 4 and finally 4 crosscourt to 1. Keep rally going in this order.

After 5 mins change it up. Player 2 plays to 1, to 4 to 3 and back to 2 and so on.

4 players. Play a dinking match up to 5 points. The court is made up of the two NVZs either side of the net. Play out the points keeping the ball within the NVZ.

**NET VOLLEY.**

This is another critical skill that requires practice. Many players refuse to come forward to the NVZ because of fear and a lack of confidence when dealing with a fast, incoming ball.

Dinking with all four players at the NVZ will almost inevitably result in net volleys. Each player during a dinking spell is waiting for their opponent to lift the ball high enough to allow a waist high volley.

Net volleying should be practiced as a stand alone skill. Technique is critical as is paddle grip.

The net volley is a punched shot with the paddle out in front of the body. Wrist flexing must be avoided. Generally there is no need to ‘hit’ the ball. Use the speed of the incoming ball to simply redirect the ball. Let the ball do the work.

**Drills.**

1 - Two players facing each other. Standing approx. 15 ft apart, start with high looping volleys. Allow the ball to drop onto the paddle at waist height. Do not play a ball above chest height. Step back or step in so that the volley is struck in an upward motion. Gradually play lower faster volleys ultimately ending in waist high fast volleys.

2 - For beginners. One person throws the ball to allow the player to volley the return. High loops to start followed by lower fast throws. The hitter must play into the hands of the thrower. 5 mins, reverse roles.

3 - Dink and volley drill. Start dinking and if a ball is attackable…attack it. This should result in a spate of punch volleys. Use this exercise to reset to a dink. Take the pace out of the punch volley by absorbing that pace on your paddle, dropping the ball over the net.

As part of the volleying drill learn how to handle balls driven from the baseline.

1 player at baseline drives a low ball at speed to the player at NVZ. The receiver must punch volley the return, back to the first player. 5 mins, reverse roles.

**THIRD SHOT…THE OPTIONS** ( When opponents are at the NVZ)

1- Forehand and backhand drive.

The idea is to hit low fast balls within 12 to 18 inches of the net. Where the drive is aimed depends on the position of the hitter.

Player in middle of court.

2 options. Straight at opponent OR down the middle between opponents.

Player Near sideline.

3 options. Straight at opponent. Down the middle. Straight down the sideline.

2 - Lob.

The minimum requirement of a lob is to ensure opponent cannot smash the ball…so high and deep into the court.

2 options. Straight down the line OR cross court.

Straight lob travels over a shorter distance and offers a smaller landing zone. Ideally push this shot over opponent’s backhand side. If the lob is poor, at least you are playing to the opponent’s weaker side.

Cross court lob has further to travel and offers a larger landing zone. Not as much height required as you are unlikely to be hitting directly over an opponent.

3 - Dropshot.

Technique is important as this is a very subtle, controlled shot.

3 options.

1 Straight down the line.

Most difficult option because the landing zone is small. This shot requires total accuracy and can only be achieved by getting the trajectory of the ball right. The ball should reach its highest point on the hitter’s side of the net so that as it crosses the net it is already dropping.

2 Middle of court, between both opponents. Easier than a straight down the line drop. Target area is larger. Requires a lower trajectory. Can create uncertainty among opponents.

3 Wide cross court. Easiest option. Larger landing zone. Low trajectory. Pushes opponent wide.

**Miscellaneous shots and strategies.**

**Defending a lob.**

If a lob is played effectively where the receiving team must run back to retrieve it, a call must be made instantly on who is to take the return. All things being equal, …both players mobile and capable…the person being lobbed must decide if they can get to it or if it should be left to their partner. A clear call is needed in either case.

The best option is for the person being lobbed to leave it to their partner. Why? The ‘lobee’ would have to watch the ball directly over their head, gauge the distance it is going to travel and then run around the ball to play the shot. Not ideal.

The partner of the lobee, standing across the court can see the trajectory of the ball going over their partner and can gauge the landing point accurately. Consequently, the partner can get into position for a successful return.

What shot should the lobbed team play?

Just like any baseline shot there are three options…Drive, lob, drop.

The least effective option will be the forehand or backhand drive. Very difficult to be accurate and easy for opponents to attack.

The best option is a drop shot.

**Dealing with the return of a successful lob.**

If the lob is successful, it will have forced the returner to the back of the court. They are likely to be off balance and still in motion…not ideal for a controlled shot.

Both players from the lobbers side should get to the NVZ. In **most** cases the returned lob will come back at chest height with pace. Ideal for a put away.

If the lobee returns with another lob see above.

If the lobee returns with a dropshot the receiving team at the NVZ is back in control to play a dink.

**Dealing with a poorly executed lob.** A very common issue.

If a lob is clearly smashable both players on the lobber side of the net should back up close to the baseline and rely on the law of averages.

Ie. Most smashes will land mid court and no matter how strong the smash the receivers have more than a 50/50 chance of returning the smash.

Should the receivers remain mid court or at the NVZ it is unlikely they will get a paddle to a successful smash.

**Positioning on court.**

Always think in TRIANGLES. If the ball is the top (pointy end) of the triangle the two players on the receiving side are the other two points.

Where the receivers position themselves depends on where the ball is about to be struck from.

The starting point for the receivers is that they must be close enough to each other to cover the gap between them ie The left hand players forehand should reach the backhand of the right hand player…closing the gap between them..

If the ball is central on the court ie 1 mtr either side on the centre point… the receivers should remain centred at the NVZ. If they have successfully closed the gap between them, they force their opponent to play wide of them which offers a very small target.

If the ball is to one side of the court eg, 1 mtr inside the sidelines the receivers must move the base of the triangle to ensure that a ball down the line is closed off. If they move together successfully, they will also close off a ball down the middle. This leaves the hitter with the very difficult shot of playing a wide cross court shot into a restricted landing zone.

Of course this triangle strategy is only useful against a drive from the baseline. The options of a lob or dropshot are still open to the hitter but successful triangulation should neutralise the forehand or backhand drive.