

Lesson 2 - Consistency

How To Build A Consistent Game

Objective

Consistency is one of the most important traits of a solid doubles game. In this lesson, you'll learn how to improve your consistency in order to avoid falling victim to the opponent's "please-lose-to-me" style through unforced errors.

What Is Consistency?

Within the Point Control System, we define consistency as: "the ability to repeatedly hit your chosen target." Ironically, the start point for incorporating this critical element into your game, choosing a target, is the element most often ignored.

Targets Lead To Accuracy

If we are doing a drill and a student errs and wonders what he did wrong, I always ask, "Where were you aiming?"

He may stop and think for a moment, then reply sheepishly, "Well, I wasn't really aiming."

I shrug, "Then you didn't really miss."

Sometimes he'll look disappointed at my reply. He probably expected me to say "You didn't bend your knees enough, or you took your eye off the ball." But slowly the truth begins to sink in and he realizes that before I can tell him why or how he missed the target, he has to have chosen one and tried to hit it.

If you don't choose a target, you deprive yourself of the "starter" that sets in motion the vital parts of stroke production and tactics. Choosing targets and stroking toward them will lead to accuracy. Accuracy then opens the door to consistency.

The Target Factor

The first factor is understanding how to choose targets. As a general rule, the smaller the target you choose, the less consistent you'll be in hitting it. The larger the target you're able to choose, the greater your chances of hitting it.

Choose targets that are appropriate for your level. For a 3.0 player returning serve, a target such as “crosscourt” might be adequate tactically and lend itself well to consistency. However, for a 4.5 player, “crosscourt” is not tactically damaging enough. He needs a more specific target like “low and in the server’s alley.” If he struggles to be consistent with this target, he might lower his target expectations to just “crosscourt and over the net” until the required consistency returns and then aim again at the original target. The difficulty level of the target you choose dictates how difficult or easy it will be to be consistent.

Even the top pros double-fault, but it’s seldom because they can’t get their second serve into that big service box. They could do that all day. However, when their opponent’s return is so strong that the second serve has to be placed in a very small area in the corner of the box, double-faults increase. And, just as the pros do, you have to select your targets according to the opponents you’re playing, always keeping in mind that larger targets lend themselves better to consistency than do smaller ones.

The Net Clearance Factor

You’ve all seen those players who clear the net by five feet, hit nothing but moonballs, and never seem to miss. Clearing the net by a greater margin is an excellent way to drive up your consistency level, especially if you’re in the habit of over-hitting or hitting the net.

Your opponents will determine your allowable net clearance by the quality of their net games. Unless the opponents are all over the net, allow yourself some clearance. Nothing makes less sense than hitting the net tape when the opponent is camped on the baseline.

The Power Factor

The third factor in consistency is power. Players who try to hit a winner on every shot will naturally struggle to be consistent. These players attempt to ruin the consistency of the opponents by subjecting them to unmanageable levels of power. However, the harder they hit the ball, the lower their own level of consistency. Much like an automobile that’s driven too fast for a curvy road, too much power diminishes control.

The Stroke Mechanics Factor

“Moonballers,” on the other hand, are at the opposite end of the spectrum. They rarely miss because they hit the ball so softly that they can do this with very simple stroke mechanics.

The purpose of this book is not to teach you the stroke mechanics. However, I will say that stroke mechanics have a direct relationship to consistency. Some strokes are very long and swingy. These strokes don’t lend themselves to consistency because their mechanics contain too much timing risk.

One player who comes to mind as really understanding this concept is John McEnroe. Mr. McEnroe is probably the greatest doubles player of all time. In fact, it has been said that the greatest doubles team in the world is John McEnroe and anyone else! He uses stroke mechanics that could have been designed by a physics professor. His backhand return of serve, for example, is a work of simple artistry compared to many of his counterparts. Consequently, it produces a high level of consistency while generating efficient, manageable power. (To incorporate this same understanding into your own game, use short backswings on ground strokes, minimal spin, and take out any swing in your volleys.)

The Time Factor

Proper use of time also can help your consistency. In addition to shortening your strokes, another way to create the feeling of having more time is to vary the timing of your split-step. This will be discussed in detail in Lesson 5. For now, know that the usual time to split-step is when the opponent is about to strike the ball. If you find you need more time, split-step earlier. The timing of the split-step is something you can adjust to suit your need for time... and time affects consistency.

How Many In A Row Is “Consistent”?

No matter how hard you hit it, you can’t become a successful tennis player with one shot in a row. If you intend to play at a level where your opponents can sustain even a short rally, you’ll need a few shots in succession. Set your sights on three. With three shots in a row your team can sustain a six shot exchange. If you’ve ever counted the number of hits in your doubles points you’ll realize a six-shot exchange is quite long. Assume you are adequately consistent if you can make three shots in a row. Later we’ll learn more on how the three shots link together to become the backbone for creating a tactical plan to beat the opponents.

Frame Of Mind Plays A Role

A large component of consistency is mental. The Inner Game of Tennis by W. Timothy Gallwey is an excellent book on how thought processes interact with kinesthetics and I would not do him justice by attempting to paraphrase his ideas here. However, I will suggest that internal consistency leads to external consistency. Think of yourself as a solid, consistent player and expect the ball to come back. That's what it means to play a worthy opponent. Expecting the ball to come back is a basic component of consistency because without that assumption you have no need for consistency. You'll know you're truly achieving consistency when you feel a little disappointed the opponent didn't get the ball back one more time!

Balance

Maintaining balance is an important function of the body. Without it, ordinary functions like walking and bending over would be difficult, at best. Complex physical activities like playing tennis would be completely impossible. Your body has an innate ability to maintain its balance, provided you don't overtax it. As a biological priority, your body will try to regain lost balance to the detriment of other, less necessary functions, such as hitting a tennis ball. It is essential that you consciously try to conserve your balance when entering and exiting shots, split-stepping, etc. If you are off-balance, your body's natural priority system will override unnecessary activities (playing tennis, for example) to concentrate on the essential function of returning to a balanced state. If you stay balanced in the first place, you have more of your body's natural physical abilities left to devote to hitting a tennis ball. We've already mentioned the importance of consistency in your play. Consistency is impossible unless you maintain your balance. Enter and exit all shots with your balance intact. If you have to struggle to maintain balance, don't hit so hard. You only have the right to use as much power as you can control with your balance intact.

Three Examples Of The “Consistency Game”

It's deuce at 4-4 in the third set and you have the privilege of returning serve for this important point. You know the server has a solid first volley, but also know he'll be feeling the pressure of the moment. Normally, you'd rip the return to the server's feet, but you feel a little more consistency is in order. In this situation, clear the net with more margin than usual. This introduces a little bit of “please lose to me” in the shot and gives the server the opportunity to miss if he's so inclined. Shorten your backswing to eliminate unnecessary timing risk and use a nice smooth follow through.

It's windy and sunny out and you are the lucky recipient of a sky-high lob that's right in the sun. Normally you'd go for an angle off the court, but you feel a little more consistency is in order. Choose the middle of the court at about the service line as the target for your overhead. Cut the power bit and abbreviate the stroke. Your opponents are at the baseline anyway, so the best they could do is lob again and maybe the next will be easier to handle.

The opposing net player has been poaching like crazy on his partner's serve, making it difficult for you to be consistent with your return. You know he needs to be kept honest and you're tempted to blast one down the line, but you feel a little more consistency is in order. For consistency, use the lob rather than blasting the return down the line. It gives you more margin for error by requiring less pace, allowing for simpler mechanics, and allows you to play a damaging shot without aiming near the lines.

To Summarize

To win a point, you need be only one shot more consistent than your opponent. Select the factors in your "consistency game" that meet the tactical needs of the moment. From your arsenal decide what serves you best: choosing larger targets, increasing net clearance, cutting pace, simplifying your strokes or split-stepping earlier.

Point Control System Drill

For this drill you will need a partner. The idea is to play on half a doubles court including the alleys. Deuce to deuce and ad to ad. One player serves and the other returns. The object is to hit three shots per side. Be nice to each other and help extend the point to a six shot rally. You may serve and volley just as in a real point. If you're someone who stays back, then do that and make your three shots in a row without missing.

Once you can regularly accomplish this, you may be a little more aggressive about winning the point. Practice using the factors of the "consistency game" to reach three hits per side. Rotate the serve and the sides of the court until all are experienced.

Congratulations!

You have completed the lesson on consistency. You are now ready to build on this knowledge by moving to the next lesson.