

# PREPARING FOR REGIONAL OR NATIONAL TOURNAMENTS

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## Contents

<b>OBJECTIVE:</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>PICKLEBALLTOURNAMENTS.COM</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>USAPA &amp; TOURNAMENT SANCTIONING</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>COMPETITION EVENTS</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>FORMAT</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>HOW TO PREPARE FOR A SUCCESSFUL PICKLEBALL TOURNAMENT</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>SUMMARY - TOURNAMENT DAY</b> .....	<b>12</b>

# PREPARING FOR REGIONAL OR NATIONAL TOURNAMENTS

## OBJECTIVE:

To prepare 3.5 level and above players for competing in local, regional, and national tournaments by participating in skill, strategic and mental exercises aimed to promote confidence, stamina and a growing knowledge of highly competitive play vs. recreational play. This topic will include how to enter tournaments and how tournaments are structured, how to navigate through “pickleballtournament.com,” what to expect once you’re at a tournament and rules that must be followed, and how to walk away with success from the experience regardless of results.

## PICKLEBALLTOURNAMENTS.COM<sup>1</sup>

The system most often used to register players and run tournaments, PickleballTournaments.com. Unless you are entering a local club event, you will likely use PickleballTournaments.com to locate and register for a pickleball tournament. If your local club is still too small to offer tournaments, and wonder what other events might be available in your state, you could access pickleballtournaments.com.

One of the options available is to search for tournaments by state. As you can see, pickleball tournaments are not limited to North America ... this software is used by tournament directors around the world.

Once you have found tournaments in your state you will need to consider a number of options. Most tournaments provide you additional information to enable you to make an educated decision:

- **Information:** Location, registration and tournament dates, and the minimum age to enter. (Note: most tournaments specify that the player’s age is determined on 12/31 of that year. You always have the right to play down, i.e. in a younger age group if you wish or perhaps your partner is younger than you.)
- **Competition Events:** As you see in the sample below this tournament offers only doubles play for participants between a 3.0 and 4.5 skill level. If you wish to compete in singles, this tournament is not for you.

- **Welcome:** This section will typically tell you if it is an indoor or outdoor event, the number of courts available, and a little bit about the area.
- **Food/Lodging:** If lunch is available on site and if discounted lodging is available, they will display this information here.
- **Cancellation Policy:** Take note of this section as typically registration fees are not refunded or are only refunded before a certain date. That means if you are injured or your plans change at the last minute you won't be able to recoup your registration fee.
- **Format:** This section expands on the Competition Events information telling you the format of the event you can select. More on this later.
- **Contact:** If you have any questions as you review this information, most events provide a contact person with an email address to whom you can direct questions. Some folks will even help you find a partner if you don't have one.

### USAPA & TOURNAMENT SANCTIONING

When you see the list of tournaments that meet your criteria you are likely to see various logos or symbols next to an event. This leads us to a discussion of the USAPA and sanctioning. The governing body for pickleball in the United States is the USAPA. In addition to the helpful information on the website (like the official rule book, places to play, etc.); there are many member-only services. Among them is the fact that entrance to many pickleball tournaments requires you to be a USAPA member. This leads naturally to a discussion of sanctioning. As you read about a tournament you are considering entering, you will find that the event falls into one of three categories: USAPA Sanctioned, USAPA Medal 10 Match Only (MMO) Sanctioned, or not sanctioned.

**Sanctioned Event:** This means that you can expect every match to have a referee assigned. You will be responsible for calling your lines in all pre-medal matches, but a referee will keep score, ensure that non-volley zone rules are enforced, and that play remains fair and within the rules. Fortunately, most matches proceed without a dispute or controversy.

**Medal Match Only Sanctioned Events:** This means that your matches will NOT have a referee assigned unless and until you reach the medal match (i.e. the matches awarding bronze, silver and gold medals). During such tournaments, you will be responsible for calling the score, making line calls, enforcing the non-volley zone and server/receiver rules throughout the match until you reach the medal rounds. If there is a dispute

between the players on the court, and a referee is not present, you can ask for the Rules Official or Tournament Director to mediate the dispute.

**Non-Sanctioned Events:** In these events, likely you will not have a referee assigned at all. Also, you typically do not need to be a USAPA member to enter these events.

### COMPETITION EVENTS

The type of event to enter is an important consideration. Surveys have consistently shown that the majority of pickleball players prefer to enter “skill events”.

Originally, we categorized pickleball events as “skill” or “age”.

**Skill Event:** Event in which all players of a particular skill level competed against one another. e.g., if you had 10 doubles teams ranked 3.5 than they would be in the 3.5 skill event. It didn’t matter if they were 20, 30, 40, 50, 60 or 70+ years of age. The winner of that event was the 3.5 team that played best on that day.

**Age Event:** Event in which players of a certain age range (e.g. 35-49 or 55-60) competed against one another without regard to their skill level. In these events, the goal was to identify the best singles player or doubles team within a specific age range. The National Senior Games is a good example of this type of event.

**Skill/Age or Age/Skill:** More recently, in part because of the number of entrants, tournaments have now begun to further segment the field as. For very legitimate reasons, tournament directors need to often make difficult decisions. To illustrate this dilemma, we will consider the following scenario. Let’s say you have only 2 teams with a 4.0 skill rating 12 who entered the 65-69 age bracket. For this example, we will assume they are also the oldest players with a skill rating of 4.0. It is pretty difficult to create an event for only 2 teams. Believing skill level is more important than age the tournament director (TD) decides to combine these teams with younger players. However, the TD only has the following teams entered as 4.0 rated players:

- 65-69: 2 teams
- 60-64: 0 teams
- 55-59: 0 teams
- 50-54: 1 team
- 35-49: 3 teams

If the TD drew the line at 50, there would only be three teams...hardly enough for a real competitive event. But by combining these teams with the three in the 35-49-year-old bracket we have a bracket, i.e., a reasonable

number to compete. By combining these teams into the 4.0, 35-49, 50-54, 55-59, 60-64, 65-69 bracket you have created a **Skill/Age** event. An event that will show priority to skill over age when creating the final brackets. It is difficult for a 69-year-old to compete with a 35-year-old even when both are rated 4.0. That is why some events instead prioritize age over skill. Meaning that when there are not enough teams entered for a specific age and skill level, they combine players/teams with differing skill levels. In an **Age/Skill** competition, you might find that the 35-49 age group includes 3.5, 4.0 and 4.5. There is no perfect system.

While you might hope for competition against your age group and skill level; you wouldn't want to spend money registering for a tournament and traveling there to find that there is only one other team with which to compete. Tournament directors must work to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to play at least two matches, and with that in mind, they need to make tough choices. The best one can hope is that the rules for combining age groups or skill levels will be spelled out in the tournament documents before you enter the event.

## FORMAT

The above discussion relates to the types of competitive events that may be offered in any tournament. Next, we deal with the format. Format relates to the number of points and/or games per match, as well as the number of matches one will play. Typically, at the beginning at each event, those competing will be told the number of points and/or games that will make up each match.

Common examples are:

- Best 2 out of 3 games, each game to 11 winning by 2; or
- One game to 21, win by 1; or
- One game to 15, win by 2.

**Best 2 out of 3 games** is the most common format used. However, when tournaments must manage the amount of court time each game consumes (due to a limited number of available courts or limited daylight) they may have to adopt a different format. In addition to determining how many points or games are required to win a match, the tournament director must determine how medal winners will be determined.

The most common formats are double elimination and round-robin.

**Double Elimination:** is typically used when there are more than 5 teams in a division. Rather than one loss and done, a team is placed in the "loser's

bracket” (or lower bracket) after their first loss. Here they compete against another team that has also lost. If they win that match, they continue to compete in this bracket until there are no other “loser’s”. They then play the winner of the primary (“winner” or upper) bracket for silver or gold. As you can see, in this format it is possible to lose your first match of the day but come back to win gold at the end of the day. It is important to note, that when playing in a double elimination event every team has the opportunity to lose twice before they are eliminated. That means that the team challenging the winner of the top (winners’ bracket) must beat them twice. Typically, the first match is best 2 out of 3; and if successful they then play again to 15.

**Round Robin:** When there are only a few teams entered into a specific event, the Tournament Director will often decide to utilize a round-robin format. Again, the goal is to enable each team to play as many matches as possible while most fairly determining the winner of the event. In a round-robin event, you will play each of the other teams in your division. The winner of the match and the points won is recorded after each match is played. Typically, the team winning the most matches is awarded the gold medal, second most silver, and so on. In the event of a tie, the point differential is used as the tie-breaker

**US OPEN:** The US OPEN has adopted a variation on the double elimination format for most of its events. Like a traditional double elimination, each team must lose twice to be eliminated. However, only the team that remains in the winners’ bracket is allowed to win gold. Having lost a match, one goes down to the “consolation bracket” and there can only win bronze.

**Your Skill Level:** It may be as you think about entering your first event you may not know what skill level you are. This is a common problem for players entering an event for the first time or if your pickleball community is rather small. If you are unsure, you can attempt to find a rating clinic, where a pickleball instructor will play with you or observe you doing various drills and provide you an assessment. There are many programs like this across the country. If you can’t find an instructor nearby, you could videotape a full game and forward it to me for analysis. If you find you enjoy playing in tournaments, you will find that the USAPA through its partner pickleballtournaments.com will provide you a very accurate Tournament rating over time. In the fall of 2018, the USAPA introduced

the USAPA Tournament Player Rating System. By analyzing the results of hundreds of thousands of matches in that system the USAPA was able to provide tournament players a UTPR. The UTPR rating is based on matches analyzed and is calculated to 4 digits. That is, rather than 4.5 one is a 4.875 which is rounded down to 4.5 for skill level events. You'll note that this system enables a player to have a different rating for same-gender doubles, mixed doubles, and singles. Also, keep in mind, the rating fluctuates slightly after each tournament recorded. So, if you want to, you can see your rating after every tournament you play.

More recently, PICKLEBALLTOURNAMENTS.COM has introduced its own rating system called the WPR. This rating is derived from all matches played in tournaments that use PT.COM software.

The most recent rating system is DUPR which uses all the matches you play in tournaments plus all your local matches that you submit to DUPR. At this time no tournament has adopted DUPR as their standard of rating.

### **How To Prepare For A Successful Pickleball Tournament**

Have you been bitten by the pickleball tournament bug? I know the feeling. Once you feel the adrenaline and the rush of playing competitively, it can be hard to resist playing in more tournaments. It's also hard to resist that desire to win gold. If you're wondering how, you can best prepare yourself for success, then you've come to the right place.

Even if you're playing in a tournament for fun, preparing yourself properly is going to give you the best experience possible. I'm not only going to talk about how to prepare for a tournament physically, but mentally as well. Let's get started!

### **Make sure you pick the right partner**

Finding the right kind of partner for a pickleball tournament, especially a large, sanctioned event, is going to make your life much easier. Here's what you need to know: find someone who's going to share the same goals and expectations as you. This is huge.

You know this already, but finding someone with a similar skill rating is a good place to start. This puts you and your partner on a relatively even playing field in terms of skill. But what's really important are the goals

and expectations. Ask yourself, what do you want to get out of playing pickleball tournaments? Why are you playing in them?

What your answer is will dictate what kind of player you find as your partner. If your goal is to just have some fun and enjoy your games and watching the others, then find someone who is going to share that mindset. But if your goal is to win, win and win some more, well, you get the idea.

If you're a casual player, the last thing you want is to pair up with someone who is hyper-competitive and just wants to win. It's not only going to be miserable for you, but it's going to be miserable for your partner as well.

### **Practice in similar conditions**

If you've never played in a pickleball tournament before, let me be the first to tell you that it is completely different than regular pickleball. Open play or rec pickleball is fun, social and relaxed. Tournament pickleball, on the other hand, is significantly more serious.

I'm not saying that tournament pickleball can't be fun and enjoyable. That's certainly not the case. But playing in your first tournament is going to feel very different and it's something that you probably won't be used to. This is why practicing in the same conditions as the tournament will give you an extra boost of confidence before you go in. It also helps to reduce tournament nerves, something that most people deal with.

Here are the three general rules you should follow the week of the tournament if you can:

1. Play with your partner
2. Play with the tournament ball
3. Play in either outdoor or indoor only

Out of these three, playing in the environmental setting is probably the most important. This is especially true if you've never played in either location. For example, if you only play indoors, but you're playing in an outdoor tournament in a week, you're probably going to have a rough time at the tournament. Make sure you get used to the setting in which you're going to be playing, even if you play a mix of both.

**If the tournament is indoors, then play indoors only!** Most tournament directors will have the ball selected many months before the tournament starts. It's wise to play with the selected ball so that you get used to all of the variables that the ball introduces to the game. As you're practicing with the different environments and pickleballs, make sure you include your partner. There's nothing better than getting positive court chemistry going before the tournament. Discuss anything that needs to be hammered out before game day.

Are you going to stack? How far over should the forehand player take the shots in the middle? Who is going to serve first? The more of these questions you answer, the better you'll be able to hit the ground running once the big day comes around.

### **Pack everything the night before**

Okay, let's get into the actual tournament preparation. I highly suggest that you pack everything that you need the night before the tournament. I didn't do this for my first tournament, but I really should have. In my rush to get out the door, I forgot multiple items that I wish I would have brought.

Not only that but getting everything ready the night before will help to reduce tournament nerves. Just from my conversations with people, I can confidently say that the vast majority of players get tournament nerves. It's normal!

Getting everything ready the night before is going to help you reduce the nerves and will help you to sleep better. In terms of what to pack, here are some ideas:

**Pack extra clothes.** If you've never played in a pickleball tournament before, then you may be surprised to know that you will work twice as hard on the courts as you do in open or rec play. It's brutal.

With all of that work comes a whole lot of sweat. Packing extra shirts (I typically bring 3-4), is essential. You don't want to walk into a gold medal match while you're literally dripping.

You could also consider packing extra socks and a pair of sandals. Wearing sandals can help to cool your feet off after every match to help reduce hot spots or even worse, blistering.

**Pack extra towels.** If you're not already the kind of player that brings a towel with them to pickleball, I highly encourage it. It not only keeps you from sweating into your eyes but more importantly it keeps all the sweat off your paddle handle.

And remember, as I said earlier, you will sweat a ton during your first few matches of the tournament. It will be much more than what you're used to, so be prepared!

**Pack extra paddles.** If you have an extra paddle laying around, throw it in your bag. You never know what will happen when you're at a tournament. You could be warming up with your partner, then all the sudden your paddle face and the ball are both going over the net together. Don't let something like that happen to you. Bring an extra paddle just in case!

### **Get fueled!**

You will play a lot harder in a tournament setting than you would in a rec play pickleball setting. Considering that, you have to fuel your body in a way that will give you the best chances of success.

I know that eating breakfast is hit or miss for a lot of people. But having something in your belly before you start playing is going to guarantee that you will make it to lunch without your stomach screaming at you. Even if it's just a granola bar or something, it's better than nothing at all.

When it comes to eating food later in the day, remember that the tournament committee may be providing lunch to players. In fact, they may even give you breakfast. Just make sure you know the details so that you don't start a match with an empty stomach. Food isn't nearly serious as drinking fluids though. Getting enough water is essential to keep your body going, especially if you're playing outdoors during the spring or summer.

The trick here is to not start your hydration after or before the first match. It's better to start your hydration the moment you wake up in the morning. Regardless of if you drink coffee or not, you should be drinking water the moment you wake up. Dehydration is a problem in the West; people don't

get enough water. Don't be one of these people the morning of the tournament!

### **How to deal with tournament nerves**

The vast majority of pickleball players deal with tournament nerves. It is 100% normal. The unique thing about tournament nerves is that it's hard to notice if someone is dealing with tournament nerves or not. In fact, I guarantee you that when someone is watching you warm up, they're probably thinking "Wow, that player looks so calm!" Even though you may be sweating bullets. Get used to people watching you at tournaments!

What we call tournament nerves is just anxiety. Having anxiety is being in a state of "fight or flight" where your brain thinks that there is a threat of some kind. The trick is finding out what that threat is and convincing the logical side of your brain that the threat is no longer present. Combining that with deep and conscious breathing will help enormously.

**Focus on the current rally, not the score.** When you're anxious, any situation can feel like it's spiraling out of your control. The fact that we're forced to say the score before a serve can add to that mounting pressure. But we all know from rec play, any team can come from a score of 1-10 and win 12-10. Remind yourself that pickleball is a game of inches and focus on getting one point at a time. Treat every rally as its own independent segment of your game and let go of any mistakes from previous rallies.

**Drill before you start your day of rec play.** When you're stressed, your brain seems to be doing its own thing. It helps to be able to rely on muscle memory until your mind settles. The only way to develop that muscle memory is to drill and drill and drill.

We, as pickleball players, have a really bad habit of going onto a court, "warming up" for 2 minutes, and jumping right into rec play. That is a huge disservice to your own skill development in the long run. Instead of doing a basic warm up, spend at least 5-10 minutes and practice one skill that you want to drill. Over time, that will add up to hours of drilling! And that instinct you build into your game can make a huge difference when you feel like you're panicking.

**Participate in lots of competitive events.** Part of being an athlete is getting used to being in a high-pressure situation. If you only participate in a tournament every couple of months, you're never going to get used to the physical sensations that plague you during competitive games.

No matter how hard you pretend rec play was a tournament, you can never replicate that awful feeling. So, signed up for ladders, leagues, and round robins – any type of organized play that is even a little competitive. Play competitively 2-3 times a week. Over time, those anxious sensations slowly became quieter and quieter because eventually competitive play started to feel like rec play.

Getting to that comfort level is only part of the goal – you have to maintain it. When you move up in rating, all that experience washes away, and you have to start over getting used to being nervous at a whole new rating. It's a lot of pressure knowing that you're the lowest 3.5 when folks are about to cross over to 4.0! Try participating in competitive events that challenge you, so that when it's game time, it feels like just any other day on the courts.

**Try meditation and external mental anchoring.** Meditation is all about making time for yourself, living in the moment, and awareness. Most guided meditations teach you to focus on your breath and calm your thoughts. In others you pay attention to your body and really listen to what it's trying to tell you. All of these internal practices help you connect your mind and body.

**Try a little “medicine” to calm yourself.** If you're a fan of fragrances, lotions and essential oils might be able to help ground you and soothe your nerves. Lavender, citrus, and vanilla are other scents that can have calming or inspiring effects. Last but not least, you can take a shot of your favorite liquor! What are other strategies for dealing with stress during a tournament or performance anxiety?

### **Preparing yourself mentally**

If we were to talk all day about preparing yourself physically for a tournament, then we would have to talk all year about preparing yourself mentally. This is where the rubber meets the road. This is how pickleball tournaments are won or lost.

First and foremost, you have to have the right expectations. If you and your partner are just there casually to have some fun and do a bit of competing, then your expectations for the tournament should reflect that. Always remember that open play pickleball and tournament pickleball are almost completely different sports. One is for play and the other is for competition. Open play is where you learn how to play, but tournaments are where you learn how to win. Winning is different than playing

People do not play pickleball tournaments as you see in 5.0 games on YouTube. They play to win, and that's it. For example, if a team is noticing that their opponents can't move very well, then they will lob them all day long. Or if a team isn't getting up to the net very well, they'll just bang it all day. Pickleball tournaments are not a place where the best technique wins. It's a place where weaknesses are brutally exploited regardless of what they are. This is a huge point that you must understand before going into your first tournament. Until you get into the 4.5 and 5.0 area, you rarely ever see "textbook" or predictable pickleball being played at tournaments.

### **Now you're prepared!**

Pickleball tournaments are for fun, fellowship, and fitness! And they are fun! If you're just starting out in the pickleball tournament world, don't worry so much about winning. Just take in the experience, learn something new, and make new friends!

### **SUMMARY - Tournament day**

Playing competitive pickleball doubles (or singles) is much different than playing in a regular weekly group, even if it is composed of the best area players. In competitive racket sports, there are always a great many practice players who beat just about everyone, but who can never get past the first round of any serious tournament.

You also need to be able to concentrate well beyond any irritations, and therefore the need for yoga and match experience in some less-important tournaments. It is called being "**tournament tough.**"

At a tournament, you will likely see new players and styles for the first time, and they might have some well-practiced shots that you have never experienced nor even knew existed. You will feel a different kind of

pressure, because you don't want to let your partner down because of the cost of travel, hotel, tournament fees, etc.

There are a lot of new distractions and inconveniences you don't have when you play the same old crowd on the same old courts.

At the tournament, there might not be any practice courts, and you might have to play with just a few minutes' warmup. Then, at the same time you normally eat lunch, you might play again, with no rest between matches. Don't complain, because it is the same for your competition.

If you eat too much in advance, it feels like a glob in the stomach. If you don't eat enough, you feel lightheaded and weak. You need to hydrate, but a nervous stomach might not allow you that necessity. The courts where the event is played might play faster, or slower, or grip the ball and alter rebound. Then there are the lights, a noisy announcement system, teenaged girls waving. ... Oh, that's right — they think it's funny when you pass out and they take you away on a gurney.

One of the first things that could go in this tournament environment is something as simple as flexibility. From the sideline, we can see some players have stiff legs, almost like stilts. They might stand on their heels, rather than their toes, because of this unseen but palpable tension.

Bent knees allow you to lower your weight to the ground, maintain better balance, and make those last micro-second adjustments to get into position and control the ball.

This is the reason that tournament players need to practice, practice, and practice some more. To deal with these distractions, you need to be totally confident in your own game — and that confidence is a result of practice.

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<sup>i</sup> Portions Taken From Sarah Ansbury, Pickleball Tournament Mastery