

HOW TO GET THE MOST FROM OPEN PLAY PICKLEBALL

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**PICKLEBALL LEAGUES AND TRAINING
(PLEAT)**

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Open Play Pickleball

OBJECTIVE:

Most pickleball players play some form of open play – from anyone can come to semi-private groups. In this article, we share some tips to take advantage of the open play pickleball near you and things that you can do to maximize your improvement.

But before we dive in, those of you new to pickleball might be wondering...what is open play?

Open play is simply a predetermined time where pickleball players show up at the courts to play. You don't have to worry about finding three other people or not being able to play when you're traveling.

All you simply need to do is find out where and when and then show up paddle in hand.

Some clubs divide up the dates & times, i.e., beginner players on one day and advanced players on another. Other facilities have everyone show up at once and segregate different levels on different courts.

Most locations have rules, written or unwritten, that govern play. If you are new to the group, it's usually best to ask an experienced player to explain the ropes.

In general, most open play settings are pretty welcoming. The one exception might be if you are playing with the wrong skill levels, so if you're new to the group, make sure to get a lay of the land.

Let's get focused on some of the things you can do to get the most out of a rec play experience. (rec and open play are interchangeable terms).

Critical Spectating-Developing a Pickleball IQ

Frequently during open play, there will be periods where you are waiting to play. Socialize and catch up with your friends. Maybe stretch some and get some hydration or a snack.

But once you are done with these, you are in a prime spot to learn and improve. This is because the players with whom you usually play the game are out on the courts playing. So you get to see the game you are playing in real-time—not just talking here about pickleball in general. You get to watch and study the actual game played by you and your contemporaries on the court.

The way to do this is to see if you can identify shot selection and basic strategy that makes sense and those that could be re-thought. Look at the movement of the players and their position on the court.

What does Player 1 do well, and what is something that Player 1 could do better?

This is not just watching the game as entertainment (which is fine too). This is studying the game as it unfolds. Learning the rhythm of a good rally as well as the disharmony of a rally played without intentionality.

Do this, and your Pickleball IQ will increase and, with it, your play and enjoyment of the game

Working on “X”

Open play can vary immensely from game to game. Sometimes you will be in an incredible 10-10 tied match full of tension and drama. On the other hand, some games will last 3 minutes and be 11-1. The 10-10 game gives you plenty to work on for sure, but the 11-1 game can sometimes feel like a waste of time. One way to make all of your time during open play as productive as possible is to pick ONE thing to work on, say the depth and consistency of your return of serve. Then, rather than being concerned with the outcome of the games, keep your focus on your returns of serve. Doing so will give you a

metric to measure that is way more valuable than wins or losses. What's critical here is that you pick one thing, not multiple ones. You might change it between games or based on the opponents on the other side of the net but don't try to work on multiple things in the same game

What To Do With A Challenging Open Play Partner – Part 1

Rec play presents situations where you may be paired with a challenging partner. One type of challenging partner is the player who does not come up to the NVZ line after returning, will not ever try to slow the game down (even when it makes sense), cannot hit the ball, etc.

In these situations, three pieces of advice:

1. Focus on something that will help you. For example, when you have a player who insists on playing from the baseline, stay with them – wherever they are on the court. If they look at you funny or ask why you are doing that, you can tell them that you will play from where they are. This approach allows you to work on your third shots and resets, skills that will come in handy when you play the 10-10 game.
2. If you are playing with a partner who is considerably different in ability and you know your opponents, ask them to make sure to hit you some balls. There are different ways to do this – do it in the way that most makes sense for you and your group. It is no fun to stand on the court while your partner gets every single ball hit to them – outside of tournament play, this is a big no-no.
3. Maintain a healthy perspective. It is likely, in fact, should be expected that you will lose in either of these two scenarios. So, it should not be upsetting when you tap paddles at 2-11.

What To Do With A Challenging Partner – Part 2

There is another sort of challenging partner you may find at open play: the not-nice player, the whiner, and similar.

You have a couple of choices here. If it is just someone who complains about everything (the net, the wind, the color of someone's shirt), perhaps play with them and either shut out the noise or lighten the mood as much as possible. The same goes for the negative nelly for whom nothing ever goes right. Look at this as an opportunity to work on your mental focus.

If the level of negativity or just non-niceness is such that its impacts can't be overlooked, then the other option is to decline the invitation to play. Each time the paddles get held up, it is an invitation for the four players to go out there and hit the ball around. You have every right to decline the invitation and should probably do so if the player is such that your experience on the courts will suffer a severe negative impact.

If you need more ideas on how to deal with this gracefully, check out this blog.

Sportsmanship

You are both responsible for your own sportsmanship out there and responsible for protecting ourselves from the less than stellar sportsmanship of others.

Open play can bring together different levels of play. It is ok to want to play at your level or slightly above it. But do not forget to also play with those who are still working on getting to your level. You may be the player who helps them climb that ladder.

Avoid the temptation to target the weaker opponent but also do not freeze them out. Instead, play each shot like you usually would and let the player in that position receive the shot. Remind your friends when opposing you and a weaker player to do likewise.

Pickleball is a game requiring multiple players. Show respect to yourself and your opponents by remembering that a loss for you means a win for them.

Conclusion

Open play pickleball can be a fun experiment with all sorts of possible player combinations. Some result in exciting matches. Some are duds. Get the most out of all of them by adopting the above recommendations into your open play.

Importantly, maintain your agency and the boundaries necessary so that you enjoy your time on the pickleball courts. You have a right to maintain a positive and healthy relationship with pickleball, and no person should be able to interfere with it or take it away.