

## **Active Doubles**

*by Coach Mark Sun*

Where are *you*? And what are *you* looking at? Eyes at the net.

Imagine this scenario: Mark is playing mixed doubles with Liz, against Doug and Becca. Liz serves to Becca, and Mark and Doug are up at the net. As Liz and Becca hit consistent crosscourt ground strokes, Mark and Doug are watching the ball go back and forth. Doug is so intent on watching the ball that when the ball goes behind him, for a moment, his head is turned all the way around watching his partner, Becca, hit.

Becca decides to hit hard to Mark at the net, and Mark volleys the ball to Doug. Since Doug is still turned around as the ball travels by him towards Mark, Doug doesn't react quickly enough to return the volley directed at him.

Being unprepared at the net is a common occurrence to players like (fictitious) Doug (my buddy Doug, in reality, is rarely unprepared at the net). He can be much better prepared to handle his opponent's volley if he learns to watch the net man whenever the ball goes behind him to his partner.

As the ball flies past him to his partner at the back of the court, Doug should quickly change his focus from the moving ball to the other net man. Doug should trust that his teammate will hit a good ball and he will know what kind of ball she hits by studying the body language of the opposing net player. He should not turn around to watch his partner hit as it generally doesn't help win points. Eyes on the other net man are the key to being prepared when the ball is behind you.

Pretend you are Doug. First, by watching the opposing net man's eyes track his incoming ball, you can see in what direction that your partner has hit the ball. If it is a good lob, the net player will look way up. If it is a cross court return that the net player cannot get, they will generally watch the ball with little enthusiasm.

Second, see how the net player adjusts his body to the ball. If the net player prepares with his racket back and is moving quickly, it probably means he's about to intercept the ball with a volley. Once you see that action, you can prepare to return his volley by taking a small step back and keep a close eye on his racket

head. After all, this is where the ball would be struck and very possibly towards you with pace. If you see the net player, reach up and “scratch” his back preparing to hit a massive overhead, you can conclude that your partner threw up a shallow lob and then you should turn around, and protect yourself as you shrink into a ball-like armadillo. (While waiting for the sting of the overhead, you can prepare the stern words for your partner!) By watching the player instead of the ball, you will be able to handle the volley return with much more preparation time and look like a star.

When the ball gets hit to your deep partner behind you, consider backing up a few steps in order to give you more time in case your partner hits a ball to the net man. By keeping an eye on the other net man when the ball gets behind you, you can also be ready when the other net man unexpectedly poaches and moves to the other side of his court.

Now if the ball that your deep partner hits gets past the net man, then you can forget about the net man and you should focus on the ball that the opposing deep player will hit. You should move up closer to the net with the intent of attacking his ground stroke. And a great target is a volley towards the net man’s side of the court.

I like to say that if there are 2 snarling dogs on your street and one of them is on your side of the street, then you would naturally keep a close eye on the dog closest to you. That dog is the one that can hurt you. So when you are at the net, make sure your focus is on the other close net man when your partner is about to hit the ball. Good doggie, let’s play with the ball! Woof!

### **Active Doubles Axiom for the net player**

- When the ball is in front of you, move up a few steps and look to attack the ball.
- When the ball goes behind you, move back a few steps and watch the net man.
- When you volley, attack the other net man’s side of the court.