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Mixed Doubles

Written by Al Allott
Friday, 11 June 2004

Source: Washington State Badminton Association Newsletter, Winter 1996

If you do not have trouble with boy - girl relationships, mixed doubles is the most challenging of the three doubles played in badminton. It combines the power and ability to cover a significant amount of court for the man, and the finesse and touch of a woman.

Mixed doubles is sometimes referred to as "singles with interference." This is because of the impression that the woman cannot compete in the back court or on even terms with the man. The man controls the play so that most of the birds are returned in his direction. The woman is allowed an occasional shot at the net just to say she is playing the game. THIS IS NOT MIXED DOUBLES.

In basic mixed doubles, the man will cover the majority of the shots in the back court while the woman will cut off any weak shot at the net. In some cases, the woman may be stronger than the man and will cover more of the court. In other cases, both may be of equal skills and will play regular doubles with each sharing their time in the back court. For this article, however, the man is assumed to be of superior strength and power and the pair will use the traditional "front and back" formation. Of course, the ultimate object of each individual in the pair is to realize their strengths and weaknesses and maximize their abilities to produce a winning game.

The front and back system in mixed doubles is the basic style of attack with the woman ready to hit down all shuttles at the front of the court and her partner ready to smash from the back. As the woman is closer to the net and has less time to react to the opponents' shots, her basic area of responsibility is in front of the service line. She must be careful not to reach behind her for shots that she may lift to the opponents. She must hold her racket up at all times, ready to make short jabs (not a full swing) on shots close to the net. The man must have finesse and strength to return shots that can not be smashed by the opponents. Both partners must avoid lifting or clearing to the back at all costs, since this front and back formation is very vulnerable to drop shots and smashes, directed down the line or cross-court.

In this formation, the woman should never look around to see what her partner is doing; she should constantly watch the movements of the opponents. This will tell her from what direction of their court to expect their return and also give her a good idea what type of return the opponents will make. Both partners must be adept at setting up the opponents so that one of the partners can obtain a kill. In preparation for a match, a pair must first plan an overall strategy on the strengths and weaknesses of an opponent's game. They must find the answer to any shot the opponents may try - often what works for the opponents also works against them as well. Brains, tactics, and the ability to play consistently (that is, NO UNFORCED ERRORS) often become the winning ingredients.

Serving

In mixed doubles, the serving formation is for the man to always stand behind the woman no matter which partner is serving. When the man is serving, the woman must stand in a position that will not obstruct the sight of the bird to the opposition. For a right handed man serving on his forehand, the woman must stand just in front of and to the left of the T. It doesn't matter which court the man is serving to, she will always be in that position. If the man is left handed and serves with his forehand, she will stand to the right of the T. (If the man uses the backhand serve, the woman stands on the same side of the T as the man.) The purpose of this formation is allow the woman to 1) be close to her base near the T while allowing her partner to serve cross-court and 2) attack a hairpin return anywhere along the net. Any pair may have slight deviations in player positions when starting the serve but consistency is a key element to winning play.

The server in doubles should use the short low serve to the front center corner of the service court as the basic service. This narrows the angle of the return by the receiver. (Serves to the alleys or tram lines allow the receiver a wide angle of service return. One must remember if you are trying to catch your opponents off guard by a wide serve, they may catch you off guard by the sharply angled return. As the old saying goes, "you give angle and you get angle.") This low serve should be used practically all the time and the high flick serve and drive serve held as a threat. If any opponent is susceptible to a high or a particular serve, however, the server should not hesitate to use that serve more than the low serve to the center.

The team should score a larger percentage of points when the woman is serving, since the man is fully prepared for the return and can clearly see the whole court from his starting position. He knows exactly how and what his partner will do on each service and can anticipate the service return. It is therefore very important for the woman to consistently deliver an accurate and low short serve especially to an intimidating male receiver.

Service to the Woman

Many teams have a predetermined plan to serve high to the woman in order to push her away from her base of operation at the net. While overhead returns are often the weakness of woman players, this tactic has dubious value against

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Men's Single

- | | |
|---------------------|-----|
| 1. LIN Dan | CHN |
| 2. JONASSEN Kenneth | DEN |
| 3. GADE Peter | DEN |
| 4. LEE Chong Wei | MAS |
| 5. BAO Chunlai | CHN |

Ladies' Single

- | | |
|-------------------|-----|
| 1. XIE Xingfang | CHN |
| 2. ZHANG Ning | CHN |
| 3. PI ~ * Hongyan | FRA |
| 4. YAO ~ * Jie | NED |
| 5. WANG ~ Chen | HKG |

Men's Double

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|-----|
| 1. LUNDGAARD HANSEN Martin | DEN |
| 2. HADIYANTO Luluk ALVEN Yulianto | INA |
| 3. PAASKE Lars RASMUSSEN Jonas | DEN |

Ladies' Double

- | | |
|---------------------------|-----|
| 1. YANG Wei ZHANG Jiewen | CHN |
| 2. WEI Yili ZHAO Tingting | CHN |
| 3. GAO Ling HUANG Sui | CHN |

Mixed Double

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|-----|
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| 2. ZHANG Jun GAO Ling | CHN |
| 3. ERIKSEN Jens SCHJOLDAGER Mette | DEN |

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the best woman players. Firstly, most women do not rush serves but stay back in their receiving court and "play it safe." They are consequently in position to smash any high service and not necessarily in position to return a low serve. Secondly, a high serve, unless it catches a receiver by surprise, immediately gives the opponents the attack. By probing during the first game, players must be able to determine which serve, either high or low, to backhand or forehand, will produce winning points.

Service to the Man

A good low serve to the man is the one essential ingredient to winning a match. An occasional "flick" serve will tend to prevent intimidation. No matter how advanced the players, a basic principle is that serves to the backhand draw a return to the server's backhand, and a serve to the opponent's forehand will tend to elicit a return to the server's forehand. This is less apt to hold true when the receiver has a longer time to hit the serve and does not apply at all when a serve is too high.

Receiving Service

Many mixed teams position themselves differently for the return of service. Sometimes the woman will stand behind the man when he is receiving, posing as a regular doubles partner. In this situation the man will attempt to "kill" all weak serves or make such an aggressive shot that his partner will be able to smash any subsequent return by the opponents. Other times the woman will stand beside the man in the traditional front and back formation. In this position, the man must not be too aggressive and over commit to the front court, as he must be able to cover any return to the back court. His return of serve therefore has to be softer or longer while still forcing a lifted return, the better to gain time to cover the back court. He will let his partner return all shots at the net.

The return is dependent on the formation the opponents are using. If they are a "front and back" pair, then the half-court down the alley should be prominent in the receivers' scheme of attack. The half-court is a controlled drive played to pass the net player but hit so that it will fall in an area just behind the front service line. It is designed to draw the man closer to the net and catch him out of position and at the same time induce the woman to turn away from the net, over-reach for the shuttle, and get in her partner's way. If the half court is too high or short, the opposing woman can cut in and clip off the shuttle at the net. If the shot is too deep it affords the opposing man the opportunity of hitting the shuttle at head height and taking the initiative. These half-court returns mixed with long flat drives to the body of the man or to the corners of the deep court, together with occasional drop-shots played to the corner of the net away from the woman, are the best returns against another "front and back" pair. Cross-court drives should be used sparingly since the woman is primed to return these shots into winners to an open court.

Return of Service by the Woman

Against another "front and back" team, a woman should rarely, if ever, play a drop-shot from a high serve. The opposing woman will be waiting at the net ready to cut off even the best of drop-shots. (Against a "sides" pair, a drop-shot from a high serve is a good basic return since none of the opponents will be up guarding the net.) The woman should always remember to play a return of a high serve that will allow her time to reach any part of the net for her next shot. A sharply angled smash down the side line will be the best and safest return. She must guard against cross-court smashing too much or she will find it extremely difficult to reach a well-returned drop-shot, angled away from her to the opposite corner of the net.

The Rally

During the rally the man uses well-disguised half court shots down the line in an attempt to get the opponents to lift or cross-court the bird. In turn, the woman attempts to kill any misguided half-court shots for winners. The initiative can be lost sometimes by hitting the shuttle too high in the air or by the woman cutting in too soon and not putting the shuttle away decisively, but more often than not it is lost by the man cross-courting too soon. If a rally is temporarily stalemated by each side's playing well placed half court shots or long drives, the man should not attempt a cross-court drive until the shuttle can be met around shoulder height. When hit at this height the shuttle can be made to travel downward fast enough to prevent the opposing lady from intercepting the shuttle or the man to do much to counter the shot. One must take care hitting cross-court shots as the counter attack by the opponents may be directed down the line into your now open court, or may be hit more sharply cross court back at you. Furthermore, the man who returns a well placed half-court shot with a cross-court has a good chance of hitting his own partner with the shuttle. When both teams are executing good half-courts down the line, neither of them able to cross court and both reluctant to lift to the back, the woman who first recognizes this stalemated half-court duel and "poaches" or cuts off the next half court will usually win the rally.

Strategy Against a "Sides" Pair

When playing against a "sides" pair, the "front and back" man should not be drawn into a driving or smashing battle since he will quickly be "pooped." He must remember his opponents intend to chase him all over the court, cutting out his lady partner entirely in some cases. They will play half court shots, long flat drives, and deep high clears from side to side in the hope he will smash or drive prematurely and be caught off balance by quick change-of-direction shots.

Drop-shots are the basic form of attack against the "sides" system, starting from the return of serve and continuing through the rally. Both the man and the woman should direct many of these drop-shots to the center of the net to draw both "sides" players forward. All drop shots should be played to fall steeply over the net. The man should smash down the center of the court to avoid sharply angled returns, or toward the weaker of the two opponents. Any consistent misses by that person will certainly disconcert the partner and they may change their style of attack (which may be good or bad). Cross-court shots of all types should be used sparingly.

Conclusion

To succeed in mixed doubles it is essential that each partner's mind should work in perfect harmony with the other's. Since many shots travel through the woman's reach, both partners must telepathically agree on who is going to take

the shot. On the other hand, one must hit shots that confuse the opponents by making them go for the same shuttle. This forces them to make errors, which eventually makes them lose all confidence in each other's abilities on the court. Once you have induced this type of degeneration in your opponents, your odds of winning are greatly increased.

Al and Beverly have been more successful than not in making their opponents lose all confidence in each other on the court, since they are still happily married and still playing with each other in tournaments, a very rare feat in competitive mixed doubles. Badminton players for over 30 years, they are past Washington and Oregon State Veterans Mixed Doubles champions and were 1992 US Nationals Masters Mixed Doubles finalists. Both Al and Bev are and have been prime promoters of badminton in Washington. Al twice has been WSBA president; Bev coached badminton at Bellevue High School for 17 years.