



THETENNISCHANNEL.COM LAUNCHES “ROVING PLAYER” ADVICE COLUMN WITH RENOWNED TENNIS REPORTER JOEL DRUCKER

SAMPLE “ROVING EYE” Q&A:

Q: Whenever I play doubles with one particular person, I always get worried. He's better than most of us, and glares at his partners whenever they make mistakes. He's just so competitive. What should I do?

A: Let's start with this notion: If he's truly so competitive, then surely he should know that the best thing he can do is create an atmosphere where two people can thrive. That said, let's focus less on him and more on the issue of being the lesser player on a doubles team. One thing you can do prior to any match when partnered with this dude is to let him know that you intend to try as much as you can. And then, by gum, do it! One reason the better player on a doubles team gets uptight is his fear that if the partner doesn't pull his weight, the better player's going to have to do significantly more work every time he touches the ball. This can be very demoralizing. So instead, make it your job to focus as much as possible to play the right shot. Don't go for too much on your service returns. Get in an extremely high percentage of first serves, even if that means taking off a little pace. In practice, ask for plenty of overheads, since you know you'll likely be lobbed. And also, just let your partner blow off steam in the way that works for him. It's not always necessarily personal. Then again, if he vents directly at you, tell him that neither of you has ever made a nickel playing this game, so what's the big deal?

Q: Can you write on when to use the Australian formation, the "I" and both players back. Why would you use these in a match? Doreen Westford, MA

A: Dear Doreen: Each of these tactics has value, but first, in a bigger sense, the use of different formations is important most of all because it forces opponents to see the court differently – and that's something you should experiment with throughout the entire match. A companion piece, for example, is to alter where you stand to serve and return. Even pros get into a returning

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groove, and recreational players are even more technically shackled – for reasons related to technique and practice, some people simply can't hit a forehand down the line with anywhere near as much pace as a crosscourt drive. For that reason alone, it's good to use any of these formations. What they do most of all is plant doubt in your opponent's head. The purpose of any

tactic is to raise consciousness – that is, to disrupt the other team and at the same time keep your own duo from falling into a predictable rut.

The “Aussie” or “tandem” formation is the one where the net partner is stationed more or less in line with the server. One major goal of this is to nullify an opponent’s crosscourt return, in effect eliminating the sharp, low angle of, say, a powerful forehand drive. When the opponent is forced to hit down the line he’s less likely to hit the ball away from the incoming net rusher. And because the ball no longer is moving at the angle of a crosscourt drive, it’s a lot harder for the receiver’s net man to cut off your incoming shot. Another good reason to use the “Aussie” is if you’re trying to get a return to come back to a side you particularly favor. When my friend Dan serves into the ad court in a conventional format he’ll sometimes have to take a return off his shoelaces and play a low backhand volley. But when we play “Aussie” he’s able to let the ball bounce and strike his powerful forehand.

At the recreational level I’m not a big fan of the “I.” That’s the formation you see where pros crouch right along the center stripe and then move one way or another. As Pam Shriver once told me, “It’s not so easy to get out of a crouch to hit a volley.” And so you know, when facing this formation, it’s best to aim your return right down the middle - the croucher is moving one way or another, so just drive it straight ahead.

“Two back” – both receiving partners hanging back near the baseline – is good when one partner is returning poorly and you’re just getting devoured by the net man. It’s one thing to volley weak returns at someone’s feet. But again, the court looks far different when you have to volley into wide open spaces. “Two back” is also wise when you and your partner decide it’s best to throw up repeated lobs – returns, second shots and so on. Don’t feel that in any way you are engaging in underhanded tactics when you do this. The lob is the most underrated shot in tennis – and at the recreational level, overhands are guilty until proven innocent. Many times it’s productive to go with two back on the first serve and then move back in for the second. Another incremental tactic is “3/4 back,” wherein the net man is in no-man’s land – but ready to dart forward if the return is good.

I also recommend experimenting with the “Aussie” early in the match, even giving it a go at 40-love just to see how the opponent react to it. It’s good to try this stuff early so that later in the match if necessary you’re comfortable with it. Hold the “two back” in your pocket and use it only when your returns are really starting to suffer.