Positioning, Staggering and Who Covers What Shot in Doubles
By: Gigi Fernandez

I retired from competitive tennis in 1997 as half of the best doubles team of my era and the second best in the history of the game. In the last century, top singles players played doubles! Players like Martina Navratilova, Pam Shriver, Steffi Graf, Arantxa Sanchez-Vicario, Gabriela Sabatini, Jana Novotna and Lindsay Davenport where top 5 singles players who won Grand Slams doubles titles during my time. The Top Ten year end singles ranking for the majority of the 90’s had several players that were rankded in the top 10 in singles AND doubles. So, how was it that Natasha Zvereva and I, two players that were ranked in the 20’2-30’s, who didn’t have the speed, power, agility, or weapons to be top singles players, where able to consistently and soundly beat higher skilled opponents in doubles? A case of the sum being better than the parts created a formidable partnership, which all started with impeccable positioning and court coverage, an uncanny understanding of high percentage play and of course an ability to perform under pressure.

Since retiring, I have spent a large portion of my time coaching players, from beginner recreational players to Grand Slam champions, how to become better at doubles. For the past three years I have coached hundreds of 3.0 to 5.0 USTA rated players. I discovered that the basic fundamental concepts of doubles and the tactics that I applied while playing as a professional apply to all levels, if modified to the level of play. I created a 6-step method of playing doubles to help players of all levels improve at doubles. The laws of percentage will be in your favor if you play
high percentage tennis and make your opponents hit low percentage shot. The Gigi Method teaches players the right place to be positioned to take away the high percentage shot and make opponents hit low percentage shots. It simplifies shot selection based on the three formation you are in, 2up, 2back and 1up/1back. Lastly, following the same strategies that allowed Natasha and I to beat higher skilled opponent, will help take your game to the next level.

**THE GIGI METHOD STEPS 1 & 2 Positioning and Court Coverage**

This is an overview of the first 2 Steps of The Gigi Method: Positioning and Court Coverage. Players need to be positioned in the optimal place based on what part of the court they are standing and need to have a deep understanding of the coverage responsibilities of each player.

**The Real Estate and Mathematics of the Doubles Court**

Let’s begin by understanding the dimensions of the doubles court. The singles court is 27 feet wide and 78 feet long. So in a singles match, you’re responsible for covering more than 1,000 square feet of space. As we’ve all seen at all levels, it’s quite possible to find open real estate, or create space, by moving a player side to side and hitting shots that are either barely reachable or even untouchable.
The doubles court has an additional nine feet of alleys, (4.5 on each side), making the court 36 feet wide with a total area of 1,404 sq. ft. But thanks to having a partner, each partner is only responsible for 702 square feet, seven to eight feet in either direction, a mere few steps. The Gigi Method will show, so long as you abandon fear of getting passed down the line, that the figure of 702 is even lower. Since statistics show that the vast majority of points in tennis are won by mistakes, a significant principle of The Gigi Method is to position yourself in the proper place to take away the easier shot and make your opponents hit the lower percentage shot, hopefully drawing the error.

The Three Formations

Let’s talk about positioning and the three basic formations you will ever face in doubles:

1. Two players at the net (2U)
2. Two players at the baseline (2B)
3. One player at the net and one at the baseline (1U1B)

This grid indicates who should have the advantage at each formation.

Your team will always be in one of these basic formations (The same holds true for your opponents, but let them figure out for themselves while
your team takes charge of the match.) And as you deploy each of these formations, please keep this in mind: It's easier to repeatedly hit forceful shots from closer to the net than from behind the baseline.

The Gigi Method proclaims that the best position on the court your team can ask for is one where you and your partner are both in a good net position – and your opponents are split between one at the net and one back. Consider this configuration – two of you at net, the opposition split -- the Holy Grail of doubles. Conversely, the worst position in doubles is one up, one back with two up at the other side of the net. Dare we call it the Reverse Holy Grail? Or the Highway to Hell?. While defending against the Holy Grail, the sole baseline player experiences supreme pressure to hit shots into no apparent opening -- while also making sure their partner at net is protected and doesn’t end up pulverized by a shot struck by the other team (the infamous sitting duck situation). "As there is no obvious place to hit the ball, the lone baseliner tends to panic and will either throw up a lob or make a mistake. Many of the points in this situation end with a tactical or technical error.

Still, if you don't panic, you can extricate your team from the Reverse Holy Grail/Highway to Hell with just one shot and a few smart steps (I'll tell you how later). So most of all, you need to do everything possible to get to the Holy Grail before your opponents. For example, when players find themselves in a crosscourt baseline rally, I encourage them to take the position at the net and get to the Holy Grail. However coming in on a bad shot can be worse than staying back. So you
need to learn what the proper shots are to get there – the right mix of power, spin, height, control and balance. (If you are not being successful getting to the net, download the “Gigi Rules for Coming into The Net”)

**Positioning Basics – Front Court**

Proper net positioning is a critical element of The Gigi Method. I developed a grid that successfully explains to players of all levels where they should stand. Additionally, we will discuss appropriate court geometry. The simple truth here is that you can’t quite cover 100 percent of the court. Two players covering three areas, there will always be one more accessible. But I guarantee, by following The Gigi Method, you and your partner can cover 80-90 percent of the most important parts of the court – and by conceding the rest, you’ll likely compel your opponents to try those low-percentage shots that hasten defeat.

It is critical that players are positioned properly when they are the net, as the majority of points in doubles are won or lost with one or two players at the net – and it’s vital to learn where you and your partner should stand to be most effective. You might think this sounds obvious. You might even feel insulted. But having participated in thousands of clinics over the last 20 years, I’m shocked to see where a great many recreational players stand. So let’s get this straight. Where should you be standing when you are at the net?
**Identify Neutral** *(green X)* Divide the service box in equal quadrants by drawing a horizontal and a vertical line through the middle of the service box. *(orange lines)* The interception point of these lines is neutral.

*When in doubt don’t run off,*

*Go to neutral and be tough!*

**Neutral Circle** *(Yellow circle)* While standing at neutral, extend your racquet arm as far as possible and draw a circle around neutral. Players should have at least one foot in the neutral circle most of the time they are at the net.

**The 4 quadrants** – Dividing the service box to identify neutral creates four quadrants. These are the four areas of the net. In each of these areas, you have specific responsibilities.

1. **Zone 1 – Defend the Alley Zone** – From this zone, you want to defend the alley when players are hitting shots that could go there. You should never step inside the alley to defend this area or past the blended line of the 60-foot 10 and under court, if present, or 18 inches from the singles sideline. You also don’t want to back up to zone 4 to defend the alley, as it is far easier for the opponents to hit the ball low to the feet when you are standing further from the net.
2. **Zone 2 – Poach Zone.** A poach is when a player cuts across to their partner’s half of the court and takes a volley. You want to make sure you are poaching from Zone 2. The closer you are to the net, the more likely you are to hit a winning volley off the poach. It’s important when poaching that you don’t turn your shoulders and run sideways. If you move that way, experienced players will see the intent to poach, react swiftly to your volley and direct the ball behind you. Instead, you want to move forward first, and then diagonally towards the center strap of the net. If you are successful reaching the ball, it is best to hit it towards the direction that you are moving, which would make it go towards the opposing team’s net person.

**Never** poach and go back cross-court to the baseline player (such as with what you think is a cute drop volley) unless you are 100 percent sure you can hit a winner. And I mean 100 percent. Because if you don’t hit a winner, you are now on the same side of the court as your partner and left your entire half of the court wide open. When you have successfully reached the ball on a poach, make sure to continue towards the opposite side while your partner shifts and covers behind you. If you attempt a poach but aren’t able to reach and strike the ball, then go back to your original side. (If you are not getting to the poaches, Download the “How to Poach Successfully Lesson”)

---

(If you are not getting to the poaches, Download the “How to Poach Successfully Lesson”)

---

**Download the “How to Poach Successfully Lesson”**
3. **Zone 3 - Defend Zone** – From this zone, you defend the court in situations where your opponent has poached or you are retrieving to defend a short groundstroke or an overhead. You don’t want to poach from this zone. Though it’s possible to hit winning volleys from this zone, that’s not really your focus here. Instead, your mission is to defend the middle, particularly since smart doubles players will frequently hit the ball there. You want to take away the obvious, easy shot (middle) and instead let your opponents feel that they must try the lower percentage, riskier shot into the alley.

4. **Zone 4 – Doubles NO MAN’S LAND** - Zone 4 is Doubles No Man’s Land. This area should be avoided. Since high percentage doubles indicates that hitting the ball through the middle is the correct play when poaching, then defending should happen towards the middle. Again: leave the alley open. You especially don’t want to defend from this quadrant and leave the middle open, as it is easier to hit balls to the middle than to the alleys. If you take the middle away from your opponents and make them hit into this quadrant or towards the alley, there is a bigger likelihood that they will miss. You also don’t want to defend the alley from this zone, as you are too far back and have left a lot of area for your opponents to hit the ball low. Nothing good ever happens from this quadrant and avoiding it will instantly make you a better doubles player.

**Gray 60-foot line** – A critical element of the Gigi Method and highly successful doubles is rarely positioning yourself outside the line created by the blended line of the 60-foot court, if present. (or outside the neutral circle) If this line is not present,
it is 18 inches from the singles sideline. Players should rarely step past this line towards the alley and under NO CIRCUMSTANCE should a player find themselves with one foot inside the alley. You can cover the alley without standing in the alley and standing there leaves over 80% of the court for your partner to cover. I don’t know about you, but this is not the type of partner I was seeking out.

Net Position: A Staggered Approach

Once both players have reached the Holy Grail (2 at the net), and assuming at least one opponent is at the baseline, players should be staggered according to which half of the court the ball is being hit by their opponents with one player always positioned slightly forward of their playing partner. Keep in mind that this concept does not apply when all four players are at the net.

Only recently have I come to understand the benefits of staggering and have become a huge proponent of this way of covering the net, for recreational players. As a pro, I never staggered. I was able to cover my entire half of the court as well as half of my partner’s - and so was my partner. From thousands of hours of practice and match play, I knew instinctively which balls were mine and which my partner should cover. We knew the tendencies of all our opponents and were able to anticipate their shots as they came off their strings -- or even earlier. Nothing other than the greatest topspin lobs or sharp crosscourt angles were getting past us. Not only was staggering not necessary, but it was basically ineffective, as it would have positioned one of us too far from the net, allowing our opponent to either hit a clean
winner or compromise one of us with a powerful shot down at our feet. This, however, is not the case with most recreational doubles players, many of whom I’ve seen could use a little more help from their partners when it comes to covering lobs.

**The Ball Magnet**

When both players are in the net area, it’s vital that the player closest to the ball stagers forward. The volleyer in front of the baseliner hitting the ball moves forward and towards the middle. Think of a magnet and pretend the ball has a magnetic field of attraction. The player that is closest to the ball when the ball is on the opposite side of the net is most attracted to the magnet and thus closer to the net, while their partner is slightly back. If staggering is properly applied, one player is always slightly forward, and one is back protecting the lob and backing up their partner if the middle ball is not reachable by them. One player should always be up and one slightly back.

Correct staggering leaves the down the line lob open, which has a smaller area to hit onto and is easier to intercept by your partner.

Reverse staggering leaves the cross-court lob open, which has a much larger area to hit onto and is almost impossible to intercept by your partner as the ball is moving away from them.
Staggering reduces the potential effectiveness of the crosscourt lob (the easier lob to hit, as there's much more space in the court to lob crosscourt than down the line). It also eliminates one of the common problems of recreational doubles: middle confusion. Now, in the staggered configuration, it’s this simple: The front person gets the middle ball if they are able to. For as long as there has been doubles play, good doubles players intimidate their opponent towards the middle first and foremost, not towards the alley. The lower the level, the more you should stagger, as lobs are more common and someone has to protect them. The higher the level, the less staggering is required.

Then there is the unfortunate case of reverse staggering. This happens when the person in front of the the baseliner makes the mistake of following the ball and thinking they must cover the down the line shot into the alley -- and therefore, forcing their partner to cover the middle and the potential crosscourt shot near the alley. Since the only way to cover these two areas is to get close to the net, the crosscourt lob is frequently wide open. (Green Oval) To repeat: the culprit here is following the ball – a doubles crime The Gigi Method addresses in depth.

I hope you have enjoyed this lesson. Feel free to forward it to your friends and share with your coaches, team captains or anyone who helps you with your tennis. For more doubles lessons visit www.masterdoubles.com