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Pickleball Practice

I asked a few players what they do to practice. A few said that they don't practice and just play, working on shortcomings at the same time. Most, however, said that practice is essential to improving their skills. They say that only with practice do elements of their game become automatic, allowing them to play better all around. Most people's practice fell into three categories:

1. Correcting something that isn't going well;
2. Perfecting a skill;
3. Doing drills to stay on top of things.

Whichever group fits you—practice, if done correctly, will get you there. First, determine what you need or want to work on. Second, make sure you're doing it correctly so you don't have to "unlearn" it later. Most practice requires another person to help you by throwing or hitting balls to you.

1. Correcting Part of Your Game

Some players commented that elements of their game "disappeared" sometimes and suddenly they weren't hitting overheads properly or serves weren't accurate anymore. Have someone watch you and suggest what you might try to change, or pay attention to your stroke, timing, and/or your body position to figure out what the problem might be.

Once you've identified the problem, practice doing it the right way (or at least a different way), concentrating on only that thing. In a little while, the "new" method should become habit, and you won't have to think about it anymore.

2. Perfecting a Skill

Many people use drills to help them become better in a certain area. Players mentioned these areas most: 1) dinking, 2) serves or groundstrokes, and 3) backhand weakness. A couple of people mentioned some fun ways to practice the first two.

One is a game called "Back Ball" where players stay back near the baseline and must let the ball bounce before hitting it. This game improves the accuracy of ground strokes, and people say it's fun.

Another game variation improves dinking. In this game, the non-volley zone line is considered the baseline and balls hit beyond that line are "out." Playing this dinking game is great for practicing the dink in a competitive situation. Players who don't yet feel comfortable with the soft game can use this method to get better at it quickly.

As for backhands, the best answer is to have someone hit balls to your backhand side repeatedly until it's easier. Again, you have to analyze what you're doing in order to decide what other things to try. One player mentioned that instead of using the standard backhand he's used for years (imported from his days as a tennis player), he's trying something new that he saw another player use. But more on that next month when we'll talk about different ways to hit backhand strokes.

Are You Perfect?

If not, folks I talked with say you should practice. It will help develop your game and improve skills that need attention. While much of pickleball is mental, developing automatic responses and honing your skills can't hurt, and will usually make you better. Perfection is only more practice away.

— Gale H. Leach (with help from Denise Williams, Dave Muslin, Pat Kane, Bob Halpin, Sue Gardiner, Bill Booth, Bob Barczak, and Vic Avery)