

Grilling on the Paddle Court This Summer

BY GARY HORVATH

With the APTA Nationals behind us, it is time to switch our thoughts to summer and grilling on the paddle court. Save the burgers for afterward. We are talking about game-like drilling. First, we'll digress briefly to talk a little "volleyball."

Volleyball, Bicycle Riding, and Grilling

Last fall the USA women's national volleyball team did what no other women's team has done before. They won the World Championships with the coaching and practice philosophy "The game teaches the game." John Kessel, Director of USA Volleyball Grassroots program, describes how the women's team implemented this philosophy by talking about the process of learning to ride a bicycle.

Think about when you learned to ride a bike. You were put on the bike, given a push (and a prayer), and off you went.

Did you have private or group bicycle riding lessons?

Did your parents buy you special shoes, shorts, for riding your bicycle?

Did you do drills where you pedaled down the street with your left foot, then your right foot, etc.?

Did you have a bicycling nutritionist?

Did you have someone teach you about mental toughness when riding your bicycle to school?

NO. You got on the bike and you rode it. And when you fell, you got up, got back on the bike, you kept riding, and you got better.

The game teaches the game! The same holds true whether you are playing volleyball, riding your bike, or playing platform tennis.

The Essentials of Grilling

If John Kessel was your platform tennis professional, he wouldn't have you drill and he wouldn't have you play games that often. You would Grill. Games + Drills = Grills.

Grilling is the process of incorporating technique, tactics, mental toughness, and even nutrition into match-like practice activities. Components of successful grilling are listed below:

- When there is relevant or game-like training, there will be a greater transfer of skills from practice to competitive situations.

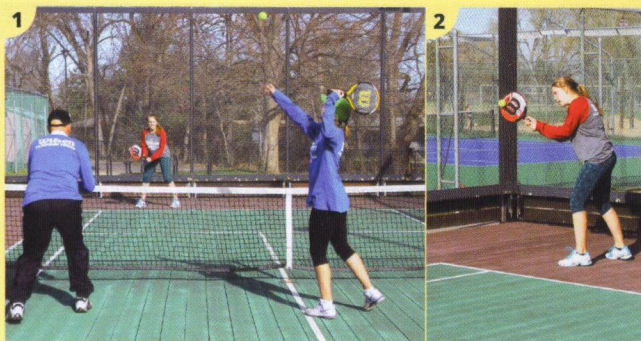
- Numerous research studies have shown that athletes have greater retention when grilling is purposeful, and favors "random practice" as opposed to "blocked practice."
- Effective grills allow all players to be involved in meaningful ways, i.e. there is no standing around. By setting different expectations for each player it is possible to include different abilities in many grills.
- Players can develop short positive cues that will serve as technical or tactical reminders. For example, backcourt players may use the cue "lobs go in" as a reminder to hit every lob in the court.
- Keeping score provides players with an incentive to play their hardest on every point.
- Good grills are easy to understand and explain. They should be given a name so they don't have to be explained every time.
- Grills may be constructed so that players will be pushed out of their comfort zone. Failing in a grill should be viewed as an opportunity to improve.
- Develop grills that end with a natural conclusion, such as when a player hits a shot out.

There are hundreds of drills, but you only need a good imagination and no more than 12 to 15 grills to cover all aspects of the sport. With a little ingenuity players can vary the scoring and rules for their grills to include everything from technique to mental toughness—all in a game-like situation.

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Play paddle this summer! It is more enjoyable to deal with mosquitoes in May than frostbite in February. Seasoned veterans find the summer is a great time to improve their weaknesses, or learn to control the fast-moving summer ball. For beginners, there is no better time to learn the sport. Included are two grills that will show you how to convert drills to game-like situations. Then, take a look at the drills you have done in previous clinics, lessons, and practice sessions (some of them may actually be grills). Decide what you want to work on this summer and make up your own set of grills based on the criteria above and the ideas below. If you need more ideas for grilling, look through back issues of *Platform Tennis Magazine* or talk to your local professional.

Happy grilling this summer and remember, "The game teaches the game"! ■



THE G&M GRILL

This grill is named after former National Champions Flip Goodspeed and Scott Mansaker because of a tactic they used against opponents who tried to beat them by lobbing every shot from the backcourt. G&M would occasionally hit their volleys short (on purpose) and close the net to take their opponents out of position.

A player at the net begins the grill with an overhead to a corner. In turn, the backcourt player lobs every ball. At some point the team at the net hits a short ball, a la G&M, and the fun begins.

The G&M grill allows the backcourt player to practice lobbing off the deck and out of the wires. She reads when the players at the net hit a short shot, moves in, hits a controlled drive to the seam, at the body of a net player, or to the outside of the court.

The team at the net works on being brave (they shouldn't be afraid if the backcourt player is hitting up), reading the ball, developing quicker reactions, communicating about techniques and tactics, and remaining mentally tough and tactically disciplined when the backcourt player wins the point.

As seen in the photos a lefty-righty combination will have to communicate more effectively at the net and compensate for the fact that either both their forehands or backhands are in the middle.

This grill could be played to 21. Because the team at the net has an advantage, the backcourt player would be awarded 3 points for each point won and the team at the net would be awarded 1 point.



TWO-ON-ONE IN THE CORNER

Former champion Hank Irvine advocated practicing two-on-one in the corner. The grill begins with a serve and the players play out the point in either corner. (The doubles team covers the entire court.)

The server practices technique, placement, and moving to the net along the proper line. In addition, she develops the discipline of almost always hitting the first volley deep to the backcourt in the center of the court.

Tactically she learns to read and anticipate. The placement of her serve affects what type of shot she has to hit on her first volley. The team at the net must focus on maintaining proper positioning for points that may exceed 20 shots.

The backcourt player learns to read and anticipate the placement of the serve and the appropriate type of return to hit. After the return she focuses on appropriate shot selection (moving the ball and opponents, mixing up shots, changing pace, etc.) Her shot selection is guided by the axiom, "Lob from the red (or when you are in trouble) and drive from the green."

A 7-11 scoring system could be used for this grill. The receiving team has to reach 7 before the serving team gets to 11. It is possible to mix abilities in this and many grills by setting different expectations for the players. For example, weaker players may be given a two-point handicap when they are in the back court.

How can you customize this two-on-one grill to make you a better player this summer?



Gary Horvath is the Past President of the PPTA and served on the APTA board for 13 years. He is also a USPTA professional, a volleyball coach, and a long-standing member of the Wilson Advisory Staff.