

The 'Play for Your Partner' Playbook

How to Win with a Doubles Partner Who Plays Differently Than You

by Brent Abel

The Problem Most Doubles Players Create

Most doubles players believe they're style of play is THE way to play doubles.

And to win, they need a partner who plays almost exactly like they do.

When that doesn't happen, they start criticizing, correcting, or resenting their partner mid-match. Communication turns negative. Trust drops. The team underperforms.

There's an old Australian mindset about playing doubles that is the complete opposite:

Play for your partner.

That means:

- Accept their preferred style
- Support it fully
- Decide to blend *your* game to fit around *their* strengths instead of demanding they change

When you do this, something powerful usually happens.

Your partner starts reciprocating.

They begin looking for ways to set you up, play shots that fit your style, and make *you* look really really good.

Support creates support ... because demanding they play "the correct way" usually creates resistance and resentment.

You are not limited because your partner plays differently.

You become limited when you refuse to figure out how to adapt — and when you keep a ready-made excuse in your back pocket every time you lose.

Why Different Styles Often Make Stronger Teams

Complementary styles frequently beat identical styles.

Examples:

- One aggressive net player + one steady baseline player that intentionally sets up the net player.
- A returner of serve who prefers the baseline but is always thinking about how to set up their net partner.
- A poacher who knows they don't have to always put away volleys because their partner 'has their back'.
- A calm, consistent shot making partner paired with an aggressive fake poaching net player.
- The list goes on with how different styles can compliment each other IF both players are playing for their partner.
- And the reality is this ... partners may have to probe for a while to see how their styles can best compliment each other. Mistakes will be made during probing. That's OK when the goal is the two of you are going to work together to figure it out.

The goal is not uniformity.

The goal is court coverage, balance, shot choices that 'play for your partner', and mutual support.

How to Play Successfully with a Different-Style Partner

1. Playing for the first time together ... have a 60-second pre-match conversation.

Ask two simple questions:

- "What do you prefer to do most out there?"
- "How can I best support you today?"

Once you have a sense of *what they prefer*, say something like:

"Perfect. My style is a little different but that's totally OK.

Together we can mesh our styles and really make this work against these guys today. It

might take a game or two for us to probe and see what shot choices are best for us, but this'll be fun today."

Keep it short, positive, and forward-looking. This immediately lowers pressure and sets a cooperative tone.

2. Make one clear agreement.

Examples:

- "You take the lead on poaching — I'll cover behind you."
- "I'll stay solid cross-court so you can be aggressive."
- "When you're serving, I like to be disruptive and fake poach a lot. If you feel it's better for me to signal to you what I'm about to do, yeah, we can do that for sure."

Agreements start to get you guys on the same page. That brings out that feeling of 'We're in this together'.

3. Once you two have probed a blended partner style, then start adjusting more to the opponents.

Watch what the other team is giving you. What are their strengths? Let's not give em what they want.

Then decide how your blended styles can now attack *their* weaknesses.

4. Use only supportive language during the match

You're going to lose some points, so I like to ask ...

- "What's your favorite serve right now?"
- "What's your favorite return right now?"
- "Want me to poach if you play a 2nd serve?"
- "That server's partner is poaching a lot on me, so I'm going to play a lob on my next couple of return points."
- "No sweat. Let's keep workin ..."

Your *Play For Your Partner* energy is contagious. Your partner relaxes. Plays better. Feels like you guys are working together as a team.

Negative comments about style differences almost always make both of you worse. Keep any coaching, even if you feel it's helpful, out of it.

5. After the match, review the partnership — not just the result

Ask:

- What did we do well together today?
- Wondering how we can do more of that the next time we partner up?
- How about let's schedule a practice match next week and work on that?

6. When Your Partner Is Having a Rough Patch

When your partner starts making errors, your job is **not** to correct them or coach them.

Your real job is to help them stop thinking about how they're probably feeling they're hurting the team.

What works for me: Distract them by asking a simple question like:

- "What's YOUR favorite serve to play right now?"
- or "What's YOUR favorite return to play right now?"

Help them focus on what *they* feel is the most reliable thing they can do in that moment — even if it means they want to lob everything just to stop missing.

Then 100% back them up.

When you take the pressure off them this way, they usually start playing better again much faster than if you try to "fix" them.

What Works Best For Me

Instead of blah blah blah ... do this.

"My partner refuses to play the right way."

→ There is no single "right way to win."

They have their way because of whatever. It doesn't matter why that's their style. It is.

You think they can change from a baseliner to an aggressive net player today? Come on.

My job is to support *their* way, figure out how to blend our different styles, and make our team stronger *because* of our differences.

“They won’t come in.”

→ There’s a reason why. We don’t have to call em out on it. I’ll let em know that them staying back and playing their good solid groundstrokes and accurate lobs is going to work well for me and the team.

“They stay back too much.”

→ See above. I’ll let em know that I’ll be active up at net and look to fake poach or move across when they play a tough dipping groundstroke at one of our opponents. Their consistency from the backcourt can actually help us.

“They poach too much.”

→ I always encourage my partners to keep poaching if that’s what they love to do. I know they’re going to miss some volleys, not put away some easy volleys, but whatever, I’ll make sure they know they have free rein to keep poaching even when they miss once in a while.

“They don’t play aggressive enough.”

→ I love to play with partners who are the ‘setters’.

They’re super steady, super reliable, and give me the freedom to take a few more poaching chances, to miss a few thread the needle shot choices, and allow me to be the ‘closer’.

Every time they set me up for a point ending shot, I make sure I immediately look at them BEFORE they can say anything to me and let em know ... helluva set up partner!

Complementary roles often win more than two players trying to do the same thing.

“They don’t put their volleys or overheads away.”

→ No one does all the time. So I’ll encourage them to keep going for their shots when they miss a sitter.

I want my partner to know that if we lose a point, let’s at least send that message ... we’re going to keep going for it.. So if you miss, miss with confidence.

I’ll also let them know I’ll position myself to clean up anything that might come back. Confidence grows faster with support than with criticism.

Real Life Doubles Reality Check

Once in a while there are going to be parts of matches — and even entire matches — when you're going to play like crud.

It's just life in tennis.

And there are also going to be parts of matches (and entire matches) when you play lights out.

The same thing will happen with your partner once in a while too.

When you truly "Play for Your Partner," you completely accept that reality.

If your partner had a bad day, you definitely help them shake it off, move on, and maybe — just maybe — you ask yourself whether there was anything else you could have done during the match to help them break through and play up to their highest standard.

And just because you think you've found the perfect doubles partner who plays the exact way you want them to... that is **never** a guarantee you're going to play well yourself and win every doubles match.

I've seen players whose partners complement their style of play perfectly and still blame their partner after a loss.

When you accept the reality of a loss and think about how you can better support your partner going forward from that loss... oh boy, **that's** when you truly become a great doubles player and demonstrate that you know how to Play for Your Partner.

That's when you become known as the kind of doubles partner who's always trying to be supportive and bring out the best in their partner.

That attitude and mindset will actually help both of you become even stronger individual doubles players — and you are then known as a great partner.

So get out there and just... **Keep Workin'**.

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