

DOUBLES: Dirty Up Their Visual Landscape

by Brent Abel

Here's how to influence doubles points from home — and then how to cash in on the one poach they don't believe is about to happen.

Most of us seasoned (older!) players think poaching is vital to being a great doubles players. You know, that guy who secretly crosses into the middle and **puts the ball away**.

OK. But that combo of moving into the middle and even beyond the center service line **AND** then putting away whatever return is there ... is rare.

That's the ideal version of poaching. And yet, for most of us, it is not even the best one.

Because you can change the outcome of points and do a lot more damage ... without leaving home.

The returner is hoping to see a clean picture with you quietly parked inside your service box, the cross court lane wide open, and a comfy sense that their return doesn't have to thread-the-needle.

Give them that picture and they have a stress free swing.

Take that comfy picture away and their swing changes.

They get tentative. They steer. They tighten. Even when they do get the ball comes back, it often comes back slower — and your partner is suddenly playing an easier ball.

That is the whole disruptive art. Dirty up their visual landscape.

The fake is the high-percentage poach.

A real poach asks your first step to be disguised, quick, decisive to have any chance to win the point.

A well-timed fake poach forces that returner into nano-second decision making.

That fraction is enough to cause disruption.

It gets personal. You're messing with em. Hmmmm.

They planned a crosscourt return into a fat stationary window.

As the serve is incoming, their visual world now gets dirty because you show em a little head move, a shoulder twitch, a one-step towards the middle ... that they can *clearly* see.

They hedge their bets that you MIGHT be poaching ... so they up the swing speed to make sure it gets by you ... IF you do move.

Opps. Wide. Into the net. Sails deep.

Now this really does get personal.

They miss because their picture *moved*. The *move* didn't have to be a full out poach.

Even when they do make the return back cross court, it's a softer ball your partner can much more easily handle.

You never touched it. You still owned the point. You did your job. And you didn't have to poach.

What “lots of movement” actually means.

It's subtle.

It does not mean wandering. Or a 3-step fake poach. It means their landscape never stays still.

Split and load. Start with one forward step into a split step. I like to start one step back from where I want to end up. That starts the visual disruption.

A parked net person is a still photograph. A moving net person is a question for them.

Pinch the middle a little but without your alley being a 4 lane freeway. Make em decide. *Is the crosscourt going to be there?*

When you show movement, you're selling the alley might be open. I don't mind if they hit up the line into my alley and it lands on the doubles sideline once in a while. I want that to be their reality. If you don't thread-the-needle and hit the sideline, it's mine.

Establish the fake from the start.

Act I — Show them you only fake.

Early in the match, dirty it up on purpose. Recover home.

Do it enough that the story in their head becomes: *he's moving, but he doesn't go.*

Now they start trusting the crosscourt again. The swing gets a little freer. That is what you want. You trained them into believing your movement is safe.

Act II — Make the next fake even more obvious.

Once you feel they're now falsely lulled into safety, start the fake a hair *early*—early enough that they can read it.

Sell it. Let it look like the same tell they have already solved. The picture they see is: *here he goes again, and he'll stop, so the crosscourt is open.*

Act III — Then go.

When they commit to that open-looking crosscourt, you come back home but then ... go. You cross and take the ball. Same look they have been ignoring. Different ending.

The poach works because you spent three games teaching them it was harmless. You surprised them with *a brand new type of movement.*

Now they've got a new layer of disruption to account for at the last second. Talk about making it personal.

Use this sparingly. One real fake-&-go after a stretch of true fakes is an ever dirtier landscape.

If you do it every other point it's not nearly as effective.

Let the server do some of the work. Let's make this a team effort.

Server's job: Body. You want to add another layer of making it tougher on the returner. They have to get out of the way of the incoming ball.

You two should talk before the point. Either with a signal or literally.

They see you two getting organized. They see you two have a plan.

Now we're making it in-your-face personal.

The payoff is making it easier for your serving partner.

This is always the possibility of a two-shot mindset, not a highlight you gotta put the ball away tennis.

When the fake works, three things show up:

- a miss
- a slower return into the middle you might be able to jump on
- a slower ball to your partner

When you do get to a ball you can volley, play it through their middle and always assume it's coming back. It might not, but if it does, no sweat, just take it from there.

You never have pressure to have to put it away.

What doesn't work

- Showing the real poach before you establish the fake.
- Faking so identically, every time, that they stop looking.
- Making the fake too far into the middle so that you can never recover back home, and now the alley is wide open and their DTL pass is easy.
- Hunting for hero winners when the job was only to make them uncomfortable.

Fake poaching is not a sloppy motion. It is threatening the middle while you can still cover home — until the one time you don't stay home.

The art of it all

This takes Reps. The one-step fake move is easy. The timing of it is the art.

Dirty up their visual landscape. Influence the point from home.

Make your one all-out poach from time to time when you've trained them into trusting it's just another fake.

Let's roll.

Brent