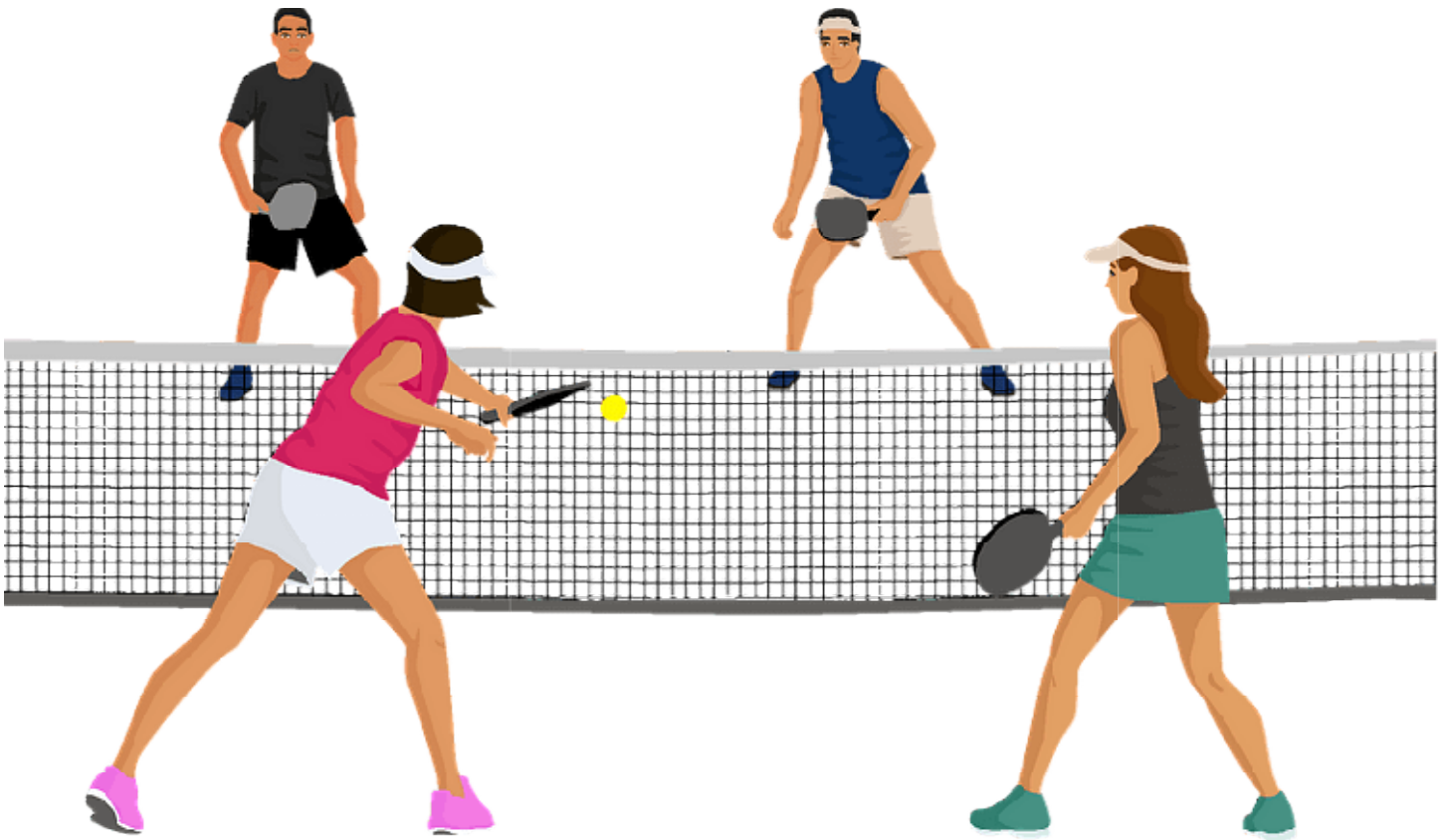


LOOKING TO PARTICIPATE IN ADVANCED PICKLEBALL? PLEASE READ.



Advanced Pickleball Session at Cato-Meridian Community Rec. Center

WHAT IT IS: A venue at which players who possess an advanced level of skill (see pages 2-4 for details) can come and play against each other in a competitive format in order to further develop their game.

WHAT IT IS NOT: A venue where players who have not yet achieved an advanced level of skill can compete against advanced players in an effort to eventually reach the advanced level. For this goal, players should attend “open play” sessions where they can get into some games partnered up with an advanced player against two opponents who also possess advanced skills.

What Does “Advanced” Pickleball Play Look Like, Anyway?

Ask that question of five different players, and you’re likely to get five different answers. Unfortunately, consulting guidelines from the United States of America Pickleball Association (USAPA) isn’t all that helpful, either. For example, USAPA describes a player at Skill Level 2.5 as one who has “limited experience and who can sustain a short rally with players of equal ability and has a basic ability to keep score.” Huh? Think about that. When the highest skill level USAPA recognizes is 5.0, how can a player possessing only the basic skills and attributes described for Level 2.5 be considered half-way to the top? It doesn’t make a lot of sense. As a result, many community pickleball programs have developed more detailed descriptions to help program organizers and players better discern the differences between novice, intermediate, and advanced players.

Generally, at most pickleball venues, advanced players are considered to possess the skills described in USAPA Skill Level 3.5 at a minimum. Here’s what USAPA says about the skills of players rated at Level 3.5:

3.5 Skill Rating per USAPA

FOREHAND: *Improved stroke development with moderate level of shot control.*

BACKHAND: *Learning stroke form and starting to develop consistency, but will avoid using backhand if possible.*

SERVE / RETURN: *Consistently gets serve & return of serve in play with limited ability to control depth.*

DINK: *Increased consistency with limited ability to control height/depth. Sustains medium-length rallies. Starting to understand variations of pace.*

3RD SHOT: *Developing the drop shot as a way to get to the net.*

VOLLEY: *Is able to volley medium paced shots thereby developing control.*

STRATEGY: *Moves quickly towards the non-volley zone (NVZ) when opportunity is there. Acknowledges difference between hard game and soft game and is starting to vary own game during recreation and tournament play. Can sustain short rallies. Is learning proper court positioning. Has basic knowledge of stacking and understands situations where it can be effective.*

The above description is certainly more detailed than USAPA’s definition of a 2.5 player, but there is still plenty of room for elaboration. As noted above, many local pickleball programs have done just that and established their own more descriptive guidelines. One such outfit is the Hoffman Estates Pickleball Program, which is located near Chicago. Below is their description of a 3.5 Skill Level player, which again, constitutes the minimum level of skill demonstrated by an “advanced” player.

3.5 Skill Rating per Hoffman Estates Pickleball

- a) *Continuing to improve their knowledge of the rules of pickleball. Knows all the main rules at this point.*
- b) *Generally able to get their serve in play and return most serves.*
- c) *Regularly serving deep and returning the serve deep.*
- d) *Understands **most** basic match strategy and the tactics that apply to skills that they either possess or are trying to learn; however, employment of such strategy and tactics is still inconsistent.*
- e) *Improving their skill to play with partners effectively, with proper communication and good team coverage of the court.*
- f) *Moves to the net quickly after returning serve, but may occasionally still lag back too long.*
- g) *Hits to the weak side of opponents somewhat regularly.*

- h) Possesses shots such as forehand and backhand ground strokes, forehand lob, overhead smash, net volleys and sustained “dinking”, and hits them with a fair level of consistency.
- i) Developing the ability to place their shots with some accuracy.
- j) Starting to employ drop shots from $\frac{3}{4}$ court and using them with some success to get to the net.
- k) Developing the backhand lob.
- l) Improving their knowledge of when to make specific shots.
- m) Learning when to use soft shots versus power shots to their advantage.
- n) Gaining the reflexes and judgment to avoid hitting balls which may be going out of bounds.
- o) Comfortable with putting more velocity on balls but less comfortable returning high velocity balls softly.

For Skill Level 3.5, note that both USAPA and Hoffman Estates refer to the importance of players getting to the non-volley zone as quickly as possible and avoidance of hitting “out balls”. Other commonalities include consistency of serve, importance of a deep serve, and the use of differing strokes, such as: dink, forehand, backhand, lob, and drop shot. Both lists also mention having an understanding of proper court positioning and the importance of good communication with your partner. It’s fair to say that if a player doesn’t exhibit the afore-mentioned attributes to a good degree, he or she is not yet a 3.5 player and could not yet be considered to have achieved an advanced level of play.

Now, let’s see what the guidelines have to say about the attributes of players at Skill Level 4.0. Here is the USAPA description:

4.0 Skill Rating per USAPA

FOREHAND: Consistently hits with depth and control. Is still perfecting shot selection and timing.

BACKHAND: Has improved stroke mechanics and has moderate success at hitting a backhand consistently.

SERVE / RETURN: Places a high majority of serves and service returns with varying depth and speed.

DINK: Increased consistency with moderate ability to control height/depth. May end dink rally too soon due to lack of patience. Is beginning to understand the difference between attackable balls and those that are not.

3RD SHOT: Selectively mixing up soft shots with power shots to create an advantage, but with mixed success.

VOLLEY: Able to volley a variety of shots at different speeds. Is developing consistency and control. Starting to understand the block/re-set volley.

STRATEGY: Aware of partner’s position on the court and is able to move as a team. Demonstrates ability to change direction in an offensive manner. Demonstrates a broad knowledge of the rules of the game. Has a moderate number of unforced errors per game. Solid understanding of stacking and when and how it could be used in match play. Beginning to identify opponent’s weaknesses and attempts to formulate a game plan to attack weaknesses. Beginning to seek out more competitive play.

Now, here is the description from the Hoffman Estates Pickleball Program:

4.0 Skill Rating per Hoffman Estates Pickleball

The 4.0 skill level describes players who are capable of consistently executing at or above a 3.5 skill level. The 4.0 player distinguishes himself or herself from the 3.5 player by possessing increased skills and strategy, or by more speed, power or consistency.

In comparing the USAPA and Hoffman Estates descriptions of Level 4.0 players, the key attribute of both is **consistency**. Although the Hoffman definition is very brief, it emphasizes consistency. Likewise, the USAPA description of a 4.0 player

uses the word, or some form of it, four times. If having achieved Level 3.5, most of us, if being honest with ourselves, probably recognize that the biggest thing holding us back from becoming a 4.0 player is **CONSISTENCY**!

So, finally, with the assumption that advanced players at Cato are competing at least at Skill Level 3.5 and striving to become more consistent in their play, here, just “for kicks”, are the attributes of 4.5 players per USAPA and Hoffman Estates.

4.5 Skill Rating per USAPA

FOREHAND: High level of **consistency**. Uses pace and depth to generate opponents' error or set up next shot.

BACKHAND: Can effectively direct the ball with varying depth and pace with good **consistency**.

SERVE / RETURN: Serves with power, accuracy, and depth and can also vary the speed and spin of the serve.

DINK: Ability to place ball with high success at changing shot types while playing both **consistently** and with offensive intent. Recognizes and attempts to hit attackable dinks.

3RD SHOT: **Consistently** executes effective 3rd shot strategies that are not easily returned for advantage. Able to intentionally and consistently place the ball.

VOLLEY: Able to block hard volleys directed at them and can **consistently** drop them into the NVZ. Comfortable hitting swinging volleys. Hits overhead shots **consistently**, often as put-aways.

STRATEGY: Has good footwork and moves laterally, backward, and forward well. Uses weight transfer for more efficient footwork. Able to change direction with ease. Very comfortable playing at the non-volley zone. Communicates and moves well with partner — easily “stacks” court positions. Understands strategy and can adjust style of play and game plan according to the opponent's strengths and weaknesses and court position. Limited number of unforced errors.

4.5 Skill Rating per Hoffman Estates

The 4.5 player is distinguished from the 4.0 player by increased skills, a higher level of strategy, quickness of hands, judicious use of power, superior placement of shots and **consistently fewer unforced errors**.

- a) Comfortable with all the rules of pickleball.
- b) Controls and places both the serve and return of serve.
- c) Generally **consistent** in their play, understands match strategy & uses a variety of shots to effect their strategy.
- d) Moves effectively with a partner and easily switches courts to cover their partner's side when required.
- e) Comfortable playing at the non-volley zone line. Works with their doubles partner to control the line by keeping their opponents back, driving them off the line, or controlling the speed or placement of the ball.
- f) **Consistently** hits to their opponents' weak side when possible.
- g) Can block strong volleys directed at them at the non-volley zone line or elsewhere, and can place their volleys with a good degree of accuracy.
- h) Has excellent footwork and moves forward, backward and laterally with ease and quickness.
- i) Understands the strategy of “dinking”, employs it on a regular basis, can sustain a “dinking” session until receipt of a “put away” shot, recognizes the “put away” shot, and usually succeeds in ending the rally with it.
- j) Hits overheads **consistently** “in”, often with high velocity, and striving to place them more effectively. Developing the ability to return overheads hit at them or their feet.
- k) Fair to good ability to change from a soft shot strategy to a hard shot strategy during any given rally, or vice versa.
- l) Utilizes both forehand and backhand lobs, striving to employ lobs from anywhere on the court. Has good accuracy in placing lobs.
- m) **Consistently** makes drop-shots successfully from $\frac{3}{4}$ court and frequently makes successful drop-shots from the baseline as their preferred method of getting to and gaining control of the net.
- n) Good at avoiding returned shots which may be going out of bounds.
- o) Can handle a good deal of speed on shots without over-hitting or hitting out-of-bounds too often.
- p) Usually recognizes and exploits the weaknesses in their opponent's game.
- q) Generally poaches effectively.
- r) Developing their use of spin on a variety of shots.