



(Graciously)

GET TO PLAY WITH BETTER PLAYERS

(And Make Sure You're **NOT** That Person Everyone Hates to Play With)

As a full-time pickleball coach, I often tell my students that one of the best ways to improve is to play with better players. It forces you to play at the top of your ability, makes you pay for your mistakes, and puts you on the fast track to a higher skill level.

All of that is GREAT for you, but how about for those "better players" who are playing WITH you? It does almost the

OPPOSITE for them. Playing with YOU keeps them from having to play at the top of their ability, from paying for their mistakes, and from improving their skill level as quickly. But everyone has to start somewhere, and even the best players in the world were beginners at one point.

The culture of pickleball has always been very welcoming and inclusive of new players, but as you focus on improving

your game, you DON'T always want to play with weaker players.

As a newer player, how can you graciously get to play with better players so as to improve your game? As a better player, when is it fair to ask others to step aside so you can get a higher-level play, while still "remembering your roots" and making time to play with lower-level players?

Here are some general pickleball etiquette guidelines, which address these questions and more.

WHEN YOU WANT TO PLAY WITH BETTER PLAYERS:

- Politely ask if they mind you joining, and give them an out. For example, "Do you all mind if I get a game in with you, or would you rather play on your own?"
- Ask at the beginning or end of the day, when they are warming up or cooling down. DON'T go when they are in the midst of a streak of higher-level play.
- If you do approach them in the midst of higher-level play, ask "Hey, do you mind if I get a game in with you all before you quit today?" so that they can continue playing a few more games, but will hopefully commit to playing with you.
- If they do play a few games with you at the beginning of the day, be conscientious about giving them a chance to play with other higher-level players. Let them KNOW that you're being conscientious, so that they will be more likely to want to play with you again in the future. You might say, "Hey, I see you can get a good game in against those guys, I'll sit this one out and maybe we can play again later if you have a chance."
- If you ask stronger players to join a game with you, HIT TO THEM! Especially in a recreational game, no one likes to sit on a court watching their partner hit all the balls. The higher-level player is doing you a favor by playing with you, so hit the ball to him/her at least half the time. It will

make you a better player, make it more fun for the other players and make it more likely that they will play with you again next time.

- Don't be obnoxious if you beat a stronger player in recreational play. We all play our best when we play with better players. When we play with weaker players, it can be challenging to stay focused, so remember that they may not be playing at the top of their game. (Or, if your opponents read the rest of this article, they may be focusing on improving their own shots, rather than on winning.)
- If they give you feedback on your game, have an open mind and be appreciative of them taking the time to play and help you.

WHEN WEAKER PLAYERS ASK YOU TO PLAY:

Remember, someone took you under their wing when you first started playing, so pay it forward and make a point to regularly play with players who are weaker than you. Perhaps you regularly play a warmup game with them, or once a week you decide to dedicate the last half of your play to playing with them.

- If people invite you to play but you opt for a higher-level game, let them know when you WOULD be willing to play, perhaps later in the day, or later in the week.
- When you do play, let them know in advance how long you're planning to

play; for example, "I'd love to play with you all for a game or two, but then I'd like to get in with those other players."

- Don't be patronizing — or overly aggressive. Instead of focusing on who wins or loses, find a way to make it challenging for yourself. Pick a shot you want to improve upon and focus on hitting that shot. Or, try to reduce your number of unforced errors. Focus on keeping the ball in play rather than slamming every put-away shot.
- Limit your feedback to one aspect of their play during the game. Giving too many pointers can be overwhelming. Plus, they're probably already nervous about playing with you, so don't be too critical. Afterward, if you want to give them a little more info, you might ask, "Are you open to some feedback on your game?" If the answer is no, you've just learned your first lesson as a coach: You can only teach the ones who want to learn. •



Prem Carnot, author of the Amazon.com #1 Best Seller *Smart Pickleball: The Pickleball Guru's Guide*, is the premiere pickleball coach on the planet. Thousands say his teachings are "transformational" and that they play their "best game ever" after learning from Prem. Get your FREE

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