

# The Pickleball Mental Edge



**Learnings from Pickleball Pros and  
Pickleball Enthusiasts to Improve  
Your Pickleball Mental Game**



**Stacie Townsend**  
Founder of Pickler  
[www.thePickler.com](http://www.thePickler.com)

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**This book is dedicated to every Pickler that we have had the pleasure of playing with, playing against, and otherwise enjoying the sport of pickleball with.**

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# Introduction to The Pickleball

## Mental Edge

Pickleball, just like any other sport, has a physical and mental component. The physical component of pickleball is obvious, whether you are drilling, playing recreationally, or playing competitively in a tournament. However, many of us, like myself, may be guilty of not paying enough attention to the mental component of pickleball.

I recently played in a tournament for the first time in several months. Although I had been playing recreationally about three times per week, as soon as I stepped foot on the pickleball court during the tournament, I was nervous and tight. As a result, I played stiff, conservative, below my ability, and after a quick two-loss exit from the tournament, I felt terrible that I really let my mixed doubles partner, Matt Leiz, down. The next day, I came back for the women's doubles event and, although we did not win, I played confident and aggressive. I let the nerves dissipate, as I reminded myself that I am capable of playing at a high level and if I was going to lose, it was better to go down swinging!

This mental failure of mine was so timely for me, as one week later I headed to Indian Wells, California for the 2018 Margaritaville USA Pickleball National Championships to compete in the Women's Doubles 4.5 19+ division. During this one-week period, I worked on my mental game and mental strategy. Every day, I reminded myself to (1) play aggressive, (2) allow myself to become emotionally invested and engaged in every point, and (3) only focus on my play and my communication with my amazing partner, Anna Leigh Waters, and let the rest (i.e. my opponents' play, the score, and the overall outcome) fall into place. Without question, this mental preparation led me to play the best pickleball I have ever played on the biggest pickleball stage, and to a gold medal.

This experience reminded me how important the mental component of our pickleball game really is. As a former softball player, I always loved the quote by baseball legend, Yogi Berra—"Baseball is 90% mental and the other half physical." The same goes for pickleball.

After speaking with countless pickleball pros and other pickleball enthusiasts at every level, I quickly realized how many of us pickleball players have made the same mistake I have—not devoting enough time and attention to improving our respective mental game. In light of this, I have come up with eight learnings to help you improve your pickleball mental edge. Whether you are playing recreationally or competitively, I hope these mental learnings will elevate your pickleball game.

# 1. Just Play Pickleball

Have you ever approached a shot ready to hit a drop shot, and then changed your mind to a drive, and hit the pickleball straight into the net? Or, vice versa? I am sure we have all heard the phrase, “Oh! I changed my mind!” on the pickleball court at least once. We are all guilty of this—second guessing ourselves and overanalyzing a shot.

When you step on to the pickleball court for a match—especially for a tournament match—it is important that you just play pickleball. Do not overthink it. You hopefully have put in the effort during drill sessions, practice play, and even warm-up. This effort has prepared you for the moment you step on to the pickleball court for a match. Keep it simple and trust in your game.

Now, I am not saying do not think at all. Pickleball is a game that requires strategy, adjustments, and thought. You have to think! But think and then do. For instance, have you ever tried to think of and say the score, while also serving? If so, have you ever served the pickleball



into the net or out of bounds? Our bodies and minds are generally not built to think and do at the same time. So, think, say the score, do your pre-serve routine, and then serve. In other words, think and then do.

This concept of “think, then do” is even more important at the higher levels of pickleball because your reaction time to respond to a shot is so limited, as players like Lucy Kovalova, Leigh Waters and Ben Johns can drive the pickleball with extreme velocity. To execute this important concept of “think, then do”, create a plan with your partner before you even step on to the pickleball court. For instance, determine who will cover the middle, who will take the lobs, who will be the “alpha” or “court general” directing traffic yelling “Me!”, “You!” or “Switch!”, etc. Know this before the pickleball is even served because once the pickleball is in play, you will not have time to think, only do, and one of the worst feelings on the pickleball court is when we find ourselves blankly staring at our partner after we let a pickleball sneak down the middle because of poor planning and poor communication. So, strategize and create a plan with your partner before the game, during timeouts, or even quickly between points.

However, once time is in and the game is on, just play pickleball.

By now, you are just playing pickleball, right? What if your opponent is arguing with the referee and making a scene? Or, your opponent just threw his or her pickleball paddle, and it unintentionally hits a bystander or even your partner? Or, maybe your opponent is trying to get in your head by yelling during a point or even talking trash between points? Distractions like these can take place at any point during a match, and even take place at the highest level of pickleball. The key is how you respond to these distractions. Continue to stay in your zone. If you need a moment to shake a distraction, take a deep breath, take a time-out, or look at your number one fan for some encouragement, but make sure you refocus, find your zone, and just play pickleball.

### **Key Takeaways:**

1. Just play pickleball.
2. Think and then do.
3. Have a plan, work a plan.

4. Stay in your zone.

## 2. Confidence from 0-0-2

If you think you can, you can. No one exudes this concept more than one of the best in the pickleball world, Kyle Yates. I think many around the pickleball tournament circuit may agree, that Kyle is confident in his ability to win on any given day. I mean this as the utmost compliment to Kyle. Like Kyle, you have to believe you are the best and that you are capable of winning. Pickleball is a game with winners and losers, and—especially in tournament play—you are hopefully competing for a gold medal and not to win a couple games and to lose a couple games. You have to believe in yourself and your ability on the pickleball court because that belief will directly translate to your physical performance. If you are unsure of your ability, you will play timid—like I did in my recent tournament that I eluded to in the Introduction. If you are confident in your ability, you will play loose, aggressive, and hopefully your best pickleball. Confidence is key from the very start, from 0-0-2. Again, if you think you can, you can.

If you get a little nervous before a pickleball match, work on building your confidence and

dissipating your nerves by practicing under pressure during drill sessions, practice play, and even warm-up. For instance, during a drill session or practice play, tell yourself it is the gold medal match with the entire tournament on the line, or even play a round robin with friends where everyone antes up five or ten dollars for the winning team (in other words, put a little money on the line). See how your focus and intensity change. Also, one great piece of advice that I received from one of my partners, Debbie Drum, is to never let your first point count in the tournament. What Debbie means by this is to play intense practice points, or, if possible, even practice matches, before playing your first tournament match. Many Picklers play better pickleball after a game or two. I certainly loosen up as I play and start to sweat a little. So, playing practice points before stepping on the pickleball court when it counts—whether during tournament play or even recreational play, like a round robin—can help you eliminate your nerves, play confidently, and, backtracking to the first learning, just play pickleball.

No matter what happens over the course of a pickleball match, or even day of pickleball,

always keep this confidence. As discussed in a later learning, pickleball is a game of swings and momentums. Always believe in yourself and your partner and your ability to win—you never know what can happen. For example, during the 2018 Margaritaville USA Pickleball National Championships 5.0 19+ gold medal match, Leigh Waters and Catherine Parenteau fought their way out of the losers' bracket to force the if-necessary game to fifteen against Lucy Kovalova and Irina Tereschenko. Leigh and Catherine started down 7-0. Unphased, Leigh and Catherine began to battle back against Lucy and Irina. At match point for Lucy and Irina (14-10), Leigh and Catherine still believed and remained confident in themselves and each other. Leigh even leaned over to Catherine at this point in the match and told Catherine, "I think we are going to win. We can do this!" This unwavering belief and confidence led Leigh and Catherine to a 17-15 victory in one of the most exciting pickleball matches I have ever witnessed after a 7-point deficit. Always believe and remain confident (and, it goes without saying, confident, but not arrogant) from 0-0-2 until the final point has been played.

## **Key Takeaways:**

1. Be confident from 0-0-2.
2. If you think you can, you can.
3. Play a few points under pressure to get your nerves out.
4. Never give up.

### 3. Positivity Breeds Positivity

As you know, pickleball is more commonly played as a doubles game, rather than as a singles game. As a result, not only do you need to play confidently and play your best pickleball, but your partner does too—at least if you want to be successful. A good partner is one that helps you, motivates you, and remains positive. Positivity is infectious. Positivity breeds positivity, and positivity is essential if you want your partner to play confidently and play their best pickleball.

Have you ever had a partner that gets angry or belittles you after you make a mistake? Maybe this partner even rolls his or her eyes, or is overly critical and coaching you on every shot to the point that you feel nervous and out of your element? Even when you win with this partner, you probably are not having any fun, which is what pickleball is all about. As the great golfer Payne Stewart once said, “A bad attitude is worse than a bad swing.” If your partner makes a bad shot, remain positive and build your partner up so that you both are mentally ready to win the next shot. Remember to pay attention to your words *and*



your body language, which can both send the same message. No one is ever trying to flub a shot. Remain positive. You are a team; stick together as a team.

Positivity is especially important in situations where one person in the pickleball duo may be targeted more than the other, which is a common strategy in doubles play—especially mixed doubles play. The targeted player may feel picked on and quickly get down mentally, as oftentimes teams will target the player with the weaker skill set. If you are ever this person, hang in there. You can do it. Your partner is depending on you to stay mentally and physically tough, and your partner will come in for the kill shot as soon as it presents itself. If your partner is ever this person, ooze of positivity for your partner. Your positivity will most certainly have an effect on your partner's play.

One way to breed positivity on the pickleball courts is to give credit to your partner for good pickleball play and take responsibility for your shots. In other words, voice credit for great shots—"Yeah! Great shot!" or "Keep it up, partner!". Also, voice and take the blame for bad shots—"My bad. I won't do that again." or "My

fault. I got the next one.” This includes a bad shot by your partner, as you may have contributed to the bad shot, such as by having a poor shot before to set up the bad shot. This will help breed positivity, as well as establish the lines of communication and build trust between you and your partner.

### **Key Takeaways:**

1. Remain positive.
2. Be vocal and use body language to show your positivity.
3. Take responsibility for your shots.

## 4. One Shot at a Time

How do you win a pickleball match or even a pickleball tournament? One point at a time, and to break it down even further, one shot at a time. Zone in and focus on every shot. Win every shot. If you and your partner win every shot, you will win every point. And, if you and your partner win every point, then you will win every pickleball game. So, focus and be completely engaged on each shot because each shot will add up.

What if you lose a point or you make a terrible shot? Use your short-term memory and flush it. It is over and in the past. You cannot change it. Move to the next point, move to the next shot.

There are so many things in the game of pickleball that you cannot control. You cannot control your partner, your opponents, the referee, the wind, the sun, bad calls, stray balls interrupting play, etc. However, you can control your focus, your play, and how you approach each shot (remember, whether you or your partner are attacking the pickleball, there is always something

that you need to do, including being in the proper position on the pickleball court). Whether you are winning a pickleball game, trying to make an epic comeback, just made a terrible shot, or just drove a winner, keep the same mindset and keep the same mission. Focus on what you can control, which is your next shot. Win the next shot. Pretty soon, it will add up to winning the whole pickleball match or even the whole pickleball tournament.

### **Key Takeaways:**

1. One shot at a time, one point at a time.
2. If you make a bad shot, use your short-term memory and flush it.
3. Focus on what you can control, which is your individual game and your next shot.

## 5. Ride the Wave – The Big “M.O.”

How many times have you seen a pickleball team go on a stellar run and win six, seven, eight or more points in a row? Pickleball can be dictated by momentum, also known as the big “M.O.” However, momentum is tricky. Oftentimes, you cannot explain why you have the momentum, but you better use it while you have it because once you lose the momentum, it can be extremely difficult to get back.

If you are just starting a pickleball game, your goal is to steal the momentum. If you have lost the momentum during a pickleball game, your goal is to dig yourself out and grab the momentum back from your opponents. One of the easiest ways to break or change the momentum of a pickleball game is to use a timeout. During most pickleball tournaments, you and your partner will have the ability to call two timeouts per game. If you do not use your timeouts, you do not get to keep them or take them home with you, so do not be afraid to use them. A good rule of thumb is to call a timeout if your opponents have scored three

points in a row. A timeout will give you and your partner the opportunity to think and refocus. Quickly re-evaluate your strategy to see if you can change something to change the momentum—stick with what is working and change what is not working. (I understand timeouts are essentially non-existent during recreational play. However, maybe you could try slowly running down a stray ball or grabbing a quick drink of water as a mental reset. Any break in the pace of the pickleball game may make a difference.)

One pickleball duo that I thought was exceptionally good at not allowing their opponents, which included myself, to capture and run away with the momentum was Rachel Oxenden and Sarah Rosenblum. This is because of their mental focus on, and emotional engagement with, every shot. Every point playing against Rachel and Sarah felt like the score of the game was 0-0. They exercised the last few learnings “to a T”—Rachel and Sarah were so persistently positive, they had so much belief in each other, and they zoned in on every shot. They cheered for each other on every great shot and reassured each other of their ability to win on any point that their opponents received against them. Rachel and

Sarah had an energy that was hard to grab and use any momentum against. In summary, to combat your opponents stealing any momentum and using it against you, be confident, positive, and high energy, like Rachel and Sarah.

**Key Takeaways:**

1. Ride the wave and use the momentum.
2. To break your opponents' momentum, use your timeouts (remember the rule of three).
3. To deny your opponents' any momentum, remain engaged and high energy with your partner on every point.

## 6. Conquer the Number Ten

The number ten. So, close to victory, as ten is just one away from the end of the pickleball game at eleven (for games to fifteen, fourteen would be the key number and so on). All too often, pickleball players crumble at the number ten and fail to finish the pickleball game. This is oftentimes a mental lapse by the serving team, as they press to get the last point, let their heels touch, take their foot off the gas, lose their sense of urgency, and/or otherwise do not remain mentally tough.

When you get to game point or even match point, keep your same pickleball mental edge—(1) just play pickleball; (2) keep your confidence up; (3) remain positive; (4) focus on one shot at a time; and (5) use your momentum that got you to the number ten in the first place. The pressure of game point or match point is non-existent. The pressure is really on your opponents. So, keep your pickleball mental edge and finish the game. Do not let your opportunity slip by. Have a sense of urgency and finish the game on that point opportunity.



You would be surprised at how many pickleball players at every level leave the door open to allow their opponents to make a comeback and steal the game. For example, Matt Wright and Dave Weinbach had match point against Kyle Yates and Ben Johns in the 2018 Margaritaville USA Pickleball National Championships Men's Doubles Open gold medal match. Matt and Dave failed to win the match on their match point opportunity, which left the door open for Kyle and Ben to not only come back and win that game, but win the following game to win the match and force the if-necessary game to fifteen, and then win that if-necessary game to win the entire tournament (8-11, 13-11, 11-2, 15-6). So, slam the door and win the pickleball game as soon as you reach the number ten.

One of the toughest pickleball duos out there is Daniella and Michael Niss, also known as the "Block Niss Monsters." What makes them so tough on the pickleball courts is their mental toughness. I have not seen many "number tens" go by without this duo finishing the game. When asked what they attribute their success with the number ten to, the Block Niss Monsters mentioned two things:

- Daniella and Michael feel no pressure because, at the very least, they bought themselves a point. In other words, their opponents now have to get twelve points to win the game (assuming a win by two game format that is common of most recreational play and tournaments).
- The Block Niss Monsters have a rule when they get to the number ten—every shot must be over the pickleball net. If the shot is not over the pickleball net and in play, they are out of the point. The Block Niss Monsters want to put the pressure on their opponents to win the point, rather than making a poor shot themselves and taking themselves out of the point.

Remain mentally tough and conquer the number ten.

### **Key Takeaways:**

1. Keep your pickleball mental edge when you reach the number ten.

2. Every shot is over the pickleball net on the number ten.
3. Have a sense of urgency and conquer the number ten.

## **7. Be Kind, Be a Pickleball Ambassador, Be a Pickler!**

What makes pickleball truly unique is its culture. Pickleball is a community inspired by fun, comradery, and downright good people, which is clearly demonstrated by the “paddle tap” after every pickleball game. As we—as one united pickleball community—struggle to grow our great sport while also keeping this unique culture intact, I think it is important to exemplify this pickleball culture in every regard. And, we have such great role models at every level across the entire country leading us in this charge. However, I think sometimes we—including myself—could use a reminder to always carry ourselves as a true professional and ambassador for the sport of pickleball. In other words, be a Pickler!

So, here is your reminder:

1. No matter how frustrated I become or how bad things go for me on the pickleball court, I will:
  - a. Be kind to everyone;

- b. Not throw my paddle;
  - c. Not roll my eyes;
  - d. Not cuss or use foul language (at least out loud);
  - e. Not hit the ball in frustration into the net or otherwise after a point has ended;
  - f. Not be persistently negative toward anyone or the game of pickleball; and
  - g. Be a pickleball ambassador.
2. No matter how good I become at this beloved game of pickleball, I will remember I was once a beginner, too.
  3. I will do my best to spread the sport of pickleball and encourage others to join and play with me on the pickleball court.

## **Key Takeaways:**

1. Be kind.
2. Be a pickleball ambassador.
3. Be a Pickler.

## **8. Live Your Best Life On and Off the Pickleball Court!**

In the words of my friend and up-and-coming pickleball phenomena, Riley Macdonald, pickleball is “inexplicably enjoyable.” I think we can all agree with Riley. Above all, pickleball is, and is meant to be, FUN!

So, if things do not seem to go your way one pickleball game, do not worry. You can always find someone on the pickleball court looking for “one more.” And, if a whole day or whole tournament of pickleball has you down, you will always have tomorrow or the “next time” for some redemption. In the meantime, engage in the pickleball lifestyle and pickleball community, and have some food, drinks and laughs with your pickleball friends. Because win or lose on the pickleball courts during a game, we are all winning because we all have pickleball!

### **Key Takeaways:**

1. Pickleball is FUN!

2. Join in the FUN and live your best life on and off the pickleball court!



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## About Pickler

Pickler is a pickleball lifestyle brand that launched in November 2017. Pickler promotes the sport of pickleball and inspires pickleball players to live their best life on and off the pickleball court. Pickler hosts a pickleball educational platform and offers a range of pickleball clothing, shirts, shorts, hats, visors, jackets, pants, bags, and other gear and accessories to help pickleball players pickle their opponents on and off the pickleball court.

### **Join the Pickler community!**

Website - [www.thePickler.com](http://www.thePickler.com)

Facebook - [@PicklerLLC](https://www.facebook.com/PicklerLLC)

Instagram - [@PicklerPickleball](https://www.instagram.com/PicklerPickleball)

Pinterest - [@PicklerPickleball](https://www.pinterest.com/PicklerPickleball)

## **About the Author**

Stacie Townsend is a pickleball enthusiast and founder of Pickler. She also currently works as a business attorney that advises technology and entrepreneurial companies. Before finding pickleball in 2017, Stacie was a professional and international softball player, who, after playing for the Great Britain National Softball Team for eight years and playing at the collegiate level for the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP), was inducted to both the British Softball Federation Hall of Fame and the UTEP Athletics Hall of Fame. She also was named to the All-World Softball Team after the 2012 World Championships. Stacie continues her competitive athletic career on the pickleball courts. Since winning gold in the 2018 Margaritaville USA Pickleball National Championships Women's Doubles 4.5 19+ division, Stacie strives to continue her pickleball journey and move to the pro division, and, above all, she strives to spread, grow, and further the sport of pickleball that has captured her heart in recent years.