Only Tennis

FREE GUIDE

GAME PLANS

What to do against the 6 opponents you keep losing to

- PUSHER
- MOONBALLER
- SLICER
- AGGRESSIVE BASELINER
- LOBBER
- NET RUSHER

Spot what's beating you and walk into your next match with a plan.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

You don't need to memorize dozens of patterns. You need to recognize the problem, pick an answer you can actually hit, and watch what happens.

Opponent types describe problems, not people. The same player can push from the baseline and lob the second you come in. Another can attack with the forehand and slice everything on the backhand. Use the label to form a guess, then let the match confirm it.

Change one thing at a time. One point proves nothing. Look for a pattern that repeats in similar situations.

Every useful plan answers five questions

1. What is my opponent doing over and over?
2. Which of my answers is feeding that pattern?
3. What change can I make with the shots I already have?
4. What result would tell me the change is working?
5. What will I try if it isn't?

Pick your chapter

WHAT'S HAPPENING	START WITH
You miss trying to end points against someone who gets everything back	**The Pusher**
High, deep balls keep you pinned back and uncomfortable	**The Moonballer**
Low slices make you lose margin and rhythm	**The Slicer**
They attack early and punish every short ball	**The Aggressive Baseliner**
Your trips to the net keep ending with a lob over your head	**The Lobber**
Their net game makes you go for impossible passing shots	**The Net Rusher**

Singles. For recreational players, roughly NTRP 3.0 to 4.5. These plans come from widely taught tactics, adapted by Only Tennis for rec players. They don't guarantee wins. Your opponent gets a say too.

BEFORE TACTICS: DO YOU HAVE THE SHOT?

A plan that looks great on paper is a bad plan if it needs a shot you can't hold together under pressure.

SHOT THE PLAN NEEDS	IF YOU DON'T OWN IT YET
Approach shot (the ball you hit on your way to the net), volley and overhead	Pick your trips to the net more carefully and build pressure from the baseline
Taking the ball on the rise (right after the bounce)	Adjust your distance so you hit at a comfortable height
Drop shot	Use a controlled short ball only when you can hit it. Don't force a perfect drop shot
Big passing shot	Hit a low first ball and set up the next one
High, deep topspin	Hit your most reliable shot with margin. Don't invent spin mid-match

Attacking doesn't mean hitting as hard as you can. It can also mean taking time away, playing from inside the court, moving your opponent or making them hit from an awkward spot.

A short ball isn't automatically an attackable ball. Check the contact height, your balance, your time and where your opponent is. If you're late and the ball is below the net, play a rally ball.

YOUR FIRST FEW GAMES: A QUICK SCOUTING REPORT

Watch without turning every point into a risky experiment.

- Which side, forehand or backhand, comes back shorter off a deep ball?
- Do they just keep the ball in play, or do they counterattack when you open the court?
- Are they comfortable when they have to move forward?
- What happens when they get a higher ball? A lower one?
- When you come in, do they go for the pass or the lob?
- Are your errors coming from shot choice or from execution?

> **Don't assume someone has a bad volley because they push, or that every slicer hates high balls.**

01

THE PUSHER

PRESSURE WITHOUT BEATING YOURSELF

How to spot them

They put a lot of balls in play, add little pace of their own and look happy waiting for your mistake.

You start going for harder and harder shots because you feel you should win this easily.

If they defend well and then punish you when you open the court, they're also a counterpuncher (a defender who strikes back). Don't assume they can't attack.

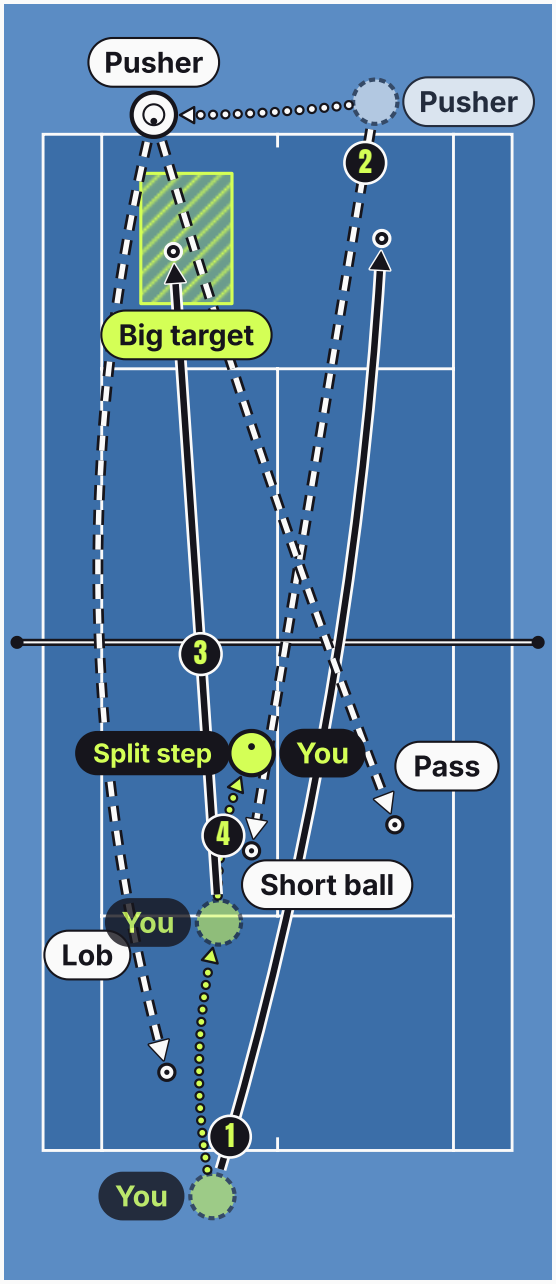
What they want from you

Your impatience, shots aimed at the lines and attacks off balance. You don't get bonus points for hitting harder or prettier.

Plan A: build pressure until a real short ball shows up

Rally with margin. Work a direction you can repeat and notice which side sends back the shorter balls. When you get one you can step into on balance, approach to a big target. Prepare for the next ball instead of expecting the approach to end the point. A real short ball lands near your service line and lets you hit at waist height or higher, on balance, without stretching.

1. Play deep to the side that keeps coming back short.
2. Your opponent sends back a shorter ball.
3. Step in on balance and approach deep, usually down the line, so you can cover their reply.
4. Adjust your position, split step (a small hop as they hit, so you can move either way) and get ready for a volley or an overhead.

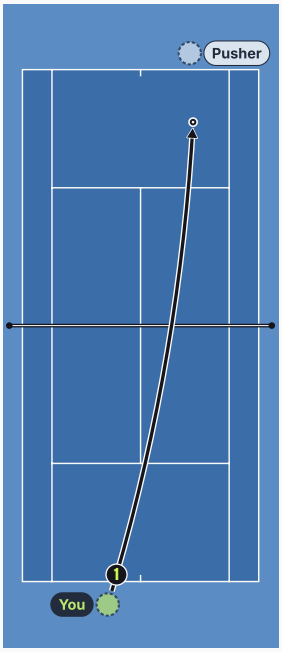


Rally deep crosscourt with margin until the short ball comes. Step in, approach down the line into a big target, come in shading toward the side you hit to, and split step ready for the pass or the lob.

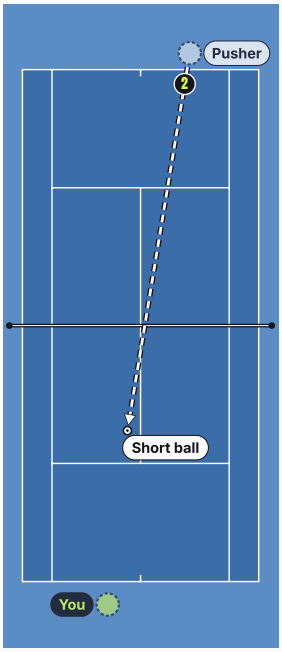
THE PUSHER

STEP BY STEP

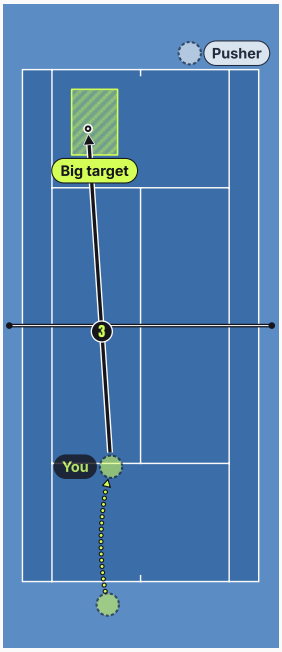
BUILD THE POINT, THEN ATTACK THE SHORT BALL



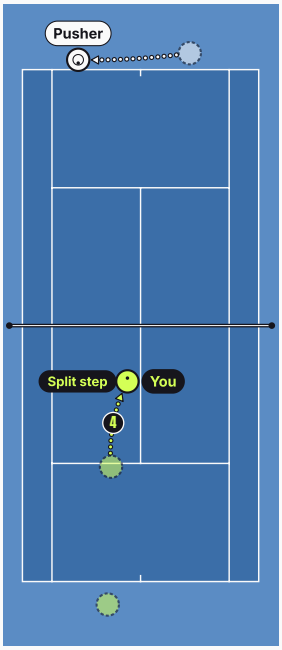
1 You rally deep crosscourt, with margin.



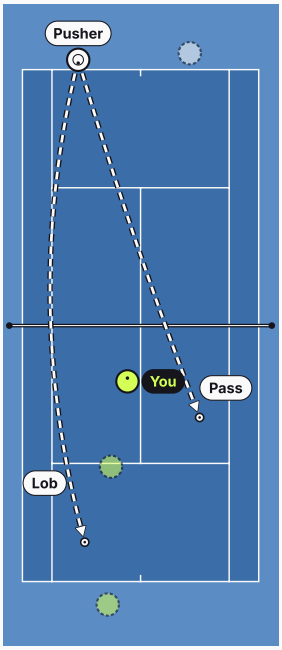
2 Their reply lands short, inside your service line.



3 Step in and approach down the line to a big target.



4 Come in, shading toward the side you hit to, and split step as they hit.



5 Be ready for either reply: the pass or the lob.

THE PUSHER

Why it can work

You put pressure on from a better position and stop relying on a hard winner. Now they have to pass you, not just wait for you to miss.

Plan B: test them moving forward

If they cover side to side well, hit a short, soft ball to bring them forward. Watch how they handle it and how their first volley looks. It doesn't have to be a winning drop shot. You just want them doing something they don't like. If they get there easily and attack, stop. When they do come in, the lob over them is often the next ball.

Simpler option

If your net game isn't reliable, keep building from the baseline. Step into the short ball to apply pressure with margin and recover behind the baseline. You don't have to come in.

Rec player vs. pro. You don't need to out-hit a pusher. Pros can attack earlier because their big shots hold up under pressure. At rec level the extra risk often costs more than it earns, so make them hit one more ball, not one better ball.

Common mistakes

- Trying to end every rally with a winner.
- Hitting harder because you're frustrated.
- Confusing patience with backing away from every opportunity.
- Bringing them to the net without checking if they're good there.
- Treating long rallies as a sign you're losing. Against this player a long point is normal.

It's working if

You attack on balance more often, their replies get weaker and you make fewer rushed errors. You can lose a well built point and still be making the right choice.

When to change the plan

- If they handle short balls well, stop bringing them forward.
- If your trips to the net keep ending in deep lobs, go to the lobber chapter.
- If you can't get a shorter reply at all, rethink your direction and depth before you start hitting harder.

Practice with a partner

One player keeps the rally going and mixes deep balls with a few shorter ones, without warning. The other decides: reset (a safe, deep ball that gives them nothing to attack) or step in. After each point, name the ball you chose to attack and whether you were balanced. Switch roles. The goal is to spot the right ball, not to come in every time.

COURT CARD

**MARGIN IN THE RALLY.
ATTACK THE RIGHT BALL.
BE READY FOR ONE MORE.**

02

THE MOONBALLER

A HIGH BALL IS NOT AN EASY BALL

How to spot them

They use high, deep balls to push you back and make you hit above your shoulders.

You either back up too late or try to rip it from above your shoulder with no control.

A moonball is a rally ball. A lob is an answer to someone at the net. The same player can use both.

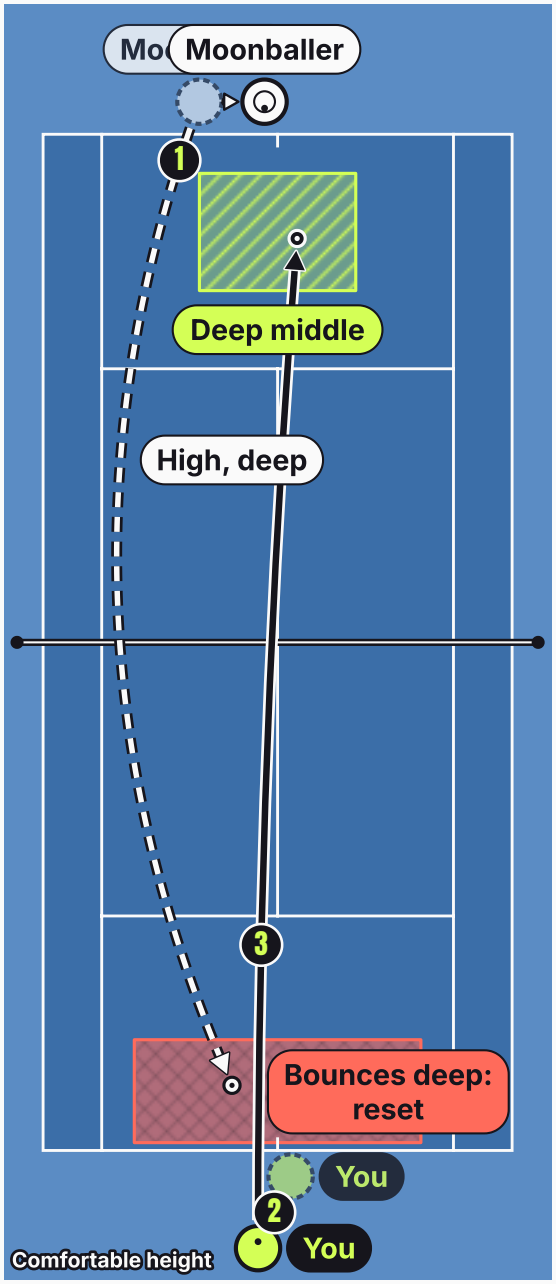
What they want from you

An awkward hit, a short reply, or a rushed attack because the ball looked slow.

Plan A: sort out your distance and attack the one that lands short

Read the depth early and adjust your position so you meet the ball at a comfortable height. Reset the high, deep one with margin. Then recover and wait for the ball that actually lands shorter.

1. Spot the high ball that will land near your baseline.
2. Adjust your distance and send it back without forcing a winner off balance.
3. Recover based on how good your reply was.
4. When the next one lands short, step in and build the attack.

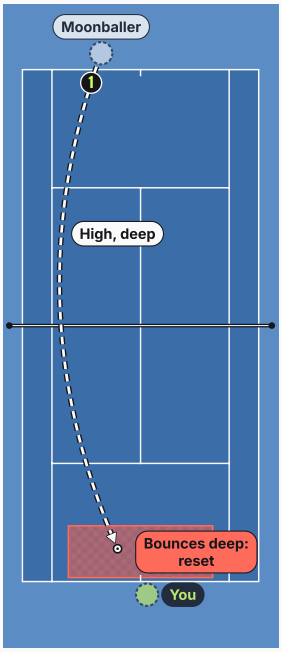


When the high ball bounces near your baseline, move back early so you meet it at a comfortable height. Reply deep through the middle with margin and wait for a better ball.

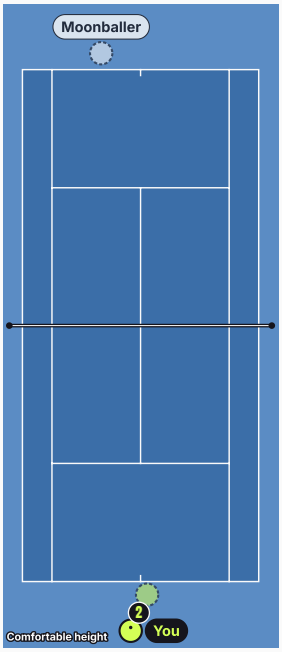
THE MOONBALLER

STEP BY STEP

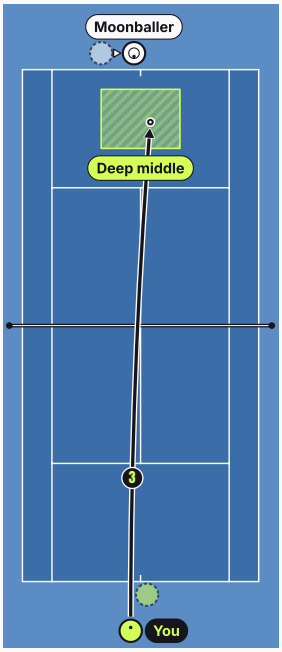
DEEP MOONBALL: BACK UP AND RESET



1 Their high ball is going to bounce deep, near your baseline.



2 Back up early so you meet it at a comfortable height.

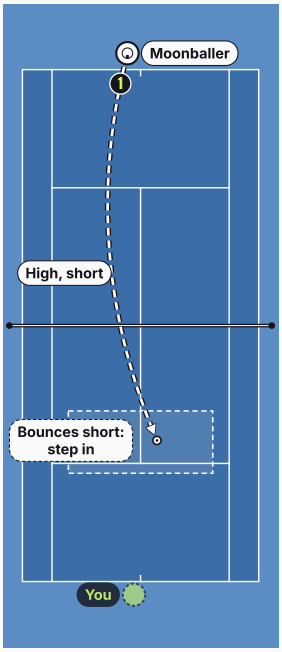


3 Reply deep through the middle, with margin, and wait for a better ball.

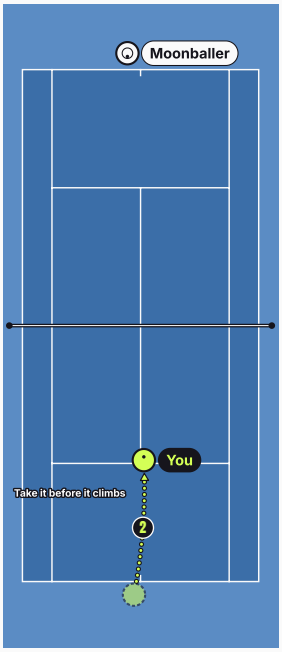
THE MOONBALLER

STEP BY STEP

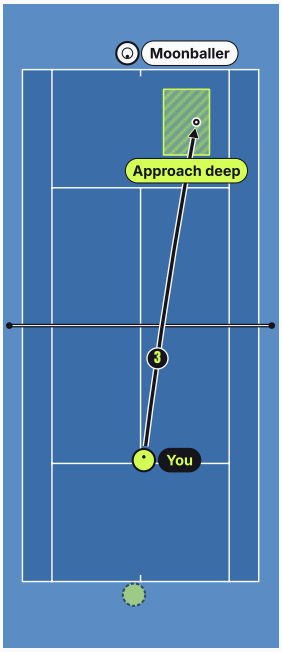
SHORT MOONBALL: STEP IN AND ATTACK



1 Their high ball is going to land short, around your service line.



2 Step in and take it around chest height, before it climbs over your shoulder.



3 Approach deep, then move in and split step.

THE MOONBALLER

Why it can work

It separates two different jobs: surviving a tough ball and punishing a friendly one. You stop treating a high ball as an easy ball.

Plan B: take time away, if you own the shot

Taking the ball on the rise or as a swing volley can rush them. Save it for balls and situations you've practiced. If you lose control when you take it early, skip this.

Simpler option

It's fine to back up so you can hit comfortably, just don't stay back out of habit after a good reply. Where you recover depends on the ball you just hit and what your opponent can do with it. Another option: move them side to side, since a high, deep ball is harder to hit on the run. If they hit it just as well on the run, drop it.

Rec player vs. pro. Pros can attack a ball above the shoulder because their footwork gets them there early. If you tend to arrive late, back up and let the ball drop into your strike zone. Backing up here is a smart choice.

Common mistakes

- Treating a high ball like an attackable ball.
- Moving your feet late and hitting jammed.
- Trying to take every ball on the rise.
- Attacking and then running too close to the net, forgetting the lob.
- Ignoring the wind. With the wind behind them, their high balls carry deeper, so start a step further back.

It's working if

You hit more balls on balance and fewer of your replies land short by accident.

When to change the plan

- If taking the ball early adds a lot of errors, go back to your comfortable height.
- If you can never get out of the back of the court, check whether your replies are landing short or giving them too much comfort.

Practice with a partner

Your partner alternates high deep balls with high shorter ones. Before contact, call your decision out loud: "reset" or "step in". Then play the point out. Judge how well you read the depth, not just who won.

COURT CARD

READ THE DEPTH.
HIT AT YOUR HEIGHT.
STEP IN WHEN IT LANDS SHORT.

03

THE SLICER

A LOW BALL IS NOT AN EMERGENCY

How to spot them

They slice a lot, keep your contact low and break your rhythm.

Some slices skid. Others float and give you time to step in. Those are two different balls with two different answers.

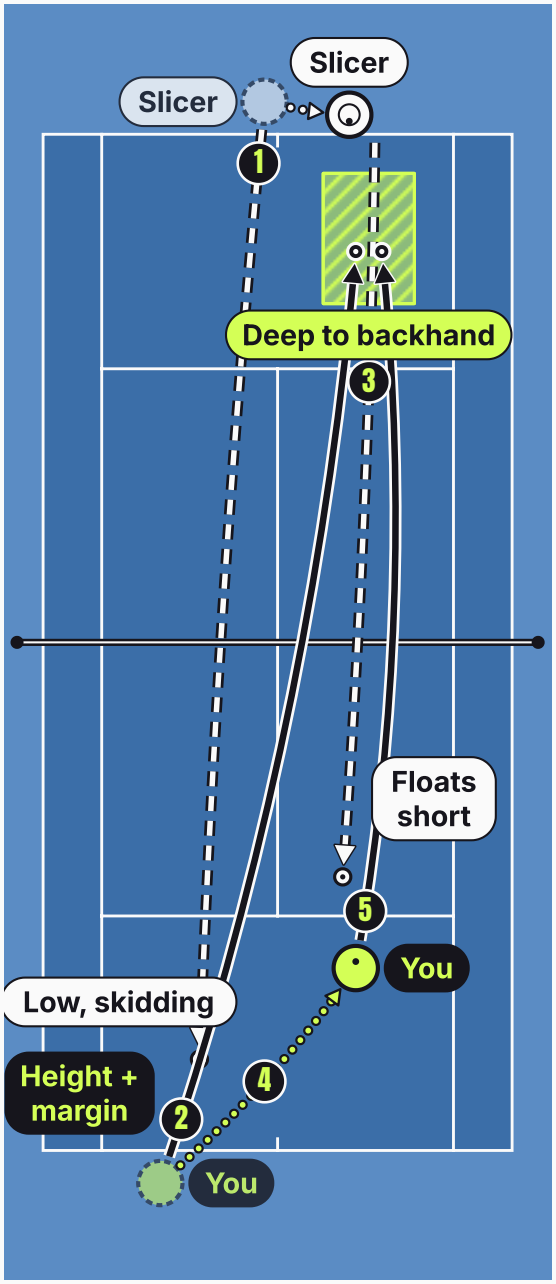
What they want from you

A big swing with no margin, or trying to hit down on a ball below the net.

Plan A: reset the low one and earn a friendlier ball

On low balls, give yourself net clearance and skip the big swing. Test height and depth to their slice side to see if their reply gets worse. When a short or floating ball shows up, step in.

1. Get a low slice and send it back safely.
2. When you can, play deep with more height to the slice side.
3. Watch whether the reply floats or lands short.
4. Step in and play the next ball from a better position.

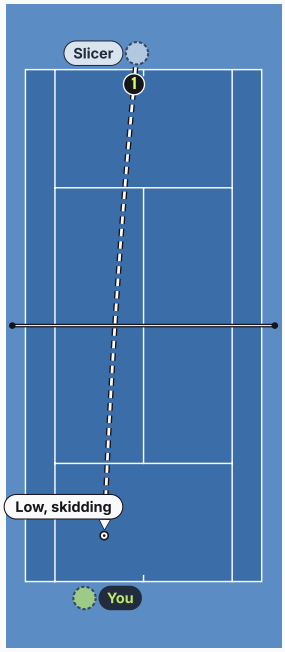


Their slice skids low at your feet. Reply with height and margin deep to their backhand. That ball is hard to slice aggressively, so the next one often floats short: step in and approach.

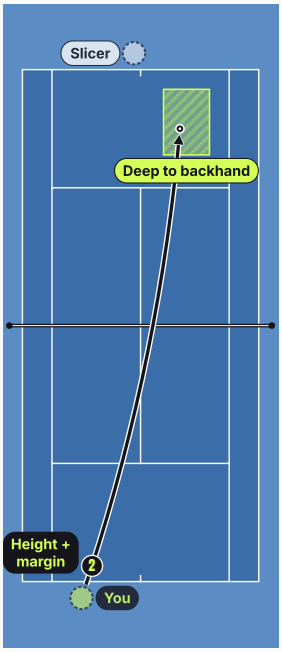
THE SLICER

STEP BY STEP

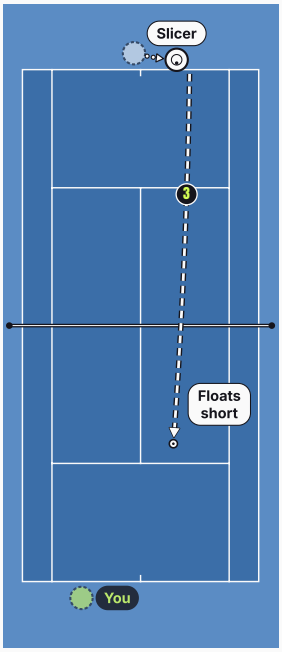
LIFT THE LOW SLICE, ATTACK THE FLOAT



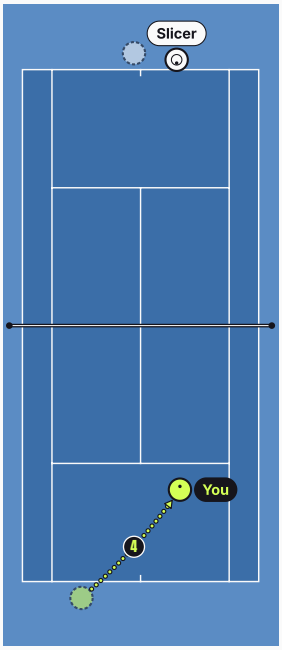
1 Their slice skids low at your feet.



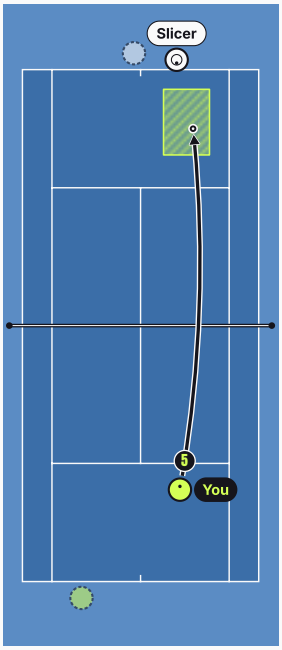
2 When you can, reply with height and margin, deep to their backhand.



3 That ball is hard to slice aggressively, so their reply floats short.



4 Step in early and meet the floater on balance.



5 Approach deep to their backhand again and come in behind it.

THE SLICER

Why it can work

You don't try to attack the most uncomfortable ball. First you change their contact height and improve the next ball you get.

Plan B: stay solid with your reliable shot

If their slice stays good, stick with safe, high-margin shots until a better chance shows up. Slicing back is an option if it's a reliable shot for you. You don't have to out-slice them.

Simpler option

On the skidding slice, bend your knees, shorten the swing and aim higher over the net. Prioritize a big target. Don't try to manufacture heavy topspin you don't own yet. Forget the rule "never hit topspin on a low ball". The choice depends on height, balance, margin and execution. The problem is a shot that doesn't fit the situation, not the name of the shot.

Rec player vs. pro. Your best answer to a skidding slice is the boring one: deep, with margin, then wait for the floater. Pros lift knee-high slices with heavy topspin because their technique holds up at that height. For many rec players, that's exactly where the errors pile up.

Common mistakes

- Treating a skidding slice and a floating slice as the same ball.
- Swinging big on every reply.
- Assuming they volley badly because they slice.
- Insisting on high balls even when they don't bother them.

It's working if

You make fewer errors into the net and get more short or floating replies.

When to change the plan

- If they handle height well, try something else. Trust what the match shows you over what the plan says.

Practice with a partner

Your partner mixes low slices and floaters. Neutralize the low ones and look to step in on the floaters when you're balanced. Play the point and review whether your choice matched the ball you got.

COURT CARD

RESPECT THE LOW BALL.
TEST HEIGHT.
STEP IN ON THE FLOATER.

04

THE AGGRESSIVE BASELINER

GIVE THEM NOTHING SHORT

How to spot them

They take the ball early and dominate whenever you leave something short.

Some attack a lot and miss a lot. Others attack and make it. Know which one you're playing.

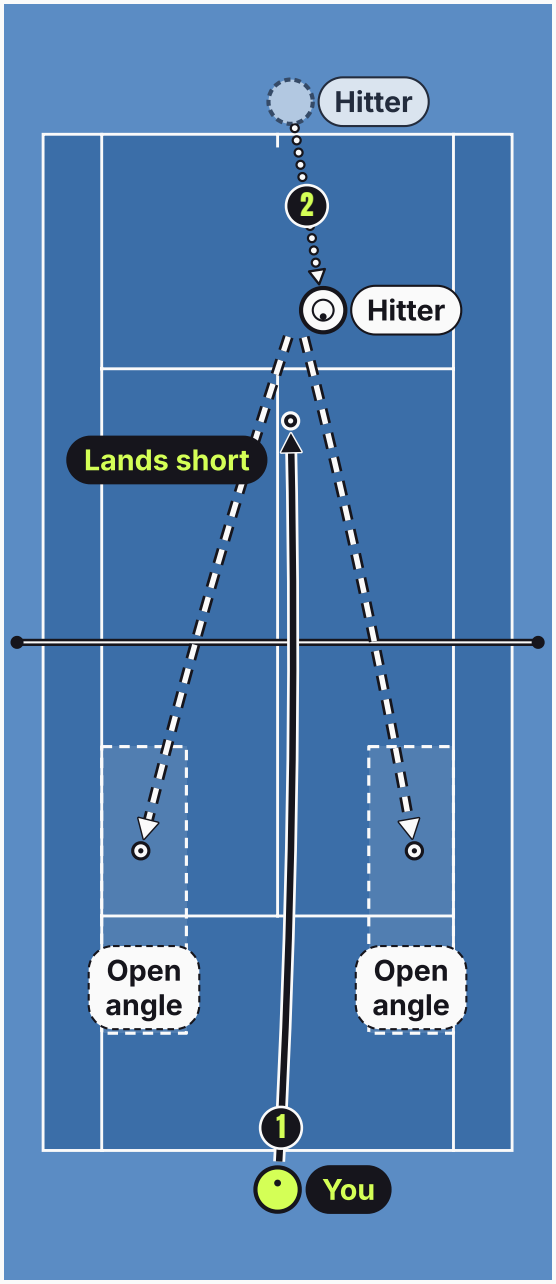
What they want from you

A comfortable short ball, or a power contest you can't sustain.

Plan A: take away their comfortable chances to attack

If they attack a lot and miss a lot, keep it deep and in play and let them take the risk. This plan is for the one who attacks consistently. Prioritize depth and big targets. Try deep balls through the middle to limit some angles and see if they stay aggressive without so much space.

1. Play deep through the middle. If their forehand is the weapon, lean the ball toward their backhand side.
2. If their reply comes back less aggressive, work their less consistent side.
3. Keep your margin until you get a ball that lets you take the initiative back.
4. Attack that ball. Don't try to out-hit them.

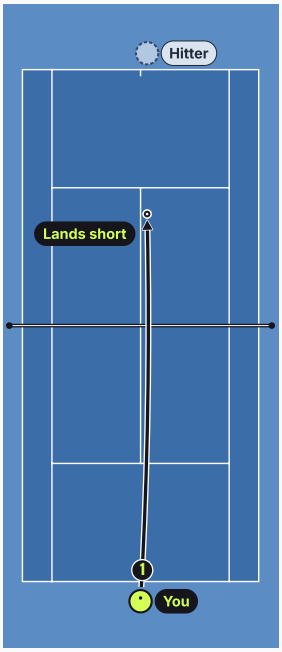


A ball that sits up mid-court lets them step in and open the court on both sides. You are stuck on the baseline guessing.

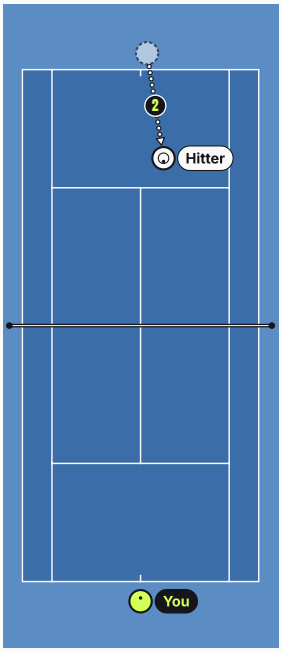
THE AGGRESSIVE BASELINER

STEP BY STEP

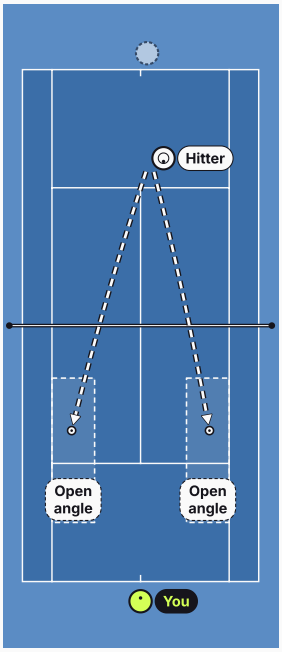
SHORT BALL: YOU HAND THEM THE ANGLES



1 Your ball lands short and sits up mid-court.



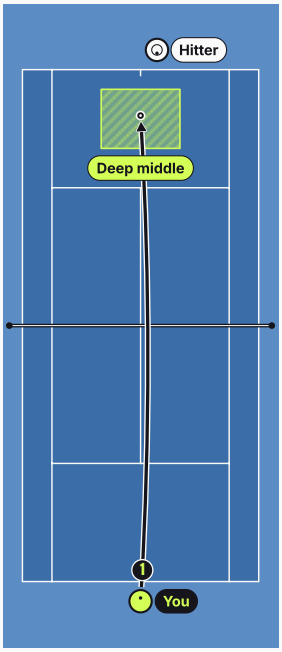
2 They step in and take it early.



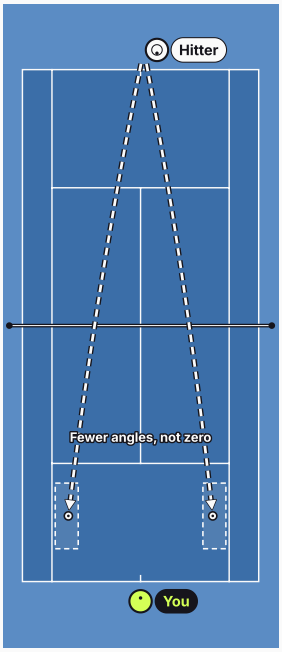
3 Now both angles are open, and you are stuck on the baseline guessing.

STEP BY STEP

DEEP THROUGH THE MIDDLE: FEWER ANGLES



1 Hit deep through the middle, so they stay behind the baseline.



2 From back there their angles shrink, but they do not disappear.

THE AGGRESSIVE BASELINER

Why it can work

You give them fewer short balls and fewer angles. That can make their attack harder to build, but it won't stop a good attacker from hitting through the middle.

Plan B: test a new height or pace

Try a different height or pace and see which one bothers them. Change one thing at a time. Careful: a slow, short ball makes their job easier.

Simpler option

Use your steadiest shot and aim for the depth you can actually get, without aiming at the baseline. When you're late, buy time with a high, deep ball through the middle instead of attempting a hard change of direction. They often attack second serves and short returns, so make your first serve a reliable one and return deep through the middle.

Rec player vs. pro. Pros can trade big hits all day. You probably can't, so make them hit from deep and from the middle, where their angles are smallest.

Common mistakes

- Answering every big hit with a bigger one.
- Changing things randomly without finding out what works.
- Waiting for a consistent attacker to miss on their own.
- Giving a short ball "to break their rhythm" without checking if they attack it well.

It's working if

They attack from less comfortable spots, or you get more time on your shots.

When to change the plan

- If they keep dominating from the middle, test height, direction or your court position. Trust what they actually do over what the plan says.

Practice with a partner

One player looks to attack short balls. The other tries to hold a deep rally with margin. Then test one change in height while keeping everything else the same. Compare which balls let the attacker take over. Switch roles.

COURT CARD

KEEP IT DEEP.
AIM BIG.
CHANGE ONE THING.

05

THE LOBBER

THE PROBLEM STARTS BEFORE THE LOB

How to spot them

When you come forward, they throw up a lob and it keeps landing behind you.

Before blaming your overhead, look at the quality of your approach and how close you run to the net.

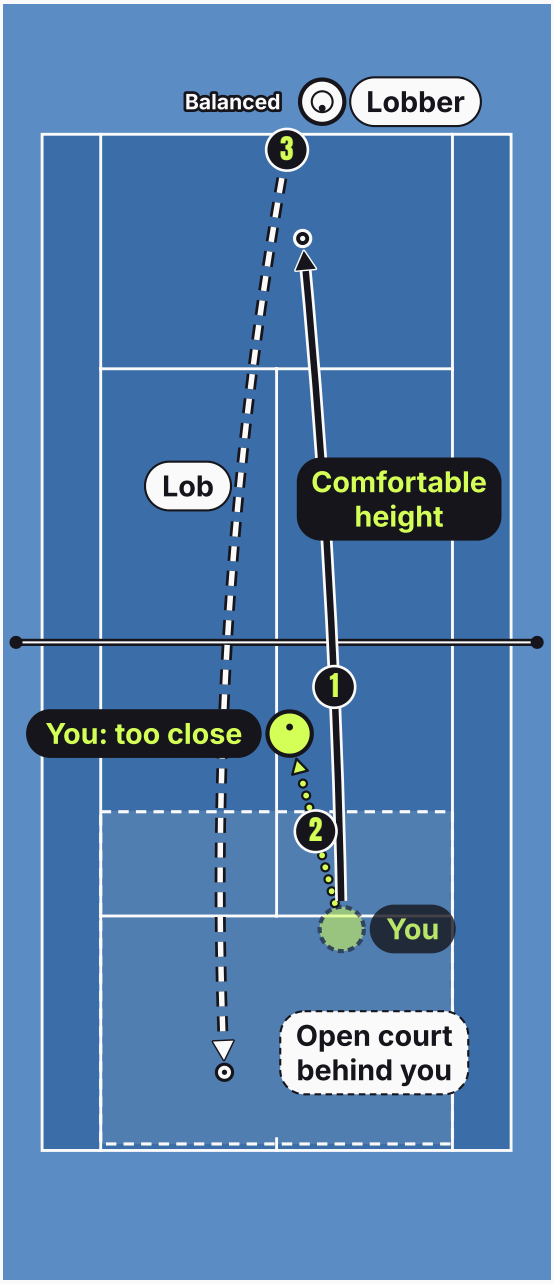
What they want from you

A predictable approach off a comfortable ball, and an overeager rush to the net that leaves space behind you.

Plan A: pressure them before you close in

Come in behind a ball that makes them hit on the move, off balance or out of position. Split step as they make contact and adjust to the likely reply, instead of sprinting all the way to the net on autopilot.

1. Get a ball you can approach on balance.
2. Hit to a target that really pressures this opponent.
3. Move forward under control.
4. Split step as they hit and read the reply.
5. Get ready for a volley or an overhead, depending on what comes.

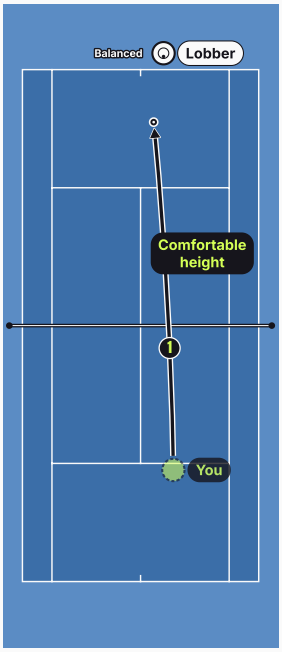


An approach to the middle at a comfortable height leaves them balanced. Rush right up to the net and the whole court behind you is open for the lob.

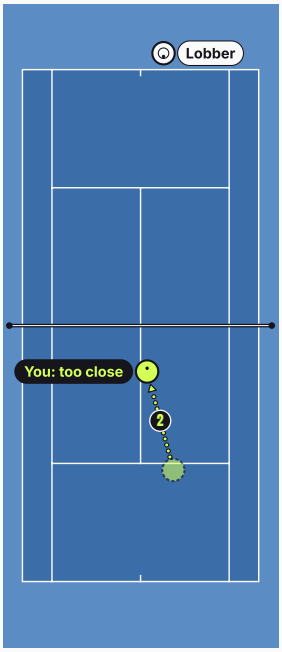
THE LOBBER

STEP BY STEP

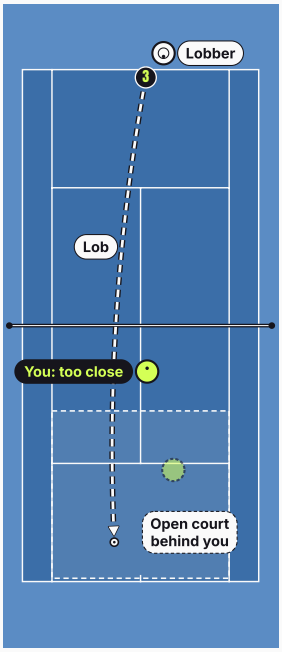
EASY APPROACH: AN EASY LOB



1 You approach to the middle at a comfortable height, so they stay balanced.



2 You rush right up to the net.

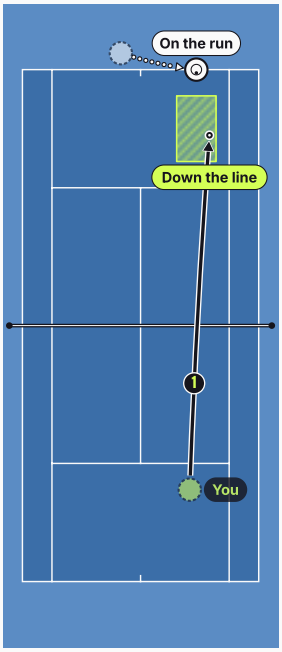


3 They lob into the open court behind you.

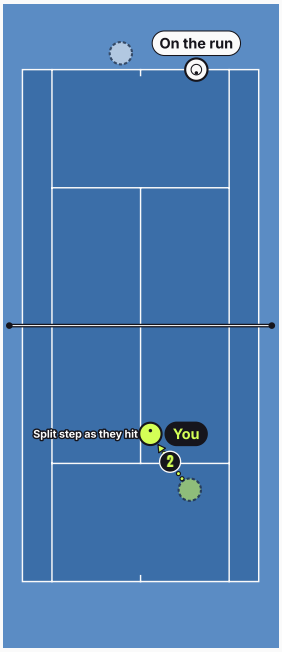
THE LOBBER

STEP BY STEP

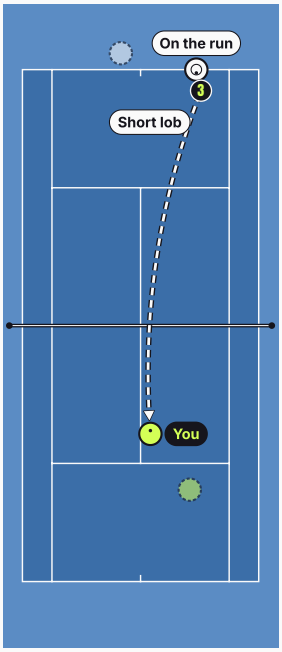
PRESSURE APPROACH: A SHORT LOB



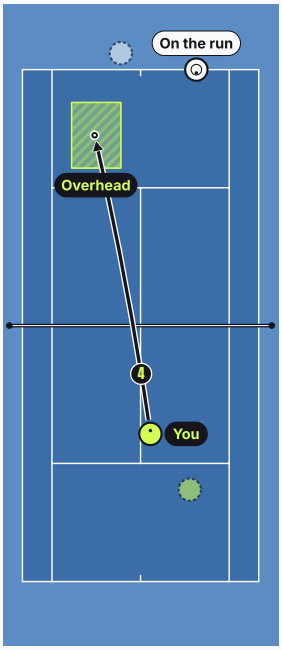
1 Approach down the line so they have to hit on the run.



2 Come in a few feet inside the service line and split step as they hit.



3 Their lob on the run tends to land short.



4 You are already there: hit the overhead to a big target.

THE LOBBER

Why it can work

Pressure can make their lob less accurate, and a less predictable position gives you better options. There's no magic distance from the net. Close in after your split step when they're stretched. Stay a bit further back when they're balanced, because that's when the lob comes. Signs a lob is coming: they're set, the racket drops low and the face opens.

Plan B: choose better and reset when needed

If your overhead is shaky, come in on better opportunities. On some lobs, when you have time and space, let it bounce and reset the point. You don't have to save every lob with an off-balance smash. On the overhead, aim for a big target. You don't need a winner. Check the sun and wind at each changeover: when the sun is in your eyes, let more lobs bounce.

Simpler option

Build more pressure from the baseline before you come in. Practice the overhead on its own: turn sideways and shuffle back. Don't backpedal.

Rec player vs. pro. A decent lob is hard to handle at any level, and at rec level it's often the easiest answer to someone rushing the net. Pros can close tight because their approaches leave little time to lob. Earn your trip forward before you take it.

Common mistakes

- Coming in on any short ball, even when you arrive off balance.
- Running in too close to the net without reading the reply.
- Assuming every lob has to be finished in the air.
- Blaming only your smash for an approach that left them comfortable.

It's working if

Their lobs get shorter and you reach them on balance.

When to change the plan

- If they keep landing deep lobs even under pressure, respect the quality and pick your approaches better. Coming in more isn't necessarily the answer.

Practice with a partner

Start with an approach shot. The defender picks lob or pass without warning. The attacker moves forward, split steps and responds to what they read. After the point, judge the approach quality and your position at their contact.

COURT CARD

PRESSURE BEFORE YOU COME IN.
DON'T RUN IN BLIND.
READ THEIR CONTACT.

THE NET RUSHER

06 YOU DON'T HAVE TO PASS THEM ON THE FIRST BALL

How to spot them

They come in behind the serve, the return or any short ball.

Just seeing them up there makes you aim at tiny targets and go for a perfect passing shot from a defensive position.

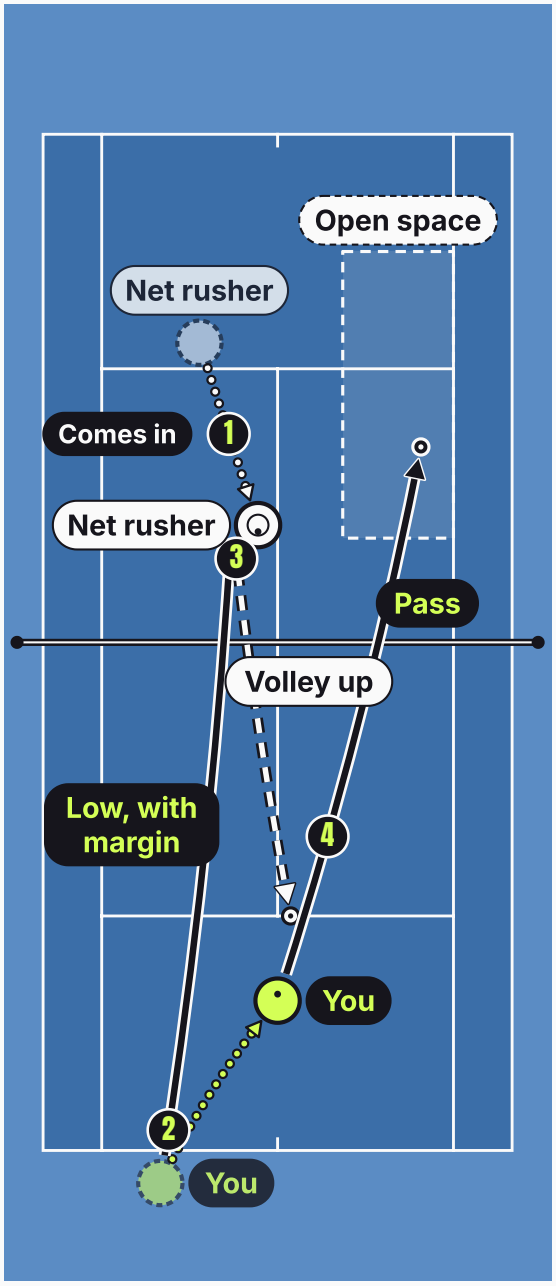
What they want from you

For you to rush, change direction off balance and miss before they ever hit a volley.

Plan A: build the pass in two shots

When you're under pressure, look for a low first ball that forces them to volley up. The next ball can give you a much better passing chance.

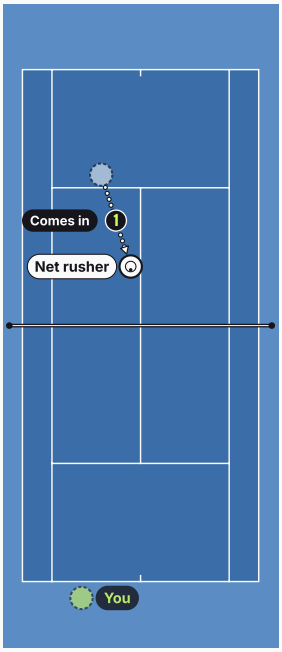
1. Your opponent comes in.
2. You hit low with margin. When in doubt, go through the middle or at their feet.
3. They have to lift their first volley.
4. Step in or set up to pass on the next ball, if it lets you.



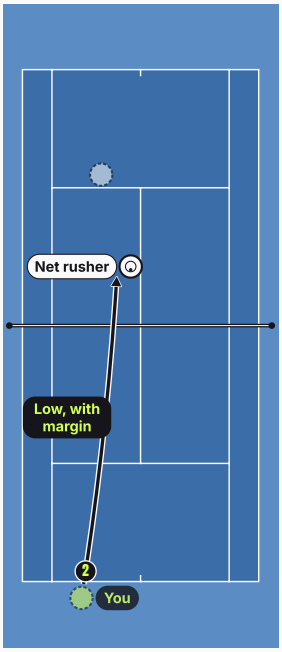
Do not go for the winner on the first ball. Dip it low at their feet with margin so they volley up from below the net. The volley sits up mid-court: step in and pass into the open side.

STEP BY STEP

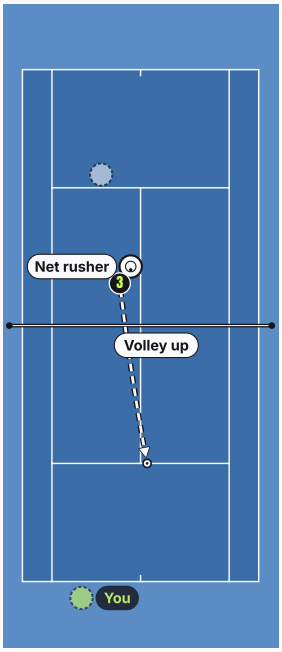
TWO-BALL PASS: LOW FIRST, PASS SECOND



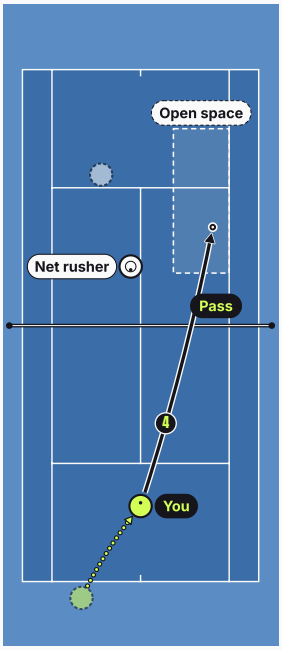
1 Your opponent comes in to the net.



2 Hit low with margin, at their feet, so they volley from below the net.



3 They have to lift the volley, and it sits up mid-court.

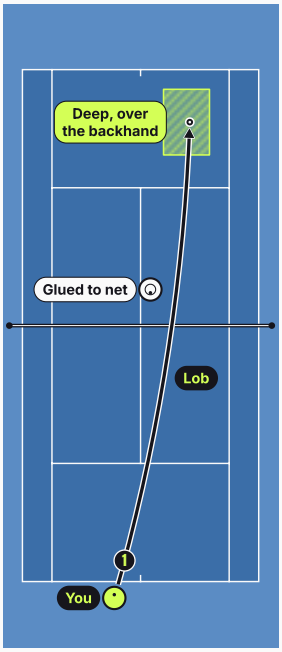


4 Step in and pass into the open side.

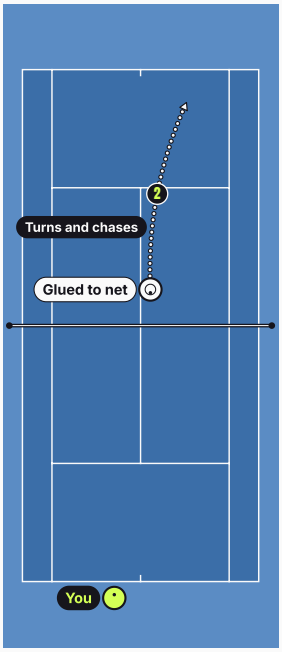
THE NET RUSHER

STEP BY STEP

GLUED TO THE NET: LOB THE BACKHAND SIDE



1 Lob over their backhand side, deep, with height to spare.



2 They have to turn and chase it, far from the net.

THE NET RUSHER

Why it can work

A low contact limits their ability to hit down. You improve the situation before going for the finish. A good volleyer can still give you trouble.

Plan B: lob the player who crowds the net

If they get very close to the net, test the lob. Going over their backhand shoulder helps when you have time to choose. Hit it high and aim deep with margin, not at the baseline. Under pressure, pick the lob you can make over the perfect one.

Simpler option

Use your steadiest shot and keep it low. If the lob is your most reliable shot and their position invites it, use it. Don't invent a big passing shot just because they're at the net. Against serve and volley, block or chip the return low at their feet. You don't need a big return.

Rec player vs. pro. A volley from below the net is hard for anyone. Pros can pass from tough spots because they make the ball dip with pace. If you can't do that on the run, a low first ball is your more reliable weapon.

Common mistakes

- Counting any ball they touch as a failure.
- Going for the line from a bad position.
- Repeating the same answer no matter where they stand.
- Assuming every low first ball produces an easy volley.

It's working if

They're volleying from below the net more often and you get a better second chance.

When to change the plan

- If they handle low balls well, mix in the lob and rethink your targets.
- When a clear passing shot shows up right away, take it. You don't always need two shots.

Practice with a partner

Your partner comes in behind a short ball. Choose a low ball or a lob based on their position. Play the point. Review whether your first reply created a better second ball, even if you lost the point.

COURT CARD

KEEP THE FIRST ONE LOW.
SET UP THE SECOND.
USE THE SPACE BEHIND THEM.

COURT CARDS

Three reminders per opponent. Screenshot this page or keep it in your bag.

THE PUSHER

Margin in the rally.
Attack the right ball.
Be ready for one more.

Change it if: They handle the short ball well, or you keep attacking off balance.

THE MOONBALLER

Read the depth.
Hit at your height.
Step in when it lands short.

Change it if: Taking it early adds errors, or your replies keep landing short.

THE SLICER

Respect the low ball.
Test height.
Step in on the floater.

Change it if: They handle the high, deep ball well.

THE AGGRESSIVE BASELINER

Keep it deep.
Aim big.
Change one thing.

Change it if: They still dominate the ball you're giving them.

THE LOBBER

Pressure before you come in.
Don't run in blind.
Read their contact.

Change it if: Their lobs stay deep even under pressure.

THE NET RUSHER

Keep the first one low.
Set up the second.
Use the space behind them.

Change it if: They handle the low volley and close in without fearing the lob.

POST-MATCH LOG

Opponent and date _____

Score _____

Main problem _____

1. What pattern cost me points?

2. What was my starting plan?

3. When did I use it?

4. Did the change produce weaker replies, or just more of my own errors?

5. How did my opponent respond?

6. Which adjustment worked best?

7. What do I need to practice before the next match?

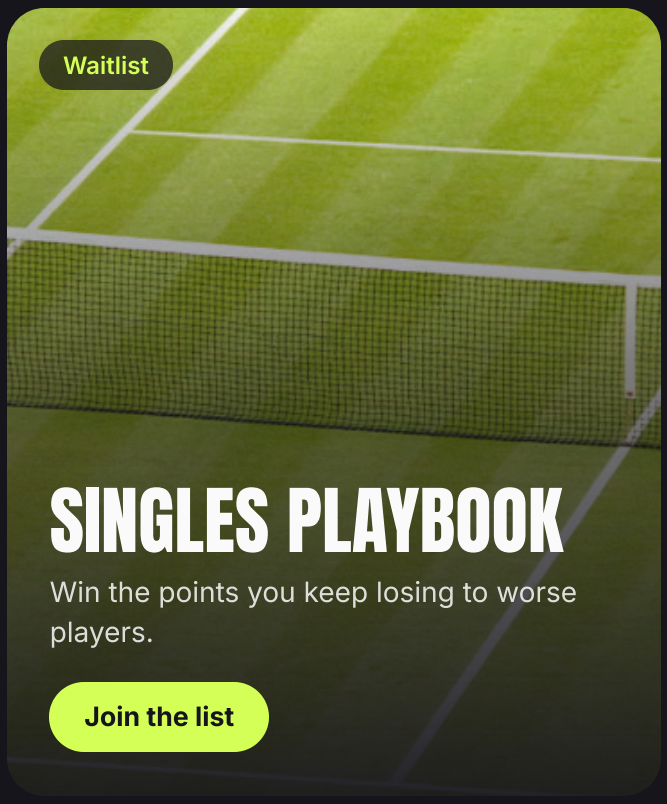
Separate the decision from the execution

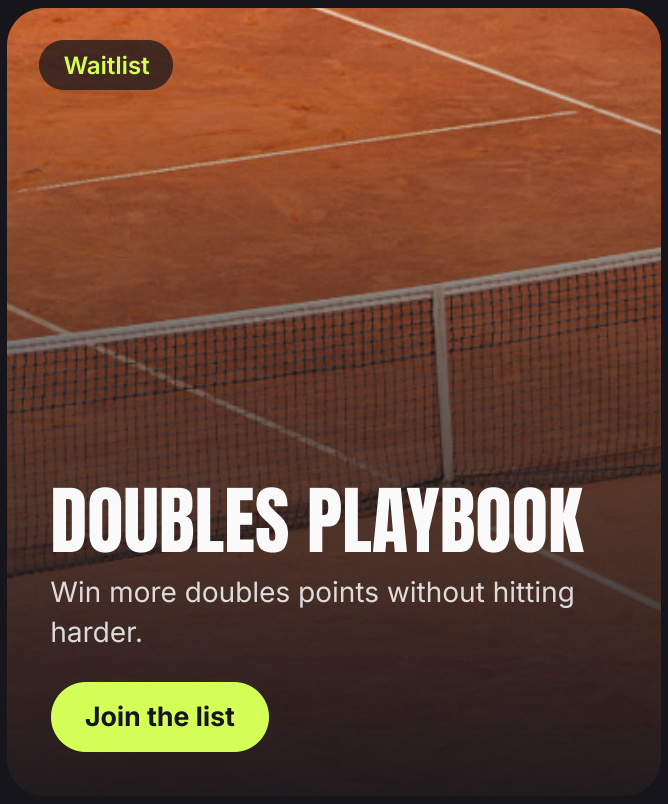
WHAT YOU SAW	HOW TO READ IT
I picked an attackable ball, arrived balanced and missed the shot	The decision may have been good. Work on execution
I attacked a deep, uncomfortable ball and missed	Rethink which balls you call opportunities
I executed the plan well and my opponent kept answering well	Rethink your read of them
I won a point with a very low-margin shot	One lucky winner isn't a plan

WANT TO GO DEEPER?

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Only Tennis

YOUR NEXT MATCH

Pick one opponent, one plan and one change. Write down what happened. That's how a plan becomes a habit.

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