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*DOUBLES
STRATEGY*

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DOUBLES STRATEGY

*A Creative and Psychological
Approach to Tennis*

Françoise Dürr

*David McKay Company, Inc.
New York*

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Durr, Françoise.
Doubles strategy.

1. Tennis—Doubles. I. Title.
GV1002.8.D87 796.34'228 77-21194
ISBN 0-679-20350-8

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Manufactured in the United States of America

Illustrations & Design by Remo R. Duchi

D 965 d
1978

Acknowledgments

There is no way you can sit down and write a book and still play the tennis circuit. Many people helped, and I would like to give a special thanks to Don Coughlan, a good friend and teaching pro in Sausalito, California. Don went through all my random notes and made sense out of them. He spent hours helping with the diagrams and in general making the whole project come together. Without his help, I could not have done it.

I would also like to acknowledge a very special person who has given me the most encouragement of all to become a world-class player: Joseph Selpa, my coach. After I won the national championship in France for the first time, he told me that it was only the first step to becoming the best in the world, even though France seemed like the world to me then. He has been a father, friend, and supporter, and I love him very much.

Françoise Dürr

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DOUBLES
STRATEGY

1

The New Popularity of Doubles

Doubles in the Background

For years singles dominated the world of tennis, and doubles, whether men's, women's, or mixed, remained in the background. Tennis heroes and heroines like Bill Tilden, Renée Lacoste, Suzanne Lenglen, and Maureen Connolly became legends for their performance in singles. Discussions about which era produced the greatest players and comparisons of style of play of the pros were always in terms of singles.

There are several reasons why singles overshadowed doubles. One is related to the need of sports spectators to identify with an individual. Even in professional team sports like basketball,

baseball, or hockey, fans pick out individuals as superstars or idols. Thus singles offered tennis enthusiasts the opportunity to watch an individual compete and take sole responsibility for the outcome. Fans could relate to such a competitor on a one-to-one basis, and if he or she was successful, they could single him or her out as a hero or heroine.

Another reason why singles overshadowed doubles is related to the players themselves and their feelings about the game of doubles. One contention is that the pros did not enjoy doubles and participated in doubles only because of tournament format and obligations. This is true to some extent, but the players' preferences were dictated by other factors. Doubles wins did not bring the status necessary to have tournament entries accepted. Nor did doubles wins bring the greater prize money. In fact, an early-round singles loss brought more money than a late-round doubles win. Why get tired from a tough doubles match and take a chance on losing a later singles match? After a first- or second-round singles defeat, why not move on to the next competition for acclimatization and practice rather than stay for a less profitable and less prestigious doubles match?

A third reason why doubles lagged behind is that, with the exception of a very few players like Billie Jean King, the superstars of singles are not superstars of doubles. Singles and doubles are two different games, and many players understand and favor one over the other. However, a highly acclaimed singles champion like Chris Evert is extremely popular even though she is not a brilliant doubles player. On the other hand, a less well-known champion of doubles like Frew McMillan does not command the same attention because he is not a singles giant.

Doubles to the Main Court

The influx of big money into professional tennis and the tremendous surge in the popularity of tennis created the conditions necessary to boost doubles to a better balance with singles.

Consider the days of amateur tennis of the past. Doubles was considered the domain of weekend players—it was not *real* tennis. In tournaments it was relegated to the back courts, and singles

scheduling took priority. Perhaps a few spectators would stop by for some light entertainment.

Compare this with the situation today. Ever-increasing demand for spectator tennis and ever-increasing available capital have encouraged extending the tournament circuits into the bad weather months. Enclosed arenas have been built—arenas with *one* court. By necessity all play is set on the same stage. Voilà! Doubles has its audience; it is no longer set out of sight. You can witness the drama of gut-busting, arm-stretching doubles—serves that bob like elusive apples, shotgun volleys, feather-duster touch shots, angles that stretch players parallel to the ground, lobs to the wall returned with contorted backfiring, drop shots that tease an opponent into the desperate effort to make the return before the ball dies at his or her feet. And you love it!

Doubles players now have not only an enthusiastic audience and more recognition than they had before, but also more financial reward. Better prize money is being awarded. Grand Prix points for the men and International series points for the women designate top teams for extra compensation, and the Mixed Doubles Championship on television in the spring has become a major winter event.

In nonprofessional tennis doubles has become the answer to the staggering demand for courts, a demand brought on by the tennis boom. Many facilities—public and private—have eased court availability during the warm weather months by requiring doubles during prime time—a very palatable solution for tennis enthusiasts. If you live in an area where bad weather months prohibit playing outdoors, doubles provides the answer for the otherwise prohibitive cost of using indoor courts.

Just as more and more spectators enjoy watching doubles, so do more and more players enjoy playing doubles. If you are a beginner, novice doubles allows you to concentrate on one discipline at a time—service, net, and so on. If you are an advanced player, you may still prefer one-on-one confrontation, but hopefully you are learning to appreciate the challenge of playing in a team situation and working for the power, placement, and movement that blend to make a doubles team.

2

The Doubles Court vs. the Singles Court: The Effects of the Alley

The most obvious difference when you compare the singles and doubles courts is size. Initially the difference may not seem substantial to you. The serving areas of both courts are the same, and although the doubles court has the additional width of the alleys on each side, as a doubles player you theoretically have less width to cover (18 feet) than as a singles player (27 feet). See Diagram 1.

Let us look more closely to see what effects the additional width of the alleys has on the doubles court and how these effects influence your tactics in doubles.

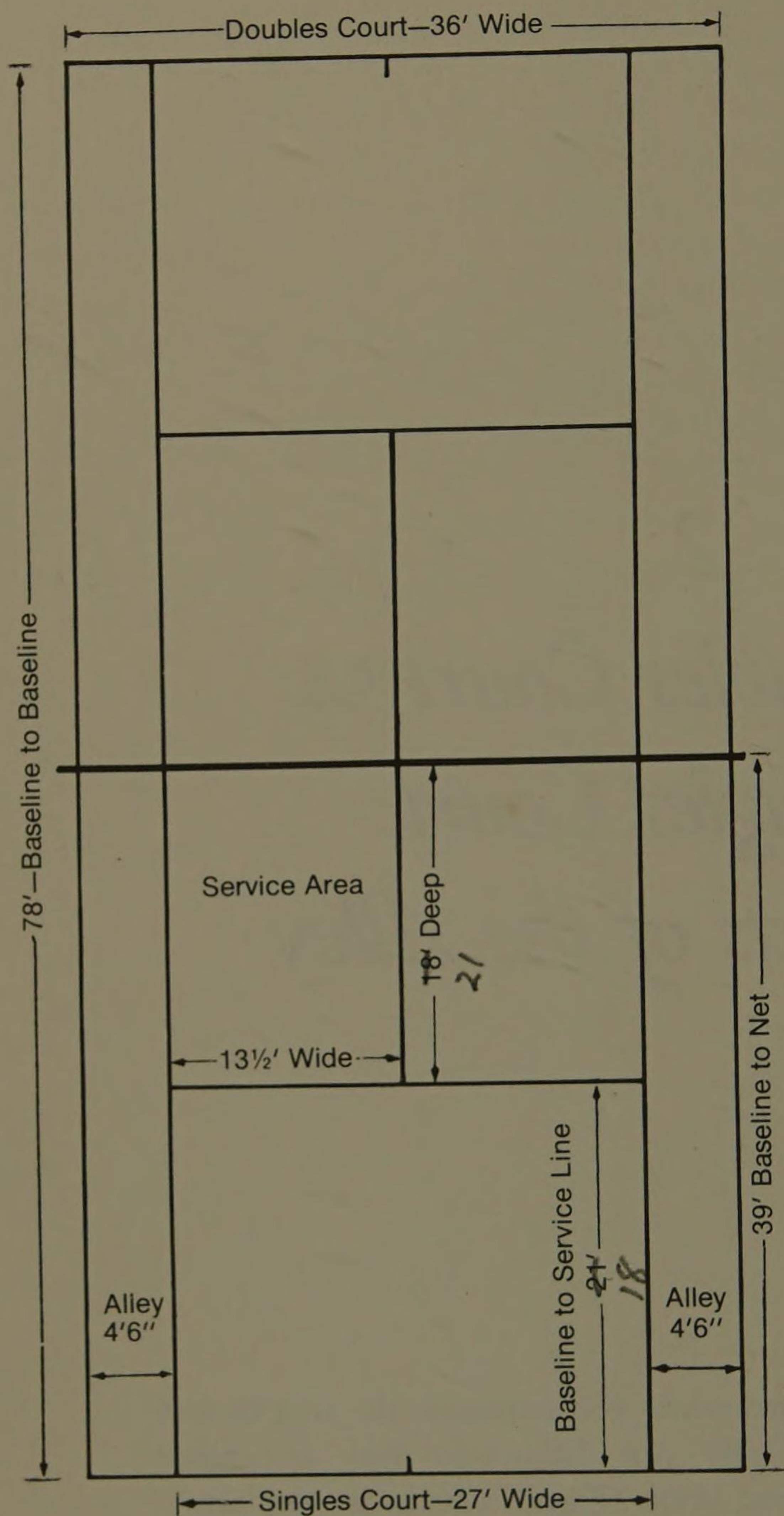


Diagram 1—*Dimensions of the Singles and Doubles Courts*

Horizontal Effect: Wider Angles and Expanded Playing Area Surrounding the Court

The most important difference between the two courts is the playing area surrounding them. The alleys allow you to make wider angles, and such possibilities expand your opponent's

playing area surrounding his or her alley at a ratio greater than 1:1 to the alley. See Diagram 2.

When the Ball Bounces at the Outmost Corner of the Baseline. Compare the effect of the angle of the bounce at the outmost corner of the baseline of the doubles court (Bounce A) with that of the angle of the bounce at the outmost corner of the baseline of the singles court (Bounce B). When your opponent is at a distance one alley-width from the baseline, his or her playing area surrounding the doubles court produced by the angle of Bounce A is

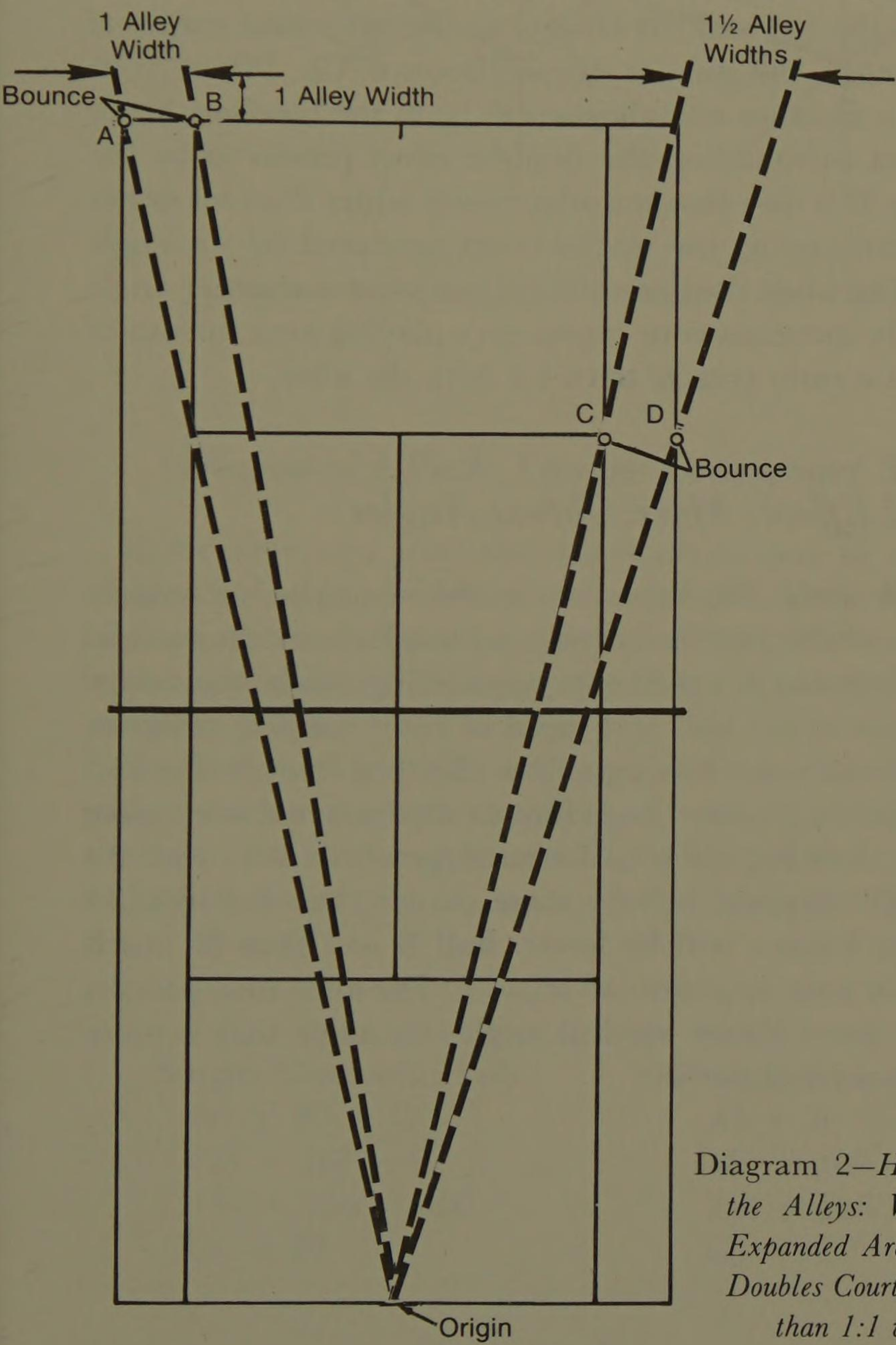


Diagram 2—Horizontal Effect of the Alleys: Wider Angles and Expanded Area Surrounding the Doubles Court at a Ratio Greater than 1:1 with the Alleys

one alley-width wider than his or her playing area surrounding the singles court produced by the angle of Bounce B. The alley thus permits you to make an angle that horizontally increases your opponent's playing area surrounding the court at a ratio of 1:1 with the alley.

When the Ball Bounces at the Outmost Corner of the Service Line. Compare now the effect of the angle of the bounce at the outmost corner of the service line of the doubles court (Bounce D) with that of the angle of the bounce at the outmost corner of the service line of the singles court (Bounce C). When your opponent is at a distance one alley-width from the baseline, his or her playing area surrounding the doubles court produced by the angle of Bounce D is *more than* one alley-width wider than his or her playing area surrounding the singles court produced by the angle of Bounce C. The alley thus permits you to make a sharper angle that horizontally increases your opponent's playing area surrounding the court at a ratio greater than 1:1 with the alley.

Vertical Effect: More Obtuse Angles

When we talk about the distances created by angles, we usually refer to horizontal distance and overlook the effects on the vertical plane. See Diagram 3. Without considering such secondary influences as spin of the ball and speed of court surface, compare the ball that bounces on the singles line (Bounce A) with the ball that bounces on the doubles line (Bounce B) from the very same origin. Because the alley allows a flatter slope of the ball, Ball B's vertical angle (30 degrees) will be more obtuse than Ball A's (45 degrees) and its bounce will be lower. Ball B will thus be much more difficult for your opponent to retrieve. The alley thus permits you to make a more obtuse vertical angle—an angle that is more troublesome for your opponent.

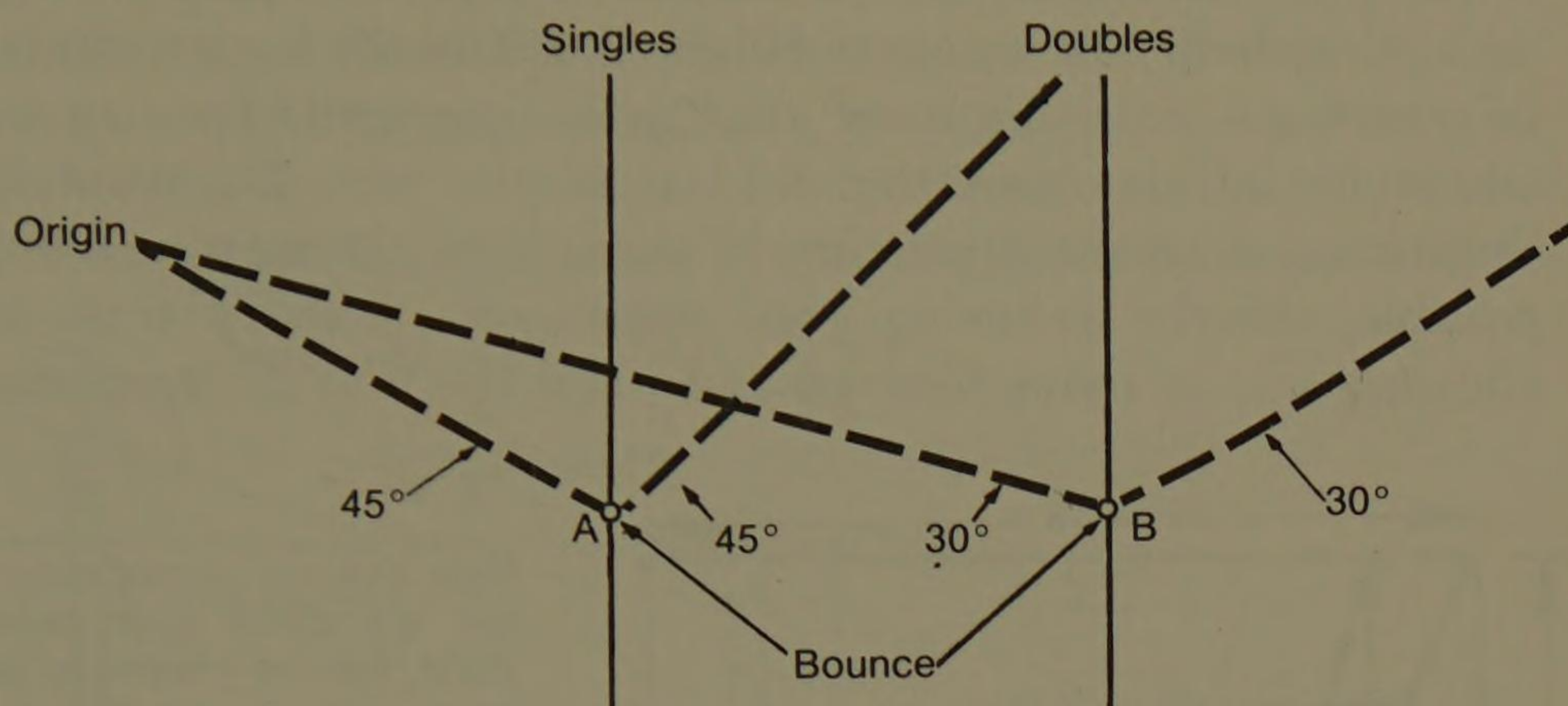


Diagram 3—*Vertical Effect of the Alleys: More Obtuse Angles*

Diagonal Effect: Longer Crosscourt Shots

Remember also that the alleys allow you to make a longer diagonal shot in doubles than in singles. You can hit the ball higher and deeper crosscourt, and it will still stay in the court. This is an important consideration when your opponents are at net and you plan to lob.

See Diagram 4. Using arbitrary numbers for dimensions that will provide nice round numbers, compare the length of a crosscourt lob in a singles court (C_1) with that of a crosscourt lob in a doubles court (C_2) by using the formula for the hypotenuse, $A^2 + B^2 = C^2$

Singles Crosscourt Lob

$$A^2 + B^2 = C^2$$

$$12^2 + 16^2 = C^2$$

$$144 + 256 = 400$$

$$C_1 = 20$$

Doubles Crosscourt Lob

$$A^2 + B^2 = C^2$$

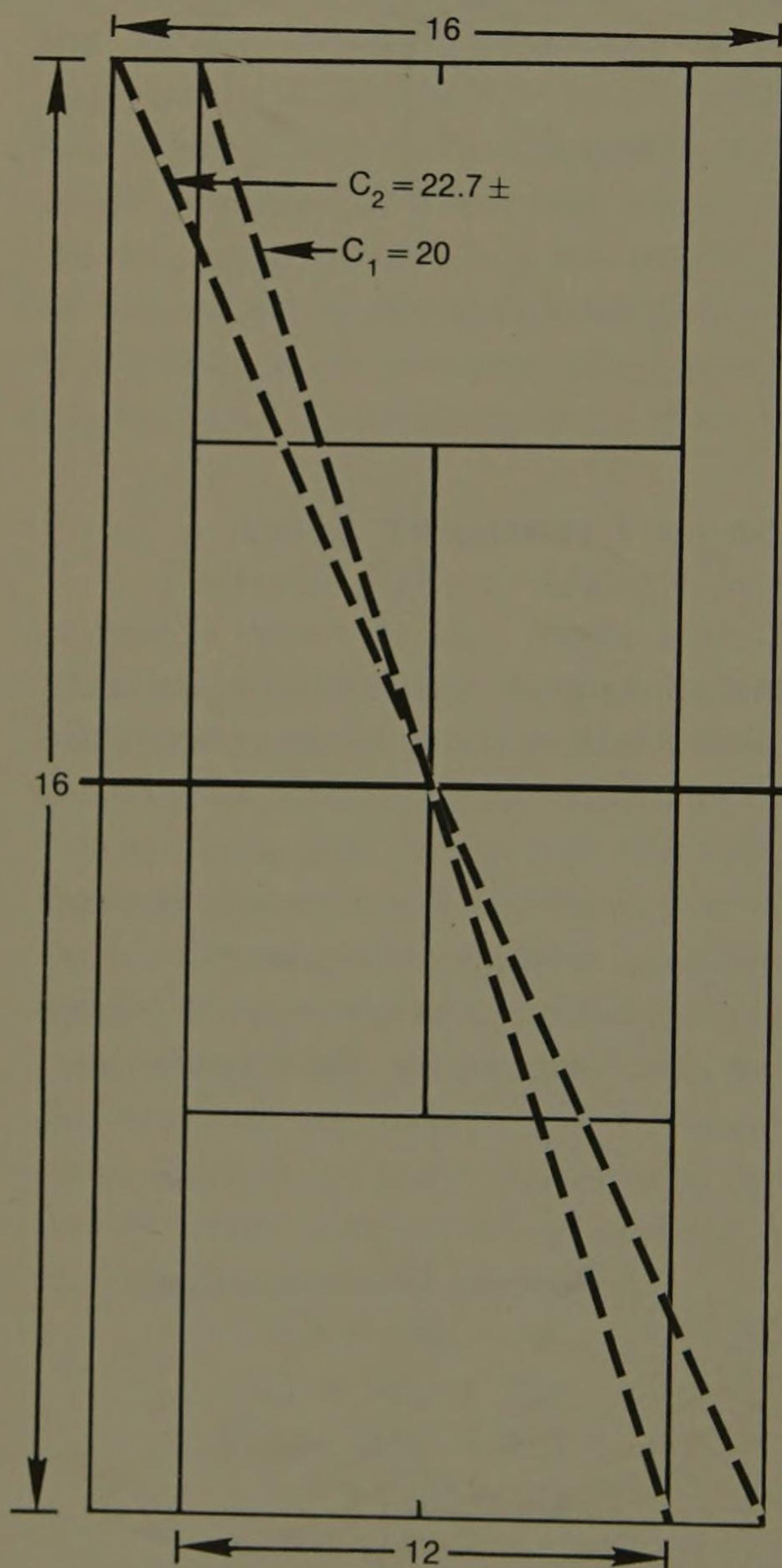
$$16^2 + 16^2 = C^2$$

$$256 + 256 = 512$$

$$C_2 = 22.7^{\pm}$$

Time Effect: Increased Flight Time of the Ball

The alleys of the doubles court also increase the possible flight time of the ball. The longer the flight time and the longer you wait to return the ball, the more time your opponents have to take advantage of the hesitation and close the net. To avoid this situation, cut off the flight time of the ball by taking it as soon as possible, thereby reducing your opponents' recovery time and allowing you to move forward and place the ball to unprotected



Note: Figures on this diagram are not actual court dimensions. Figures chosen to produce round numbers for formulas.

Diagram 4—*Diagonal Effect of the Alleys: Longer Crosscourt Shots*

areas. Remember—there is no rule that the ball must bounce before you hit it, except on serve.

See Diagram 5. Suppose you are Player 2, and you must return a crosscourt shot from Player 1. If you use the better line of interception (A) to get to the ball ($2_1 \rightarrow 2_2$), you will reduce the flight time of the ball, put Player 1 in a defensive position ($1_1 \rightarrow 1_2$), and have a good approach shot (Return A) to close the net. If you

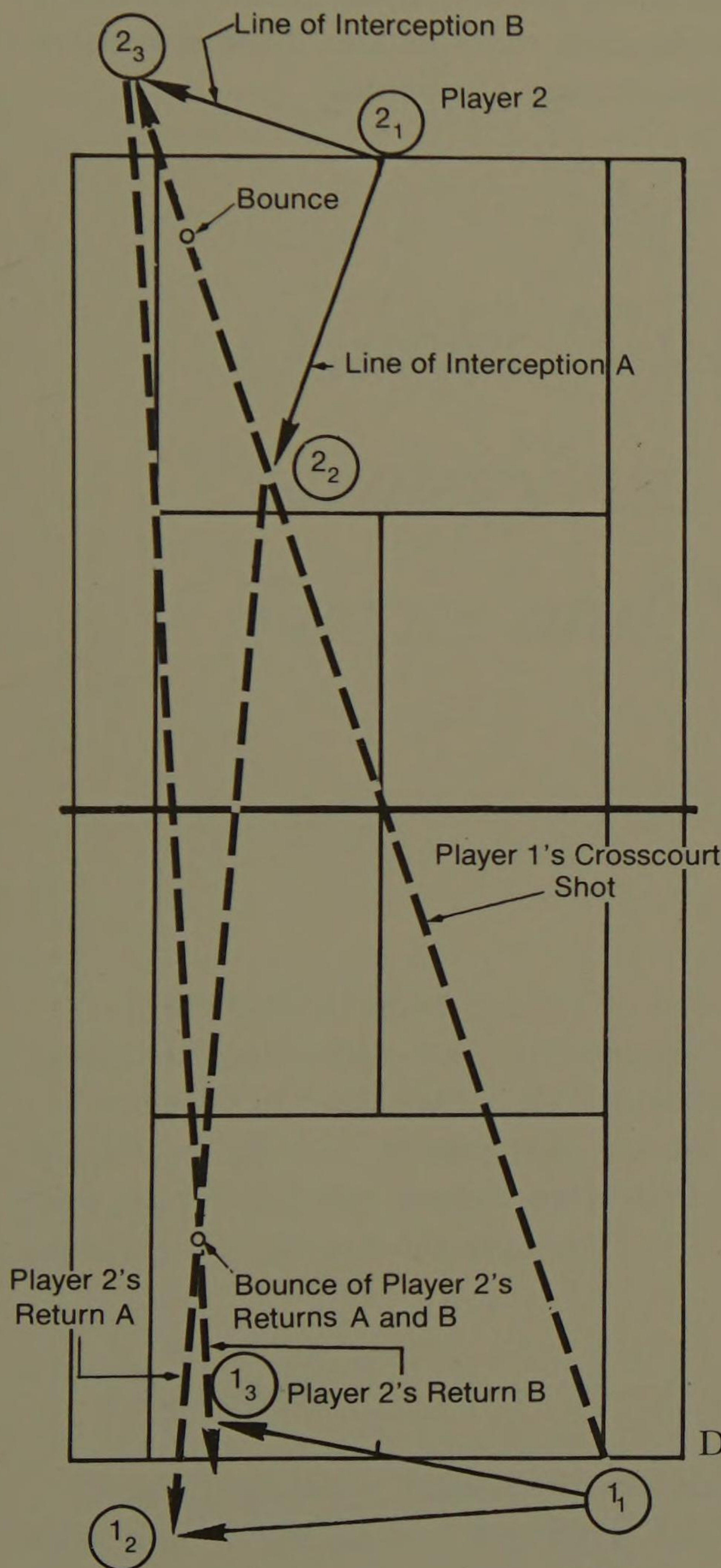


Diagram 5—Reducing the Flight Time of the Ball to Gain the Offensive

use the alternate line of interception (B) to get to the ball ($2_1 \rightarrow 2_3$), the flight time of the ball is increased, you must return from out of court and have no possible offensive play, and you will probably return closer to Player 1 (Return B), thereby allowing a possible offensive interception by Player 1 ($1_1 \rightarrow 1_3$).

Now that you see how the alleys of the doubles court increase the possibilities of angles, surrounding playing area, crosscourt shots, and flight time, you should become more aware of the role these factors play in the tactics and strategy of doubles.

3

Doubles Tactics and Strategy vs. Singles Tactics and Strategy

As I mentioned before, singles and doubles are two very different games. Let us define their differences in terms of the strokes that are the tools of both games. By understanding the possibilities and limitations of each stroke, you will be better able to understand how and why the tactics and strategy of using these strokes separate one game from another.

The Serve

Tennis popularity started to grow rapidly during the era of the serve-and-volley game. We have all been impressed with the

rocket-like serves of pros like Stan Smith, Arthur Ashe, and Roscoe Tanner. It is therefore understandable that many amateur players consider power the key to a successful serve.

However, as I'll now show, in neither singles nor doubles does the serve have to be powerful to be effective. Nor should the serve be the sole offensive weapon in either game. I have managed to stay in the top ten among women players in the world for more than fifteen years with a serve that Bud Collins has dubbed "pitty-pat." It is so slow that in a fast-serve contest in Washington, D. C., my serve never moved the needle on the machine used to judge the contest.

In Singles

Consider first the serve in singles. There are three basic strategies in singles: serve-and-volley, backcourt, or an all-court mixture of the two. Each strategy has a different serving requirement. The following guidelines might help you to determine your strategy and your service tactics according to the weaknesses and strengths of your opponent:

- If you see that your opponent needs a net target for a successful return or can only reflex a ball back, do not play serve-and-volley. This strategy will only make up for his or her limitations rather than take advantage of them. A steady backcourt game and slow, twisting serves will frustrate him or her out of the match.

- You may find that a hard, wide serve is an asset for a weaker, less experienced opponent who desperately swings late and thereby unintentionally passes you down the line. If you then change your tactic to a one-half-speed serve, he or she will probably hit everything out.

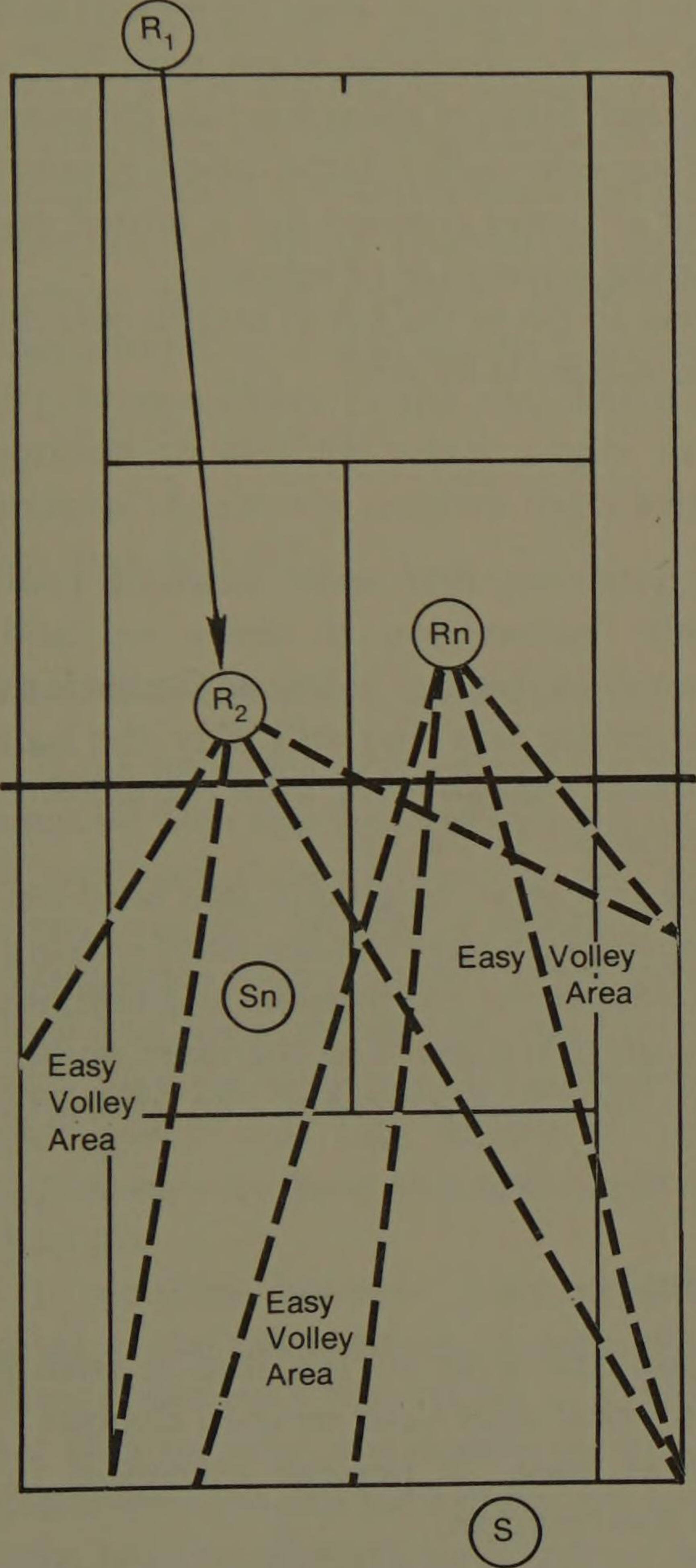
- If your opponent is weak-armed and only blocks balls back, serve wide to either side. He or she will be stretched far and will not have the strength for a successful return.

- If his or her footwork is poor and preparation slow, serve three-quarter speed into the body.

- No matter what the quality of your opponent, keep him or her off balance by varying the speed, twist, and spin of your serve.

- If you are losing, try deep, soft first serves to the backhand.

Unless your opponent is having even more success, keep up the tactic. Over a period of time the pressure of your reduced errors and the constant attack on his or her backhand will take its toll. Your opponent will have to work for each point and will lose momentum. You will be forcing your opponent to win each point instead of losing it yourself.



Key to Players:

R = Receiver

R_n = Receiver's netman

S = Server

S_n = Server's netman

Diagram 6—*Team-Splitting Offers No Offense or Defense*

In Doubles

In doubles there is only one basic strategy: Get your first serve in and go to the net as fast as you can. You cannot afford to stay on the baseline while your partner is at net. Such team-splitting gives your opponents the opportunity to close the net and gain the offensive. See Diagram 6. Suppose you serve and do not follow your serve to the net. The receiver feels no pressure when he returns and approaches the net ($R_1 \rightarrow R_2$). The receiving team now has a united offensive position at the net. Each of them has two different easy-volley areas—a total of four easy-volley areas—open because your team has neither a united offensive position nor a united defensive position. You have lost the advantage of serving.

Although you use the big serve to get to the net in singles, you do not use it to get to the net in doubles. Why not?

The Hard First Serve in Singles

In singles a fast, wide, or jamming first serve weakens your opponent's return and thereby allows you to move up and maintain the offensive. You can take the first volley as far back as between the baseline and the service line and still play the ball safely to an opening in the court far enough away from the receiver to allow you time to move even closer to the net.

More important, should your first serve be a fault, you need not follow your second serve to the net. You have the option of waiting for a strong return of your second serve at the baseline and lobbing or passing if your opponent rushes to the net. You therefore do not have the pressure of getting in your first serve and can afford to strive for the big first serve.

The Hard First Serve in Doubles

In doubles, however, to gain the time to get into a strong position at the net—an absolute must after your serve in doubles—the same big serve must be at least 70 percent successful in producing a weak return from the receiver.

Think what happens if both your serve and the receiver's return are hard and fast: Your netman's time and ability to intimidate

the receiver with the threat of poaching is reduced. Your own time to move to the net is reduced, and you must make your first volley—probably a weak one—just inside the baseline. The receiver's netman will probably intercept your weak volley, and your netman will not have time to cover the interception. The receiver will close the net before you do, and your opponents will take command of the net.

Also, in doubles your percentage of first serves in is critical. Unlike when serving in singles, you do not have the option of staying back on the second serve. If you do stay back, you will face the same set of circumstances I just described, and the receiver will close the net before you do. In fact, with the second serve, the receiver can take a bolder, more offensive stance. Knowing that your second serve will not be a power serve, he or she will move a step or two closer to the net. There he or she will be in a better position to aim for wider angles and to perhaps test out your netman. Again, the receiver has a better opportunity of closing the net than you do.

The Most Effective Doubles Serve

If the hard, fast serve is not the most effective serve for doubles, what is? One approach to this question is to consider what returns of serve are most effective in doubles and from there determine what serve will prevent or frustrate such returns.

In singles your opponent's best return of your serve is one that is deep and wide, thereby forcing you to move laterally and slowing your advance to the net. You therefore serve with all the slice, spin, and power you can muster in order to limit the receiver's opportunity to pass you and make you move to the side rather than up.

In doubles, however, your netman's ability to cover half the court at the net reduces the possibility of effective lateral returns. Your opponent's best return is at your feet as you come in to the net after serving—a very difficult shot to handle. To counteract the effectiveness of this kind of return, use a *three-quarter-speed serve* with some twist to allow yourself time to get in close enough for the net to actually protect your feet. The added twist on your serve may unbalance the receiver enough to weaken the return and thereby

give you more opportunity to make an effective volley. Billy Jean King says that my serve is so slow and well-placed that I'm standing at the net before she gets a chance to hit the return.

The Return of Serve

I discussed the return of serve briefly in the previous section, but let us try to define further the differences between the returns of serve in singles and doubles. Imagine now that you are the receiver and consider how to most effectively neutralize the advantage of the server by your return.

In Singles

Area of Return. As I pointed out earlier, the area of return in singles is much less restricted than in doubles because you have only one opponent. You are able to return *deep and wide* and thereby to pull the server to the side and impede his or her advance to the net.

Stroke of Return. In singles you also have the time to execute a *normal groundstroke* as a return. If your opponent comes to net after a big serve, you have a good possibility of passing him or her with an equally powerful groundstroke. If your opponent does not come to the net (there is no pressure in singles to do so), then your strong return at least will somewhat reduce his or her offensive potential. In fact your return might feel so strong or well-placed that you can follow your return to the net and thereby gain the offensive position. Or you can stay at the baseline and use deep groundstrokes to keep your opponent at the baseline until you feel you have placed a ball so well that your opponent will not be able to pass you if you come to the net. Once you come to the net, however, you must try to win the point as soon as possible, because it is difficult to cover the entire net yourself for more than one or two volleys.

In Doubles

In doubles as well as in singles, the server, because he starts play, controls the offensive position. Your return should be an attempt

to neutralize that advantage. The key elements of an effective return in doubles are placement and quickness.

Area of Return. Remember that your area of return is restricted because the server's netman can intercept returns on at least one half of the court. You must return, therefore, in the direction of the incoming server. However, the return must be one that he or she cannot easily volley away for a winner. A return *at the server's feet* with a troublesome bounce or drop of the ball will frustrate and weaken his or her ability to place a strong volley and thereby give you a stand-off—another chance to play the ball and hopefully to further reduce his or her initial advantage as server.

The most popular stroke to achieve this ideal return is the chip shot. In this stroke you hit the ball softly and with underspin for control. The ball drops quickly and dies on the bounce.

Stroke of Return. In singles you know that the server *might* move in behind the serve and volley from approximately the service line. In doubles you know that the server *will* move in and volley from well within the service line. Also, in doubles you are more likely to move to the net yourself after your return. You therefore cannot afford the time, as in singles, to stand back and execute a powerful groundstroke with exaggerated backswing and followthrough as a return. Such exaggeration affords the server more time to move in tighter to the net and gives you less time to follow your return to the net. Instead, you must stand in as close as possible to receive and use a *groundstroke return with abbreviated backswing and shortened, firm-wristed followthrough*. The quickness of this kind of return shortens the time the server has to get to the net and increases your time to follow your return to the net.

Groundstrokes

In Singles

Groundstrokes are basically for backcourt play, and are used in singles much more than in doubles. You keep your opponent back with deep corner-to-corner placements that barely clear the net.

In Doubles

In doubles you cannot afford the time to execute the full backswing and followthrough of baseline groundstrokes. Before you even recover from such a stroke, your opponents will be at the net and will volley away your shot. To save time, you shorten your backswing and followthrough and take the ball above the net. To avoid or frustrate your opponent's volley, you hit down at an opponent's feet or make a soft shot that dies just as it clears the net. You thereby force your opponent to hit up. Then you can make the putaway shot down.

If, however, your team is forced to the baseline, you can use groundstrokes as a defensive measure against your opponents at the net. Hit these groundstrokes with extra topspin so that the ball stays low, dips as it clears the net, and therefore is difficult for your opponents to handle. To hit topspin, keep your racquet face vertical and brush up—bottom to top—on the ball as it leaves your racquet to give it spin in the direction it is traveling. The spin of the ball makes the ball difficult to volley. And if it bounces, it usually hops and gains pace.

Or, given the same situation of being at the baseline with your opponents at net, you also can try a power play with groundstrokes—that is, hitting two or three flat, hard balls to intimidate your opponents into taking a step or two back from the net, and then hitting a topspin shot that will drop at their feet.

The Lob

The lob is primarily a defensive stroke in both singles and doubles. By sending the ball high, you can gain time to recover after being pulled out of position by a well-placed shot. Or you can use the lob to open the net.

Consider the following possibilities of the lob in doubles:

- A good lob, by giving you the opportunity to move up as your opponents retreat to retrieve, may reverse a situation where your team is at the baseline and your opponents are at the net.
- A quick lob volley over your opponents' heads may even catch

them flat-footed and turn out to be a winner for you. However, use this tactic only if your opponents are so tight at the net that you have relatively few options. When the ball is above the net, it is always best to volley downward, but the lob volley is an occasional answer for the ball below the net.

- A lob over the head of the server's netman as a return of serve can unbalance the net attack of the server and thereby give your team the opportunity to reduce the server's advantage.

The Net and Volley

In Singles

In singles you must earn the net with placements that will not allow your opponent to make passing shots. And once you are at the net, you must win the point as soon as possible because it becomes increasingly more difficult for you to cover the entire net yourself once you have made your first or second volley.

In Doubles

In doubles you control the net as server by virtue of the starting position of your netman. He is able to cover 50 percent of the net before you even serve the ball, and if your serve is good, you can close the other 50 percent almost before the ball reaches the receiver. As in singles, once you have control of the net, you should win the point as soon as possible to prevent your opponents from gaining a stand-off position that could possibly weaken your advantage.

Dominating the net does not mean that you should limit your offense to power volleys. Like big serves, big net shots poorly played often beget even faster returns that do not give you enough time to recover and prepare. Early interception and solid placement, not just power, are the keys to good net play. However, do not hesitate to hit out when you know you have a good setup. Even so, always be prepared for a return.

The Overhead

The antithesis of the lob, and of comparable value, is the overhead. The overhead, or smash, requires a blend of power and placement. Like the serve, it is an offensive shot that, if played incorrectly, can produce a backlash rather than a winner.

In Singles

In singles, placement, and not power, of the overhead is of primary importance. Because your opponent has his or her entire court to cover, you usually can win your point by simply hitting the ball where he or she is not.

In Doubles

In doubles, because you must hit through two opponents, you have less chance of placing the ball where someone is not. Power is more important than placement. Also, because your opponents will be fairly close to the net, a hard smash will reduce their reflex time.

The Half-Volley

The half-volley is a technique to handle a low ball that bounces before a volley is possible, but not soon enough to allow a normal groundstroke. The ball is taken at the bounce with no backswing, but with a short, sweeping-up followthrough to direct and lift the ball.

In Singles

In singles you half-volley *down the line* to stretch your opponent wide if he or she is at the net and keep your opponent deep in the corner if he or she is at the baseline.

In Doubles

In doubles you half-volley *down the line*, or if an opponent is covering the line, you half-volley *crosscourt to the feet of your other opponent*.

Remember that the half-volley is rarely a winner. It is a difficult shot to execute, but if you are successful in simply playing it back, you can hope to close in immediately and make the easier volley.

The Approach Shot

The approach shot is not a specific stroke. It is a groundstroke, a volley, or a half-volley taken inside the baseline and followed to the net.

In Singles

In singles, place your approach shot deep *down the line*. Because a down-the-line ball must have an appreciable angle of rise to clear the net, a medium-pace ball will travel upward after clearing the net. Your opponent not only will be stretched to reach the ball, but also will have to withstand the power of a ball hit straight ahead. He or she will be forced into making a weak defensive shot or attempting a low-percentage winner.

In Doubles

In doubles you should not go down the line on an approach shot. If you do, one of your opponents will close the line and volley away the rising ball. Instead, follow the general rule of a *crosscourt* approach shot *to the feet of your opponent*. A medium-pace crosscourt shot usually has a gentle angle of rise so that the ball drops just as it clears the net. Your opponent must hit up, and you have a good chance of winning the point with a strong volley.

Occasionally the netman directly opposite you will anticipate

the crosscourt shot and will move from his or her position to intercept it. In this case a short, easy shot down the line may prove quite effective.

The Drop Shot

In Singles

The drop shot is effective in singles to make an outright winner, to tire your opponent, to force a strong backcourt player forward to play a weak net game, or simply to catch your opponent off balance and set up an opening.

In Doubles

The drop shot in itself does not have the same effectiveness in doubles that it does in singles. But if you modify it to a soft angle shot, you increase its possibilities in doubles. Soft angle shots skim the net and drop quickly so that your opponents have little opportunity for making forceful plays. More important, an opponent is forced to hit up. If he tries to hit with power, the ball will carry high enough above the net for you or your partner to volley it away for a winner. Your opponent would be wise to answer your soft, short angle with another soft, short angle.

My hope is that this review of strokes and of the differences in tactics and strategy of using them in singles and doubles has made it evident that strokes are your tools for building a good game. You must learn to execute each stroke and shot separately before you can attempt to progress to an integrated all-court game of either singles or doubles.

For the amateur, the progression to good tennis is a straight line. It starts with mastery of strokes and presumably ends with understanding of strategy:

STROKE → MOVEMENT → TACTICS → STRATEGY

In the following chapters I shall discuss the three main

components of the game of doubles—serve, return of serve, and net—in much more detail and show how your mastery of the strokes required for each component enables you to use the tactics that will achieve a winning strategy.

4

The Serve

The Standard Serves

Your service is most effective if you vary the speed and spin of each serve and thereby keep the receiver off balance. To accomplish such differences in delivery, change your racquet grip and your ball toss, not the speed of your stroke. Your racquet grip and ball toss determine the angle of your racquet face when it hits the ball, and it is the angle of your racquet face that determines how much of the power of your stroke will be distributed to velocity of the ball and how much to spin of the ball.

There are three standard serves—flat, slice, and twist. A fourth serve—the American twist—is a variation of the twist.

The Flat Serve

For the flat serve, use the forehand grip (usually the eastern or shake-hands grip) and a forward toss.

The advantage of the serve is its speed, its potential for overpowering the receiver.

This same speed, however, often backfires to become a disadvantage because it shortens your net approach time. See page 16 for a discussion of a fast serve in doubles. Also see Diagram 8 on page 29 for a comparison of the first-volley position of the server after a flat serve as opposed to after a three-quarter-speed twist serve.

Another disadvantage of the flat serve is its low percentage of success. You often must rely upon your second serve, thereby reducing your offensive potential. Diagram 7 points out the odds against a flat serve being successful. Even a flat serve by a seven-foot-tall player with a three-foot reach (including racquet) barely clears the net.

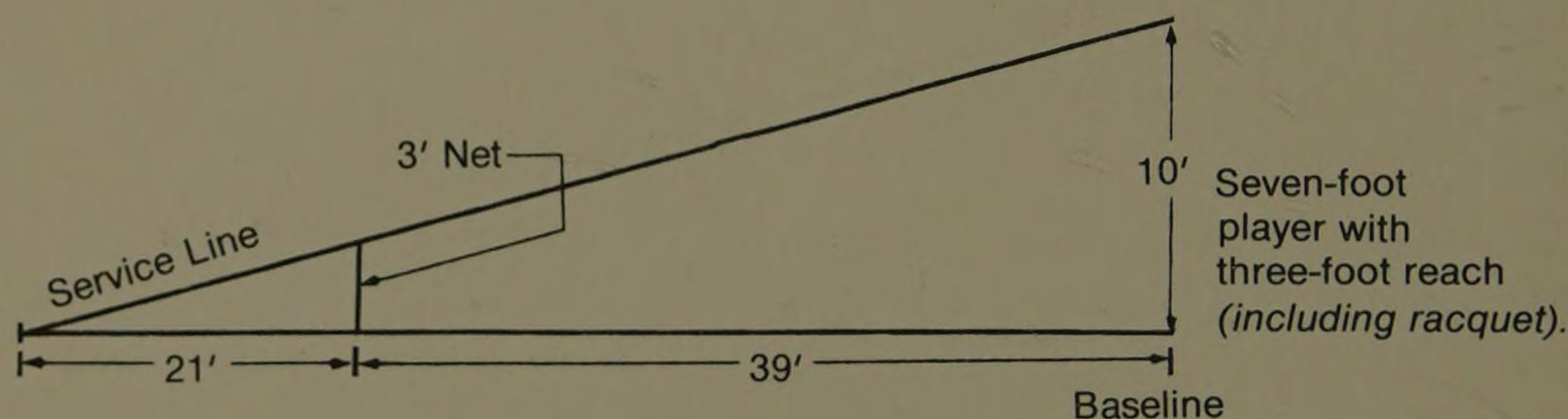


Diagram 7—*The Flat Serve Barely Clears the Net*

The Slice Serve

For the slice serve, use the backhand grip and a side toss. The ball curves sharply from right to left (right-hand service), and continues to curve after it bounces, skidding low. See Diagram 9 on page 31.

The advantage of the slice serve is that the curve of the ball can pull the receiver wide or can jam him or her with a difficult angle to the body.

The slice serve has three disadvantages: (1) reaching laterally for the side toss reduces your forward motion into the court, (2) net

clearance of the serve is limited, and (3) the receiver has a greater angle of return if the serve pulls him wide but he still is able to make the return.

The Standard Twist

For the standard twist serve, use the continental grip (halfway between the forehand and backhand grips) and a slightly overhead

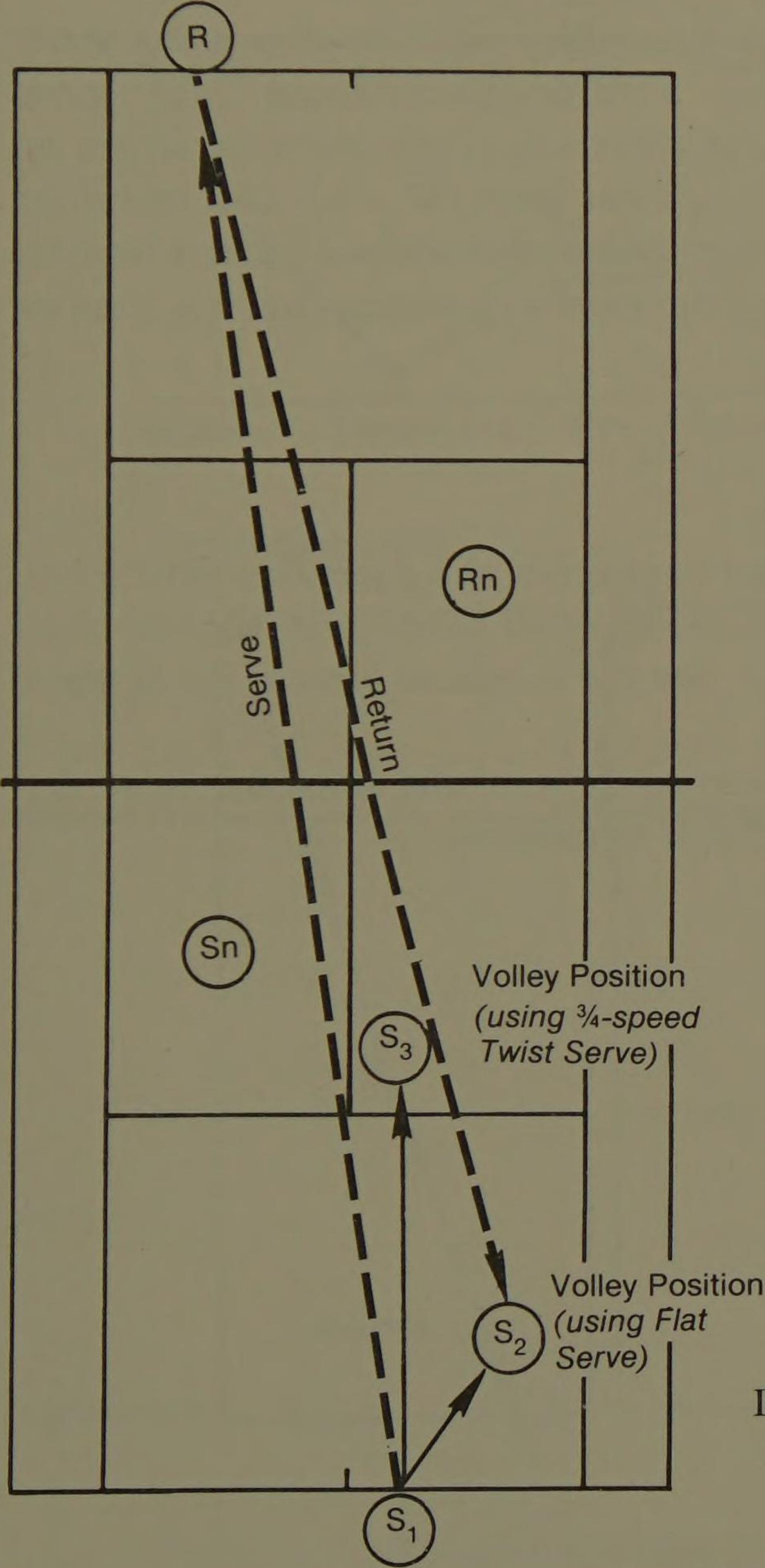


Diagram 8—*First-Volley Positions After a Flat Serve (Position 1) and After a Three-Quarter-Speed Twist Serve (Position 2)*

toss. The ball curves slightly like that of the slice serve, but the added topspin causes the ball to arch over the net and then drop down sharply. The mixture of spin and slice adds speed and kick to the bounce. See Diagram 9.

When delivered at three-quarter speed, the twist serve has several advantages: (1) the percentage of successful first serves is high, (2) net clearance is adequate, (3) the twist imparts additional power to the bounce, and (4) you have sufficient time to reach the net to make your first volley.

Diagram 8 compares your first-volley position after a flat serve (Position 1) with that after a three-quarter-speed twist serve (Position 2). Because the twist serve allows you the time to get in closer to the net ($S_1 \rightarrow S_3$) than a flat serve ($S_1 \rightarrow S_2$) and therefore enables you to volley the return sooner, the receiver has less time to approach after his return and the receiver's netman has less time to intercept your volley.

The American Twist Serve

An offshoot of the standard twist serve, the American twist serve gives the ball a reverse bounce—the ball bounces in the opposite direction of its curve of flight. See the overhead view of the bounce in Diagram 9.

Its advantages are the same as those of the standard twist. Its disadvantage is that it is difficult to execute.

SIDE VIEW

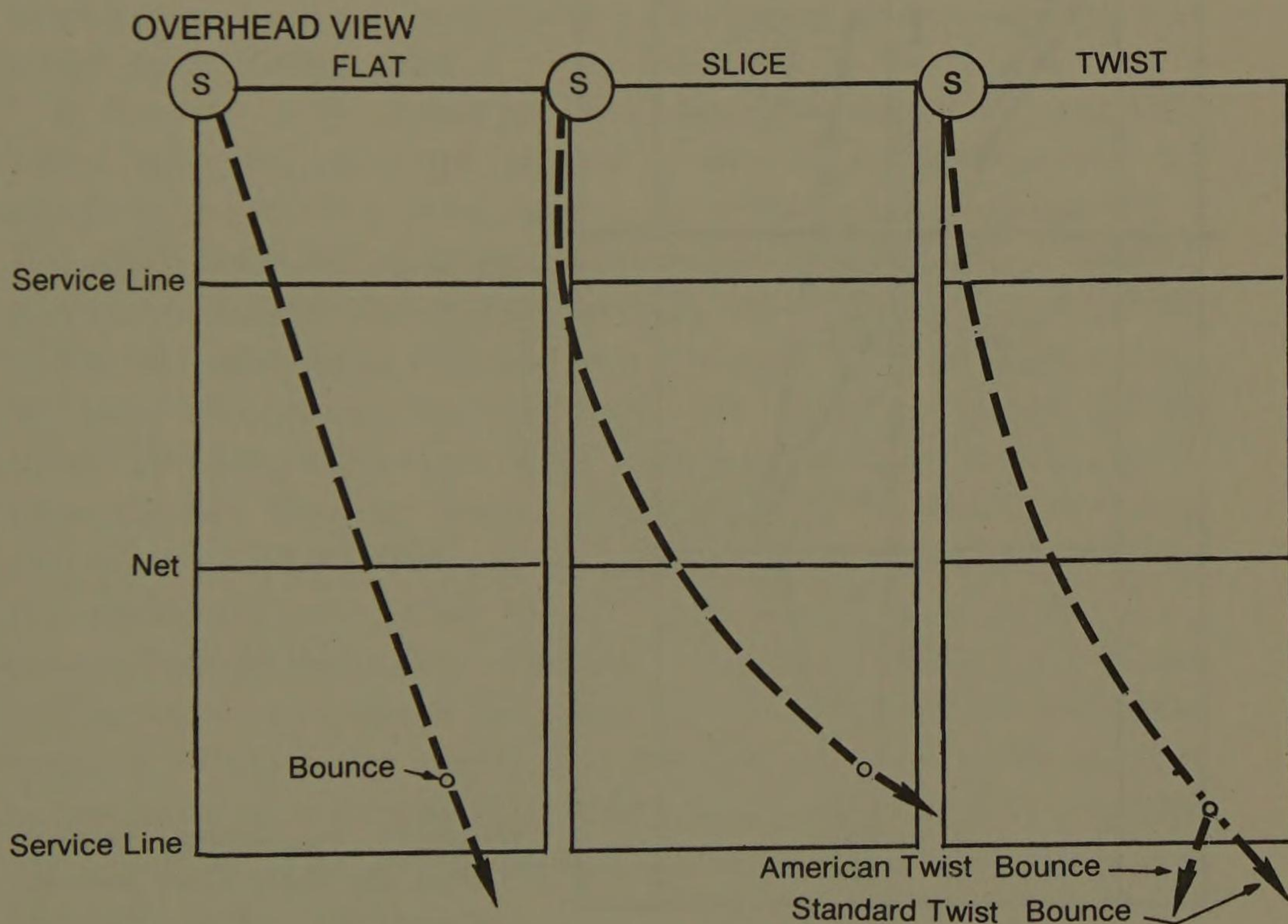
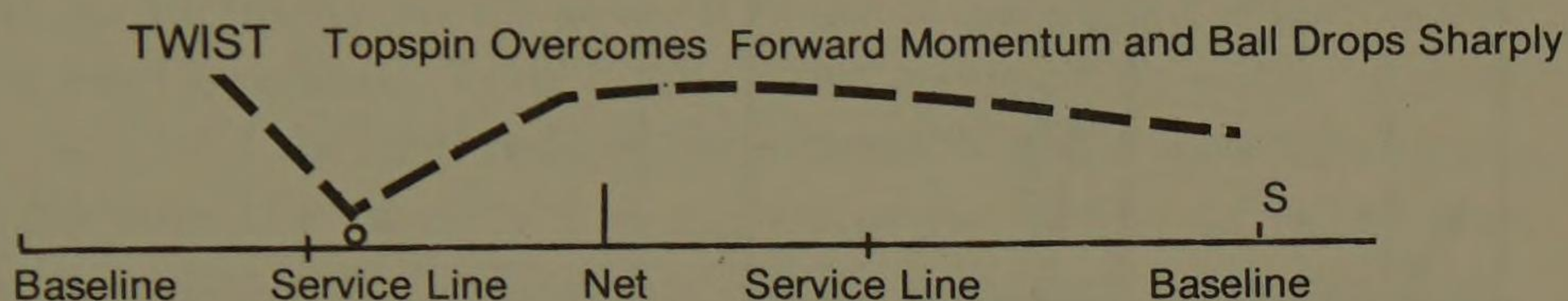
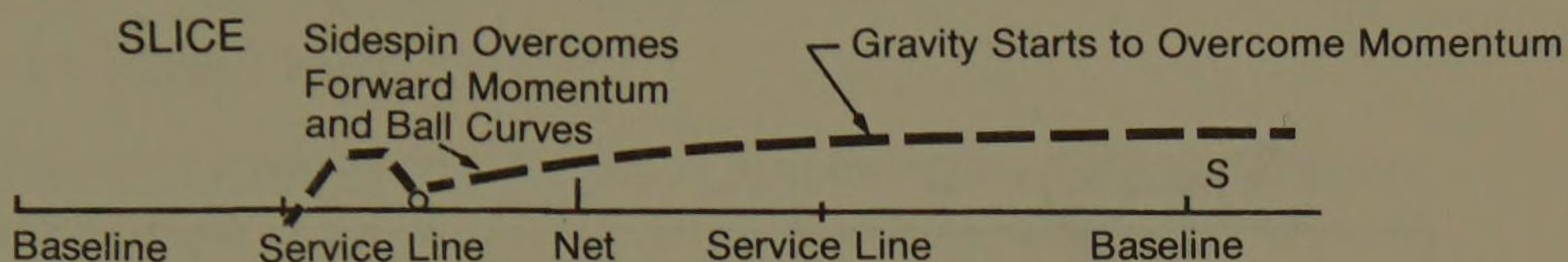
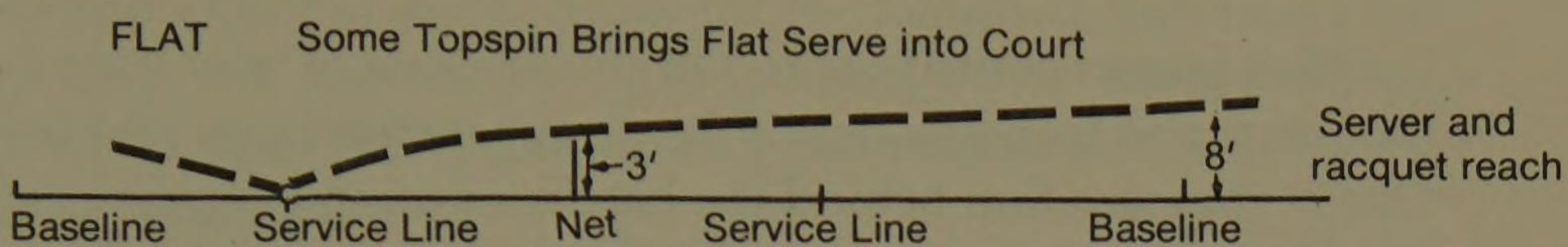


Diagram 9—Service Trajectories of the Three Standard Serves:
Flat, Slice, and Twist

Serving Position and the Angle of the Serve

Other factors contribute to the effectiveness of your serve besides the speed and spin you derive from your racquet grip and ball toss. One is your position behind the baseline and the angle of the serve (in relation to the serving court).

Let us look at the following diagrams (Diagrams 10-17) to see

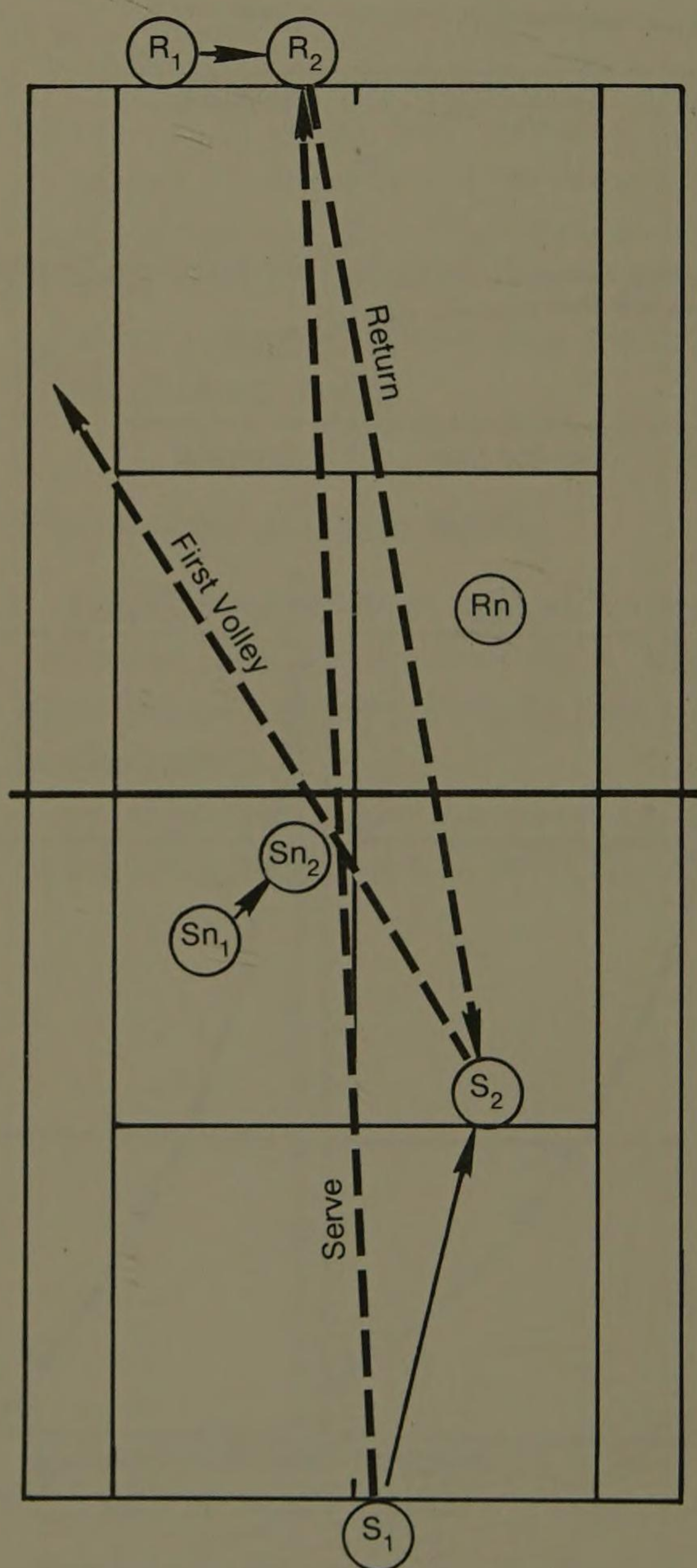


Diagram 10—*Serving Position:*
From the Right Court from the
Center. Angle of Serve: Up the
Middle to the Backhand

the probabilities resulting from various serving positions at the baseline and angles of serve. Allow for the following conditions for all examples: all players are right-handed, all serves are three-quarter speed (spin is not considered), and returns are determined by what is most probable.

From the Right Court

In Diagram 10 your serving position is from the right court from the center; your serving angle is up the middle to the backhand. Although serving from the center allows you only forehand coverage of the return, the angle of the serve to the backhand is so effective that the receiver is not likely to be able to make a backhand return very wide to your forehand. Your netman can move closer to the center ($S_{n1} \rightarrow S_{n2}$) and thereby reduce the receiver's angle of return even more. Because the receiver has moved to the center to make the return ($R_1 \rightarrow R_2$) and therefore has left his or her alley unprotected, you can make your first volley to the receiver's alley without any interception from either opponent. This serving position and angle have a high degree of effectiveness.

In Diagram 11 your serving position is again from the right court from the center; however, your angle of serve is wide to the forehand. In this situation the receiver must move wide to his or her forehand ($R_1 \rightarrow R_2$) and therefore has a maximum angle of return. Your netman cannot intimidate the receiver because he or she must protect his or her own alley from a down-the-line return. You must move wide to volley the return ($S_1 \rightarrow S_2$), and your volley probably will be weak. The long flight time of the wide return allows the receiver to close the net. Because you have moved wide for your first volley and your netman has stayed in position to cover his or her alley, the middle of your court is now open to either opponent. You cannot bypass them down the line because the receiver's netman will move to cover his or her alley now that the receiver has come forward to close the angle. The receiving team has the perfect opportunity to intercept your volley and put it down the middle for a winner. This serving position and angle of serve has a very low percentage of effectiveness.

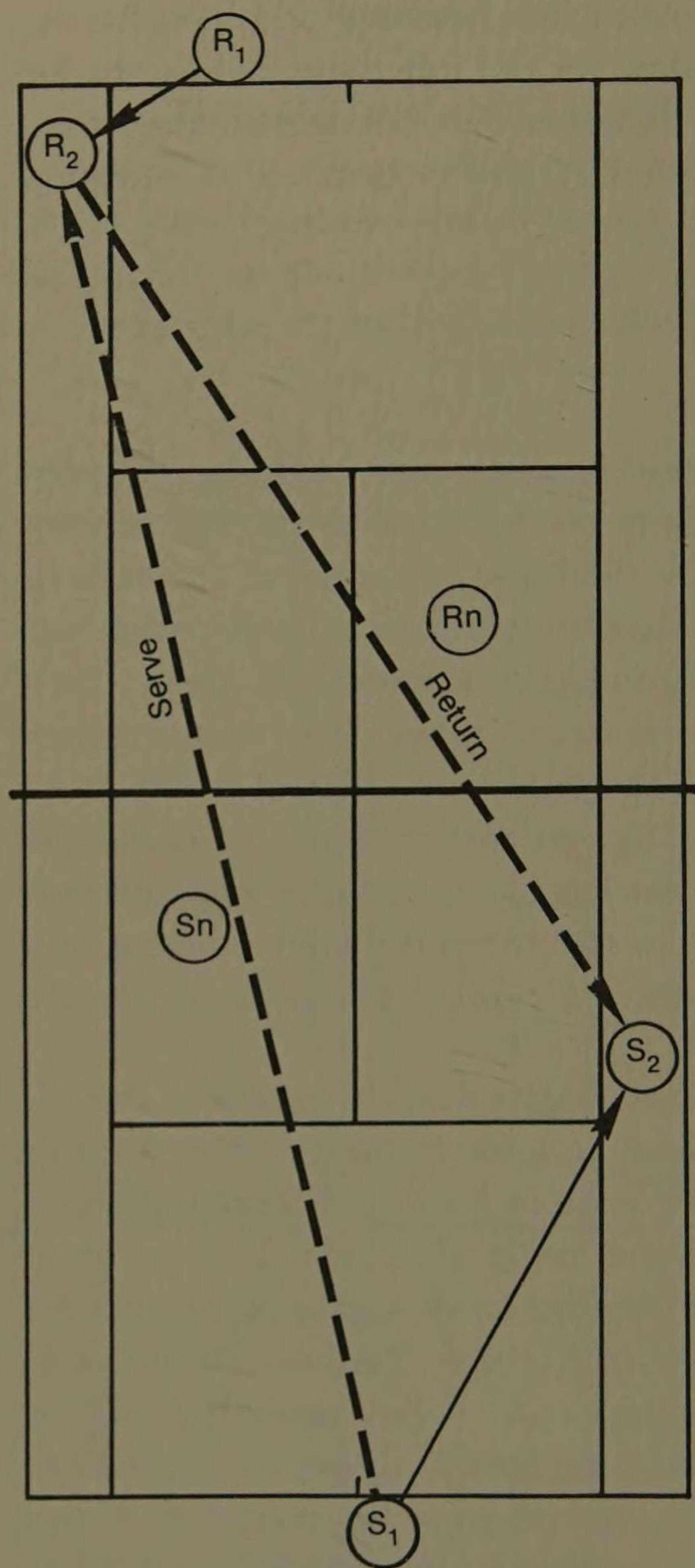


Diagram 11—*Serving Position:
From the Right Court From the
Center Angle of Serve: Wide to
the Forehand*

In Diagram 12 you are serving from the right court from the wide position (junction of baseline and singles line); your angle of serve is to the forehand. This serving position gives you the best opportunity for an angle that will stretch the receiver wide enough ($R_1 \rightarrow R_2$) that he or she will not be able to make an effective return. The diagonal flight time of the serve and the return allow the time and opportunity for you to close the middle of the court—the available return area—and your netman to protect his or her alley. The angle

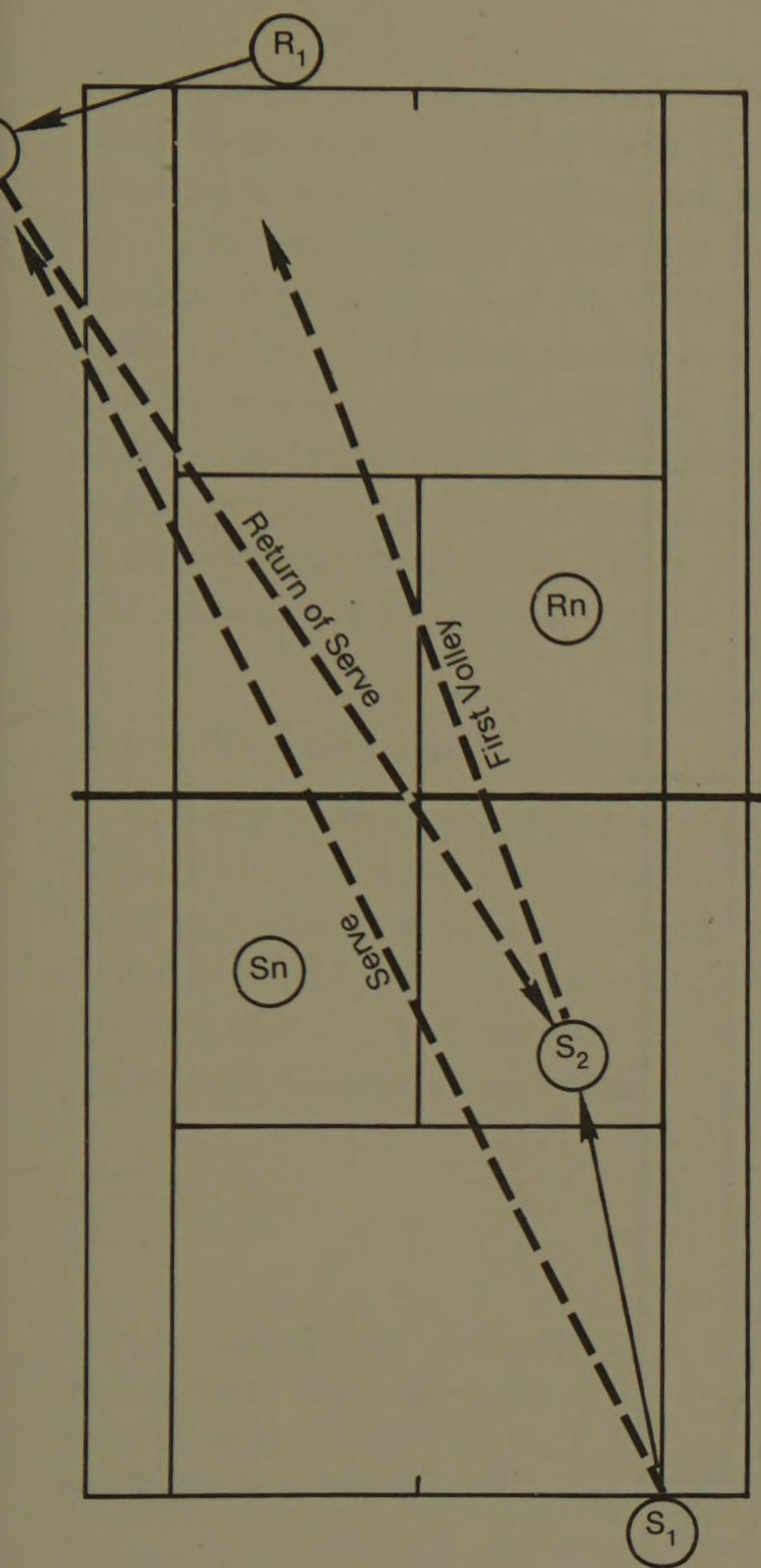


Diagram 12—*Serving Position:*
From the Right Court from the
Wide Position (junction of base-
line and singles line). Angle of
Serve: To the Forehand

of return may necessitate your making a difficult backhand volley, but, more likely, your netman will be able to intercept a weak return and thereby protect you from the backhand volley. The receiver's netman will be forced to cover the middle of the court when the receiver moves wide to return serve, and he or she will be vulnerable on both sides to your netman's interception. However, should you make the volley of the return yourself, your angle of approach ($S_1 \rightarrow S_2$) will limit the angle of your volley. You most likely will volley to the open court, but another option will be

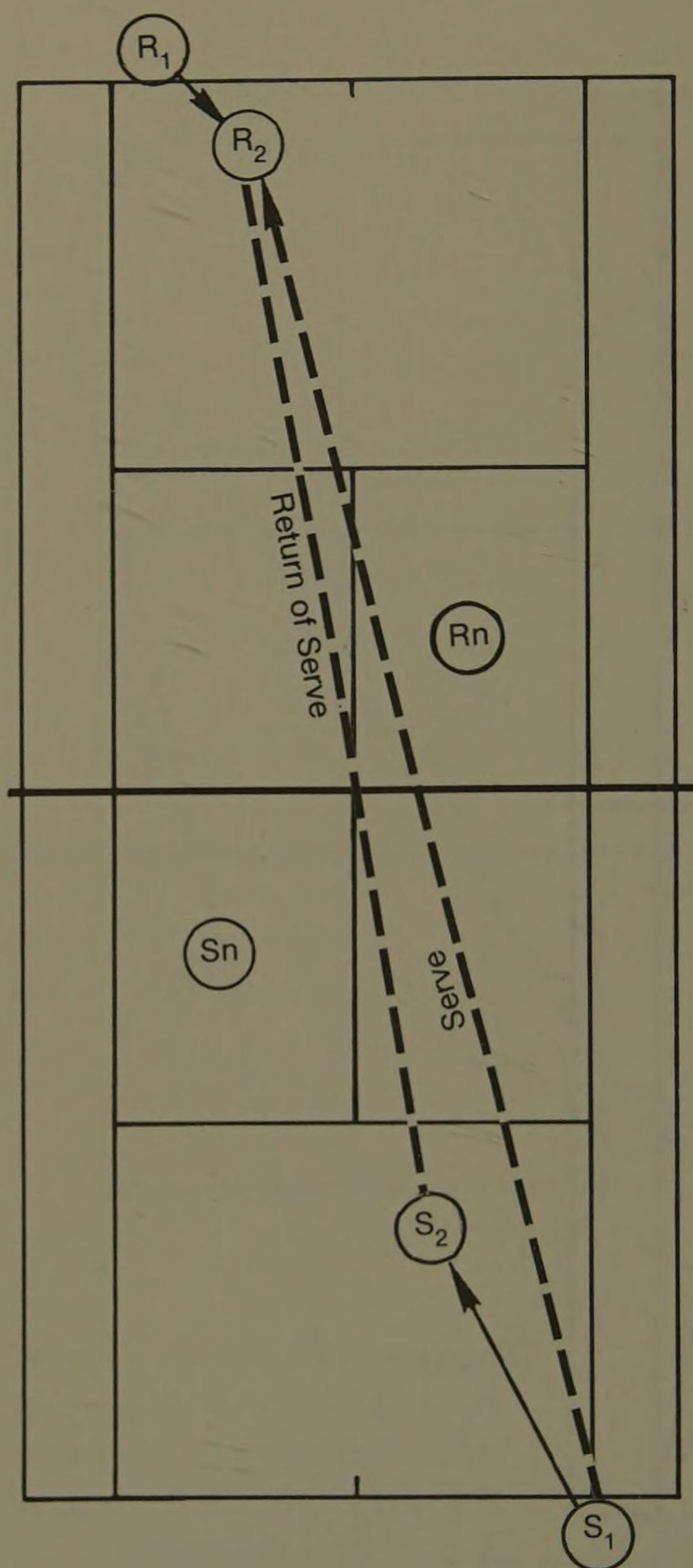


Diagram 13—*Serving Position:*
From the Right Court from the
Wide Position. Angle of Serve:
Up the Middle to the Backhand

down the line. *This serving position and angle of serve have a medium percentage of effectiveness* because the angle of serve is fairly difficult to achieve.

In Diagram 13 your serving position is from the right court from the wide position (junction of baseline and singles line); your angle of serve is up the middle to the backhand. This serving position and angle of serve give two advantages to the receiver: (1) he or she can make an easy, quick backhand return by simply blocking back the serve on the same angle, and (2) he or she can move forward to return ($R_1 \rightarrow R_2$) and therefore possibly close the net before you.

As server, on the other hand, you face two disadvantages: (1) your target area (up the middle to the backhand) is small, and (2) the return is so quick that your netman cannot intercept the return and you cannot get in to the net tightly enough. Because you are caught in no-man's-land ($S_1 \rightarrow S_2$), you must take a low backhand volley from behind the service line. The receiver's netman is in a good position to poach, and the receiver has closed the net. Your volley can be intercepted by either opponent and put away behind your netman or in the forehand area left open by your backhand volley close to the middle. *This serving position and angle of serve have a low percentage of effectiveness.*

From the Left Court

Serving from the left court into the backhand court presents some different problems if you are a right-handed server. We shall look at some diagrams of possible serving positions and angles of serve from the left court, but remember that these serves will not be very effective because you are serving into the receiver's natural crosscourt backhand and easier up-the-middle forehand return.

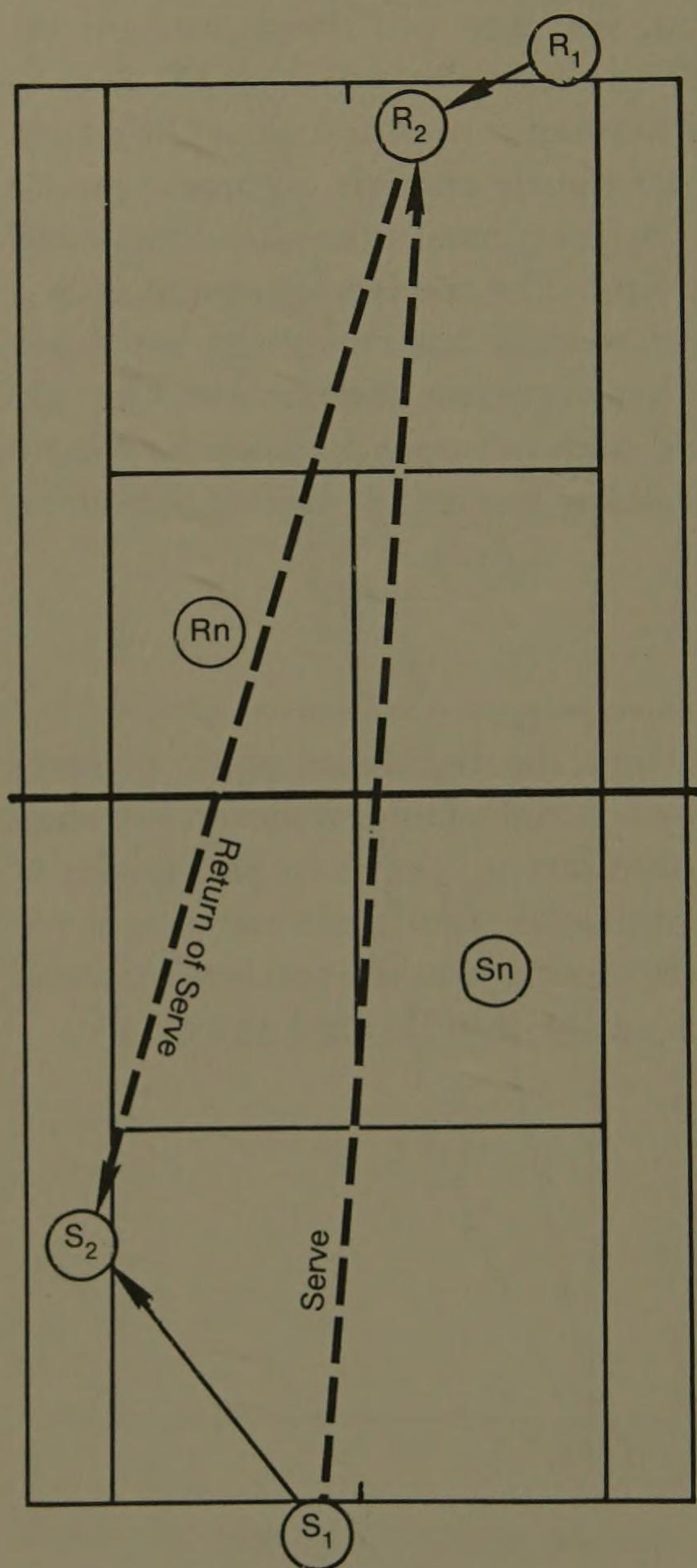


Diagram 14—*Serving Position:
From the Left Court from the
Center. Angle of Serve: Up the
Middle to the Forehand*

In Diagram 14 your serving position is from the left court from the center; your angle of serve is up the middle to the forehand. In this case the receiver does not have a wide angle of return, but he or she still is able to move forward ($R_1 \rightarrow R_2$) and make a quick return that your netman cannot intercept and to possibly reach the net before you. As server, you have a large backhand area to cover after your serve, and when you must go wide ($S_1 \rightarrow S_2$) to reach even a moderately angled return, you leave the middle open. Also, because you must stretch to reach the return, your first volley probably will be weak.

The receiver's netman has the perfect opportunity to intercept and put away the volley for a winner. *This serving position and angle of serve have a low percentage of effectiveness.*

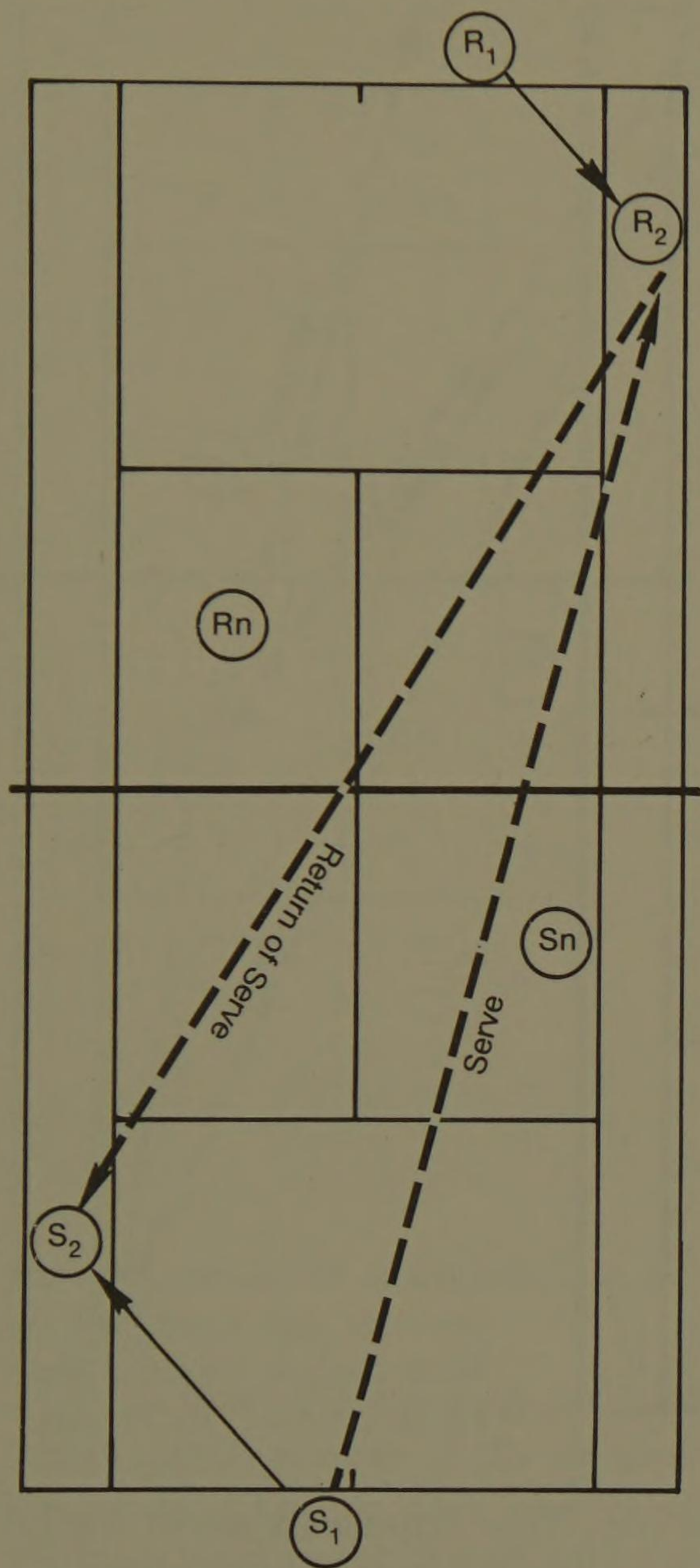


Diagram 15—*Serving Position: From the Left Court from the Center. Angle of Serve: Wide to the Backhand*

In Diagram 15 your serving position is from the left court from the center; your angle of serve is wide to the backhand. Although the receiver must move wide to make the return ($R_1 \rightarrow R_2$), he or she is able to make a natural backhand return at a wide angle to your backhand and out of reach of your netman. Again you are stretched wide to reach the return ($S_1 \rightarrow S_2$) and forced to make a weak backhand volley.

The flight time of the diagonal return allows the receiver to close the middle, and the receiver's netman is able to protect his alley

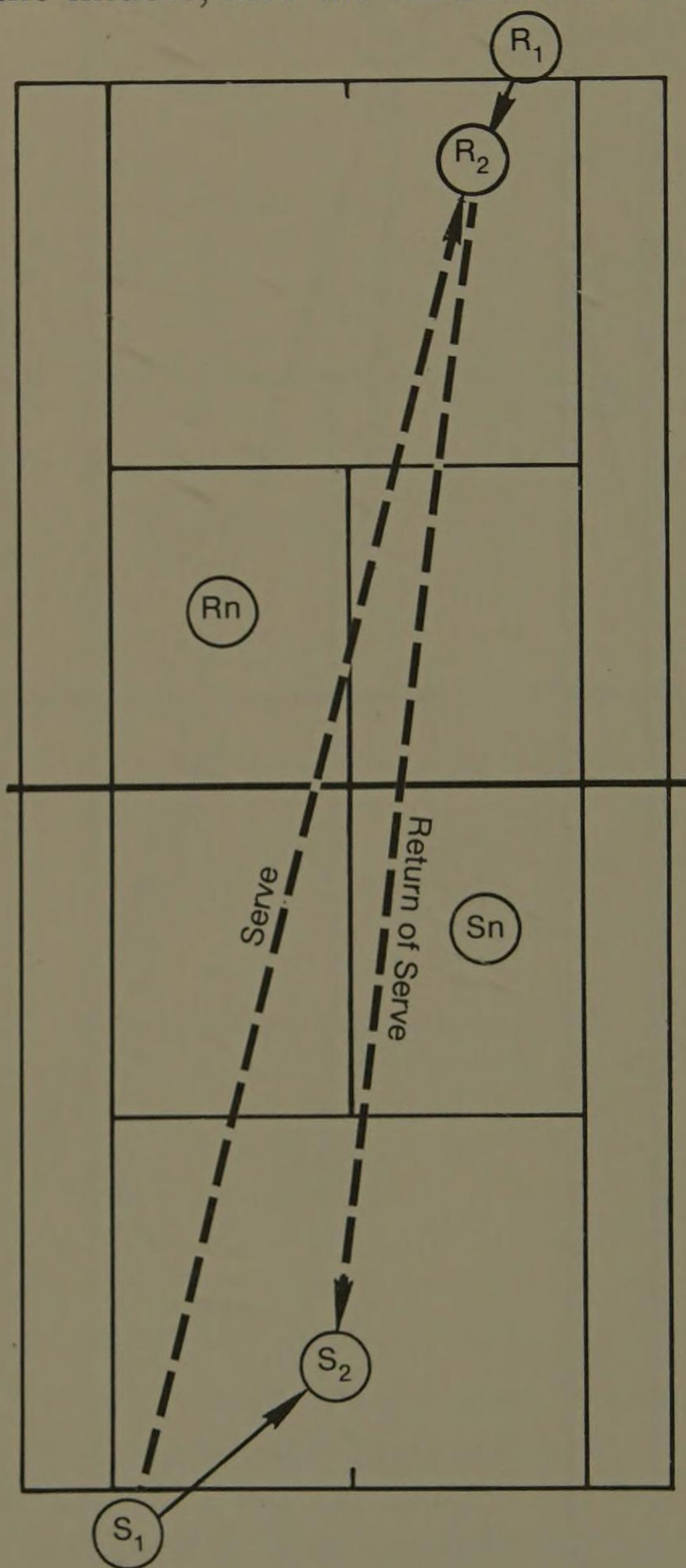


Diagram 16—*Serving Position:
From the Left Court from the
Wide Position. Angle of Serve:
Up the Middle to the Forehand*

from your volleying down the line. Your opponents are in a good position to intercept your first volley and put it away down the middle of your court. *This serving position and angle of serve have a low percentage of effectiveness.*

In Diagram 16 your serving position is from the left court from the wide position (junction of baseline and singles line); your angle of serve is up the middle to the forehand. Although the receiver has a limited angle of return, he or she still has the advantage of moving forward (R₁ →

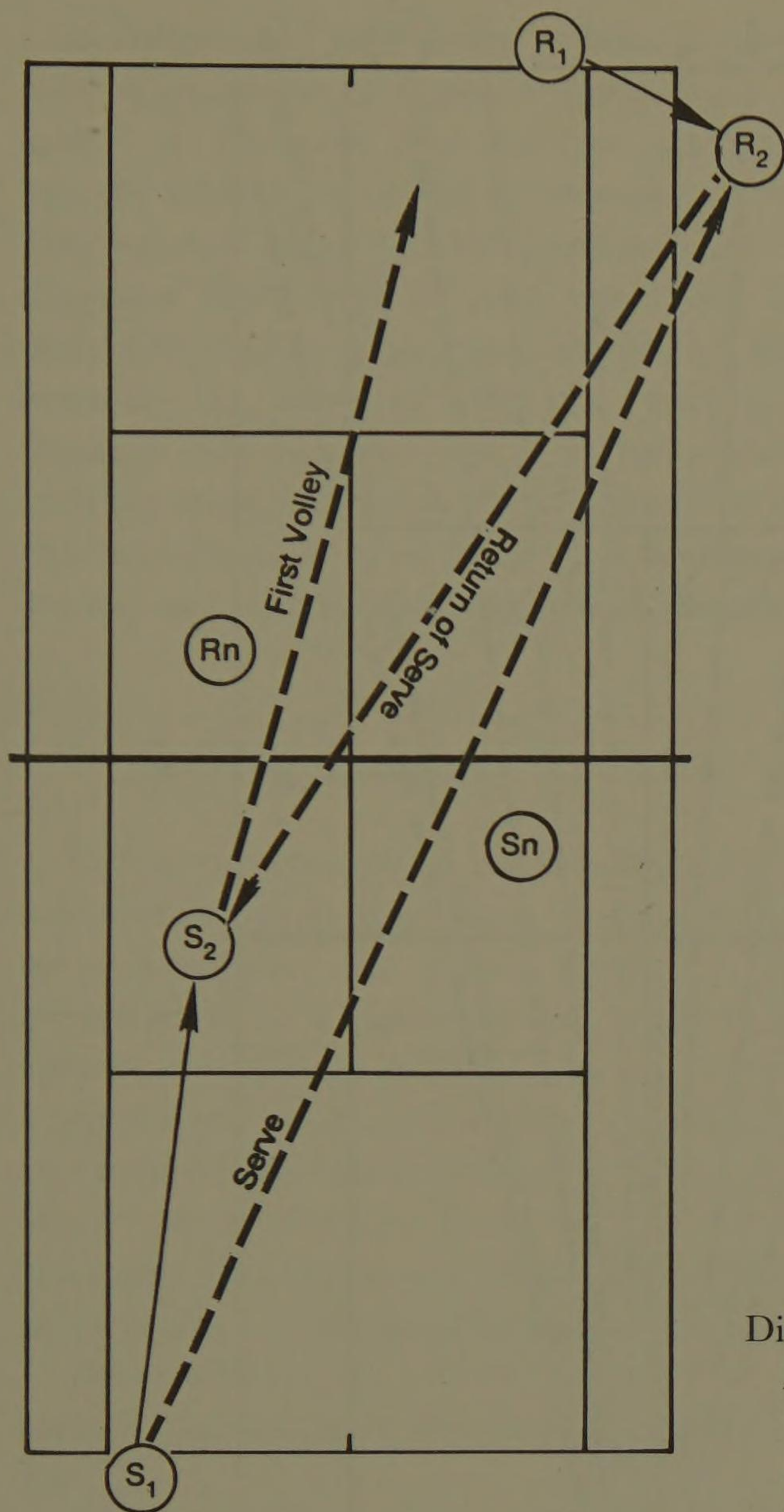


Diagram 17—*Serving Position:*
From the Left Court from the
Wide Position. Angle of Serve:
Wide to the Backhand

R₂) and making a quick return. You, as server, do not have time to get in tightly enough at the net and must take the first volley deep (S₁ → S₂). The receiver is able to close the net, the receiver's netman leans to the center, and your backhand area is wide open to both opponents if they intercept your volley. Because the return is to your forehand, however, you have some chance of making a viable volley. Your netman knows the strength of your forehand is in the middle, and does not feel pressured to attempt a risky poach to help you out. *This serving position and angle of serve have a low percentage of effectiveness.*

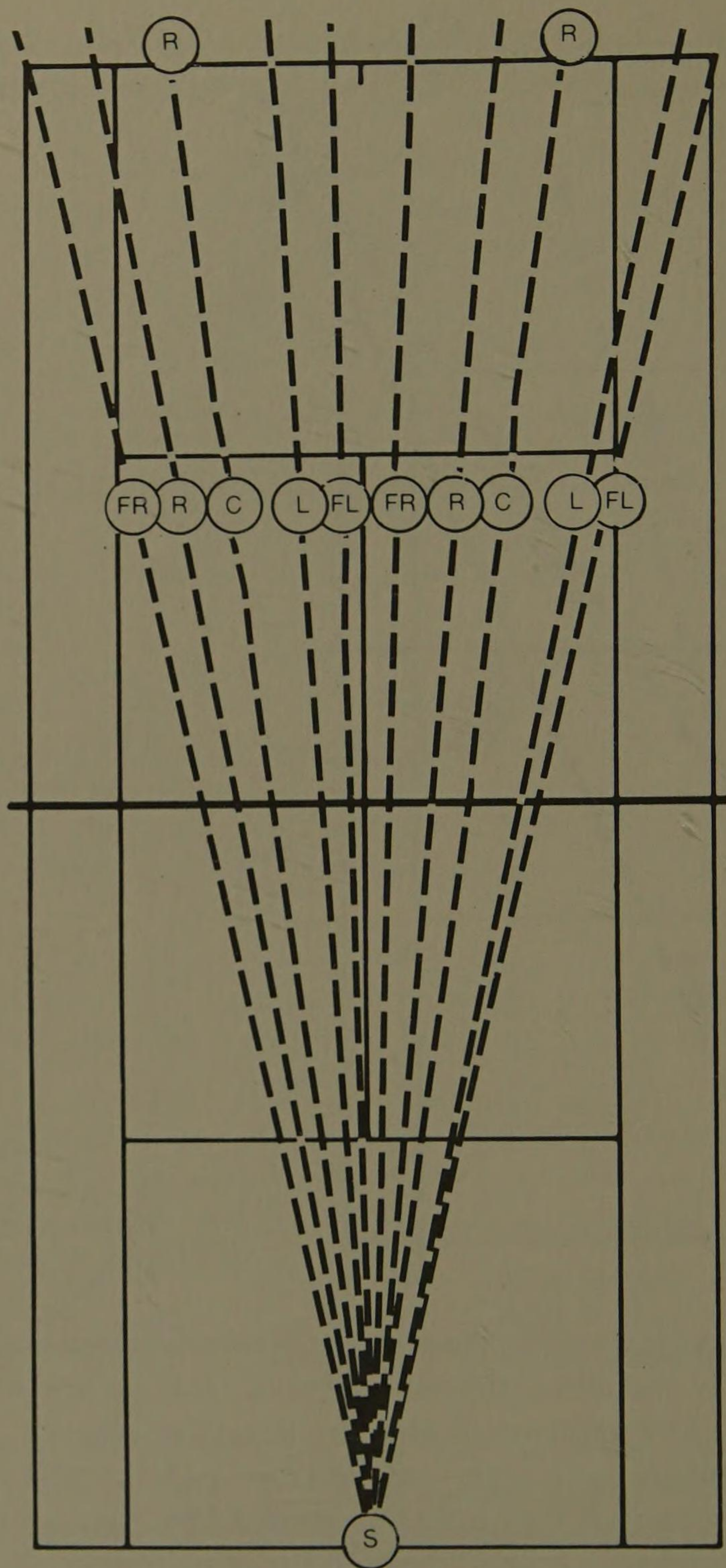


Diagram 18—*General Position of Serving Targets*

Note: Targets are not fixed. A straight line between the server and the receiver determines the center (C), and all targets maintain their relation to that center. The server or receiver can change position and thereby change the center.

In Diagram 17 your serving position is from the left court from the wide position (junction of baseline and singles line); your angle of serve is wide to the backhand. The receiver has a maximum angle of return, but the stretch he or she must make to return the serve ($R_1 \rightarrow R_2$) may weaken his or her return. You have the advantage of the long diagonal flight time of your serve to get to the net ($S_1 \rightarrow S_2$) for your first volley. You can control the middle while your netman controls his alley or perhaps reaches forward for the poach. Because the receiver has left the middle of the court open by moving wide to return, the receiver's netman is pressured to cover the middle and leave his or her forehand area open. This serving position and angle of serve have a high percentage of effectiveness.

Serving Targets

Let us return now to the standard serves—flat, slice, and twist—and discuss them in relation to the five basic serving targets in each serving square: far right, right, center, left, and far left (as determined by a right-handed receiver looking at a right-handed server). See Diagram 18.

As server, your basic tactic is to prevent a maximum return by the receiver by not serving into his or her hitting zone—that area where he or she will have maximum racquet control and body balance. Instead, your serve should either jam the receiver or stretch him or her to either side.

When using the flat or power serve, serve either far left or far right to stretch the receiver. Serve straight at the receiver to jam him or her.

When using the slice serve (which will curve to the receiver's right), serve far right to stretch the receiver, serve left to jam the receiver, and serve far left to make a return by the receiver difficult even if the curving angle of the ball is not sufficient to jam him or her.

When using the standard twist, serve far right so that the slight curving action and quick bounce of the ball will force the receiver to reach both wide and high. Serve left to jam the receiver. Serve far left so that the curve of the ball into the body and the high skip of the bounce will make a return difficult.

When using the American twist, remember that the ball will jump in the opposite direction of its curve. Serve right to jam the receiver.

Serve left so that the ball jumps away and high and makes a return difficult. Serve even farther left to stretch the receiver and thereby further complicate his or her return.

The Serve and Control of the Net

Control of the net is the goal of both the serving and receiving teams, and the serve is extremely important in determining which team will be able to close the net first.

As I pointed out in foregoing sections, the speed, slice, spin, and twist of the ball are not the only factors contributing to the effectiveness of your serve. Your serving position, the angle of your serve, and your serving target are instrumental in not only eliciting weak returns, but also stretching the receiver laterally or otherwise impeding his or her forward approach after the return so that you can close the net before your opponent does.

How the Server Moves to the Net

Your forward movement to the net begins with the followthrough of the serve itself. The downward swing or tail end of the followthrough brings your shoulders and hips forward, and your back foot steps out to balance your body for a continuous, even acceleration. An erratic toss, an unrhythmic motion, a stiff wrist, or overhitting will hamper the followthrough and impede your approach to the net.

To take advantage of the acceleration and balance generated by a good followthrough, stay low for easy change of direction, but not so low as to impede speed. Take full strides, keep your shoulders down for balance, and extend your hands to enable you to maneuver your racquet quickly and to hit the ball as early as possible.

When the receiver's racquet starts forward, shorten your steps to stutter steps—short, quick, forward-moving steps—to allow you to move laterally quickly if necessary but to still keep your forward momentum for early interception of the ball.

Continue moving while volleying to enable you to keep longer control of the ball on your racquet and to close the net more tightly rather than stopping, volleying, and starting up again.

The Role of the Server's Netman

The effectiveness of your netman is also dependent upon your serve. A good serve allows him to overplay his area—move beyond his position—and intimidate the receiver. A poor serve may make him a target, thereby limiting his intimidation and leaving you with large lateral areas and hard returns to handle yourself. Given average serves, your netman should play conservatively and rely upon the advantage of your starting position as server to win the points.

The key to effective service is to get your first serve in with a variety of speed, spin, twist, angle, and target that will probe and capitalize on the receiver's weaknesses in movement, racquet preparation, footwork, and forehand and backhand returns.

5

The Return of Serve

Like the serve, the return of serve is a crucial segment of each point. The serving team is now vulnerable because the server has not yet closed the net, and the receiving team must get the ball back in order to even play.

There seem to be two possible ways to play the return. One is to attack the vulnerability of the serving team; the other is to just get the ball back. Actually, both of these are one and the same. Getting the ball back in itself attacks the serving team's vulnerability, and getting it back consistently undermines the server's confidence.

However, do not confuse getting the ball back with playing it safe. Playing it safe is a negative approach. If you are too

concerned with control, your stroke may become stiff; if you are too intent on relaxing, your hand or wrist may become too limp; and if you are afraid of overhitting, you may tend to hold back on a full followthrough. Think more in terms of a positive approach—of hitting out. You may make some errors, but you will be using a natural stroke that eventually will work for you.

Three Basics

Taking the Ball in Front of Your Body

When you take the ball in front of your body, you gain three distinct advantages in return of serve: you can maintain your balance, you can utilize your peripheral vision, and you can take one or two steps closer to the net.

Stroke Control

Only your stroke should influence the ball. A shift of weight or incorrect muscle sequence at the moment of impact can upset the return.

If such improper body use is a matter of habit, then your return will be consistently erratic. Should this be the case, work with an instructor or coach to break the habit and rebuild a basic technique. Do not be afraid of change, of relearning in order to improve. To make a correction, slow down the stroke and intellectualize the muscle memory—that is, keep track of the entire stroke until the new correction has been incorporated. If your racquet moves more quickly than your mind, then the old muscle memory re-introduces itself and the old error reappears.

Concentration

Building up mental awareness takes as much practice as developing physical abilities. In fact, mental development must be in proportion to physical development. Both the amateur social player and the professional player must maintain a certain level of mental discipline in order to realize the complete physical dimension of their game. See Diagram 19.

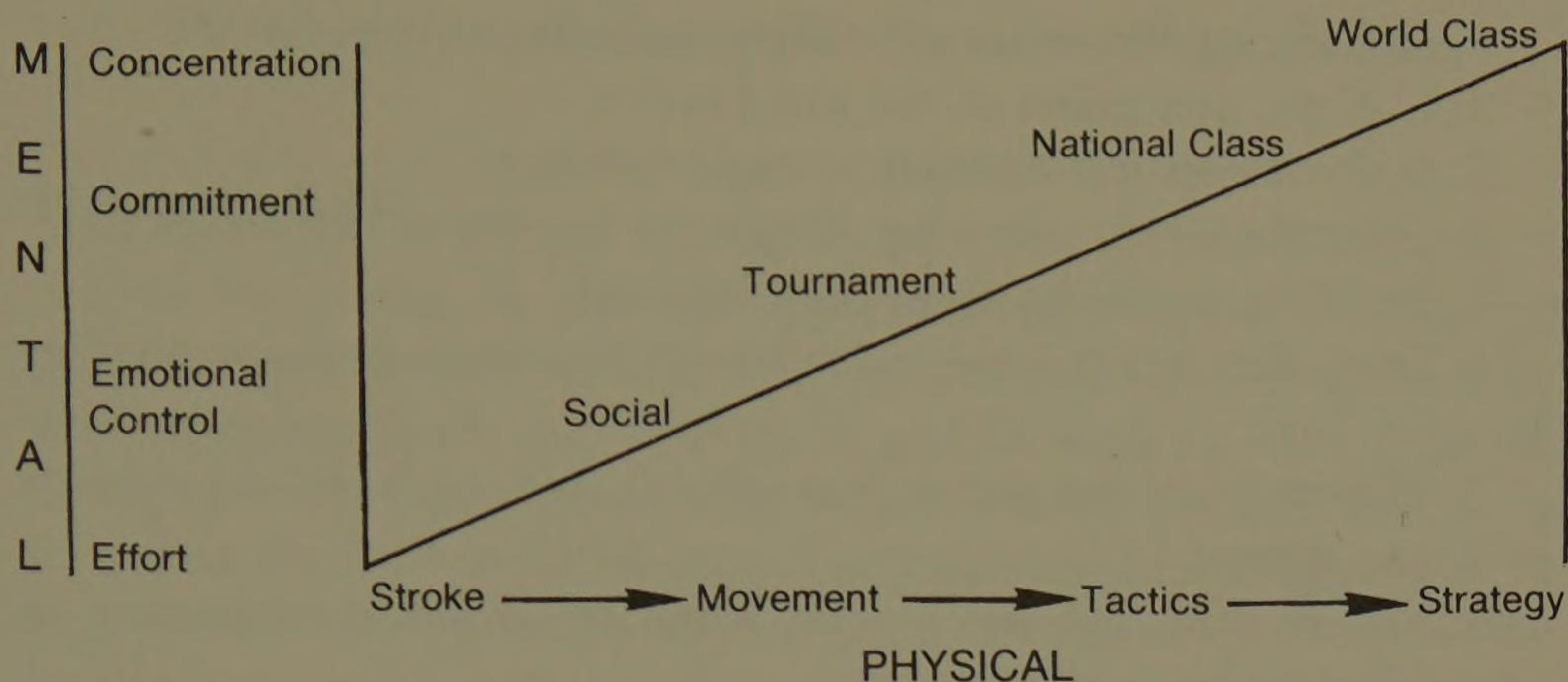


Diagram 19—*The Physical and Mental Dimensions of Tennis*

The professional player's level of mental involvement, of course, is very high. On return of serve he should be able to concentrate on such physical considerations as the execution of his return stroke, where and how to place the return, and when and how to approach the net. The beginner, on the other hand, is able to concentrate only on getting the ball back by keeping it in front of the body and using the simplest stroke possible.

If you are an intermediate or advanced player, you still must concentrate primarily on the ball, but you probably have developed by now an automatic mental checklist to keep your return stroke simple and effective. If you try to deliberately think out the checklist, you probably will disrupt the natural flow of the muscle memory that has been developed. If you wish to use such effects as spin and speed, study them separately and use them only as options, not as standard high-percentage returns.

Whatever you do, do not expend so much mental energy on the idea of winning that you fail to concentrate on the moment-to-moment play of the game.

Preparation for the Return Before the Serve

Make Observations During the Warmup

You can prepare yourself mentally and physically to receive before the server even comes to the line by making the following observations during the warmup:

1. Are the balls new or old? Light or heavy?
2. Is it the first point of the third set?
3. Is the server left-handed or right-handed?
4. Does the server use a lot of spin, or are his or her serves flat?
5. Does the server have an easy motion?
6. Does the server have a backcourt stance or serve-and-volley stance?
7. Where does the server toss—front, side, or back—to achieve different serves?
8. Where does the server look when he or she is beginning to serve? Before he or she serves?
9. What type of stance does the server have? Could he or she hit a wide twist to the forehand, or does his or her body preclude that?
10. Does the server hold the racquet tight or loose? What type of grip does the server use?
11. Is the server slow to warm up, or fast? Flashy or effective? Relaxed or nervous?

Use the Continental Grip

It is definitely an advantage to be able to use the continental grip for the return as well as the rest of the point. Because you can use this grip for every stroke, you need not keep changing your grip, and you can respond more quickly to the rapid exchanges in doubles. One potential problem of the continental grip is overusing your wrist. Keep your racquet head up, and if you use your wrist at all, incorporate it into the total stroke and do not create a separate movement for it.

Body Position

Your hands and shoulders are important in body position of returning serve. Bring your shoulders forward so your hands have room in front of your body to move without having to fight to get around your body. Let your hands hang at mid-thigh.

Keep your legs comfortably apart—the width of a step—and turn out your toes about 45 degrees. This stance allows you to step in either direction without pivoting. Bend your knees and put your weight on the balls of your feet for balance.

Preparation Between the Serve and the Return

Watch the Ball

Keep your eyes on the ball the entire time—while it is in the server's hand before the toss, while it is in the air during the toss, while it comes down into your court and bounces up after it lands. Sometimes the net tape catches your eye and distracts you from following the ball to its bounce. The ball seems to disappear, and you blame such variables as the speed or spin of the ball or the lighting of the court, but in fact you simply have not followed the ball. A good way to learn to see the seam of the ball when it's in flight.

Use an Abbreviated Groundstroke

Just before the wrist snap of the server, make a slight hop to bring your weight to the balls of your feet. When you determine the direction of the ball, keep your hands low, pivot your shoulders, and make a short backswing. You will develop power by meeting the ball with a solid forward swing and utilizing the power of the serve itself. During your forward swing, keep the ball on the strings of your racquet long enough to impart direction, speed, and spin. What you are doing, basically, is abbreviating (or condensing) a groundstroke.

Use Your Upper Body

Do not worry about getting the lower half of your body—your hips and feet—around; you do not have enough time. Preparing your upper body—turning your shoulders, arms, and racquet as one unit—is sufficient to hit solidly through the ball. Your hips will turn slightly with your shoulders anyway, and your left foot eventually will step naturally with the followthrough. If your shoulders, hips, and feet cannot support the followthrough, then sheer arm muscle and mind will take over.

In fact, the most important element in preparation is your racquet. You hit the ball with your racquet, not your body. If your racquet is not in hitting position, preparation of the rest of your

body means nothing. But if your racquet is in hitting position, you can always hit the ball and muster as much body support as time will allow. I have become famous for my unorthodox strokes, but most people don't recognize that my racquet is always in the

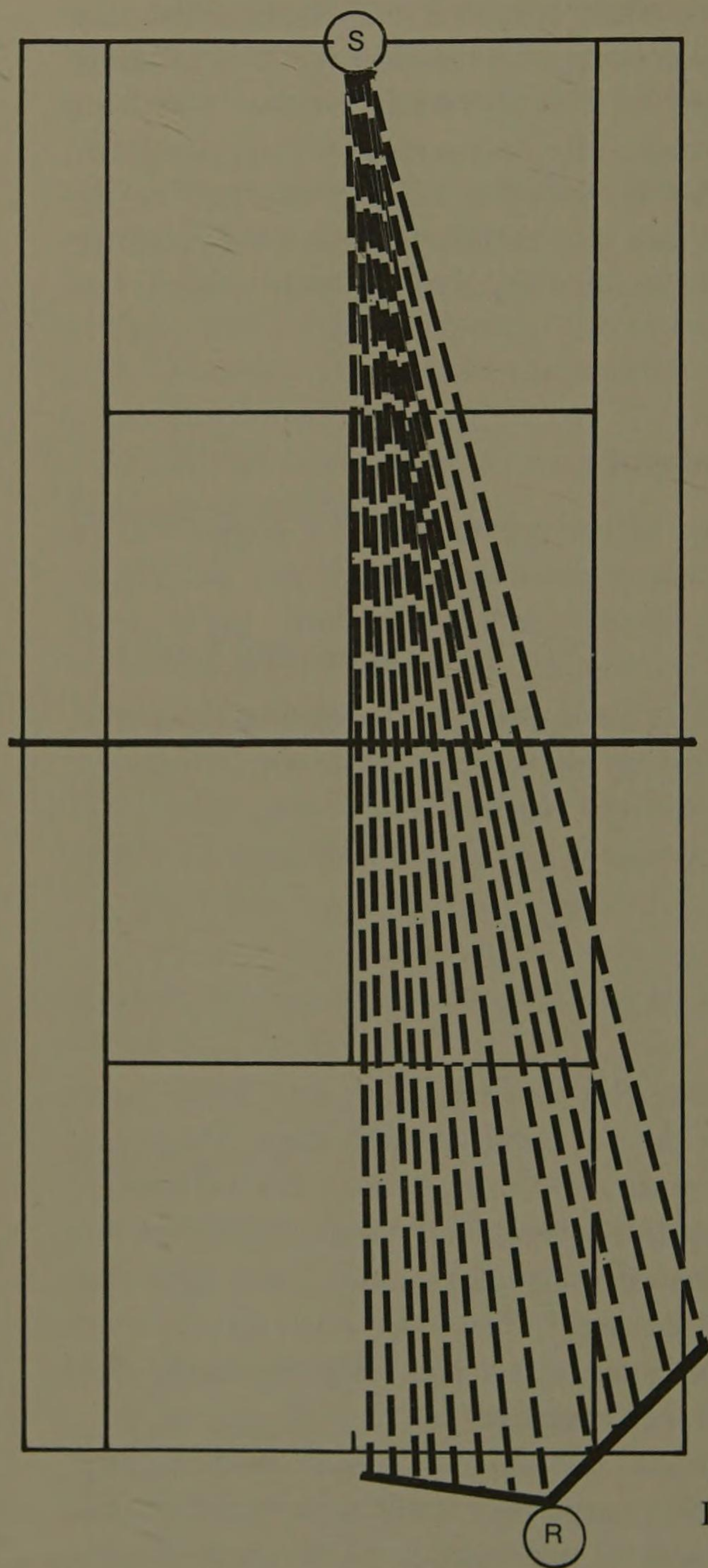


Diagram 20—*The Receiver's Angles of Interception*

proper hitting position no matter how awkward my grip or body position might be.

Step Toward the Ball

Seventy-five percent of serving placements will be within one step, especially if you intercept at a 45-degree angle. This angle of interception not only limits the angle of the serve, but also keeps your body weight into the ball. See Diagram 20.

Within a step and a half, you can reach 85 percent of serves, and within two steps, you can return 95 percent.

If you miss a return, it is probably because of not watching the ball, overreacting, not completing your followthrough, or taking too much backswing, rather than because of the speed or angle of the serve.

The Jab Return

Many good players return an opponent's serve well with no more than a jab. The jab offers a definite advantage to the receiver—it eliminates the need for a backswing. You can take the ball on the rise and very soon after the bounce, sometimes almost like a half-volley. The racquet acts as a backboard, and you lend just enough forward swing for control. The result is that you use the server's own power against him or her by merely deflecting the ball. The quick return so reduces the server's approach time that he or she must make the first volley from behind the service line, and you are able to advance to the net more quickly.

However, the jab has some disadvantages. It can be inconsistent on soft surfaces, it offers little possibility of variation, and it is difficult to master.

The Chip Return

The chip shot, especially off the backhand, is one of the best methods of maintaining a consistent return. You achieve the chip by using an underspin followthrough.

With little backswing, take the ball on the rise. Instead of

holding your racquet perpendicular to the ground and contacting the ball at a 90-degree angle to produce a full rebound effect, lay back your racquet face to reduce the degree of rebound of the ball and increase the length of time you can keep the ball on your racquet. Remember—the longer you keep the ball on your racquet, the more control you will have.

Hit the high balls downward, because underspinning requires starting your racquet above the ball. Slide the low balls above the net.

Comparison with the Jab Return

The chip return requires less precise timing than the jab return. In the jab return, both your body and your racquet are moving forward, and thus you have two considerations.

The chip return, however, requires more backswing, and thus your body moves forward after the stroke rather than during. You have only the forward movement of your racquet to consider before and during the stroke.

Both returns require your taking the ball on the rise and playing it downward to the feet of the incoming server.

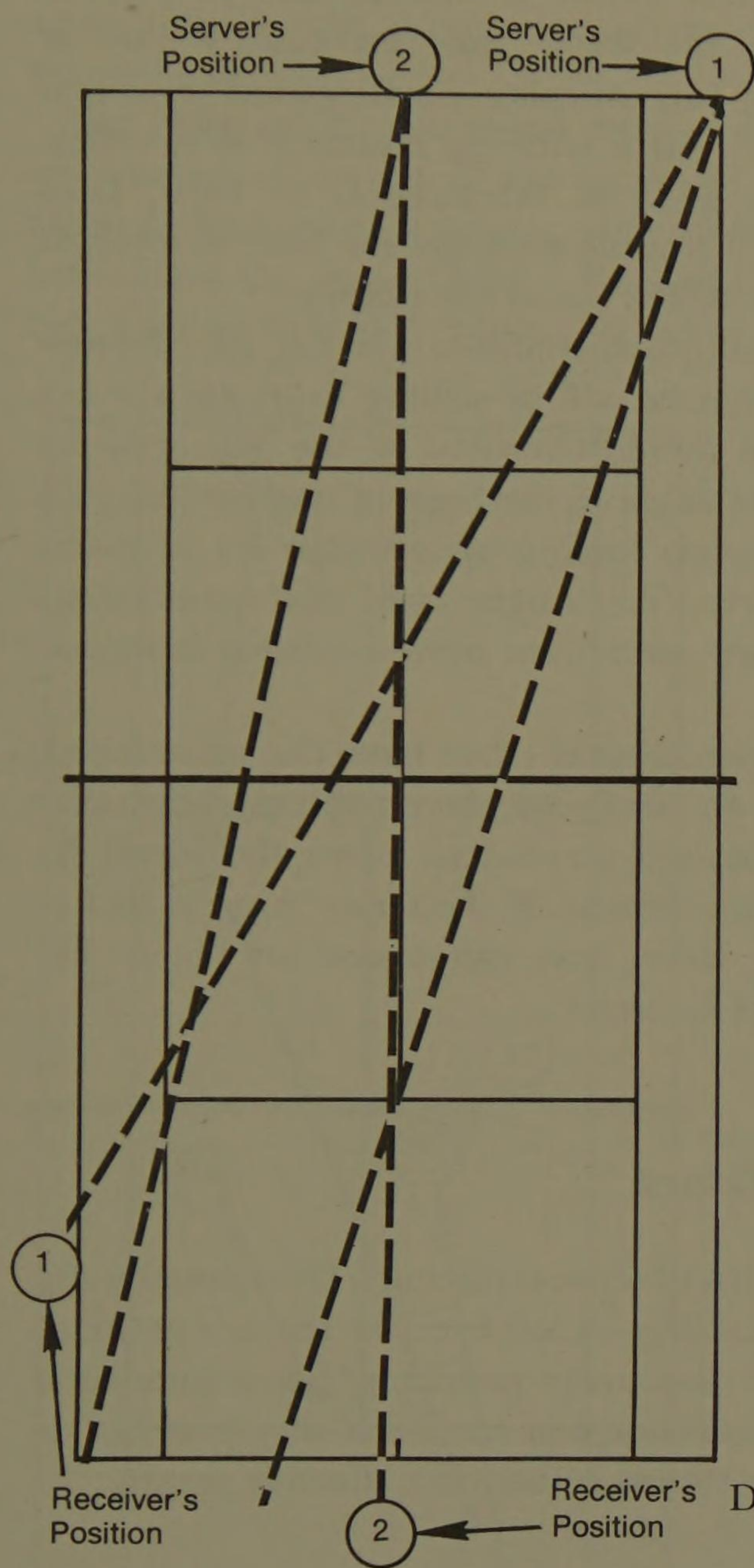
The Psychology of the Return of Serve

Return of the First Serve

The first serve is the strongest tactical position of a point. If the serving team plays it correctly, they should be able to win the point by the second volley. The only possible way for your team to disrupt this control is to return serve consistently and to force play on each point. Consistency has an unnerving effect. In many cases it can create pressure and thereby erode a winning team's edge.

The first serve most likely will be fast and angled. Your best position to receive it is the junction of the singles line and the baseline. See Diagram 21. From this position you move—usually one step is enough—according to the speed or angle of the serve. You move in and out to compensate for speed; you move left or right to accommodate angle.

Take the ball on the rise, if possible. You may take a step or two



Note: Number of server's position and the reciprocal angle to be covered by the receiver correspond.

Diagram 21—*Finding the Best Position to Receive*

back, but remember that your backing up gives the server more time to get to the net. However, play it wherever and however you are most consistent.

Overplaying the first serve by standing in close to receive or trying for a booming return can be effective in upsetting the server, but, once again, do not sacrifice consistency.

Return of the Second Serve

The second serve is usually easier to handle, but be careful. Sometimes the extra spin the server uses for control can be troublesome. Similarly, you can overplay a soft second serve and thereby lose the opportunity for a winning return or first volley. During the mixed-doubles final at Wimbledon in 1976, Dick Stockton had a great deal of trouble with my soft second serve. It was a major factor in Tony Roche's and my victory.

An opponent may have so much confidence in the effectiveness of his or her second serve that he will be willing to try for the big first serve. In this case, you should overplay on the first serve by covering the server's favorite angle in the hope of undermining his or her confidence and perhaps forcing an attempt for a lower-percentage kind of first serve. You might even win more points from such an opponent's first serve than from a consistent second serve.

Second serves are often mechanical—they have the same speed, spin, and target. If you are an advanced player, you can capitalize on such predictability of second serves and upset the server by making consistent, deliberate returns. If the server is pressured to change his or her second serve, you can count on his or her confidence being completely shaken.

The Crosscourt Return

You usually play the return of serve crosscourt. Occasionally use other shots to upset predictability—a lob over the server's netman, or a down-the-line drive to discourage poaching. Sometimes such shots are winners but the percentage of success is very low. Let us consider why the crosscourt return is the most effective return.

Why the Crosscourt Return Is Most Effective

By returning crosscourt, you both avoid the possibility of an offensive volley by the server's netman and pressure the incoming server to make a good volley. However, the crosscourt return has an even more important advantage: the diagonal path of the

return increases the ball's flight time and thereby allows you more time to approach the net. If you can get to the net before or at the same time as the server, the server's initial advantage will be neutralized.

See Diagram 22. Once you are moving toward a position at the net where you can cut off any angles ($R_1 \rightarrow R_2$) and your return has cleared the server's netman, your netman moves to restrict and intimidate the server ($Rn_1 \rightarrow Rn_2$) as the server approaches ($S_1 \rightarrow S_2$). Your team is in a position to put away the server's volley down

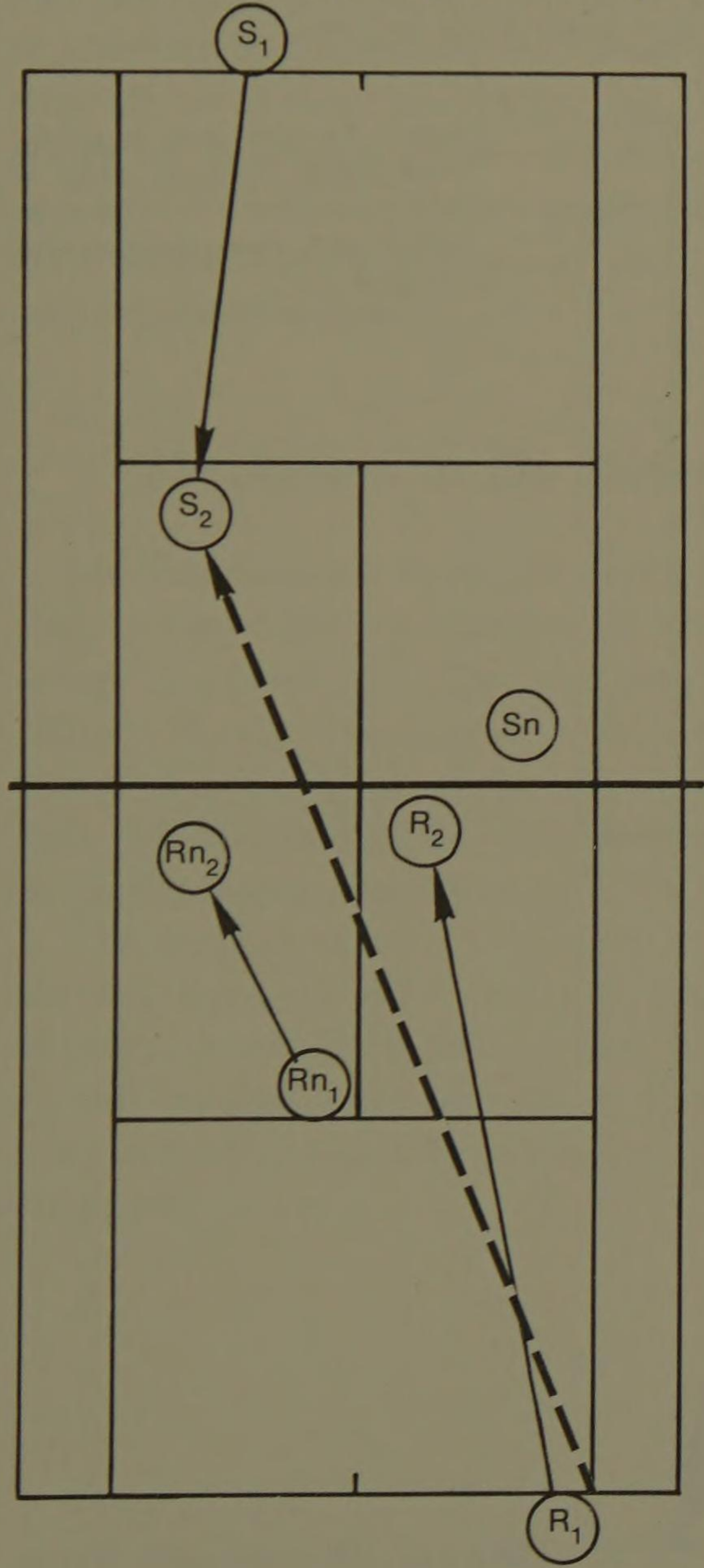
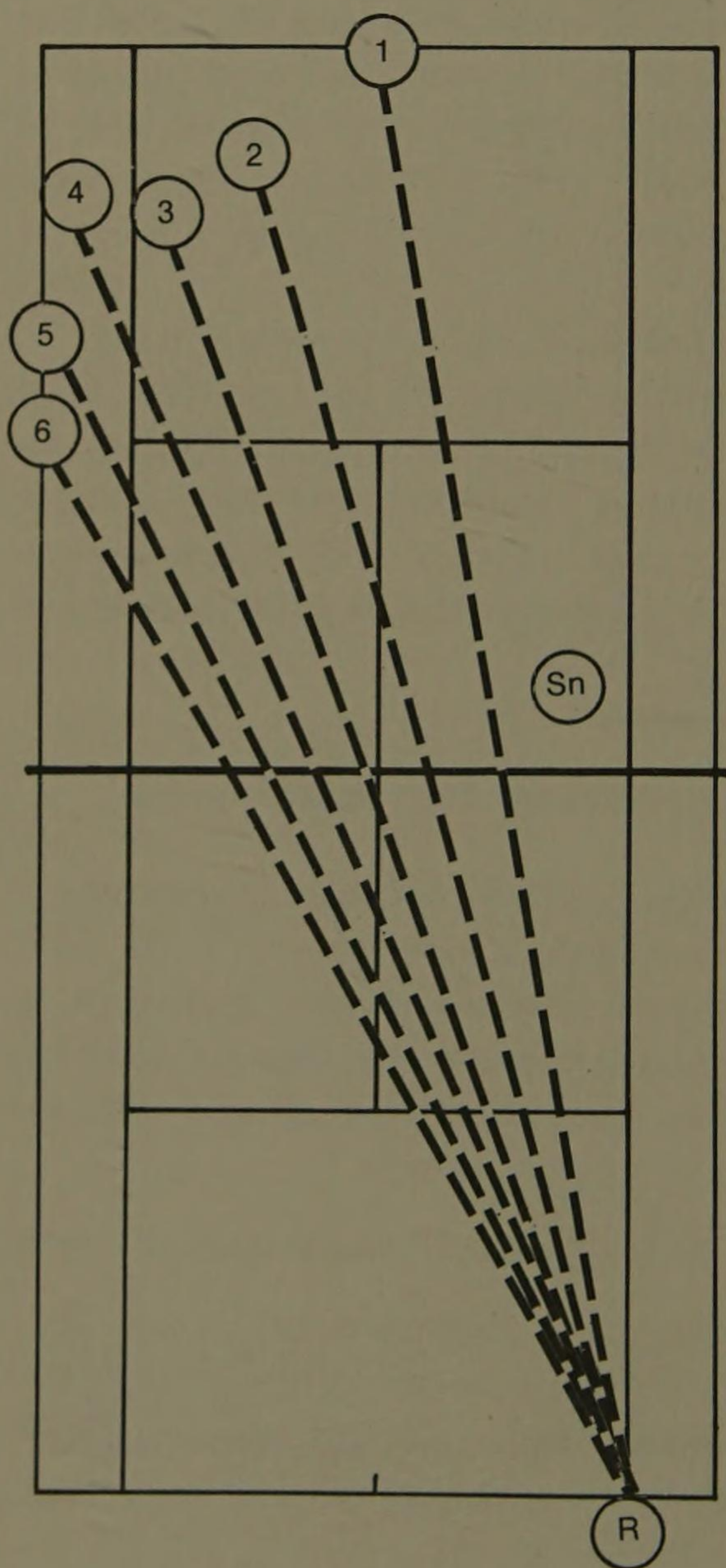


Diagram 22—*The Crosscourt Return*

the middle, which has been opened up by the angle of your crosscourt return.

To increase the diagonal flight time of the crosscourt return even more, play the ball with a combination of soft underspin and sharp angle. The underspin gives the ball a low trajectory and keeps the ball close to the net; the downward angle of the ball keeps the ball from crossing the net until the last moment before it bounces. This combination of underspin and angle makes the crosscourt return extremely difficult for the incoming server to volley, while allowing you more time to come to the net after your return.



Note: To use this example from other position, draw a line from point of return to target and then analyze the situation.

Diagram 23—Crosscourt Return Targets

Crosscourt Return Targets

See Diagram 23 for possible targets for your crosscourt return. Certain targets have a higher percentage of success than others. A return to *Target 1* is not really a crosscourt return; the server's netman can intercept it very easily. The server's netman possibly can intercept a return to *Target 2* also, but the return would be a difficult one for the server to volley. A return to *Target 3* is the easiest for the server to reach quickly and play crosscourt before you can close. The return of the serve that has the best percentage of effectiveness is one hit to *Target 4*. It takes the server only one step off his fastest line to the net, but it is your safest target. A return to *Target 5* pulls the server wide, but it is a short target for you and therefore requires good control. *Target 6* pulls the server even wider, but it is also a very short target and therefore has a low percentage of success.

The Return at the Netman

See Diagram 24. A return at the server's netman so reduces the flight time of the return that you are kept back while your partner is up. You cover the alley, and your netman moves to close the net ($Rn_1 \rightarrow Rn_2$). Your hope is that the server's netman will be so jammed or taken aback by the return that he or she can respond only defensively, and you can move forward with an approach shot or your netman can intercept the server's netman's volley.

The purpose of such a return is to keep the server's netman from moving from the alley and poaching. But you should make your netman aware of the tactic before you use it (perhaps by a hidden signal), so that he or she will be ready to close the net rather than wait to cover a possible poach by the server's netman of your usual crosscourt return.

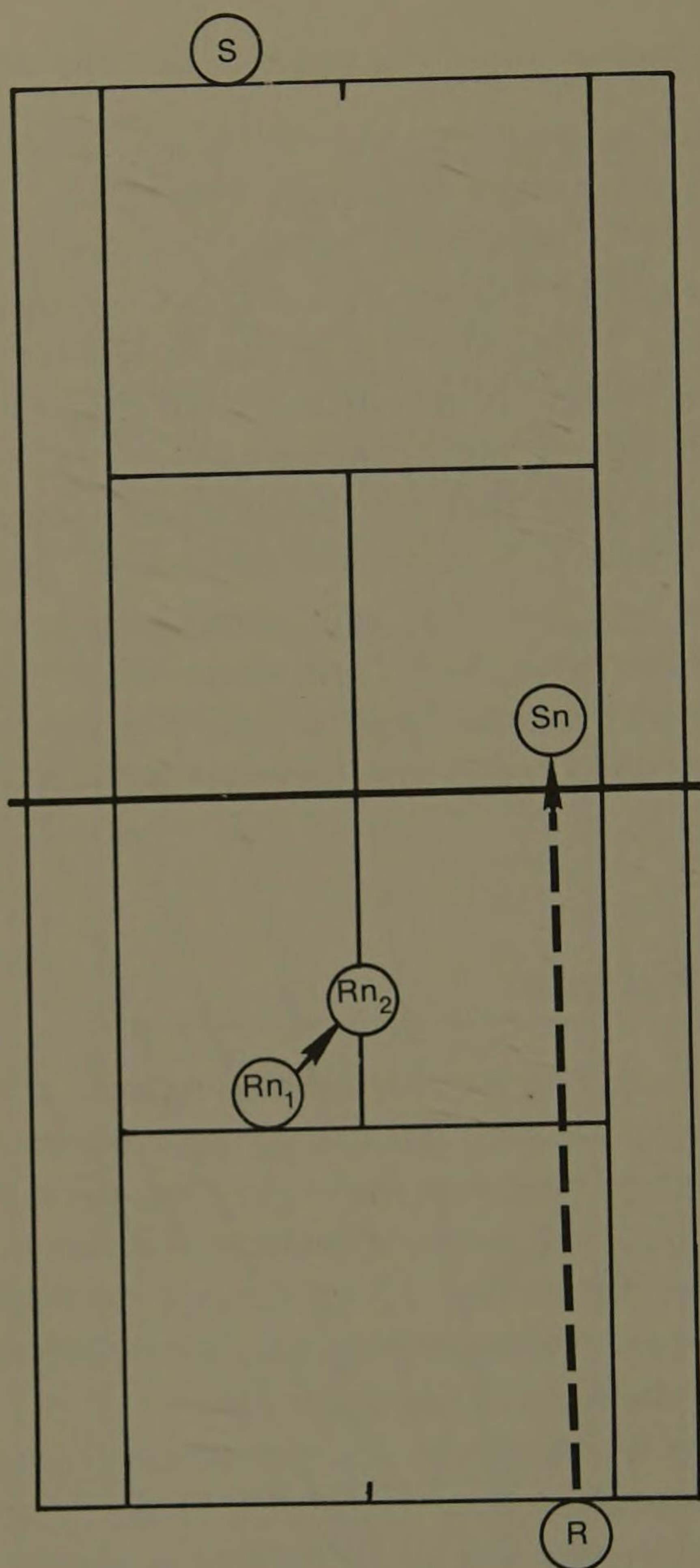


Diagram 24—*The Return of Serve at the Netman*

The Return Down the Alley

See Diagram 25. When you return down the alley, the server's netman is not jammed and has the opportunity to make some offensive angles. To limit the volley of the server's netman and thereby reduce his or her offensive potential, hit very hard to produce a response that is a weak or late volley. Then both you and your netman overplay ($R_1 \rightarrow R_2$ and $Rn_1 \rightarrow Rn_2$) to pinch the volley before the server can help. However, you must win the point quickly before the serving team stabilizes itself.

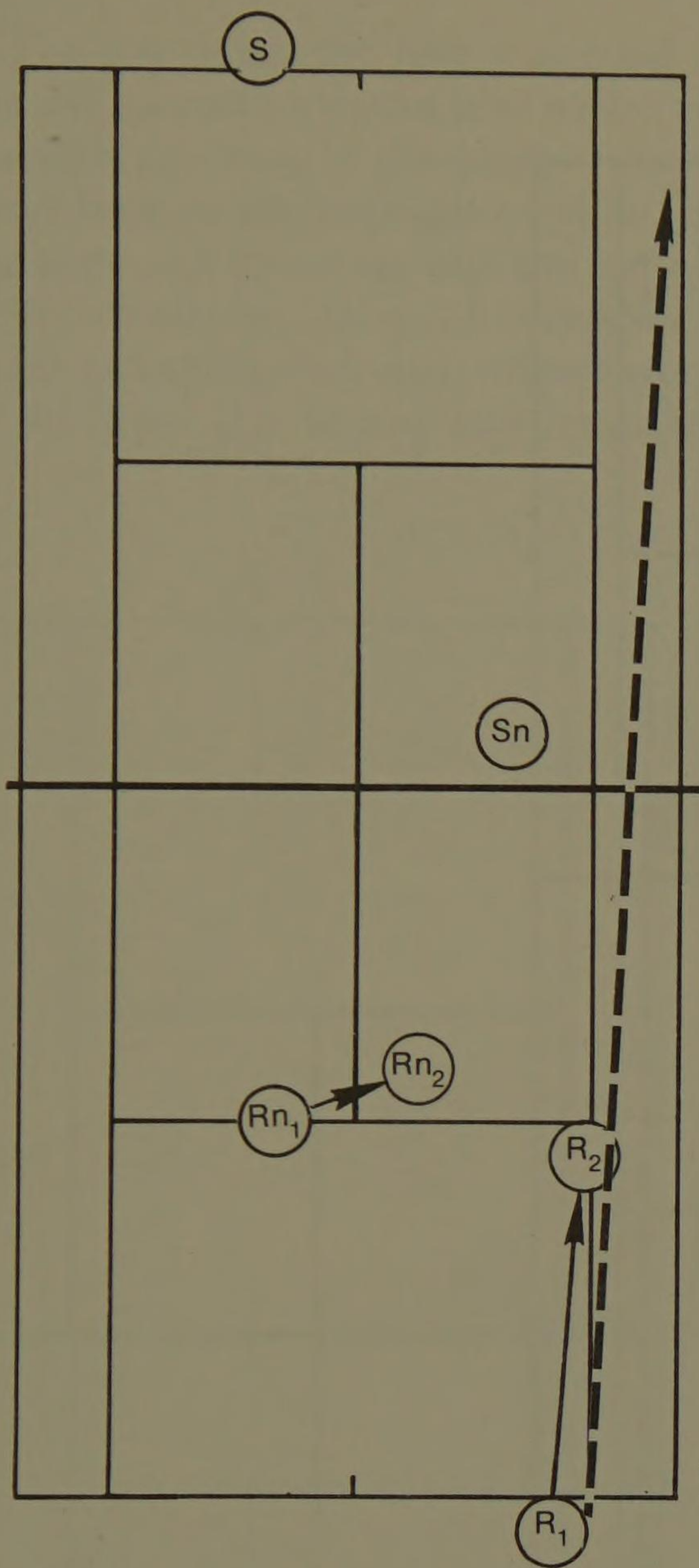


Diagram 25—*The Return of Serve Down the Alley*

Returning down the alley is a good ploy early in the match to stop the server's netman from poaching or to break up a pattern of predictability. However, *it has a low percentage of effectiveness*, partly because of the extra height of the net as it crosses the alley.

The Lob Return Over the Server's Netman

The lob return of serve down the line forces the server's netman back for an overhead. If your team returns that overhead, you have the opportunity to close the net.

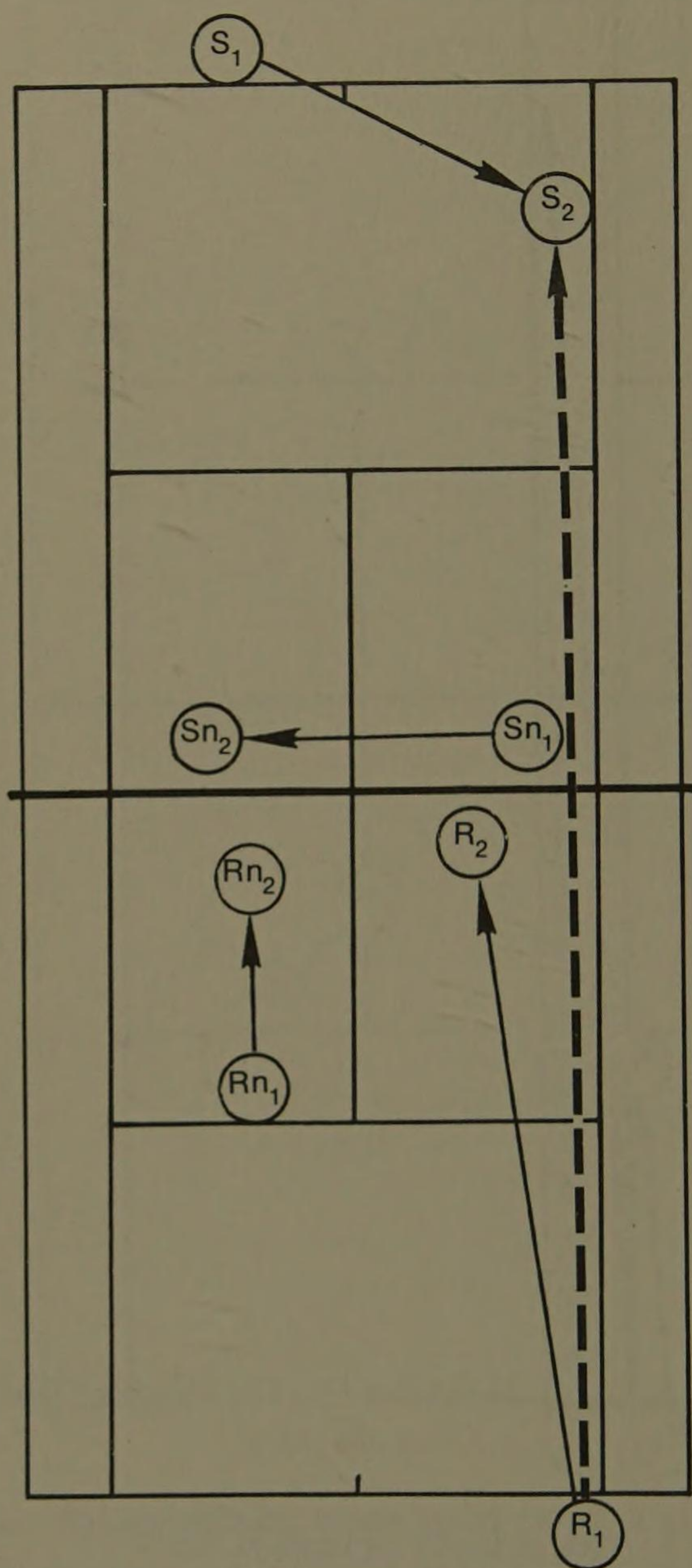


Diagram 26—*The Lob Return of Serve Over the Server's Netman*

If, however, the lob is over the server's netman (see Diagram 26), the server is forced to cross behind ($S_1 \rightarrow S_2$) and take a backhand volley, thereby allowing your team to close ($R_1 \rightarrow R_2$ and $Rn_1 \rightarrow Rn_2$). Or the lob might catch the serving team offguard. Perhaps they will have to answer with a lob, again giving your team the opportunity to take the offensive. No matter how the serving team plays the lob, your team must close quickly to make use of your momentary advantage.

The lob down the line is a good tactic against big serves or against a server's netman who is slow or has a weak overhead. *It has a medium percentage of effectiveness.* It is not so effective from the left court because the forehand overhead of the server's netman covers the alley and the server also can cover with his or her forehand.

The crosscourt return lob is very risky. The server should be able to hit an overhead winner, unless he or she closes so quickly that he or she is not able to stop and get under the lob.

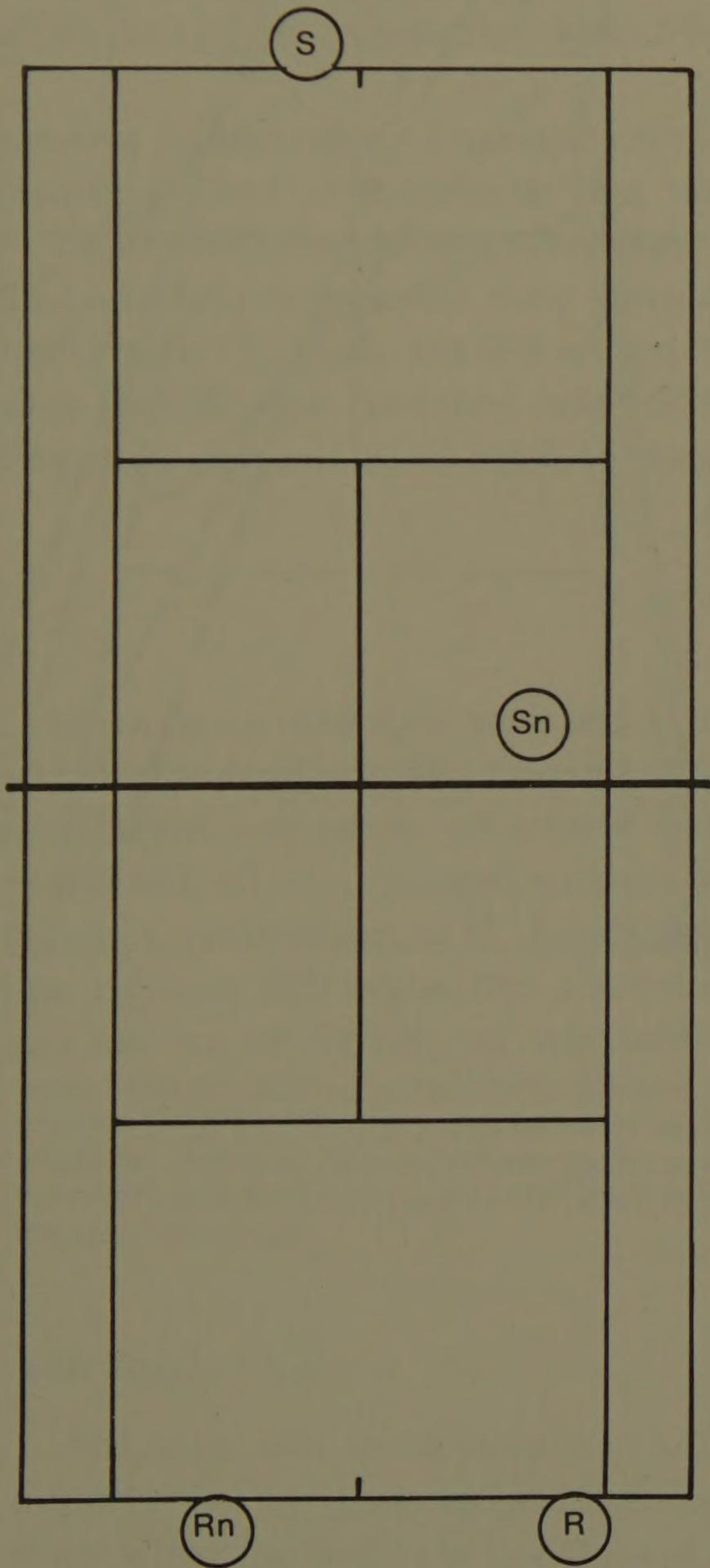


Diagram 27—*Defensive Receiving Positions*

Defensive Receiving

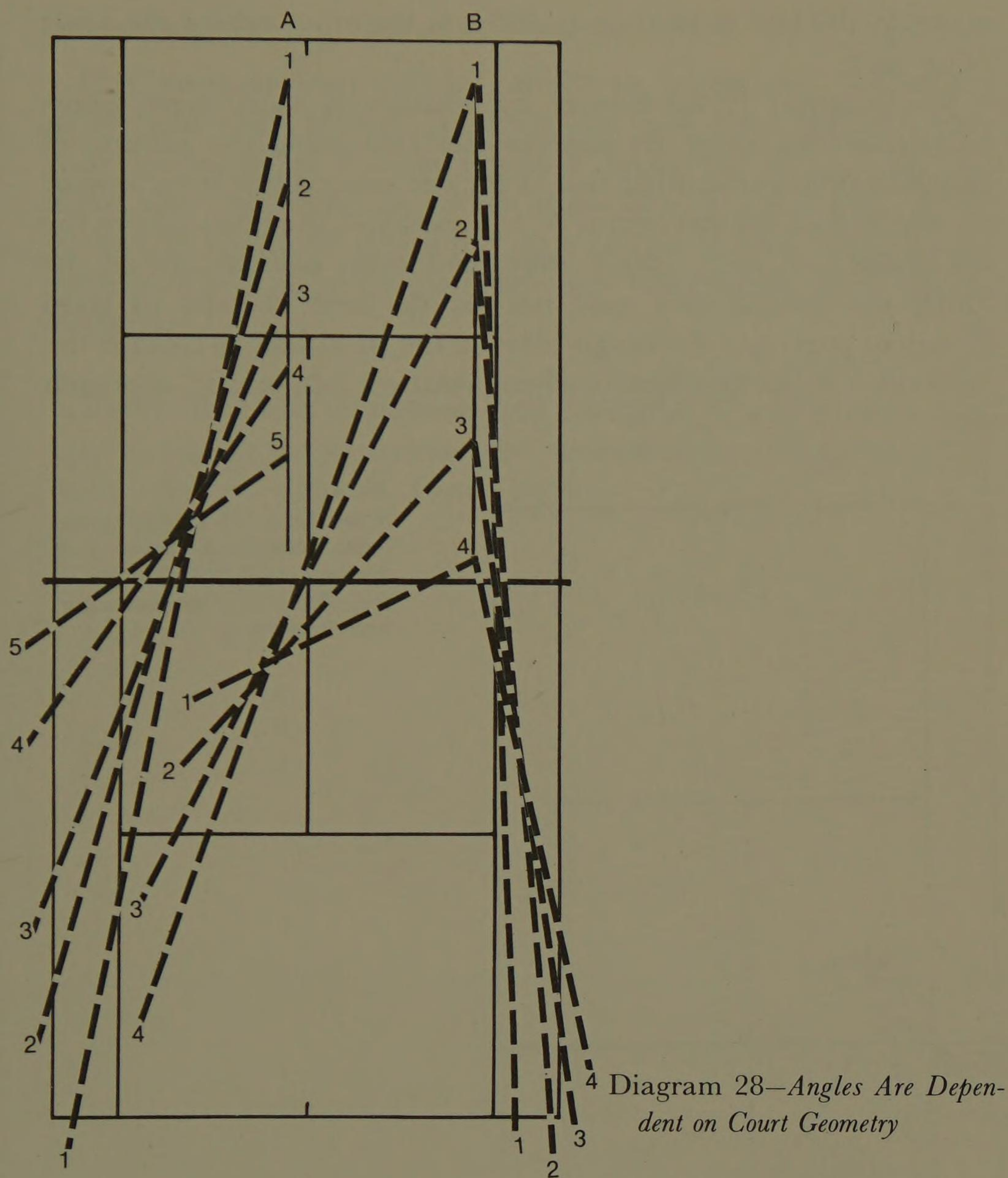
If the serve is overpowering or your team is getting few opportunities to break because of your poor returning or the good net play of the opposition, try a defensive posture—you and your partner at the baseline—until an opening develops and you both can close the net. See Diagram 27. If only the first serve is difficult, then your netman may move up to the regular position for the second serve.

There are various ways to develop openings that allow you to move to the net: lobs, groundstrokes, soft angles, or, better yet, a mixture of these.

The best defense is to mix shots constantly and thereby prevent the net team from getting set and developing a unified attack. Also, cut off the ball early whenever possible to force them to recover quickly, thereby increasing your chances to play the ball away from them without having to hit big shots. Trying to hit passing shots or winners from the baseline will defeat your objective of trying to unbalance or force back the net team and thereby gain access to the net.

Lobs

When lobbing, always try to force your opponent to move back to take the lob. As you can see in Diagram 28, the farther from the net your opponent is, the fewer angles he or she can make (and angles are the key to beating a baseline defense) and the less power he or she can put into an overhead. If a momentary opening develops, play a groundstroke with a soft angle that possibly will catch your opponent away from the net before he or she can recover from the overhead.



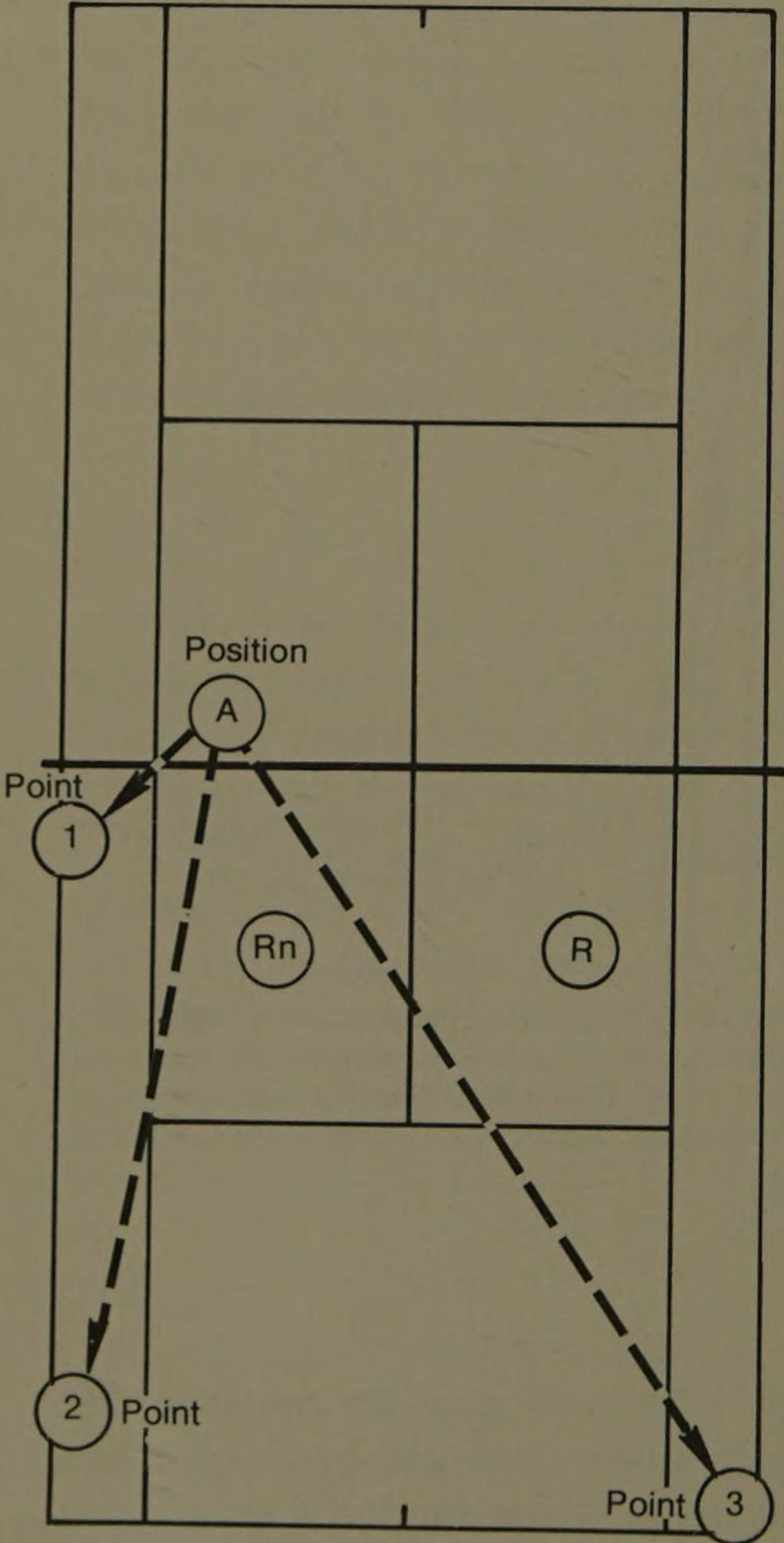
Note: From Position A (center court), you can hit angles equally to either side. From Position B (singles line) you can hit wider angles to your opponents' left court and straighter angles to your opponents' right court. Remember that the net is lower in the middle and allows you to play soft shots wider. Also, the closer you are to the net, the easier the angle.

Soft Angle Shots

Although soft shots from the backcourt give the net team the opportunity for easy angles, soft angle shots are good approach shots when the ball is below the net or where there is a short-court

opening (the ball must drop quickly on the other side of the court or go out).

See Diagram 29 for further explanation of short court. Short court and long court are concepts for evaluating the amount of playable area on the other side of the net along a line from a point on your side of the net (Point A) to a point on the other side of the net (Point 1, 2, or 3). Try to play the longest *available* line on the court; the longest line may not be the best because of good opponent coverage. Although playing the short line or court is the most risky, it can be effective when making a soft, angled approach shot.



Note: Point 1 is shortest court from Position A, Point 2 is medium court from Position A, and Point 3 is longest court from Position A.

Diagram 29—Short Court—Long Court

Groundstrokes

Play groundstrokes up the middle or at players. Alternating power and extra topspin (to make the ball drop quickly) keeps your opponents at the net guessing, limits the angles they can make, and may even intimidate them into taking a step or two backward, especially if you put up a couple of lobs. Once the net team retreats, you can exploit their new vulnerability and take the offensive.

Every team has weaknesses and strengths. The most important time to exploit the weaknesses and neutralize the strengths is at the return-of-serve segment of each point.

6

The Net

As you move closer to the net, your strokes require more quickness and less power. Thus, at the baseline you use your hand, shoulders, and step to achieve sufficient power and control for your groundstrokes. When you return or make an approach shot, only your hands and shoulders are necessary for power and control. And when you are close enough to the net to volley, only your hands are the essential factor.

In the volley your racquet itself rebounds the ball. Your hands, with only a short forward motion, control the shot. If you try to create power with backswing and full followthrough, you will be wasting energy and time. A backswing requires extra time, the

extra time allows the ball to drop before you hit it, and a full followthrough takes away from your time to prepare for the next volley. The best way to reinforce this action at the net is during practice to put a headband around your upper arms to force your elbows together so that you cannot swing but only punch the volley.

To examine the volley further, let us isolate the four positions in doubles—the server, the receiver, the server's netman, and the receiver's netman—and see what their roles are in relation to the net.

The Server

The First Volley

When you serve, you try to achieve two results: maximum flight time of your serve so that you can approach and get in tight at the net, and a limited return from the receiver that you or your netman can volley away easily at the net. When you approach, you try to volley the receiver's return. The closer you are to the net and the more quickly you make this first volley, the less time the receiver has to recover and return the volley. If the receiver's return is high, you can play your first volley through the opposing netman. If the return is such that you must make a low or deep first volley, play it crosscourt and then move forward to close the angle. If you or your partner do not win the point by the second volley, your serving advantage will be neutralized.

Sometimes your body speed as you approach the net acts as a hitting force, and you run through the shot. Or you build up so much speed that you do not have time to prepare your racquet or change direction. To temper such loss of control, keep in mind the following procedure for the first volley.

When you approach after your serve, run only as fast as maintaining your balance will allow. Shorten your stride to stutter steps as the receiver hits the return. When you make your first volley, reach through the ball so that your stroke, not your body speed, controls the ball. Angle the face of your racquet for underspin and control. After hitting the first volley, keep moving forward for a better angle and a better chance to complete the

close of the net by the second volley. Shorten your steps to maintain balance, control body speed, and permit easier change of direction. Throughout the approach, keep your hands as far forward as possible so that you can reach for the ball without your body interfering. However, do not drop your racquet head below your hand, or your wrist will lose its firmness. Always try to get your hand below the ball by bending your knees and bringing your shoulders forward.

Exceptions to the Approach Volley

There are some exceptions to the general rule that your approach after serving should be a volley. If the receiver is able to

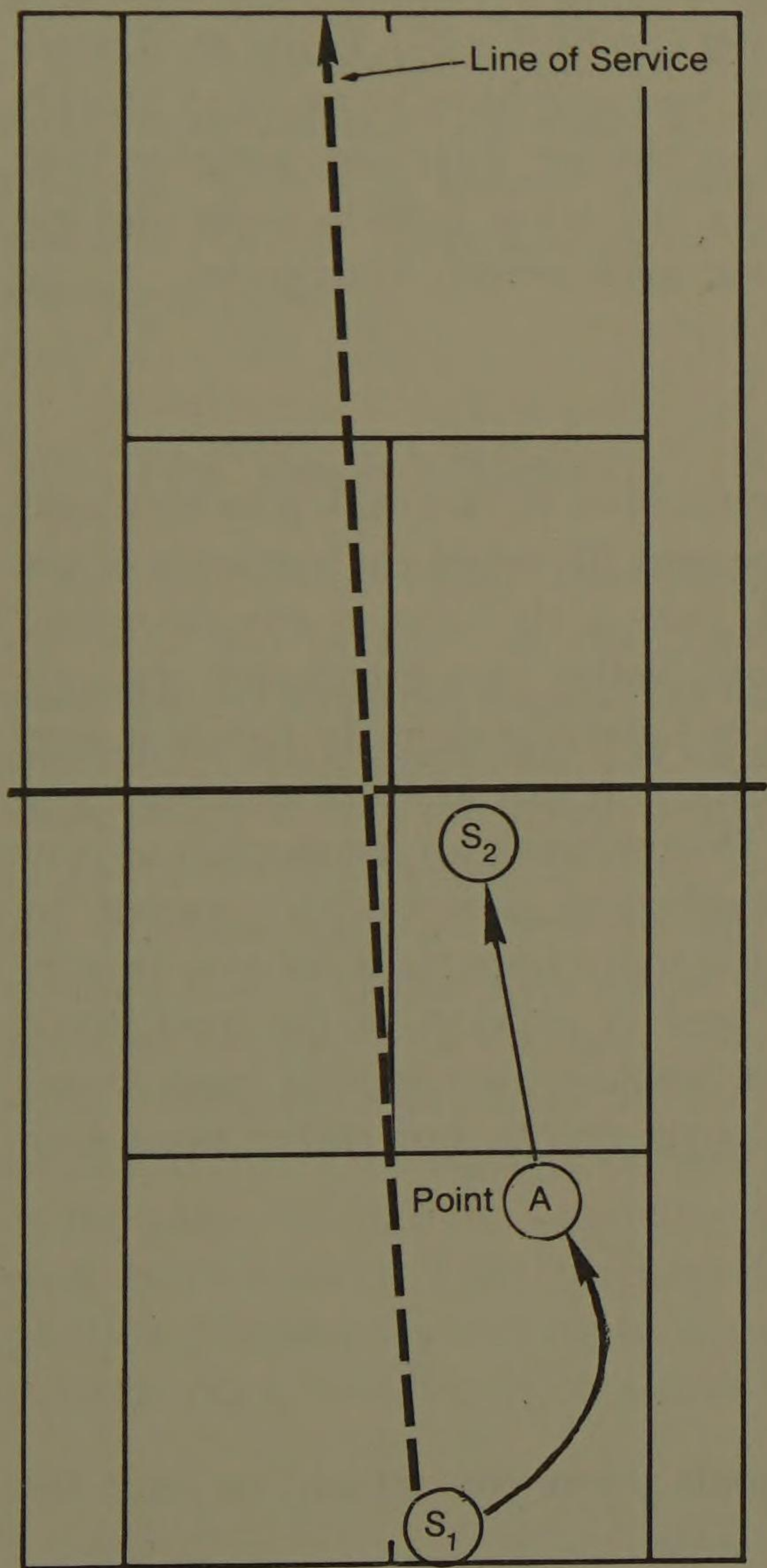


Diagram 30—*Looping to Find the Best Line of Approach*

stand in and receive so early that the return always forces you to half-volley, then you should approach more slowly, let the return bounce up to net level, and then drive your approach shot. The receiver possibly will be overcommitted in his or her own approach after making the return, and will not be able to handle the extra speed of the ball. Or the receiver's netman, sensing your hesitation and seeing the possible half-volley, may vacate his or her alley to poach, giving you an opening down the line.

Another exception occurs when a serving position or angle does not give you the best angle of approach. This situation requires your looping—moving from the serving position to the best line of approach. See Diagram 30.

You must loop ($S_1 \rightarrow$ Point A) to balance court coverage, and then you move forward to the net (Point A $\rightarrow S_2$). If you go directly from S_1 to S_2 in a straight line, you will have to move so quickly that you will not have time to change direction, prepare your racquet, and control your stroke. To allow time to make the few extra steps to make the loop, you must modify your serve.

The Second Volley

The second volley usually determines the point. Up to now your team has maintained its offense and thwarted the attempts of the receiving team to gain control. Now is the time to win the point. However, do not put the second volley into a category separate from the flow of the preceding or following shots. In theory it may be a pivotal play, but in practice it is just another shot that you play to obtain the best results. Do not break up the rhythm of your play or impose another psychological pressure on yourself by considering the shot special. It is more important for you to play each shot as well as possible and in support of the next. Such consistency is an attack in itself, because the opposing team knows it cannot rely on your errors to get points, but rather must earn them.

The Receiver

As receiver you have two goals when you return: to limit the

time the server has to get to the net by cutting off the angle of the serve and taking the ball on the rise, and to make a low or difficult return with enough angle to increase the flight time of the ball and to pull the server away from the middle of the court.

Once you make your return, you try to thwart the advance of the server by returning his or her first and second volleys and thereby obtaining a stand-off that eventually will neutralize the server's initial offensive advantage. Perhaps you can create an opening for your own approach to the net by mixing speeds, lobbing, or using any other such means to frustrate the serving team. Unlike the server's clear-cut tactic of serve-and-volley, your tactic as receiver is to constantly probe to find the best way to get to the net and disrupt the server's offensive attack.

Even if you do not make the best possible return, your single most important task is to make a return. If you are forced to make an error, make it by hitting too deep rather than hitting too short and into the net. There is always the possibility of the other team's playing it back.

The Server's Netman

As the server's netman your role when your partner is approaching is to put pressure on the receiver by threatening to poach, poaching, or covering angles. Do not overplay so much that you constantly leave openings; the suggestion of movement is often more effective than the actual poach.

To restrict the receiver as much as possible, maintain the classic net position—halfway between the center service line and the doubles line, and one step and a racquet reach to the net. This position, coupled with the short court available to the receiver on a wide crosscourt, reduces the amount of court open to the receiver to 50 percent. If the receiver's return is predictably crosscourt or he or she plays the ball the same way in certain situations, you have even more control. Your partner, the server, can help keep your position offensive by serving to the receiver's weaknesses, but you must be ready to cover all angles of service.

The Receiver's Netman

As the receiver's netman you have two responsibilities before you settle in at the net: to cover the center in case the server's netman poaches crosscourt, and to cover the alley in case the server makes his or her first volley down the line. Once the ball passes the server's netman, you focus on the server and try to intimidate his or her approach. If your partner, the receiver, is returning well, you may start tight at the net to pick off the server's first volley. However, if the receiver is returning weakly or the server is serving well or the receiver's opportunity to come to the net is somehow limited, then you start farther back in proportion to the weakness of the return. Whatever the reason, you must so position yourself that you and your partner can develop a united attack.

Sometimes on the second serve you can stand as close as possible to the center service line to psychologically reduce the serving area. You can afford to overplay this way because the second serve usually brings a strong return that forces a weak volley from the server. However, if the receiver returns weakly, you may be caught in an overcommitted position. Also, you must be careful not to be hit by the ball; if the ball touches you, the point goes to the server. In fact, this is one reason you do not attempt this tactic on the first serve; the server could aim his or her first volley at you and win the point.

All Four Players at the Net

Once all four players are at the net, everyone is on equal ground. All the advantages and disadvantages of starting positions disappear, the separate considerations change to team considerations, and the points will be lost more by errors than by planned strategy of attack. Balls will be played a bit too high or too wide, and the opposing team will try to capitalize on such advantages. The key at this point is to play advantages until an opening develops and then to play the opening. If the first opening does not work, go back to playing the percentages; with patience you will win the point.

Guidelines for Playing the Net

Although playing advantages is the general rule-of-thumb for playing the net, there are several guidelines for you to follow when you and your partner are at net.

- When you play the net, you are completely committed to an offensive position. And such commitment requires your making anticipated, well-played volleys rather than guess-and-swing swats at the ball.

- The first person who can get to the ball takes the ball. You do not have time to wait for the ball or discuss the pros and cons of who should take the shot. Exceptions to this basic rule will stand out, and you can change play accordingly.

- Be aware of possible responses in order to develop anticipation. Whether your opponent plays the ball to you or your partner, stay ahead of the possibilities and maintain a constant awareness of the ball. We have discussed some likely strategies, and you should count on just such shots from your opponents. Sometimes the unexpected happens, but the percentage of such shots nullifies their effect.

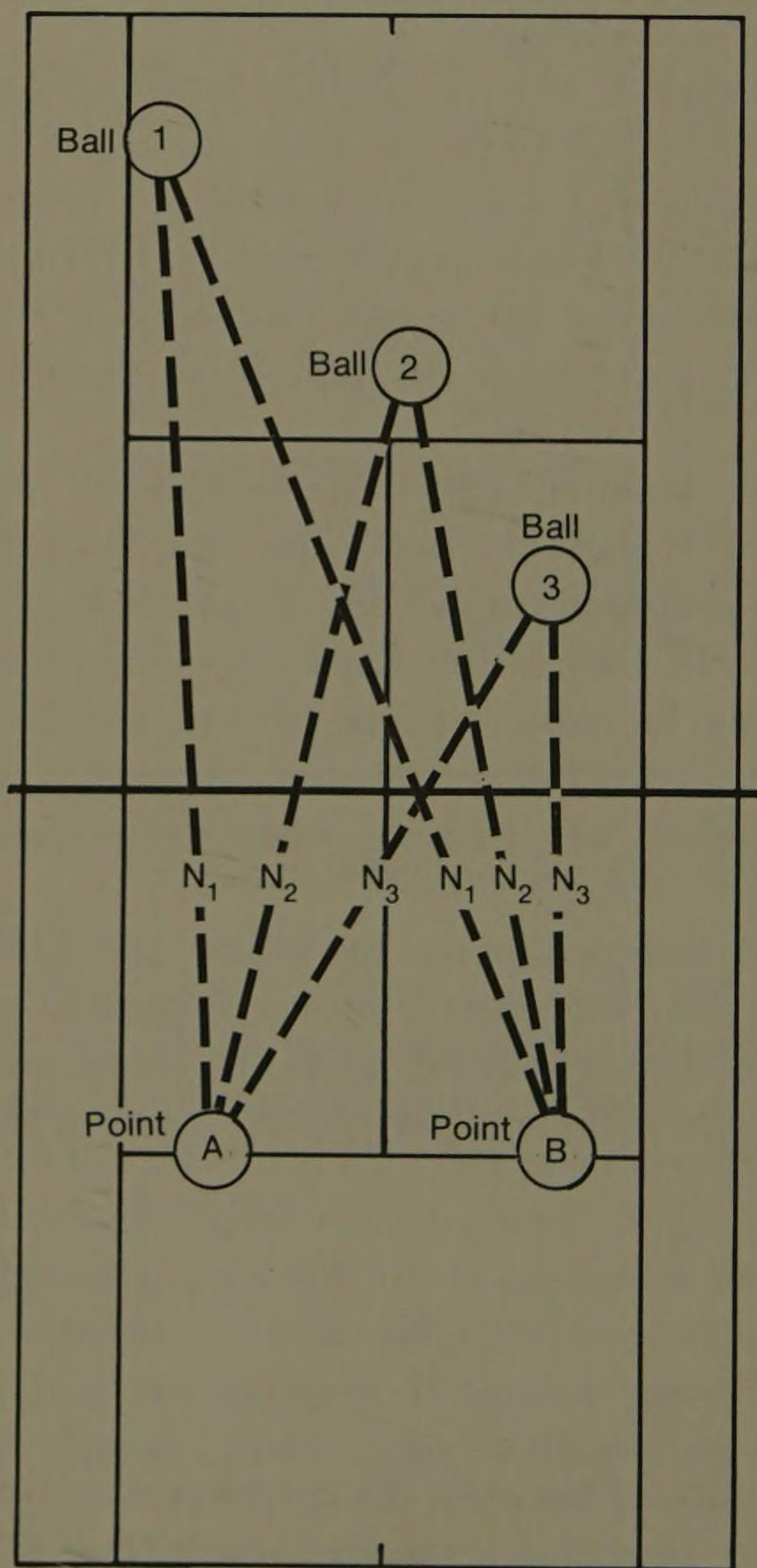
- Regardless of where your opponent plays the ball, reach out your hand and lean your body toward the ball. This reaction gets you in rhythm with the play, prepares you for any occurrence, and encourages continual flow to the ball rather than jerky stop-and-start responses. Also, reaching for and leaning toward the ball keeps the ball in front of you instead of to the side, because your body, or at least your shoulders, are turning when your hand reaches.

- Do not turn your head independently to follow the ball. Because turning the head is a slow movement, your eyes must keep refocusing and the ball goes through blind spots. Leaning and moving your shoulders gives you sufficient peripheral vision to see your opponents.

Position at the Net

Your basic net position is halfway between the center service line and the doubles line, and one step and a racquet reach from the

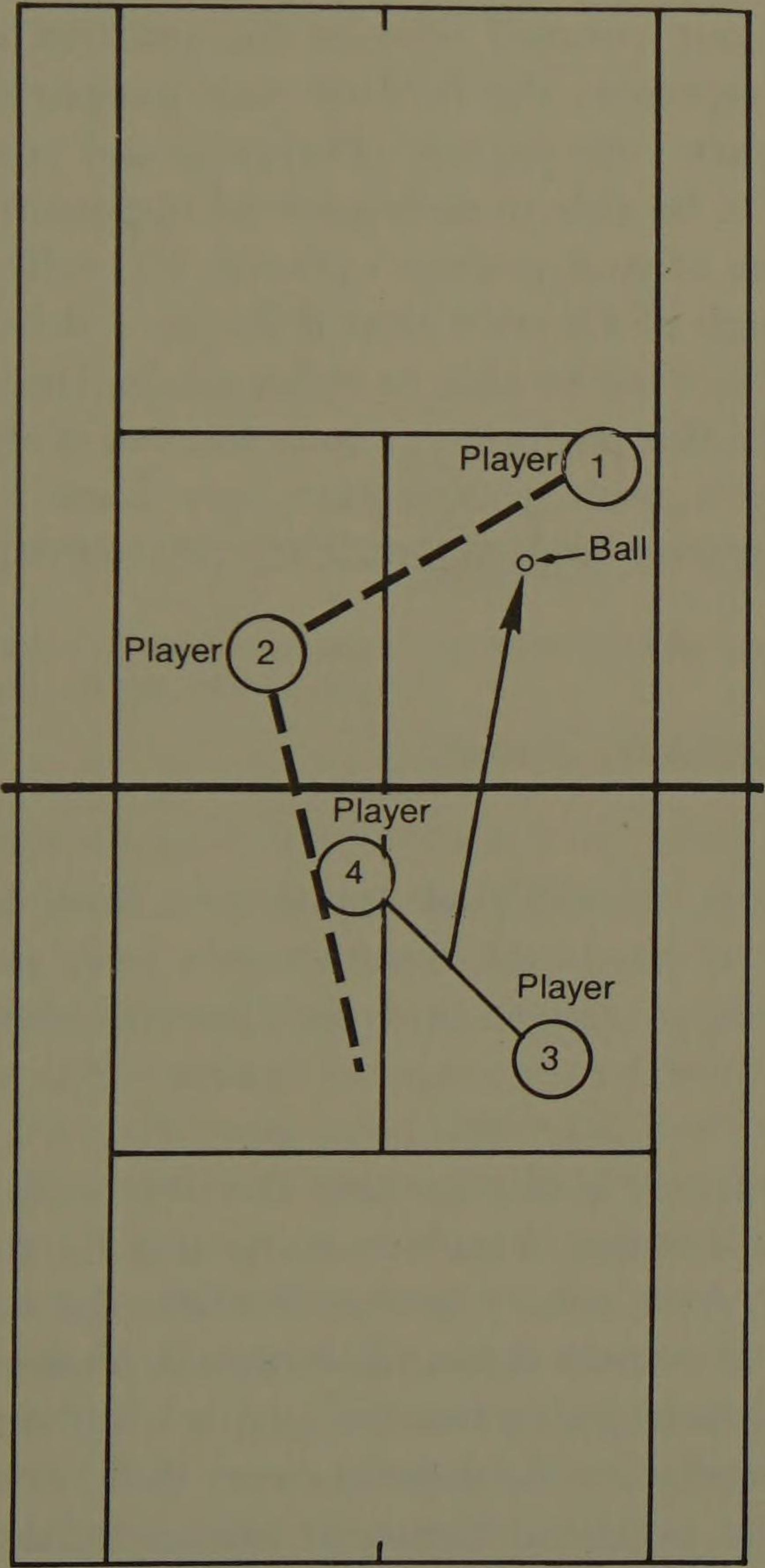
net. This is the area of your responsibility. This position allows you to move to and from the net and to intercept balls coming through your area at various angles with one step and a racquet reach. See Diagram 31. Suppose you are playing the net in the left court. By drawing an imaginary line from your fixed net position at Point A to the ball, you find your best line of coverage. You make one step and a racquet reach at a 45-degree angle along Line N_1 to cover the angle of Ball 1, along Line N_2 to cover the angle of Ball 2, and along Line N_3 to cover the angle of Ball 3. Because you have the forehand in the middle, you will take most of the shots coming to the center of the court. Your partner in the right court stands at his



Note: N represents a netman, and the subnumber indicates the ball being played.

Diagram 31—*Net Position*

or her net position (Point B)—halfway between the center service line and the doubles line, and one step and a racquet reach from the net—and can make one step and a racquet reach at a 45-degree angle along Line N₁ to cover Ball 1, along Line N₂ to cover Ball 2, and along Line N₃ to cover Ball 3. Both you and your partner move in and out along the line from your fixed positions (Points A and B) to the ball, closing angles. These positions also allow you and your partner to move one step and a racquet reach laterally to intercept alley shots and shots down the middle (if you and your partner take one step and a racquet reach to the middle of the



Note: The dotted lines indicate the field of peripheral vision of Player 2.

Diagram 32—*The T-Concept and Peripheral Vision*

court, your racquets will touch); you have complete command of the width of the court.

Another way of analyzing net position is the T-concept. See Diagram 32. You (Player 4) and your partner (Player 3) defend the net by forming a defensive wall (Player 4—Player 3) at a right angle to the flight of the ball. We can liken you and your partner to a wall, because either one of you can make one step and a racquet reach to the middle and intercept any ball that comes between you. The wall and the flight of the ball through the middle form a T.

Position yourself so that all players are within your peripheral vision. Using Diagram 32, put yourself now in the position of Player 2. The dotted lines represent the field of your peripheral vision. You must be able to see your partner (Player 1) and your opponents (Players 3 and 4) to be able to anticipate an opponent's (Player 3's or 4's) interception of your partner's (Player 1's) volley. You also must be wide enough of Player 4 that if Player 1 drives the ball at Player 4, Player 4 will not be able to volley the ball back into your (Player 2's) alley. In this position you may feel out of the mainstream of play, but you must concentrate very hard on keeping in rhythm with the play and maintaining full sight of everyone.

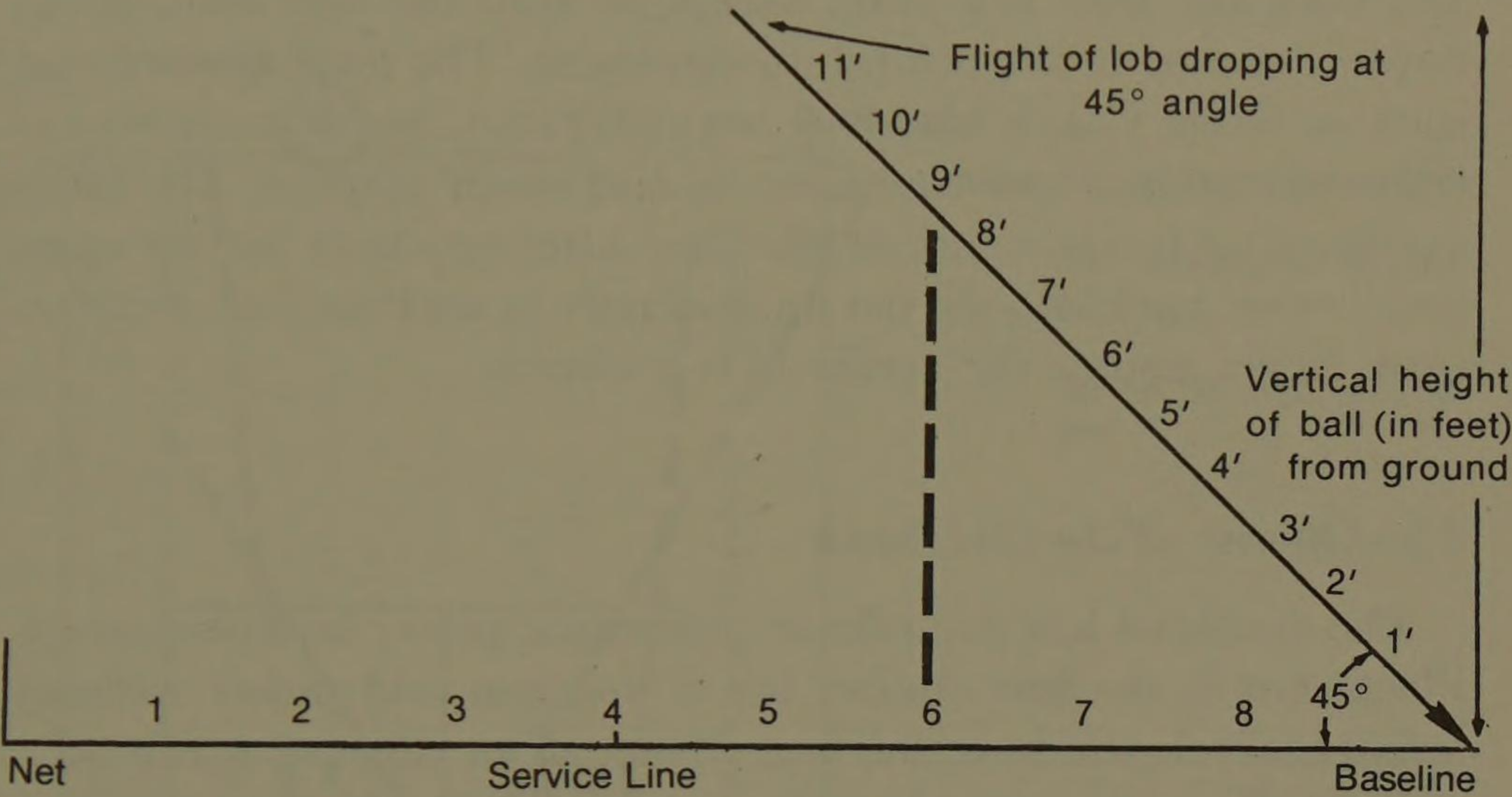
The Overhead

Many times when you are at net and your opponent is back, he or she will try to lob over your head and thereby try to push you back from your offensive position and to gain the opportunity to close the net. Your best offensive weapon against such a lob is an overhead.

One of your first considerations before making the overhead is whether to allow the ball to bounce. You determine this by the angle of descent of the ball. As a rule, you should allow the lob with a descent of more than 45 degrees to bounce before you take it as an overhead. When a ball is dropping that steeply, it is moving faster vertically than horizontally, and is therefore very difficult to time if you try to make the overhead before it bounces. Also,

because a ball, without any consideration of spin, bounces to 50 percent of the height of the lob, you can feel confident that you can still take a lob that is beyond the reach of your netman as an overhead after it bounces.

When covering a lob dropping at a 45-degree angle or less, you need not let the ball bounce. Nor should you turn and run. Back up under the ball and cut off the lob at the highest point possible. By making the overhead at the highest point possible, you keep



Maximum number of steps you need in order to back under ball. (*With anticipation and position, can be fewer.*)

Diagram 33—*Covering a Lob*

your distance from the net at a minimum. The closer you can stay to the net, the better the angle on your overhead and the faster you can close the net after the overhead. Also, by cutting down the flight time of the lob, you give your opponent less time to prepare for the overhead.

Actually, you need take only four or five steps at the most back from the net to cover a lob with a 45-degree angle or less. A lob requiring more than that number of steps would probably go out anyway. As you can see by the perpendicular line from the step-6 mark in Diagram 33, even a woman of average height (five and one-half feet) with her arm and racquet extended (another three feet) could reach a lob with a 45-degree angle of descent a step or two behind the service line.

How to Play the Overhead

In all net play your hand (racquet) always is reaching for the ball. The overhead is no different. By extending your left hand in front of you at about a 45-degree angle, you gain depth perception, align your body to the flight of the ball, and turn your body sideways to the net as in the serving position. Cock your racquet behind your head and snap out just before your pointing hand theoretically catches the ball. Power comes from your wrist, and you need not leap nor jump except to keep the ball from going beyond you or to hit behind an opponent. The leaping overhead such as Rosie Casals has, is a beautiful shot, but it requires exceptional balance and coordination and much practice. The basic overhead probably is just as effective. After you have hit the overhead, move back into the net immediately in anticipation of the return. Never assume the overhead is a winner.

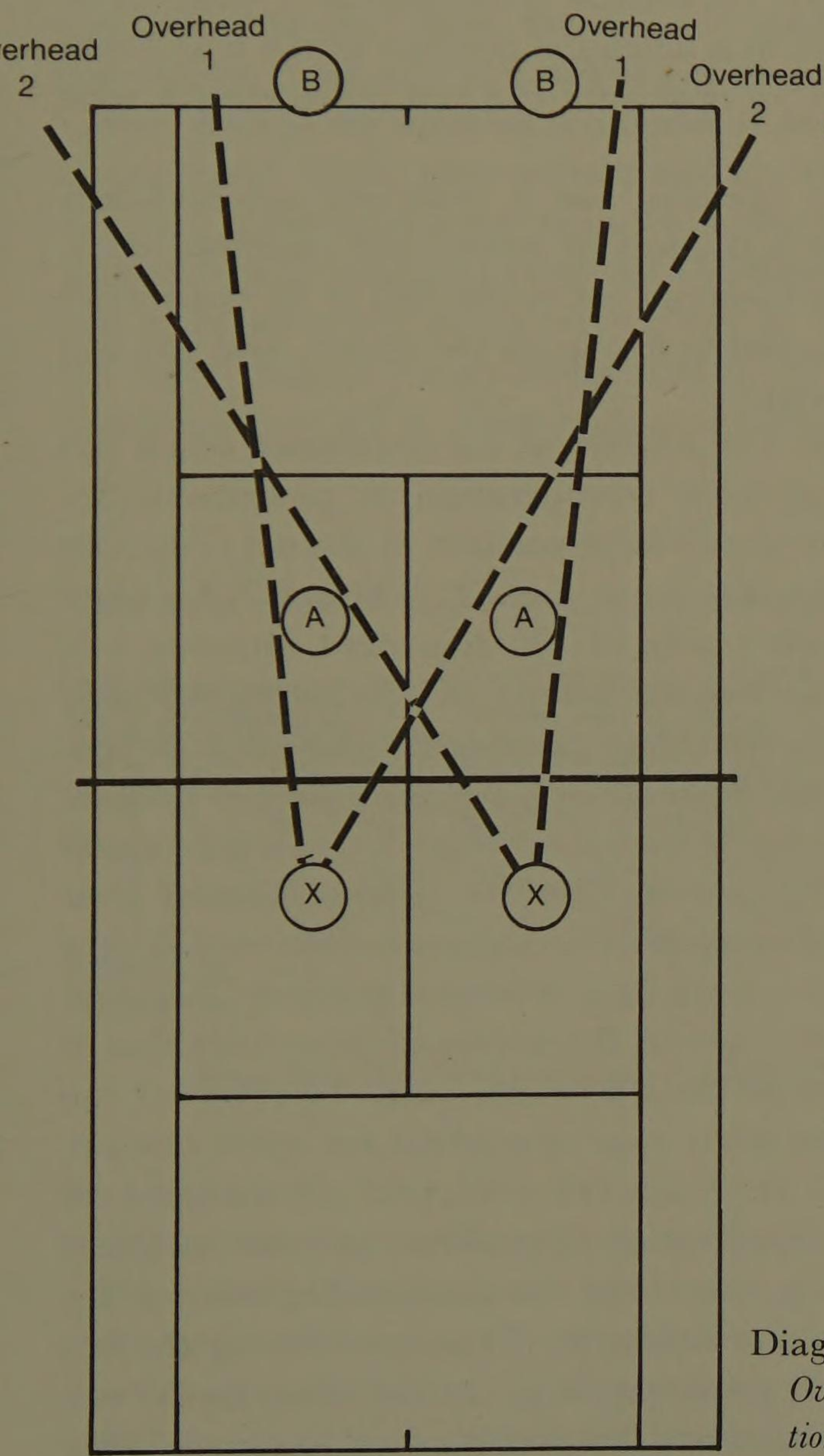
The Offense of the Overhead

The overhead has two offense potentials: power and placement. Placement is the first choice, but if you can add power without losing control, you have the best chance of an effective overhead.

Power. If you can use power in your overhead with direction and consistency, then by all means drive and attack. When your opponents are at net, use your power to jam the weaker player or hit up the middle. When your opponents are split—one up, one back—play your power at the netman, try for a high percentage angle, or use three-quarter speed to the deep man. If you do play the ball deep, make sure that your choice for power will weaken your opponent's response rather than just limit the time you have to close the net. When in doubt, play a three-quarter-speed twist overhead deep. When you make the play from out of court or both you and your partner are back, always use three-quarter speed to allow yourself enough time to get in good position or close the net.

Placement. Placement of the overhead presents three considerations: depth, angle, and opening. You determine depth of placement by where you are and where your opponents are when you make the overhead. For example, when you and your opponents are at net, enough depth to jam an opponent or make him or her

hit up is sufficient. When only one of your opponents is at net, drive a deep angle between them so that they do not have the opportunity to get under the bounce or to run down a shallow overhead. When your opponents are both back, then power or angle must accompany the depth to ensure a weak response. When you and your partner are back or you are out of court, try for more depth to allow you more time to gain a more offensive position.



Note: AA, offensive opposition.
BB, defensive opposition.
AB or BA, split opposition.

Diagram 34—Placement of the Overhead according to the Position of the Opposition

There is a simple guideline for determining the angle of the overhead: the closer you are to the net, the more angle is available to you. Remember also that the angle of the overhead has two dimensions: horizontal and vertical. When the angle of the overhead is too wide for your opponent to reach, then you have used the *horizontal* plane of the angle of the overhead to your advantage. You use the *vertical* dimension of the angle of the overhead to your advantage when you drive the ball into the ground and it bounces high enough to be over the heads and beyond the reach of your opponents. The latter is a good tactic when your opponents are in a defensive position at the baseline or the court is so slow that an opponent can run down even a good horizontal angle.

Whenever there is an opening, use it. You will automatically reduce the lobbing team's chances of getting the overhead back. However, if there are no openings, drive the ball at an opponent's feet. He or she will be forced to hit up on the return, and you will not have to risk hitting out.

As I mentioned before, the position of the opposition when you hit the overhead is a primary consideration in placement. See Diagram 34. If they have an offensive position at the net (Positions AA) and you and your partner are at the net (Positions XX), place your overhead to the alley side of the opponent opposite you (Overhead 1). You achieve two advantages by this placement: only one opponent will have a chance to get it back, and because that opponent is so near to you, he or she will not have time to prepare to return. Overhead 2 is a second option if both opponents are at net (Positions AA), but you must play the overhead *behind* your crosscourt opponent to ensure its effectiveness. Overhead 2 is a better placement against a team in a defensive position (Positions BB) at the baseline. The angle of the overhead is so wide that it either will be a winner or produce a weak return. You can use the same guidelines as above when your opponents are split—one up, one back (Positions AB or BA). The choice of Overhead 1 or Overhead 2 will depend on which X-position you are in (right court or left court) when you take the shot and which of the opposing team is at net. For example, if you are playing the left court and the opponent opposite you is at the net (Position A) and his or her partner at the baseline (Position B), then you would play

either overhead. If you are playing the left court and the opponent opposite you is at the baseline (Position B) and his or her partner at the net (Position A), then you would play Overhead 2.

Covering the Overhead

You cover an overhead much the same way as any volley that your opponent makes from above the net. However, because of the power and vertical angle of an overhead, you cannot stand in too close to the net. If you do, you will have very little time to react and reflex the shot back, the ball can pass any part of your body and still be good, and you might get hurt.

Move Back for the Overhead. You usually should move back to cover an overhead. If you have lobbed and are expecting an overhead as a return, move back a few steps while the lob still is in flight. Your opponent will probably take the overhead high and hit it hard, and your retreating to the service line or thereabouts will increase the flight time of the overhead and therefore put you in a better position to return it. Your opponent's distance from the net and

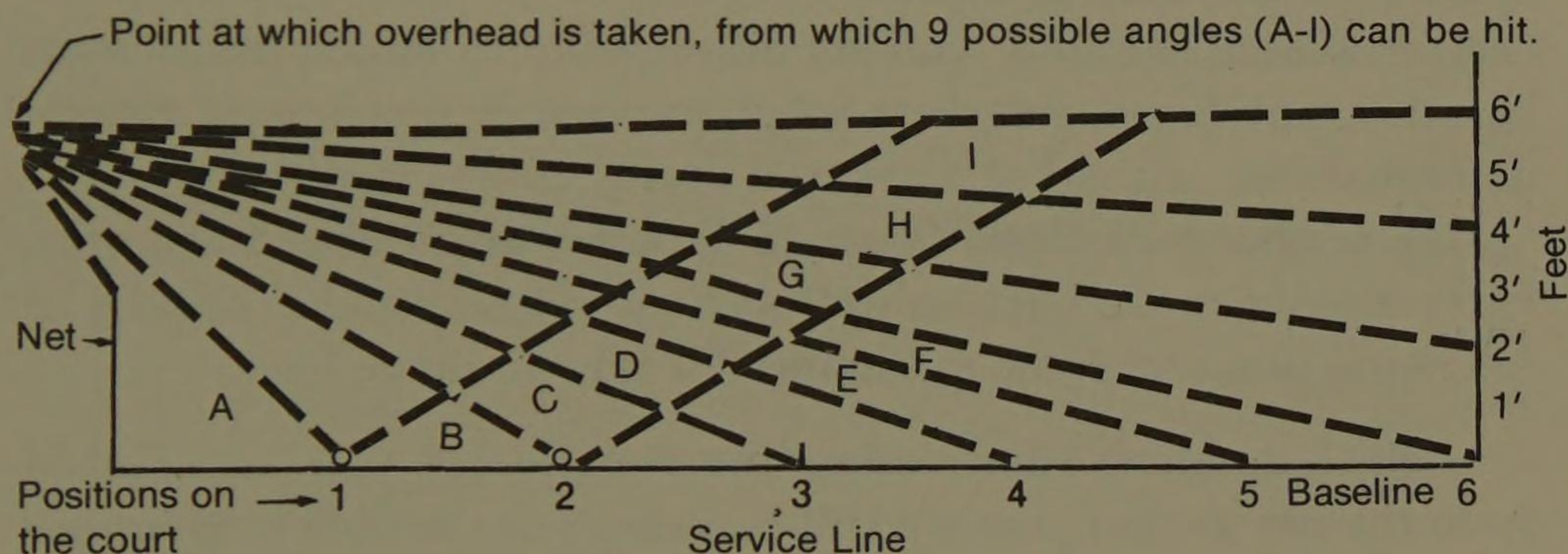


Diagram 35—*Proximity to the Net when Covering an Overhead*

the height of the ball when he or she hits the overhead should give you some clues as to the ball's possible speed and placement.

For some guidelines as to how much to move back to cover an overhead, see Diagram 35. From Position 1 (closest to the net), you must cover a vertical range of five feet to cover the overheads that will stay in (Overheads A–F). Because the flight time of the

overheads will be short, you have little time to react to them, and you might even misjudge and hit at out-overheads (G-I).

At Position 2, you must cover a vertical range of four feet to be able to return the in-overheads. The bounce of Overhead A will be within that range. Again, you will have very little time to react and may misjudge and play the out-overheads.

At Position 3, the vertical range of the in-overheads is three feet. The bounces of Overheads A and B are within that range. You have several advantages at Position 3:

1. You have a limited area to cover.
2. You have enough time both to react and to take the offense by returning quickly enough to catch your opponents out of position.
3. You can take the shot high enough not to have to hit up.
4. You can close the net again with just a few steps.

At Position 4, the vertical range of the in-overheads is two and one-half feet. The bounces of Overheads A and B are not within that range; in fact, they increase the vertical range to more than two and one-half feet. From this position you are too far from the net to be able to close the net quickly and too far from the baseline to adopt a defensive position.

At Positions 5 and 6, you should be able to handle most shots because you have the most time, but your position is strictly defensive.

How to Move Back for the Overhead. To cover an overhead you must know how to move back as well as how much to move back. The following provides some guidelines for how to move back:

- Back up along your closing line even though you have moved from the net so that you are still covering your area of responsibility. (Refer to Diagram 31 on page 76.) Move back enough that the ball will pass the lower part of your body or bounce in front of you. This range reduces the area you must cover and gives you a chance to get your racquet on the ball.

- After moving back, get your balance and prepare before your opponent hits the overhead. Do not jump or bounce at this time. Keep your feet in contact with the ground so that you can move instantaneously.

- Cover the power zones. For example, if your opponent comes

in with a forehand shot, he will get more power from hitting crosscourt than from hitting straight ahead. Also cover the high percentage shot, forcing your opponent to go for a second choice that is a lower-percentage shot.

Blocking the Overhead. There are times when it is better to block the overhead than to move back for it. The closer the ball is to the net level when your opponent hits the overhead, the less the vertical angle possible and the less power he or she can use without the risk of hitting the ball out. If your opponent tries to drive the ball, he or she may end up off balance and overcommitted on the followthrough, especially if he or she uses topspin.

In this situation, stand in as close as possible, see the ball of your opponent's racquet, meet the drive above the net, and like a wall, rebound it back before your opponent can regain balance and recover from his or her followthrough. To prepare for rebounding or blocking the ball, keep your shoulders forward to keep your arms in front and to lend them strength in holding your racquet firmly against the impact of the drive. Keep your arms well out in front so that they are free of interference from your body, reach out your hands, bend your knees, and stand balanced on the balls of your feet. Open your wrist and lock it in position to withstand the impact of the hard shot. Most important, *block* the ball with the racquet face. Even if your opponent returns the rebound, your position or stance for the block is perfect to handle the next shot easily and to gain a very good chance of controlling and winning the point.

Net Tactics

We have discussed the basic net shots—volley, overhead, and covering the overhead. Now let us touch upon some of the basic net tactics.

The Poach

Poaching—crossing in front of your partner at the net and taking his shot—is perhaps the most dramatic net tactic. However, it often

creates more problems for your team than for your opponents, and some of the problems have nothing to do with the success or failure of the tactic itself.

There are definite times to poach, and both you and your partner must be ready to handle the response. You poach only if you can make a better shot than your partner to benefit the overall position of the team: to take advantage of a setup (when your opponent has been forced to make a defensive, weak, or obvious shot); to reduce pressure on your partner; to cut off an angle; or to limit the time for the other team to get in position for a setup. Once you poach, you must continue to cross, and your partner must go behind you and cover the vacated area. You cannot stop and return to your original position. For more discussion of poaching see pages 100–103.

The Lob Volley

The lob volley also can be an effective tactic at the net, but it not only is precarious and difficult to execute, but also can turn you into a target. You must be careful how you hit it as well as when you play it.

Never play the lob volley from above the net; you will be sacrificing an offensive shot for a defensive one. Also, play it when there is no alternative. For example, if you are making a desperate effort to reach a low shot and your opponents have closed the net, your only hope is to go over them. Or if an angle pulls a netman wide and he or she returns low and races to close the net again, then a lob is perfect to take advantage of his or her overcommitted forward movement. A lob also can take advantage of wind, sun, lack of confidence, slow reaction, or a disheartened opponent.

One final word about the lob volley: always play it so that the opposition must move *back*, not stand still or move forward.

Hitting or Jamming an Opponent

Hitting or jamming an opponent when you are at net is an effective tactic. When the ball is below the net, angle the ball to an opening or to the body of an opposing netman, specifically to his or her forehand hip (a difficult shot to get back). You hit at your opponent not with the intention of hurting him or her but of

making that opponent step back and thereby creating an opening for a better angle. Or, inversely, you may jam an opponent after you have hit an effective angle that has put him or her off balance.

If in Doubt, Play the Middle

Whenever you are at the net and there is any question as to where you should play the ball, play it low to the middle. A shot down the middle always has plenty of court available to it, confuses the opposition as to who should take the shot, and limits the angles of return, thereby producing returns that are easy to cover.

Take the Shot as High as Possible

A basic rule-of-thumb for playing the net is to take the ball as high as possible. Sometimes your opponent will hit a drop shot—the ball drops over the net and stays below net level even after it bounces—and your response may be another drop shot. However, do *not* make the mistake of *not* taking the ball when it is *above* net level. Similarly, if the ball has dropped below the net level, let it bounce and come back up after its bounce before you hit it so that you can make a driving shot rather than having to play an angle or defensive shot.

A commitment to offensive play is the key to playing the net. You might have to back away or play defensive shots when the opposition has a stronger offensive position, but at no time is your position defensive—it is always offensive.

7

Building Blocks for Doubles

Once you understand the physics of tennis and have mastered all the strokes, do not assume that practice and competition alone will bring success. What you have accomplished so far is merely a foundation; what you build from this foundation depends on your willingness to consider new building blocks of the game—percentage shots, anticipation, communication with your partner, and influence of score on determination of tactics, strategy, and stroke—and to ask new questions about the game: What makes a team effective? What makes it ineffective? How does a team compensate for its weaknesses?

Percentage Shots

Let us examine the first building block mentioned above—percentage shots. Knowing why, when, and where to make a particular shot is as important as knowing how to make the shot. You determine the why, when, and where of a shot by its percentage of success. I have already discussed and evaluated percentages of effectiveness of certain shots in previous chapters, but you must make your own analyses and thereby sharpen your awareness of various possibilities and situations.

To evaluate the percentage of success of a shot, consider three elements of equal value: the difficulty of the shot, the effect of the shot, and the possible response of the opponent. For example, a shot that is very easy to make might rate a 33 percent, but it may have only a medium effect of 15 percent. If it allows the best possible opportunity for the opponent, it merits 0 percent. Added together ($33 + 15 + 0$), the shot's chance of success is 48 percent.

Also, as difficult as it may be, you must separate the effect of the shot from the response of the opponent to make an accurate evaluation of the shot. The effect of the shot does not necessarily control the response. For example, see Diagram 36, and assume you are the server's netman. To evaluate the effectiveness of your poach ($S_{n1} \rightarrow S_{n2}$) and sharply angled volley to the alley of the receiver, use the criteria of the difficulty of the shot, the effect of the shot, and the response of the opponent. The angled shot certainly is not difficult for you if you are an advanced player. Its effect is to limit the receiver to one desperate possibility—down your alley. However, that response, even made weakly, is to the vulnerable area of your team. You vacated that area when you poached, and the server must move all the way to the other side of the court to cover. You can see by the dotted line on the diagram ($S_1 \rightarrow S_2$) that the server must change direction twice to compensate for your move; first he or she moves forward after the serve, then more diagonally toward the center when you poach, and finally toward your alley when the receiver makes the down-the-line shot. Thus, although the effect of your poach and angled volley is to limit the receiver to one possibility, that one possibility of response by the receiver will keep the ball in play and perhaps even win the point.

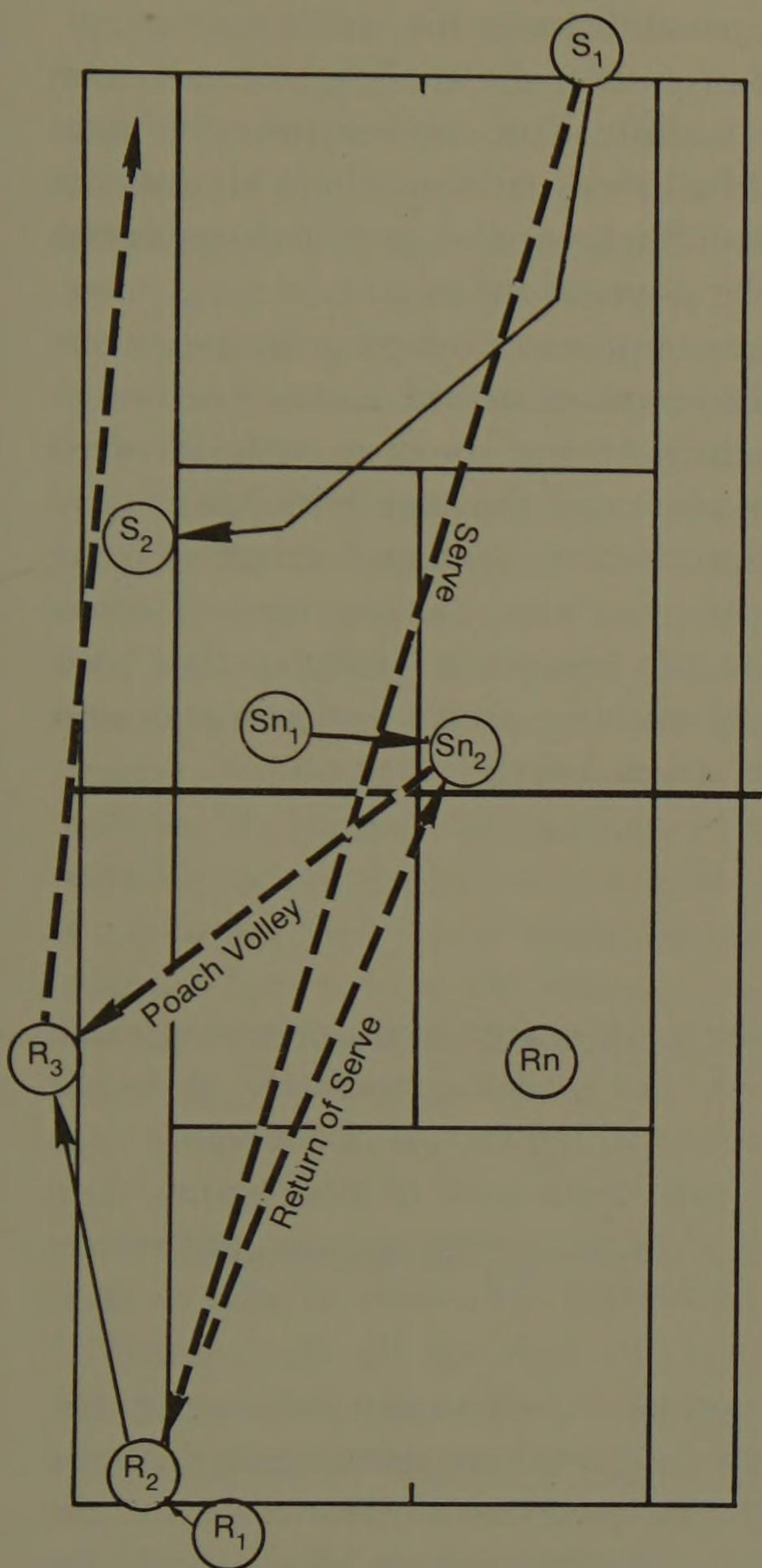


Diagram 36—*Evaluating the Percentage of Success of a Poach Volley*

Consider now a more standard poach and volley of the same standard return: you play the poach between the receiver and the receiver's netman or to the right of the receiver's netman. The percentage of success of either of these shots is much greater than that of the sharply angled volley because they allow the server to close the net quickly and thus your team can handle any response of the receiving team at the net. Also, the percentage of success of

the shot down the middle is even greater because it is an easier shot for you than the angled volley. The effect of all three is about the same—they offer very limited possibilities to the receiver.

When analyzing the effect of a shot, do not forget the hidden psychological impact of certain shots. You can intimidate a team with power or make them feel foolish by running them all over the court or catching them offguard. Such psychological influences can be far more important than the physical influences.

Learning to play percentages requires developing an awareness and discipline that eventually becomes second nature. Although this learning is not very exciting at first, once accomplished, it improves the quality of your play and the ease with which you handle tough situations and maintain a mental edge. Playing percentages also simplifies play for you. If you cannot assess situations and possibilities, you can become so confused that your strokes are hesitant, you let opportunities go by, and you and your partner both converge on the ball and then let it pass.

Anticipation

Another building block of the game is anticipation. Anticipation is too often considered a talent for guessing correctly. A better definition is awareness of ball-controlling factors. Developing such awareness is like working on any other part of your game. You must learn to break down and then reassemble actions and results so that you can understand individual influences as well as their role in the overall picture.

For the return of serve, you prepare prior to and during the toss, and you anticipate from such indicators as score, glance of the server before his or her toss, the position of the server on the baseline, whether the server is right-handed or left-handed, the direction of the wind, the success of previous serves, the server's grip, the condition of the balls, and the past history of the server's overall play, especially his or her first volley. After impact, the speed, angle, spin, arc of flight, and target of the ball all give you information for the response.

For all other strokes, your anticipation has two parts: you prepare during the flight of the ball to your opponent, and you respond to the return of the ball by your opponent. During the first

part you must consider the distance your opponent must move to get to the ball and then get back in position, the amount of backswing he or she uses for the stroke, his or her balance during the shot, the angle of the racquet head as he or she swings through the ball, the position of the ball in relation to his or her body, the balance of the opposing team, the balance of your own team, and the best percentage response. Once your opponent hits the ball, your focus should be on the ball, not on your opponents. Evaluate your best position of interception—the point from which you will play back the ball. If your opponent has made a good shot, your only possible response may be defensive. However, never accept your position of interception—choose it. Always try to take the ball at your best advantage, not your opponent's.

After you have watched the ball and analyzed the possibilities and have selected your point of interception, what's missing? The stroke, and often players do just that—miss the stroke. You must ready your racquet when the ball is leaving your opponent's racquet. It must be in position to hit as the ball crosses the net, whether or not the rest of your body is ready. If there is not enough time to get your body ready as well, at least you can bring the racquet forward on the chance of getting back the ball. Perhaps the best definition of anticipation is having your racquet ready all the time.

Communicating With Your Partner

Being ready all the time also means communicating with your partner—a very important building block of doubles. The means of communication depends on the players. Some partners pass information with the same elaborateness and dramatics as a baseball coach; some partners use an on-court huddle to discuss strategy in as technical a fashion as a professional football play book; some use a wink or a look or a behind-the-back gesture. Betty Store and I played together for years and could make moves automatically without any signaling and could compensate for each other's situations.

If anticipation is not possible or you have not yet developed the necessary awareness, rely upon the following generally accepted practices:

1. The left-court player covers the center court.
2. Once the netman starts to cross, he must continue; his partner in the back must move to fill the opening.
3. If there is a one-up-one-back situation, the back man has an overall view and captains the situation.
4. Try to cover your own overhead. If you cannot, cross and wait for your partner, who must run the ball down, to give instructions to stay up or come back.
5. In any situation of possible confusion, talk.
6. Use the score to help decide tactics.

Score

This last practice is often overlooked, but consideration of score is another very important building block. The score not only indicates the count, but also your focus—whether you should probe for information, maintain a certain strategy, or bring in different tactics.

All points are important. In the early part of the match you may use certain shots to test both your team's and your opponents' weaknesses and strengths. These probes, along with the basic game plan, are the foundation of the momentum of your attack. You maintain that momentum by recognizing the pivotal importance of score.

Let us isolate each point and look at the different considerations for each. Remember that we will be establishing guidelines that you should monitor with common sense and flexibility. If modification or even complete reversal of a guideline is successful, then by all means make the change.

In the following breakdown of the scores of a game and the evaluation of each team's strategy at certain scores, consider yourself the server for each score.

At the score 0-0 your team, because of its serving advantage, can overplay to increase your intimidation. The receiver wants to get the ball in play to give his or her netman a chance to poach your first volley. Even if the receiving team is not successful, they have put pressure on your team to win the point. The opening point can set the tone for the whole game.

At the score 15-0 your team has a chance for a two-point lead of 30-0. However, your team's court positions are not so strong when the left-court receiver is returning, because he or she has the opportunity for the natural crosscourt backhand return to your backhand. You therefore hope to have your serve dominate the point rather than chance a strong return. The left-court receiver feels the pressure to win the point just to stay even. He or she must play the percentage for a solid crosscourt return that will allow him or her to close the net. The receiver's netman must stay tight to the net to pick off any error, but should not try any spectacular or risky plays.

At the score 0-15 you feel the pressure to win the point so that your team will not be down 0-30. Again, rely on your serving dominance and basic solid play. However, the left-court receiver has a chance to offset your serving advantage. If he or she can win the point for a 0-30 lead, you will need four points to win or three to go to deuce; the receiving team will need only two points to win or one to go to deuce. The left-court receiver therefore might try for a bigger shot, because the lower percentage of the shot is offset by the advantages of success. If the shot is not successful, the score is tied, and no ground is lost.

At the score 15-15 both teams are facing a critical point; the result could be 15-30 or 30-15—the most pivotal score of the game. Again, you and the receiver should play basic tennis.

At the score 0-30 you are in trouble and must become more aggressive to force the receiver to make an error. Becoming more aggressive does not mean making power shots or otherwise taking chances; it involves concentration and hustle. The right-court receiver can now be a little more offensive.

At the score 15-30 rely on basics. If you lose the point at this score, you will need a minimum of four points to win, and the receiving team will need only one. The receiver should go after this point and force you, not just feed into your serving dominance by making a weak return. The lower-percentage big shot balances the chance of success. If he or she misses, no ground is lost.

At the score 0-40 try something to break the momentum of the receiver—a big serve, the I-formation (discussed later), or some other tactic. Although the receiver has many chances for the one point he needs to win, he or she must not let up and assume success.

At the score 40-0 the receiver has nothing to lose. He or she must try something to get back into the game. You must maintain your attack.

The score 30-30 and 40-40 (deuce) present the same situation. Your team should rely on serving dominance and basic strategy. The right-court receiver wants to give his or her partner a game point. He or she must get the ball in play, but then close quickly and go for the point. If the right-court receiver does not get the point, perhaps the left-court receiver has a chance of returning the score to deuce. If he or she does get the point, then perhaps the left-court receiver can make the final point to win the game.

At the score 40-15 play solid, basic tennis, but do not play hesitantly. The right-court receiver must look for any opportunity to go for a strong return. If he or she wins the point, you are reminded that your opponents still are playing aggressive tennis. A strong winning return may even undermine your confidence and lead the way to a deuce score.

At the score 15-40 rely on your serving dominance and solid basics to win the point. The right-court receiver should pressure you to play well and not allow you to rely on your serve to win the point. He or she should not necessarily go for an all-out winning return; a solid return and offensive posture are more effective.

At the score 40-30 you again should rely on serving dominance and solid basics. The left-court receiver should concentrate on making a good return that will pressure you to win the point.

At the score 30-40 again use standard play. The left-court receiver should go for any opening and attack.

Besides these guidelines for play at certain points of the game, there are some more general considerations:

- When ahead, keep up the attack. Never let your momentum drop and never let someone back into a match by assuming victory.

- Change a losing game one step at a time. If you do not, you will lose the good tactics, and the transition will be too radical for you to carry out.

- Note that the left-court receiver has all the pivotal and most of the game-winning points. The right-court receiver can only win or lose at 40-15 or 15-40. However, without the support of the right-court receiver, the left-court receiver never has the opportunity to win the game, only the opportunity to tie.

- You cannot afford to lose your service game. A service break generally costs the set, because it is especially difficult to break back in doubles.

- The receiving team expects to lose most games, not by giving up but by the design of the game itself. However, they must put pressure on the serving team to win the game as opposed to their simply losing.

- The best chance to break is early in the set—before the serving team can warm up. Also, taking chances is least costly at this stage of the match.

- The most critical game for the team that started serving is at 4–4. If the receiving team breaks, they can serve out the set. The most critical game for the team that received first is 3–4.

- Maintain flexibility. Change the standard plays and introduce exotic ones when there is a need. Be willing to constantly revise for changing conditions.

Now that we have discussed some of the building blocks of doubles, let us look at some basic questions about the makeup of your team, its strengths and weaknesses, and how to make it more effective.

Right Court vs. Left Court

Understand first that the balance of power and range within each team is not 50–50. If you play the right court, you have the tougher side to win or control points because your backhand covers the middle. You must turn your body, or at least your shoulders, 135 degrees on some shots to return crosscourt backhands. In contrast, if you play the left court, your forehand covers the middle. In fact, three quarters of the court is to your forehand side. Also, your crosscourt backhand is along a more natural angle. You therefore have the better power range for all your strokes.

As the left-court player, you also have the better chance to win the point from return of serve. The serve to the right court is stronger and more consistent because the natural curve of the serve enables the ball to pass over the lower part of the net and still hit any target. The serve to the left court is more of a problem for the server, because the curve of the serve to the backhand takes the ball over a higher part of the net. As the receiver in the left court,

this problem of the server is your first advantage. Your second advantage is that the server's netman can poach only with his backhand on your return, and thus his or her options of power, placement, and range are limited. See Diagram 37. If your netman covers the middle ($R_{n1} \rightarrow R_{n2}$) and you cover the alley ($R_1 \rightarrow R_2$), the server's netman can make a backhand poach ($S_{n1} \rightarrow S_{n2}$) to your alley. However, you will be able to return the shot ($R_2 \rightarrow R_3$) down the server's netman's line for a winner or play crosscourt from the back court. Thus, the server's netman, percentagewise (except on setups), must poach up the middle, which will be covered by your netman ($R_{n1} \rightarrow R_{n2}$), and therefore will not gain any advantage from the poach. Your netman returns the poach through the center of the serving team so that the approaching server ($S_1 \rightarrow S_2$) cannot make his or her first volley a winner down your netman's alley.

If Both Partners Are Right-Handed

It should be obvious from the above that if you and your partner are right-handed, the stronger player should play the left court. His or her forehand will be to the middle and thus can cover more than one half of the width of the court. He or she thus can back up or run down almost any shot, make overheads, and poach—all with the forehand. The right-court player has the job of keeping the ball in play long enough for the left-court player to take advantage of a setup or a weakness and make the winner.

The more effective server should serve the most times, and therefore should serve first. However, consider also the influence of the sun and the possibility that a sideline fence too close to the court may be used to the advantage of the weaker server.

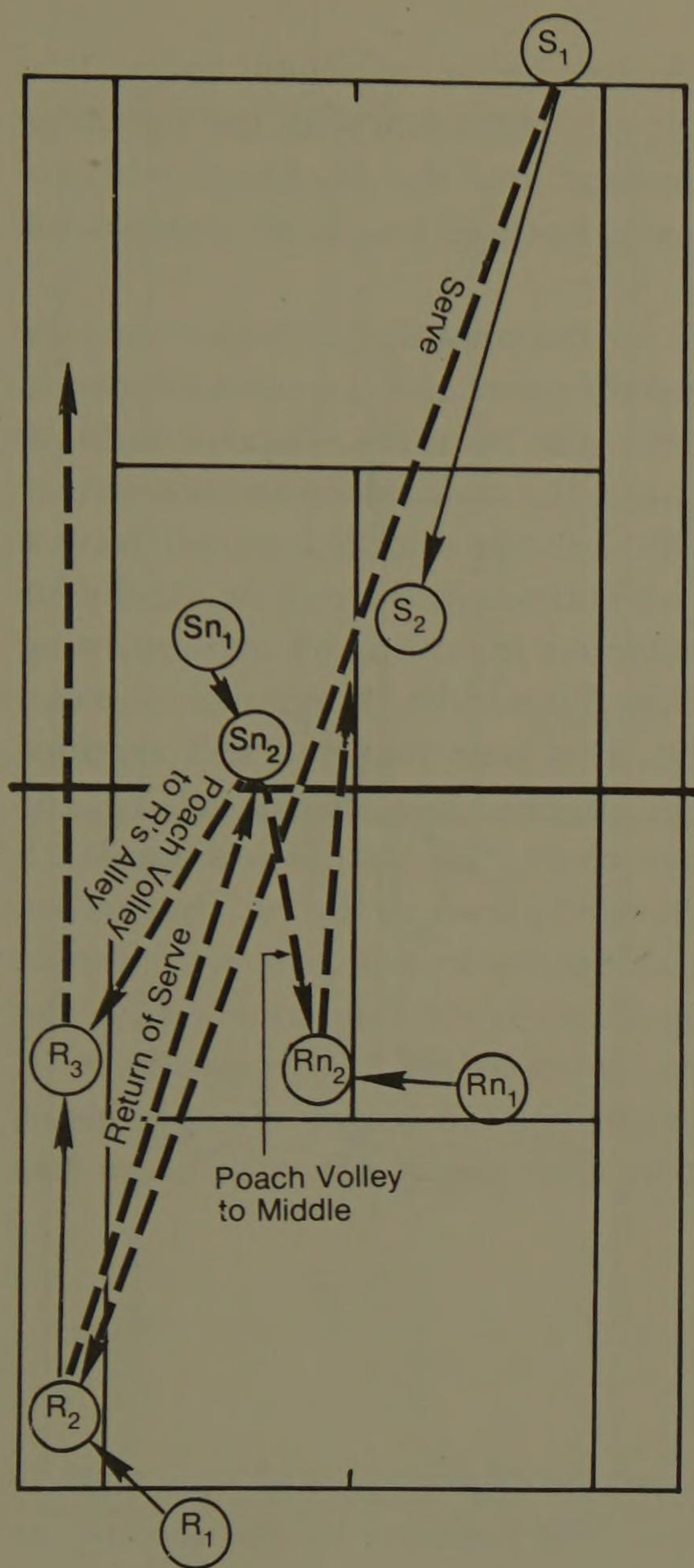


Diagram 37—*Covering a Poach with the Receiver in the Left Court*

If One Partner Is Left-Handed

But what if one member of your team is left-handed and the other right-handed? Although the left-hander often plays the left court and the right-hander the right court to enable strong forehand crosscourt shots and extra range of forehand coverage of wide angles, there are some arguments against this accepted procedure.

Remember that the most important key to breaking service is the return of serve and the first volley. By placing the backhands of

your team to the middle (right-hander in the right court; left-hander in the left court), both of you must deal with the two most difficult shots—the backhand return and the backhand volley—from the middle. Also, as netmen, both of you must poach with your backhand.

Consider now the arguments for the opposite arrangement—the left-hander of your team in the right court and the right-hander in the left court. Both your returns will be more effective because both of your backhands will have the natural crosscourt stroke. Also because both forehands will be to the middle, you will have a better chance to handle power plays through the middle. And your backhand volleys will be more effective in cutting off and returning crosscourt angles than in guarding the middle. As netmen, you can both poach with your forehand. It is true that you will sacrifice some range in covering wide angles, but compared to the advantage of your team's inner court, this sacrifice is minimal. Remember also that the right-handed player in the left court offers the strength of his or her being able to back up or run down almost any shot or make an overhead—all with the forehand. As for the serving advantage, both of you can spin the ball respectively in either sideways direction. The right-handed player can spin his or her serve to the right; the left-handed player can spin his or her serve to the left.

Poaching

One of the best ways to increase the effectiveness of your team is by poaching or offensive crossing. You need not be the netman on the serving team to poach. As the receiver's netman, you often can take advantage of the weak position of the server when he or she makes his or her first volley. See Diagram 38 for an example of the effectiveness of the poach of the receiver's netman in the left court. Poaching on the first volley as receiver's netman in the right court, however, is a much weaker tactic. When you cross from the right court, you must poach with your backhand, and your partner, who most often will have returned from the wide position, will have a great deal of court to cover.

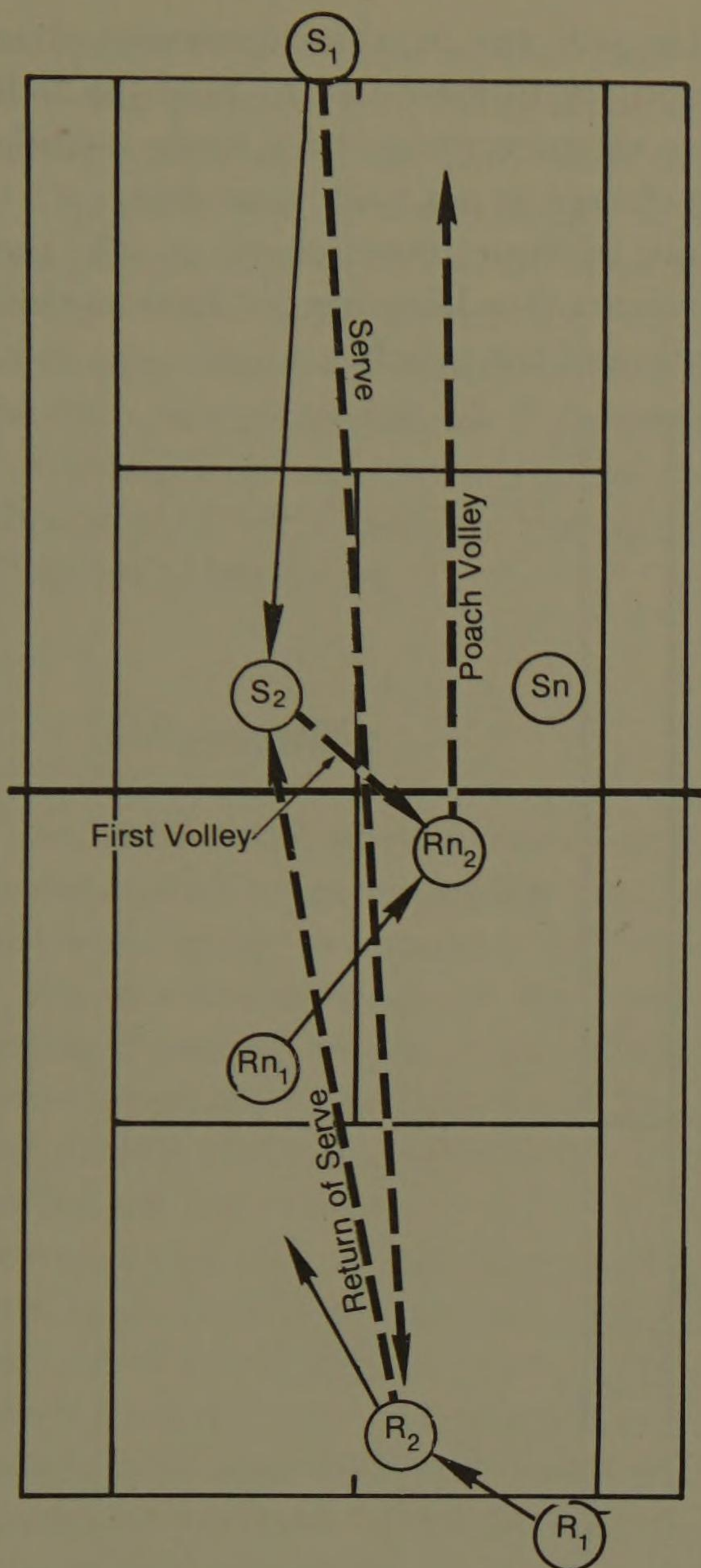


Diagram 38—*Receiver's Netman Wins the Point by Poaching in the Left Court*

Sometimes the server's first volley is so weak or defensive that you feel confident about crossing and winning the point outright without even forewarning your partner. However, this is the exception to the general rule of somehow signaling and communicating to your partner that you intend to poach so that he or she can fill the gap you leave. Often you use the tactic of poaching to simply break up the rhythm of the serving team, regardless of the conditions; you may win the point by poaching, or your opponents may return your shot. In either case, your partner must be ready to cover for you.

The serving team most often will not be able to prevent your winning poach, but they should try to force you to play the ball between them and through two racquets rather than to the outside where only one of them has a chance to get back your shot.

If the serving team is aware of your intention to poach, the server has four options to counteract. See Diagram 39. Each option depends on your team's execution of the poach.

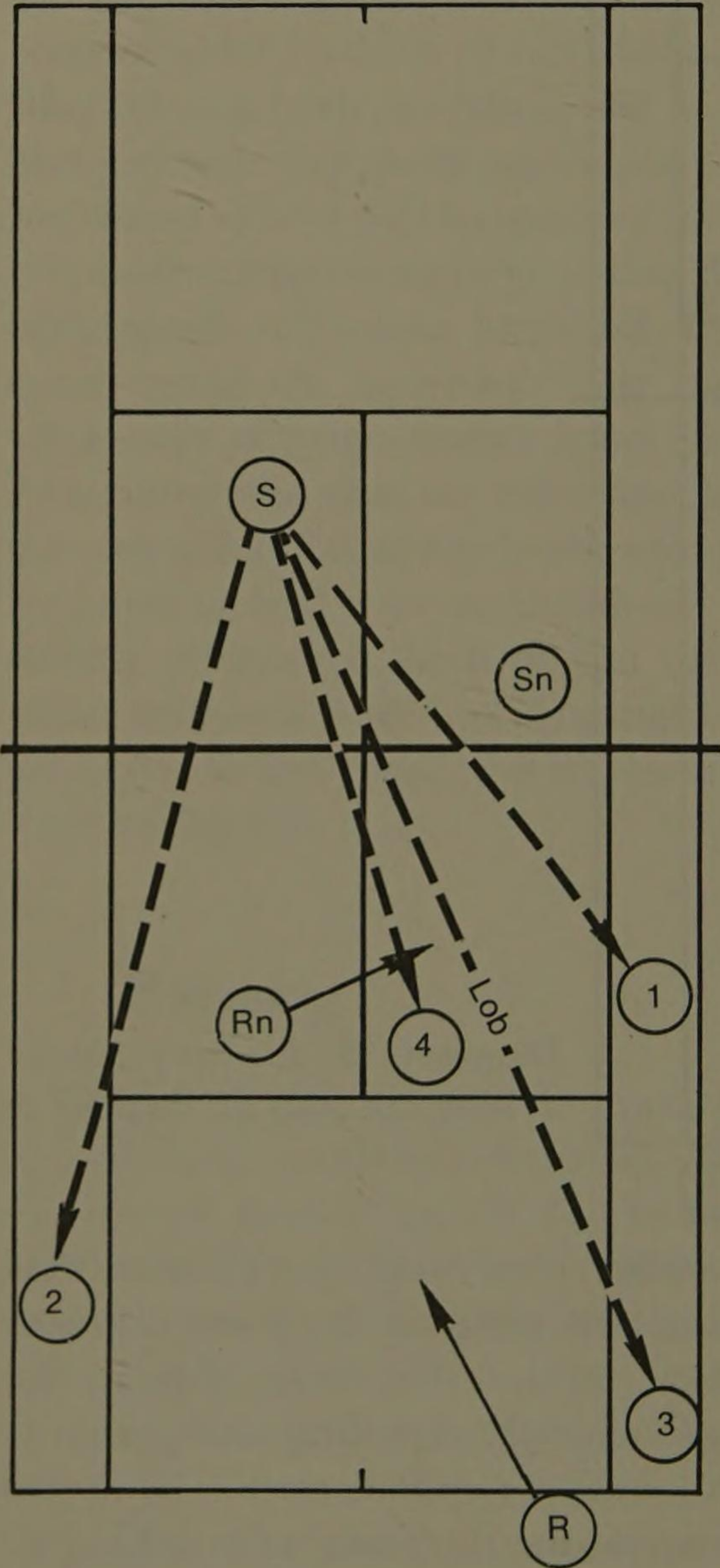


Diagram 39—Options of the Server to Prevent the Receiver's Netman from Poaching

Option 1: If you, as netman, are slow to cross, then the server can play an open, soft, dying angle ahead of your poach so that by the time you reach the ball, it has dropped below the net.

Option 2: On the other hand, if you move too soon, the server can play the first volley at an open angle down the line.

Option 3: If your partner, the receiver, closes too quickly and too wide after his or her return instead of closing to your normal net position, the server can use a crosscourt lob.

Option 4: If your team's execution is correct, then the server should play his volley low through the middle to your partner's (receiver's) backhand.

I-Formation

Sometimes the serving team sees that its advantageous position is threatened by exceptionally good crosscourt returns that do not allow the server to approach and volley successfully.

An effective strategy of the serving team to undermine such strong crosscourt returns, especially by the left-court receiver, is the I-formation. See Diagram 40. As the server's netman you stand in the middle of the court (to form a straight line or *I* with the server) to cut off the crosscourt angles of the returns. Your partner, the server, serves wide to gain flight time and limit the receiver to only one angle of return. However, he or she must be prepared to cover for you if you decide to move. You start a step or two back to be ready for a lob, but still maintain the advantage to step forward to poach with your forehand. When the receiver's netman sees your team's I-formation, he should start play a step or two wider to force you to play the middle and a step or two in to take advantage of any momentary off-balance of your team. The receiver should return down the line and close quickly, knowing that his netman will cover the possibility of a crosscourt shot by the server. Once the ball is in play, the server moves to cover your normal position, or you can move back to your normal position while the server makes his or her usual approach.

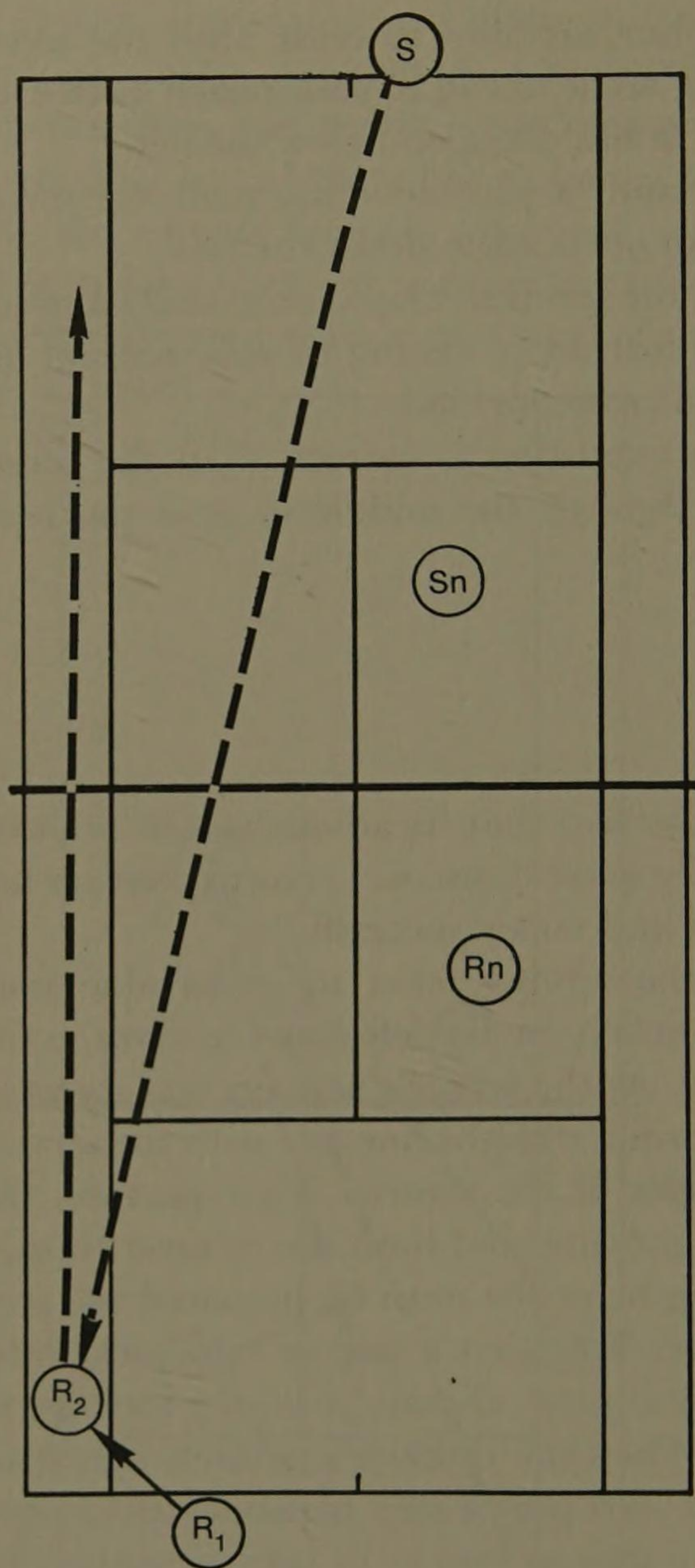


Diagram 40—*The I-Formation*

Note that this tactic of the I-formation is weak against a right-court return. Down-the-line forehand returns from the right court usually are much stronger than from the left court, and backhand returns of such an angled serve are likely to be beyond the server's attempt to cover your (server's netman's) normal position. Also, your partner, the server, will have to cover a down-the-line return with his or her backhand, and if you poach, you also will have to use your backhand.

Do not use the I-formation in either court unless regular positioning is not successful, and even then, make sure that your partner's serve is effective enough for the modified play. Even with a left-court return, if his or her serve is to the forehand, the receiver can angle it away from both of you. On the other hand, a serve to the backhand in the left court is very effective. The receiver cannot use the natural crosscourt backhand because you, as netman in the I-formation, are covering just such a return. He or she must return late down the line, and the advancing server has sufficient time to cover the return with his or her forehand.

Mutual Respect and Understanding in a Team

Perhaps the single most unifying element in a team is mutual respect and understanding. Whether your partner is weaker than or equal to you in skills, experience, and knowledge of the game, you must be supportive of each other.

If you are the stronger player, you must encourage your partner to contribute whatever strengths he or she does have to the team. If you are the weaker player, you must understand and value your partner's and your own roles and responsibilities.

If both of you are equal, then the team should follow the more classic approach of one partner setting up and the other putting away. You must evaluate your own particular strengths and weaknesses and agree on which of you should play the right or left court. Sometimes such a decision is not that simple or clear-cut, in which case one or both of you must concentrate on making a strong physical and mental adjustment and developing compensatory tactics.

Off the court you and your partner should communicate to each other your ideas, feelings, and evaluations of each other's and your opponents' strengths and weaknesses, tactics, and strategy. Most important, from this give-and-take dialogue you will develop a bond of empathy and support and an understanding of each other's expectations. These expectations must be balanced. Both of you should contribute fully. If you do not achieve a measure of harmony, effectiveness, and success satisfactory to both of you, then together you must review the situation and consider the

changes necessary to establish a better team. Sometimes the result may be a simple agreement to try for every shot, run down every ball, and never give up.

These suggestions may seem pedantic, but perhaps they can save a friendship for you, make your chance for exercise worthwhile, or win a world pro title for you.

Remember—you should enjoy doubles, not have to endure it.

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