SITUATION TRAINING: APPROACHING & AT NET SITUATIONS -Part 1

Situation Training (ST) is a practical application of the international coaching trend called the Game-based approach. It allows players to learn the tactics and techniques required for successful play in real-life situations.

ST is about learning tennis **situationally**. It logically integrates tactics and technique. It helps coaches evolve from being *'stroke coaches'* to *'game coaches.'* In contrast to 'stroke-coaching', ST is about helping players learn to *expand the library of situations they can handle during play*.

In defining situations, ST uses two elements:

- **'The 5 Point Situations':** These are general situations occurring during a point and include Serve, Return, Both-Back, Approaching & at Net and Passing.

- **'The Shot Cycle':** The elements that occur during a single shot situation ('Shot' for short)

(See acecoach.com article: 'Situation Training–Core Elements' for an introduction to these concepts) https://acecoach.com/situation-training-basic-elements/

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This article will explore the tactical categories and specific shots of the **Approach & at Net Point Situation**. The goal is to identify the most common shot situations that allow players to dominate when coming to and being at net.

Because this is a large topic, we will split all the information into two parts:
- Part 1: **Approaching**
- Part 2: **At Net**

Keep in mind that, practically speaking, approaching always flows into net play.

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APPROACH - TACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS
Approaching the net occurs in two main situations:

1. **Player Initiated Approach** (chooses to take the net).
2. **Opponent Initiated Approach** (Player gets pulled into the net).

Both of these options create a different mix of the Phases of Play:
- **Neutral:** Receive a ball of moderate difficulty and choose a medium-risk response that ensures the opponent cannot attack without risking. (You do not have the advantage, but neither do they).
- **Offence:** Receiving a ball with less challenge and choosing slightly more risk to respond. (Gain the advantage by putting your opponent under pressure and challenge their timing)
- **Defence:** Receiving a difficult ball and choosing less risk to respond to either stay in the point or turn the tables on the opponent.

Choosing to come in affords more offensive opportunities (or neutral if not executed well enough).

Being pulled in creates more defensive or, at best, neutral situations unless the opponent executes poorly, flipping the advantage to the player.

2 'TICKETS' TO NET
There are two 'tickets' a player's approach shot can 'buy' when approaching:

- **'Economy' ticket:** Whether a deliberate approach or pulled in, the player cuts off the opponent's space and takes their time away. However, that does not guarantee an easier volley. When pulled in, an economy ticket is often all that is available, and the player must make the best of the situation.

- **'First class' ticket:** If the player is approaching and their location cuts off the opponent's options (Economy ticket), they can 'upgrade' to a first-class ticket. This is done by executing a shot that puts the opponent in trouble, creating an easier volley or overhead.

  Anytime an opponent is in trouble, the player can take advantage and come in. This typically takes the form of two approaches:
  - **'Intercepting'** is when the payer sees an opponent hit a high/weak shot and quickly moves forward to take it in the air (e.g. a drive/swing volley.
  - **'Sneaking-in'** is when the player wasn't intending to approach but sees the opponent in trouble and takes the opportunity to add pressure by coming in.

COURT LOCATIONS

Players who approach the net regularly are called 'All-Court' players (unless their style is to come in as often as possible, in which case, they are defined as 'Net-Rushers').

Approaching and at net situations can occur in many parts of the court, so reviewing the court location map we use for ST would be helpful.
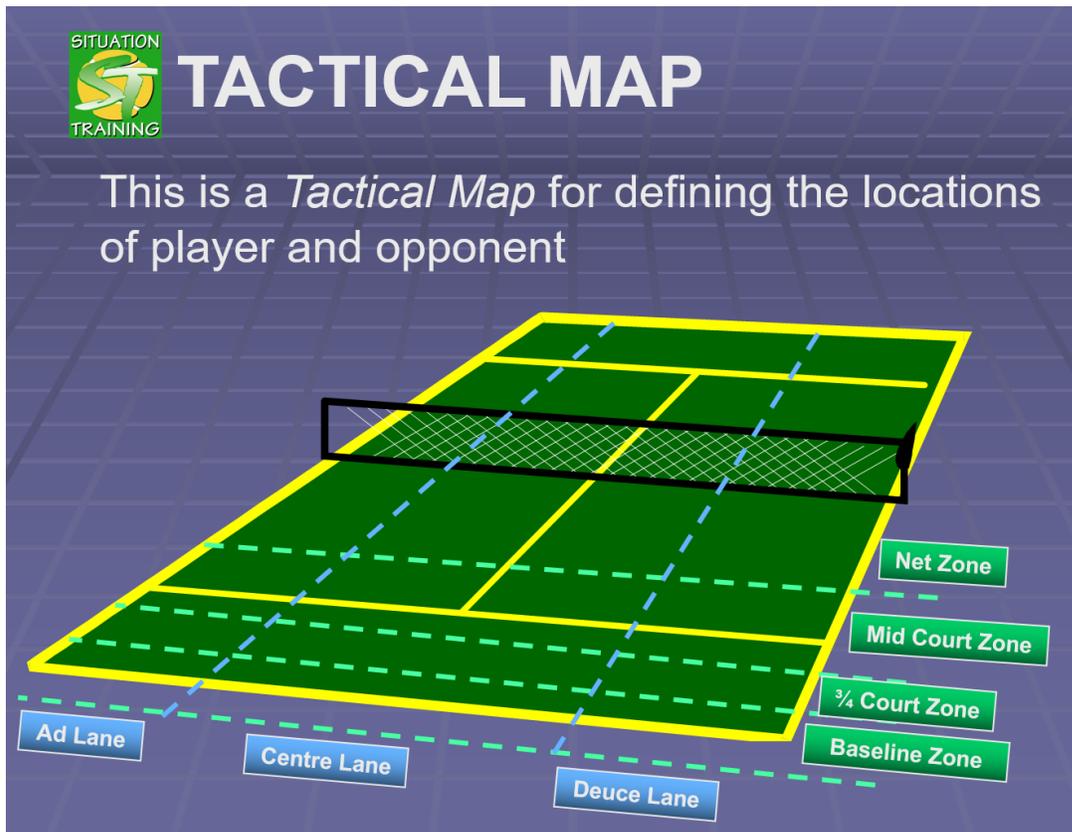
Some tactical systems mistakenly attach the Phase of Play (Neutral, Offence, Defence) to the court location. They designate 'Attacking zones' & 'Defensive zones,' etc.

A more practical reality is that, although there are some locations and Phase of Play connections, all three phases can happen in almost all locations. For example, a hard shot driven at you when in the 'Attacking zone' at net is, in reality, a defensive situation. If the ball is at your feet, neutral may be all that is possible.

Compared to many other tactical systems, one unique aspect of ST is that the location does not determine the Phase of Play. Phase and location are determined by the situation.

GEOMETRY OF APPROACHING

It is essential to maximize court coverage when approaching. Coming to net cuts off the opponent's space, so attaining the best location provides the maximum advantages.

The court is a constant rectangle, so specific geometric angles must be mastered, like playing billiards on a pool table.

When a player hits their approach shot, it sets up certain options for the opponent. Imagine when the opponent hits the ball. They become the apex of a triangle. The two sides of the triangle are where they can safely hit shots past the net player. A smart player does not need to cover every possibility. Any shots the opponent must take high risk to execute can be ignored. (the shaded areas on the diagram do not have to be covered). Opponents may make some of those, but, in the end, they will miss more than they get.
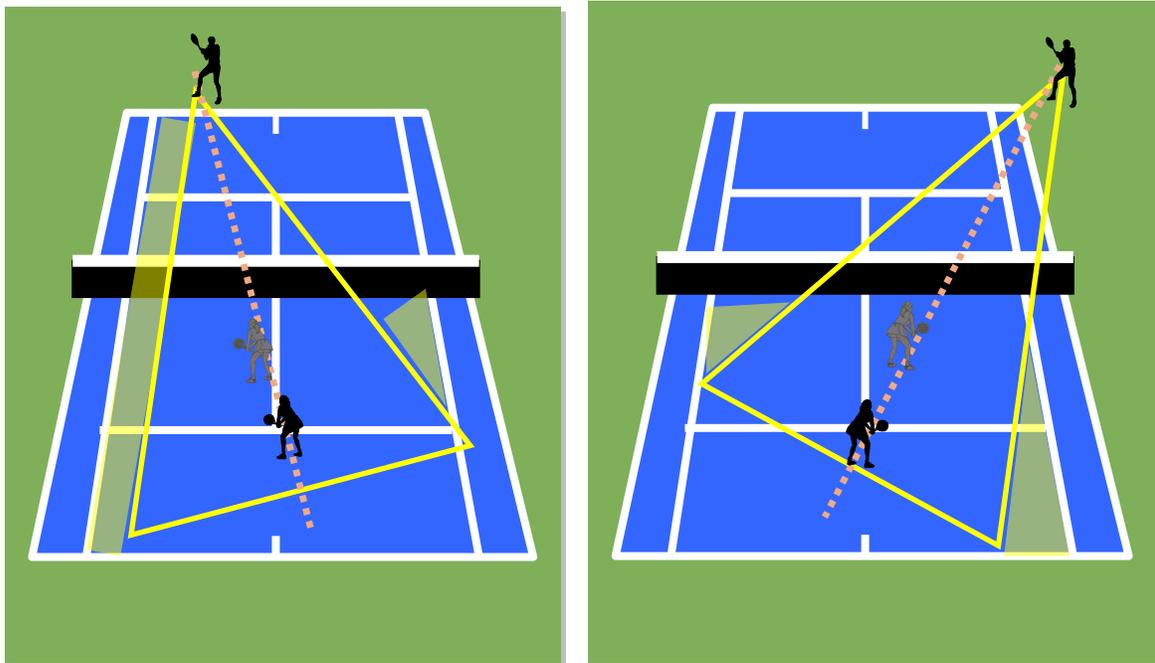
To optimize court coverage, the player must *'bisect the angle of possible return'*. In other words, locate in the middle of the two sides of the triangle. Interestingly, when approaching from further back (Baseline or ¾ Court), no matter the angle the opponent is hitting from, it almost always bisects through the centre service line. This makes that position ideal for preparing for a first volley. However, as the player gets closer to the net, they must shade to the side the shot originated from (e.g. 2nd volley)

The angles are different when approaching from the sides or mid-court. Players can immediately move to a closer net position since they are already far into the court. When so far off to one side, it is a much better idea to approach down-the-line or down the middle as the recovery position is much closer.

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Notice on the diagrams below how far over the player must go to cover a crosscourt approach, even if it takes the opponent well off the court. This is problematic since the player needs to get to their volley position for the split-step **before** the opponent contacts the ball.
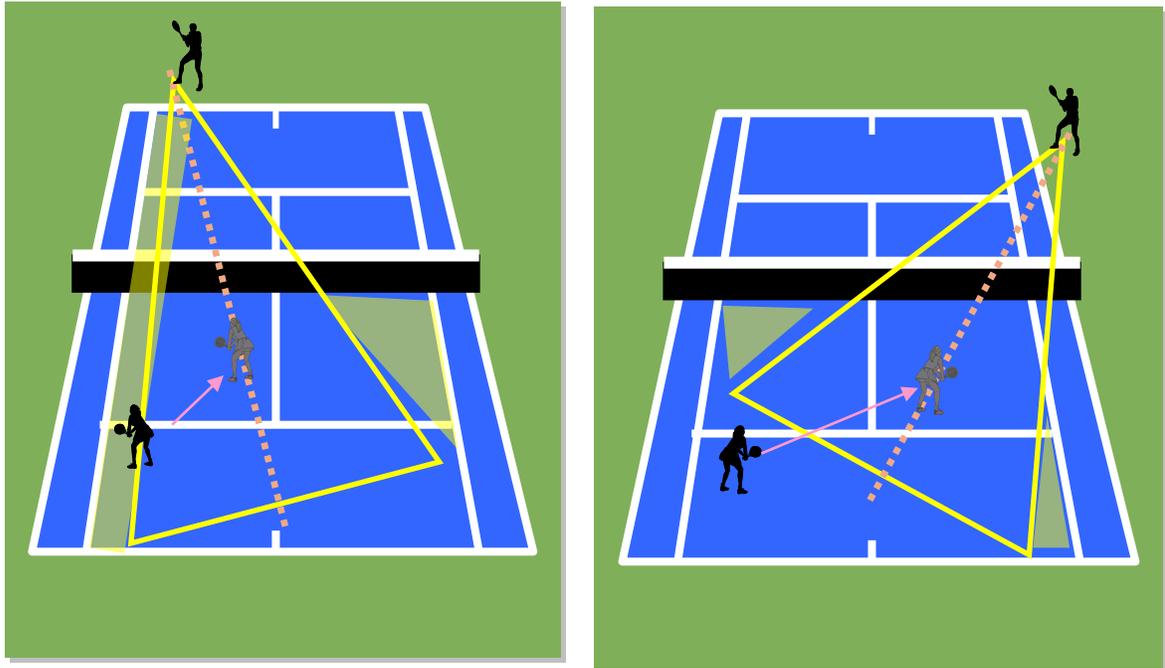
SPLIT STEP

Any discussion regarding approach shots must include the split-step. When the opponent impacts the ball, the player makes a small hop and balances off in an athletic, ready position.

This is an essential action to be ready to get to any volley or overhead. Trying to change direction while running doesn't work well. This is why it is more important **when** a player performs their split-step as **where** they perform it.

The split step has two options that need to be trained:
- A **'Balanced Split-step'** is when the player lands equally on both feet in full balance, allowing an explosive move in any direction.
- A '**Selective Split-step'** is a more advanced move where the player lands on one foot and pushes out with the other towards the volley. In other words, they start moving towards the volley during the split-step.

APPROACH TACTICAL OPTIONS

The Approach options 'tree' below outlines the main possibilities. For example, following the elements in Green down the tree, we see a 'classic' approach option of a shot from the Ad lane, midcourt, drive down-the-line on the backhand using underspin. (For a right-hander)

Here are the main elements that go into the shot:

Location: Where the approach shot originates from produces a set of specific angles.

Trajectory: The path the ball takes as it flies through the air (consisting of its height, distance and speed). This will affect controlling time.

Placement: As mentioned previously, where the ball is placed will set up specific angles that affect the opponent.

Stroke Family: What side the ball is hit from (including the option of running around the backhand for a more aggressive forehand).

Spin: This also influences the trajectory for time & space control.
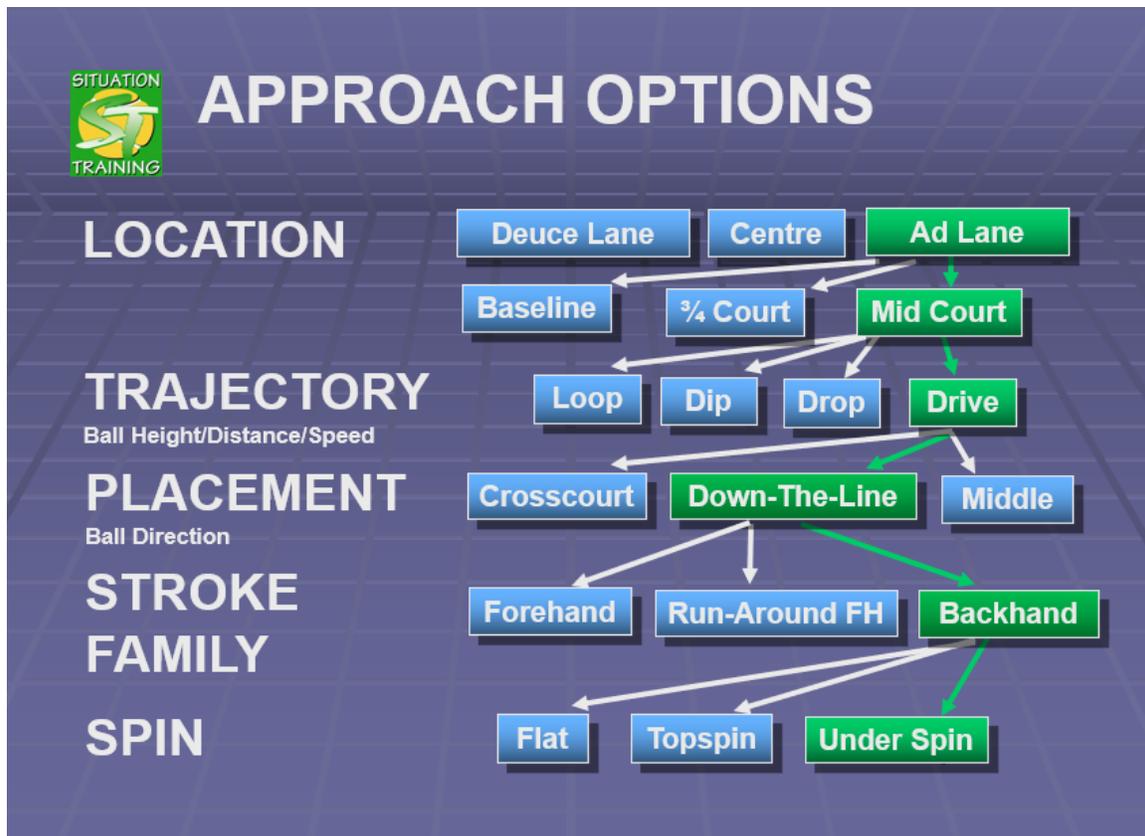
APPROACHING TACTICAL PACKAGES

We can combine options to create useful approach **'Tactical Packages'**. These include some of the most common Approach options players should have in their 'toolbox' (But not every possibility).

1. PLAYER INITIATED APPROACHES

These are options for when a player chooses to approach the net. They include 'intercepting' a high ball and 'sneaking in' when the opponent is seen to be in trouble.

- **Crosscourt 'Dip':** An angled crosscourt with topspin can take the opponent off the court to open up the space.

  However, the shot is not without risk as the opponent has more angles to pass or an easy down the line if the player doesn't cover the court well.

- **Run-around Forehand 'Drive':** Running around the BH allows the player to hit an aggressive FH. If placed in the middle (ideally to the BH side of the opponent), it minimizes passing angles. This is becoming one of the most effective approach options based on game analytics.

- **Drop shot:** One of the most effective uses of a drop shot is as an approach option. Since the player is already in the court for the approach and the opponent is most likely looking for a strong approach, it is the ideal 'surprise tactic'. D-T-L is a better option as the player immediately cuts off the opponent's space.

Diagram with Right-handed player

- **Down-the-Line 'Drive':** An approach directed D-T-L places the player in the way of the opponent's shot. This is in contrast to a crosscourt approach where the player must travel further to cover an opponent's D-T-L pass. For a power approach, a flat or slightly topspin shot will work; however, a placed driving underspin will stay low and force the opponent to lift the ball upwards, giving more volley options.

- **Crosscourt Intercept 'Drive':** A high ball can be taken as a 'drive/swing volley'. Placing it crosscourt (including inside-out) allows for more space to be aggressive with less risk.
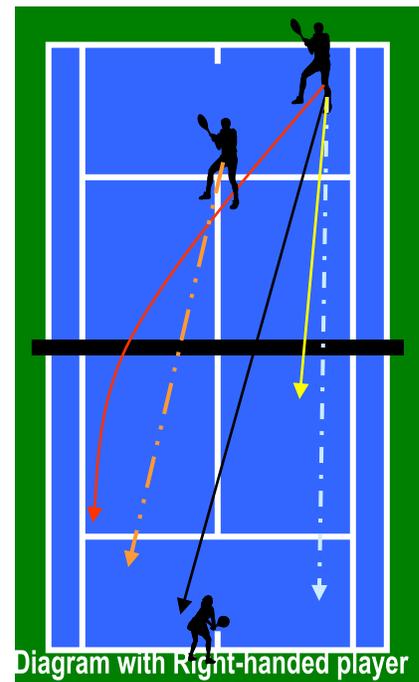
2. OPPONENT INITIATED APPROACHES

These are options for when a player is pulled in by an opponent. The player will be under pressure since they didn't plan to approach but are forced into the situation. Hitting and moving back will most likely result in a poor response and location, so continuing to the net is the best option.
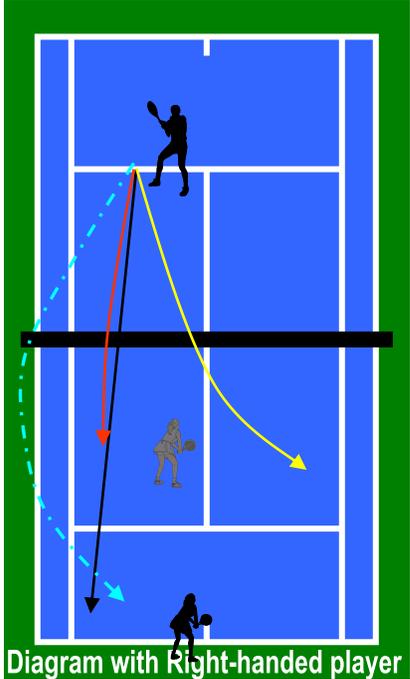
- **Drop Shot:** Since the player is pulled to the net, this becomes a good option to try to 'turn the tables' on the opponent. 'Dropping a drop' is an especially effective response. Placing it down-the-line will situate the player in the way of the opponent's options. But sharp angles are also available for a crosscourt.

- **Slice drive deep:** If the player is running forward and stretching, they will likely have an open racquet face. This makes a slice (underspin with some sidespin) an easier shot to hit. If the player can hit it deep, they can push the opponent back. It is important not to get too close to the net after the shot to cover the lob. Down-the-line or down the middle offers the best net location to cover any passing angles.

Diagram with Right-handed player
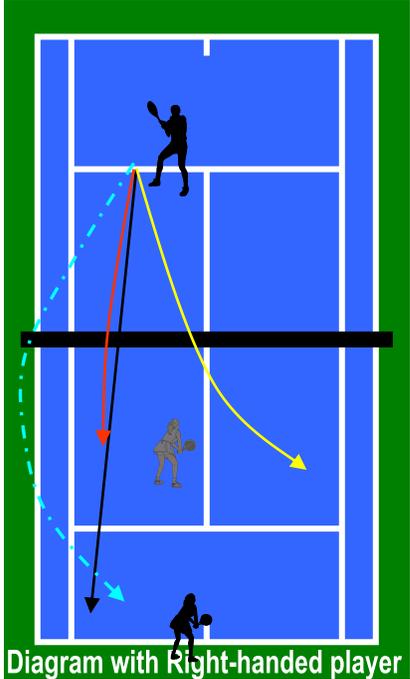
- **Sharp Topspin Crosscourt 'Dip':** If the player is pulled in but to the side of the court, this opens up a sharp crosscourt angle. This is an excellent response when an opponent has hit a 'dip' angle that pulled the player in. ('Dip' a 'Dip").
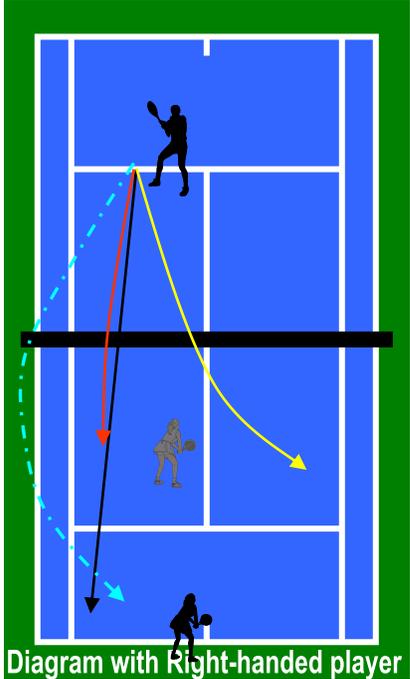
- **Lob:** A common tactic is, when an opponent sees the player they pulled in will be challenged, they follow their shot to the net (light-coloured player on diagram). An effective response for this is a small lob over the opponent. Lobbing over the backhand side may help avoid an aggressive overhead by the opponent.
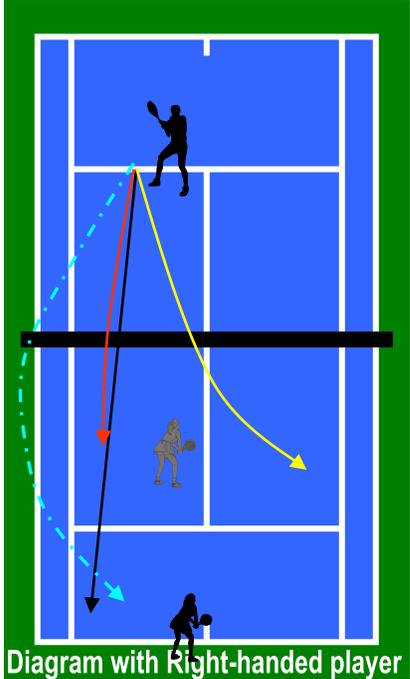
PRACTICING

It is most effective to train the approach coupled with the volley. Even when training volleys, the only time a player would start at the net is when playing doubles. Otherwise, their volley always flows from the approach they make and from where.

It is essential to train both *player initiated* and *opponent initiated* options. Opponent initiated approaches are often ignored in most training programs but happen regularly in matches.

Opponent Pulls you in drill:
On opponent initiated approaches, it is only realistic if the player does not expect the shot. Training this situation requires the players to be surprised to force late shots, reaching forward, etc.

The simplest way to train this is for the coach to feed either a deep shot that pushes them back or a short ball that pulls them in.

The player doesn't know which one is coming, so will not be able to 'cheat' on the drill by getting a premature start. This will force a more realistic challenge.

The point can be played off the feed. The player who wins is the 'Approach Champion' and is the one who gets the feed.
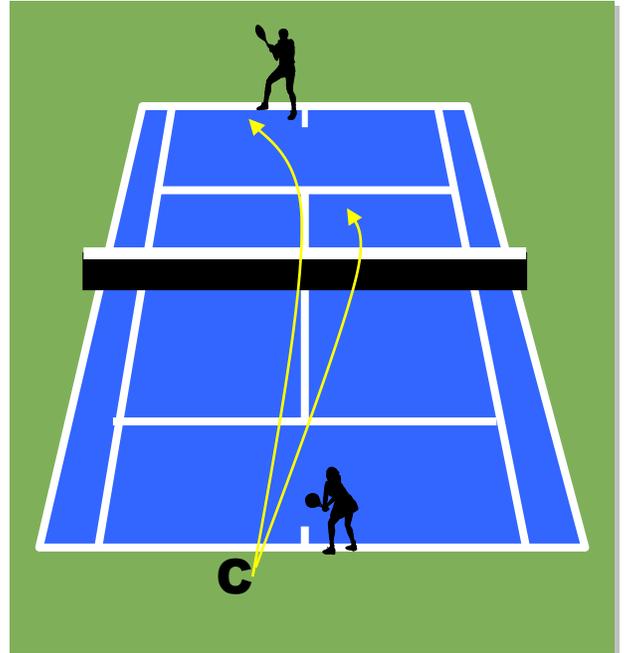
Approach Perception Drill:
Often, a player can execute approach shots and volleys, but this never happens in a match because the player doesn't recognize when to come in.

One player feeds a 'friendly' deep ball, and the point is played out. If any player sees an opportunity to approach the net, they must call 'Pressure' (they lose the point if they do not call as the coach needs to know what balls the player recognizes as approach opportunities and when).

If a player calls the cue and wins the point in front of the service line, they gain 3 points. Play to 11. Alternate who feeds each point.
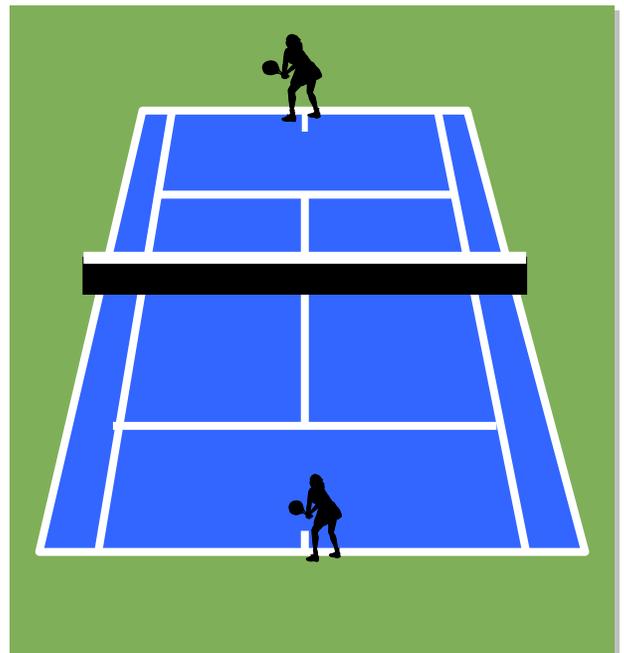
CONCLUSION

Approaching is an essential skill to gain advantage. Players need to be trained to choose to come into the net and handle situations where they are pulled into the net. Approaches flow into net play, and training the sequence of approach and volley/overhead together is best. Covering the court is a matter of understanding the geometry involved to position in the optimal location to cut off the opponent's space and time.