

Objective Strength for Lineups

I've heard some Tennis Pros say, "I don't do lineups." What they mean is they don't want to be in the unenviable situation of choosing who plays, what position and who sits out. They would rather someone else be responsible and may not know the players' abilities. Determining team lineups has repercussions as vast as making the playoffs to people who no longer want to speak with you. Hence, I understand when someone doesn't want to make a lineup. However, objectively determining lineups is critical to successfully lead or coach a team.

I am a big proponent of major team decisions, such as who makes the lineup or playing strength versus rotating players, should be decided democratically by all team members before the season begins. Consider the advantages and disadvantages of important team decisions, and realize regardless of direction some members won't be happy. However, when everyone votes on team structures, no single person is responsible for outcomes.

There is some subjectivity in making lineups. Some people play better in practice than matches and vice versa. However, there is a very strong relationship between how one plays in practice and how they will compete in matches. For partnerships we've all heard stories about two individuals who don't like each other and just can't play together. As a veteran Pro who's heard numerous reasons why one player can't or shouldn't play with another, I prefer to view the relationship in this manner: "Let's put aside the fact that Shelly's dog bit Alice's little boy two years ago and he's now afraid of animals, and focus on playing tennis and doing what's best for our team." Players who have a history of not liking each other can be doubles partners, and this may even mend their relationship. Put the subjectivity, emotions and favorites aside, and there is an objective way to determine player strength and lineups. It's just going to take a little time and some practice quadrants.

Let's say you've got 12 players who need to be considered for a one through five doubles team lineup. Also, you are new captain or coach with this team and have no knowledge about anyone's playing ability. Initially, you can do one of two things: group players in what you think or are told are the top four, middle four and bottom four players or have the players draw for numbers one through twelve.

Players one through four are in the top quadrant; five through eight in the middle quadrant and nine through twelve in the bottom quadrant. Once a week, or more often as time permits, each quadrant will play three practice sets amongst its' own players. Before the quadrant begins, each player draws a number between one and four. Pairings are made by a predetermined rotation: the first set is 1 & 2 vs. 3 & 4; the second set is 1 & 3 vs. 2 & 4; and the third is set 1 & 4 vs. 2 & 3. Players keep track of their scores and apply the criteria for movement for moving up or down for the next quadrant. Here are the priorities for the criteria for movement: 1. set win-loss record 2. number of games won.

Hence, after playing one quadrant (three sets) the player with best record in the middle quadrant moves up to the top quadrant as does the winning person in the bottom quadrant moves to the middle quadrant. Likewise, the loser in the top quadrant moves down to the middle quadrant as does the player with the worst score in the middle quadrant goes to the bottom quadrant.

Play one practice quadrant each week for about five or six weeks, and you'll know your objective strength for lineups and partnerships. Also, you can have four quadrants (16 players) instead of three and could play no ad scoring or super tiebreakers to expedite the process. Whether you play sets or super tiebreakers, it's important to spread the practice quadrants out over a few weeks. Truly, some players will have off days, and you need practice results over time. This shows the importance for starting team practice at least one month before the season when you are serious about accurate lineups and winning. For the many people who don't practice and decision makers without recent results, how do you really know who should play?

Practice quadrants can benefit ALTA, USTA and Pro leagues. Over time, the practice quadrants will show the objective strength of doubles players. Follow the quadrant results and you can feel good about accurately stating lineups and not feel bad about who sits out – everyone earned their position.

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