

The Art of Blitzing

BY JERONIE BARNES



In both football and platform tennis, blitzing involves an aggressive effort made by the defensive team to apply pressure and be disruptive to the offensive team. In platform tennis, a blitz takes place when a player from the backcourt moves forward toward the net and attacks the offensive side when one or both of their opponents are positioned at the net. Although it may look like a reckless, kamikaze attack on the opposition, more often than not, it requires preparation, teamwork, timing, placement, speed, and quick hands to pull off a winning blitz.

When to Blitz

1. Off the return of serve. This is typically the most used and easiest blitz move to execute. It is most effective and successful when it is a planned move that has been discussed or signaled before the start of the point between both members of the returning team. The returner or the returner's partner can carry out the move, ideally when the returner has successfully hit the ball by the server's partner and forced the server to hit up on a volley from below the height of the net.

2. Off of a ball that has dipped below the height of the net forcing the volleying team to hit up on the ball .

When playing against players who volley farther off the net or don't recover well when they've been pushed off the net, a blitz can be a smart tactic to implement. Typically this blitz is applied after hitting a topspin ball that dips below the height of the net and forces the volleying team to hit up. You can also employ this blitz behind a touch ball with some under spin. This is a much riskier option, though, and requires more precision, feel, and space between your opponents and the net.

3. Off of a solid lob that has forced the person hitting the overhead away from the net and into a defensive position.

This blitz move requires the ability to hit a good lob. If you are capable of hitting high, deep lobs that send your opponents off balance, this might be a play you want to add to your arsenal. Timing and surprise are key elements to blitzing off of an offensive lob.

How to Blitz

1. Get in behind offensive shots. Avoid being random about when you charge forward to blitz. If your partner is hitting a short,

low lob and you've decided to blitz, you've put yourself in a dangerous position. Successful blitzing teams create good opportunities to blitz. They either get the ball low off of the return or other drives, or have the ability to push their opponents beyond the service line with high, deep lobs.

2. Know where to position yourself as the person blitzing and as the partner.

You are going to move towards the net and towards the middle of the court as the blitzing player. Try to get in quickly. You want to move in fast enough where you can hit a volley from above the height of the net, either at your opponents' feet or into an opening. As the partner of the person blitzing, you are going to move towards the middle of the backcourt behind your partner. It is important to not become a spectator as the partner of the person closing in. Stay alert and get in position. This will give you the best opportunity to cover anything that may potentially get by your partner. (See Photo 1)

3. Anticipate and time your move.

Be ready to go and commit to the blitz! When blitzing off of an offensive drive hit by your partner, you want to start closing in when the ball is bouncing on your side of the net. When blitzing off of your own drive you are going to make your move forward either while you are striking the ball or as soon as you've finished hitting your shot. When blitzing off an offensive lob, you want to close in when the person hitting the overhead goes to look up at the ball they are going to strike. The blitzing player sneaks into position and attempts to catch the other team off guard and unprepared. If you hesitate on any of these blitzes, you typically will not be close enough to the net to hit an offensive volley that can hurt your opposition and you may find yourself out of position to play the next shot effectively. You also need to be aware of whether or not you or your partner has put the other side in trouble. Often, it is easier to blitz off of a shot that you've hit, rather than your partner's shot, because you are more conscious of whether or not you've placed the ball exactly where it needs to be to have success.

4. Be prepared.

When you are on your way forward to the net, have your hands set up in front of you in a neutral ready position so that you can pick off a forehand or backhand volley.

5. Sometimes it is a smart move to abort your mission.

Just because you blitz does not mean that you have to pick off the next

ball or stay up at the net. If you've blitzed but your team has been unsuccessful at getting the ball low enough to put your opponents in a defensive position, or they have responded with a difficult shot to volley back, it is perfectly acceptable to let the ball go by you. This will present the opportunity for your partner to lob the ball back, giving you time to get back into position in the backcourt and reset.

How To Defend Against The Blitz

1. Stay alert.

The whole purpose of the blitz is to catch your opponents off guard, so to be successful at defending the blitz you need to stay ready at the net with your hands up.

2. Develop a good first volley off of your serve.

Too many people seem to put value on a strong serve instead of a strong first volley. Players often say that their serve is getting them killed, when in reality it is an inability to hit a first volley that stays low and keeps the volleyer's team off the defensive. The faster you hit your serve against a player with a good return of serve, the faster it comes back, if they choose to take it off of the deck. Sometimes a slower serve will provide you more time to get close to the net and balanced to hit a solid first volley.

3. Stays as close to the net as possible.

The closer you and your partner play to the net, the more difficult it becomes for a blitzing opponent to force you to hit up on the ball. Get in quickly behind your serves and get back in quickly after hitting overheads that have forced you off the net and you'll have opportunities to stuff an opposing blitz.

4. Play Australian, poach, or play both back on your serve.

When dealing with strong returners who blitz or you're on the serving side where the server has a weak first volley, try Australian formation and/or poaching. This will allow the server's partner to pick off more volleys from above the height of the net and hopefully keep your team from starting the point on the defensive. It will also keep the returner from getting comfortable hitting the same crosscourt return on every ball. The last option to try when all else fails is to give up the net and play both back on your serve.

5. Communicate.

If your partner is hitting a defensive overhead, keep your eyes forward on your opponents and be ready to speak up if your opponents began blitzing. A simple call of "In!" will alert your partner that someone is moving forward and that they need to play



2



3



a more offensive overhead that will keep you out of danger. (Photo 2 shows the wrong way; watching your teammate. Photo 3 shows the right way to work to defend the deep overhead.)

6. Bail.

When dealing with a quicker opponent with fast hands who continues to beat you with their blitzes and volley-to-volley exchanges, sometimes the best thing to do is check your ego and get out of there. Playing from the back court will slow things down and force longer points out of blitzing teams who often like to speed things up.

The best players in platform tennis are well-rounded and can adjust their games accordingly, depending on what their opponents throw at them. Blitzing is an effective weapon to have in your paddle arsenal that will keep your competition off balance. It can be extremely frustrating for your opposition when it's done properly. Defending the blitz well can take the wind out of your opponents' sail who rely on trying to attack from the backcourt. Keep working on blitzing and defending against it, and your points will change for the better. ■



Jeronie Barnes is the Platform Tennis Director at Midtown Athletic Club in Chicago, IL, and is currently ranked in the top 25 nationally.