Badminton Rules

The absolute basics

The aim of badminton is to hit the shuttle with your racket so that it passes over the net and lands inside your opponent’s half of the court. Whenever you do this, you have won a rally; win enough rallies, and you win the match.

Your opponent has the same goal. He will try to reach the shuttle and send it back into your half of the court. You can also win rallies from your opponent’s mistakes: if he hits the shuttle into or under the net, or out of court, then you win the rally.

If you think your opponent’s shot is going to land *out*, then you should let it fall to the floor. If you hit the shuttle instead, then the rally continues.

Once the shuttle touches the ground, the rally is over. In this respect, badminton is not like tennis or squash, where the ball can bounce.

You must hit the shuttle **once only** before it goes over the net (even in doubles). In this respect, badminton is not like volleyball, where multiple players can touch the ball before sending it back over the net.

Badminton is played indoors

Some of you may be familiar with playing badminton on a beach, or in the garden. This is fine when you’re playing it as a casual game, but it doesn’t work when you start to get competitive.

The shuttle is blown off course by even the slightest breath of wind. That’s why competitive badminton is always played indoors.

Setting up a badminton court

Badminton has its own nets and posts; the net is much lower than for volleyball. Sometimes a sports centre will set up the court with a slack volleyball net instead, because the staff don’t know anything about badminton. Ask for proper badminton posts and a badminton net.

If you need to set up the court yourself, then check three things:

* The net covers the whole width of the court.
* The net is pulled tight, not slack.
* The net is in the middle, so that both court halves are the same size.

Often it can be hard to see the badminton court lines, because lines for other sports are also painted on the floor. The badminton court lines should all be in one colour, so try to focus on that.

Singles, doubles, and mixed doubles

You can have either two or four players on a badminton court: one player on each side, or a team of two players on each side. One-against-one is called singles; two-against-two is called doubles.

In doubles, either player can hit the shuttle; you do not have to take it in turns. The only exceptions are the first two shots of the rally; I’ll explain this when we discuss *serving*.

In total, there are five types of badminton:

* Men’s singles
* Women’s singles
* Men’s doubles
* Women’s doubles
* Mixed doubles (each team is a man and a woman)

Men’s doubles and women’s doubles are also called *level* doubles.

These are the only types of badminton played in serious tournaments. In casual play, however, women sometimes play against men (e.g. two women against two men).

What are all those lines for?

When you first look at a badminton court, you could be forgiven for thinking it has too many lines. This is mainly because the court is marked up for both singles and doubles, which use slightly different court sizes.

The outermost lines form the doubles court. So in a doubles rally, the shuttle is allowed to land anywhere on the court.

The singles court is slightly narrower than the doubles court. The singles side lines are not the outermost lines, but the next ones in. Taken together with the outermost (doubles) side lines, these make narrow alley shapes along the sides of the court. These alleys are often called the *tramlines* or *side tramlines*, since they look like tram or train tracks.

So here’s another way to think about it: the side tramlines are *in* for doubles, but *out* for singles.

All the other lines are for serving

There are still three lines we haven’t discussed yet. These lines mean nothing during the main rally, and only apply when you’re serving. This is similar to how a tennis court has special lines for serving.

Serving

Serving is how you start the rally: someone has to hit the shuttle first! To prevent the server gaining an overwhelming advantage, there are special restrictions placed on serving that don’t apply during the rest of the rally.

The *receiver* is the person who hits the second shot in the rally. In doubles, the receiver’s partner is not allowed to hit this shot.

How to serve

In badminton, the serve must be hit in an upwards direction, with an underarm hitting action. You are not allowed to play a tennis style serve.

The main rule here is that when you hit the shuttle, it must be below your waist. To be exact, the rules define this to be a height level with the lowest part of your ribcage. In other words, you can serve from a bit higher than the top of your shorts, but not much.

Service courts

The service courts are smaller box shapes inside the court. We’ll look at what they are used for in a moment, but first let’s get the right boxes.

Notice that the badminton court has a line down the middle, extending from the back to near the net; this is the *centre line*. At the front of the court, the centre line is met by another line; this is the front service line. These two lines form a T shape where they meet.

A singles service court is a box made from four lines:

* The centre line
* A singles side line (inside side line)
* The front service line
* The back line (the outside one, all the way at the back)

On your side of the net, you have two service courts: your right service court, and your left service court. The same is true for your opponent.

The doubles service courts are slightly different. They are wider, because they use the outside side line (remember: the doubles court is wider); and they are shorter, because they use the inside back line.

That’s what the inside back line is for: doubles service, and nothing else. It’s probably the most confusing line on a badminton court, because that’s all it does!

So just to be clear, a doubles service court is made from these four lines:

* The centre line
* A **doubles** side line (outside side line)
* The front service line
* The **inside** back line (not the very back line, but the next one in)

How service courts are used

Service courts are used for three things:

* The server must stand inside a service court.
* The receiver must stand inside the diagonally opposite service court.
* The serve must travel into the diagonally opposite service court.

For example, suppose the server is standing in his left service court. The receiver will be standing in *his* left service court, which is also where the serve has to go.

If the serve is going to land outside the service court, then the receiver should let it fall to the floor. If the receiver hits the serve, then the rally continues even if the serve had been going *out*.

The server and receiver must stay inside their service boxes until the server contacts the shuttle with his racket. After that, they can leave the boxes immediately and move anywhere on court.

Deciding who gets to serve first

In a major tournament, a coin toss is used to decide which side will serve first.

In more casual club or league games, you usually just throw the shuttle up in the air, let it land, and see which side it points towards: that side serves first.

Points, games, and matches

Every time you win a rally, you get a point. Starting from zero, the first person to reach 21 points wins the game. In club badminton, this is usually where you stop and choose players for the next game.

In standard league or tournament play, however, what really matters is the *match*. A match is the best of three games: you win the match by winning two games. So a match could last either two or three games.

Whenever you win a rally, you also get the next serve. So if your opponent was serving in the last rally, the serve passes to you; if you were serving, you keep on serving.

To win, you need a two-point lead

You have to win the game by at least two points. If the score reaches 20–20, then 21 points are no longer enough to win the game. You need to win two clear points: two points in a row, one after the other.

For example, 22–20 would be a winning score, as would 25–23. But 21–20 would not be enough, and neither would 24–23.

If you reach 30–29, however, you’ve won the game. 30 points is the upper limit. This rule is intended to prevent games dragging on too long, especially at the top level of play, where excessively long games put athletes at risk of injury.

Always say the server’s score first

It’s a good habit to say the score to your opponent before starting each rally. It’s surprisingly easy to lose track of the score, and saying it between rallies helps prevent disputes.

When you’re saying the score, always say the server’s score first. So if you are serving and have 10 points to your opponent’s 15 points, then the score is 10–15 (not 15–10).

Which side to serve from?

Remember that you have two service courts: one on the right, and one on the left.

When the server’s score is an even number, he serves from the right service court. When his score is an odd number, he serves from the left service court. For this reason, the right service court is also known as the *even* service court, and the left service court is known as the *odd* service court.

Odd numbers? Even numbers?

* Odd numbers start at 1, and go up by 2
* Even numbers start at 0, and go up by 2

So the odd numbers are 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, and so on. The even numbers are 0, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, and so on.

Even and odd numbers alternate. So if you keep winning rallies, you’ll keep serving from a different side each time: right, left, right, left, right, and so on.

Because zero is an even number, the game always starts with someone serving from the right (even) service court.

What about the receiver?

The receiver’s position is determined not by his own score, but by the server’s score. The receiver always stands in the service box diagonally opposite from the server. In other words, both players will be in the even service courts, or both will be in the odd service courts. You can never have one of each (one odd, one even).

Scoring in doubles

The actual *scoring* in doubles is simple: instead of each person winning points, each pair wins points. The part that often confuses people is this: how do you decide who serves, who receives, and which side they should be on?

At the start of the game, when the score is 0–0, the serving pair choose who serves for the first rally, and the receiving pair choose who receives.

The even/odd rule still holds. So if the server’s score is odd, he will serve from the left court (if even, from the right). Just as for singles, the receiver will stand in the diagonally opposite service court.

Whenever the serving side wins a rally, the same person serves again (but from the other service court). The serve does not alternate between the partners: it stays with one person, until the opponents win a rally and get the serve.

Everyone has a service court

To make sense of doubles scoring, you must understand two crucial ideas:

* Every player has a service court, at all times.
* When your partner has one service court, you have the other one.

Let’s take an example: you are getting ready to serve from your left service court. So your service court is obvious: it’s the box you have to stand inside.

Your partner is not serving or receiving, so he doesn’t have to stay within one of the service boxes: he can stand anywhere on your court. Nevertheless, we say that **your partner has the right service court.**

Bizarrely, most people say that your partner is in the right service court. This makes no sense at all, because your partner probably has one foot in each service court!

The same idea applies to the receiving side. In this example, the receiver has the left service court, and his partner has the right service court. Until you serve, the receiver must stay within his service court, but the receiver’s partner can stand wherever he wants.

It doesn’t matter where you go during the rally

Suppose you serve from the right service court. By the end of the rally, you could easily be standing inside the left service box with your partner standing inside the right box. This has no effect on your service courts for the next rally.

In other words, the service courts are set at the start of the rally. Although you move around during the rally, the service courts don’t change. At the end of the rally, you have to remember what your service courts were:

* Who was serving?
* Who was receiving?
* From which side?

Once you remember this, you work out the positions for the next rally.

When you serve and win the rally

Suppose you serve, and then your side wins the rally. For the next rally, you will serve again, but from the other side. In other words:

**When the serving side win a rally, the server and his partner swap service courts.**

Remember that you and your partner must always have different service courts. That’s why the server’s partner also changes service court here. This change has no effect on the server’s partner — he can still stand wherever he wants — but he needs to remember his service court for future rallies.

**The receivers never change their service courts.** The only way to change service courts is to win a point when your side is serving.

When the receivers win a rally

When the receiving side wins a rally, the serve passes to them. **Their service courts do not change from the previous rally.**

If their new score is odd, then whoever has the left service court will serve; if the score is even, then whoever has the right service court will serve.

Consequences of this system

If you think it through carefully, you can figure out two interesting consequences of this system:

* You never serve to the same person in two consecutive rallies.
* When you win back the serve, the new server is whoever **wasn’t** serving last time.

The rules actually state these consequences explicitly:

11.4 Sequence of serving

In any game, the right to serve shall pass consecutively:

11.4.1 from the initial server who started the game from the right service court

11.5 No player shall serve or receive out of turn, or receive two consecutive services in the same game, except as provided in Law 12.

(Law 12 is about how you correct mistakes. We’ll look at that later.)

It’s easy to forget the score or forget which side you were on. When you forget, you can usually use those two facts to help remember.

For example, suppose you have just won back the serve. You know the score is 10–8, but you cannot remember which side you should be. You also know that last time, your partner was serving (not you). Therefore, you must be serving from the right service court.

Similarly, suppose you cannot remember the score. It’s either 13–10 or 14–10, and you have just won back the serve. You know that your partner just received in the right service court, and that he was serving last time. This means you must be serving from the left service court, and therefore the score is 13–10.