

STRATEGY • COURT DRIFT • ADAPTATION

Wrong Color?

By Martin Shapiro

It is not unusual to hear a player, when they have lost a game or match, lament that the court drift favored the other color. Sometimes the remark goes all the way to the extreme: “It’s impossible to win on [insert Black or Yellow] on that court!” Can color assignment really determine the outcome of a game, given comparable skill levels of the competing players? Is there nothing a player can do if the court highly favors the other color?

I can tell you that I never blame the color. There is always a way to win on any color on any court. You must adjust your strategy, making different shot choices than when playing an equal or favorable color. Here are some of the tactics I use against my opponent (O) when the court has a strong drift in favor of the other color (drift is from O’s side to yours) across both sides of the court.

CourtShuffleboard.com scope note: This article describes tactics for a particular kind of strong cross-court drift and reflects the author’s strategic approach. Actual drift patterns, court surfaces, disc behavior, player skill, and local game formats vary; adapt the ideas to what the court is doing that day.

CORE STRATEGY

Core Strategy remains the same: When ahead, clear-clear-clear-score on your hammer; and try to steal O’s hammer by 1) clogging up the board for O’s hammer shot, 2) scoring your own hidden disc, and/or 3) putting O in the kitchen when you won’t risk being kitchened. When behind, look to create opportunities to score extra hidden discs and/or use kitchen bait to get O to go onto the board to give you a chance to kitchen O. However, scoring extra hidden discs will be difficult due to the unfavorable drift, so you must rely more on the other tactics below.

TAMPA AND ST PETE GUARDS

When shooting practice discs before the game, you must determine as well as you can:

1. Can you hide behind a St Pete? A Tampa?
2. Can O hide behind theirs?
3. Can O use the drift to hide behind your Tampa?
4. Can you use the drift to come around O’s guard to clear or snuggle O’s disc that they have hidden?
5. Will the drift prevent O from clearing a disc that you tried to hide but is left exposed due to the drift?

It is essential that you carefully watch all practice shots, not just your own, to make these observations.

FIRST DISC OUT

If you put up a normal St Pete, you can’t hide behind it but O can. Or if you put up a Tampa, O may have sufficient drift to hide behind it. Instead, I usually start a frame with a somewhat wide St Pete. I am not trying to set a guard for hiding, but rather a block to stop O from any opportunity to hide a disc on their side of the court, which they might do down their alley behind a normal St Pete. The wide St Pete also starts to build a wall of blocks to clog the board for their hammer shot.

If O clears, put up another wide St Pete. If O sticks when clearing, use that disc as part of your wall of blocks; put up another block on that side, either on the outside if needed to block O from going down their alley to score a hide, or on the inside to further build the wall on their side. If O puts up a Tampa or St Pete, fill in to block the hide and build the wall. If O goes on the board scoring, clear it. If O goes on the board on a line, cover it above the scoring triangle if you can do so without providing a guard that O can hide behind, or clear it.

When you fill in, O may bump up their disc into scoring. If so, you might be able to use the drift or a bump up to snuggle their disc with your own to clear or score. Otherwise, you can continue to build the wall so O will only get the one score for the frame as there won't be any open spots for their hammer shot. You might try to clear the guard and scoring disc with a combo shot, but this is also helping O by clearing the board on their hammer, making it easier for them to score their hammer shot.

WHEN OPPONENT HIDES

If the drift is strong enough, you can snuggle or clear by shooting to the outside of their Tampa or to the inside of their St Pete. On your hammer, this is usually the better choice than clearing the guard or attempting a combo shot to clear, as often when the discs have accumulated on the board you will have an opportunity on your hammer shot to kitchen and score. Just watch out that you don't give O too many scoring discs if you are playing a points game.

WHEN OPPONENT IS OPEN ON THE BOARD

When clearing O's disc on the board when you don't have the hammer, you can attempt to kitchen and stick in three circumstances: 1) you are behind and need to set kitchen bait; 2) you are behind and shooting your last disc; 3) the disc on the board is on O's side and there is a guard blocking their alley making it nearly impossible for them to use kitchen speed to both kitchen your disc and stick their disc in scoring as the court drift will cause them to miss or glance.

When you have the hammer, stick to Core Strategy. Don't shoot to kitchen on your hammer shot except when: 1) there is plenty of room to stick in scoring; 2) if shooting at a non-scoring disc, you have great confidence that you have the drift down pat and won't end up on a line; 3) Core Strategy demands it (you are behind, especially late in the game); or 4) it's late in the game and the only way to stop O from winning.

TAKING A HIDE

When you are ahead and four hammers or less from the end of the game, don't take a hide! Clear the guard if it's your hammer even if it's in your St Pete or Tampa position, or block the board if it isn't.

If you are ahead earlier in the game, take a Tampa hide when O can't clear at kitchen speed on that side due to the drift even if your disc is partially or fully exposed. O often has to shoot faster than kitchen speed to clear on your side because the drift will take their disc off the mark if shot slower. Many players will still make the attempt to kitchen, either missing your disc completely or glancing off your disc to leave it still scoring.

If you are behind, you can take a hide at every opportunity. But you aren't really trying to hide a score as you know the drift is working against you. You are just making it look like you are trying to score when what you are really doing is setting kitchen bait. The drift will carry your disc out into the open on the board, tempting O to take the bait. O may miss and/or stick. If they miss, you can cover, or score another on the other side of the board. If they stick, you can kitchen (or reverse if they put you in the kitchen). This is better than just shooting kitchen bait directly in the open because O is less likely to notice it is kitchen bait and therefore less likely to just clear.

SHOOTING THE 7TH DISC

Normally I favor putting up a block on my last shot when it's O's hammer, but the strong drift in O's favor gives you some additional options.

If there are already a couple blocks above the board, adding another block to cover most of the board is usually still the best option when you aren't behind. But if there is just one block that is in your wide St Pete position, you can put up a wide seven on that side even though the drift won't allow it to get fully hidden. It won't be easy for O to clear and stick, or to kitchen, even if it is a deep seven, because the drift will carry O's disc away from it when shot at scoring or kitchen speed. O may not succeed in clearing your disc and sticking to score.

When shooting your last disc for a block at the tip of the scoring triangle on O's hammer, if there aren't any other blocks, shoot to place the disc slightly to your own side. This forces O to shoot the hammer on O's side where it is more likely to drift into the centerline. As an alternative to shooting to block at the tip, when the drift favors O on both sides of the board you can shoot your disc onto the centerline between the 8s. O may drift into it when shooting to the 8 on their side, doubling it to give you a score; or O may drift onto the sideline when shooting to the 8 on your side resulting in no score.

SUCKER HIDES

When behind late in the game, use the sucker hide (a Tampa or St Pete guard misplaced on purpose) to get O to go on the board, which you can kitchen. If you put up a narrow St Pete, or into O's Tampa position, O will be tempted to use it to hide a disc. Use this shot when there is a strong enough drift that you can tap O's hidden disc into the kitchen by shooting around the outside of the St Pete, depending on the drift to carry your disc in. If the drift isn't that strong for you, place a somewhat wide Tampa instead. If O takes that hide, you will have three choices to attempt a kitchen, depending on the drifts. If the drift is strong enough, you can shoot inside your Tampa to bump O's disc. If you have some drift in on your side shooting from the 4 position, you may be able to shoot behind your Tampa to bump O's disc. Or if you can't do either of those and O is hidden behind your Tampa, do a combo shot on your Tampa at kitchen speed to bump O into the kitchen.

OPPONENT'S TAMPA

If O has a Tampa guard on a board that has a strong drift, you can use it as your own guard to place a scoring disc next to the centerline on your side. Although your disc is exposed, the strong drift will prevent O from clearing at kitchen speed or less. Often O will glance off, leaving you with a scoring disc on O's side, which you can then cover. If you are shooting your last disc on O's hammer, and there is a strong drift, you can also use the drift to score close to the centerline in the 8 on O's side behind O's Tampa, O will likely stick touching the centerline when clearing your disc, or bump you into your 7 to give you a score.

OPPONENT'S NARROW ST PETE

If O has a narrow St Pete, you can block their hide by using the drift to place a corner 10. If O clears it, place another. If O sticks when clearing, you can place another, pushing them onto the line if they are scoring. If O then has just the hammer shot left, they have a challenging shot to clear and stick: if O shoots fast enough to clear your disc off the board, O's disc will probably end on a line; if O shoots slower to score the 10, there is a high chance of leaving your disc scoring in the 8.

COVERING A SCORING DISC

When you have a scoring disc that you need to cover, put your guard a little further to the side that is into the drift (i.e., towards O's alley). This forces O to clear on the side where the drift carries O's cue disc away from your scoring disc, making it hard or impossible for O to clear at kitchen speed or less. This will prevent O from snuggling, kitchening or sticking hidden in scoring.

These special tactics counter the advantage that O gains from a favorable drift. Add them to your arsenal so you can win no matter which court and color you play. I'm sorry to say, you will have no excuse anymore for losing on the "wrong color".