The eternal question in doubles on the return: should I chip or rip? Should I be careful or go for it? Should I crush it or bump it? There really is no answer as it all has to do with your rhythm on that day, how your opponents are playing, what the server allows you to do and the movement or poaching ability of the server’s partner at the net.

My theory on the return is you can go for position or you can try for pace, try to choose just one. By going for position, I mean that you are going to try and get to the net as quickly as possible and try and win the point volleying or smashing. By pace I mean you have made a decision to pound the ball and try and win the point outright or hit it so hard the other team pops the ball up for your partner.

When I choose position instead of pace, I chip the return. The chip allows me to already be moving forwards as I make contact so, in essence, I am trying to get to the net, to achieve good position, before the server does. The chip allows me to almost get a running start. When I make contact with the ball, I am already nearing the service line and within a second or two I am at the net. This is a great strategy IF the server’s partner allows you to get away with it. What I mean by this is that inherently a chip is slower than a drive, it is hit with backspin so it is not moving very fast. A good poacher should recognize this and jump over and intercept it before it gets past him or her. Even a sharply angled chip can be chased down by an active net player as again, the chip isn’t a fast shot. The beauty of the chip is that if it does get by the net player it is low and slow and tough to handle. The server may have to pop it up and you and your partner are both there to nail it.

When I choose pace it means I am going to hit the return hard, either at the net person or cross court. You are trying to take away the time of the serving team through velocity. It is a great strategy IF you have this shot in your arsenal. The beauty of driving the return hard is that very often your opponents will have to pop the ball up into the air and you and or your partner can put it away. The drawbacks to pace or driving the ball hard is that anytime you choose velocity it is easy to make a mistake. I always tell my students velocity without spin = far. But if you can hit the ball hard it is a great tool on the tennis court. One drawback to choosing pace is that it is harder to get to the net. When I hit my drive return, my balance is stationary and I have to get re-motivated to move forwards. One nice thing about the chip is that you are usually already moving forward when you hit it so it is easy to keep moving towards the net.

It would be wonderful if we all had perfect drives and chips so that we could just say ‘oh this time I will chip and come in’ or ‘this time I will rip it and see what happens.’ Many of us have
one shot or the other but oftentimes not both in our quivers. If you can hit hard then work on having an effective chip too. If you are a good chipper, then work on being able to put some velocity on your drives as well. Having both makes you a more complete tennis player. Having said that, there is one person that may dictate what you do on the return of serve – the server!

I was watching Peter Burwash coach a tour player a few years ago. He was working with her on a chip and charge strategy in singles. I think the scenario was 30-40 and she was working on taking the ball early with the chip and coming in to apply pressure. The server served a slow-ish ball and the tour player hit a big drive return even though it was a chip and charge drill. Peter's response was that the serve was 'too slow to chip.' I never asked him about that comment but what I gleaned for my own tennis is that it is easier to chip a serve that has some velocity and weight to it, you're taking the server's power and blocking the ball back cross court. If that is true then the opposite is also true, it is easier to drive the return when the serve is a bit slower. Because the drive is a more complicated shot you might need a little bit more time to set up and take the big swing needed to supply the pace or velocity you want. This is why on TV you will see the smarter receivers chipping the big 130 mph serves and ripping their second serve returns. It has to do with time, if you don't have time then chip, if you have time then you have the time to rip.

But when all is said and done the eternal question remains: should I chip the return and move in for good position or should I just choose pace and rip that sucker? The choice is up to you!