TABLE TENNIS TIPS

Larry Hodges

Three years and 150 online tips all in one volume!

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All in One Volume

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<u>On the Cover</u>
Larry Hodges coaching Derek Nie
at the 2013 U.S. Open in Las Vegas.
Photo by Jinhua Feng

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FOREWORD

Welcome, fellow table tennis fanatics, to three years of worth of Tips of the Week, compiled in one volume in logical progression.

These Tips are online, available for free to anyone. I put them up every Monday on my website, TableTennisCoaching.com, and this volume contains all of them from January 2011 through December 2013. Feel free to browse them—but do you really want to have to call them up, one by one, in random order as far as content goes? I've updated quite a few of them, not to mention a lot of editing. Some had links to specific online videos, so I had to adjust the wording, inviting readers to go to YouTube.com and do basic searches for the appropriate technique.

They range over ten basic topics: Serving, Receiving, Strokes, Grip and Stance, Footwork, Tactics, How to Improve, Sports Psychology, Equipment, and Playing in Tournaments.

There are unavoidable redundancies in this book. They come in two types. First, the content of the Tips often overlap with other Tips. This is unavoidable as many of the Tips cover parallel material. For example, there are two Tips on developing the forehand smash, and while there is overlap between the articles, they cover it in different ways.

And second, I incorporated a number of these Tips in my previous book, *Table Tennis Tactics for Thinkers*. This is especially true of the Tips here in the chapters on Tactics and on Sports Psychology. But perhaps a second reading will be the key to really learning and understanding the material?

Finally, I'd like to thank those who proofed the book for me, pointing out numerous problems they found, from typos and grammar mistakes to better wording suggestions. They did an incredible job of making me look good! They are:

- Kyle Angeles
- Stephanie Hughes
- John Olsen
- Dennis Taylor

CHAPTER ONE: SERVING

SHORT SERVES

June 4, 2012—Serving Short with Spin

Many players face a devastating choice: Should you serve with lots of spin, with the serve going long and allowing the opponent to loop, or should you sacrifice spin, even serving with no spin, so you can keep the serve short? Actually, you can do both. In fact, the spinnier the serve, the easier it is to keep short.

Nearly every coach will tell you to first learn to serve with great spin. Holding back on the spin so you can serve short is a good way to develop a bad habit. When you can get great spin on the ball, *then* you learn to serve short—but this happens automatically. To get maximum spin, you need to whip the racket into the ball at full speed (using the arm to get the playing hand moving, and snapping the wrist into the ball just before contact) but barely graze the ball. Nearly all of the energy from your arm and wrist goes into spin. When that happens, the ball barely comes off the racket—and so it is easy to keep the ball short. Those who have difficulty serving short with spin are having trouble mostly because they are not grazing the ball finely enough. The solution isn't to serve with less spin; it's to serve with *more* spin by grazing the ball more.

The other reason a spinny serve might go long is that the contact point is too high, which also leads to the serve being too high. Once you are grazing the ball very finely, you need to learn to serve it low with a low contact point, and learn where to bounce it on each side of the table for varying depths. If you barely graze the ball, you'll not only maximize the spin but since nearly all your energy is going into spin, you'll find yourself almost struggling to get the ball to reach and go over the net—which is a good thing. It means the serve will be short and spinny.

The ideal spin serve will, if given the chance, bounce twice on the opponent's side of the table, with the second bounce as close to the end-line as possible. Sometimes a super-short serve is effective (which might bounce three or more times on the opponent's side, given the chance), as it forces the opponent to reach well over the table, but super-short serves are also easier to flip, push short, or quick-push at an angle. Many players use "half-long" serves, where the second bounce is right around the end-line, and the receiver

is never quite sure if it will come off the end or not.

Once you have a true spin serve that you can serve short, I'd recommend adding no-spin serves as a variation, and focusing on keeping this and the spin serves very low, with the second bounce near the end-line. Serving no-spin when there's little threat of spin isn't as effective after the first few times. No-spin becomes far more effective when it can be done with a spin motion, when there's a threat of spin. (How do you serve no-spin with a spin motion? Several ways, but primarily by contacting the ball near the handle, where the racket travels slowly even in a vigorous serve.) A no-spin serve with a vigorous motion is called "heavy no-spin." Seriously!

It's easier to serve short backspin or no-spin than to serve short sidespin or topspin, or various combinations of these two. So many players fall into the habit of serving just backspin or no-spin when they want to serve short. This greatly limits their options, and makes things a lot easier for the opponent. Well-disguised backspin and no-spin serves are effective, but they are often even more effective if you can throw sidespin and topspin serves into the mix.

At the beginning/intermediate level, I recommend that a player who has difficulty serving short with spin should add a simple short backspin serve, with the focus on keeping the ball low with as much backspin as possible while still keeping the ball short. This simple backspin serve should be a temporary serve, used only so the player doesn't spend all his time serve and blocking. (Also, since most players will push it back long, you get to practice your serve and loop a lot.) Roughly speaking, by the time a player is 1800, a well-coached player should be able to serve with good spin and keep it short. By the time he's 2000, he should have varied spin serves that go short. By the time he's 2200 he should have varied and deceptive serves that go short. (He should also be able to do all this with long serves.)

But you don't have to wait until you're 1800, or 2000, or 2200 to do these things. There are many examples of players who really worked at their serves early on (both short and long), and were able to compete with "stronger" players because of this—and because of that stronger competition, they improved faster. Why not you?

September 9, 2013—Where to Serve Short?

Many players understand the need to serve short (in addition to long serves), since short serves stop the opponent from looping. More advanced

players learn the control to serve “half-long,” so the second bounce, given the chance, would be right about the end-line. However, many players who serve short do not think about placement. There are five: short to the extreme forehand, middle forehand, middle, middle backhand, and extreme backhand. Here are the advantages and disadvantages of each. (Some of these are written as if both players were righties. It would be a long article if I covered all possibilities.)

Every opponent is different, so test each of them out on these five types of placements and see which one works best for you.

Extreme Forehand

- Advantages: It makes the receiver reach way over the table, often leading to awkward returns. To guard against this the receiver often has to stay close to the table, making him vulnerable to deep serves, especially to the wide backhand. After returning these serves the receiver may have trouble getting back into position.
- Disadvantages: It gives the receiver a big angle crosscourt, and also gives maximum table as a target, since there is more court diagonally then down the line. To guard against this angle, the server might not be able to effectively cover down-the-line receives. For a righty serving to a righty, this means the receiver can flip to the wide forehand, and to cover this, the server may have to move to his right, leaving the backhand side vulnerable.

Middle Forehand

- Advantages: It takes away some of the angle into the forehand and gives less table to flip into. It also forces the receiver to move in differently than against the wide angle—often having to step slightly to the left (for righty versus righty)—and some players have trouble doing this.
- Disadvantages: The receiver doesn’t have to move as far in, and so can get in and out more quickly. The receiver also now has a slight angle into the backhand as well as into the forehand. It also allows a receiver with a strong backhand flip (especially a “banana flip,” a heavy topspin/sidespin attack against a short ball with the backhand) to more easily step over and use the backhand.

Middle

- Advantages: Receiver has to decide in a split second whether to receive forehand or backhand. Serving to the middle takes away the extreme angles in both directions, and leads to the least amount of table the server has to cover. It gives the receiver the least amount of table to receive to since there are no long diagonals from the middle. This is the most popular location for elite players, though of course they vary it.
- Disadvantages: Receiver can more easily use their stronger side for receiving, forehand or backhand. The receiver can angle the ball equally to both sides.

Middle Backhand

- Advantages: Only gives a slight angle into the forehand side, so the server can often follow the serve with a forehand from the backhand side. If the serve goes slightly long, he might still get a backhand return instead of a forehand loop.
- Disadvantages: It allows the receiver to receive backhand without having to reach too much over the table. It gives an angle into the backhand and some angle to the forehand. It's the most common serve at the beginning and intermediate level, so those players are used to this.

Extreme Backhand

- Advantages: It takes away any angle into the wide forehand (for righty versus righty), and so the server can try to cover the backhand side with his forehand, knowing that if the receiver does get an extreme angled return, the receiver can always switch to backhand. It brings the receiver well over the table, making him vulnerable to deep ball on the next shot. If the serve goes slightly long, you'll most likely get a backhand return instead of a forehand loop.
- Disadvantages: It gives the receiver an extreme crosscourt angle. It takes away any indecision from the receiver since he'll almost always receive backhand.

September 5, 2011—Short Serves to the Middle

If you like to follow your serve up with your forehand, you probably want to serve short (so the opponent can't attack your serve with a loop) and most often to the middle. Why?

If you serve short to the backhand, the opponent has a wide angle into your backhand. You'll likely have to follow your serve up with your backhand.

If you serve short to the forehand, the opponent has a wide angle into your forehand. To cover this, you have to leave your backhand side open to a down-the-line return, and if your opponent does this, you'll have to follow up your serve with your backhand.

If you serve short to the middle, you don't have to guard against any extreme angles—your opponent's return options are limited. The amount of potential table to cover is less than a short serve to the corners. (There's also the added advantage that the opponent has to make a decision between forehand and backhand. Since most players favor their backhand against short serves, this may leave them vulnerable to deep serves, if the receiver is already committed to a backhand receive.) So perhaps make serving short to the middle central to your serve and follow game.

October 1, 2012—Short Serves to the Forehand from Backhand Side

One of the most under-utilized serves is the short serve to the forehand from the backhand side. Most players serve from the backhand side since this puts them in position to follow their serve with a forehand if there's a weak return. However, far too often players do this serve over and over crosscourt to the opponent's backhand. This makes it easier for the receiver to get into a rhythm and make effective returns. Instead, try serving short to the forehand. There are numerous advantages to this serve and only a few disadvantages.

The most common serves from the backhand side that go short to the forehand are the forehand pendulum and reverse pendulum serves, the backhand serve, and the forehand tomahawk serve. Pendulum serves are forehand serves with the racket tip down. Normally the racket goes right to left for a righty (with contact on the left side of the ball), but for a reverse pendulum serve it goes left to right (contact on the right side of the ball), which is awkward for many players starting out. Forehand tomahawk serves

are done with the racket tip up, with racket going from left to right (contact on the right side of the ball). Some players do reverse tomahawk serves, with the racket moving right to left (and contact on the left side of the ball), and hitting the ball with the backhand side of the racket. Backhand serves are usually done with the racket moving left to right (with contact on the right side of the ball). Backhand serves are easier to keep low and short, but often have less variety than pendulum serves, where it's easier to go either direction at contact and to do subtle changes to vary the spin. Tomahawk serves are relatively easy to keep short, but are more difficult to serve with heavy backspin, and so are often predictably sidespin and topspin variations.

Left-to-right sidespins (i.e. backhand serves, tomahawk serves, and reverse pendulum serves) are often more effective since the sidespin requires the receiver to aim down the line, which is awkward to do when receiving a short ball with the forehand. When a receiver reaches in with the forehand it's easier to aim crosscourt, which is the direction you want to aim to compensate for a forehand pendulum serve.

Here are the advantages and disadvantages of serving short to the forehand. (We're assuming two righties for this, but most applies to lefties as well.)

<u>Advantages</u>

1. It's a variation that throws the receiver off from the more common serves into the backhand.
2. Most players find receiving short balls to the forehand somewhat awkward with their forehand. In fact, many will try to receive this with their backhand. If so, then angle it even more to the forehand side (if necessary, serve more from the middle of the table, or even from the forehand side), or throw in deep serves to the backhand to keep them in position.
3. Many receivers cannot forehand receive down the line against a ball short to their forehand, and you get a predictable return to your forehand.
4. It draws the receiver in over the table, giving the server the opportunity to jam him on the next shot, either to the wide angles or middle.
5. Against a player with a strong forehand but weaker backhand, a short serve to the forehand draws him in over the table, leaving him

vulnerable on the backhand on the next shot.

6. It's a shorter distance to the opponent's side than going crosscourt, and so rushes the opponent.
7. You are closer to the net when serving down the line, and so it's easier to serve low, since your target is closer.
8. You can throw in short serves to the middle as a variation. If the receiver has been receiving short balls with his forehand, he may find this change awkward if he's already looking to receive with the forehand.

Disadvantages

1. It gives the receiver an angle into the server's wide forehand. This can leave the server vulnerable to two ways, both to a wide-angled return to the forehand, or, if the server moves over to cover the wide forehand, he may leave himself open on the backhand. (But see #3 above.)
2. It's tricky keeping this serve short since you have less table than if you go crosscourt, and if it goes long, it's often an easy ball for the receiver to forehand loop.
3. **Since you usually don't want to serve long to the receiver's forehand (an easy ball to loop for most players), serves to the forehand tend to be short, while you can get away with long serves to the backhand more often (since most players don't backhand loop as well). This cuts down on the variety of serves you can do to the forehand.**

LONG SERVES

April 18, 2011—Fifteen Important Deep Serves

When you serve fast and deep, you want to aim at one of three main targets: to the wide forehand, wide backhand, or at the receiver's elbow. It's also best to have at least two variations so they can't adjust, ideally with a fast sidespin or side-topspin serve, and a fast no-spin serve. (No-spin serves don't jump off the paddle as fast, so opponents have to stroke the ball more, which is problematic when you rush them by serving fast no-spin.) So players should develop at least six variations of their fast and deep serves—

preferably more. You can do it with sidespin left, sidespin right, side-top left, side-top right, and no-spin, and can do all of these to the wide forehand, wide backhand, and middle. That's fifteen variations, and that's just to start, since you can vary the degree of each type of spin, as well as the motion used for the serve. (Regarding the motion, I like to serve down the line to a righty's forehand by aiming to their backhand and switching directions the split second before contact. Try it!)

It takes more timing to do a fast and deep serve with great speed then other serves. So even if you use these serves only occasionally, you need to practice them far more than the proportion of times you use the serves. If you don't, when the score is close and the time comes to catch the receiver off guard with a fast and deep serve, will you really be able to pull it off consistently at full speed?

October 22, 2012—Turn Opponents into Puppets with Long Serves

One of the big mistakes players at the intermediate/advanced levels make is to serve short over and over against an opponent who doesn't attack long serves. I've watched national championships lost because a server insisted on serving short against a receiver who was very comfortable returning short serves but had great difficulty against deep serves. At the lower levels, and often well into the advanced levels, players often serve long because, even though serves are generally easier to attack (usually with a loop), they have major advantages as well. Done well, a deep serve turns the receiver into a puppet, with the server holding the strings.

The main advantage of a short, low serve is that it is difficult to attack, since the table is in the way, making it difficult or impossible to loop. It also brings the opponent in over the table, leaving him vulnerable to a deep attack.

However, a short serve also allows the receiver to rush you with a quick, angled flip or push, or to drop the ball short. The shortness of your serve means the receiver can contact the ball much closer to you than off a long serve (so you have less time to react), as well as giving him a wider angle. A receiver can also drop a short serve short (so that, given the chance, it would bounce twice on your side of the table), stopping you from looping as well as catching you off guard if you were looking to attack a deep return.

Serving long takes away these advantages for the receiver, and if he can't attack the deep serve effectively, then there's little reason to serve short

too often. Instead, serve as deep as possible, knowing you'll have more time to react to his shot and that his returns will have less angle available. Deep serves should go very deep, with the bounce somewhere near the receiver's end-line. Serves where the ball bounces more toward the middle of the table (depth-wise) are not nearly as effective—they are more easily attacked, they don't jam or force the opponent off the table, and they allow the receiver to hit the ball more quickly and with better angles than off a truly long serve.

This doesn't mean you serve long every time, allowing the receiver to hang back, waiting for the deep serve. Mix in short serves so he has to watch for those as well, making the deep serve even more effective. A mixture of long serves to the backhand and short to the forehand are especially effective.

If you like to serve backspin and loop against pushed returns, and your opponent doesn't loop against deep backspin serves, why serve short? Serve long, giving yourself more time to react to the receiver's push, while also cutting down on his possible angled returns.

There is one variation of long serve that doesn't go very long—the half-long serve (sometimes called a tweeny serve). With these serves the second bounce on the receiver's side, if given the chance, would go just barely off the end (or, as a confusing variation, the second bounce would just barely hit the table near the edge). These are difficult to attack effectively, they don't allow the receiver the quick, angled returns they could off a shorter serve, and they are almost impossible to drop short.

Placement is also important. Often players serve right into an opponent's waiting forehand or backhand. Instead, serve at either extreme angles or to the middle. If you serve at extreme angles and very deep, the receiver will have to move to the ball, and it's not easy for him to make a strong return off a deep ball when he has to run it down. When you serve to the middle, it should be right at the receiver's playing elbow, the mid-point between forehand and backhand, and very fast, forcing the receiver to make a quick judgment on whether to use forehand or backhand, and then moving to cover it—not an easy return.

Deep serves should focus on either speed or spin. Speed serves rush the opponent, forcing weak returns. They are often most effective if served dead, i.e. spinless or even with a very light backspin, forcing many receivers to put the ball in the net (especially when served to the middle), or to over-compensate and go off the end. Spin serves can be served either fast (so they rush the opponent, but allow him to use your own speed against you with a

counter-hit) or slow (so they break more dramatically but give the receiver more time to react), and should break as they approach the receiver, so the receiver has to both move to reach the ball and compensate for the spin. Most often you want the breaking serves to break away from the receiver, especially if you can serve deep into a receiver's backhand so it breaks away from him, making him reach for it. (Most players have less range on the backhand, so forcing them to chase after a breaking serve here is especially effective.) When reaching for a ball, receivers often lower the racket, and so they lift the ball high (giving you an easy smash) or off the end.

So develop those deep serves as a powerful weapon, along with short serves. The only thing more fun than turning a receiver into a puppet as you pull the strings, moving him around at will with your varied serves, is to win national championships with them. You might not do the latter, but you can be a serving puppeteer.

November 7, 2011—How to Ace an Opponent

A fast, down-the-line serve from the backhand corner (normally done with a forehand pendulum service motion) is a valuable serve. It's great at catching righty forehand loopers off guard as they look to loop your serve from the backhand corner. It's also sometimes good against more neutral players, as they aren't used to fast serves to the forehand and so can be erratic against them. It's even effective against lefties, who are often guarding against serves wide to their forehand, and so are vulnerable to this sudden serve to their wide backhand. Against lefties, however, you'd look to ace them by going crosscourt to their forehands, though you are less likely to get an ace as players generally guard the crosscourt angle. (Lefty servers, this serve is effective for you as well—but I'll let you work out the specifics.) So develop this serve or you will be handicapping yourself against some players.

If you aren't sure how to do the serve, ask a coach or top player to demonstrate. But the key is to fake as if you are serving crosscourt, then at the last second change directions and serve fast topspin down the line. Contact point should be a bit behind the table so that the first bounce can be near your own end-line, which gives the serve the maximum amount of table to drop and hit the other side. (This is true for fast crosscourt serves as well.)

Pick and choose when to use this serve. Often you can tell by the receiver's stance and body language if he's looking to step around. Even if he's not stepping around, if a receiver looks a bit flat-footed, he's probably

vulnerable to this serve.

Once you can do the serve effectively, it's time to make it even more effective. Here are two ways you can do that. First, you can use spin, either sidespin either way or extra topspin. If you do, make sure to put more power into the serve so that you don't sacrifice much speed for spin. Extra topspin pulls the ball down and allows you to serve even faster.

Second, contact the ball with the racket still aimed at the righty receiver's backhand, but hit it down the line with sort of a slapping sidespin (your racket going from right to left at contact). This is my favorite. Typically the first time I go down the line, I do it the "easy" way, changing the racket direction at the last second. Now they are watching for that last second racket change, so I don't give it to them. By keeping the racket aimed to their backhand, you catch them moving to cover that shot, and their forehand side is open.

Once you've done a fast down-the-line serve, the rest of the match the opponent is guarding against it, and guess what? All your other serves become a bit more effective.

DECEPTION AND VARIETY

July 25, 2011—Importance of Serve Variety

Many players develop a small but effective set of serves, and find success with this. However, often they are limiting themselves with a lack of variety.

While it is important to develop a small set of highly effective serves that you can use over and over, it's also important to have enough variety in your serves so that you can most likely find one that your opponent will have trouble with.

For example, many players develop very nice forehand pendulum serves, the most popular serve in high-level table tennis. But since so many players do this serve, many opponents are good at receiving them, while having trouble with other serves. I've seen many players who have trouble with a specific serve, such as a backhand serve short to the forehand. (This has the opposite sidespin as a forehand pendulum serve, though it can be mimicked with a reverse forehand pendulum serve.) And then when I coach against this player, I find that the player I'm coaching can't do this serve! Often they can do the regular forehand pendulum serve short to the forehand,

but it's the other type of sidespin that the player has trouble with.

Another example would be fast and deep serves. Many players have difficulty with certain types of these, such as fast and dead to the middle (elbow). And yet many players can't do this simple serve, and so are giving away many points, games, and possibly a winnable match. Fast sidespins to the wide backhand give many players trouble, and yet few bother to learn these serves. And then there are the all-out forehand loopers who loop every deep serve to the backhand—and woe be the server who can't cross up this player with a fast serve down the line to the forehand!

The list goes on and on, and yet the principle is simple. Learn to serve short and long (including fast) to all parts of the table with all varieties of topspin, sidespin, and backspin (and don't forget corkscrewspin and no-spin!), and you'll have it all covered. While you don't need to be an expert on every serve, you should be at least proficient at most serves so you can pull out the needed ones when needed.

May 2, 2011—Exaggerate the Opposite Motion on Serves

If you serve backspin, you follow through down, right? And if you serve topspin, you follow through up, right?

WRONG! At least, you shouldn't. Instead, right after contact, try changing the direction of your racket and exaggerate the *opposite* motion. Don't try to bring the racket to a stop and reverse directions; whip it about in a tight semicircle, making it almost impossible for the opponent to pick up just when you contacted the ball.

Logically, if you always follow through downward on topspin serves, and upward on backspin serves, your opponent will pick up on this, right? Actually, not very often. Since returning serves (and most other table tennis strokes) are done instinctively, the receiver's instinctive reaction to a downward motion is to read backspin, and for an upward motion to read topspin. So in most cases you can get away with this, though you should vary your follow-through just in case.

Note that you normally wouldn't serve pure backspin or topspin in table tennis; you more likely would serve side-backspin or side-topspin. When you serve side-backspin, follow-through up and to the side; when you serve side-topspin, follow through down and to the side. You'll be amazed at the confusion and havoc this will create.

November 27, 2012—Serving Short to Forehand and Long to Backhand

Want to twist your opponent into a pretzel? You can do so with one of the most common serving combos in table tennis: short serves to the forehand and long, breaking serves to the backhand.

Short serves to the forehand are usually more awkward to handle than short ones to the backhand. This is because the wrist is freer on the backhand side to adjust the racket angle, and also because contact is made in front of you, right in front of your eyes, instead of to the side with a forehand receive. Long serves to the backhand are usually trickier to handle than long ones to the forehand. This is because most players loop better on the forehand side, and because you have a bigger hitting zone on that side than on the backhand side, where a breaking serve can be awkward to handle.

Serving short to the forehand or long to the backhand also maximizes the amount of table the receiver has to cover. Suppose you serve very short and wide to the forehand, so the receiver has to contact the ball one foot from the net near the sideline. Suppose you serve long to the backhand, so the receiver contacts the ball about a foot past the end-line behind the backhand corner. Then the distance between these two contact points is about 6.7 feet. (The same is true, of course, if you serve short to the backhand or long to the forehand.) If you instead serve short and long to the forehand (or to the backhand), then the distance is about five feet. That's over 20 inches of extra movement for the receiver. It's even more if you serve wide to the backhand, and perhaps break it even wider with sidespin, so the receiver has to take the ball from outside the backhand corner. The contact points between a short serve to the forehand and a deep breaking serve to the wide backhand can be seven feet apart.

So why not combine these two into a deadly duo?

You can do this with forehand or backhand serves. (It's usually a bit more effective with a forehand pendulum serve, which allows you to break the deep serve to the backhand away from the receiver. However, a backhand serve type sidespin allows you to actually break the short serve a bit away from the receiver, though not as much since has less travel time.) Make sure to start out the same, with the same motion until just before contact. Then either serve very low and short to the forehand, or use a long, breaking serve into the backhand.

Short serves are often best where the second bounce on the far side of

the table, if allowed, would be near the end-line. However, in this case, it's better to serve very short to maximize how much distance the receiver has to reach to get to the serve. Make him cover the full seven feet.

The receiver also has to prepare for the deep serve into the backhand. By making it break, you force the receiver to reach even more. (This is especially true if you can break it away from the receiver, such as with a forehand pendulum serve if both players are righties.) It's often effective to focus on deep spin serves, but not too fast. A fast serve to the backhand can often be more easily countered, using your own speed against you.

So the receiver has to be ready both for the quick step in to reach a short serve to the forehand, while also being ready to cover a deep, breaking serve into the backhand. This is not an easy task, and leads to many mistakes. On top of that, it also makes it almost impossible for a receiver to forehand loop the serve from the backhand side.

So twist your opponent into a pretzel as he tries to cover these two diagonally opposed serves for which the human body was never designed. Make him cover the full seven feet as you turn him into a cooked pretzel . . . and break him.

SPIN

April 16, 2012—Where to Place Your Spin Serves

While you should vary your spin serves to all parts of the table—at least until you find out what gives your opponent trouble and what doesn't—there are certain spin serves that are generally more effective when done to specific parts of the table.

The main principle to remember is that, in general, opponents will have more trouble returning a serve that spins away from them than one that spins into them. For example, when a righty serves a forehand pendulum serve to another righty (so that the ball breaks to the server's right, the receiver's left), if the ball is served to the wide backhand, the ball spins away from the receiver. This serve is usually harder to receive than the same serve to the forehand, where it breaks into the receiver. Similarly, a backhand or tomahawk serve to the forehand is generally more difficult to receive than one to the backhand, since it also breaks away from the receiver (to the server's left, the receiver's right). There are three reasons for this.

First, a receiver has to move or reach for a serve that breaks away.

This makes it trickier to control as he may be hitting on the move, making it harder to control.

Second, while the receiver may set up with his racket at the right height to receive the serve, when the ball breaks away and he moves or reaches for it there is a tendency to lower the racket. This means he will likely lift the ball too much, and either go off the end or receive soft and high.

Third, to counter the incoming spin the receiver has to aim to the left to receive a ball breaking away on the backhand side, and to the right to receive a ball breaking away on the forehand side. In both cases it's more natural to aim the other way, especially on the forehand side. So countering a sidespin that breaks away is usually more awkward.

Here's a simple way of visualizing this third reason. Imagine a forehand pendulum serve short to your forehand. To counteract the spin, you have to aim to the left, i.e. a normal crosscourt forehand, which is not difficult for most players. In fact, if you wanted to place this ball crosscourt you would want to aim to the left of the table, which isn't that difficult with a little practice. Now imagine a backhand or tomahawk serve short to your forehand side, so the ball is breaking away from you. To counteract the spin, you have to aim to the right, down the line—see how awkward that can be? If you wanted to take it down the line, you'd have to aim to the right of the table, even more awkward. Even advanced players often have trouble with this.

There are always exceptions. Some players are good against balls that break away, and are awful against ones that break into them. Or perhaps you simply are better at one type of sidespin serve, and the opponent will have trouble with it on both sides (especially if you vary the placement), while having little trouble when you use your other, less effective sidespin serve. So experiment—but do so with the knowledge that sidespin serves are usually more effective when placed properly. (And if you haven't yet developed these spin serves, there's no time like now to start learning them!)

May 6, 2013—How to Create a Truly Heavy Backspin Serve

First, you must learn to graze the ball very finely. This takes practice, and is where most players are lacking. Too often they let the ball sink into the sponge, and so much of their racket speed turns into ball speed. Instead, you should graze the ball so finely that you struggle to get the ball over the net. A key here is that contact should be on the bottom of the ball, with your racket

roughly parallel to the floor. If you contact it toward the back, as most players do, then you'll likely sink the ball too much into the sponge.

Second, you must have racket speed. This comes from the arm and wrist (though with some serves, such as a pendulum serve, you use your body as well to get the arm going), with the wrist most important. The arm should drive toward the ball, with a vigorous wrist movement right as you contact the ball. As the racket approaches the ball, you should snap the arm and wrist as if snapping a whip.

Third, you can get extra backspin with a higher toss. This is because the ball is coming down faster, and you can convert that speed into spin. To do so you must contact the ball not only on the bottom, but even a little bit toward the front of the ball, with the front of the racket slightly higher than the back. This scooping motion seems unnatural to players at first, and makes it tricky to keep the ball low unless you graze the ball very finely, with a contact point very low to the table. The higher toss comes at a price—you lose some control—so you should first perfect your serves with a lower toss (head-high or so) before going for higher tosses. Many or most world-class players prefer a lower toss with slightly less spin because of the increase in control as well as being able to do more deceptive motions in the increased time as the ball goes by.

Fourth, the grippier your racket surface, the more backspin you will get.

A truly heavy backspin serve that stays low and short is extremely difficult to attack, so you'll get lots of passive returns (pushes) that you can attack. Players are not used to so much backspin and so often put it in the net. Combine with other spins (including no-spins), and you will create havoc with your opponents.

February 13, 2012—Those Dizzying No-Spin Serves

A low, heavy backspin serve is difficult to attack, especially if you serve it short or to the opponent's weaker side. For that reason it is often the serve of choice for many attacking players who are looking for a passive return to attack. However, there are several problems you face with this serve. If you serve with heavy backspin, it's easy for an opponent to dig into it and push it back low and heavy—your own backspin rebounds off their open racket with backspin. If you serve it long, it's easy to loop with heavy topspin, converting your own backspin into topspin. If you serve it short, it's

easy to push back short and low, making it difficult to attack. How do you overcome these problems?

The answer is to develop other serves as variations, such as a good sidespin or topspin serve—and you should develop these. However, there's an easier way that most top players use, and that's to mix in no-spin serves.

A key to getting heavy spin on the serve is to contact the ball near the racket tip, which is the fastest moving part of the racket when you snap your wrist into a serve for heavy spin. Suppose you use the same motion, but contact the ball near the handle, where the racket is moving much more slowly. You get an almost spinless ball. If you really exaggerate the spin motion but serve with no spin, it's a "heavy no-spin serve."

Now it's more difficult for an opponent to push it back heavy as they can't use your spin against you, plus they are probably expecting backspin, and so their push pops up. If the serve goes long and they attack it, they'll likely misread it as backspin, and go off the end. If they try to push it back short, it'll likely pop up as well as go long.

It's extremely important to serve no-spin very low to the net. There's no spin to directly mess up an opponent, and if it goes high, it's easy to attack. If you serve it low, it's surprisingly difficult to flip aggressively—if an opponent does attack it easily, you are probably not serving low to the net.

At the higher levels, no-spin serves are the most common serve in doubles, often with backspin serves mixed in as the main variation. Since your opponent knows which court you are serving to in doubles, he is camped out ready to make a return from his stronger side. At these higher levels, deep serves are looped, short sidespin and topspin serves are flipped aggressively, and short backspin serves are dropped short and low. Since the opponent can use your own spin against you, the no-spin serve is often more effective than the spinny one. A short no-spin serve may not force as many outright mistakes, but there's no one easy way to return it effectively.

So develop a no-spin serve as a variation to your spin serves, and learn to really load up the ball with so much no-spin that no opponent can possibly overcome that dizzying lack of spin you throw at them.

GENERAL

May 9, 2011—A Journey of Nine Feet Begins at Contact

When you serve, do you just serve? Or do you stop and visualize the

serve first? And when you visualize the serve, do you visualize all of it, or just part of it? You should visualize the entire journey the serve takes, all nine feet of it (or 10.3 feet, if you serve crosscourt).

Contact point: How high from the table? Most players contact the ball too high, and so the ball bounces too high. Also, how far behind the end-line? For spin serves, contact the ball just behind the end-line—any further back simply gives the receiver more time to react, plus it's harder to control the depth from farther back, especially if you want to serve short. For fast and deep serves, contact is farther back so that the first bounce can be near your end-line. Finally, where on the racket is the contact? For maximum spin, generally on the point on the racket furthest from the spin (the fastest moving spot). Or near the handle if you want to fake spin but serve no-spin. Visualize the contact.

Spin: How much and what type of spin? You should visualize this very clearly before serving. Also visualize any extra motion you use for deception, such as a changing follow-through to deceive the receiver.

Speed: How fast is the serve going out? If it's a spin serve, you don't want it going out too fast, as that would mean much of your energy went into speed instead of spin. However, even for a short serve, you might want it to have some pace to rush the opponent and to make it harder for him to control the return. Visualize the speed of the ball.

First bounce: Where on the table? Generally, for short serves, the first bounce is nearer the net. However, the farther the bounce is from the net, the lower you'll be able to serve as the ball will have a lower trajectory as it passes the net. You should clearly visualize where the ball is going to bounce, as well as how it will bounce out from there. (On the first bounce, the spin doesn't affect the bounce as much as the second bounce.) This is probably the most overlooked part of serving.

Curve in the air: How does the ball curve through the air? If a backspin, it should float; if a topspin, it should sink; if a sidespin, it should be breaking sideways. Visualize!

Height over net: You want the serve as low as possible. Visualize this! If it is bouncing too high, then either your contact point was too high, or

you are serving downward too much.

Bounces on far side: Where is the first bounce? How does the ball break from the bounce? How high is the bounce? If too high, perhaps try serving so the first bounce on your side of the table is farther from the net, so the ball can cross the net with a lower trajectory. Given the chance, will there be a second bounce, and where would that be? Visualize it.

Putting it all together—the serve as a whole: Once you've visualized all of the above, you should think of it as one continuous thing, not a series of discrete parts. Visualize the contact, spin, speed, bounces, and path of the ball as a whole. Then serve a winner!

October 10, 2011—Trick Serves and Third-Ball Serves

If you have a tricky serve that opponents miss or pop up over and over, that's great. However, too much reliance on this can actually hold you back. The same tricky serve that your peers mess up against might be returned more easily by stronger players, including the ones you hope to learn to beat. For example, if you have a side-top serve that many opponents push back and so pop up, stronger players, especially after they see the serve a few times, might just drive or loop it, and suddenly your serve is a disadvantage. So instead of relying on winning off the tricky serve over and over, develop a good third-ball serve, one that players at nearly all levels will return somewhat passively, allowing you to attack. Then you can use the tricky serve as a highly effective variation that even stronger players might never adjust to.

Your typical third-ball serve is a short and low backspin or side-backspin, which is often pushed back, setting you up to loop (or in some cases, a regular drive). The irony is that if you do these serves well, opponents will tend to expect backspin, and so when you fake backspin but instead give side-top or no-spin (by contacting the ball near the base of the paddle but still exaggerating the serve motion), the opponent will often push and pop the ball up. Sometimes the no-spin becomes the main serve, with spin the variation, since no-spin serves are harder to push heavy or drop short than backspin, and if very low, are often harder to attack as well.

June 4, 2013—Five Steps to a Great Spin Serve

Serving takes practice, often alone with a box of balls as you serve, over and over. Take your time; don't rapid-fire serve. Visualize what you

want to do with each serve as you practice, and then try to match what you visualize. You might want to get a coach to help at the start, or watch what top players do, and perhaps get their help. Learn to follow your serve with an attack—often it's the threat of the follow-up shot that makes the serve effective as opponents try to be too perfect with their returns.

1. **Put great spin on the ball**
   There is no substitute for this. Spin comes from racket speed and grazing motion. Racket speed comes mostly from the arm and (even more) the wrist, which need to work together to accelerate the racket into the ball. (Contact should be near the tip of the racket, which is the fastest moving part of the blade in a normal serving motion.) Even more important, however, is the grazing motion, which is what takes so much practice. When you can graze the ball so that nearly all of your racket speed becomes spin, you are well on your way toward developing a great spin serve. You can practice this away from the table—get a box of balls and serve on a rug, and watch how the ball spins on the rug. Make the backspins come back to you, the sidespins break sideways, and the topspins jump away.

2. **Put different spins on the ball**
   It's not enough to just make the ball spin; you need to develop different spins. Most players start out by learning simple backspin and topspin serves. Next you should develop sidespin serves, and then combinations—sidespin-backspin and sidespin-topspin (usually called side-back and side-top serves). Then you should add a no-spin serve that looks spinny (called "heavy no-spin"), where you use a big racket motion but hit the ball near the base of the racket and so put little spin on the ball. Finally, you might learn to serve with corkscrewspin, where you'll have to toss the ball up higher.

3. **Put different spins on the ball and control it**
   Having all these great spinny serves isn't so great if you are popping balls up or can't control the depth. High serves are going to be attacked, and long serves will usually get attacked by stronger players. Learn to serve so the ball crosses the net very low. (Do this by contacting the ball low to the table.) Learn to control the depth of

your serve so you can serve it very long (so first bounce is near the end-line) and short (so that given the chance, the ball would bounce twice on the receiver's side). Also learn to do "half-long" serves, where the second bounce, given the chance, would be near the end-line, often the most difficult serves to return effectively. Learn to do these serves to all parts of the table—left, right, and middle.

4. **Put different spins on the ball with the same motion**
   Serving different spins won't always help if the opponent can easily see what type of spin you are serving. So learn to use the same motion for different spins. This means using a serve motion where the racket at different times is traveling down, sideways, and up, in one continuous motion. Then you can vary the spin by simply varying where in the service motion you contact the ball. For example, with a forehand pendulum serve (with the racket tip down), you would start with the racket moving down, then sideways, and then up. You can also rotate your racket as you serve, so you can vary the spin by varying the contact point on the racket.

5. **Put different spins on the ball with the same fast, quick motion**
   Once you've learned to do all of the above, it's time to ramp it up by doing it faster and faster. Instead of a leisurely down, sideways, and up motion, do the entire motion in a few inches in the blink of an eye, making it almost impossible for any but a highly experience receiver to pick up the type of spin from the contact point. Better still, exaggerate the part of the motion where you aren't contacting the ball; if you are serving side-top, exaggerate the down motion; if you are serving side-back, exaggerate the up motion.

August 26, 2013—A Step-by-Step Sequence to Learning the Forehand Pendulum Serve

Want to learn a *really spinny* pendulum serve? Not just a get-the-ball-in-play one that anyone can return, but one with great spin? One with so much spin that the backspin serves will come back into the net and sidespin ones will break sideways as if yanked by a string? Here's how. (The instructions assume you are right-handed; lefties adjust—sorry.)

Step One: Go to YouTube.com and put “pendulum serve” in the search box. Lots of videos will come up—study them! Study them. You want to have a good idea of what you are aiming to do.

Step Two: Hold the racket out in front of you, forehand side pointing up. (You don’t need a table for this.) Toss a ball up, and on the drop spin the bottom of the ball with a right-to-left motion. The ball will jump some to your left. Now tilt your racket slightly so the left side rises (i.e. clockwise). Now repeat, this time contacting the ball on the bottom-left. You should be able to spin the ball so that it goes straight up. Catch it and do it again. Do this over and over until you can really spin the ball, and so that it goes straight up. This is how you learn both to spin the ball and to control it. Make sure to just graze the ball—the goal is to make the ball spin. If you do this exercise regularly, pretty soon you be putting tremendous amounts of spin on the ball.

Step Three: Repeat step two, except now go back to spinning the very bottom of the ball. The ball will jump to your left some; catch it. Again, the goal here is to both spin the ball and control it. You need to be able to control how far the ball jumps to your left before you go to the next step.

Step Four: Now you are ready to try this on a table. Repeat step three, except don’t catch the ball—let it go. You should now be able to spin the ball and control it, and so should be able to control where it bounces on the table. Practice this until you can spin the ball and control it so it bounces over the net after one bounce, a legal backspin serve. Remember that the contact point is nearly the very bottom of the ball. Don’t worry about the height of the serve; focus on great spin and control. When you get good at this, the ball will come to a stop on the far side, and even bounce backwards. Top players can put so much backspin on the ball that it practically jumps back into the net.

Step Five: Now focus on contacting the ball very low to the table, perhaps six inches high, and keeping the ball low to the net. The lower your contact point, and the finer your grazing (i.e. more spin, less speed), the lower it will tend to bounce.

Step Six: Go back to YouTube.com and again put “pendulum serve” in the search box. Study them! The above is a great way to learn to put backspin on

the ball and control it. Now learn to contact the ball with a sideways motion for sidespin-backspin and sidespin. As you get better at it, you'll learn to contact it on the upswing of the pendulum swing for sidespin-topspin. Once you can serve with heavy backspin and control it, it's not that hard to learn the same with other spins.

Step Seven: Now it's time to learn the Reverse Pendulum Serve. As above, start by going to YouTube.com and put "reverse pendulum serve" in the search box. Repeat the steps above, except now the racket tip points toward you—but otherwise it's exactly the same each step of the way. Good luck!

A few key points to remember:

1. Serving is a violent motion. If you want the ball to have lots of spin, you need your racket to move at high speed. That means using your service motion to drive the wrist into the serve, with the wrist snapping into the ball just before contact.
2. Graze the ball near the bottom. (Contact more toward the back of the ball only if you are serving longer and faster.) However, until you learn to really graze the ball very finely you'll end up serving high when you do this. To compensate, contact the ball slightly toward the back of the ball.
3. To keep the ball short, the first bounce on your side of the table should be near the net. However, if you want the ball to go half-long, so second bounce is near the opponent's end-line, the first bounce should be more in the middle of your side of the table (depth-wise).

April 23, 2012—Reverse Forehand Pendulum Serve

The most popular serve in table tennis is the forehand pendulum serve. With this serve, the racket tip is down as you contact the ball with a right-to-left motion (for righties). And it's a great serve—but it can be even more effective if you can vary it with the reverse pendulum serve variation.

The most under-used serve in table tennis is the forehand reverse pendulum serve. This is the reverse of the normal forehand pendulum serve, with the racket moving left-to-right at contact. It seems awkward at first, but is surprisingly easy to learn.

The big advantage of this serve is that your opponent doesn't know which type of sidespin you will be serving when you set up. For most players, if they set up to do a forehand serve, it's going to be one sidespin; if they set up to serve backhand, it's the reverse sidespin. Now your opponent doesn't know until just before contact which way you are going. This is a huge advantage. As they develop the serve, advanced players learn to hide which version they are going to use until later and later in the serve, giving opponents more and more trouble.

When you develop the serve, start with straight sidespin—it's easier. Vigorously rotate the body into the shot, and then snap the wrist just before contact. Then learn to do side-backspin and side-top, and even no-spin (which, if you have a big motion, looks spinny, causing just as many mistakes as actual spin). The serve is often most effective short to the forehand, but vary it all over the table and see what works against different opponents.

You can find many examples of Reverse Forehand Pendulum serves on YouTube.com.

July 9, 2012—Telegraphing Serves

One of the more subtle ways of turning an effective serve into an ineffective one is to telegraph it. Players often telegraph their serves for years and never realize it. They get away with it because most players don't pick up on it, and so don't realize the server is essentially signaling the serve in advance. However, as you reach higher levels, opponents pick up on these subtle signs more often, often subconsciously, and the server doesn't realize it—he just thinks he's playing stronger opponents who return serves better. The most common example are servers that telegraph whether they are serving long or short.

As an example, I recently played a top player, rated about 2350. He would serve short most of the time, but about every fourth serve he'd switch to a deep serve to my backhand. I could see it coming every time (and would step around and loop it with my forehand), but it took two games before I figured out what was giving it away—whenever he served deep, he'd set up with his racket slightly farther back and more closed than when he was going to serve short. I beat him three straight, and then told him what had happened.

There are many other examples; players tend to set up differently for different serves. They may start with their racket in one position to serve

short backspin, another for sidespin and topspin serves, perhaps another for no-spin. Or it might be something more obvious. For example, many players like to high-toss serve, but can't really control them. So the serve might always be predictably long, or the same type of spin over and over. (Many high-tossers serve only backspin serves that go long.) One player I know always sticks his tongue out at the start of his serve motion when he's serving deep! (I used this against him for years, both as a player and when coaching against him.) At the recent U.S. Open one opponent had an obvious different motion for his short and long serves, and so very early in his service motion perceptive receivers were already moving in for short serves or preparing to loop the long ones.

How do you read a telegraphed serve? If you observe the server, you might not consciously see differences in his serve motion any more than you consciously see differences in, say, people's faces. But subconsciously, just as you can recognize a person's face without consciously seeing what makes it different, you can subconsciously recognize different motions that go with different serves. Once you can do that, you can try to figure out what it is that gives the serve away—but surprisingly, from a player's point of view, that's not important. All that's important is that you are able to recognize what the serve is in advance. Let your subconscious be your guide.

How do you avoid telegraphing the serve? It's actually very simple. Set up each time as if you plan to serve the same serve, and only when you are set to serve should you "change" your serving plan to what you really want to serve. This doesn't mean you can't decide earlier what serve you are going to use; it means that after deciding what serve you are going to use, you still consciously set up as if you are serving your most common serve, and then make the mental switch to the serve you are really going to use.

Five-time U.S. Champion Dan Seemiller once told me that he could often tell what an opponent was serving before they served. The subtle clues are often there, you just have to look for them, both consciously and subconsciously. Trust your subconscious when it picks up on something. It usually knows what it's doing.

July 16, 2012—Serving Low

Serving low is one of the most underestimated skills in table tennis. The problem is that while some opponents will attack slightly high serves, more often it simply gives the opponent more leeway for their returns,

making both controlled and aggressive serve returns much easier. Players at the beginning and intermediate levels often get away with slightly high serves for a time, especially if they have otherwise good serves (i.e. spinny or deceptive), but inevitably, at some point, they will lose winnable games because of these serves, often without realizing the problem. A low serve forces the opponent hit up on the ball instead of driving the ball forward, making most receives more difficult.

An exercise I sometimes recommend to players is to stand to the side of a match between a very strong player and a much weaker one and see the contrast. You may have to watch several match-ups as there are relatively strong players who don't serve super low just as there are weaker players whose serves almost skim the net. Watch the world-class players to see not only how low their serves cross the net, but how low the balls bounce on the far side.

So how do you keep your serve super low?

First, contact the ball low to the table, ideally below net height. The higher the contact point the higher the ball will tend to bounce. There are top players who contact the ball seemingly high but that's because they've developed such incredible touch that they can get away with stretching this. It's a lot easier to have a low contact point than to have incredible touch.

Second, barely graze the ball when serving, especially when serving short with spin. The more you graze the ball, the more energy goes into spin instead of speed, giving the ball a lower bounce. (You should graze the ball even on no-spin serves. The key to a no-spin serve that looks like a spin serve is to use a regular spin motion but contact the ball near the slow-moving handle, where grazing the ball will create little spin.)

Third, don't think of it as serving low. Think of it as a struggle to get the ball over the net. If you contact the ball very low and barely graze the ball, there should be little energy in the motion of the ball, and it should barely even reach the net, much less go over it. So instead of trying to lower your serve, think of having to raise your serve so that it barely goes over the net.

Fourth, note that the key is not just serving low to the net, but making the ball bounce low on the far side. Besides serving so the ball crosses the net low, you do this by having the ball bounce on your side as far from the net as possible. It's easier to serve short by having the first bounce on your side be relatively close to the net, and that's how it's usually taught. However, as you

improve, move the first bounce on your side of the table farther from the net. If the ball bounces near the net, it needs a higher upward angle to cross the net, and so bounces more downward on the other side, meaning much of its energy is going downward, which means it'll bounce higher. However, if the first bounce is farther from the net, then it'll cross the net with a lower angle, and so bounces less downward on the other side, with more of its energy going forward instead of up, and so you get a lower bounce. The problem, of course, is that the farther from the net the first bounce is the harder it is to serve short (with the forward energy making it go deeper), so you have to practice and work on seeing how far away from the net you can make the first bounce while still keeping it short. (Jan-Ove Waldner is often credited with being the one who discovered this connection between first bounce and the height of the bounce.)

Fifth, practice!!! When you can start half the rallies with a low, spinny serve, you have a tremendous advantage. If you want to have this tremendous advantage, you know what to do. Go to it.

January 28, 2013—Holding Back on Serves

Suppose you have a tricky serve that gives your opponent all sorts of problems. But suppose it's also one of those serves that he can get used to, and only works by either surprise or by the opponent's not being used to it. Should you hold back on this serve for key points in the match?

To start with, you won't really know if the serve is effective unless you actually try it out against an opponent. Sometimes you may know from previous matches. Either way, you should use it early on to establish whether the serve is effective. If the serve is not effective, then you know not to use it later on. If it is effective, you get to use it early in a game, and then come back to it several more times, including near the end if necessary. If you do need to come back to it again near the end of a close game, imagine where you'd be if you hadn't used the serve early on, perhaps more than once?

The idea behind holding back on a serve is that 1) if you use it too often, the opponent will get used to it, and so 2) hold back on it until you reach a key point. The thinking is that if you use it early in a game, and that game ends up not being close, then you've "wasted" that serve.

There is logic behind the above, and yet many players way overdo this, holding back on their best serves—i.e. some of their best weapons—except when it's close. This is like a looper not looping until it's close, or a

hitter waiting until it's close before hitting.

If you have a serve that really bothers an opponent, use it regularly in rotation with your other serves, and put yourself in a position where you use the serve at the end of games to win that game, not just when you are down (and where you might "waste" the serve anyway if your comeback falls short). If you are in a competitive match, and can win one "free" game on the strength of one serve, use it! And don't kid yourself into thinking that your opponent will magically become strong against this serve as long as you use it somewhat sparingly and with some variations. His returns may become more effective, but that's true of any shot you may throw at him.

If you do have one serve that really gives the opponent trouble, try to use variations of it to keep him guessing throughout. The more you vary it, the harder it will be for the opponent to get used to it, and so you can use the serve more often.

It's better to use your winning shots (and serves) and win than to hold back on them and hope to come back and win with them at the end.

August 19, 2013—Height of Service Toss

How high should you toss the ball when you serve? At all levels there's a huge range, from tosses that challenge the six-inch rule to ones that go up to the rafters. And yet most top players toss the ball up to perhaps head-high. What are the advantages of these different tosses, and how high should you toss?

Let's start with the rules. You must throw the ball up at least six inches (that's the height of the net for perspective), and contact it on the drop. There's no limit to how high you can toss it.

You can divide tosses into three types: very short tosses, medium-high tosses (the most common), and high tosses.

The purpose of a **short-toss serve** is to rush the opponent. So these serves should be as short as possible, probably in the 7"-8" range, and often challenging the 6" rule. Many players push this to the limit, and often toss it up less than six inches. (If you do, prepare to be faulted on it sometimes, and for opponents to complain. Ideally, learn to consistently toss it just over six inches.) Short-toss serves are usually done on backhand serves (since higher tosses are tricky to control on that side), though it can be done on other serves. Ironically, since players are so used to higher tosses on forehand serves, a short-toss on that side often appears lower than the same serve on

the backhand side, so a short toss on the forehand side is more likely to rush an opponent—or to have him (often erroneously) complain that the toss is too low. Another advantage of a short-toss serve is that the ball is traveling slower at contact, giving great control, especially on height and depth, once the server masters the faster timing required. The disadvantage of a short-toss serve: the server is somewhat rushed.

The purpose of a **high-toss serve** is to maximize spin as well as throw off the opponent's timing. By throwing the ball high into the air it maximizes the speed of the dropping ball. A good server can use this to increase spin. To do so, he must still accelerate his racket into the ball at full speed and just graze the ball—not an easy thing to do with a fast-dropping ball. Below the elite levels most high-toss serves are more for show than actually improving the serve—the player often doesn't yet have the timing or skill to graze the ball; it takes lots of practice. (But it might still be a good variation if not overused.) By throwing the ball high into the air you also throw off the opponent's timing, because he has to stand there waiting for the ball to come down. It also means he may take his eye off your racket as he watches the ball, and so miss the actual contact when the ball finally reaches it. (Suggestion for receivers—watch the ball only far enough up so as to see how high it'll go, then focus on the server's racket so you don't miss contact.) You can actually divide high-toss serves into two types—high tosses, and super-high tosses. Some throw the ball up perhaps five feet over their head; some throw the ball high up into the rafters, making the receivers crane their necks to follow it. The disadvantage of a high-toss serve: loss of control on spin, speed, height, and depth.

The purpose of a **medium-high serve** is to maximize control. This means tossing the ball perhaps up to eye level or just above. This allows the server to serve without rushing, and maximizes the overall control of spin, speed, height, and depth. At higher levels, where depth control is so important, this is the most common serve. (Why is depth so important at the higher levels? Because they usually want the serve to be as deep as possible and still be "short," i.e. second bounce right at the end line, or the related version where the second bounce is just barely past the end line.) Another advantage of a medium-high toss is that it allows you more time to do deceptive motions as the ball reaches the contact point. With a short toss, you don't have as much time to do this; with a high-toss serve, the ball goes by so fast you also don't have as much time to do this. With a medium toss, you

can do all sorts of racket movements as the ball goes by to deceive your opponent. The disadvantage of a medium-high toss serve is that you aren't rushing your opponent, nor are you throwing off his timing or maximizing spin.

My recommendation is to focus on medium-high tosses at first, until you have great spin on your serves as well as excellent control. Then you can begin experimenting with shorter and higher tosses. By varying the height of your toss, you can throw off an opponent's timing. At the higher levels, high-toss serves are especially effective, but don't make the mistake of doing them for show; learn to do them *effectively*. And that takes lots and lots of practice. As do all great serves.

April 29, 2013—The Decline of the High-Toss Serve and Why You Should Learn It

The high-toss serve used to be one of the most popular serves at high-level table tennis, and pretty common at the intermediate level as well. There are still plenty of players who use it, but it is not as common as before. Why is this? But first, you should understand what the serve is, and its advantages and disadvantages.

A high-toss serve is just that—a serve where you toss the ball high into the air, often ten to fifteen feet up. It is the most spectacular of serves. It is also the hardest to control. If you want to learn a high-toss serve, watch how the top players do it, and practice a LOT. (You can see many examples of this at YouTube.com.)

Most players below the advanced levels can't really control a high-toss serve, so the serve tends to be easy to attack once you get used to it. But because the serve is "different" many players have trouble with it, even if it isn't done very well. Most high-toss serves are done with a forehand pendulum serve. (For a righty, this means the racket is tip-down, and moves from right to left. For a reverse pendulum serve, the racket would move left to right.)

Advantages of a High-Toss Serve

1. A higher toss means the ball is traveling faster at contact, which allows you to put more spin on the ball.
2. The higher toss throws off the timing of opponents.

Disadvantages

1. Less control of depth, making it more difficult to serve short.
2. Less control of height, leading to higher serves that are easier to attack.
3. Reverse pendulum serves are difficult to do with a high toss.
4. Faster-moving ball makes it harder to do as much deceptive motion as the ball passes by at contact.

From the advantages, you see that you can get more spin on the ball. This is especially effective when going for an extremely heavy backspin serve, which opponents will often put in the net since they aren't used to such heavy backspin—but only if you perfect the serve. It's not easy learning to throw the ball up way in the air and just graze it as it comes down! But if you learn to do so, the serve can be highly effective—especially if you also learn to vary the spin, with varying degrees of backspin, sidespin, and corkscrewspin, as well as no-spin serves that look like backspin.

However, as you can see there are also disadvantages, and they outnumber the advantages 4-2. This doesn't mean you shouldn't high-toss; it means you have a bit more practice to do. With practice, you can negate the first three disadvantages as you learn to control the depth and height, and perhaps learn to do a reverse pendulum serve with a high toss. (Some players simply use a lower toss for the reverse pendulum serve, and with a high toss only do normal pendulum serves. Not sure what a reverse pendulum serve is? YouTube and Google are your friends!)

The key problem with a high-toss serve is the speed at which the ball falls at contact, which is both the strength and weakness of the serve. While it does allow more spin, the faster-moving ball means you have less time for deceptive motion as the ball goes by, as well as a loss of control. Most players find they get more deception and control with a shorter toss, which is why most serves toss the ball perhaps head high. However, the high-toss serve is still a great weapon to have, either as a front-line serve used over and over, or as a variation to throw an opponent off, which is how I use it. Many players will toss the ball head high over and over, and then, perhaps several times a game, using the same motion, they'll suddenly go for a high-toss, which often leads to a completely befuddled opponent who simply isn't ready for the extra spin (especially backspin) of a properly executed high-toss serve

—hence advantage #3.

Another advantage of the high-toss serve is that since fewer players are using it than before, players are less used to it, and so have more trouble with it. So if you are looking for an extra weapon for your serving arsenal, get high with the high-toss serve.

December 12, 2012—Depth Control of Serves

One of the most under-practiced aspects of serving is depth control. Most intermediate and advanced players know that serving short stops an opponent from looping. As players advance, they begin to see the advantage of serving short with the second bounce as deep as possible. This makes it harder for the opponent to flip or drop short, to return at a wide angle, or rush the server.

As they advance, players also begin to see that a deep serve that goes very deep, so the first bounce is near the opponent's end-line, is much more effective than a long serve that bounces more in the middle of the table. The deeper the bounce, the more you jam the receiver, force him off the table, cut off angles, and give yourself more time to react to his shot. (Deep serves can either be spin serves, fast serves, or a combination of both.)

You'd think that players would really focus on controlling the depth of their serves, making sure that the second bounce of a short serve and the first bounce of a long serve are both near the opponent's end-line. And yet few players really take the time to really learn to do this.

Draw a line on the far side of the table about four inches from the end, a few inches more for beginners. (You can use chalk, or perhaps just put a string across the table.) Now get a bucket of balls, and practice your serves—but on every serve, make sure that either the first or second bounce lands in the last four inches of the table. (Make sure that you don't hold back on the spin on your spin serves or you defeat the whole purpose here. If you have trouble creating spin, focus on that before you worry too much about serving short with spin.) Don't consciously aim; learn the feel of the serves that go the proper depth, and visualize doing it each time just before you actually do the serve. Ingrain the feel, and you'll ingrain the serve.

August 12, 2013—Service Contact Point

Where should you contact the ball when serving? This is one of those subtle things that many players spend their entire playing lives or careers

ignoring, never realizing they are giving their opponents an advantage. Where you contact the ball makes a significant difference on how your serve goes out and how it is returned. Here are three things to consider when serving.

First, your contact point should be low. The higher you contact the ball, the higher it will tend to bounce on the other side. At minimum, try to contact the ball no more than nine inches or so high, but ideally even lower, even lower than the six-inch net. The lower you contact the ball, the easier it is to keep the ball low. And keeping the ball low when serving is one of the most underrated parts of serving. It's not just that slightly high serves are easier to attack—they are—but also that super-low serves have to be lifted over the net, forcing weaker and less consistent returns. They also cut off most aggressively angled returns.

Second, contact should be as close to the table's end line as possible. If you contact the ball a foot behind the end-line, you give your opponent that much extra time to react to your serve. Why give him that time? Some players do toss the ball backwards when serving, since this allows them to essentially throw the ball back into their racket, which can give extra spin. (It also makes it easier to illegally hide the serve.) The rules state that the ball must be thrown up "near vertical," so there is some leeway here. In general, however, you want to give the opponent as little time to react as possible, so even if you throw the ball back some (within the confines of "near vertical"), you should balance this against the extra time the opponent has to read your serve.

Third, for fast serves that go deep on the table, move the contact point back. To maximize the speed on your serve, you want the ball to travel over the table for the maximum time between bounces so that gravity (and topspin, if you served with that) has the most time to pull the ball down, thereby maximizing how fast you can potentially serve. This means the first bounce should be as close to your end-line as possible, with the second bounce very deep on the opponent's side. To do this, you need to contact the ball a little behind the end-line, perhaps a foot back. The contact point should be very low to the table, no more than a few inches higher than table height, allowing you to serve the ball mostly forward and very low to the net, to maximize the speed you can put on the ball and still keep the ball on the table.

So focus on the position and height of the contact point on your serves, and take your service game to new heights!

CHAPTER TWO: RECEIVE

April 4, 2011—What is the Goal of the Receiver?

Returning serve is the most difficult part of the game to master. There are more variations to prepare for than at just about any other time—reading spin off a fast motion, topspin or backspin, sidespin either way, corkscrewspin, no-spin, long or short, fast or slow, to wide angles or the middle—there are infinite possibilities. And yet, most players don't practice their receive much, except in games, and there they are looking to win, not try something new that might cost them a match. Find someone with decent serves and practice returning them. (And return the favor.)

But you also need to know what to do with the serve. There are two possibilities.

1) **Aggressive receive that takes the initiative.** Try to dominate the point when you see the chance. Examples include short serves that pop up slightly, serves that go long that the receiver is ready for (and should usually loop), and serves that the receiver reads well and is comfortable attacking. A player should always be looking for such serves and be ready to pounce on them.

The goal isn't to win the point on one shot; the goal is to take the initiative and put the server in an uncomfortable position. Key to this is placing the shot, either to a wide angle or to the opponent's middle (opponent's transition point between forehand and backhand, usually the elbow). When flipping very aggressively, you might consider mostly flipping crosscourt at a wide angle, as this gives you more table to aim for.

The downside to an aggressive receive is that you will also lose some points when you miss. It's a tradeoff.

Some players are afraid to attack serves, and return almost all serves passively. This makes things easy for the server, since he can serve knowing that he's going to get a ball he can attack. You need at least the threat of an attack to make a controlled receive more effective.

2) **Controlled receive that neutralizes the serve.** The goal is to force the opponent into a mistake or a weak attack, or to catch him so off guard he can't attack at all. These receives are the most misunderstood. Against a short serve, don't just push the serve back mindlessly—do something with the return to put pressure on the server. Push quick off the bounce, deep, at a

wide angle, low, and with good backspin. Change directions at the last second. Drop it short. Push with sidespin. Push with no-spin, but with a vigorous wrist motion just after contact to fake backspin. Do a steady, well-placed flip. (You should flip most short serves that don't have backspin.) Constantly vary your receive so your opponent never knows what you're going to do next.

Against a long serve, mostly loop, but go for consistency, spin, placement, and depth.

Some players feel they have to attack every serve. They aren't confidence that they can handle the opponent's first attack if they use a controlled receive, even if the attack isn't very strong. The problem here isn't the receive—it's the defense. If you can't block an opponent's loop (or consistently handle it in some other way that fits your game), then you need to work on your defense.

Which of the two receives should you use? You should generally favor controlled receives until you have mastered them, and are comfortable against the opponent's attack off that receive. When you can do that, you'll have enough control to be more aggressive off the serve. Then you can do either, depending on your opponent and your playing style.

January 24, 2011—When Receiving, Emphasize Placement & Consistency

When receiving, many players are either overly aggressive or too passive. It's important to find the middle range. However, it is even more important to understand that it is consistency, placement, and variation that are most important.

Flip kills and loop kills are exciting ways to return serves. However, they are also quick ways to lose the point by missing. Always remember that all you have to do is break even on your opponent's serve, and you'll probably win on your serve. So you don't need to hit a winner off the serve. Just return it in such a way that your opponent can't hit a winner—which normally means catching him at least slightly off-guard. To do this takes good placement, variation, and hiding the direction and shot selection until the last second.

If you don't place the ball well, your opponent may jump all over your return. Few players can cover the entire table with a strong third-ball

attack, especially if you don't telegraph your direction early in the shot, so it's important to figure out what part of the table your opponent will have the most trouble with, and go there. A well-placed passive return is often more effective than a strong return hit right at an opponent's strength.

Without good variation, of course, your returns are predictable. Mix in loops, flips, pushes, drives, and do them at different speeds, spins, depths, as well as varying the placement. Aim one way, then at the last second go the other way so your opponent can never know where you are going until you contact the ball. If your opponent looks like he's looking for a push return, give him anything but that.

What is your primary job in returning serve? To mess your opponent up! Go to it.

April 1, 2013—The Many Ways to Receive a Short Backspin Serve

I am often left in open-mouthed astonishment when watching matches as players will return short backspin serves the same way, with simple long pushes to the opponent's backhand, over and Over and OVER!!! There is little attempt to vary these returns or do much of anything to mess up the server. And yet they seem surprised that the server is ready for these simple pushes, usually with a big third-ball loop attack. If the opponent serve and pushes, then perhaps pushing the serve back long over and over will work. But that's mostly at the lower levels. If you want to reach the higher levels, you have to do a bit more with the receive.

If the serve is long, it's a bit more simple—just loop the serve, forehand or backhand. If you don't loop, at least play aggressive. A passive return of a deep serve is easy for the server to attack, since he has more time than off a short serve. (Aggressive usually means a topspin return, i.e. a drive or loop, but it can also be an aggressive push.) The same is true of a short sidespin or topspin serve (which is somewhat rare at the lower levels)—you should flip it.

However, against a short backspin serve, you can't loop, and flips are a little trickier. But you have more options to mess up the server, if you only use them. So what should you do against a short backspin serve? There are three main possibilities, but with countless variations.

1. **Push long**. Do this to the wide backhand or wide forehand, and sometimes at the opponent's middle (the playing elbow) against a

two-winged attacker, so he has to decide between forehand and backhand, and move to do so. Push quick, heavy, low, deep, and wide, with disguised placement. If you do some of this well, but some poorly, your push will be poor; it's better to do all six decently. Experiment with pushing with sidespin, especially a sidespin that breaks away from the opponent on his wide backhand side. A sudden quick push to an opponent's wide forehand is often a free winner since they get this so rarely.

2. **Push short**. This stops the opponent from looping. But don't just push short; sometimes aim to push short one way, and go the other. Top players finesse their pushes so sometimes they drop them short at the point of the net closest to their contact point, other times at angles to the forehand or backhand. Often the best move is to fake a short push to the opponent's stronger side against short balls, then go the other way.

3. **Flip**. This can be done forehand or backhand. These days more and more players attack short serves with a backhand banana flip, using it even against short serves to the forehand. Focus on consistency and control, and save the flip kills for serves that actually pop up at least slightly, or (at higher levels) where you really read the serve well. Learn to aim one way and go the other way at the last second.

Never forget that your purpose in returning a serve is to mess up your opponent. You don't do this by being predictable with passive returns; you do this with unpredictable and effective returns.

April 25, 2011—The Short Serve & Short Receive, and Looping

If you have a nice loop, then you want to serve and return serves to set it up, right? Many players learn by the intermediate level that to serve and loop, you usually want to serve short. If you serve long, the opponent can loop, but if you serve short, usually with backspin, you normally get a long push return you can loop. So the centerpiece of many intermediate and advanced games is serve short and loop.

You can also serve short sidespin, topspin, or no-spin. Rather than a push return, you'll often get a flip return, which is also long and loopable. If the serve is very low, the flip will usually be weak enough for you to attack.

The corollary to this is that if you return a short backspin serve with a short push, you'll probably get a long push return you can loop. It takes practice to do this—you have to read and recognize the serve as short backspin, step in, and have the control to push with enough touch to keep it short and low. If you don't learn to do this, then you'll probably be pushing long (letting the other guy loop) or flipping (not a bad idea, but predictable and off a low ball, it can be attacked). At first you'll mess up a lot, but with practice, it'll be a big part of your game, regularly setting up your loop. Watch the best players, and you'll see that short receive is central to many of their games.

March 14, 2011—Why You MUST Attack the Deep Serve

Against a short serve, you can take the ball quick and rush the opponent, you can go for angles, and you can drop the ball short. You have a number of ways to mess up an opponent without actually attacking a short serve. This is where you can get really creative.

Against a deep serve, you don't have these options. You can't rush the opponent with a quick shot, go for extreme angles, and you can't return it short. If you return the deep serve passively, you are giving your opponent lots of time to set up his best shot. So don't.

Instead, get in the habit of attacking deep serves. Ideally you should loop them. If you make mistakes at first (you will), then that's the best reason to keep attacking them—to learn to attack them. The more you do it, the better you'll get at it, and your level will go up.

The key is to practice attacking them, generally by looping, both in games and in practice. I've seen many players lose a match because they couldn't return serves effectively—and later they'd be off practicing their strokes rather than practicing return of serve. If you have trouble attacking a deep serve (or any other serve return), find someone who can do the serves that give you trouble, and practice against them, either in a practice session or matches.

There will always be exceptions to the "rule" of attacking deep serves. For example, some players have trouble against backspin, and against them you might want to push deep backspin serves. Or you might want to roll back a serve with soft, defensive topspin if the opponent has trouble with that. But these are generally tactics for lower-level play, and if your goal is to win at a lower level, then by all means continue to return deep serves

passively.

At higher levels, there are players who do return deep serves defensively. Choppers, for instance, may return a deep serve with a defensive backspin. But even here the backspin returns may be fairly aggressive, i.e. heavy, deep, and angled. And there are high-level players who are not good against backspin, and so relatively passive backspin returns might be effective, especially as a changeup. And if you are attacking most serves, then an occasional defensive return is a good changeup against some players.

But these are the exceptions. A player may get away with passive returns of a deep serve, but the key here is they are getting away with a weakness when they could be better players if they returned the serve by being aggressive. Rather than cover for a weakness, why not make attacking deep serves a strength?

January 31, 2011—How to Return Different Serves

We will define a "short" serve as any serve that, given the chance, would bounce at least twice on the receiver's side of the table before going off the end. Any serve that doesn't do this will be considered a "long" serve.

To attack short serves to the forehand, you will need to develop a forehand flip. The shot can be demonstrated by any top player or coach, or you can learn about it in most table tennis books.

Treat sidespin and topspin serves almost the same if you attack them. Even a heavy sidespin will only affect the ball a little bit if attacked at a reasonable pace, so start out by simply aiming a little away from the corners. Most mistakes are made in the net or off the end, which means misreading the topspin or backspin. As you get more advanced, you will need to learn to compensate for the sidespin so that you can accurately put the ball anywhere on the table. This may mean aiming one foot off the side of the table to get the ball to go into a corner, to compensate for the sidespin.

No-spin serves are effective because they can be disguised as having spin, because they are easy to control, and because players are so used to returning backspin or topspin/sidespin serves that they have trouble with a ball with no spin. At the higher levels, a backspin serve is easier to push short than a no-spin ball, and a sidespin or topspin serve is easier to flip than a no-spin serve. With a no-spin serve, a server gets a consistent ball to attack, although fewer outright mistakes.

Let's divide serves into three basic types, and explore how they

should be returned.

- Long Serves
- Short Sidespin or Topspin Serves
- Short Backspin or No-Spin Serves

Long Serves

There is one general rule for returning long serves: ATTACK!!!

This doesn't mean you rip the serve, but that you should at least return it aggressively. This is true of all attacking players, and even for many defensive players. A chopper may return most deep serves defensively, but should mix in attacks. Most players should return a deep serve defensively only as a variation or for tactical purposes (such as against an opponent with a weak attack).

Why should you attack deep serves? Because the serve is deep, you will be contacting the ball from farther away from the opponent than when returning a short serve. This means that your opponent has more time to react to the shot. If your shot is defensive, your opponent will have too much time to prepare his attack. Also, since you are farther away from the table, you have less angle, so your opponent has less distance to move than going for the angled-off returns possible off a short serve.

Fortunately, it is easier to attack a long serve. Ideally, you should loop any serve that is long. The table is not in the way as it would be for a short serve, and so you can take a longer backswing. You can also backswing from below the table to lift against backspin. If you don't have a loop, or can only loop with the forehand and aren't fast enough to regularly step around the backhand corner to loop with the forehand, then you should learn to drive the ball against deep serves (i.e. a simple forehand or backhand drive).

When attacking a deep serve, remember to lift against backspin, but go mostly forward against topspin or sidespin serves. A common mistake is for receivers to drop their right shoulder too much (for right-handers) when looping a sidespin or topspin serve, and loop the ball off the end.

Short Topspin or Sidespin Serves

The general rule here again is to attack (although you can also "chop-block" the ball back as a variation). On the backhand side, use your normal backhand drive, but with a somewhat shorter stroke, for control. On the forehand side, use a forehand flip for most returns. Go for well-angled

returns, or at the opponent's elbow (his transition point between forehand and backhand). Usually, the best place to go is to the backhand, but many opponents will step around and use a forehand from the backhand corner, and so you might want to catch him by returning to his forehand. Also, a player might be stronger on the backhand than on the forehand, in which case you should return most serves to the forehand side.

Many players, especially those who are fast on their feet and with good forehands, like to return nearly all short serves with their forehands. If you can do this, it is a tremendous advantage as it allows you to take the initiative in the rally AND puts you in position for a forehand on the following shot. Jean-Michel Saive of Belgium is the master of this technique.

To chop-block the ball, keep your racket perpendicular to the table (roughly), and chop down on the ball—sort of half block, half push. What you don't want to do is push, since the racket normally aims upward when pushing. If you push a topspin or sidespin serve, the ball will shoot off the end or side.

Certain short sidespins are easier to attack than others. A backhand sidespin serve is tricky to return with the forehand because the natural racket angle on the forehand side when reaching in (for right-handers) is to the left; to return this sidespin, the racket must aim to the right. Similarly, a sidespin serve going the other way is normally trickier to handle with the backhand, although the wrist is more flexible for this shot so it is easier to do. Some players favor the forehand or backhand for the receive, depending on what type of sidespin is coming.

Short Backspin or No-Spin Serves

The general rule here is variation. Learn to flip, push short, and push long.

The easiest way to return a short backspin serve is to push long. This is also a quick way to get into trouble. Top players learn to push quick off the bounce, and develop a good block to defend the upcoming attack. However, many players push because that's all they know how to do against this serve, and that's a mistake. Push long by choice, for tactical purposes, not because you have no other choice. If you do push, push quick, low, with good backspin, to a wide angle.

The most common receive at the higher levels is a short push, but many players don't have confidence in pushing short until they've practiced

it and used it in competition for some time. So practice and use it until you perfect it! It becomes a very powerful weapon once mastered, taking away the server's advantage and stopping a third-ball loop.

Lastly, learn to flip the ball at wide angles. Deception and placement are more important than speed. Many players make too many mistakes trying to flip hard. Instead, hide the direction of the flip until just before contact, and place the ball very quickly off the bounce to the opponent's weakest spot. Don't think of a flip as an all-out attack; think of it as a way to disarm an opponent's serve and force a weak return.

October 3, 2011—Returning Long Serves with the Backhand

The key is that you have to *do something* when returning any long serve or you give the opponent a big opening. That usually means attacking it. Against a long serve to the backhand, that usually means either backhand looping or hitting/punching a strong backhand. A player with good footwork may step around and loop with the forehand, but most can't do that on a regular basis unless they are very fast or they anticipate the serve. If the serve is fast, you can use the speed against the opponent with a punch block. If you have trouble attacking the serve, try shortening your stroke.

You want to place the ball, usually wide to the corners, or (if the opponent isn't looking to attack with the forehand) a strong shot to the elbow. Shots to the middle backhand or middle forehand put little pressure on the opponent, and are often ripped.

You want to hide the direction. For example, if you aim your backhand crosscourt to the wide backhand, then at the last second change and go to the wide forehand, you can catch an opponent off guard. If you aim to the wide forehand, many opponents will move to cover that, and then you can do a simple return to the backhand.

You want depth. Even a weak topspin ball that goes deep can be effective if it either has topspin or is to a wide angle. (However, you don't want to rely on this—a good player might still tee off on this.) Against some players who hang back to counterloop, a shorter, softer, spinnier topspin return is more effective, but don't overdo it or they'll get used to it.

A sudden chop, chop block, or sidespin block can also be effective, but only if you can control it, and usually only as a variation. If you can deaden the ball with a chop block or sidespin block, many opponents will have great difficulty. If the serve has sidespin, try sidespin blocking it back,

using the opponent's own spin against him. (Go with the spin, not against it. For instance, against a forehand pendulum serve, your racket should go right to left for a backhand sidespin block.)

Lastly, variation is important. If your opponent knows what you are going to do, things get pretty easy for him. Even if you are going to loop all deep serves (as most advanced players should), you should vary the placement, depth, speed, and spin, and throw in sidespin loops as well.

May 14, 2012—Returning the Tomahawk Serve (or a Lefty Pendulum Serve)

This is the forehand serve where you serve with the racket tip up, and contact the ball on the right side so it curves to the left, and the spin makes the ball come to your right off the opponent's paddle. (This is for a righty. It's the same breaking spin as a lefty's forehand pendulum serve.) The serve normally has a combination of corkscrewspin and sidespin.

It's awkward for many to take a ball spinning away from them on the forehand side and aim to their right, especially if the ball is short—try it and you'll see. Until you reach the advanced levels, nearly everyone returns this serve crosscourt toward the opponent's forehand side, and often they miss by going off the side to their left, or they allow the opponent to camp out on the forehand side.

Now think about this. Have you *ever* missed returning this serve by returning off the right side? Probably not. So just take it down the line, to the backhand, knowing the sidespin will keep you from going off the side. Contact the back of the ball, perhaps slightly on the left side, so that the ball goes to the right, down the line.

Keep the racket relatively high—don't lower it as you chase after it as it bounces and spins away from you, or you'll end up lifting the ball high or off the end. Better still, don't chase after it—anticipate the ball jumping away from you and be waiting for it, like a hunter ambushing his prey. It's often this last-second reaching for the ball that both loses control and forces the receiver to hit the ball on the right side, thereby making down-the-line returns impossible, with many returns going off the side to the left.

When the tomahawk serve is deep, it is often easier to loop down the line because by doing so you don't have to overcome the incoming sidespin so much. When looping this type of sidespin crosscourt you contact the ball somewhat on the far side (the right side of the ball), going with the incoming

spin, so you have to overpower it. It's almost like looping against a backspin. If you take it down the line, you contact the ball more toward the back, so you are going against the spin, so it's like looping a topspin. Just as when looping against topspin you don't have to lift the ball much when going down the line, so the table isn't in the way, and you don't have to overcome the incoming spin as you'd do against a backspin.

Because the table is in the way, many players compensate by rolling the ball back softly. If you place it well, you can get away with this. However, another way to handle this is to loop it aggressively, so you don't have to lower the racket below table level, so that the table isn't in your way. This works especially well if you loop crosscourt, since you may be able to backswing from the right side of the table. If you loop down the line the table may get in the way a bit more. As noted in the previous paragraph, the key when going crosscourt is that you have to overcome the incoming spin with your own topspin.

Finally, if you simply can't do anything aggressive with this serve, use placement and deception. Aim one way, and at the last second return the serve softly (and perhaps quicker off the bounce) the other way. For example, aim to the server's forehand, which is where he expects it, and then at the last second just pat the ball down the line. This pretty much takes the server's forehand out of play. If his backhand is stronger, try the reverse.

Note that the tomahawk serve is rarely used at the higher levels. (Though there are a few who specialize in it.) There's a reason for this: it's generally easier to read the spin off this serve (the wrist motion is more limited) and there's generally less variation than from other serves. Sure, you might have trouble with this serve the first few times an opponent pulls it on you. But after you've seen it a few times, and made adjustments, you should be able to take the initiative off this serve, and force most servers to use other serves.

November 18, 2013—Three Reasons Players Miss Against Deep Sidespin and Topspin Serves

At the elite levels, deep sidespin and topspin serves mostly get looped, and are mostly used as occasional variations. But at lower levels they are often the bane of players who hit or loop them off the end over and over. Why do they do this? There are three main reasons.

First, they do not adjust to the amount of spin on the ball. A ball with

topspin or sidespin is going to jump off your paddle faster than a ball that is not spinning, and you have to take that into account. If you don't, the ball will take off faster (and higher against a topspin) than expected, and so go off the end. So you must aim lower. (Note that while sidespin pulls the ball sideways, players who hit or loop the serve don't usually miss against these serves by going off the side since the spin takes less on their paddle when they attack the ball, so it will only go a few inches more to the side than expected.)

Second, they do not take into account that their contact point is usually closer to the table than in a rally. This is especially true for loopers. For example, against a block, a player may loop from several feet behind the table. But against a topspin or sidespin serve, the contact point is generally 1-3 feet closer to the table. This means that the far end of the table is 1-3 feet closer to you, so you must aim lower or you will go off the end.

Third, they lift breaking sidespin serves off the end. This is especially true against ones that break away from the player. The reason is that they may hold the racket at the perfect height to return the serve—but then see the ball breaking away, and reach for it. When reaching, players generally lower their racket—and so they lift more, and go off the end. So make sure to keep your racket at the height you want to start the stroke—but even more important, learn to read the break of the serve so you don't have to make last-second lunges.

A solution to all three of these problems is to contact the ball more on top of the ball, especially when looping. There should be little lift.

How can you overcome these and other bad habits in returning these and other serves? PRACTICE!!! Instead of just practicing rally shots all the time, you and your partner should take turns serving to each other. You could play out the point, but it's even better to just get a bucket of balls and have one player serve over and over, while the other just receives. The server doesn't play the point out; as soon as he serves, he reaches for the next ball to serve. This gives you a lot more receive practice per time then playing out the point. Have the server give the same serve over and over until the receiver is comfortable with it, and then move on to another. When you are fairly comfortable against most of the serves you may face, have the server vary them so you learn to adjust to each one. And remember—you don't have to kill or loop kill the serve. When returning serves, consistency, control, depth, and placement are king.

February 14, 2011—What to Do With Problem Serves

Everybody has at least one serve that always gives them trouble. It might be a certain sidespin, or a deep serve, a short serve, a no-spin serve, an angled serve, etc. (For example, you can almost divide players into two groups—those who have fits with forehand tomahawk serves to the forehand, and those that loop them with ease. Which are you?) The question is what to do against these problem serves?

First, focus on control. Place the ball, usually at a wide angle and deep. Often this alone will solve the problem. You don't need to dominate on an opponent's serve (though it helps); you need to break even, and dominate on *your* serve.

If you are still having trouble, analyze the problem. If you keep popping the ball up, or hitting it wide, adjust. If you keep making the same mistake, and don't adjust your return, you'll keep making the same mistake.

Against some serves, you might try a "scare tactic." If there's a single serve that really bothers you, attack it relatively hard one time. Loop it or flip it aggressively! Scare the server. Even if you miss it, most often he won't use it again, at least very often. If he does keep using it, then you'll just have to figure out how to return that serve because you're up against a smart opponent. (I know I have far more difficulty looping a deep serve that breaks away from me, like a deep backhand serve or tomahawk serve. I have little trouble looping ones that break into me, such as a regular forehand pendulum serve. Guess which one I tend to be more aggressive with the first time I see it? The last thing I want to do is be too soft against a serve that breaks away from me, which is practically telling the opponent to keep giving me that serve since I have trouble with it.)

Conversely, is there a serve that you are very good at receiving? One that you can really loop or flip aggressively, for example? Don't go overboard attacking this serve too much early in a game or you'll never see it again. Consider slowing down your attack of this serve, being consistent with good placement, and slowly building up a lead. Instead of one-shot winners, return the serve to take the initiative—play the percentages.

December 23, 2013—Returning Hidden and Other Tricky Spin Serves

What can a player do if he is having trouble reading the spin on the opponent's serve? At the lower levels, this usually means the opponent's

serving motion is too quick for the player to pick up the direction of the racket at contact. At the higher levels, it's often because the opponent is hiding his serve, a serious problem since many umpires do not enforce the serving rules, allowing players to illegally hide contact and making it difficult to read the spin on the ball. However, the techniques for returning these hidden serves are essentially the same for those at lower levels who struggle to read the spin off any serve. So what can you do when you have trouble reading the spin, whether against a good server or against an illegally hidden one?

Before hidden serves became illegal, players at higher levels learned to read the spin from watching the ball itself, and how it moved through the air and bounced on the table. But since it became illegal to hide contact, this became almost a lost art. And yet it's something players need to learn or they'll have great difficulty in many matches. Here are ten tips on how to do so.

1. **Don't do too much**. Accept that if you can't read the spin off the serve quickly as the ball leaves the opponent's racket, you are not going to consistently make strong returns. Instead, your goal is to make consistent controlled and well-placed returns. (Actually, that should be the primary goal even if you read the spin.)
2. **Take the ball as late as you can**. This gives you more time to react to the spin. Most often players do read the spin of a serve, even if it's hidden, they just don't read it quickly enough to react. The more time you have to read it, the better.

3. **Assume the serve is topspin or sidespin until you see otherwise.** Even if you don't read them immediately, backspin serves are much easier to adjust to at the last second than topspin and sidespin serves. Backspin serves are almost always slower and they slow down even more as they hit the table, and you can just push or softly loop or roll them back. Topspin and sidespin serves jump as they hit the table making it difficult to react at the last second, and if you push them, they shoot off the end or side of the table. So you should generally assume the serve has topspin or sidespin and aim low with a controlled forehand or backhand drive, or possibly by chopping. If it's backspin, you can make a last-second adjustment much more

easily than against topspin or sidespin.

4. **Return the ball softly but with placement and depth**. Generally keep it wide and deep to the server's weaker side, usually the backhand. Make him move way over to this backhand side if he wants to use his forehand, and then you can block back to his open forehand side. Or go to the wide forehand to draw the opponent there, then block back to his open backhand side. Depth is extremely important; a soft return that goes deep can be effective. A soft return that lands in the middle of the table (depth-wise) will usually get hammered.
5. **Read the spin by the way it moves through the air**. A topspin ball drops quickly, a backspin serve floats, and a sidespin serve curves sideways. The differences are subtle but you should be able to pick up them up.
6. **Read the spin by the way it bounces on the table**. A topspin ball jumps at you, a sidespin ball curves sideways, and a backspin ball slows down.
7. **Read the spin from the label**. This is tricky, and it's doubtful one can really read the spin this way if the ball is spinning rapidly. But some claim they can do so, even at higher levels. At lower levels, where there's less spin, you can pick it up. Also, this allows you to read no-spin serves, where you should be able to see the label.
8. **Read the spin based on past serves**. If you keep pushing serves that look like backspin but are actually topspin or sidespin and they keep going off the end or side of the table, perhaps the next time you see that serve that looks like backspin you should accept that it's topspin or sidespin.
9. **Treat topspin and sidespin almost the same**. If you use a regular drive stroke, the spin won't take on your racket that much. As long as you give yourself some margin for error by not being too aggressive, you can treat them almost the same. Your return off a topspin serve might go a little deeper, and off a sidespin serve a little more sideways, but not as much as you'd think. When your returns go shooting off the end or side it's usually because you are pushing topspin or sidespin serves.
10. **React to no-spin serves**. A no-spin serve that looks spinny is usually more effective than a spinny serve that looks spinny. You

can read them using the methods above, except that with no spin, there’s no curving in the air or change in the bounce on the table, and you can see the label. Against a no-spin serve, you can use almost any stroke, but adjust to the lack of spin. Often players push these serves high since they are used to pushing against backspin, or they drive them into the net since they are used to driving against topspin.

CHAPTER THREE: STROKES

PUSHING

January 17, 2011—Push with Purpose and Placement

So often players push just to keep the ball in play. Push with purpose and placement! Do something with the push. So, what can you do?

Purpose: There are three basic things you can do with the push. You can push it very heavy, with the purpose of forcing a mistake or weak return due to the heavy backspin. You can push quick and fast, often with last-second changes of direction, with the purpose of rushing your opponent and forcing a mistake or weak return. Or you can push short (so that the second bounce, given the chance, would bounce on the table), with the purpose of making it difficult or impossible to loop.

Placement: Many players don't pay attention to this. They just get the ball back, and give the opponent his best shot, often a forehand loop. A push that lands six to twelve inches inside the backhand corner is easy to loop. A player with a strong forehand loop and decent footwork can not only use his forehand, but doesn't have to go that far out of position to do so. A push that goes right over the corner, angling away, or even outside the backhand corner, is a different story—it takes very fast footwork to use the forehand against that ball, and if your opponent does, he's way out of position. Often he'll be rushed, and make a mistake, a weak shot, or (often underestimated) his shot will be easy to read since a rushed player isn't very deceptive, making his loop easy to jab-block, smash, or counterloop away. (At the Teams in Nov., 2010, I coached a top cadet player to an upset over a 2350 player, with a major part of the strategy being pushes to the very wide backhand. The opponent often stepped around and ripped them with his powerful forehand, but because he was rushed, his normally deceptive loop was easier to read, and so the cadet was able to block it back to the wide forehand over and over for winners.)

The other option is pushing to the wide forehand. If your racket is aimed toward the opponent's backhand until the last second, and then you change and quick push to the forehand, your opponent is going to have a hard time reacting. If he does attack it, you can just block to his backhand, taking

his forehand out of the equation. (This assumes his forehand is stronger than his backhand; if the reverse, go after the forehand again as the player moves back to cover his backhand.)

May 23, 2011—Pushing: Five out of Six Doesn't Cut It

When you push long, you must do six things. If you do four or five, your push might give intermediate players trouble. Most players do several of these things well, and never understand that if they did them all, even advanced players would have difficulty attacking their pushes. What are six things that top players do when pushing deep to make their pushes effective?

1. Quick off the bounce
2. Deep
3. Low
4. Heavy
5. Angled
6. Disguised placement

If you do most of these, you'll give intermediate players trouble. If you do all of them, you'll give advanced players trouble.

A few notes on this. Angled placement doesn't mean you never push quick to the middle—some players have trouble with that as they have to decide whether to use forehand or backhand—but most pushes should be angled to the corners. Disguised placement means not telegraphing where you are pushing, i.e. able to push to wide forehand or backhand and the last second.

The first time I really thought about this as a set of six attributes was while playing a practice match with 13-year-old future USA team member Han Xiao. I liked to serve short backspin and loop with my forehand, but I was struggling to loop his pushes. After losing the match (he was already about 2400!), I mentioned how I couldn't serve and loop with any power and consistency. He said that's because Coach Cheng Yinghua (former Chinese team member and four-time USA Men's Singles Champion) had told him that if he did these things with his push, my loop would fall apart. It did.

January 2, 2012—Pushing and Looping Deep Backspin

If you want to play table tennis at a high level, you really should learn

to loop any deep backspin ball. There are, of course, exceptions, but they are few (such as choppers and some blockers). On the forehand side, where you have a big hitting zone, you should never really need to push against a long backspin. Think of this as a given—deep backspin to your forehand means you forehand loop. Don't even think about it, just do it.

On the backhand side, ideally you should also loop any deep backspin. However, there are times where you might get caught too close to the table against a quick, aggressive push, and since the body is more in the way on the backhand than on the forehand, you might have to push. Also, you can get away with pushing on the backhand more because you have an angle into the opponent's backhand, where most opponents aren't as good attacking. Of course, some have great forehands from the backhand side, and others have great backhand loops, so it all depends on the opponent.

Learning to loop these deep backspins is a technique issue, and you should work with a coach or watch the top players to learn how to do this. However, here's one important tip—if you want to be ready to loop against deep backspin, hold your racket relatively low. Many players hold their rackets too high and so are rushed trying to get them down to loop.

Since you are going to loop deep pushes every chance you can, should you learn to push against deep backspin? On the backhand side, yes, since most players do have to do this at least occasionally. On the forehand, probably not. You may learn to push with the forehand by pushing back and forth against deep balls, but that's just to develop the shot. At the higher levels, the forehand push is almost always done against a short backspin only. Against deep backspin, many top players literally never forehand push, and if asked to do so (perhaps in a demonstration), some find the shot awkward to do since it's not something they ever practice.

July 22, 2013—Pushing Change of Direction

Far too often players make two mistakes when pushing. First, they push to the backhand over and Over and OVER. Second, early in their stroke they aim their racket where they are pushing, usually to the backhand, in an apparent attempt to make it absolutely clear that once again that is where they are pushing. This is a great collaboration with your opponent, but not a good way to win.

First, let's review what makes a good long push. It normally should be quick, low, heavy, deep, and wide. (Exceptions: sometimes you no-spin

push as a variation, so it doesn't always need to be heavy; and sometimes you push quick to the middle so the opponent has to decide whether to use forehand or backhand.)

But there is one other important element—last-second changes of direction. If you aim your racket to the opponent's wide backhand, he'll likely react to that and prepare for a deep push to the backhand. If, at the last second, you change and quick push to the wide forehand, you'll likely cause havoc for your opponent as he makes a last-second lunge for the ball. Ironically, this is especially effective against players with strong forehand loops, the very players you would normally not push to the forehand against, since they are often edging toward their backhand side, looking to forehand loop from that side.

At higher levels, players push short more often, especially when returning a serve. If your opponent serves short backspin, instead of just pushing it short, why not aim to his backhand, and then at the last second drop it short to the forehand? Again, this causes havoc, and in this case you aren't challenging your opponent's forehand loop. Moving in to return a short ball to the forehand takes time, so why not try to trick your opponent into anticipating the ball coming to the backhand, and watch as at the last second he lunges in for the short ball to the forehand?

Moral: Don't just be pushy, be deceptively pushy!

November 12, 2013—Pushing Short

One of the trickier things in table tennis starting at the intermediate level is how to return short backspin serves without giving the server an easy ball to loop. The easiest return is a long push, but then the server gets to loop. You can also flip the short serve, but that can be tricky, and many servers can loop that return as well unless you flip very aggressively—and if you do that, you lose consistency. So what to do?

The answer is often to push short and low. A short push is a push that, given the chance, would bounce twice on the other side of the table. This makes it almost impossible to loop. As long as you keep it low, and don't telegraph the shot in advance, the server will have to move in at the last second and make a hurried return. As long as the ball is low and short, it's unlikely he'll be able to attack it effectively. It's primarily used to return short serves, but if the opponent pushes short (perhaps against your serve), you can also push it back short to stop his attack. At higher levels players

sometimes push short back and forth two or three times as they look for a ball to attack.

The keys to a good short push are a light touch and a skimming contact to create backspin. Many players try to push short by meeting the ball almost straight on, with little backspin, and rely on the light touch to keep it low and short—but that's very difficult to control. When you meet the ball straight on without any skimming motion the ball will tend to bounce out more. Instead, take the ball right off the bounce (when it's low and close to the net), chop down on it lightly as you graze the ball. The grazing motion will lighten the touch and make it easy to keep the ball low, as well as helping to keep the ball short. The backspin will also make it trickier to attack.

When stepping in to push short, make sure to get close to the table by stepping under the table with your right foot (for righties). Keep your free hand up for balance. (These last two items are important against all short balls, whether you are pushing or flipping.)

One of the problems with pushing short is that it's so easy to misread the serve and pop the ball up, giving the server an easy putaway. (Players usually have more control when pushing long.) This especially happens against balls that appear to have backspin but instead are no-spin, sidespin, or just light backspin. (To keep these returns low you have to chop down on the ball—i.e. aim lower.) The reality is that pushing short isn't really a high-percentage shot until you approach the more advanced levels where you read spins well and have good ball control—roughly a 2000 level in USATT ratings. But if you wait until you are 2000 before you start working on this, you'll be years behind your competition. (One solution is to use the short push mostly against players with easy-to-read and predictable short serves, but not against players with trickier serves, at least in serious matches and until you improve your pushing touch.)

At the advanced levels, you can add more finesse to your short push. The simplest short push is to aim it straight back at the net, where the net is closest, so your return is perpendicular to the net. But you can also angle it to the side. Better still, aim one way, and then at the last second go the other way to really mess up an opponent. Pushing short to a corner, especially the wide forehand, can be awkward for the opponent to get to, but does give them a wide angle to attack into. So sometimes it's best to push short to the middle to cut off the wide angles. It depends on the opponent. Make sure that

your shot looks the same until the last second whether you are pushing long or short.

Now we're going to get into something that's seemingly a bit more complicated, but is really quite simple once you get used to it. It's something many top players do subconsciously without even realizing they are doing it. (Skip this paragraph if it starts to give you a headache.) Imagine a straight backspin serve. If you push it back, you meet the backspin straight on, and the incoming backspin rebounds off your racket with outgoing backspin, the easiest way to push. Now imagine the server serves a forehand pendulum serve with sidespin-backspin to your backhand. (Assume both players are righties.) If you push it back normally with your backhand, the ball will jump a bit to the right when you contact it. Suppose you instead drop the racket tip a bit, thereby compensating by aiming the racket a bit to the left. Now you'll have more control in placing the ball where you aim it. If you think about it, by dropping the racket tip you'll now be meeting the incoming spin head-on, exactly as if you were pushing against a backspin. This gives maximum control. You might find it easier to drop this type of serve short to the forehand (i.e. to the left). If the server serves a backhand sidespin-backspin serve, you might raise the racket tip to compensate. You might find it easier to drop this serve short to the backhand. (The same thing applies on serves short to the forehand—raise or drop the tip based on the incoming sidespin.)

Adding a short push to your receive repertoire is a valuable tool, and combined with a good long push and a consistent, well-placed flip, will allow you to dominate even when receiving.

FOREHAND

March 12, 2012—Developing a Smash

At the highest levels, many top players don't even bother to smash—even if the ball is eye-level high, they loop. However, for most players, a smash is a must. Here are some keys to developing a good smash, forehand or backhand.

First, get some coaching or watch the top players. It's still best to work with a coach who can figure out and fix any flaws in your technique.

Second, practice. Here are two of the best smashing drills.

- **Hard-Soft Drill**. This really should be called the Hard-Medium Drill. Your partner blocks while you alternate hitting a medium

drive and then a smash. As long as you keep the ball to the same spot, your partner should be able to return many of your smashes, with practice. A variation is to hit two medium drives and then a smash. This allows you to focus more on technique with the two drives. You can do this forehand or backhand.

- **Loop and Smash Drill**. You serve backspin to your partner's backhand, your partner pushes it back to the middle of the table, you loop to his backhand, he blocks to your forehand, you smash, then play out the point. The key here is to lower the shoulder for the loop, but keep it up for the smash. After looping, many players drop the shoulder on the next shot, and their smash will almost always go off. There are numerous versions of this drill:
    - You can start by serving to the backhand, forehand, or middle;
    - Your partner can push to any pre-set spot on the table—forehand, backhand, middle, or even add some randomness by having the push go anywhere on the forehand or anywhere on the backhand side.
    - You can loop to your partner's forehand instead of his backhand. But to keep the rally going consistently, your first loop should go to the same spot each time.
    - Rather than free play, the smash also goes to the same spot, so your partner has a better chance of returning it, and so you have longer rallies.
    - Your partner blocks to another place on the table, and you move there to smash.
    - You can do this drill on the backhand side, with a backhand loop followed by a backhand smash, both from the backhand side.

Third, use the smash in games. If you don't, you won't learn to use the shot in a real match. Find ways to set it up, with serves, loops, aggressive backhands, etc. Once you have a good smash, it'll not only allow you to end the point quickly when given the chance, but it'll be one more thing your opponent has to guard against—and most players aren't going to return a good smash.

November 5, 2012—Developing Your Forehand Smash

So many players have the strange idea that the best way to develop a smash is to, well, smash a lot. It seems to make sense, but isn't always the best way. I've seen this in student after student—they work on smashing by smashing a lot, and the balls spray all over the place as they ingrain the habit of spraying the ball all over the place. Smashing is, first and foremost, a precision shot, and if you practice smashing by spraying the ball all over the place, you are being counterproductive.

Instead, focus on driving the ball only at the pace that you can control, and develop the precision at that speed. As you get better, increase the speed. If you find yourself spraying the ball all over the place, take it down a notch. Precision comes from good technique and timing, and these are things you should work on at a pace you can control. Spraying the ball all over the place is a great way to develop bad technique and poor timing.

How do you develop the precision needed to have a consistent smash? It starts with the fundamentals. A coach can help you with this, but here are five techniques that lead to precision on the forehand smash. (Most apply to the backhand smash as well.)

First, balance and positioning are key. If you aren't in position, or if you are off balance or not set for the shot, everything will be thrown off. When you turn sideways to hit a forehand, you have a big hitting zone to hit through, so positioning isn't so hard as long as you have active feet to move into position. You don't have to be fast, you just have to develop the *habit* of getting into position for each shot. If the ball is smashable, even a slow person should almost always have time to get into position. And balance is part of this, since if you step to the ball instead of reaching, you'll usually stay balanced.

Second, always use the same backswing. I believe this is the single biggest problem with players who can't smash well—they vary their backswing, and so never develop precision. It's like trying to hammer a nail where you bring the hammer up differently every time. Find that perfect spot to backswing to, and do it every time. Even if the ball is high, backswing to the same spot, and then raise the racket as needed in a continuous motion. It should become so natural and automatic that any variation to the backswing should feel unnatural and strange.

Third, use the whole body in a smooth progression from bottom to top—legs, hips, waist, shoulders, and forearm. (No wrist needed for this shot—it takes away some of the precision, though some do use it for extra power,

especially against shorter balls. More often a wristy smash will just cost a player precision.) Many players tend to overuse their arm, resulting in a strained and awkward smash. The arm (specifically, the forearm) breaks into the shot only near the end, as part of the natural progression, after the shoulder rotation.

Fourth, and closely related to the third item above, is that you shouldn't have to strain to smash. A good smash is the result of good technique as power is created from that progression from legs to forearm. If you have to strain for a shot, it means you are overusing one muscle group at the expense of others. Here's a simple test—you should be able to smash at full power while carrying on a conversation. "Full power" may be misleading since you shouldn't actually try to smash using every muscle at full power. If you try to do so, you'll just get jerky muscles that don't work together instead of the smooth progression needed, and you'll lose both precision and power. Think of using each muscle at perhaps 80% power, which allows you to use all the muscles in conjunction, which actually leads to "full power."

Fifth, there should be a slight upswing with most smashes (unless the ball is somewhat high), which results in topspin to control the shot. Even a little topspin greatly increases your target area by making the ball drop. With a fast and grippy inverted surface, the upward part of the strokes is small; with a slower, less grippy surface (including all non-inverted surfaces), there should be a little more upward motion. Careful, however, not to stroke too much up, leading to a "rolling" forehand, where a player starts with the racket too low and strokes with too much topspin for a smash. This might be the beginning of a good loop (and some players use a loop kill instead of smashing whenever possible), but not very good for a smash. Instead, focus on meeting the ball more straight on, with only a slight upward motion, and sink the ball into the wood. There should be a satisfying *smack* when you make a good smash.

With these five tips, and with overall good technique, you can turn your forehand smash into a weapon that will terrify opponents as they struggle to find ways to avoid it—which is a double-whammy, since you can dominate with both the smash itself or with the other strengths of your game that your opponent is no longer focused on avoiding.

February 27, 2012—Opening Up the Forehand Zone

A lot of players have good forehands in practice, whether they are

looping or hitting. But once a game starts, they stand facing the table, which is a backhand stance, and while their backhands are fine, when the ball goes to their forehand they mostly face the table, bringing their arm back to stroke rather than turning sideways. This leaves them with an awkward forehand stroke. They have only a small hitting zone, and this small hitting zone is jammed over the table. They have no time or space to actually execute a normal forehand swing, and end up blocking or doing awkward strokes. Their stroke is almost entirely with the arm.

Afterwards, they go to the table and spend hours practicing their already-good forehand, never understanding why they are unable to use it in a game situation.

The key to fixing this problem (which afflicts most players at most levels to some degree) is to learn to open up the forehand zone. This means that somehow you have to turn your shoulders so they are roughly perpendicular to the table, i.e. parallel to the flight of the incoming ball. Once in this position, you can unleash your true forehand power with control and consistency. But how do you do this in a game situation, instead of just facing the table and bringing the arm back?

You do so by, in varying degrees, bringing your right foot back (for righties), turning at the waist, and turning the shoulders. You need a combination of all three. Players with quick feet might bring their back foot back more than others. Players with a more supple body might rotate more at the waist and shoulders. But the result must be the same—sideways to the table.

The problem is how to develop this habit. Here are two suggestions.

First, do a simple drill where your partner hits the ball side to side, and you alternate hitting backhands and forehands to the same spot (either partner's forehand or backhand). When the ball goes to your forehand, focus on pulling with your right side so that you rotate completely about, perhaps even exaggerating the movement at first. The goal is to develop this habit of opening up the forehand zone.

When you are comfortable with this drill, do the same thing, but now have your partner hit the ball randomly to your forehand and backhand. Do it slowly at first—the goal is to do it *properly*, or you'll just re-enforce bad habits.

Second, consider hitting your backhands with a slight forehand stance. You probably don't want to do this if you are looping your backhand,

but for blocking and hitting many players keep their right foot slightly back, making it easier to transition to the forehand. (I often do this.) Experiment with this.

Trust me, if you have a good forehand in drills, you *can* do it in games, as long as you actually do it in games the way you do in practice—with the full forehand zone.

November 14, 2011—Forehands from the Backhand Corner

The primary danger of attacking with the forehand from the backhand corner (usually with a loop) is that you are leaving the forehand side open. Yet, you don't have to be a speed demon to cover that shot, though that helps. Balance and technique are more important. Here are keys to how to play the forehand from the backhand side without getting caught on the wide forehand. (Note—the advantage of the forehand from the backhand side is that it's usually easier to generate power with the forehand.)

- **Balance**. Often a player is in such a rush to step around that they are off-balance when they finish the shot. Others simply follow through way off to the side. In both cases, by the time they have recovered their balance, it's too late. Imagine a pole through your head, and as much as possible rotate around that pole. This gives you great torque yet leaves you balanced and in the same position as when you started the shot.
- **Depth**. If your shot lands short, it's easy for the opponent to block aggressively to your forehand. If you keep your shots deep, you have a lot more time.
- **Placement**. If you put the ball very wide to the opponent's backhand (for righties), they have no angle into your forehand. In general, go down the line only for winners, since you'll be wide open to an aggressive angled block to your forehand.
- **Speed**. The harder you loop, the less time you have to recover. Often it's a good idea to loop slow and deep from the backhand side, since the slowness and depth of your own shot gives you time to recover. Alternatively, loop kill so the ball rarely comes back, so you don't have to worry about the wide forehand as much. It's those medium-speed loops that are regularly blocked to the wide forehand for winners.

- **Backhand loop**. There's nothing like a backhand loop from the backhand side to keep you in position!

March 21, 2012—Forehand Deception with Shoulder Rotation

Whether you are hitting or looping, you should normally line up your shoulders when you backswing on the forehand so that the shoulders roughly aim in the direction which you are hitting. This maximizes your hitting zone and allows you to stroke naturally through the ball. If you don't rotate the shoulders back enough, you'll have an abbreviated stroke, costing you control and power. (The reverse is less often a problem, but if you do rotate the shoulders back too much, then the stroke becomes too long and cumbersome to control, as well as taking too long in a fast rally.)

So a top priority in developing the forehand is proper shoulder rotation. But once the shot is developed and the shoulder rotation natural, you can use this very shoulder rotation to deceive an opponent.

Imagine lining up to hit or loop a forehand crosscourt from your forehand side. You line the shoulders up during the backswing, and are about to start the forward swing. Your opponent sees your shoulder rotation, sees that they are lined up to hit crosscourt, and instinctively moves to react to a crosscourt shot since most players hit the ball wherever their shoulders line up to hit. Then, at the last second before starting your forward swing, you rotate the shoulders back a bit more, line them up for a down-the-line shot, and then hit down the line. Instant free point.

The key is that instant of "hesitation" where you have stopped your backswing with the shoulders lined up crosscourt, where you let the opponent react, and then the final extra bit of shoulder rotation before going down the line. The timing is surprisingly easy as long as you focus on lining up the shoulders properly for whatever direction you are going.

The shot can also be done with the forehand from the backhand side, where you aim down the line and at the last second go crosscourt. In both cases you are faking to the left (for a righty), but going to the right.

The alternate version is to line up your shoulders to go down the line from the forehand side, and simply rotate the shoulders forward more during the forward swing so that you hit crosscourt. Or from the backhand side, line up the shoulders to go crosscourt and go down the line. In these two cases, you are faking to the right (for a righty), but hitting to the left.

When doing these deceptive shots, note that some opponents

automatically cover the wide crosscourt angle no matter how you line up your shoulders. Against this type of player you should mostly fake crosscourt before going down the line. Some might be so ingrained to cover the crosscourt angle that no deception is needed, just go down the line. But when/if they adjust to that, then you can fake the down the line and go crosscourt.

One consequence of the tendency for some opponents to cover the wide crosscourt angle is that it is sometimes less effective to fake down the line and then go crosscourt, since the opponent might be ready for that. This is especially true when doing a forehand from the backhand side, where even if you fake it down the line many opponents still guard the crosscourt angle. On the other hand, if you rotate your shoulders way back to fake down the line from the forehand side, most opponents tend to react to this down the line fake, leaving the crosscourt angle open. This is because few players over-rotate the shoulders (which is essentially what you are doing here), and so opponents are more likely to fall for this.

There are other ways of misdirecting an opponent with your forehand. For example, you can learn to hit inside-out, where your shoulders aim left (for a righty) but your arm and wrist twist back at the last second and you go to the right, often with sidespin. However, that takes tremendous timing, and while many top players master the shot (especially when looping, where they have extra topspin to pull the shot down if it isn't timed perfectly), the simple last-second shoulder rotation allows you to get almost the same misdirection without developing the difficult timing of that inside-out shot.

December 10, 2012: Body Movement During the Forehand Loop

[NOTE: I'm leaving in the video link addresses below because the text refers to them specifically. Sorry if that means some tedious typing.]

Daniel from West Virginia emailed me the following question:

> "One of the things that I am struggling to understand is the relationship between rotation versus right-to-left leg weight transfer when looping. I saw in one of your earlier blog entries that you compare forehand looping with "rotating around a pole" that runs from the ceiling down to the floor. I've watched this video of Wang Liqin (www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ppw7NT9g1w) over and over and he seems to be generating most of his power with rotation rather

than right-to-left leg weight transfer. Both of his feet stay pretty much rooted in the ground at all times during the stroke:

"But whenever I watch counterlooping rallies between pros in an actual match, they do seem to be transferring their weight forward towards their opponent quite a bit, no?

"In this video of Zhang Jike looping against underspin (www.youtube.com/watch?v=vfpXuiYap94), I can see a large weight transfer onto the right foot, as evidenced by the fact that his left heel is off the ground when he initiates the stroke. This stroke seems to be slightly less about rotation and more about leg drive:

"Does this mean there is a bigger transfer of weight onto the right leg when looping underspin than when looping topspin?

"I'm not sure if any of this makes any sense, but if you could ever do a blog entry on the relationship of using rotation versus using forward momentum in generating power on the FH side, it would be really great. My stroke is really suffering as I'm just not confident in how to generate the racket speed right now."

This is an excellent question. The question basically is how much power should a player generate from these three aspects: rotational energy, driving forward with the back leg, and driving upward with the back leg.

When looping against topspin or a block (i.e. any ball without backspin), you'll mostly use rotational energy and pushing forward with the back leg; there's little upward motion. From the Wang Liqin video Daniel links to above you can see that Wang (three-time World Men's Singles Champion) uses a lot of rotational energy, but his head doesn't move a whole lot—he tends to keep the right-to-left body movement to a relative minimum as his body mostly rotates in a circle. The advantage of this is that it means his head and body end only a short distance from where they started before the stroke, meaning he is almost immediately ready for the next shot. If your head and body move more from right to left (for a righty), you may gain some power, but you'll be slower recovering for the next shot. You need to find the right balance. If you have as much natural power as a Wang Liqin, then you don't need much right-to-left movement. But if you have more time, then the extra body movement will add to your power.

Here's a video of Ma Long vs. Wang Liqin (www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y5hszYsRUhA). Watch Ma Long (far side,

currently #2 in the world, former #1) in the first point as he loops five in a row. (It's replayed in slow motion.) Like Wang Liqin, he mostly uses rotational energy, but he also moves right-to-left for extra power, especially in the very first of his loops. Now jump to the point starting 50 seconds in, and watch Wang Liqin's first two loops. (It's also replayed in slow motion.) He gets great power, yet it's almost all rotational energy—watch how little his head moves during the stroke. Now jump back to the point starting 23 seconds in (also replayed in slow motion), and you'll see a series of Wang Liqin loops where he has far more right-to-left movement—now his head does move during the stroke. Why is this? It's more a matter of not being in perfect position against these angled shots into his backhand, forcing him to go way around to loop the forehand.

So while you do want that right-to-left movement (for a righty) when looping for extra power, you want to focus on rotational energy, with the center of gravity kept well between the legs, and the head moving only a little bit. The main exception is when looping from way around the backhand side, where you often aren't as far around as you might want, in which case you compensate with more right-to-left movement. (Which means a slower recovery, so you have to have fast footwork if you do this, or simply end the point with the first shot.) The other exception is when going for extra power, but as shown by Wang Liqin and Ma Long, that's not always necessary.

Now look at the video Daniel linked to of Ma Long vs. the chopper Joo Se Hyuk (www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y5hszYsRUhA). Here Ma has to overcome the heavy backspin, and so much of his power is upward as he pushes up with his back leg. He's not going for a lot of speed in most of these loops, so there's only minimal forward motion as he topspins away, mostly stroking upward and rotating in a circle, with his head starting and ending in almost the same place. (In some of the early loops, he is almost falling backward as he focuses almost totally on upward motion.) In the first point, he loops ten balls before missing the eleventh. The first eight are all basically steady loops (by world-class standards), where most of his power is going upward. Now look at the ninth loop, where he loops with much greater power into Joo's backhand. Now there's a sudden increase in right-to-left motion, with his head ending more to the left. This gives extra power. (And since he's playing a chopper, there's plenty of time to recover for the next shot.)

What does this mean for you? The most important thing is to stay balanced, especially when looping against a fast incoming ball. Focus on

rotational energy, and add as much right-to-left movement (for righties) as needed. Many players find it a lot easier to end the point this way, and if the ball rarely comes back, then there's no problem. At the higher levels, even these powerful loops often come back, and so recovery becomes an important issue—but at that level, players are so fast they can often get away with more sideways movement, relying on their footwork to recover for the next shot. But as shown by Wang Liqin and Ma Long, it is the rotational energy that is most important, and the rest is the extra spice often used for a little extra power or to compensate when forehand looping from way around on the backhand side.

January 14, 2013—Learning to Counterloop

Once you get past serve and receive, the basic rallying shot at the higher levels is counterlooping. Some do it from way off the table, others from close to the table (often taking the ball on the rise). Most take it somewhere in between, sometime after the top of the bounce (around table level), from five to eight feet back. It's usually done on the forehand side, but some do it on the backhand side as well—especially the best players in the world, who often backhand counterloop off the bounce. (Spectators often don't even realize it's a counterloop as it happens so quickly, and think it's just a backhand block.) For this article, unless noted otherwise, I'm mainly talking about forehand counterlooping.

Not everyone needs to counterloop, not unless you are aspiring to the higher levels. If you have good serve and receive (and so can get the first attack in, forcing your opponent to either defend or go for a risky counterloop or some other difficult counter-attack) or have good defense (such as blocking or chopping), then counterlooping may be an unneeded luxury. But at the highest levels, almost everyone counterloops. Blocking is often the last resort, as the best loopers overpower blockers with modern looping strokes and equipment. Even choppers almost always look for chances to counterloop.

At a recent USA Nationals I watched two rival junior players go at it. The previous time they had played each other it had been rather close. This time the player I was coaching counterlooped relentlessly whenever the other player looped, turning the opponent into a blocker. The counterlooping player won easily. It wasn't a matter of just choosing to counterloop; the junior had been trained to do so with repeated counterlooping drills. When faced with

aggressive loops, there was no hesitation; he counterlooped, and continued the barrage on each point until the point was over.

Keys to a good counterloop include good technique (see a coach and watch the top players); light on feet (which is a habit you can develop); and good sponge. Even developing players should use modern sponges developed with looping in mind, with a slower blade until they are advanced. The paradigm used to be that developing players should use thinner and slower sponges to develop their strokes. While I believe that used to be true, I don't believe it is true any longer. Using such sponges simply limits the player from developing at a more advanced level. By using modern looping sponges, players find looping and counterlooping more natural, so it becomes central to their games.

I'm not going to go into the finer points of looping or counterlooping technique here; see a coach for that. Instead, let's talk about what you can do to develop your counterloop.

First and foremost is the obvious: practice counterlooping. Find a partner or coach who can counterloop. Stand a bit off the table—perhaps five feet—and toss the ball up and loop it directly to your opponent's side of the table. This gets you right into counterlooping, forehand to forehand. Before you can do anything else, you must be proficient at this. One hint—don't try to meet the opponent's incoming topspin straight on. Instead, hook the ball by hitting a bit on the outside of the ball, creating a sidespin that breaks to your left and away from your opponent on his forehand side (for righties). This not only makes your counterloop more consistent, it gives you better angles, forcing your opponent to cover that much more table. If you watch world-class players, you'll see that they almost always counterloop with sidespin. Be aggressive in putting your own spin on the ball; overpower the incoming spin with your own spin, mostly topspin.

When you are pretty good at straight counterlooping, try the next variation: this time serve straight topspin (and have your partner do the same) so you can start by looping off a topspin ball from close to the table, and then back up and start counterlooping.

As you practice, you'll get a feel for what type of counterlooper you are—off-table, mid-distance, or close to table. Learn all three, but generally specialize in one. At the highest levels, players try to counterloop from as close to the table as possible, but at the speeds they play they are still forced to back up.

You can also get a coach or partner to feed you multiball, where the coach loops the ball directly after tossing the ball out of his hand. This allows him to move you around as you work on counterlooping and footwork.

Many players never practice anything beyond this type of straight counterlooping. But think about it—in a game, many or most loops start from backspin, which often have more topspin (because they are adding to the backspin already on the ball), come at you from a closer contact point (so you have less time to react), often have a sharper arc (due to the extra topspin), and force you to counterloop from relatively close to the table (since they don't usually bounce out as much as a loop against topspin). Plus you don't know where the ball is going, unlike in the counterlooping drills explained above, where you are going forehand to forehand. Here are some more advanced variations so you can get more match-like practice.

First, if you have a partner or coach feeding you multiball loops, have him vary the placement, so sometimes you forehand counterloop, other times you use your backhand. (Either block, hit, or counterloop. Or, if you are a chopper/looper, chop the backhand.)

Second, work on counterlooping against an opponent's opening loop against backspin. Have your partner serve backspin, you push long, and the server loops, and you counterloop, and both players continue to counterloop. (Or, if your partner isn't a counterlooper, he can switch to blocking after the first loop against backspin.) This gives you practice counterlooping against a loop against backspin. It also gives your partner practice looping against backspin.

But there is an even better way to rapidly develop your counterloop against a loop off backspin, using an adjusted version of multiball. Your partner will need a box of balls handy. Just as above, he serve and loops against backspin, and you counterloop. But do not play out the point. As soon as the server loops, he reaches for the next ball. So the server serves and loops over and over, and the receiver pushes and counterloops over and over. By doing this you can rapid-fire practice over and over your counterloop against a loop off backspin. And the server gets great rapid-fire practice looping against backspin!) As an added bonus, the receiver should work on his long push—don't make it easy for the server. Push quick off the bounce, heavy, low, deep, and well angled. (But for this drill, always push to the same spot.)

You can also do this drill where the server loops to your backhand,

and you can either backhand counterloop, hit, or block. You can also have the server alternate, looping one to the forehand, one to the backhand.

When you are proficient at this drill, there are two variations that will bring you to an even higher level. Now have the server serve and loop to one of two spots—either the forehand or backhand. (Or perhaps the wide forehand or wide backhand.) This forces you to make a quick reaction decision, just as you would in a match. Make sure your first move is the right one—don't anticipate, just respond to the ball coming off the opponent's racket, or a split second before if you see where it's going.

The final variation is to have the server loop anywhere on the table, including at your middle. When you are proficient at this, able to counterloop on the forehand, and counterloop, hit, or block on the backhand (depending on your style and the incoming ball), and able to cover the ball to the middle (forehand or backhand, depending on your style and foot speed), you will be ready to do this in a match. And then you'll be able to turn past rivals into blockers that you can overpower.

One last tip: No Guts, No Glory. If you don't use this shot regularly in matches (whether it's practice, league, or tournaments), then you won't develop the shot.

February 4, 2013—Super Spinny Slow Loops

Some of us remember the incredible topspins of U.S. Team Member Rick Seemiller (brother of Dan) back in the 1980s. He didn't have great speed on his forehand loops. What he did have was more topspin than anyone in the U.S., and probably in the world. Even world-class players commented on this. When faced with this very slow, arcing ball that exploded off your racket, invariably going off, many an opponent called it "unreturnable." Rick pulled off a huge upset over world #1 Mikael Appelgren, the best counterlooper in the world at the time, who over and over counterlooped off the end and then just stared at his racket in disbelief.

The game has evolved since then, with super-looping sponges, and players tend to go for as much speed as spin. But there's nothing like a slow but spinny loop to mess up an opponent's block or counterloop. You can learn the shot at any age—I've seen players learn to do this in their sixties.

Another big advantage of the slow loop is that it gives you time to get back into position after the shot. You can do a slow forehand loop from the backhand side, and move back into position before the opponent can quick-

block to the wide forehand. Also, the slowness of the shot means that most block returns will tend to come back more slowly, since the opponent can't use your own speed against you. This gives you even more time for the next shot, as well as a softer ball to attack.

To do this shot you need a sheet of grippy inverted sponge, preferably one of the modern super-looping sponges. The shot is usually done against backspin, so you can use backspin in creating your own topspin. To execute the shot, it is important to let the ball drop farther down than usual, to below the table's surface, perhaps as low as your knees. Bend your knees more than usual, and drop your playing shoulder and playing racket very low, with the racket tip pointing to the ground. (If you have knee or other leg problems, you can execute the shot almost as well by just dropping the racket very low from the shoulder.) Then whip the racket upward and forward, with a big wrist snap just before contact.

Contact the ball by just barely skimming it. At first you might feel like you'll go off the end since much of your stroke is up, but if you barely graze the ball, it'll have little forward motion, and so the topspin and gravity will pull it down. Arc the ball a little higher than usual, making it go deep on the table.

You can also do the shot on the backhand. Again, let the ball drop down more than usual, stroke more upward, and just skim the ball.

Note that there's a world of difference between a spinny loop that lands short (easy to attack if the opponent doesn't hesitate) and one that lands deep (very tricky to do anything with). Depth is key!

Done properly, your opponent will face a very spinny ball, coming at him relatively slowly (so he can't use your own speed against you), and deep on the table. If he blocks, he has to punch the ball from deep on the court against a lot more topspin than he's used to. If he counterloops, he'll likely go off the end since he's not used to such a slow, spinny ball. It can be done, but it's not easy except perhaps at the highest levels.

Happy Topspinning!

February 6, 2012—Sidespin Loops

The hooking sidespin loop had its heyday in the early 1970s, with the rise of Hungary's Istvan Jonyer, the 1975 World Men's Singles Champion. Jonyer looped with a straight arm, and would often contact the ball on the far side, hooking the ball to the left (he's a righty) with incredible sidespin. Often

his racket tip would point straight down at contact, giving him essentially 100% sidespin. When players went to his forehand side, often he would loop *around* the net, with the ball barely rising above table level, and mostly rolling when it hit the far side—nearly unreturnable. Primarily because of Jonyer, the rules were changed, requiring the net to project six inches outwards. This makes around-the-net loops rare, though top players still do this shot sometimes from the very wide forehand.

However, while we may never see the sidespin dominance of a player like Jonyer again, most loops do have sidespin on them. According to former U.S. Men's Coach Dan Seemiller, your typical forehand loop should be about 15% sidespin. This is the most natural loop—for most players, it would be tricky going for 100% topspin, as the racket naturally tips downward from the shoulder, and contact point is usually below the shoulder.

Yet some players like to go for extreme sidespins on some of their loops, especially on the forehand side. It's a great way to mess up an opponent and set up your own shots. How and when do you do it? This is one of those shots where you should watch a top player do it. It's easy to copy.

The basic key for a hooking loop is to contact the ball on the far side, by dropping the wrist so that the racket tips slightly down. It's generally easier to do from the wide forehand, though you can do it from anywhere on the court. When someone blocks to your wide forehand, and you have to stretch for the ball even a little bit, it's best to get your racket outside the ball and hook it back with sidespin as well as topspin. If you do it to the opponent's wide forehand, it jumps away from him, and the sidespin will both make his timing tricky and make it difficult for him to return it to your now open backhand side, and so you'll usually get another forehand shot.

The opposite of a hooking sidespin loop is a slicing one (also called an inside-out loop), which is often done with the forehand from the backhand side to the opponent's backhand side (so that it jumps away from the opponent), but it can be done from anywhere on the court. Instead of dropping the racket tip to hook the outside of the ball, you now raise your wrist so that the tip goes up, and contact the ball on your side of the ball so that it slices to the right (for a righty). This is usually a bit more difficult to learn, but once learned, it gives you a devastating one-two combo of hooking and slicing loops. Just as with a hooking loop, the slicing loop messes up the opponent's timing, and usually forces a return toward your backhand.

You can find examples of hook loops at YouTube.com.

Tired of throwing the usual topspins and backspins at your opponent? Have a little sidespin fun!

March 18, 2013—Dummy Loops

In this modern game of topspin, many players battle to see who can get more topspin on the ball, with more speed and more consistency. After all, isn't that what tends to win games? Yet you might want to consider whether you want to join in this escalating topspin battle every single point. Why not throw an occasional changeup at them—a "dummy loop"—and watch them mess up? Go for less spin, and mess up your opponent's consistency!

A dummy loop is a loop that looks like it has a lot of topspin, but is not very spinny. You execute the shot almost like any other loop, except that you start with your wrist cocked up, so there's no natural wrist snap, and little whipping action to add to the topspin. By using a full motion, and exaggerating the rest of the stroke (especially the follow-through), it looks like you've done a normal loop, but the ball comes out relatively dead, causing havoc for your opponent. It's usually done against backspin, where you are both close to the table (so the opponent has less time to recognize the lack of spin), and where the opponent has a reasonable expectation of extreme topspin (since you are continuing the spin when you loop against backspin, using the incoming spin to add to your own).

Some players dummy loop by contacting the ball on the racket closer to the handle, while contacting the ball closer to the tip for maximum spin. It's a little trickier this way, but can be even harder for an opponent to see the difference. How many opponents can tell whether your loop contact was near the tip or handle?

A key point of all dummy loops—do the shot with a full swing, with full enthusiasm, as if you were really going for your spinniest loop. If you hold back on spin by holding back on the stroke itself, the opponent will easily see that. It's also important to keep the ball deep. That way, if the opponent does react to the lack of spin, he probably won't be able to hammer a winner off it, which is much easier to do against a ball that lands short. Even a ball with light topspin can be effective if it goes deep.

Against a primarily defensive player, where there's little risk that he will effectively attack your dummy loop, you should constantly vary your spin from heavy topspin to dead dummy loops. The change of spin will mess

up a chopper or blocker more than just extreme topspin.

It's fun watching an opponent block into the net and stare at his paddle in disbelief!

BACKHAND

August 13, 2012—Racket Tip Angle on the Backhand

Where should the tip of your racket be when you hit a backhand drive? The answer has changed over the years. Historically, players could choose to keep the racket tip down (so that a line between the tip and the handle would parallel the ground), or with the tip pointed up to 45 degrees upward, or somewhere in between. At the higher levels, however, this has changed.

When the tip is more down, you get more pure power, as well as the potential for more topspin. It's almost like having a second forehand, as demonstrated by such past stars as Jorgen Persson and Jim Butler. However, it's generally not as quick, it's generally not as consistent unless you back up more, and it's harder to cover the middle.

When the tip is more up, the shot becomes quicker and flatter, generally more consistent, and you cover the middle better, but you lose the potential for extra topspin. You can still hit the ball pretty hard, but it basically becomes an aggressive blocking backhand. A good example from the past would be 1971 World Men's Singles Champion Stellan Bengtsson, who hit his backhand with the tip somewhat up.

At the beginning level, it's probably easier to hit the backhand with the tip at least somewhat up. It's also easier for kids, since it's awkward hitting with the tip down until you are tall enough that your elbow hangs naturally well over the table. (Otherwise you have to lift the elbow up to do this.) At the intermediate level there's probably no major advantage to either way—both ways work, with tip down players more powerful, tip up players quicker.

At the higher levels, however, with modern souped-up sponges, the regular backhand has been mostly replaced by either the backhand loop or a very topspinny backhand. (The definitions aren't clear on this as the distinction between the two isn't as clear as it used to be.) To create topspin, you need to drop the tip down so you can accelerate it through the ball. Nearly all top players play with the tip more down, creating extra topspin in

their shots.

So which should you use? If you aspire to reach a high level, then unless you naturally play a quick-blocking style backhand, I'd recommend keeping the tip a bit more down, and develop it as a serious weapon, with both speed and topspin, perhaps as strong as your forehand. Some players attack with the tip down, but raise the tip some when blocking; experiment and see what works for you. If you do decide to develop your backhand into a topspinny shot that dominates like a forehand, look into using sponges that are designed for this. Trying to do a modern topspin shot with equipment designed for the game as it was played in the past is like racing in the Indianapolis 500 with a Model T. (For help with that, ask your dealer, or a coach or top player.)

February 25, 2013—Should You Hit or Loop the Backhand?

This depends partly on your level. Beginners should learn to hit their backhands first. However, it's also important for players to learn to loop early on, so as to develop good habits. It might be a good idea for beginners to learn early on how to open with a backhand loop against backspin, followed by backhand hitting against the incoming block and the rest of the rally. A backhand loop against backspin, followed by a backhand hit against an incoming block, is a very strong combo.

I do recommend learning to backhand loop against backspin. It's good to be able to hit against backspin, especially against a short ball, but a backhand loop is more consistent and takes control of the rally, as well as setting up your follow-up attack. And it's better than just pushing over and over, which gives the opponent the chance to attack and take the initiative.

At the intermediate level, backhand loops are mostly done against backspin. However, as players approach the higher levels, more and more players can backhand loop over and over during a rally.

Backhand looping over and over in a rally takes a lot of practice. On the forehand side, the ball is taken from the side, so you have a large hitting zone. ("Hitting" here means where you contact the ball, not a backhand hit itself.) On the backhand side, the body is in the way, so there's a much smaller hitting zone. Contrary to what some believe, backhand loopers need great footwork to get their hitting zone to overlap with the incoming ball. The faster the ball is coming at you, the more difficult it is, which is why it's generally easier to backhand loop against backspin than against an incoming

topspin or block (which usually come at you faster).

At the highest levels, backhand looping dominates. USA Team Member Sean Lonergan wrote in his blog at the 2008 Worlds, "The Backhand Hit is Dead." At the world-class level, nearly every player loops on the backhand side. (Even penholders backhand loop now, using reverse penhold backhands.) The extreme topspin in a loop gives the shot consistency, allows you to loop with great speed as well as spin, and puts your opponent in a difficult position. A backhand hit doesn't have as much topspin and so there's less margin for error.

So if you are aspiring to be a world-class player, then you would want to learn to backhand loop over and over. However, if you are aspiring to, say, win a senior event or reach a strong level that's somewhat lower than world-class, then you might want to focus on backhand hitting, while learning to backhand loop against backspin. (If you develop a good backhand loop against backspin, then later on you can learn to loop against topspin as well.) You might want to develop a good backhand loop against backspin and follow that with a backhand hit.

So what is the answer to your question on whether you should hit or loop on the backhand? It's your choice, based on your abilities, goals, and preferences.

December 3, 2012—Backhand Loop and Hit One-Two Punch

In a game dominated by forehand looping, many players forget there's another side and other point-winning shots. One of the best is the backhand loop followed by a backhand hit—a devastatingly effective one-two punch. It doesn't even have to be a backhand smash—quick, well-placed aggressive drive will usually win the point or set up an easy follow.

On the forehand side, many players loop over and over. It's usually easier on that side than on the forehand because you have a bigger hitting zone. On the backhand side, the body is somewhat in the way when backhand looping, so you have a smaller hitting zone—mostly in front of the body. While most top players learn to backhand loop over and over, many players—including many top players—instead open against backspin on the backhand side with a backhand loop, and (if it's blocked back to the backhand, as most often happens) follow it with a backhand hit.

There are several advantages to this. First, as noted, it takes out the problem of the body being in the way, which is primarily a problem against a

fast incoming ball (i.e. a block or topspin). Second, a hit takes less time than a loop, so even if your opening loop is quick-blocked back at you, you aren't rushed. Third, it means the opponent has to adjust to both your spinny topspin backhand loop and your not-so-spinny backhand hit. And fourth, it's easier to make last-second changes in your placement with a backhand hit, allowing you to move the ball around the table more easily (to wide angles or to opponent's elbow, the midpoint between forehand and backhand).

You should vary the placement of your opening backhand loop. (And loops to an opponent's forehand are often more effective, since most players block better on the backhand.) However, most players tend to block crosscourt against an incoming crosscourt loop. So if you have a good backhand follow-up, it's often an advantage to open crosscourt, where you both have more table (across the diagonal, corner to corner), and can expect a return to the backhand. This allows you to dominate with that backhand loop and hit one-two. Or open to the middle, which most players will cover with their backhand (when blocking), and usually also block back where the ball came from.

The key to developing a good backhand loop and hit—besides getting some coaching—is to really commit to the two shots. Decide you will backhand loop any deep ball with backspin, and that you will backhand hit any blocked or topspinned return. This tends to simplify things for you while complicating it for the opponent, who has to adjust to both. (You can actually backhand loop against a short ball with backspin with a wristy shot, but that's another topic.) When going for the backhand hit, some players think of it more as a punch-block, where they essentially hit a hard block, right off the bounce.

So take down your opponents with your new dynamic duo, or force them to feed you easy forehand balls to avoid it.

July 29, 2013—Topspinny Backhands

One of the biggest changes at the higher levels in our sport since I started playing in the late 1970s is the development of what I call the "topspinny backhand." (I should trademark that term.) When I started, most players had relatively flat backhands, with only a little topspin. The idea was to hit or block aggressively. A few players backed up and backhand looped, but few players played close to the table and tried to topspin heavily with their backhands. Part of this was the equipment—modern sponges are much

bouncier and better for this.

At first glance, a good, hard, flat backhand is a better shot. After all, it tends to come out faster, and it's easier to time, as opposed to trying to take a bigger swing and spin the ball off the bounce. There were many big backhand hitters and great blockers back in those days, but only a few really spun their backhands off the bounce over and over. (Tibor Klampar and Anton Stipancic are two that did.)

These days nearly everyone at the higher levels topspins off the bounce. There's a terminology problem—it's not quite a backhand loop (usually), but it's more than a regular backhand. Hence my term, "topspinny backhand."

What are the advantages of these topspinny backhands?

1. The topspin pulls the ball down, just as it does for a loop, and so you effectively have a larger target.
2. The topspin jumps off the table, messing up the opponent's timing. When a player hits a ball flat, it travels at roughly the same speed to the opponent, so it's easy for the opponent to time it. When a player hits the ball with topspin, it starts out at one speed, then jumps when it hits the table, making it harder to react properly in time.
3. The topspin jumps off the opponent's paddle, further messing up his timing.
4. Against a flatter ball, an opponent can take a step off the table to give himself more time to react, but against a ball with a lot of topspin, he has to take it relatively quick off the bounce when blocking or counter-hitting or he'll likely hit a weak or erratic shot, meaning he has less time to react.

One of the tougher questions for coaches is when to start players with topspinny backhands. Some say around 1800 (roughly advanced intermediate level). Others teach it almost from the start. I've seen it successfully learned both ways. But it does help to develop this shot somewhat early or you may get ingrained in your habits. I developed a flatter backhand early in my development, and while I can demonstrate a topspinny backhand, I'd have to spend a lot of practice time if I wanted to incorporate it into my game—and there's no guarantee that I'd be able to do so successfully after 37 years of flat backhands.

It's your choice—go flat or go topspinny!

January 21, 2013—Backhand Banana Flip

The backhand flip has rapidly become the dominant receive against short serves at the world-class level. The flip (usually called a flick in Europe and Asia) is a short stroke in which a player steps in and attacks a short ball, forehand or backhand. What makes the backhand flip so dominant is that since the table is in the way, it is difficult to generate topspin against short balls except with the wrist, and it is easier to use wrist over the table with the backhand than the forehand. It was just a few years ago that players like China's Wang Hao, Ma Long, and Zhang Jike showed at tournaments, backhand flipping even short serves to the forehand, considered a no-no by most coaches for many years since it puts you in an extreme backhand position, and so not ready to dominate the table with the forehand on the next shot. These players showed this wasn't true—they would step back quickly and often rip the next ball with their forehand.

This wasn't really new. Viktor Barna of Hungary won five World Men's Titles doing this with a hardbat in the 1930s, often stepping around his forehand side to attack both short and long balls with his backhand. In the 1970s players like Tibor Klampar and Anton Stipancic attacked short serves over and over with wristy and topspinny backhand flips.

However, players like Ma Long (world #1 for all of 2010 and eight months of 2011) and Zhang Jike (current World Men's Champion) have taken the backhand flip to the next level in terms of the amount and variation of spin generated, and thereby its effectiveness. A major problem with a flip is that against a heavy backspin you need to lift the ball up, and to do so you need to generate upward racket speed. How do you do this when you can't backswing down against a short ball, because the table is in the way? By backswinging to the side, and using that swing to build up momentum to generate both topspin and sidespin on the flip. Because the stroke starts from the side and curves in toward the ball, the stroke's path is the shape of a banana, and so it is called a banana flip. It's much easier to lift a short backspin ball this way then by trying to meet the backspin straight on with pure topspin.

With YouTube.com, you can find examples of these, using players such as Ma Long and Zhang Jike as examples. Watch how they draw the racket off to the side and then essentially loop the ball with their wrist, often doing so against short balls to the forehand. Contact is a grazing motion,

usually just after the top of the bounce against backspin, more at the top of the bounce against sidespin or topspin. Also note the placement of the shot—usually at wide angles, though aggressive ones can go at the opponent's middle (the elbow, the transition point between forehand and backhand).

The shot is especially effective when combined with short and long pushes against backspin serves (though you can also do this against no-spin and sidespin serves, even topspin serves, by aiming low or even chopping down on the ball). At the higher levels, being able to flip aggressively or drop the ball short against short serves causes havoc with an opponent as he has to hang back to deal with the flip while moving in to handle the short push. If you just flip every ball, a good player knows the ball is coming out and can wait for it and loop or hit it far more easily. Mixing in deep pushes is also effective in messing up an opponent's timing.

A key aspect of the banana flip is that it also has sidespin, which also messes up an opponent's timing. This is especially true if the incoming ball already has sidespin that the banana flipper can add to, such as against a forehand pendulum serve (if both players are righties or lefties). If both are righties, the incoming sidespin matches the sidespin from a banana flip, and so it's like looping against backspin, with the flip just adding to the topspin.

The best way to develop a banana flip is to (you guessed it) practice it. Find someone with good short serves, and have them serve over and over as you flip them. Ideally, have a bucket of balls so the server can just serve over and over, grabbing the next ball to serve without playing out the point. When the bucket is empty, pick up the balls and repeat. This is the best way to practice *all* types of receive, and yet few players do this, relying instead on practicing receive only in matches, which is like learning to hit drives and loops only by practicing them in matches. Not very smart. So get that bucket of balls and practice your banana flips (and other receives), and maybe someday you'll dominate like Ma Long.

BLOCKING

August 5, 2013—Blocking Tips

One of the biggest differences between players at any level and players a little below them are their blocking skills. When watching two attackers of about the same level play, often the quickest way to judge who is the stronger player is by whoever handles the other's attack better, i.e. who

blocks better. Or watch the best players in the world, especially the Chinese, and when they aren't counterlooping, watch how proficient and consistent they are at blocking. Spectators see the flashy attack shots, but often the biggest difference between these top players and those a level weaker are their blocking games. Here are twelve tips to improve your blocking game. (These are primarily for inverted and short pips players.)

1. Be quick and decisive when blocking. Blocking is not for the weak of heart, and is not a passive shot. Even soft blocks should be aggressively soft, i.e. a change of pace, not just a weak block.
2. Block aggressively against loops that land short and against slow loops. If you block these passively, you'll face the consequences. Loops that land short are easy to attack (with aggressive block, smashes, or counterloops), while if you return a spinny loop passively the spin takes on your racket more, making you less consistent.
3. Keep your blocks deep unless you are dead blocking. Deep blocks force the opponent off the table, cutting off their angles, and giving you more time to react to their next shot. Shorter blocks are usually easy putaways for opponents who are in position.
4. Block to all three spots—wide corners and opponent's middle, where they have to decide whether to use forehand or backhand. Avoid blocking anywhere else. Why would you?
5. Often change directions at the last second. This is especially easy and effective on the backhand, in particular by aiming wide to the backhand, then blocking aggressively to the wide forehand at the last second.
6. Against faster loops use the opponent's own speed to redirect the ball back aggressively. Think of it as a video or pinball game.
7. Blocking at the higher levels requires just as much footwork as attacking. Be light on your feet, and step to the ball; don't reach except as a last result.
8. Master the forehand down-the-line block. Many players are handicapped by only being able to block forehands crosscourt. This turns them into punching bags for opponents who know where the next shot is each time.
9. Learn to change the pace with dead blocks, and perhaps chop and

sidespin blocks. But if you are going to use these shots, practice them both in drills and practice matches.

10. Consider learning to topspin your blocks, essentially mini-loops. Many players don't realize that many or most top players block with topspin off the bounce, almost mini-loops.
11. Study opponents to see how soon you can pick up where they are placing their attacks. If you do this, your subconscious will pick up on it, it'll become second nature, and you'll begin to react sooner. You don't need fast reflexes to have fast reactions; fast reactions come from proper training over a period of time.
12. When you force a weak ball with your blocks, change from a blocking mentality to attack mode. Far too many players force an opponent into making a weak return—and then continue blocking. Your blocking has done its job; now's the time to attack!

January 30, 2012—Quick and Variable Blocks

Someone recently asked me why it was important to block loops quick off the bounce. He thought that taking the ball quick off the bounce made it harder for the blocker to react, and made the shot more predictable for the opponent. However, it's actually easier and more consistent to block a loop off the bounce, and the lack of variation from this only happens if the blocker doesn't vary his block.

You do want to block loops off the bounce. If you take it late, you have more ground to cover (often with little time to react, depending on the speed of the loop), as well as having to predict the ball's fast and low bounce off the table. Even more important, blocking quick off the bounce allows you to both rush and angle an opponent. If you take the ball late, your opponent has time to react to your shot, and the block loses its effectiveness.

So how do you make your block more effective by varying it? First of all, while variation is important, consistency is most important. Your block needs to be a steady, quick over-the-table shot—think of yourself as a wall. But you can be steady and still mess up your opponent by varying your blocks.

So, how can you vary your block to mess up an opponent? Here's a rundown.

Steadiness: Sheer consistency, combined with quickness, will wear down an

opponent. If you combine steadiness with at least one other variation, such as placement or change of pace, your block will be even more effective.

Three placements: Your blocks should almost always go to one of the three main placements—wide forehand, wide backhand, and middle. By blocking quick off the bounce, your opponent has little time to react to these, and they all force him out of position.

Deceptive placement: You can aim one way, and at the last second change directions. For example, suppose you aim your backhand block to the opponent's wide backhand (for two righties). At the last second, just bring your wrist back and block down the line to the forehand. Deceptive placement is perhaps the most under-used tactic in blocking at the intermediate level—far too often players telegraph where they are blocking early in the shot.

Tactical placement: Sometimes you should hammer an opponent's weak side over and over. Or you might want to go after the opponent's middle over and over. Against other opponents, you might want to go quick to their strong side to draw them out of position, and then come back to the weak side, making them move and hit their weaker shots.

Speed: Not all blocks are passive. A jab block is an aggressive block, and if placed well—see three placements above—is particularly effective. You can especially jab block against a loop that lands short. Slow, spinny loops that land short are easy to miss if you take them late, but if you take them off the bounce decisively, they are easy to jab block or even smash. To smash them, shorten your backswing.

Dead block: These are great to vary the pace and throw off an opponent's timing, and are especially effective when combined with a jab block, or against an opponent who tends to back off the table. Just hold the racket loosely and let the ball rebound out slowly.

Chop block: If you chop down on the ball at contact, you can dead block with backspin. This is more easily done on the backhand.

Sidespin block: At contact, move the racket sideways to create sidespin. You can do this in either direction. This is another way to dead block. This is more easily done on the backhand.

Topspin block: You can topspin the ball right off the bounce, both backhand or forehand, sort of a mini-loop. (Some call this the "kiss of topspin.") At the world-class level this is the most common type of block.

Use block to set up attack: Blocking by itself will only take you so far. If you use your block to mess up an opponent so that you can then attack yourself, you put even more pressure on your opponent. Any time you sense your opponent will have trouble with your block, get ready to take the attack.

Many or most of the above may be tricky to do at first, but that's because you haven't been doing them. Decide which variations above best fit your game. Then find time to practice them in drills, use them in practice matches, and soon they'll become second nature.

October 15, 2012—How to Handle the First Loop Off Backspin

A loop against backspin comes at you differently than one against block or topspin. At the lower levels, the loop against backspin is often the only loop players see, but as they reach the intermediate level and beyond, more and more they face loops against just about any deep ball.

Yet most players practice mostly against loops off block or (at the higher levels) counterlooping. Much of the reason for this is how easy it is to do drills where one player loops, the other blocks. You can do a continuous drill in this way, facing a loop something like every second, and rapidly become proficient at blocking (or at higher levels, counterlooping) such loops.

And then someone loops against your backspin in a match (usually off a push or a long backspin serve), and you miss. Why?

Three things that make a loop against backspin different. First, a loop against backspin usually has more topspin than other loops. This is because the looper is adding to the spin that's already there, i.e. using your backspin. The spinniest loops are those against the spinniest backspins.

Second, a loop against backspin is usually (not always) done closer to the table than a loop against a block or topspin. Most blocks and topspins force the opponent off the table, both in games and in drills. So you both have less time to react, and your opponent has more angle against you.

Third, since the loop against backspin is usually both spinnier and done closer to the table than other loops, the trajectory of the ball is different. A slow, spinny loop against backspin often has more arc than other loops,

which can throw off your timing. It also means you have to adjust your contact point. Against a more driving loop (i.e. less arc), you can just stick your racket out and let the ball come to you. Against a more arcing loop, you need to get your racket closer to where the ball hits the table or it'll bounce up, forcing you to lift your racket to react—and probably lifting the ball off the end.

How do you handle such a loop differently? When blocking, take it quick off the bounce, with a slight jabbing motion at contact. You need to block somewhat aggressively or the ball's spin will jump off your racket. The harder you hit it, the less the spin will take. However, the harder you hit it, the less control you'll have, so you have to find a balance. You can also block less aggressively with a more closed racket (to compensate for how the ball will jump off your racket), relying on the softness of your shot to give the ball more time to drop as well as to throw off an opponent's timing. However, if you do this too often most opponents will jump all over them.

When smashing or counterlooping against a loop against backspin, take the ball at the top of the bounce or even on the rise. This is where many players face problems, as they are better at doing this when the opponent loops from farther off the table, giving them more time. With less time, they are often late smashing or counterlooping. The key is not to hesitate. If you hesitate even slightly when attacking a slow, spinny loop, you will probably miss.

When counterlooping, make sure to loop nearly the very top of the ball. Any major lifting motion will send the ball off the end. You lift more from off the table because the ball has more distance to travel, and so more time for the topspin and gravity to pull it down. Not so when looping against slow, spinny loop against backspin.

In general, against a loop that lands short, block aggressively, or smash or counterloop. Against a loop that lands deep, still play aggressively, but focus on control.

How to practice against a loop against backspin. Too often players only face loops against backspin in a game, and so they might get to practice it perhaps once every few minutes. If they do drill against it, they do it where one player starts off with a loop against backspin and then they continue the drill (or free play), and again only getting limited practice against this type of loop. What would be more valuable is a systematic way of practicing against

this type of loop where you can do so over and over, like a multiball drill. Except a coach can't feed the type of topspin you see in a spinny loop against backspin.

Or can he? Here's an improvised multiball drill where you can face a loop against backspin over and over, and practice blocking, smashing, or counterlooping it, depending on your playing style and level.

First, get a box of balls, and set them on a chair or other stand near the table. The first player grabs a ball and serves backspin. The second player pushes it back to a pre-set spot. The first player loops. While the second player practices against this loop against backspin, the first player is already reaching for another ball from the box. *Do not play the point out.* Instead, the first player serves and loops, then grabs a new ball to do it again. The second player alternates pushing and practicing against the loop against backspin.

The result is that one player gets lots of rapid-fire practice looping against backspin, while the other gets lots of rapid-fire practice against loops against backspin, with the added bonus of practicing his push. (Take that part seriously and your push will also improve.)

There are four variations of this drill:

1. Variation One: the first player always loops to the second player's forehand.
2. Variation Two: the first player always loops to the second player's backhand.
3. Variation Three: the first player loops randomly either to the second player's forehand or backhand.
4. Variation Four: the first player loops randomly to all parts of the table.

The first two variations allow you to focus on developing your technique against loops against backspin. The third one is your stepping stone toward doing it in a match situation, where it's simplified to just two possibilities. Ultimately, you need to get to the fourth variation, as that lets you rapid-fire practice what you'll face in a match—but if you can't do that consistently yet, then focus on the first three variations until you are ready for number four. So pick out the variation where you need the most work, and go practice!

February 28, 2011—A Forehand Stance While Blocking

Many players go into a backhand stance when blocking. This is fine for the backhand, but it weakens the forehand side. Worse, it makes smashing or counterlooping on the forehand much more difficult. You may find that you can block backhands almost as easily with a slight forehand stance, which also puts you in a position to block, smash, or counterloop if the ball goes to the forehand. (Also, a forehand stance makes it easier to step around the backhand if you see a weak ball to crush with your forehand.) Try experimenting with this. Many a player has won a match by standing in a forehand stance and just blocking backhands until the ball goes to the forehand, and then *Whammo!*

April 30, 2012—Chalk Up Wins with Chop Blocks

What is a chop block? It is a block with backspin. Since long pips and (usually) hardbat automatically return topspin as backspin, it is the norm for those surfaces. But with inverted (as well as short pips to a lesser degree), a topspin ball is normally catapulted back with some topspin.

But what if the inverted blocker were to chop down on the ball at contact, thereby returning the incoming topspin as backspin? That is a chop block, and it can cause havoc with an opponent's timing.

Many players thrive in fast topspin rallies, using your own fast topspin balls to loop, counter-hit, or block back everything aggressively. A sudden chop block against a topspin ball can completely throw off their timing. Instead of a fast ball jumping out into their hitting zone, the ball dies in front of them, and there's no topspin for them to counter against. The shot is especially effective against loopers who back up from the table a lot, since they are often uncomfortable looping closer to the table, and this brings them out of their comfort zone.

To do a chop block, simply chop down lightly as you block the incoming topspin (usually against a loop), holding the racket loosely. Your shot should go out low and soft, almost like a push. Place the ball to the corners to force the opponent to use his weaker (or more awkward against a soft ball) stroke, or to the middle to cut off angles. The shot is usually done on the backhand side, but can be done on the forehand as well. (One reason most chop blocks are done on the backhand is that it is assumed you can do more effective counter-attacks on the forehand, but that's mostly true at the higher levels.)

A variation is to sidespin block, where the racket moves sideways (or

sideways and down) to create a sidespin or sidespin-backspin block. This is usually done on the backhand, with the racket moving right to left (for a righty), but can be done in both directions and on the forehand as well.

One word of caution—you should rarely chop block twice in a row. The first one throws off an opponent's timing and catches him out of position (too far off table). The second one doesn't change the timing and the previous one already brought the opponent in. So normally follow up your chop blocks with aggressive blocks or counter-attacks. Players with long pips and hardbat often chop block over and over, but their surfaces are deader than inverted, so they can really deaden the ball and keep it short. With inverted, it's tougher to do this over and over, and so it's usually best to use it as a variation, not the normal block.

GENERAL

August 6, 2012—The Feel of Good Technique

Good technique should feel right. If it doesn't, there's probably something wrong with it, and you should probably have a coach take a look at it. Good technique feels right because it is, almost by definition, the simplest and most efficient way of doing that particular stroke to maximize speed, spin, and/or control.

What this means is that once you have learned the basics of a new technique, you don't have to go through a checklist to make sure you are doing it properly. (Let a coach do that.) A coach or top player can help identify when you have made a "good" stroke, the one whose feel you should remember and repeat. There might be one or two things you need to remember and focus on while developing the stroke, but mostly just remember the feel of a good stroke, and try to repeat it. Learn the specifics only so you can get the right feel back. Then just let the shot go.

Besides the stroke itself, you should remember the feel of the contact. This is how you maximize control, as well as spin and speed. A consistent contact, combined with a consistent stroke, leads to great control and consistency.

When something feels off, all you have to do is remember the feel of the stroke and contact and it'll come back to you. Try to remember a particular practice session or match where the feel was just right, and regularly use that memory to get the proper feel back. Do this every session,

and watch your level improve.

November 19, 2012—Backhand and Forehand Playing Distance

At the intermediate and advanced levels (below world-class level), the most common rallying style combines forehand looping and backhand hitting. These players often attack backspin by looping from both sides, but once in a fast topspin rally mostly hit on the backhand side. It's simply easier for most to loop in a rally on the forehand side because the body isn't in the way, so you have a huge hitting zone. On the backhand side, players are often cramped as they try to backhand loop a fast incoming ball, so hitting is easier and more effective. This often means trying to hit the backhand close to the table while looping the forehand from farther back. How can a player handle this?

The problem is that hitters usually play closer to the table than loopers. If they stay at the table to hit their backhands, they are jammed and rushed on the forehand side if they try to loop. If they take a step back to loop their forehands (usually after the top of bounce), their backhand hits become late and less effective. This is further aggravated because most players hit their backhands on the rise, before the top of the bounce, meaning they want to play the backhand even closer to the table. Many players face this type of problem, even at the world-class level. Players such as Gue Yuehua and Jan-Ove Waldner favored hitting or blocking their backhand close to the table, combined with a looping forehand, and they are considered two of the greatest players of all time. So how do you solve this problem? There are several options.

First, let's look at what a hitter does. Often he hits the backhand on the rise, and the forehand at the top of the bounce. This isn't a problem because when you turn sideways to hit the forehand, the hitting zone opens up and hitting at the top of the bounce is easy. So there's no problem in hitting backhands on the rise and forehands at the top of the bounce. The problem is when the backhand is hit on the rise and the forehand loop on the drop. Here are six ways to handle this problem in a fast rally.

1. Develop diagonal footwork. Playing a quick backhand but a forehand loop farther back means moving diagonally back and forth rather than side to side. So practice this footwork in drills. Start with a practice partner alternately hitting balls side to side as you develop

the footwork and strokes together. Then have your partner hit the ball randomly side to side as you learn to react to these shots as if it were a game. (It might be easier to do these drills with a coach or player feeding multiball rather than doing it “live.”)

2. Learn to both hit and loop the backhand. If the ball is coming at you very fast, or if you are close to the table, favor the backhand hit. If you have more time, or are off the table, you favor the backhand loop.
3. Hit the backhand at the top of the bounce. Just as there’s no real difficulty in playing the backhand on the rise and the forehand on the drop, there is no real difficulty in playing the backhand at the top of the bounce and the forehand on the drop. You can still start the rally by hitting backhands closer to the table, but once into the rally the natural distance would be half a step back. (An alternate version of this is to simply learn to backhand loop in the rally—but of course that defeats the whole purpose of this article, which is how to combine a hitting backhand with a looping forehand.)
4. Loop the forehand at the top of the bounce. This takes some athleticism, and isn’t for everybody. But if you are fast over the table and can smoothly and rapidly loop the forehand, you can hit the backhand on the rise and loop the forehand at the top of the bounce. Sometimes you will be forced back on the forehand, and in those cases you’ll have to play your backhand late (playing backhand at the top of the bounce, backhand looping, or fishing), but when you do play the forehand at the top of the bounce, the extra effectiveness of the shot (opponents have little time to react) offset that. If you go this route, you’ll want to play with a somewhat shortened forehand loop stroke.
5. Play the backhand with your feet in a slight forehand stance. For most backhands you don’t really need your feet in a backhand stance. And so many players play their backhands with their right foot slightly back (for righties). This gives them a slight head start in playing their forehands, allowing them to play the backhand closer to the table while still reacting to a quick shot to the forehand. Make sure when hitting backhands that the upper body is rotated to face the direction of your shot; it is only the back foot that should be in a slight forehand position.

6. Learn to loop the ball late in the forehand zone. This means taking the ball near the back of the big forehand hitting zone that is created when you turn sideways. Some players learn to loop the forehand so late in the zone that they almost take it behind their body. This means learning to loop with the contact point almost directly to the side of the body, by the right shoulder (for righties). Players who do this tend to lose power (less time to accelerate), can be rushed (since they only have a small part near the back of the forehand zone to contact the ball), and have trouble going crosscourt. I don't particularly like this option, but some players do this effectively.

I've put these six very roughly in order of preference, but everyone's different. Experiment, take your pick or picks (you can use more than one method), and go through your opponents like a buzzsaw with your two-winged hitting/looping attack.

December 17, 2012—Distance from Table

How close should you stand to the table? Much of this depends on your playing style. Most new players tend to stand too close to the table. This leads to all sorts of problems if not fixed early on. A player who develops his game while standing too close is often jammed, which leads to short, jerky strokes that are rushed. Players like this may learn to block well, but the shorter, rushed strokes lead to a loss of both power and (when trying to hit harder) control. They also tend to stand in a backhand position, leading to a weak forehand. They also have trouble covering the wide forehand as they are unable to use the full forehand "pocket" since they are jammed at the table—instead, they can only hit the ball in the front of the hitting zone, rather than turn sideways and hit the ball at the top of the bounce with a more comfortable shot that uses the full forehand hitting zone.

As players becomes more advanced, the opposite tendency comes up—players who back off the table if the opponent so much as looks at them funny. There are times when you should back up, primarily when the opponent is attacking strongly or if you have a defensive style (backspin or topspin), but the backing up should be in reaction to this attack, not as a habitual way to keep the ball in play in moderately fast rallies. With good technique and practice, you should be able to rally pretty fast without backing off too much. If you back off too easily, you give your opponent more time to

react to your shot and get his best shot into play; you have no angles to play against your opponent; and you have far more ground to cover, both side to side and in and out.

There is also the phenomenon I call “The Zigzag,” of which I’m often guilty. This is where a player takes a step back to cover the forehand, then another step back to cover the backhand, then another step back to cover the forehand, and next thing you know he is lobbing from the vender booths. Instead, learn to play these shots relatively close to the table, but not so close that you are jammed.

So just how far should you stand? A good guideline is to start the rally about arm’s length from the table. From that distance you can handle most shots—stepping in for short ones, holding your ground in most rallies, and stepping back when forced to by the opponent’s attack. If you are a fast reaction player with good blocking and other close-to-table shots, then try to stay within that arm’s length of the table until absolutely forced back. If you are a looper, you’ll want to start at arm’s length, but as soon as you get into a rally you can take a step back to give yourself more time to loop. (If the rally really gets fast, you’ll back up even more, as top players often do when they counterloop.) Some players like to play a consistent off-table topspin game, in which case you’ll back more quickly than most players—but try to back up only as far as you really have to as you happily topspin away, and fish and lob only when the opponent forces you to. (In other words, make them go for risky attack shots, where you’ll get some free points, before you fish and lob.)

Of course, if you are a chopper, then you’ll be backing up as soon as the opponent attacks—though even there, you don’t want to back up more than necessary or you’ll give the opponent extra time and extreme angles to go for.

Lastly, let me urge all players to at least experiment outside their comfort zone. If you are a blocker, try backing off sometimes—either on defense or looping. If you are an off-table player, try playing at the table as a variation, blocking or even looping quick off the bounce. You may find a new dimension for your game, and at the very least, you’ll better understand how other players play, making it that much easier tactically when you play that type of style.

December 31, 2012—Balance Throughout the Stroke

You should be able to smash or loop at near full power without going off balance. Top players can play great shots in rapid succession because they are always balanced, which leads to a rapid recover for the next shot. When you go off balance, even slightly, you cannot recover quickly for the next shot. There are two times when players tend to go off balance: either when moving to the ball or when following through.

When moving to the ball, if you keep your weight somewhere between your feet, you can stay balanced. If you instead lean or reach toward the ball, you go off balance as your weight goes over just one foot or even beyond. To see this, stand in a ready position. Lean to your right (or left). Now try to move to your right (or left)—see how difficult it is? Your first move needs to be a step, not a lean.

The second place where players often go off balance is when they follow through too much to the side, especially with the forehand. If a righty has a big follow through to his left, he'll be off balance and unable to recover for the next shot. Instead, imagine a pole going through your head, and try to rotate in a circle around the pole. You don't have to do so exactly, but if you focus on rotating around this circle more and less off to the side, with your weight between your feet (or at most over the front foot), you'll be ready for the next shot. Even with a complete weight transfer from the back leg to the front leg you don't need your weight to go outside the feet, which puts you off balance. Note that a wider stance makes it easier to generate power without going off balance.

Here's a test on whether you go off balance in your follow through. Shadow practice doing your most powerful forehand shot, whether it's a loop or a smash. Freeze at the end of your follow through. Is your weight over your left foot (for a righty), or has it gone even slightly beyond that, leaving you off balance, requiring precious time to recover? Have someone give you a light shove and see if you are truly balanced. You should finish the shot balanced and instantly ready to return to ready position to follow with another shot. The best way to practice this is with multiball, where a coach feeds you shots in rapid succession, and you are forced to recover quickly for the next shot over and over.

March 5, 2012—Proper Use of the Free Arm

A lot of problems arise when players don't use their free arm properly. It's a major issue for many players. Here are two common

problems.

First, many players let their free arm just hang down instead of holding it up as a counterbalance to the playing arm. When they stroke the ball there is no counterbalancing arm to act as a counterweight, so they are thrown slightly off balance with each shot. Worse, they become so used to this they don't even realize it is happening. The cure—hold the free arm up for balance at all times, with the wrist approximately as high as the elbow, and let it naturally counterbalance your playing arm. Note that this is true on backhands as well as forehands. On the forehand, the counterbalancing is more obvious. On the backhand, as you extend your playing arm out, the free hand needs to counterbalance this by naturally pulling back slightly.

Second, when hitting forehands, players don't use their non-playing side. You should pull with the non-playing arm as you rotate around on the forehand. The non-playing side (the left side for righties) is just as important as the playing side when you hit a forehand. Your body can't rotate properly unless both sides rotate.

August 1, 2011—Jerky Strokes and Jerkyitis: World's Most Rampant Table Tennis Disease

Many players have jerky strokes that make them look like a marionette on a vibrating bed. Jerky strokes mean the player is mostly using one muscle for the stroke, often at near full-power, which is nearly impossible to control. It's better to use more muscles smoothly, i.e. at less than full power, for control as well as more power since you are both using more muscles and are smoothly accelerating into the ball rather than trying to jerk your stroke at full power at the last second.

Jerkyitis is a horrible disease. It cannot be cured. Like an accent a person has when learning a language at an older age, there will always be a bit of stiffness in your shots. But it can be controlled, just as that person with an accent can still develop conversational skills. How do you learn to control your jerkiness? By not rushing your shots, by relaxing your arm, and not trying to consciously guide your shots during a rally.

To avoid rushing your shots, you may need to take a quarter- or half-step back to give yourself more time to take a more relaxed shot. Players who suffer from jerkyitis are often jammed at the table, taking every ball right off the bounce, and looking as though they to want to take the ball *before* the bounce. This is actually okay for a mostly blocking style, but for most shots,

it’s a symptom of jerkyitis; left untreated, your game may die a slow, malingering death.

Relaxing the arm is easy—you just need to do so. Before the rally, relax your arm at your side, then gently and smoothly raise it into your ready position. Okay, it sounds easy, and it should be easy, but the key is to keep it relaxed once the rally begins. There’s a natural tendency to tighten the muscles as the ball is coming toward you as you try to guide the shot. Instead, just let the shot happen on its own—rely on your many years (months? weeks? days?) of training rather than trying to consciously trying to control each shot—which is the third thing you need to avoid to get rid of those jerky shots.

One way to practice smoothness is to do random drills. This means your partner or coach hits balls randomly to your side of the table, and you just react to each shot, using the principles outlined above. (You can do this either live or with multiball.) At first, have your partner or coach hit the ball randomly either to your forehand or backhand. When you can react to those shots easily and smoothly, increase the complexity and have the shots go truly random, i.e. to the middle and wide corners.

We’ll never wipe out jerkyitis, but if we all work together, we can wipe out much of its effects, and turn your game into an (almost) smooth-stroking table tennis machine. (In the interest of transparency, I am a lifelong sufferer of jerkyitis, but it hasn’t stopped me from reaching a somewhat high level as a player and coach.)

CHAPTER FOUR: GRIP AND STANCE

April 2, 2012—Grip and Stance

Let’s do a thought experiment. Hold a piece of paper so you hold the top with one hand, the bottom with the other. Now twist the top. Notice how the entire piece of paper twists? Now twist the bottom. Same thing. How does this relate to table tennis?

Now imagine holding a table tennis player in your hands. (You are either very strong or the player is very small.) Hold his playing hand in one hand and his feet with the other. Twist his playing hand and his entire body twists. The same happens if you twist his feet.

This is what occurs when you have a bad grip or foot position. These twist your entire body out of proper alignment, and are the most common

cause of technique problems. Most often they are not recognized, as even many experienced coaches often treat the symptoms of these problems rather than recognizing the cause.

This is why I strongly recommend that players should use a neutral grip (along with a proper stance) during their formative years, and usually well beyond that. (For shakehand players, a neutral grip means the thinnest part of the wrist lines up with the racket. If the top is tilted away from you when you hold the racket in front of you, it's a backhand grip. If the top is tilted toward you, it's a forehand grip.) A neutral grip means your racket will aim in the same direction as your body is stroking the ball. A non-neutral grip forces you to adjust your stroke in often awkward ways since the racket is aiming one way while your wrist, arm, shoulder, etc., are aiming another direction. This can lead to many problems.

For example, a forehand grip often leads to an overly wristy forehand loop, which makes it difficult to learn to control the ball, and also makes counterlooping and looping in general against fast incoming balls tricky. It can force the back shoulder down in an awkward attempt to adjust for the naturally overly closed racket angle for this grip on the forehand, which throws the timing off for many shots. It can also make the backhand too wristy, making it difficult to learn to control the ball.

A backhand grip may make forehand looping awkward, as it tends to tighten the arm up on forehand shots as well as making it more difficult to close the racket against an incoming topspin, or to loop anywhere except crosscourt. It can force the back shoulder to hunch up in an awkward attempt to adjust for the naturally overly open racket angle for this grip on the forehand, which throws the timing off for many shots. It can also make hitting aggressive backhands awkward since the arm's natural stroke path and the wrist are no longer aiming in the same direction. These are just a few of the problems a bad grip may cause.

At the advanced levels some players do adjust their grips, taking on more forehand or backhand grips, or moving the thumb up on backhands. (I generally use a slight forehand grip, but I adopted it only after I'd been playing ten years.) There are some technical advantages to this, but *only* after you have ingrained proper stroking technique.

Similarly, make sure you are in at least a slight forehand stance when hitting forehands (i.e. right foot slightly back for righties, making it easier to rotate your shoulders back as you backswing), and a neutral stance when

hitting backhands (feet roughly parallel to the table). Advanced players sometimes adjust their stance based on their playing style, and may play forehands from a nearly neutral stance or backhands from a forehand or backhand stance. But again, I recommend against this until you have ingrained proper stroking technique. For example, if you keep your feet parallel when hitting forehands when developing your strokes you'll likely end up with a short, jerky forehand (whether hitting or looping) that uses only the front part of your forehand hitting zone.

Also make sure the feet aren't too close together, as this leads to balance problems when looping or hitting with power. The feet should also be at least slightly angled away from each other, with the front of the right foot angled to the right, the front of the left to the left. If the feet are parallel, then it will be difficult to make quick body rotations when you backswing, especially on the forehand side, as well as creating balance problems on power shots.

Even at the advanced levels players often have trouble with a specific stroke because of their grip or stance. Because they've played this way so long they don't even recognize the cause of their problem, and most often they are destined to an eternity of stroking like a crinkled piece of paper. In a few cases they realize what the cause is, and fix the problem, which often simply means going back to a more neutral grip or adjusting the foot positioning.

Like a piece of paper, if you get the top and bottom parts right, the rest falls into place.

March 4, 2013—Should You Use a Neutral Grip?

When developing your shots, you want to use a neutral grip; otherwise, your strokes might not develop properly. (This is for shakehanders.) A neutral grip makes proper strokes more natural. You might be tempted to use a slight forehand or backhand grip as you develop your stroking techniques, but in the long run, this will hurt you.

What is a neutral, forehand and backhand grip? If the thinnest part of your wrist lines up with the blade (so the blade and the back of your wrist both aim in the same direction), then you have a neutral grip. If you tilt the top of the blade away from you, you have a backhand grip. If you tilt the top of the racket toward you, you have a forehand grip.

However, a neutral grip is not necessarily the way to maximize your

play at the intermediate and advanced levels. It's a tradeoff. At the higher levels, the strokes are already well developed, and so experimenting with the grip won't hurt a player's strokes much.

I used a neutral grip roughly the first decade I played. Then I used a slight backhand grip for roughly a decade. Then I went to a slight forehand grip for roughly the past decade. A backhand grip tends to favor backhand blocking and backhand looping, and gives a natural forehand sidespin loop (so it hooks left for a right-hander). A forehand grip tends to favor backhand hitting and forehand looping, and gives a better inside-out loop on the forehand (so the ball curves to the right for a right-hander).

June 24, 2013—Feet and Grip

When I coach someone, the very first things I look at are their grip and foot positioning. If either of these is done improperly, everything in between will likely be twisted like a rubber band into an awkward stroke. Get them right, and everything in between tends to straighten out. New players should focus on this to develop their strokes properly; more experienced players should focus on this to correct improper strokes they may have developed.

For example, a shakehander might hold the racket with a forehand grip, so that the racket is rotated to the left (for a righty), with the index finger partly off the racket rather than flat across it near the base. This means the racket is aiming slightly downward on the forehand side when the arm is aiming forward. Or a player might use a backhand grip, so that the racket is rotated to the right, with the thumb almost flat on the racket rather than the thumbnail roughly perpendicular to the surface. Now the racket is aiming slightly upward on the forehand side when the arm is aiming forward. In both cases the player has to adjust his stroke to compensate for the fact that his racket and arm aren't pointing in the same direction, leading to awkward positioning of the elbow and shoulder, and even the body and feet can be thrown into awkward contortions to compensate. At the advanced levels, some players do use slight forehand or backhand grips, but only after the shots are ingrained, and always for a specific purpose (i.e. to strengthen one side, even at the cost of the other side). Until the strokes are ingrained, players should use a more neutral grip, so that the thinnest part of the wrist lines up with the racket.

Common foot placement problems include feet too close together

when they should be more than shoulder width apart (especially with taller players); feet parallel instead of the tips pointing a bit outwards; weight on the heels or evenly distributed when it should be on the front inside part of the foot; and (for righties) the right foot either parallel to the left, or too far behind it, when (for beginners) it should be in between these two extremes, and so only slightly back. Each of these problems leads to technique problems where the root of the problem often isn't obvious, so players and coaches try to fix the symptoms rather than realizing the problems stem from the foot positioning.

For example, if a right-handed player has his right foot too far back, he won't be able to rotate at the hips, waist, and shoulders, since to do so would mean turning almost straight backwards. He ends up with an awkward mostly-arm stroke. Seeing this, many players and coaches tell the player to rotate the hips, waist, and shoulders, thinking that's the problem when that's just a symptom of the problem. So they make the problem even worse. Or if the right foot is parallel to the back foot, it becomes awkward to rotate properly because the amount of rotation needed to compensate for the foot positioning is too much. Again, a player or coach might tell the player to do more rotation rather than addressing the root of the problem. (At the more advanced levels, where players have learned to rotate into shots properly, a supple player often does play forehands with the feet parallel, but that's only after the proper stroke has been ingrained.)

Imagine your body is a rubber band pulled tight. If you twist either side, the rest of it twists, leading to twisted strokes that'll handicap you for the rest of your playing days. Untwist the ends, and everything in between smooths out. Do you want a smooth game or one that is twisted into knots?

July 23, 2012—Ready Position

What is the proper ready position? It's the position that will allow you to react most rapidly to the opponent's next shot. It's extremely important in a sport as fast as table tennis. Yet many players have very poor ready positions. They stand up too straight, their feet are too close together, their weight isn't on the balls of their feet, and their non-playing arm hangs loosely at their side like a dead snake.

You want your feet somewhat wide (at least shoulder width apart or more), at least slightly bent, and either parallel to the table or with the right foot (for right-handers) slightly back. The latter puts you in a slight forehand

position, but many players actually play their backhands from that position. If you play a flatter, steadier backhand (i.e. blocking and countering), then you don't need to be in a backhand stance to play backhands. The more aggressively you play the backhand (hitting or looping) the more you'll need to be in a ready position that allows you to quickly move into a backhand stance, so you want your feet more parallel to the table. Experiment and find what's comfortable for you.

Some players stand in a very backhand stance and greatly favor their stronger backhands. This may work for them somewhat, but it further weakens their already weak forehands. They would probably do better to adopt a more neutral stance.

The racket should normally point at the opponent, or more specifically, where the opponent would hit the ball. This allows you to move to forehand or backhand equally well. Some players tend to hold their playing arm out to the side too much, and so are more ready for forehands than backhands. Try holding the racket more in front of you, even if it means bringing the playing elbow more out in front.

Some players, including me, prefer to hold the racket in a slight backhand position (so the backhand side is partially pointed toward the far side). Conventionally, the backhand is hit quicker off the bounce than the forehand. This means you have less time to hit the backhand. In many cases, this doesn't matter since the stroke is shorter. I find the backhand rushed and awkward when starting from a truly neutral position, while the forehand, where you have plenty of time to get the paddle into position as you turn sideways, is much easier. So years ago I adjusted my ready position with the racket in a slight backhand position. This gives me a head start on backhands, while I still have plenty of time to move the racket over for the forehand. I don't normally coach this, but I have advised some players who feel rushed on the backhand to experiment with this.

Weight should be equally distributed between your legs, with your weight centered and balanced, and weight toward the inside balls of your feet. The feet should point slightly outwards, allowing quick sideways movement. Lean slightly forward at the waist. The non-playing arm should be raised as a counter-balance to your playing arm, with the hand at least as high as the elbow.

Want to see examples of good ready positions? Search online for "table tennis ready position pictures," and dozens of great examples will

come up. Pick what looks right for you.

You also want good playing shoes. (A good ready position with bad shoes is like running in dress shoes; not a good idea.) Ideally, get table tennis shoes, which are *made* for table tennis. They range from what are essentially socks with rubber soles (i.e. highly flexible but little support) to shoes with great support. If you have foot problems, are overweight, or play mostly on cement, you probably need extra support. Don't use running shoes, which are designed for running forward, not quick side-to-side movements.

Here's an easy way to find a good ready position. Imagine you are covering someone in basketball. Notice how you automatically spread your legs and bend your knees? This lowering of your center of gravity puts you in the proper ready position, allowing you to move quickly either way. (The only catch—lower your arms, since you don't have to cover someone trying to shoot a basketball over your head!) If you're not a basketball fan, think of a shortstop in baseball or a goalie in soccer.

June 10, 2013—Staying Low

One of the biggest problems beginning/intermediate players have is standing up too straight. Watch the top players and you'll see how they stay low—feet relatively wide and pointing slightly outward, weight toward the front inside balls of their feet, knees bent, and leaning slightly forward from the waist. This allows much stronger play than standing up straight—you'll move quicker, have better balance, recover more quickly after shots, and your shots will be more natural and more powerful. And you'll even feel more like an athlete because you'll be playing like one!

There are many examples of this online at YouTube.com—you can pull up just about any video between two top players. It may not be easy to play with a lower stance at first. Older players and those with knee problems might have particular problems, and might need to adjust—but even they should focus on staying at least somewhat low.

Why is staying low important?

1. **It lowers your center of gravity**. This increases your leverage in movement, giving you a quicker start.
2. **The bent knees give you a quicker start**. If your knees are straight, you'll have to bend them before you can move.
3. **The wider stance gives you stability and balance during**

rallies. It's hard to play effectively if you are off balance. Players who stand up too straight tend to make up for this by reaching for the ball instead of moving to it, leading to awkward and inconsistent shots.

4. **The wider and lower stance increases power**. The extra power comes from a greater weight exchange as you rotate about from a wider stance (especially on forehand shots), and from the extra power from the legs from staying low, allowing you to push off into your shots.
5. **Quicker recovery**. This comes because the wider and lower stance allows better balance. Players who stand up too straight will go off balance after a fast movement or powerful shot, and will be slower in recovering, especially on the forehand.
6. **It makes your shots more natural**. If you stand up straight, your natural stroking movement will be up, but your target is ahead of you. Staying low gives you a more natural shot in the direction of the far side of the table, and allows you to more easily put your body weight into it. It might not be natural at first, but it will once you get used to it.
7. **It makes it easier to loop heavy backspin with power**. While standing up straight gives you a natural lifting stroke, it doesn't give much power for great topspin and speed. For that, you need to use your legs, and to use your legs you have to get down with the knees at least slightly bent.

You might have to build up your leg strength to stay low—but staying low in itself builds up those muscles, and the more you do it, the stronger your legs will be, and the easier it becomes. Truly serious players should hit the weight room and focus on lower body strength training.

You can make the change to a lower stance in stages, focusing on staying a bit lower for a week, and a bit more the following week, and so on until you find a comfortable low stance. If this doesn't work, try going for the other extreme, and practice staying too low. (Careful if you have knee problems!) It may feel silly, but after playing that way for a short time you may find it easier to compromise between the too-low stance and your previous too-high stance.

And when you develop the habit of staying lower, you'll begin to feel

the benefits as your game improves. A lower stance will allow you to stand tall in the winner's podium.

October 24, 2011—Feet at More Than Shoulder Width

There's a long history of players experimenting with how wide to keep their feet. There have been times where the trend was to keep the feet closer together, no more than shoulder width. However, that has pretty much died out. Suffice to say that if you watch videos of all the top players in the world, one thing that stands out is that just about all (I'd say all but I haven't had time to watch every single player) keep their feet rather wide. This gives them stability and balance when making shots, as well as lowering the center of gravity, which makes quick movements easier. There's a simple way to verify this, and see what the world-class players really do. Look up the ITTF world ranking list. Pick a player. Then go to YouTube.com, paste the player's name in (and perhaps the words "table tennis" afterwards), and check the videos that come up. In general, the taller the player, the wider the stance, but even shorter players keep the feet wider than shoulder width.

December 3, 2013—Use a Wider Stance

One of the quickest ways to tell the difference between a world-class player and typical club player is to compare how far apart their feet are. Top players almost always have wider stances than average players. Just go to YouTube.com and watch videos of the best players and the difference becomes obvious. The wider stance can be tricky to learn, and if you have knee problems, weak legs, or are overweight, it may not work for you. But for most players, the wider stance is a big advantage.

First, it allows you to keep your balance when moving and when making powerful shots. Table tennis is all about balance; if you are even slightly off balance it affects both your shot and (often more importantly) your recovery for the next shot. When you go for a big forehand, the wider stance keeps you balanced and stable.

Second, it increases your power. The wider stance allows you to put more weight into the shot since there's a longer transfer period as weight goes from the back leg to the front leg. (This is especially true for forehand shots, but is also true for most backhand loops.) With a narrower stance, you can only transfer the weight a short distance, and so you get less power. It's like comparing a baseball pitcher with a long windup to one who tries to flick

the ball with a short backswing – the longer windup will give more power.

Third, it allows you to move more quickly. This is both because your center of gravity is lower, allowing a quicker start, and because the wider stance gives more leverage.

The downside is it takes time to learn, and is also more tiring. But the payoff is worth it. So give it a try. It'll seem different at first, and perhaps not comfortable. You might experiment by exaggerating it sometimes so that a more normal wide stance will seem more natural.

So consider widening your stance, and watch the improvement in your balance, power, and quickness.

December 26, 2011—Balance is a Habit

Recently I had an epiphany. It wasn't anything that wasn't obvious, but it was something that underlined a primary difference between hackers and pros—or more generally, between lower-level and higher-level players. And that is the habit of balance.

While practicing with a student, I hit a net ball to the right-handed student's forehand side. The student immediately reached for the ball. This put his weight on his right foot. Since he could no longer step with that foot (try it, you'll see), he was forced to lunge for the ball. He managed to reach it and popped it back on the table, an easy winner for any decent opponent. On the very next point, the student hit a net-edge to my forehand. When it nicked the net, without thinking I stepped toward where the ball was going. When it hit the edge, I took an immediate step sideways toward the ball's new direction, and without ever losing balance, reached the ball and made an easy and effective return.

The epiphany was that I didn't have to think about getting the net-edge, or reach for it, or even make a weak return, though that is often the result. The *habit* of balance took over, and so rather than lunging toward the ball, the years of training took precedence, with the result that I stepped to the ball, and reached the ball in perfect position to make the shot.

This is not a matter of practicing balance while returning nets or edges. It's a matter of practicing balance *all the time*, always stepping to the ball, always balanced, rarely lunging. (There are rare occasions where you step to the ball and then have to make a last-second lunge at a ball that's otherwise out of reach, but that's as a last resort, and only after stepping first. And you'll be surprised at how balanced you can be even when lunging.)

So develop the habit of always staying balanced, and stepping toward shots, not reaching. This makes it easy to move in any direction and ready to make a strong shot. It’s that first move—stepping that keeps you in balance versus reaching that puts you off balance—that makes the difference.

CHAPTER FIVE: FOOTWORK

June 20, 2011—Are You a Tree or a Squirrel?

Squirrels run circles around trees, and there's a lesson there. If you are a tree, you just stand there, rooted to the ground, waiting on each shot to see if you have to move. By the time you realize you have to move—how often does your opponent happen to hit the ball right into your forehand or backhand pocket so it'll hit right in the middle of your paddle?—it's too late, so you can only awkwardly reach for the ball. There are no proud redwoods in table tennis, only weeping willows.

If you are a squirrel, then you are constantly in motion. You expect to move, and so between shots you flex your knees, perhaps do a small bounce, and instead of deciding whether to move, decide *where* to move. And then you lightly scamper after every shot, or perhaps lumber if you're an out-of-shape squirrel. But at least you are moving, allowing you to make strong shots.

A good way to practice this is with a random drill. Have a partner block or feed multiball randomly all over the table. Your job is to be ready to move instantly as soon as you see where the ball's going, while at the same not anticipating, just reacting. Make sure your first move is always the right move. With practice, you'll become proficient, and that'll show up in your match results.

March 25, 2012—The Great Scourge of Table Tennis Footwork: Leaning

The ball goes to your forehand, you lean that way, and . . . suddenly you can't move. And so you lean more, and perhaps you are able to making a flailing, off-balance return. Then you watch a top player move to the ball, and while in perfect position, he makes a perfect forehand. What goes through your head? "He has a better forehand than me."

What's wrong with this picture?

This type of leaning footwork is pervasive at the beginning and intermediate levels. It happens on regular drives and loops, and even more when blocking, where players reach instead of stepping toward the ball, and wonder why their off-balanced blocks are so erratic. It's also a primary reason why so many players are unable to play from off the table. They are so used to reaching for the ball when closer to the table that when they are off the table, and have more ground to cover (but more time to do so), they fall

into their old habits and lean in the direction they need to move, thereby making it impossible to actually move in that direction.

If you need to move to the right, step first with the right foot. If you start by leaning to the right, then your weight is on the right foot, and you can't move it. Similarly, if you need to move to the left, step first with the left foot. If you need to move in, step in with either foot (the right foot for righties against short balls to the forehand, which are usually the tough ones to reach), but whatever you do don't just reach for the short ball (which means leaning) and then wonder why you can't reach it or are off balance if you do.

There are several ways of moving right or left. You can start with a short step and then shuffle both feet together; you can essentially move by shuffling both feet together (sometimes with one foot slightly ahead of the other); or (especially when moving to the forehand) you can start with one long step. The short step and shuffle (called "two-step footwork") is the most taught method, but many or most top players start by taking one long step. (This was pointed out and shown on tape at an ITTF coaching seminar I attended in Colorado Springs in September, 2010.) Much of this is easier to show than to describe in text.

How do you learn to step instead of lean? Practice. But not just at the table—you can practice *anywhere*. Make a habit of shadow practicing your footwork—it's great practice and exercise, and you don't need a racket to do so. (But if you want to have a "racket," almost anything will do—I've been known to shadow practice with a stapler.) So leave behind the leaning and get in step by stepping.

September 19, 2011—Balance Leads to Feet-first Footwork

Many players move their playing hand and arm first when moving to a ball, when the first things that should move are the feet. If you move your arm first, several very bad things are happening. First, it means you are slower in moving into position since you haven't started moving your feet first. Second, you will tend to reach for the ball—since by moving your hands first you *are* reaching for the ball—and so will generally hit an awkward shot. And third, by reaching for the ball, you go off balance, with your weight on the foot in the direction you are reaching. You will have great difficulty moving the feet at that point, since you are now weighted down on the lead foot, the very one that should be moving first in the direction you need to

move. (Try this and you'll see what I mean.)

Instead, focus on staying balanced. This means your weight should always be between your feet when moving. There might be a weight shift once you have moved into position (especially on forehand shots), but not before. Balance allows you to move quickly in either direction and to glide into position. It makes that first step very easy. (Remember to step first with the right to move right, with the left to move left.)

Coaches always tell you to move your feet first, not the playing hand and arm, but players often have trouble following this advice. I've found that if you coach a player to focus on the balance aspect, he will more naturally move the feet first, since balance is what allows this to happen easily. It's the playing hand and arm movement that takes a player off balance—so by focusing on balance, they stop doing that. Give it a try, and get your game into balance!

August 20, 2012: Covering the Middle

Players so often hear coaches tell them to attack the opponent's middle. (The middle is not the middle of the table; it's the midpoint between your forehand and backhand, where your playing elbow is.) But it is equally important to be able to cover the middle when the opponent goes there. How do you do that?

First, remember the "Middle Rule." In general, if the ball comes to your middle and you are rushed or close to the table, favor your backhand; if you have time or are not too close to the table, favor your forehand. You can vary this rule based on your own individual skills and playing style, but in general it's a pretty good rule to go by.

However, there is more you can do against those middle balls. Don't think of them as a problem; think of them as an opportunity. If you react properly and in time, you have several advantages.

If you are using your backhand close to the table, you can do a quick attack to both wide angles, as well as the opponent's middle. Often it's the perfect time to go quick to the opponent's forehand, drawing him out of position. If he sees that coming, he may move to cover his forehand—in which case he may be open on the wide backhand.

If you are using your forehand, here's your chance to dominate the table. First, just like with the backhand, you now have an angle into both wide corners, as well as into the middle. Second, the shot will leave you in

perfect forehand position for the next shot, so if you are strong on the forehand, you probably will get two forehands in a row.

Whether you use your forehand or backhand, you always have the option of going right back at the opponent's middle, and if your shot there is stronger than their shot to your middle, you should have the initiative.

So learn to cover your middle and turn this normal weakness into a strength. Practice this with random drills where your partner puts the ball to all parts of the table—both wide angles and your middle—and you practice making strong returns against them. Another good drill is to have your practice partner alternate hitting one randomly to one of the wide angles, then to your middle. You respond to the random wide angle shots with the appropriate shot, and then move to cover the middle shot with your forehand so that you learn how to dominate the table with the forehand from the middle. (You can also do both of these drills, and many others, multiball style.) Or make up your own drills to learn to cover the middle—there are many possibilities. Go to it.

April 8, 2013—Covering and Recovering From the Middle

Most coaches stress that you should place most shots to one of three spots: the wide backhand, the wide forehand, and the middle. The middle is roughly the opponent's playing elbow, the transition point between forehand and backhand. While most players can cover the wide corners reasonably well (unless drawn out of position first), the middle is often far more difficult to cover, even if in position. It also draws the player out of position, often leaving one of the corners open. While it often takes two shots to the corners to be effective (the first shot is mostly to get the player out of position), shots to the middle are effective on the first shot, and often leave the player open to all three spots on the next shot.

So how does a player cover these middle shots, and recover for the next shot?

How you cover the middle depends on your playing style, but there is a general guideline for most players, which I've mentioned in previous sections. If you are rushed or close to the table, favor your backhand. If you have time or are off the table, favor your forehand. (This is especially true if you have a good forehand loop.) But remember these are guidelines. For example, if you have a much stronger backhand, use that whenever possible to cover the middle, and then try to dominate the rest of the rally with your

backhand. If you have a much stronger forehand, then perhaps play a step off the table so you aren't rushed, and use that to cover the middle, and then try to dominate the rest of the rally with your forehand.

But it's not enough to just cover the middle; you have to be ready for the next shot. There are two possibilities: recovering after a backhand, and recovering after a forehand.

If you play a backhand from the middle, then you leave your wide backhand open. If you are relatively close to the table, then you have little time to recover. So the focus here is to follow up by rapidly getting back into position to cover that wide backhand. If you have a strong backhand, then you can take advantage of this situation by often getting two strong backhands in—the first will come from the middle, and by playing it wide to the opponent's backhand, you are likely to get a crosscourt return to your backhand, and so will get to play a second strong backhand. (In fact, you can keep doing this, locking up the opponent in a backhand-to-backhand duel, if your backhand is stronger. But don't just go to the backhand—also attack the middle, and when you see an opening, or if the opponent is weak on that side, the wide forehand.)

But here's the problem—after hitting a backhand from the middle, if you rush too quickly to cover against a shot to the wide backhand, you might inadvertently leave the forehand side open, and a smart player will follow his shot to your backhand with an attack or quick shot there. So your best response after your backhand from the middle is to move back to cover for the backhand, but come to a stop before the opponent hits his next shot. It's better to be slightly out of position but in a ready stance as the opponent hits his next shot than moving into position as he does so.

If you go to your opponent's middle, and he covers with a backhand, then watch to see how he recovers. Most often he'll be open on the next shot on one of the wide corners, and it is your job to see if he leaves the wide backhand open, or covers it so quickly he leaves the wide forehand open. If you are not sure, there's a simple solution—go to the middle again!

If you play a forehand from the middle, then you leave the wide forehand open. But if you are at least a step or two off the table, you have time to cover for it. In fact, if you are a good forehand player with good footwork, then you very much want to play forehands from the middle of the table, since you really get two for the price of one since you will likely get a second forehand, and you likely can end the point with one of these

forehands.

But this often depends on the strength and (more importantly) the depth of your first forehand from the middle. If it is weak or lands short, then it is easy for your opponent to attack aggressively, and in this case your wide forehand is often open. But just as with the backhand, if you try to cover that side too quickly, you'll leave the wide backhand open. So again, come to a stop and get into a ready position before the opponent hits the ball.

If you go to your opponent's middle, and he covers with a forehand, then watch to see how he recovers. Most often he'll be open on the next shot on one of the wide corners, and it is your job to see whether he leaves the wide forehand open, or covers it so quickly he leaves the wide backhand open. If you're not sure, just as before there's a simple solution—go to the middle again! But the danger here is you may let a forehand-dominant player play his forehand over and over from the middle, which is almost always a mistake. If the opponent is looking to play a second forehand from the middle, then go after the corners.

It's a cat and mouse game, where each player is trying to get the initiative, either by attacking the middle or attacking from the middle. If one player can draw the opponent out of position by going to the middle, and then attack an open wide corner, then he's won this cat and mouse game. If the other player makes a strong shot from the middle and follows it with another, then he has won.

October 7, 2013—Covering the Middle with the Forehand

One of the so-called axioms of table tennis is this: Against balls to your middle, if you are close to the table or rushed, favor your backhand; if you are not close to the table or have time, favor the forehand. It's a useful guideline for most players. However, if you have a strong forehand, you might want to cover the middle with it, even when rushed or close to the table. How do you do this? You have two options.

Historically, the standard way was to step off the table to give yourself time to get into position for a forehand, and hit a late but strong forehand. This especially worked for loopers, who can use both spin and speed in powering a forehand loop from a few feet further back than usual. Hitters, however, had a problem with this as hitting the ball late made their shots a lot less effective than their usual hitting at the top of the bounce or earlier. So many hitters, especially pips-out penholders, developed techniques

where they'd take the rushed forehand from the middle closer to the table by shortening their stroke, leaning to their left (for a righty), and rotating their upper torso backwards. They would also use this technique when stepping around their backhand to play a rushed forehand.

Some loopers experimented with this, such as 1993 World Men's Singles Champion Jean-Philippe Gatien, who was famous for looping from close to the table. Since then generations of world-class players have copied that, and many high-level matches become battles over who can loop from closer to the table. The first one that backs up gives the other player time to wind up as well as having more ground to cover. So these days many world-class players (including most of the best ones, pretty much all of them loopers) favor the same technique pioneered by hitters and then adopted by loopers such as Gatien, which is to simply shorten their swing and lean to the left (for righties) and rotate their upper torso to cover the middle with their forehand while staying close to the table. Like hitters, they also adopted this for when stepping around their backhand to play a rushed forehand.

Here's a classic example of this technique, with Gatien himself. Go to YouTube.com, and search for "Samsonov-Gatien 2001 Osaka" (tape is 3:39 long). Go to the point starting 33 seconds in, and see Gatien's third shot, the forehand 36 seconds in. (Gatien's the lefty on the far side.) Most players, of course, will not do this with as much power as Gatien.

This is also an example of where an old dog can learn new tricks—both older players reading this, and this coach as well. I don't know if I qualify as an "old dog" yet at 53, but it wasn't long ago that I was still coaching most players to take these middle balls farther off the table with their forehands. Now I teach both ways, but favor taking the ball quicker with a shorter stroke. Who did I learn this from? Another "old dog," 1971 World Champion Stellan Bengtsson, now a top U.S. coach.

August 27, 2012—Movement in Doubles

There are two standard ways to move in doubles. At the advanced levels, if you have two righties and they train regularly for doubles, they usually learn *circling footwork*, where after each shot the player steps backwards and circles clockwise to the left so they can approach the table from their backhand side and go into a neutral or forehand-favoring ready position. (A righty's normal ready stance would be toward the left, with his playing elbow near the center of the table, or more to the left to favor the

forehand, or more to the right to favor the backhand.) Two lefties would do the same, except they move counter-clockwise to the right. However, learning to do circling footwork takes a lot of practice, usually under the supervision of a coach. You also need two mobile players.

There are four movements made with this circling footwork. Assuming two righties, they are:

1. After making your shot, step backward.
2. As your partner is moving to and making his shot, you move to the left.
3. As your partner steps back (or to the right and then back if his shot was from the backhand side), you move in to the table from the left side, allowing you to start the rally off in a neutral or forehand-favoring ready stance.
4. Move to where the ball is being hit and make your shot. Then repeat from #1 above.

For most players (and for lefty-righty combos, which is an advantage in doubles), it's easier to use *in-out footwork*. Basically this means that after each shot, a player steps backwards to allow his partner to move in, and the two take turns, moving in and out. You don't want to move too much to the side, or 1) you'll be out of position on the next shot; 2) if the opponents hit an angled shot toward you you'll likely block your partner, and 3) if you don't block your partner against an angled shot, he'll likely block you from getting back after that shot.

The disadvantage of in-out footwork is that if there are two righties or two lefties, one of them will usually approach the table from the forehand side, and so won't be in a natural ready position. This is fine if one of the players is stronger on the backhand than the forehand. So you should normally position the stronger forehand player on the left, the stronger backhand player on the right. (Reverse for two lefties.) If you have a lefty and a righty, then in-out footwork is natural, with the lefty trying to stay on the right side, the righty on the left side.

There are four movements made with this in-out footwork.

1. After making your shot, step backward.
2. Watch where your partner is moving to make his shot, and move to the opposite side.

3. As your partner steps back, you step in.
4. Move to where the ball is being hit and make your shot. Then repeat from #1 above.

You can also do a hybrid of these two styles of footwork, where you generally use in-out movements, but when you see the opportunity, you circle around to the left (for two righties) behind your partner so you can approach the table from the backhand side and so get into a neutral or forehand-favoring ready stance for the next shot. With lefty-righty combos (or if you have one player much stronger on the forehand, one much stronger on the backhand), you would favor in-out footwork, but perhaps switch to circling footwork when the two players are stuck on the wrong side so they can get back to their better positioning.

CHAPTER SIX: TACTICS

PLACEMENT TACTICS

March 7, 2011—Do You Hit to the Three Spots?

Table tennis is chess at lightning speed. Imagine that split second as you are about to hit the ball. Do you hit wherever, or do you pick the placement like choosing a move in chess? There are three main spots to choose from (plus a huge number of other variables, i.e. speed, spin, depth, which stroke to use, etc.). Pick the best move! When attacking, most opponents don't have all three spots well covered—wide forehand, wide backhand, middle (playing elbow). Most have the backhand covered, at least at the start of the rally, and maybe one of the other spots. Most players just go to the backhand, the place the opponent almost always has covered. Pick your spot, don't telegraph it, and perhaps fake one way and go another at the last second.

March 28, 2011—Seven Placements and the Wide Angles

There are basically seven different directional placements in table tennis, though only five or six are available at any time. They are:

1. Outside forehand corner
2. Forehand corner
3. Middle forehand
4. Middle (opponent's elbow)
5. Middle backhand
6. Backhand corner
7. Outside backhand corner

Generally, you never want to put a ball to the middle forehand or middle backhand, where your opponent is just standing there, ready to hit a forehand or backhand. Most often you should be going to the wide corners or the opponent's elbow. The other options are outside the corners, but these can be tricky to play into—you have less table, and so it's easy to go long (or more specifically, off the side). Here are your options for going outside the wide corners:

- **Off a short ball in the middle of the table**, you can play either wide angle.
- **Off a deep ball toward the middle of the table**, it's difficult to play it to either wide corner, though with good topspin you can. You can also sidespin loop at a wide angle.
- **Off a deep ball from one of your corners** you can play diagonally outside the corner, especially if you can sidespin loop. This gives you the most extreme angles, and should become a staple of every player.
- **When serving** you can serve from a corner and, with a breaking sidespin, serve at extremely wide angles.

When you can play into those wide angles outside the corners, your opponent will have great difficulty as you increase the amount of table he has to cover. So add these angles to your repertoire and turn table tennis into a truly full-court sport.

April 11, 2011—The Value of Down the Line

Crosscourt. It's so much easier to hit that way. Most often you get to hit the ball back the way it's coming, and it's easier to hit that way than re-directing it down the line. You've probably hit so much forehand-to-forehand and backhand-to-backhand that it's more natural to you. And you've got fifteen and a half more inches of table than when hitting down the line. (Do the math.)

But guess what? Your opponent also likes those crosscourt shots, and he's probably already setting up for it. Watch that split second of absolute horror on his face as he realizes you are going down the line—or at least a look of apprehension—and you'll know the value of down-the-line shots.

Oh, and when you warm up, hit some forehand-to-backhand and backhand-to-forehand. It's a big table out there; use both sides of it.

July 11, 2011—Where to Place Your Putaways

Where should you put your putaway shots? Whether they are smashes or loop kills, there are basically three options.

Option One: The easiest spot. This usually would be the longest diagonal. This gives the most table to aim for, and so is the safest and most consistent. The down side—it's also the spot most opponents will expect you

to aim for, and so is the most likely to be returned. At the beginning/intermediate level, you should aim most putaways to the safest spot since it's probably not coming back.

Option Two: Aim one way, go the other. Most often this means aiming for the longest diagonal, and then, as the opponent moves to cover that spot, going the other way, usually down the line. This is riskier as you both have less table to go for and you are setting up to go one way, then have to change at the last second, but it's also going to make it very difficult for the opponent to return this shot. It's only at the higher levels that opponents can react and cover both corners.

Option Three: The opponent's middle. This is the transition spot between forehand and backhand. At all levels this is probably the most difficult spot to react to. There are players who can almost relentlessly return shot after shot at the corners, but go at their middle and they fall apart. This is the most common spot top players aim at. The down side—it means you don't get the long diagonal to aim for, plus it's a moving target, depending on where the opponent is. Also, a forehand-oriented player may counter-attack that ball with his forehand—but if he does, he's probably moving early, and leaving his wide forehand open, which is where you would go in this case.

January 23, 2012—Forcing an Opponent Out of Position

There are a number of ways to effectively force an opponent out of position. You can do this by moving him side to side, in and out, or some combination of this. In practical terms, here are ways to do so.

Corners—You play one ball wide to either the forehand or backhand. As the opponent moves wide to return the shot, he either leaves the other wide corner open, or he moves to cover that side so quickly that he leaves the other corner open. (This is really two tactics, since you can start by going wide to either the forehand or backhand.)

Middle—You go to the opponent's middle (playing elbow), usually aggressively so as not to set him up for an easy shot from his stronger side. If he moves to cover it with his forehand, he leaves his forehand side open, and if he moves to cover it with his backhand, he leaves his backhand side open. You either play to the open side, or if the opponent moves to cover that side too quickly, you go the other way.

Short to forehand, deep to backhand—You serve or drop a ball short to the forehand, bringing the opponent in over the table. Then he's jammed over the table and vulnerable to a deep ball to the backhand. Sometimes the opponent moves so quickly to cover the wide backhand that he's vulnerable to another short ball to the forehand, or deep to the wide forehand.

Short to backhand, deep to forehand—You serve or drop a ball short to the backhand, bringing the opponent in over the table. Then he's jammed over the table and vulnerable to a deep ball to the forehand. Sometimes the opponent moves so quickly to cover the wide forehand that he's vulnerable to another short ball to the backhand, or deep to the wide backhand.

Deep to backhand against a forehand player—Against a forehand-oriented player, you play the ball deep to the backhand over and over, often by pushing, until the opponent steps around to attack with his forehand. You quick-block the ball to his wide forehand, or if he moves too quickly to cover that, come right back at his backhand again.

In the scenarios given above, I've given two places to place the ball after forcing the opponent out of position. In each case there is a third option—if the opponent is hustling to cover the corners, you can go after his middle. It's hard to cover the middle when you are moving to get back into position. (This is why it is rarely a good idea to be moving back into position when the opponent is hitting the ball. It's better to be in a ready position but slightly out of position than in position but in motion.)

How to apply the above? Study your opponent, and focus on using your serve and receive to set up the above, as well as doing so in rallies, and turn your opponent into a puppet—and you hold the strings!

February 20, 2012—Moving Opponents In and Out

Most players learn early in their table tennis lives the importance of moving opponents side to side, playing the three spots—wide backhand, wide forehand, and the opponent's middle (the transition point between forehand and backhand, usually around the playing elbow). However, a quote from a Dan Seemiller camp from many years ago has always stood out for me. He said moving an opponent in and out was even more important than moving them side to side.

The two main examples of this are:

- Serving short or pushing short, and then attacking deep, especially if you use the diagonals, i.e. go short to the forehand and attack the deep backhand, or short to the backhand and attack the deep forehand. Or in both cases, after dropping the ball short, attack the middle.
- Forcing an opponent off the table in a rally and then dropping the ball short with a drop shot or dead block. Again, use the diagonals when possible, dropping to the short forehand and attacking the deep backhand, or short to the backhand and attacking the deep forehand. Or in both cases, after dropping the ball short, attack the middle.

In both of these cases you shouldn't always go short and then long; often it's better to go short a second time, catching the opponent as he moves back to react to the expected deep ball.

These types of tactics are rare at the beginning level, are used by some at the intermediate level, and are central to most advanced games. At the recent U.S. Olympic Trials, against short serves, match after match had receivers mixing up short pushes and flips, with the server sometimes tied up trying to cover for both. Most serves were short (or half-long, i.e. second bounce near the end line), and if it was returned short, the server would either attack or sometimes drop it short again, forcing the receiver to cover for both.

Once an opponent is forced off the table, most players keep blasting the ball until they win the point. In most cases, while a short ball may set up the attack that forces the weak ball to put away, once you get that weak ball it's often better to keep attacking until you win the point. However, against a player who is returning your attacks consistently from off the table, sometimes it's better to take something off the attack to throw off the opponent's timing, and then blast the next ball. For example, if you are having trouble getting through the opponent's fishing or lobbing defense, throw in a dead block to bring him in, and then attack again with the opponent now too close to the table to defend. Dan Seemiller, both now and when he was winning his five U.S. men's singles titles, would constantly mix up strong attacks and dead blocks.

So learn to turn your opponent into a marionette, and learn to yank his strings as you move him in and out.

April 9, 2012—3-2-1 Placement Rule

[NOTE—In my original Tip, this was the "2-2-1" rule, but I've since

upgraded going to the middle to three times.]

Where do most players block best? On the backhand. Where do most players attack the most? To the opponent's backhand. This never made sense to me.

When attacking there are three places you should normally go for: the wide forehand, the middle (the opponent's crossover point between forehand and backhand, usually around the elbow), and the wide backhand. Most beginning and intermediate players probably attack to the backhand twice as often as to the forehand, and almost never to the middle. We'll call it the 1-0-2 rule, i.e. they proportionately go once to the forehand, zero times to the middle, and twice to the backhand.

Instead, try the 3-2-1 rule, where you proportionately go three times to the middle, twice to the forehand, and once to the backhand. (This assumes your opponent isn't able to counter-attack with his forehand consistently, as they often do at the higher levels. If they do, change your attack placement accordingly, though it also might mean your opening attack is too soft, too short, or predictable.) Few players block on the forehand as well as on the backhand, and everyone's vulnerable at the middle. So why not go where the opponent is vulnerable?

There are exceptions to this rule. If you are going for a particularly difficult attacking shot from a wide corner, go crosscourt, where you have more table. (The table is 9 feet long, but about 10.3 feet crosscourt, about 13.5 inches longer, almost seven more inches on the far side.) Also, you have to take into consideration your own positioning. For example, if you are attacking with your forehand from the wide backhand corner, if you attack down the line you are vulnerable to a crosscourt block to your forehand (unless you are fast on your feet), so you might go to the middle or backhand. And, of course, if the opponent is able to consistently counter-attack with his forehand you might want to attack there less often.

SPECIFIC TACTICS

February 21, 2011—Wait a Split Second Longer When Looping a Push, Then Change Directions

Most blockers develop timing to react to your normal loop. At the instant they think you will contact the ball, they commit to blocking either forehand or backhand. So set up to loop crosscourt, and make no attempt to

hide this. At the instant you normally would contact the ball, watch the opponent move to cover the apparent crosscourt loop. Wait a split second longer than normal, letting the ball travel perhaps six inches to a foot more than usual, and then go down the line. (This is especially effective when looping from the wide forehand.)

You can do this the other way, faking down the line and then going crosscourt, but it's not usually as effective, for two reasons. First, since most players tend to loop crosscourt far more often than down the line, blockers tend to move to cover the crosscourt angle. Second, down the line is a shorter distance, so the opponent has less time to recover for that shot.

October 16, 2011—You Must Attack Those Steady Deep Backspin Serve Returns

Many opponents push back deep any backspin serves, and will often even do so against a sidespin or even topspin serve by chopping down on the ball, often right off the bounce. And so you get a predictable backspin return off your serve.

If the opponent is going to give you these slow, predictable backspin returns, you must take advantage of it. This means starting all of these rallies off with a serve and loop, either forehand or backhand. Simply decide you are going to do it, and do it. Yes, easier said than done, but the more you do it, the easier it becomes. You don't need a lot of speed as long as you get good spin, loop the ball deep on the table, and vary the placement to the wide backhand, wide forehand, and at the opponent's elbow.

Often it's best to serve short to the middle. By serving short, you make it difficult for the receiver to attack the serve, and so you get those predictable long push returns. By serving to the middle, you cut off the extreme angles.

You should favor your stronger side—usually the forehand, though not always—but it's better to be able to attack from both wings when necessary than give away such a free attack. Don't over-anticipate the direction of the incoming push; wait and see the actual direction as a crafty opponent might aim one way and change directions at the last second.

How important is it to attack these long backspin receives? I've seen top players coach matches where they were confused that they had to actually tell a player to do this because it was second-nature to them.

December 19, 2011—Time-Out Tactics

Each player is allowed a one-minute time-out during a tournament or league match. (Often a coach calls the time-out, but the player can waive that off if he doesn't want one at that time, except in a team match.) When should you call a time-out? Here are some scenarios where you should call a time-out—but remember, you are only allowed one, so choose carefully. I've put them in order of priority. There are also times you shouldn't call a time-out, such as when you are in the zone (i.e. focused and playing well), and a time-out might only disturb your concentration. If a coach calls a time-out and you really, really don't think you need one (and want to save it for later), then wave him off. (You might want to let him know in advance you might do this.)

<u>When to Call a Time-out</u>

1. **When losing focus before a key point**. This is the most important time to call a time-out. A time-out is a good way to get your concentration back.
2. **To think about or discuss tactics at a key point**. Generally do this when you are about to serve, since you have complete control over choosing your two serves. If you have a coach, he might be able to help choose two serves to use. Call it when you are receiving mostly if you have a good idea what the opponent will serve, and are debating how you should return that serve. Or call it to think or discuss any other tactical plans. It's also valuable to call a time-out when you are winning a relatively close game (especially late in a match), such as at 10-8 or 9-7, so as to clear your mind, think tactically, and close out that game. This is often when the Chinese team calls time-outs.
3. **When falling behind in a key game**. It's useful to call a time-out if you lose the first game and are falling behind in the second (since you absolutely do not want to fall behind 0-2), or if you have already lost two games and will lose the match if you lose another. The key is not to wait until you are way behind; instead, call the time-out when you are still relatively close and can still find a way to come back. The time-out allows you to make sure you are focused and to rethink your tactics. It's also a

good way to give your opponent a chance to cool off if he's playing well—there's nothing wrong with calling a time-out in hopes of disturbing his concentration or throwing off his rhythm.

4. **Desperation tactic**. Far too many players call time-outs as a desperation tactic near the end of a match when they are way behind and are pretty much out of it, but this rarely leads to a win. If you are losing badly, why wait until you are way down in the last game? It's far better to call the time-out earlier in the hope of not being in this situation, where the time-out will rarely help.

September 10, 2012—If You Can See It, You Can Loop It

This Tip is for those who wish to reach a high level of play, and who either play a looping style (as do the large majority of top players) or are developing their style of play and aren't sure what direction to go. The modern game at the higher levels is an incredibly athletic, fast, and spinny sport. What were considered incredible shots in the past are now routine as the looping game has developed to the current level. Part of this comes from training, part of it comes with the realization that these shots are possible, and part of it comes from modern sponges, which are far superior for looping than the ones from the past. (If I had some of these modern inverted surfaces back in the 1970s and 1980s . . . oh boy!)

The down side is that we've lost much of the hitter versus looper battles of yesteryear. Hitters dominated the 1960s, 70s, and much of the 80s, but by the 1990s loopers dominated, and now there are essentially zero hitters at the highest levels. What this means is that if you want to reach the highest levels, or even to reach a relatively high level, you probably should be looping as well. This doesn't mean other styles can't compete below world-class level, just that they are at a disadvantage. So unless you have a very good reason not to, you should develop your game as a looper. (There are also some world-class choppers, but they are not so much choppers as chopper/loopers, who primarily chop on the backhand, usually with long pips, and chop, loop, and counterloop on the forehand.)

What exactly does this mean? At its most basic level, it means if the ball comes long and you can see it, you should train to loop it. Period. (My definition here of "seeing it" is any ball that's not coming at you so fast that you can't really do anything other than reflex block or back up well off the table so you have more time.)

This doesn't mean you can't smash balls that are high, though many top players loop those as well. What it means is you don't have time to make that split-second decision on whether to loop or do something else; that wastes time. Instead, assume you are going to loop it until proven otherwise, and react by immediately setting up to loop. If the ball comes at you so fast you simply can't react in time to loop, then by all means do a reflex block or counter, or back up and fish and lob. But in general, as the ball comes out to you, you should be reflexively setting up to loop.

There is one other complication—should you loop on both sides or just on the forehand? These days I'd say both sides. There are still many players who reach high levels looping their forehand but mostly hitting their backhands, but even that can be a disadvantage at the higher levels, where these backhand hitters are turned into blockers. And yet a good, hard backhand hit or strong blocking game combined with a good forehand loop can take you pretty far. But looping from both sides can take you even farther—just watch the very best players and see how nearly all of them loop nearly everything from both sides.

So to expand on what all this means at its most basic level, here is some advice I tell up-and-coming juniors from the intermediate level up—and remember my definition above of "seeing it.": On the forehand, if you can see it, loop it. If you can't see it, back off and loop it. On the backhand, if you can see it, loop it. If you can't see it, either block or back off and loop or fish.

January 7, 2013—Six Great Rallying Tactics

I've noticed over years of coaching in matches that the large majority of opponents are most vulnerable to one of six types of rallying tactics. These are tactics once you are into a topspin rally, so we're not looking at serve and receive here, though of course you can use that to set up these rallying tactics. Here they are, in rough order of frequency.

Forehand, then backhand. This is against two types of players. The first is a player who is quick to attack with the forehand from the backhand side, but has a weaker backhand. You go to the forehand first to draw him out to that side, and then you come back to his weaker backhand side. The key is that you choose the ball you let him have on the forehand side and are ready to counter that ball back to the backhand. The second type is a player who is

strong on both wings, but weaker on the backhand once pulled out of position by going to their forehand. These are what I call “pocket players,” who can rally or attack forever when in position, but whose level drops dramatically once out of that comfortable pocket.

Relentlessly go after middle. This is against a player who is good on both wings, but doesn’t cover the middle well. Players like this are usually either tall (and so have a bigger middle) or lack mobility. Many opponents mistakenly go after the corners against these players, which they are very good against. Against a player who mostly covers the middle with the backhand a good tactic is to move the ball back and forth between wide backhand and middle, with sudden attacks to the forehand.

Pin them on backhand. This is against a player with a weaker backhand who doesn’t use the forehand from the backhand side very often. The tactic is to keep going wide and deep to the backhand with quick, aggressive shots. The goal is to force a weak ball from his weak side that you can put away. You can also go after the middle, especially if he tries to cover it with his backhand.

In and out. This is against players who either soft loop or fish over and over from off the table. Often they are two-winged players who can topspin forever if you keep hitting the ball out to them. Instead, block the ball soft to bring them in, then attack out at them. Use the diagonals—block soft to the forehand, then hard to backhand, or vice versa.

Go after forehand. Some players simply have weak forehands, and can’t do much there even if they know the ball is going there. This is especially true of some players who greatly favor the backhand and have limited mobility to cover that wide forehand. When you go after their forehand, they have difficulty, and they are hoping you will go back to their backhand, or at least to their middle where they can also use their backhand. Rarely do so.

It’s complicated. This is against a player who changes his playing style in the middle of a game. Sometimes one of the categories above fits, other times he switches to another category. The most common example is the player who switches between a two-winged attack (but weak in middle) and an all-out forehand attack (but weak at wide corners, especially if you go to the wide forehand and then come back to the backhand). Be aware of the changes so you can apply the appropriate counter-tactic. Remember that when he

change tactics, he is often going to his secondary game (i.e. weaker game) because your tactics were working against his primary game. If you play smart, the odds are he will be even more tactically vulnerable with his secondary game.

February 11, 2013—Winning with Backspin for the Non-Chopper

You don't need to be a chopper to win with backspin, even in this modern age of topspin. Backspin will always have its place, when used properly. Of course, even attackers often serve backspin, hoping for a pushed return (backspin) that they can loop. However, when should an attacking player use backspin in a rally?

Backspin Against Topspin: Chopping (which is backspin against an incoming topspin) can be tricky, especially with a fast attacking racket. Usually an attacker will use backspin only against an incoming backspin, i.e. a push. There is one main exception. If you are forced off the table, and attack from the wide forehand, an opponent may quick-block to your backhand. Ideally, you can attack this as well, either backhand hitting or looping. However, if you are out of position and have to reach for the ball, a better answer might be a backhand chop. This keeps you in the rally, gives you time to get back into the point, and it may throw off the opponent's timing.

Short Pushes: If you push short (so the ball would bounce twice on the opponent's side of the table if given the chance), then your opponent can't loop it. If you keep it low, it's very difficult to attack effectively, and will usually result in a pushed return that you can attack. Key to this is keeping the ball very low to the net. Don't just dink the ball back; brush it back lightly with backspin, which will make it easier to keep the ball low and short. Learn to change directions at the last second, dropping the ball short to the middle, left, or right. Short pushes are especially effective if you push both long and short, so your opponent never knows what's coming.

Long Pushes: There are many ways an attacker can win with long pushes. The key to long pushes is to push quick, low, heavy, deep, and at wide angles (or to the middle against some two-winged players). You should also often aim one way, and at the last second change directions. (So aim to the backhand and go quick to the forehand, or vice versa.) Here are some other

ways to win with long pushes:

- A quick push rushes an opponent, forcing mistakes and weak shots.
- Heavy backspin gives many opponents trouble, forcing mistakes and weak shots.
- Against an opponent who doesn't attack backspin well and often pushes (such as many choppers or blockers), pushing allows you to pick and choose which shot you want to attack.
- They force an opponent to drop their racket and shoulder to lift the ball, throwing off their timing not only on that shot, but on the next shot.
- If an opponent attacks a push to the backhand with the forehand, you can quick-block to the often open wide forehand—and if they get to that, you can quick-block again to the wide backhand. Also, after looping from the backhand corner, many opponents anticipate a block to the wide forehand, so a quick block right back to the backhand catches them. The same tactics often work against a player who opens with a backhand loop from the backhand side.
- A quick push to the wide forehand can catch an opponent off guard, and if he does attack it, you can then quick-block to the wide backhand. If he moves quickly to cover that, a second quick-block to the wide forehand can catch him moving the wrong way.
- A long push slows down play, thereby throwing off an opponent's timing.

Happy Backspinning!

October 21, 2013—Should You Choose Serve, Receive, or Side at the Start of a Match?

The time when a player is most likely to miss easy shots is at the very start of the match. That's when a player may not yet be fully warmed up or used to his opponent's shots yet. So it's often best to let the other guy serve first, let him mess up on his serve and attack at the start, and then get your chance to serve, when you are more into the match.

There's another, more mathematical way of looking at this. (Those with math phobia, skip this paragraph.) Suppose in a given match, the server will score 60% of the points. (In reality, it is not that high in competition

matches—more like 55% or so.) So you figure every time you serve a point, you should score an average of 0.6 points. That means if you mess up on your serve and lose two in a row because you aren't yet warmed up, you've mathematically lost 2 x 0.6 points, or 1.2 points. If you do so when receiving, you've only lost 2 x 0.4 points, or 0.8 points. In other words, you can more easily afford to lose a point on the other guy's serve than on your own—so let him serve when he's not warmed up, and put off your own serving until you are slightly more warmed up.

The exception, of course, is the player who needs to get a quick lead to build up confidence. If you lose confidence when you fall behind and don't play as well, then by all means serve first. But in that case, you need to work on your mental game.

What about choice of sides? At the start of a match, whoever wins the coin flip (or the hiding of the ball under the table) gets choice of serving, receiving, or side to start on. (You change sides after each game, and as soon as someone scores five points in the last, deciding game if it goes that far.) What if on one side it's harder to see the ball (because of the background), or the floor is slippery on that side, or something like that? There are two ways of looking at this.

A close match will go into the final game. In that final game you'll switch sides as soon as someone reaches five points. But that means that you'll likely play more points after switching sides. If you switch sides at 5-4 and the game goes to 10-10, at that point you'd have played nine points on the bad side, eleven on the good side—plus you'll be on the good side for the points at deuce. (If you switch sides at 5-3 then it's twelve on the good side, eight on the bad side.) So if you choose the bad side at the start, you'll start the fifth game on the bad side, and end up playing more points on the good side.

However, some find it harder to get into a match if they start on the bad side. These players may want to start on the good side, so that when they do move to the bad side they will be more into the match, and less likely to be bothered by the bad side.

GENERAL TACTICS

May 16, 2011—A Levels Approach to Tactics

I like to divide tactics into five levels. First, think of your game and

your opponent's game as a combination of strengths, average aspects, and weaknesses. Then there are nine possible combinations, divided into the five tactical levels.

Level 2 Tactics

- Your strengths against opponent's weaknesses

Level 1 Tactics

- Your strengths against opponent's average
- Your average against opponent's weaknesses

Level 0 Tactics

- Your strengths against opponent's strengths
- Your average against opponent's average
- Your weaknesses against opponent's weaknesses

Level -1 Tactics

- Your average against opponent's strengths
- Your weaknesses against opponent's average

Level -2 Tactics

- Your weaknesses against opponent's strengths

Next time you play a practice match, why not analyze your game and your opponent's, and the tactics you use, and see what level tactics you are using? Are your tactics positive, or are you falling into negative territory?

June 27, 2011—Complex vs. Simple Tactics

There's a myth that top players use complicated tactics to defeat opponents. Perhaps as they are about to serve they are planning out their first

three or four shots? After all, chess players plan things out many moves ahead, and table tennis has been called chess at light speed.

That's not what happens in table tennis. Top tactical players don't work out complicated tactical schemes; they look at all the complexities and find simple patterns to disarm an opponent. There are just too many variables to plan too much. It's better to focus on a few simple tactics that will tend to favor what you want to do. The key is choosing those few simple tactics. That's your primary goal in the first game of a match, equal in importance to actually winning that game. Some tactics are for setting up your own strengths. For example, if you have a powerful loop against backspin, you might serve backspin so you get a lot of push returns. If the receiver pushes at wide angles, you might serve backspin low to the middle, thereby taking away some of the angle. If you have trouble with heavy backspin, you might serve no-spin, which is more difficult to push heavy. (If you fake backspin and serve it low, it'll usually get pushed.) If you have a good smash, you might serve varying sidespin and topspin serves, with varying speeds and depths. If you are quicker than an opponent, you might serve topspin so you can get right into a topspin rally.

Other tactics are to take away an opponent's strength. For example, if an opponent has a powerful forehand, a simple remedy would be to serve short to the forehand, and then attack out to the backhand, thereby taking the forehand out of the equation. If an opponent has a strong push that is difficult to attack, then serve topspin. If an opponent has strong side-top serves and a good follow-up, then focus on returning the ball deep. If an opponent has a strong forehand and backhand, perhaps go after his middle, the changeover spot between forehand and backhand. And so on.

Similarly, you can use tactics to play into an opponent's weakness or to avoid exposing your own weaknesses. See if you can come up with your own list of tactics of this type. Ideally you'll learn to play your strengths against an opponent's weaknesses. But sometimes you'll play your medium shots to the opponent's weaknesses, or your strengths to the opponent's medium shots.

Most top players focus on just a few tactics—perhaps two or three serve tactics, one or two receive tactics, and one or two rally tactics. This doesn't mean they don't use other tactics as the situation comes up, but they are standard tactics that are ingrained from years of playing and thinking about the sport. The specific tactics against a specific player are far more

limited, and yet, if chosen properly, will pay off dividends.

November 13, 2012—Complex or Simple Tactics?

Far too often players don't think tactically, believing the game is too complex for them to play and think at the same time. And it's true that you shouldn't be doing any conscious thinking during a point. But between points a smart player does think tactically. The key is to keep it simple.

"Tactics isn't about finding complex strategies to defeat an opponent. Tactics is about sifting through all the zillions of possible tactics and finding a few simple ones that work, and developing reflexive tactics to cover other situations." (That's the opening of my book, "Table Tennis Tactics for Thinkers.") What does this mean?

The first part means you don't need to fry your brain working out complex patterns or finding ten ways to beat someone. Find two or three simple ones, and that will usually suffice. Be flexible in adjusting these tactics if they stop working, and try out new ones, but keep it simple.

The second part means you should develop the habit of thinking tactically, and your subconscious will get the idea. It will soon become automatic—you'll develop reflexive tactics to cover most situations. If you tactically tell yourself to play certain shots in a certain way to a certain spot against a certain player, it soon becomes automatic both against him and against similar players, and you can focus on just two or three other tactics instead. To any experienced observer, you'll be playing a very smart tactical game, but in reality you're only aware of two or three aspects of it. You should be no more consciously aware of most of your tactical play than you would the angle of your racket when blocking a loop—not aware at all. You just do it.

Most tactics should become second nature, allowing you to focus on just two or three things in any given match. And yet you'll be playing many more tactics without even thinking about it, because they will have become ingrained on your subconscious. You'll be tactically placing your shots side to side and in and out, varying the speed and spin, and doing all the tactics necessary to win—and you'll barely even notice you are doing it. What a smart player you are!

September 16, 2013—Real Tactics vs. Parroting Tactics

"Real Tactics" are the tactics that a player should use in a given match

to maximize his chances of winning. “Parroting Tactics” are the tactics that many players use because it’s what everyone seems to be doing, and so they figure (consciously or subconsciously) it’s what they should be doing as well. When two players of equal ability play, and one uses “Real Tactics” and the other uses “Parroting Tactics,” guess who usually wins?

The classic example of “Parroting Tactics” would be rarely serving deep to the forehand. At the higher levels, if you serve deep to the forehand, the opponent almost always loops, and the server is at a disadvantage. And so at higher levels you rarely see deep serves to the forehand except as an occasional surprise. At lower levels, opponents often cannot loop effectively or consistently against deep serves to the forehand. They usually have better control on the backhand side, and so are much better if the opponent serves to their backhand side—which most players obligingly do, since that’s what they see stronger players doing.

There is some merit to the idea that a player should play higher-level tactics if he wants to be a higher-level player, and so should avoid serving deep to the forehand since that’s generally not a higher-level tactic. But this misses the point. The higher-level tactics that usually go on in higher-level matches are not about avoiding serving deep to the forehand because others don’t do that; it’s about zeroing in on the opponent’s weaknesses and going after them. Players don’t think, “I’m a higher-level player, and so I shouldn’t serve deep to the forehand.” They think, “My opponent has a strong forehand loop, and so I shouldn’t serve deep to the forehand.” The same higher-level tactics, if applied at lower levels, would be, “My opponent has a weak forehand loop, and so I should serve deep to the forehand.” And that’s what most lower-level players should do, if the tactic works.

You don’t develop higher-level tactical skills by playing weak tactics. You develop them by playing strong tactics, i.e. “Real Tactics.” If the opponent has a weak forehand loop, you serve to it, no matter what the level. Against six-time U.S. Men’s Singles Champion David Zhuang, a pips-out penholder, most players would serve short (which he was very good against) or long to his backhand (allowing him to control the backhand diagonal, which he was also very good at doing), rather than serve long to his forehand, where his pips limited the effectiveness of his receive and where he’d be drawn out of his favored backhand position. A few players figured this out and would regularly serve long backspin to his wide forehand (often “half-long,” so the ball barely went off the end), and then counter-attack effectively

to his open backhand side.

I once coached a player who had lost the first game at deuce after serving over and over to his opponent's strong backhand. I told him he should both serve AND receive every ball to the opponent's weak forehand until the opponent won two points in a row. I even had him serve from the middle and forehand side so he could get a bigger angle into the forehand side. My player went up 9-0 before losing a point, and won the next three games easily by relentlessly going to the opponent's forehand side.

Obviously there is a limit. If the opponent knows you are going to the forehand, and you do so over and Over and OVER, he might get used to it. So you would mix in shots the other way, especially if the opponent is camping out over there. But guess what? If your opponent does camp out on the forehand side to protect that side, then his backhand opens up, and so you go there. That's "Real Tactics." "Parroting Tactics" would be to continue to go to the forehand because the player read an article that says he should go over and over to the opponent's weak forehand.

August 22, 2011—Strategic vs. Tactical Thinking

What's the difference? Strategic thinking is how you develop your game. Tactical thinking is how you use what you have to win. For example, if you have a good loop, a strategic thinker would think about what types of serves will set up your loop, and develop those serves in practice sessions. A tactical thinker would think about what serves will set up your loop in a match against a given opponent. Strategic thinking takes place during the developmental stage of your game—which never ends as long as you are still practicing. Tactical thinking takes place while preparing for and playing a specific match. You need both.

Suppose you have a weak forehand attack against backspin. When an opponent pushes heavy to your forehand, you have to tactically choose whether to use your weak forehand attack (perhaps using good ball placement to make up for the weakness of the attack), or whether to just push it back. Tactically, these are probably your only options. Strategically, you should note this weakness in your game, and go practice it so next time you aren't so limited tactically.

Are you developing your game strategically, i.e. giving yourself the weapons you need tactically? Are you developing your game tactically, i.e. learning to use the weapons you have developed strategically?

September 17, 2012—Why Table Tennis Really Is Chess at Light Speed

We often say table tennis is chess at light speed. It has all the tactics of chess except you don't have time to think things over—there's no time clock, just a ball coming at you, often at dizzying speeds. But table tennis is more like chess in other ways as well.

Most chess openings involve pushing pawns as players maneuver to control the center of the board and attack with their stronger pieces. Most table tennis rallies start with pushing as players maneuver to control the table and attack with their stronger shots.

Chess players try to control the board early on with their bishops and knights, which set up their more powerful pieces, the rooks and queen. Table tennis players try to take control of the rally early on with their opening loops and drives, which set up their more powerful shots, their smashes and loop kills.

Chess players often lose when they bring out their queen too early, before their other pieces are in position to support it. Table tennis players often lose when they try to smash or loop kill too early in the rally, before they've set up the shot.

In chess, if you lose your queen without taking the opponent's queen, you almost always lose. In table tennis, if you can't get your best shot into play while your opponent can, you almost always lose.

In chess you can start off by pushing your pawn one or two squares. In table tennis you can start off by pushing short or long.

Chess players all have a weakness—their king, which they must guard at all times. Table tennis players all have weaknesses, and they must guard those weaknesses at all times.

When a chess player is losing he often tries for a stalemate in desperation. When a table tennis player is losing a point he often lobs in desperation.

In chess the pawns are the weakest shot, but used properly, they can win by supporting stronger pieces, by smothering an opponent, or by getting "queened." In table tennis the push is often the weakest shot, but you can win with it by using it to set up stronger shots, by smothering an opponent with well-placed pushes, or by turning it into a powerful weapon with quickness, placement, heavy backspin, or keeping it short.

When a chess player doesn't know how to react to an opponent's

opening, he studies and learns the proper moves. When a table tennis player can't return an opponent's serve, he practices and learns the proper receives.

In chess, you have a lot of time to think and plan before each move. In table tennis you have a lot of time to think and plan before each match.

In speed chess, you have little time to think and plan before each move. In table tennis you have little time to think and plan before the next point.

In chess, you run into time trouble if you can't quickly and instinctively see the right move in most circumstances. In table tennis you run into trouble if you can't quickly and instinctively see the right shot in most circumstances.

So yes, table tennis is just chess at lightning speed. Which means, of course, that chess is simply table tennis at a glacial pace!

December 5, 2011—Going to the Well Too Often

If you find a tactic that really gives your opponent trouble, do some serious thinking about how often to use it. You may have two options: 1) use the tactic to win one game; or 2) use the tactic to win the match. If you want to squeeze an entire match out of the winning tactic, then you don't want to overuse it and allow the opponent to get used to it.

For example, suppose you have a serve your opponent misses over and over. Unless the opponent is brain dead, if you overuse this serve, he'll get used to it. He'll also expect the serve at key moments—so you have to decide whether it will still be effective at that time. If he hasn't made many good returns of it in the past, then he'll probably have trouble with it under pressure as well, so use it most often at these key, pressure-packed points. When he does make a good return of this serve, hold back on it for a while, and then surprise him with it again.

If you only have one serve that gives the opponent trouble, perhaps you can turn this into two by doing some variation of the serve? A different spin, speed, or depth, or even serving from a different part of the table might be enough variation to allow you to use it more often.

Suppose an opponent with a big loop keeps missing when you push heavy to his backhand. Do you really want to warm up his attack against this by giving it to him over and over? I've had many coaching experiences where a player went to the well too often, and tactically had nothing left in the last game. I once coached a match where the opponent had a huge backhand loop

off a deep push to his backhand to follow up his short backspin serves. In the first game, the opponent missed over and over. Between games I suggested using the tactic at the start of game two, then holding back on it a bit, perhaps pushing more to the forehand, pushing short, or flipping. Instead, the player I was coaching pushed long to the backhand over and over, took an early lead—and then suddenly the opponent's big backhand loop started hitting. Afraid to push deep to the backhand, my player started pushing to the forehand, where the opponent was even stronger. Afraid this late in the match to start flipping or pushing short, my player fell apart, and the rest of the match was a rout.

It's important to come up with several winning tactics, and vary them. Experiment early in the match, and find what works. If you have one serve that works, find a variation of it so you have two. If you have two serves that give an opponent trouble, go back and forth between them somewhat randomly, mixing in other serves as well, perhaps looking for a third effective variation. If you build up a lead, perhaps temporarily retire one of these serves for later. But be careful—don't blow a lead by failing to use what was a winning tactic. It's all about judgment.

May 28, 2013—What to Do at the End of a Close Game

You know the problem: you're playing well, you're battling with stronger players, and every game is close—*but you can't quite win*. Far too often you lose those close ones and have nothing to show for your great play but another "what if..."—and hopefully, just maybe, a little more experience so you'll do better next time. So how does one close out a match?

First, let me introduce you to what I call "Larry's Six-Month Law," or simply Larry's Law for short. In short, it says that when a player improves or is playing well, he may battle with "stronger" players, but at first he'll lose most of the close ones. Why? Because the other guy has more experience playing at that higher level, both tactically and psychologically, and so has more experience at what to do to win at that level, especially in close games. It doesn't mean you can't beat them, it simply means you need to gain experience at that level so you'll know what to do in those close games.

So what should you do? That largely depends on your playing style. But the most important thing is that during the match you have learned what does and does not work in this match-up between you and your opponent—or more specifically, your style and your opponent's style, and your strengths

and weaknesses against your opponent's strengths and weaknesses.

There are generally two ways to score points at the end of a close match. You can do something tricky, such as a deceptive serve or an unexpected spin (such as a suddenly heavy push or loop), and perhaps win an easy point. This works at all levels, but especially at lower and intermediate levels. By the higher levels such tricks are less successful, though they still work if used sparingly, and more often to set up a follow-up shot than as an outright point-winner. Many experienced players develop a few tricks to pull out in close games, most often with a tricky serve.

The other way is to force your game on the opponent with your serve and receive. On your serve you get to choose how to start the rally, and by the end of a close game you should know what serves will set you up for your game. Receive can be trickier since you don't know what the opponent will be serving—and presumably he's serving to set up *his* game. But a good receive can take control of a point just as well as a good serve. Focus both on what you do well and what your opponent does not.

Keep it simple. Ideally look toward tactics that narrow down your opponent's options so you have a good idea what's coming. For example, if you have a good loop against backspin, and your opponent pushes most of your backspin serves, then serve backspin and loop. If you like fast topspin rallies, then perhaps serve topspin to the opponent's weaker side (or perhaps to his stronger side, so you can follow with a quick shot to the weaker side), and go at it. Or do whatever serves set you up to do what you do best, and have confidence in.

Winning close games at any level is both a tactical and psychological battle. More close games are won and lost on the psychological aspect than on the tactical. You need both, but good tactics do not work if you are too nervous to execute. If you find yourself unable to do in a close game what you could do earlier, then you need to learn to clear your mind before playing each point, and perhaps study sports psychology.

A player who is consistently successful in close games always knows what to do in those key points, from long-term experience at that level, from what happened in that particular match to that point, and because he's psychologically confident in his ability to execute the needed shots. So should you.

September 30, 2013—Mid-Match Technique Adjustments

One of the axioms of coaching is that you can't fix technique in the middle of a match. Whether coaching someone in a match, or trying to make adjustments yourself in a match, technique is something that needs to be honed in practice so it becomes automatic (i.e. subconscious) in an actual game. The reason for this is that the game is mostly played subconsciously. You don't consciously do technique very well in a game situation, or even choose the proper racket angle—your subconscious does all this after you've honed it in practice. There are just too many things to remember to do for one to do so consciously; the minute you take conscious control all that training is out the window. To fix something in mid-match means to consciously take control, and that rarely goes well.

This is why the conscious mind's task during a match is mostly tactical—choosing what serves to use, how to receive, how to rally, etc. (And even there, much of it becomes subconscious—for example, when your conscious mind decides to attack deep serves, for this to work the subconscious has to get the message so it does so automatically.) The conscious mind should also focus on sports psychology—but that's basically techniques to get the conscious mind out of the way so the subconscious can take control.

There are a few times when you can make basic fixes to stroking problems, though not necessarily technique problems. (I will write this as if I was coaching a player in a match, but you can do this yourself, i.e. coaching yourself in the same way.)

Suppose your player lifts way too much when looping or smashing, and keeps going off the end. (There could be a dozen technical reasons for this; he might be standing up too straight, or using too much arm, or not transferring his weight forward, etc.) Trying to fix his technique directly probably won't work—that's something you'll have to do after the match, when you can zero in on the specific problem and drill the player to do it properly. So what can you do? Instead of trying to fix the technique, understand that the poor technique is putting the ball off the end when it aims for the table. So change the target; tell the player to aim for the top of the net. If the player makes a conscious decision to aim for this, and then lets the subconscious do this, it'll probably get the message and aim for the top of the net—and will likely do just what it was doing before, i.e. aiming too high, and so it'll instead go over the net and hit the table.

Suppose your player has a wristy forehand that causes him to lose

control. Telling him to change his technique isn't going to help in that match; it'll just put him in the position of trying to learn a brand new technique, i.e. a wristless forehand he hasn't used before. His subconscious doesn't know what to do, so you essentially turn the player into a beginner, at least with this one aspect. You could, of course, think of the match as just practice and have the player focus on the technique. Then it's not really a "match" so much as a practice session. But it's a highly inefficient practice session as the player will only haphazardly get to use the shot in question, and when it comes up, guess what? He'll reflexively do what his subconscious is used to doing, i.e. the poor technique. That's why to fix technique you have to practice it in a drill situation, where you do it over and Over and OVER until it is so honed that the subconscious can do it in a match. If it can't, then it'll fall back on old habits during the match, and reinforce the bad habit.

Suppose your player is standing up too straight, which leads to all sorts of technique problems, such as lifting too much when looping. If he's used to standing up straight all the time, there's not a lot you can do in the middle of a match. On the other hand, if the player sometimes stays low but other times (perhaps in the pressure of a match) stands up too straight, reminding him to stay low is a simple message that the subconscious can get since it's used to staying low, and it solves the technique problems.

Sometimes it's not a technique problem so much as adjusting to something the subconscious hasn't seen before, and so isn't able to react properly. For example, suppose your player keeps blocking an opponent's slow, spinny loops off the end. The player hasn't seen such spinny loops before (at least not enough for the subconscious to learn what to do automatically), and so nearly every block goes off. You could tell him to close his racket angle—but that probably wouldn't work. In a game situation the subconscious automatically chooses the racket angle, and trying to adjust this against these super-spinny loops in the middle of a match is slow and difficult. If you tell your player to close the racket more, and he tries to do so consciously, he will likely lose what little control he had as his conscious mind can't reflexively do the proper angle in the split second it has to do so, and will tend to fall back on the reflexive angle that wasn't working before. So consciously telling oneself to close the racket more isn't really that helpful—the subconscious can see that it's blocking off the end, and is already trying to make adjustments (often too slowly) if you let it. (The more you play the easier these adjustments become.)

However, if you tell the player to block more aggressively, then the spin won't take on the paddle as much, and the player won't be as susceptible to heavy topspin as before. It's a simple message to the subconscious —"block harder!"—and as long as it's not overdone ("harder" doesn't mean "smash"), it will often solve the problem.

Here's my recommendation: focus on developing proper technique in practice, not in matches. Work with a coach or top player if possible, or watch videos. Get the technique down before using it in serious matches. It's okay if you don't yet have the timing for the techniques as long as you are doing it mostly properly. Matches are a great way to learn, but they are not the place to develop technique.

July 4, 2011—Coaching Against Yourself

Imagine coaching someone to play against you. What would you tell them? Now imagine coaching yourself to fix up the very weaknesses that you would coach an opponent to play into against you. The top authority on a player's game should be that player, so listen to yourself; you are a wise and knowledgeable coach!

December 9, 2013—Learn Tactics by Coaching Others

One of the best ways to learn tactics is to coach others during matches. It's a different vantage point that forces you to really open your mind to tactics going on in a match where you aren't playing, both tactics that are being used and ones that are not. It's especially helpful when coaching players near your own level, but you can learn a surprising amount even coaching much lower-level players. And if you happen to be coaching a stronger player, well, there's a lot you can learn there if you are striving to reach that level. Here are two ways you can learn by coaching others:

First, when you just watch others play, you aren't forced to really analyze what's going on. Sure, in theory you can, but do you *really*? Most just watch the rallies. However, if you are coaching one of the players and are going to coach them between games, you suddenly have strong incentive to watch closely and analyze what's really going on. And from this, you can learn from both the player you are coaching and his opponent. You may be surprised at how much is going on out there, both intentionally by smart players, and stuff the players at the table don't see but that you do, now that you are paying attention—and you can learn from this. What you learn by

coaching a player not only helps that player, but helps you as well.

Second, it's easy for a player to get stuck in his own little tactical fishbowl, doing the same things over and Over and OVER, never realizing there's a lot more he could be doing. There are zillions of tactics out there, and while you aren't going to use most of them, you should be ready to use many, depending on your opponent. You need to be out there seeing what others are doing so you can pick up on some of these tactics. You won't do this by just doing the same tactics you are used to over and over; you have to get out of your fishbowl and see what others are doing.

A corollary to this is that if you are stuck in this tactical fishbowl (often without realizing it), others on the outside can see what you are doing, and a good coach or experienced player might be able to help. So it works both ways—you can learn by coaching, but you can also learn by someone else coaching you—and if the latter, he learns by coaching you! Call it the "Circle of Coaching."

December 30, 2013—Do Something Different

These days it seems like everyone's trying to be like everyone else. That's a pretty successful way of getting good, if you copy the top players. But many are missing the benefits of doing something different. Give your opponent a different look, at least on some shots, and guess what? He might begin to struggle. This doesn't mean changing your whole game to some unorthodox mess; it means developing certain "pet shots" that are different than the norm. They give you more variation on certain shots than if you only have "orthodox" shots.

For example, a few years ago penholder Wang Hao and shakehanders Ma Long and Zhang Jike, all from China, showed up on the world scene flipping short serves to their forehands with their backhands (with banana flips, i.e. mini backhand loops over the table with topspin and sidespin), and all three reached #1 in the world. Few had done this before, and now seemingly everyone at the higher levels is doing it. Or check out videos of Dimitrij Ovtcharov of Germany, world #6 and the #1 European, and his unorthodox backhand serve from the middle of the table. Or former world #1 Timo Boll, also of Germany, who often switches to a forehand grip for looping with extreme inside-out sidespin loops.

Some, of course, naturally do something different, by having a non-inverted surface, a different grip (Seemiller grip, or even penhold grip for

some, since many aren't used to playing that), an unorthodox stroke (not usually good unless it's just as a variation), or even something as simple as being left-handed. But most players will want to do something "different" while sticking to your normal shakehands inverted on both sides game. There are lots of ways. Below are ten examples—and I do all of these on occasion, though less now than when I was an active tournament player and honed these variations by actually using them regularly. Pick out one or two, and give them a try!

1. **Serve from forehand side**. Nearly everyone serves from the backhand corner these days, with a few tomahawk serves from the forehand. Throw in a few forehand pendulum or backhand serves from the forehand side. The surprise factor will often make up for your starting a bit out of position.
2. **Serve short sidespin to the forehand**. So many players serve over and Over and OVER to the middle and backhand it's almost silly, and when they do serve short to the forehand, it's a simple backspin ball. Instead, learn to serve short to the forehand with sidespin that pulls the ball toward your forehand, making it awkward for the opponent to return the ball down the line. You can do this with a backhand serve, a reverse pendulum serve, or a forehand tomahawk serve. Or do it with a regular forehand pendulum serve.
3. **Slow, spinny loop**. Most people these days loop either hard or harder. Try letting the ball drop a bit more, and go for a super-spinny slow one. If it goes deep, it'll drive blockers crazy. If it lands short, it'll drive counterloopers crazy.
4. **Dead loop**. Fake spin, and instead give a dead loop. You sell this by using an exaggerated follow-through right *after* contact (including a big wrist snap), making it seem spinny.
5. **Dead push**. Push without spin, but with an exaggerated follow through to fake spin.
6. **Sidespin push**. Come across the ball as you push. This is especially easy on the backhand, with a right-to-left motion (for righties), with the ball breaking to the right. It's especially effective wide to the right, breaking into a righty opponent's backhand.
7. **Ginzo push**. Most players push to keep the ball in play. Throw in a few super-ginzo (i.e. extremely heavy) pushes, and watch opponents

struggle. It's easier if you take the ball a little later for this, but advanced players can do this quick off the bounce.

8. **Dead block**. Block it dead, chop block, sidespin block—these will frustrate many opponents and set you up for a conventional attack. They are especially effective and easy on the backhand side.
9. **Countering change-of-pace**. Rather than bang every ball in a fast counter-hitting rally, sometimes hit one soft. Either keep it low and short to the net, or deep on the table.
10. **Flatter flip**. Most players flip short balls with topspin. (It's called a flick in Europe.) Sometimes try a flatter one. Hit it a bit softer since you don't have topspin to pull it down, but not too soft. (Recently I've seen a number of top players experimenting with this variation.)

May 20, 2013—Tools and Tactics for the Physically Challenged

Table tennis is an Olympic sport, and at the highest levels is played by some of the best athletes on the planet. Even at levels below world class it is dominated by great physical athletes who can race about the court ripping shot after shot. But we're not all great physical athletes, and we're not about to give up against an opponent just because he can race around the court ripping shot after shot, and we can't, are we? So how can one compete with an opponent who is faster, stronger, and more athletic? Or against a kid who might not be bigger and stronger, but who can seemingly rally at ten times your pace?

To do so you need to think both strategically and tactically. Strategically, you need to develop the tools needed to defeat these physical phenoms. Tactically, you need to learn how to use those tools. So what are these tools, and how can you use them? There are a number of ways of defeating a more athletic opponent. Here are ten tools you can develop in your game to turn an Arnold Schwarzenegger into a 90-pound weakling and kick ping-pong sand in their face.

1. **Serves, serves, and serves**. This could be the first three items. You have complete control over the start of the rally when serving, and this is where great athletes can be turned into quivering masses of mis-hits. A book could be written on this topic alone. Suffice to say that you should use serves to set up your best shot, and to set up the

other tools outlined below. Mix in short and long serves, with extreme and varying spins. Often the best tactics is to mix in short serves to the forehand and long, breaking spin serves to the backhand. Or just serve short backspin (and no-spin) and loop first.

2. **Receive, receive, and receive**. This could be the next three items. Above I said that the server has complete control over the start of the rally. The key word there is "start," and if you develop strong receive, you take control. You don't want to take on a faster opponent in a speed battle by attacking all his serves. Instead, focus on variation and control. Use your receive just as you used your serve, to set up your best shot, and to set up the other tools outlined below. The key difference is that you can use these tools as your receive, and set the tone for the rally.
3. **Spin**. Table tennis is a game of spin, and you should use the extremes to mess up your athletic opponent. Use both heavy topspin and heavy backspin so that he has to make major adjustments. Heavy, deep backspins slow the pace down; even if your athletic opponent attacks it, it'll likely be a slower shot that you can block or counter-attack aggressively. If you topspin, focus on slow, spinny loops that go deep on the table, and watch your opponent struggle to deal with these. He's probably used to something faster; don't give it to him. So look to push heavy or loop very spinny, both deep on the table. (I could have broken this down into Backspin and Topspin, but I really believe they go together in this context.)
4. **Deep**. If the ball is deep, your opponent can't rush you, and he's often jammed. A steady player can out-rally a faster, stronger one as long as he keeps the ball deep. So practice rallying deep on the table, both in topspin and backspin rallies.
5. **Short**. If you can push a ball short and low, it'll tie up your opponent over the table, leaving him vulnerable to a follow-up deep shot. It'll also take most of his attack away.
6. **Vary Pace and Depth**. While keeping the ball deep is important in most rallies, mix in softer and shorter shots to mess up an opponent's timing. Great athleticism doesn't mean great timing, and moving an opponent in and out can make an athlete look like he's been snake-bit.
7. **Move the Ball Around**. Focus on the three spots—wide backhand,

wide forehand, and middle (roughly the opponent's playing elbow, his crossover shot between forehand and backhand). If your opponent is mostly a forehand player, play the corners. (Yes, go to his wide forehand so you can draw him out of position and come back to his backhand, plus he's often looking for forehands from the backhand side, and so shots to the forehand can be hard for him to handle well.) If he's more two-winged, then go after his middle to draw him out of position, and then go after the corners.

8. **Deceptive Placement**. Aim one way, then go the other. This is especially effective when pushing or blocking. The most common way is to aim a backhand push or block crosscourt, and at the last second go to the wide forehand.
9. **Out-Rally Him**. Don't take on a faster opponent in a speed battle. Instead, take the ball a little later to give yourself time to react, and play steady and deep rallies until the opponent either misses or gives you a ball to attack. Often it's effective to start the rally off with one quick shot, and then play steady—the contrast can throw off the faster opponent's timing. Against some players you can just pin down on their weaker side (usually the backhand) and play deep balls there over and over until they miss (though you should look for chances to move the ball around or change the pace or spin). Against others you need to keep moving the ball around so the opponent is forced to hit shots on the move.
10. **Stay Focused and Play Smart**. It's often said that table tennis is 90% mental. Let your opponent have the other 10%; just make sure you win the 90% mental battle.

PLAYING SPECIFIC STYLES AND SHOTS

May 13, 2013—Beat Unorthodox Players with Fundamentals

How often have you played somebody with, for lack of a better word, weird shots? Perhaps they hit shots with a floppy wrist (so you could never tell where the shot was going), or with sidespin on shots that normally don't have sidespin, or perhaps they just used a non-inverted surface that you weren't used to seeing. There are infinite possibilities. The problem was that you found these "weird" shots difficult to play against with your more fundamental game. Why does one with sounder fundamentals have problems

with weirder games, and how can you overcome that?

There's nothing wrong with having a little weird in your game to throw opponents off. But there's a reason why certain shots, mostly done with inverted rubber, are done by the top players, and are considered orthodox play. Learn these fundamentals, and you'll have an advantage over those who have not mastered these fundamentals. This doesn't mean you'll win, but a player with weaker fundamentals will have to essentially play at a higher level just to match you. For example, to use the floppy wrist example mentioned above, the timing needed for such shots is much higher than for more orthodox technique, so that player will always be handicapped. But this is often offset by the inherent "weirdness" of the shot, since you aren't used to it. How do you overcome it?

The keys are depth and consistency. Against any type of weird shot, if you keep the ball deep on the table, you'll have more time to react to the less orthodox shots coming back at you. Given time, your better technique should beat the weaker technique, unless the other player is simply better. Given the time needed, your more orthodox shots should be more consistent at any given pace than the less orthodox version.

It's not always this simple. For example, depth may give you more time to react to the opponent's shot, but it also gives him time to attack, especially by looping. So against a looping opponent with unorthodox technique, you might start by going short, or perhaps long to a spot where he can't loop (often deep to wide backhand), or simply find ways to attack first (deep on the table), and then turn it into a more even battle of good versus "bad" technique. Or against a non-inverted surface, where it's the surface that's "weird," not the technique, you would need to understand the properties of that surface so you can play against it properly—but again, depth will give you more time to react to it.

There has always been age-old battle of standard versus non-standard technique. Sometimes the non-standard technique becomes standard, such as reverse penhold backhand, the banana flip and other backhand flips (often done against balls that are short to the forehand, once considered a no-no), or even looping itself (which was a "weird" shot until it became more common in the 1960s). And sometimes a player with "good" technique has something different to throw at opponents, such as the grip change to a very forehand grip Timo Boll often does when looping to get an extreme and "weird" inside-out forehand loop.

But good technique (i.e. sound fundamentals) almost always wins out against the less sound ones, so you should master these fundamentals. It's often after players have mastered these fundamentals that they experiment with other ways, and sometimes find something to do that is "different."

May 30, 2011—Play Into the Weird Stuff

Suppose your opponent has something that gives you problems. It could be a weird shot, like an inside-out or a sidespinning loop, or an extra-flat backhand, or a playing surface that gives you trouble. Should you avoid it? That's probably the first inclination, and if it's something you truly can avoid, then that might be the best strategy. But won't your opponent be trying to get whatever gives you trouble into play? You are probably going to have to deal with it. And the last thing you want to do is to still be having trouble with it near the end of the match, and lose because of it.

Instead, find chances to play into it when you are ready for it, and get comfortable against it. When you can do that, then you can play tactics to avoid it, knowing you'll be ready for it when necessary.

Here's one tip that may solve most of your problems with "weird" surfaces and strokes. Keep the ball deep on the table, and you'll have a lot more time to react and your opponent won't be able to angle you much. It's those short balls that come back quick and angled that cause most of the problems.

July 15, 2013—Adjusting to Weird Serves and Shots

There are two ways to adjust to "weird" serves and shots. One is to practice against *every single one of them*, until you are comfortable against *every single one of them*. Since there are a huge number of ways to serve or hit a ball, and anything that's not "orthodox" can be considered "weird," this would mean basically turning your practice sessions into just practice against these weird shots, as opposed to developing a foundation to your game. This would be a mistake.

While you should sometimes practice against seemingly weird serves and shots you might see in a match—especially the more common ones—it's better to focus on developing a strong foundation to your shots. This allows you to develop complete command over your shots. When developing a shot, but before a player really has command of it, he mostly does the shot robotically, meaning he can do it against the same incoming ball over and

over, but can't adjust to anything different, i.e. "weird." But with practice, you develop command of the shot and it becomes so ingrained that adjusting to different shots becomes easier and easier. But it takes experience—not against every possibility, but experience adjusting to different incoming shots until you become used to making adjustments and have confidence you can do so.

You don't need to practice against every type of weird incoming shot to be able to deal with each of them. What's needed are two things: command of your shots, and general experience in adjusting. By playing lots of matches against lots of different players (whether practice, league, or tournament) you develop the habit of adjusting. And then, when you do play something different, you don't need to spend huge amounts of time learning to adjust to it; you've already developed that habit. If you have command of your own shots, and have developed the habit of adjusting to different shots, then you'll have little trouble adjusting to whatever an opponent can throw at you. This, and a little tactical thinking to figure out the weakness of the opponent's shots, are all that's needed to give you the advantage.

The key thing to remember is this—if the opponent is doing something weird, then pretty much by definition it's not standard technique, and there's probably a reason for that. If you have command of your shots and are used to adjusting to opponents, and do a little tactical thinking to figure out the weakness of the opponent's technique, then your more standard technique will give you an advantage over this less standard technique.

One hint that'll help against most "weird" rally shots: keep the ball deep on the table, and you'll have more time to react to their shots. Remember that they are used to your more standard shots, while you are not as used to theirs.

Beginners dread playing against "weird" players. Top players look forward to it knowing the player's game is flawed.

April 15, 2013—Playing the Big Backhand Player

How does one play an opponent with a big backhand? There are several versions of this type of player. Some have big backhand smashes and seem to be able to smash anything from that side. Others don't hit quite so hard but keep coming at you with it. Others have big backhand loops. In each case you are faced with an opponent whose backhand is stronger than yours, and is a constant threat to win the point. You have several options, and you

can (and should) use more than one of them.

1) Depth

Compared to the forehand, the backhand is often a cramped shot because the body is in the way. And so the enemy of the backhand is depth. If you keep the ball deep on the table, few players can attack that ball as strongly as they can off a short ball. This is the most common reason for an opponent with a big backhand—balls that aren't going deep, thereby giving the opponent opportunities for big backhands. (Note that depth is the first item listed, but keeping the ball low isn't even listed as one of your options. That's because it's assumed that you are trying to keep the ball low. The exception—deep, arcing loops with heavy topspin are effective against most big backhands despite being high.)

2) Play the Forehand

The most obvious thing is to simply play the forehand side. The problem here is that even with a big backhand player, the forehand might be pretty powerful as well. So figure out early what shots the opponent has trouble with on the forehand, and play those shots there. Often the forehand side isn't as quick as the backhand, and so quick, angle shots there are effective.

3) Play the Forehand, Come Back to the Backhand

Many players have strong backhands when they are in position. So draw them out of their backhand pocket by going to the forehand first, and then coming back to the backhand. (Ironically, this is also an excellent way to play a player with a big forehand—draw them out to their forehand side, then make them play backhands.)

4) Attack First

If you have good serve and receive, you can most often get the first attack. There's nothing like a good first attack (again, deep on the table) for stopping any type of attack by the opponent.

5) Attack the Middle

Make the opponent move side to side to hit those backhands by playing both wide to the backhand and to the middle. (The middle is the mid-point between forehand and backhand, roughly where the playing elbow is.) This forces the opponent not only to move, but to decide between forehand

and backhand. Players with big backhands often favor the backhand even on shots that go somewhat out to the forehand side, and so their "middle" might be toward their forehand side. Find that spot and go for it. The more table the opponent tries to cover with the backhand, the more you can make him move.

6) Consistency

As long as you keep the ball deep on the table, and perhaps move it around some (wide backhand, middle, wide forehand), a consistent backhand can often beat a more powerful one. Don't try to be quicker or more powerful than the opponent with a big backhand; out-steady him while keeping the ball deep and making him move.

7) Changing Spins

Few players have powerful backhands against both backspin and topspin. Find the spin they have the most trouble with, and place it deep on the table. Or go back and forth between deep, spinny loops and deep, heavy pushes to force him to adjust to both.

And finally, there's an eighth option:

8) Develop your own big backhand

June 13, 2011—Playing the Fisher

The fisherman (or fisherwoman?) . . . the scourge of many. The player who backs up and softly and defensively topspins everything back a few feet over the net. His shots are not quite lobbing, not quite looping, and not quite counter-hitting. It can take a lot of work to race around the table attacking his shots with your forehand—not easy when the fisher puts the ball side to side, deep on the table, with both topspin and sidespin so the balls jumps as it hits your side of the table. How does one play this style?

First off, you have to decide how physical you can play. If you have the foot speed, stamina, and a strong enough forehand (looping or smashing) to attack each of these shots with your forehand, then by all means do so, though (as explained below) the occasional change-of-pace may be important, depending on how steady the fisher is. The key is how you attack them.

If you don't have the foot speed, stamina, or a strong enough forehand to keep attacking, then you will have to mix in blocks, especially with your

backhand. (Of course, if you have a far more powerful backhand than forehand—rare, but sometimes the case—then attack with the backhand.) Don't feel as if this is a major weakness—more players lose to fishers by over-attacking then by ones who change the pace by mixing in blocks along with their attacks.

The arc of a ball from a fisher is longer, and the topspin makes the ball bounce out, so the top of the bounce is about a half step father off the table than you might expect. Unless you have great reflexes and timing and can take the ball off the bounce, you'll need to take a half step back to smash or loop at the top of the bounce. Otherwise you'll get jammed.

Here are the keys to playing a fisher.

Placement: Never attack the middle forehand or middle backhand—those are the easiest shots for the fisher to return. Instead, focus on the wide backhand and middle (elbow area), and the wide forehand when you think you have a clean winner (or if the fisher happens to be weak on that side, though usually that's the strong side). Since a fisher needs to anticipate where your attacks are going in order to react to them, if you can aim one way and go another, he'll struggle.

- **On the forehand side**, the fisher has a bigger hitting zone, more range, can more easily create both topspin and sidespin, and can more easily counter-attack, usually with a counterloop. Usually avoid this side until you see a clean winner.
- **On the backhand side**, the fisher is more cramped, and normally has less range, less spin, and less potential for a counter-attack. Go after this side with a vengeance, along with attacks to the middle. Most attacks to the wide backhand side will come back to your backhand side, allowing you to continue your attack into the wide backhand, where you have more table than if you go down the line or to the middle. The catch is to do so, you have to step all the way around your backhand side if you want to use your forehand.
- **In the middle**, the fisher has to make a split-second decision on whether to go forehand or backhand, plus it's usually easier to run a ball down in the corners then to get out of the way of a ball in the middle. Focus on attacking the middle slightly on the backhand side to force an awkward backhand return. This is often a good spot to end the point on. However, there's more table when you go after the

corners, so if you attack the middle over and over you are more liable to make a mistake. Some fishers seem to get every ball back on the backhand side, but that's because all the attacks are going right to the backhand side; mix in attack to the middle, and the fisher will begin to crumble.

Change of Pace: Once a good fisher gets his timing down, he can often seemingly return shot after shot even as you smash or power-loop over and over. How do you break out of this pattern? Try changing the pace. Attack one ball softer than normal, or perhaps block one. The fisher is consistent off your strong attacks only because he is anticipating them, and so his timing and positioning are set for strong attacks. Change the pace, and you may mess up his timing and positioning. You might even try looping soft and spinny as a changeup, and watch the fisher struggle to adjust without missing or giving you an easy ball to put away.

Loop or Smash? You can do either against a fisher, or (often even more effectively) do both. Do whichever you are more comfortable with. If you have a powerful loop, the extra topspin of your loop will make it easier to keep your attacks on the table; at the higher levels, top players pretty much kill-loop over and over against a fisher. But if you have a good smash, use that, especially if you can be deceptive with it.

The Short Ball: As long as he keeps the ball deep on the table, a good fisher can run down almost anything you attack. The goal shouldn't be to end the point with each shot; the goal should be to put pressure on the fisher until he returns a ball that lands short. (Of course, in trying to force this, you'll force plenty of outright misses as well.) When you get that short ball, that's when you end the point. You can now attack the ball much closer to the table, at wide angles, and your opponent has less time to react. As long as you don't telegraph your shot, you should be able to rip this ball at a wide angle so that the opponent simply can't run it down, or to the middle where the opponent simply can't react.

October 14, 2013—Playing Choppers

There is nothing more infuriating than losing to a patient chopper who lets you beat yourself with your own errors. Losing to a chopper is like four-putting in golf; you may have made some good drives to get to the green, but

all you remember are the misses at the end. Rather than four-putting forever, let's learn how to beat the chopper.

A chopper is weakest in the middle, and that is where you should focus most of your attacks. However, you have more table (and so more margin for error) by going diagonally to a corner. Going for a winner down the line often catches the chopper by surprise. A chopper who is not particularly fast is vulnerable at the corners, especially if you aim one way and then go the other; a chopper with inverted on both sides is more vulnerable in the middle. Keep these "basics" in mind when playing any of the following styles.

There are four general ways of playing a chopper. Informally they are called European style, Asian style, Pick-hitting, and Chiseling. While you should favor one of these styles, feel free to combine them in developing your own style against choppers.

In all four cases, focus on attacking the middle, the weakest spot for nearly all choppers. This is *imperative* when playing choppers.

European Style.

The goal here is to bring the chopper in close to the table, and then attack hard, especially at the chopper's middle. The chopper is too close to the table to make the return, and so misses. When using this technique, you should mostly serve short to bring the chopper in, and try to follow with a strong attack. Sometimes, however, fake the attack, and push short instead – the chopper, in his haste to back up for the expected attack, will have trouble with this ball, and will often have to make a last-second lunge to return it. Even if he makes the return (often a weak one), he will be left jammed over the table and vulnerable to the next ball, which you can promptly loop for a winner. If the chopper stays closer to the table to guard against this drop shot, then you attack. The chopper has absolutely no way of answering this . . . in theory.

During a rally, if the chopper makes a good return from away from the table, push short again, and start over. The object in a rally is to catch the chopper too far away from the table or moving backward so that you can drop the ball short, force him to rush in, and attack when he's jammed up against the table. Alternatively, you can push a few balls, keeping the chopper close to the table, and then attack when you think he's not expecting it.

Asian Style.

The goal here is to control the spin and pace of the rally. This method is especially good against a long-pipped chopper, but takes regular practice against a chopper to learn to do effectively. Pips-out players are especially good at this style, but many good inverted players also play this way. This style doesn't work well against an all-inverted chopper who chops very heavy. Let's assume you are playing a long-pipped chopper.

Here the aim is to get the chopper off the table, and then attack relatively softly over and over, into the long pips side, but not with full spin. The chopper can only return whatever spin you give him because of the long pips, and so their returns are not particularly heavy, making your continuous soft attack easy. After topspinning a few balls, you find one you like and loop or smash a winner.

Depending on what you are more comfortable with, you can topspin many balls in a row before going for a winner, or only a few—be unpredictable. Mix in pushes. Some players just topspin over and over, not pushing or going for a winner unless they get a very easy one. You should try to vary your spin, sometimes looping very dead, sometimes spinny. However, beware of varying spin returns when you vary your own spin. For example, when you give heavy topspin, expect heavy chop, and so either lift the ball more on your next shot, or push and start over. Don't fall into the trap of spinning heavily over and over – a chopper loves it, and all you'll get are heavy chop returns, which can be very difficult to loop consistently.

You can mix in pushing, but too much pushing will throw your own timing off. By topspinning over and over to the long pips side (but not with full spin), you can build up a rhythm that a chopper will have difficulty breaking.

Try to get down to almost eye level with the ball by bending your knees. This will help your consistency by making the lifting easier and will get your eyes closer to the ball so you see it better.

Pick-hitting Style.

The goal here is to pick your shots against the chopper's push, and if you can't easily put away the return, push and patiently look for another ball to attack. Unless you have a putaway shot, you rarely attack two balls in a row. Instead it's push a few balls, attack, push a few balls, attack, push a few balls, attack, etc., until you get a putaway shot or the chopper misses. Most of

the attacks should go to the chopper's weakest spot, usually the middle, sometimes the forehand. (The backhand chop, often with long pips, is usually a chopper's most consistent shot, but not always.) Most players attack by forehand looping, but you can also drive or smash, forehand or backhand.

You need to vary your pushes to find a ball to attack. For example, a quick, off-the-bounce push to a chopper's long pips often forces a weak return, and any push with long pips has little spin, which you may be able to attack. A sudden push to the forehand can set up your own forehand attack. After a series of heavier pushes, a sudden no-spin or light backspin push can set up a higher return to attack.

The advantage of this style is you don't have to deal with varying chop returns, which are where attackers make most of their mistakes. The disadvantage—besides the obvious patience needed and long rallies that you'll sometimes play—is that the chopper may start attacking. You have to find a balance. The more the chopper attacks effectively, the more you'll need to attack to stop that.

Chiseling Style.

I am not fond of this style. This basically means pushing with the chopper until the chopper either misses, pops up an easy one, or gets impatient and attacks too much. At the higher levels, chiseling is rare, but at the lower and medium levels, it is more common. Since I'm a strong believer that the game has to be FUN (it is a game!), I don't like this way of winning. Unless you're a chopper yourself (in which case SOMEONE's got to push, and it might as well be you), I'd rather see a player lose by attacking in some way. You may lose now, but you'll learn how to play a chopper better in future matches.

August 8, 2011—Playing Lefties

The problem with playing lefties is two-fold: first, their shots come out differently than righties, and second, your natural ball placement to a righty is usually wrong against a lefty. The first part is more or less a matter of playing lefties until you get used to how their shots come out. The two shots from a lefty that most commonly mess up a righty are aggressive crosscourt backhands to the wide forehand, and their serves, especially forehand serves into your forehand that break away. (Hint—if you wait until the last second and then lunge for the ball as it breaks away, you're probably

going to miss. Since you probably lower your racket as you lunge, you will probably go long.) It's just a matter of getting used to these shots.

One trick for returning a lefty's forehand serve into your forehand is to aim the ball down the line to the lefty's forehand. The lefty has to be ready to cover that shot, and so at the last minute you can take the ball crosscourt into their backhand. (This is assuming they are stronger on the forehand; if the reverse, you may do the reverse.)

Assuming you are comfortable against a lefty's shots, then the key becomes tactical. Where do you want to play your shots? For example, against a righty, you might play steady shots to the backhand, knowing the opponent can't put his backhand through you—but now that same shot goes into a lefty's forehand, where he may have more power. Or you might play quick shots to a righty's forehand, if your backhand is quicker than the opponent's forehand—but now that shot goes into a lefty's backhand, which not only may be as quick or quicker than your backhand, but also gives him that wide angle into your forehand.

So you may want to rethink your basic ball placement shots—but also use the reverse. Against a lefty, now you can hit quick, aggressive backhands crosscourt into their wide forehand; now you can lock them up on their backhands with your forehand into their backhand. Plus now you can use your own forehand pendulum serve that breaks into their forehand. (Though here the lefty has an advantage—he's probably more used to a righty doing that to him than you are used to a lefty doing it to you.)

So there are really three basic keys to playing a lefty—the aforementioned getting used to their shots and ball placement. However, the latter is really two things—learning (instinctively) what shots you do against righties that you don't want to do against lefties, and learning (also instinctively) what shots you normally don't do against righties that work against lefties.

CHAPTER SEVEN: IMPROVING

August 15, 2011—The Book on Your Game

If you can't write a book on your game, either you don't know your game or you don't have a game. It's as simple as that.

Most likely, if you are reading this tip and are at least a semi-serious player, you *do* have a game. So what is your game? What are your strengths, weaknesses, and in-betweens? How do you serve, return serves, and rally to get your strengths into play and dominate, while avoiding using your weaknesses? When do you use your other shots (shots that are neither strengths nor weaknesses, but something in between)? While you don't want to tie yourself down on what you'd do in any given situation, you should have a specific repertoire of shots you favor in any given situation, and be able to pick and choose from among those shots in any given situation, based on your opponent's game. Above all else, how do you dominate a match?

Not everyone's a writer, and few of you are actually going to write a book on your game. But you should be able to at least outline the book on your game, and have the entire book in your head. If you can't, then you need to think about your game and get to know it. Or, if you are new to the sport, develop your game, and get to know it as it develops.

September 26, 2011—Develop Your Game Around Your Playing Style

When you start out, you need to develop the fundamentals. As you develop your shots, your playing style will gradually emerge. Some players have a firm idea on how they want to play almost from the start—hitter, looper, blocker, chopper, etc. Others aren't sure at first, often for years, as they develop their game. And the style often changes—I was an all-out hitter my first three years, then switched gradually to all-around, with equal emphasis between looping, hitting, and steady countering, plus a little of just about everything else.

Style comes from two things: what the player does well, and what the player wants to do. They are not always the same, but they usually have a large overlap as players tend to get better at the things they want to do (because they use them more), and they tend to want to do the things that they do well, since that leads to winning. So most often players naturally develop a style based on these two factors. Others really want to play a specific style, perhaps because they saw a top player play that way. They may

simply want to be a chopper or lobber because of the spectacular points they play. Or they may develop a blocking style, but simply decide they want to play like most world-class players do and become a looper. (That's a primary reason why I switched from all-out hitting to more looping.)

With my students, I regularly advise them on how their game is developing, with two things in mind. First, develop an over-powering strength, something will dominate at whatever level they are at, and develop a style around that strength. Second, develop all aspects of the game they will use, since having strengths does not help if opponents can simply play into their weaknesses. I try to lead them into a style that will win for them. But that style also has to match what they want to do. There's no point telling someone to be a looper if he hates looping, like one of my students.

Once you have begun developing a style, you should continue to develop that style. Watch players with similar styles, learn what they do and *why* (this is important—don't be afraid to ask the player), and incorporate whatever you think will work for you.

Since rallies begin with serve and receive, this means developing serves and receives that work for your style. This is probably the most under-used, under-thought, and under-developed part of most player's games.

For example, if you have a nice loop against backspin, it might not be to your advantage to push too many short serves back long, since this gives the opponent a chance to loop and so lowers the chance of a backspin return you can loop. It also might not be to your advantage to flip, which gets you into a topspin rally, and again takes away your loop against backspin. Instead, a player like that might develop a short push, which increases the chances that the opponent will push long, giving you that backspin ball to loop. Similarly, short backspin serves will often give you long push returns to loop. And if you serve topspin, you are unlikely to get a backspin return from most players. (This doesn't mean you don't vary in these other receives and serves, just remember they are variations to the shots that should be more central to your game. For example, a sudden long push receive against some players will often result in a push return to set up your loop.)

If you are a hitter or counter-hitter who likes to get into bang-bang topspin rallies, you might want to serve and receive more with topspin. Or you might serve short backspin and follow with a slow, very steady loop to get into those topspin rallies.

Find the unique aspects of your style that give opponents trouble and

focus on winning with those shots. Germany's Timo Boll, the #1 European, forehand loops with a somewhat unorthodox extreme forehand grip. This gives him perhaps the best inside-out loop in the world (his lefty loops usually break to the left), and he uses this to great effect. Much of his game is used to set up this shot, which is a primary reason he's the only European who can often challenge the Chinese. At the same time, if a shot is too unorthodox, consider whether the benefits of the shot outweigh the negatives, since the very fact that it is unorthodox means it likely has problems, or it would become "orthodox." (Sometimes the unorthodox becomes orthodox, such as reverse penhold backhands or attacking short serves to the forehand with the backhand.)

One last thing to think about when developing your style. Since so much of style comes from serve and receive, sometimes the style comes from those shots. For example, if you develop a serve that players keep popping up, you might develop a nice smash, and you are well on your way to becoming a hitter—all because of the serve you developed. Or if you have a nice backspin serve, you'll get a lot of backspin returns, and so you might develop a nice loop, and you are well on your way to becoming a looper—all because of the serve you developed. So while you should develop serve and receive to match your style, sometimes style comes from the serve and receive.

Ultimately, you should develop a personal style that's all your own, and really know your style. Given the chance, you should be able to write a book on your game; if you can't, either you don't know your game or you don't have a game.

February 7, 2011—Develop an Overpowering Strength

At the beginning/intermediate levels, most matches are won by whoever is more consistent. Great strengths haven't yet developed, so while players do have strengths, the matches are mostly won by whoever makes the least mistakes.

As you advance, this changes. At the intermediate/advanced level, matches are mostly won by whoever gets his strength into play. The looper wins if he gets his loop into play. The hitter wins if he gets his hitting into play. Even the steady player—and steadiness can be a strength at all levels—wins if he's able to get into rallies where his steadiness prevails. And so on.

It's not enough to just develop an overpowering strength. You also

have to have ways of getting it into play. It's not enough to have a good loop or a strong hitting game if your serves or return of serve allows your opponent to attack and turn you into a blocker. It's not enough to be steady if your serve or return of serve allow your opponent to play his strengths, thereby overpowering your steadiness.

So develop an overpowering strength (or strengths), and develop serve and receive techniques to get it into play. At its most basic level, table tennis is all about getting your strengths into play and stopping your opponent from using his.

March 19, 2012—Fix the Biggest Weakness in Your Game

Everyone has a "biggest weakness" in their game, almost by definition. Beginning and intermediate players may have many weaknesses, but there's probably a biggest. Even great players don't do everything great—it's all relative, and their biggest weakness might be something that would be a powerful strength for an intermediate player.

So what should you do about this "biggest weakness"? FIX IT! So how do you go about doing that?

The first step, of course, is really identifying this biggest weakness. Is it a stroking technique problem? Footwork? Weak serve or receive? Choking under pressure? Analyze your results and figure it out. Perhaps watch videos of yourself playing, and compare what you do with what top players do. A coach or top player might be able to help out in this analysis.

Once you've identified the biggest weakness, how do you fix it? To fix a stroking or footwork problem, some might do a few practice drills, or perhaps work with a coach once or twice. If it's serve or receive, perhaps they'd work on this a few times. If they choke under pressure, they'd probably tell themselves to relax under pressure and hope that solves the problem.

None of these fixes will work.

The problem with a bad habit (i.e. your "biggest weakness") is that it has become ingrained. You aren't going to fix it with a little practice or a few sessions with a coach. (You might quickly get it right in a drill, but under match conditions?) To fix an ingrained bad habit you have to focus on it and make it your single-minded top priority to get it right. Until you spend an extended period of time—lots and lots of practice sessions—you won't be able to undo the bad habit that you've spent your playing career ingraining

the wrong way.

You also need to work with a coach or at least study videos of top players to see how the technique should be done. You don't want to replace a bad technique with another bad technique.

You not only want to turn the bad technique into good technique; you want to turn this weakness into a strength! For example, if you have an awkward backhand, don't just aim to develop a decent backhand, where if you are successful it'll be a decent backhand, while if you are "not successful" you'll continue to have a weak backhand. Instead, aim to make it a strength. If you are successful, it'll become a strength. If you are "not successful," you'll probably end up with the decent backhand you wanted anyway—and so will be successful.

To fix a bad stroking habit often you have to exaggerate the fix. For example, early in my career when I stepped around my backhand corner to attack with my forehand I wouldn't rotate around enough or bring my back foot back far enough. Because of this I could only effectively attack down the line; if I went crosscourt I had little power. To fix the problem I spent two weeks doing drills where I'd forehand hit or loop from the backhand side crosscourt with my back foot way back, and my body rotated around to the right way too much. This put me in a perfect position to attack my own forehand court (!), but not to hit to the other side. But after doing this nearly every day for two weeks, I began to naturally rotate about when I stepped around to use my forehand from the backhand side in games. After doing this exaggeration drill regularly for a few months, the problem was cured.

The same exaggeration technique works with other stroking problems. Is your stroke too long or too short? Exaggerate the other way for a while. Do you block loops off the end all the time? Have someone loop to you where you focus on closing your racket so that when you do miss, it's in the net. Can't get enough spin on your serve? Practice serving on a rug (away from the table), and focus on just spinning the heck out of the ball, not caring where the ball goes, and make it jump when it hits the rug. In each of these cases, if you aren't sure about technique, see a coach or video. Be creative in finding ways to exaggerate the fix or finding other ways to get it right.

If your biggest weakness is sports psychology (such as choking under pressure), then read up on sports psychology or even meet with a sports psychologist. Then play simulated pressure matches where you start out each "match" at, say, 9-9 in the fifth. (The key is to convince yourself that these

are tournament matches.)

Once you've fixed the problem, it'll be fixed for life. Then, if you dream of becoming a much better player, find the next "biggest weakness" and focus on that. Keep doing this, and you'll leave all your rivals far behind as you move up in the table tennis world.

You can spend years working halfheartedly to fix a problem in your game and never fix it. Or you can focus on the problem as your top priority for a few months and fix it, and even turn it into a strength for the rest of your playing days. Which do you choose?

September 23, 2013—Saturation Training

Everyone has a weakness in their game or a shot they'd like to perfect. How do players go about addressing these problems? Usually in haphazard fashion. They'll either try to work on it in actual matches, or they'll work on it some in practice, along with everything else. The result is usually a little improvement, which often convinces them they are on the right track. And so they progress very slowly. But it can be done much more quickly with a little "saturation training."

What this means is that for a time you should focus almost entirely on whatever it is you are trying to improve. It means devoting both practice time and match play to the single-minded goal of improving a weakness or perfecting a strength. You can still practice other things, but during the time of saturation training this should be kept to a minimum, and mostly to maintain other aspects of your game. The saturation training should include lots of shadow practicing the new technique as you work to ingrain it.

Let's say you want to develop a backhand loop against backspin. You could practice it for 5-10 minutes with a partner, and then look for chances to use it in a game against your usual practice partners. Or you could arrange to practice it for perhaps an hour a day for a time, and arrange practice matches specifically around developing this shot. Let's look at both of these methods of practice, using the backhand loop against backspin as an example.

How do you practice the backhand loop against backspin? Ideally, find a coach or player who can feed multiball to you and go at it. (Make sure to have a coach or top player help you out first so you do it right.) Or practice it against a robot, but don't do this exclusively—you want to learn to react to a ball coming off a racket as well. Or have someone just push your backspin serve back over and over so you can practice the shot. (But remember that

you get many more shots per time with multiball or a robot.) Do the shot over and Over and OVER until it is so ingrained you can do it in your sleep. It has to become muscle memory, and that doesn't happen by practicing it haphazardly now and then. You have to practice it relentlessly until it becomes a part of you.

Once the shot is pretty much ingrained in this way, you need to use it in practice matches. And here is where many players make a major mistake—they look to use it against their peers, who may not give them the shot they want. Instead, seek out someone who will normally push your serve back right at your backhand, allowing you to use the shot over and over. Or someone who will serve and push, allowing you to backhand loop. This usually means playing a weaker player, where you can control the start of the rally and get the shot you want to practice. Get the shot ingrained in this way as something you can do regularly in a match.

It's only after doing this that you should focus on using it in matches against your peers. Now you might not get as many easy chances to do the shot, but when the chance comes, hopefully it's now so ingrained you'll do it automatically. And at this point, it is part of your regular repertoire.

Whatever shot you are trying to perfect, use the same type of thinking shown here to saturate your practice so you can develop the shot. And then keep developing it, while perhaps sometimes using a little saturation training to develop other parts of your game.

March 28, 2012—Make a Game of Your Weaknesses

One of the best ways to improve is to make a game that zeroes in on your weaknesses and forces you to improve them. There's nothing like a little fun competition to bring out your best!

For example, suppose you have a weak backhand counter-drive. Here's a game I've played with students for years, spotting points to make it competitive. I put a box, towel, or other object around the middle of the table so that my opponent has to aim for my backhand to keep the ball in play. Then we play backhand-to-backhand games, where either of us starts the rally by serving straight topspin, then we go at it, backhand-to-backhand. If the ball hits the box or towel, or goes to the other side of it, then they lose the point. If a player plays anything other than a backhand drive, they lose the point. The rallies become fast and furious—and the backhands improve!

Need work on your loop or block? Play a game where one player

loops everything, the other blocks. You can do this either all crosscourt or all down the line (using a box or towel to block off the target area, as with the backhand-backhand game), so players know where the ball is going and can focus on developing the loop or block. (At the advanced levels, you can do this where players can loop or block anywhere.) Alternate version—the blocker is allowed to smash or counterloop if he sees a weak loop. Another alternate version—both players battle it out counterlooping.

If you need work on your pushing, then play an all-pushing game with someone. Server serves backspin, and play out the rally, backspin only.

Want to learn to push short and low? Here's a great way to do that. Take turns serving short backspin, with both players pushing short. (Pushes can go anywhere.) If either player thinks the push is going to go long (i.e. wouldn't bounce twice if given the chance), he lets the push go, and if it's long, he wins the point; if it bounces twice, he loses the point. If a player pops a push up, the opponent is allowed to smash or flip kill it, but must win the point on one shot; if the opponent returns it (even by lobbing), then he wins the point. And, of course, if a player misses his push he loses the point.

One of my favorite games is the serve and attack game, which forces you to be very aggressive on your serve. Play a regular game, except allow both players only two shots after the serve to win the point. There's nothing like the knowledge that you have to follow your serve with an attack to focus your mind on doing so—and thereby learning effective serve and attack patterns. It also develops your receive as you look for ways to stop the opponent's attack on his serve.

So examine your game, decide what weaknesses need work, and invent a game that'll force you to turn this weakness into a strength out of sheer competitiveness.

April 22, 2013—Proper Practice Progression Prevents Poor Play

Do you do the Six P's? Proper Practice Progression Prevents Poor Play. (Or, as I sometimes put it, "...Pathetic Play.") I've actually heard this as the Five P's, but I've added "Progression." Proper practice progression means starting with the basics and working your way up to more advanced techniques for all aspects of your game. It also means practicing these shots in context, i.e. game situations. Think of it this way, using the forehand as an example.

- **Step One** is develop the forehand, usually with help from a coach or by watching top players, and then by hitting forehand to forehand with someone, or doing multiball with a coach.
- **Step Two** is learning to move and hit the forehand, so you do footwork drills, such as 1-1 footwork, where your partner puts the ball alternately to your wide forehand and the middle of the table, and you move side to side hitting all forehands. You can also do this alternating hitting forehands from the middle and backhand side of the table.
- **Step Three** is learning to hit random forehands. Now your partner puts the ball randomly all over your forehand (or backhand) court, and you have to hit all forehands.
- **Step Four** is learning to play forehands in a game situation. For example, you serve topspin to your partner's forehand, he strokes it back to your forehand, and you smash or hit the forehand aggressively. Or serve into your partner's backhand, and play your forehand down the line from your forehand side to his backhand. Or the same thing, but your forehand from your backhand side to your partner's backhand side.
- **Step Five** is learning to do the shot at a higher level. For example, you serve topspin to your partner's backhand, he returns to your backhand, and you forehand smash. Or, if you can loop backspin, you can do a drill where you serve backspin, your partner pushes, you loop, your partner blocks, and you smash the forehand. (At the more advanced levels, you might loop both the backspin and the block.)

You can do similar practice to develop any stroke as well as footwork. (You should develop strokes and footwork together.) You can also use this principle for developing serves, starting with simple spins, then heavy spins, then heavy and varied spins, then heavy and varied spins with the same motion, then heavy and varied spins from the same motion to all parts of the table, both in direction and depth, and low to the net. When the serve is ready, you practice it with a partner, where you play out the point (or play games), and learn to connect your serve with follow-up attacks. Do enough of this type of practice, and you *will* Prevent Poor Play.

March 21, 2011—Shadow Practice Your Shots

If you spent five or ten minutes each day shadow practicing your strokes and footwork, you'll be surprised at the improvement, not to mention the health benefits. Make it part of your fitness regimen. For example, every day do 50-100 forehands, backhands, forehand loops, backhand loops, and side-to-side footwork, alternating forehands and backhands or just doing all forehand, side to side. Adjust to your own style of play, i.e. if you mostly loop the forehand, do lots of forehand looping shadow practice. If you are a chopper, do lots of chopping. Vary the routine to include other moves you use regularly, such as shadow practice stepping in and flipping a short ball to the forehand, or a forehand loop against backspin followed by a smash or loop against topspin. When no one's watching (if you're shy), play out points as if they were real!

June 17, 2013—Shadow Practice for Strokes and Footwork

A great way to improve the sharpness and steadiness of your shots is to shadow practice them. This means practicing your shots without the ball. One of the best things that ever happened to me when I was a beginner was when I was told to shadow practice my forehand and backhand drives and loops, and side-to-side footwork, one hundred times a day. This was a primary reason why I went from beginner at age 16 to 1900+ in about two years

For Beginning Players: focus on the basics. You want to develop smooth, repeatable shots and footwork. You might want to have a coach work with you first, so you aren't practicing bad habits. Once you know what to do, do perhaps fifty to a hundred forehand and backhand drives, and fifty to a hundred forehand and backhand loops. Then go side to side fifty to a hundred times, stroking each time (either all forehand, or alternate forehand and backhand).

One key thing: remember that strokes have three parts: backswing, forward swing, and back to ready position. Many players tend to just go back and forth (going directly from forward swing to backswing), which you never do in a game. The stroke should go through a triangular motion (dropping down to ready position), not just a back and forth motion.

For Intermediate Players: Focus on improving the speed, crispness and power of the shots and footwork. Think about the type of specific movements you do in a game, and mimic them. For example, if you want to develop a powerful forehand loop that you can use from all parts of the table,

then shadow practice powerful forehand loops, from both the wide forehand and wide backhand, as well as from the middle, and practice moving from one spot to another. (Note—intermediate players should also use some of the techniques explained for advanced players.)

For Advanced Players: At this point, your shots are consistent and powerful. You should continue to do the shadow practice as explained for intermediate players. However, now you should add randomness. As you shadow practice, imagine you are playing a real match. Imagine a specific opponent, and play out the rallies—except now you are playing at whatever level you hope to attain. Want to be a world-class player? Then shadow practice rallies as if you are world-class! Instead of alternating forehand loops from side to side, add randomness—imagine your opponent spraying the ball all over the court. For example, after looping a forehand from the backhand court, your "opponent" might put one to the wide forehand, which you then cover; or he might block one right back to your backhand again, which you've vacated after the previous shot to get back into position, and so you either step around again for the forehand, or play a backhand attack shot.

You can also practice receive techniques—imagine an opponent's serve, read it, and return it. You might step in, drop a ball short or flip it, then step back and attack the next ball. Or you might shadow practice looping the deep serves. Think of what happens in a real match, and play out those points.

For All Players: You can practice everything this way, except for the actual timing of hitting the ball—and you can do that later at the table, with much faster, stronger and crisper shots because of the shadow practicing. And the nice thing is you can shadow practice anywhere—at work, at home, on the subway. (Okay, that last might get you strange looks—but I've done it before!)

June 6, 2011—Practice Matches

A practice match is just that—a practice match. The problem is that many only get the second part—"match"—and forget about that first part —"practice."

This doesn't mean you don't take a practice match seriously or don't give it 100%. It's not a goof-off match; it's a practice match. But how should you approach a practice match differently than a tournament match?

To start with, you should treat most practice matches almost the same

as a tournament match. That means playing to win. But there are differences. Winning may no longer be top priority. On the other hand, playing well should always be a priority in practice—even if you don't win.

In practice matches, if the goal is to improve, then this is your chance to practice whatever it is you need to improve. For example, if you're a blocker who is trying to develop his loop, practice matches are an opportunity to do that. Decide how you want to play in the future, and strive to play that way in practice. Your goal is to play well and to improve.

But not all opponents are the same. Some are weaker; some are about your own level, and some are stronger. How should you approach these matches?

Playing weaker players is a blessing. Now you can really practice your shots! Here's the chance for a blocker to work on his serve & loop; the looper to work on his blocking; and so on. Pick out something you need to work on, and go for it. Need to develop a counterloop? Let your opponent loop first and try to counterloop. Have trouble looping a heavy backspin? The weaker player might not have a good attack, but if he can push heavy, you have your practice. And so on. Against weaker players, practice your weaknesses, practice against their strengths, or go all the way and pit your weaknesses against their strengths. Or perhaps practice your own strengths, and see if you can completely dominate the match, if that's what needs work.

Against players your own level, find a balance. Here's where you incorporate the things you developed playing against weaker players. When there's no tournaments or other important matches coming up, try to improve and add on to your game. If there are important matches coming up, focus more on playing to win, while picking and choosing what new techniques you can now use. Use the match to practice your normal game.

Against stronger players, here's your chance to push your own strengths to a higher level. Improving isn't just about working on your weaknesses; it's also about making your strengths dominating. Do you have a good loop? Now's your chance to see if you can dominate a stronger player with it. Do you play fast? Now's your chance to see if you can play at the pace of the stronger player. And so on.

Let's suppose one of these "practice" matches is close, and it's near the end of a game. What do you do? You could try winning with the shot or shots you are working on. Better still, this is your chance to practice learning how to win. So instead, play to win using whatever tactics are best. Practice

isn’t always about practicing a shot; it’s also about practicing tactics. Learning to win, and what tactics to use to win, are huge practice.

Let me re-emphasize that you should give 100% in practice matches; otherwise, you aren’t being fair to your partner, and you are wasting your own time. But use the time intelligently, and optimize the development of your game. Play to win, but play to win using the shots you want to use for winning.

October 31, 2011—When to React

Have you ever studied your opponent to see exactly when in his strokes he commits to a specific placement? There really are two important points in the swing.

The first is when the opponent has committed to the placement, but you don’t know where yet. Normally you would not react to this, but sometimes, against a predictable opponent (which means most players), you can anticipate. For example, if you serve a deep breaking serve to an opponent’s backhand, most likely he’ll return it to your backhand. So you might anticipate this, and at the instant when the opponent has committed his direction—but hasn’t actually telegraphed the direction—you might anticipate his return by stepping over to attack with your forehand. Don’t overdo this, but it’s a definite tactical advantage if you can do this sometimes.

The second important point in the swing is when the opponent has telegraphed where his placement will be. You should learn to observe this so you can move the instant you can see the direction. Many players don’t move until the opponent has hit the ball, but for the large majority of players, you can see where they are going by the time they start their forward swing. At the higher levels, many players learn to hide their direction longer and to even fake one way and go another, so against players like that learn when they have really committed.

The shoulders are often the giveaway for where a player is going on the forehand. Many players line their shoulders up early to hit crosscourt or down the line, and it’s like they have a big sign across their shoulders saying where the shot is going. When you first learn the forehand, this is fine, but as you advance, learn a little subtlety and deception. For example, from the forehand side, rotate the shoulders way back as if you are going down the line, then at the last second whip about and go crosscourt. Or set up to go crosscourt, and at the last second rotate the shoulders back more so you can

go down the line. Or simply cock your wrist back at the last second and go inside-out down the line. These are easier shown then explained—have a top player or coach show you how to do these shots.

January 16, 2012—Larry's Six-Month Law

Here's Larry's Six-Month Law. If you work hard and improve, and are finally playing at a higher level in practice, you'll generally need to do this for about six months of tournaments and practice matches before you'll be able to consistently win at this level in tournaments. During those six months, you'll probably battle closely with players who were much stronger than you until your recent improvement, and occasionally you'll beat one, but mostly you'll lose close matches that, afterwards, you'll swear you should have won—often with good reason.

What's actually happening? The problem you face is that your opponents have played at that level for a much longer period of time, and so are both psychologically and tactically better prepared to win key points than you are, since you are new to that level. You and your opponent may play the same level, but when it's close, the experienced opponent who has been doing this much longer is more confident and knows exactly what to do tactically. He knows what serve to throw at you at the end of each game, how to return your serve, where to place the ball, and he's confident that he can execute the shots needed to win. You don't have this experience, and probably aren't as sure about what to do at the end of each game. Guess who wins most of those key points?

The key thing to understand is that the only thing that now separates you from your opponent is mental. When you miss a shot at a key time, and it's often the same shot you made over and over earlier, it wasn't the physical aspect that messed up, but the mental. Either you weren't confident and so messed up, or you were crossed up tactically and so were fooled into messing up. Learn from your mistakes in these close matches, pay your dues during those six months or so, and it's inevitable you'll start winning. And perhaps, just maybe, you'll be one of those players who doesn't take six months to start winning at your new level.

To reiterate: The key thing to understand is that it's mostly mental. You might as well tell yourself *it's all mental*, since that's pretty much true.

September 4, 2012—Multiball Training

Most rallies at the intermediate level start out with backspin, often with the server looking to serve and loop. If he doesn't loop, then the receiver looks for a chance to loop. Whoever can open with a strong loop against backspin has a huge advantage. But many players practice looping against the block over and over, or occasionally do serve and loop drills where they get only one loop in the rally. Wouldn't it be great if there were a way to practice looping against backspin systematically, over and over? (Well, that's easy—play a chopper. But there aren't that many choppers around these days. So what can you do if you don't have a chopper handy?)

And wouldn't it be great if there were a way to push yourself with stroking and footwork drills at a pace faster than you or your practice partner can rally consistently? Or to simulate game situations that you need work on?

The answer is multiball training. In multiball training, a coach or practice partner stands to the side of the table with a box of balls (on the left side if he's a righty), and feeds the ball to you. He does this by tossing the ball back, usually (though not always) letting it bounce on the table, and then hitting it to you with his paddle. In this way he can feed different spins and speeds to all parts of the table, either in systematic patterns or randomly. Essentially all of the best players in the world regularly use multiball training; the top Chinese players use multiball for about one-third of their practice sessions. (To see examples of this, go to Youtube.com and search for "table tennis multiball training.")

By having your partner feed you backspin over and over, you can practice looping against backspin, and get far more practice shots per minute (up to one per second or so) than if you just do serve and loop practice. Or the feeder can vary it, giving you a backspin and then a topspin, as it would be in a real rally (if opponent blocked your first loop back), and do so in rapid succession. Or he can feed topspin side to side or in other patterns so you can practice stroking and footwork. Or he can feed the ball randomly to all parts of the table (or to designated segments), simulating a real game.

All multiball drills are either rote drills, where you know where the ball is going, or random drills, where you do not, or some combination of the two. An example of a combination would be one ball to the middle that you attack with your forehand, followed by a random ball to either corner that you attack with forehand or backhand.

To do multiball training, you'll need a box of balls. You can do it with a few dozen balls, but most coaches start with a gross (144) or so of

training balls. (Training balls are cheaper than tournament balls, i.e. 3-stars, and you can buy them a gross at a time rather inexpensively.) If you and a practice partner are doing this, start off by actually practicing your multiball. (When I first began coaching many years ago one of the first things I did was go off to a table and practice multiball feeding for about an hour.)

While most multiball training is fed from the side of the table, there are variations where the feeder feeds from the far side of the table, either by the end-line or from farther back, to simulate shots from those positions. And while most coaches bounce the ball on the table before feeding it, some speed things up by hitting the balls right out of the air without bouncing them.

There are an infinite number of multiball drills you can do; use your imagination. You can either isolate a specific shot that needs work (such as forehand or backhand loop or smash against backspin), the types of footwork drills you use in a match (such as side to side), or other match simulations. For example, when I played tournaments I liked to dominate the table with my forehand, so players would often serve short backspin to my forehand, then quick-push to my backhand to take my forehand out of play and force me to play my weaker backhand. So I did multiball drills where the feeder gave me a short backspin ball to my forehand, then a deep backspin to my backhand. I'd push the short ball, then step around and loop the second with my forehand. (For most players, I'd recommend looping the second ball with your backhand, unless you have very fast feet, so develop your backhand attack.)

Here are a few drills you can try, including ones mentioned above (so you don't have to keep consulting the text). Use your imagination; many top players and coaches make up drills on the spot to address a particular issue.

- **Looping against backspin from both wings from all parts of the table**, either to one spot or to multiple or random spots. Examples include backspin alternating to wide forehand and middle, and you loop both with forehand; or backspin alternating from wide forehand to wide backhand, and you alternate looping forehand and backhand.
- **Backspin/topspin combinations**. For example, backspin to the middle, followed by topspin to the wide forehand; you loop both with your forehand. Or a longer pattern such as four feeds alternating between backhand and forehand, where perhaps the first is backspin, the next three are topspin, all in quick succession as in a

match, and you have to attack all four shots.

- **2-1 drill**, also called the backhand-forehand-forehand or Falkenberg drill (for the Falkenberg club in Sweden, where it was popularized by 1971 World Men's Singles Champion Stellan Bengtsson), where you play three shots: a backhand from the backhand side, a forehand from the backhand side, and then a forehand from the forehand side. This is a favorite among top players since you practice the three most common moves: covering the wide forehand, covering the wide backhand, step around forehand.
- **Random topspin**, either to two spots, the wide forehand and wide backhand, or to all parts of the table. You can also combine random drills with rote drills, such as having a ball to the middle you attack with your forehand, followed by a random ball to either corner that you attack with forehand or backhand.
- **Short ball (often with backspin) followed by a deep ball**. You push or flip the short ball, and loop the deep ball.

October 29, 2012—The Falkenberg Drill

The Falkenberg Drill (also called the Two-One Drill and the Backhand-Forehand-Forehand Drill) is probably the most popular drill for players at the intermediate and advanced levels. It combines three of the most common moves in table tennis: covering the wide forehand, covering the wide backhand, and the step-around forehand from the backhand side (since you often want to end the point with your forehand against a weak ball to the backhand). Go to any major tournament and you'll often see the top players warming up with this drill.

The drill was popularized by 1971 World Champion Stellan Bengtsson. While he was developing as a player at the Falkenberg Club in Sweden in the 1960s, one of the most common drills was forehand-backhand footwork, where a player alternated hitting a backhand and then a forehand from the backhand corner. The problem was this only practiced one of those three common moves—the step-around forehand—and half the drill was following a forehand from the backhand side with a backhand, which isn't as commonly done. Stellan made the Falkenberg Drill central to his training, and soon players around the world took notice.

In the most common way of doing the drill, you keep the ball to your partner's backhand. Your partner hits two balls to your backhand, one ball to

your forehand, and then repeats the sequence. You return the first ball with your backhand, step around your backhand corner and return the second ball with your forehand, then move to your wide forehand and return the third ball with your forehand. You should use the same strokes in the drill as you want to do in a match—hitters should hit, loopers should loop. Many loop the forehand and hit the backhand.

There are many variations. You can start the drill off backspin with a loop, and then continue. You can either hit or loop the forehands or backhands. You can do the drill to your partner's backhand or forehand. You can have free play after a certain number of repetitions, such as after three (nine shots). Or use your own imagination and make something up. Or just use the basic standby, as described above, as many do.

The drill can also be done with multiball. This allows a player to maximize how fast he can do the drill, since miss-hits by either player no longer affect the drill.

A key factor in the drill is balance. If you are even slightly off-balance at any time, you'll have trouble recovering for the next shot. When I say "off-balance," I don't mean actually stumbling-around off balance; if your center of gravity goes outside the area between your feet, or even goes too much on one foot, it'll slow down your recover for the next shot. The most common problem here is letting the weight go too much to your left (for a righty) when playing the forehand from the backhand side. It is this constant state of balance that allows top players to seemingly get to every ball since balance is the key to getting a quick start. So keep your weight between your feet.

If you go to Youtube.com and put in "Falkenberg Drill," a number of examples will come up.

October 29, 2013—Start Some Drills with a Serve

Most players practice with drills that are very different from what they actually do in a match. There's a logic to this—you want to perfect each part of your game, and you do that by isolating the shot so you can do it repeatedly, something you can't do nearly as effectively in a game situation. For example, if you want to be able to loop over and over against a block in a match, you first should practice looping over and over against a block in practice against a ball blocked to the same spot, which doesn't happen often in a match. However, there's a time for isolating a shot to perfect it, and a

time to match game situations.

After doing these simple rote drills, many players go either to random drills (such as the ball blocked randomly to all or certain parts of the table) or match-type drills (such as serve and attack). These are also good drills. But you also want to learn to connect how a rally really starts in a match (with a serve and receive) and how you'd follow it up, with an emphasis on doing so repeatedly so you can develop the techniques.

An example of a drill for this is one player serves backspin; the receiver pushes back long (usually to a pre-set spot); the server loops off the backspin to a pre-set spot, and then the rally continues with the server looping over and over off the block. The blocks can go to one spot, go side to side, or be randomly placed. A drill like this allows the server to combine looping off backspin with repeated loops against block, which is what often happens in a match.

A hitter (or a counter-driver or blocker, who still have to hit in rallies) could do a version of this where, after the opening loop against backspin (which even hitters, counter-drivers, and blockers should learn to do), he follows with hitting instead of looping. (In the modern game, nearly everyone at the higher levels learns to loop in rallies, but not everyone.)

A chopper/attacker could do the same drill, looping or hitting the forehand over and over, except the receiver's goal is to block him out of position and force him to chop with his backhand. After that it could be free play.

Drills like these are not just for the server; the receiver is also practicing his receives and his blocks, or whatever else he is doing in the drill. Some drills should center around the receiver, who perhaps receives and attacks the next ball in a pre-set pattern.

The drills don't have to all start with a serve and a long push return. You can do drills where the receiver pushes short over and over (and server flips, or perhaps pushes short again and loops the receiver's next long push) or flips the serve over and over (to one spot or varied spots). Or the server can serve long, the receiver attacks, and the server counter-attacks.

So come up with your own drills where you do a drill that allows you to develop a shot repeatedly but in a more match-like situation by starting the rally with a serve and receive.

October 9, 2012—Training Cycles

So you have a big upcoming tournament a few months away, and want to prepare yourself to be at your best? Welcome to the world of training cycles.

Some players train the same way all year, and as a result they show steady improvement. However, that improvement comes about because of the sheer amount of training. Often these players lose at big tournaments to those who don't necessarily train more, but train *smarter*.

So how can you best prepare yourself for a big tournament coming a few months away? The first step is to assess where you are now, and where you want to be. Be honest with yourself: where is your game right now? Where do you want it to be for the big tournament? What parts of your game need improvement?

Break your game down into five parts: physical fitness, serves, receives, strokes & footwork (these go together), and sports psychology. Divide each of these into strengths (or potential strengths) and weaknesses. If it's borderline, perhaps think of it as a potential strength. (I'm talking more about the first four items; see info below on sports psychology.)

You need to put equal emphasis both on improving your weaknesses and on turning your strengths into overpowering ones. How do you turn a strength into an overpowering strength? Both by practicing the strength and by practicing the techniques that will get it into play. (Having a great loop isn't nearly as valuable if you don't have serves and receives that set it up, for example.)

Decide where each of these items is now, and where each need to be for the big tournament. Once you've made that assessment, you are ready to begin. It's always good to know where you are going before you begin.

You will now start a gradual progression where you start out by focusing on practicing the raw ingredients of your game (fitness, serve, receive, strokes & footwork), and gradually transition to match-type play. Here's a rough breakdown.

Fitness: What's your current fitness level, and where does it need to be for the big tournament? Do you need to work on general conditioning, weight training, stretching? Start out by doing longer but easier workouts, and gradually transition to more intense ones. For general conditioning, you can do running, cycling, or similar exercises, or you can focus on combining it with your table tennis by doing extensive footwork drills. (This saves time.)

Weight training and stretching are musts for truly serious players, and are especially important as you get older.

Serves: How effective are your serves now, and where do they need to be for the big tournament? Do they consistently put pressure on your opponent while setting you up for your best shots? Start out by working on many varied serves. Get a box of balls and practice! Experiment, trying out different variations and copying others you have seen. Test them out in matches. As the big tournament approaches start to simplify by focusing on the ones you think will be most effective for you. (You might be developing other serves that won't be ready for the big tournament; put them aside, and go back to developing them afterwards.) Make sure you have lots of variations ready for different opponents with different receiving strengths and weaknesses.

Receives: How effective is your return of serve now, and where does it need to be for the big tournament? Can you consistently make good receives that stop the opponent from doing what he wants to do while setting you up to do what you want to do? Just as with serves, experiment with many varied receives and test them out in matches. As the big tournament approaches start to simplify by focusing on the ones you think will be most effective for you. Use matches to get feedback on what you need to develop. Ideally practice your receives in drills with a partner with good serves, who just serves over and over so you can practice your receive. (Playing out the point or keeping score is optional.) Otherwise you'll have to develop them in actual matches.

Strokes & Footwork: How strong are your strokes and footwork now, and where do they need to be for the big tournament? The two go together because you have to move to stroke; you can't have one without the other. The bulk of your practice will likely involve both. Early on focus on the basics, with lots of rote drills, i.e. drills where you know where the ball is going, such as side-to-side footwork. Make sure to use the same strokes you plan to use in the big tournament—if you are a looper, then do footwork drills where you loop; if you are a hitter, do footwork drills where you hit, etc.

As the big tournament approaches, the emphasis should gradually change to more random drills and match-type drills. Random drills are ones where you don't know where the next ball is going. For example, your partner might put the ball randomly to your forehand or backhand, and you

have to react. Or he might put the ball randomly all over your forehand side, and you have to react and move to loop or hit your forehand. Match-type drills mimic match conditions, and generally start out with a serve and receive. (So they combine everything you are working on.) For example you might serve short backspin, your partner pushes long to your backhand, you loop to his backhand, he blocks to your forehand, and then it's free play. There are countless variations; examine what type of patterns you use in your game, and develop drills that match. You might also consider playing in some smaller tournaments as the big tournament approaches so you can be "tournament tough" for that one.

Sports Psychology: All the training in the world won't help you if you show up too nervous to play or in some other way not ready to mentally compete at your best. There's a lot of material online about this. Google is your friend.

Putting It All Together: As the big tournament approaches, it's time to put it all together. Now is the time to focus on lots of matches where you use what you've been practicing. The matches not only fine-tune your game, but also provide feedback as to what needs more work and what tactics you will be using in the big tournament.

The Gradual Transition: I want to emphasize that you don't only do basic rote drills at the start or only random and match-type drills at the end. You should be doing all of these drills in your training. It's a matter of degree as well as level. (Higher-level players will do more random and match-type drills early on, while beginners need more rote drills.) As the big tournament approaches, you increase the amount of random and match-type drills. You should also increase the intensity of the drills, often by doing more drills but for less time each.

The Big Tournament: The day finally arrives. You've prepared for this for months. Now is where the training pays off. Good luck!

May 7, 2012—How to Play and Practice with Weaker Players

In some table tennis club in Lake Wobegone, all the players are above average and you never play a weaker player. But the rest of us have to make do playing and practicing with whoever is at our club. And often that means playing and practicing with weaker players.

Some recoil at the idea. It's almost a mantra for many to say, "I want to play stronger players." And it helps tremendously to play stronger players if you want to improve rapidly. But you also need to play matches with weaker players, and you can get good practice with them as well. Here's why.

Stronger players tend to dominate the points, and if you only play them there's a tendency to develop a game that reacts to what the opponent is doing rather than forcing your game on the other. (This can be true for both matches and practice drills.) It's also harder to try new things against a stronger player since new things aren't usually developed yet and so don't work too well against better players. It's against weaker players that you can try out new things before they are ready to try against stronger players. Sure, you can try out new things against stronger players, but since you are new to these new things, you won't be very good at them, and you may not get very good feedback since the stronger player will likely dominate against it.

For example, suppose you want to develop your short push against an opponent's short serve. Against weaker players you'll see weaker serves whose spin you can read, and develop control in dropping them short—and soon you'll be ready to try it out against stronger serves. If you start out against stronger serves you'll have more trouble reading the spin, and so rather than focusing on developing your ball control, you'll be forced to do two things at once—read the spin and control the ball. When developing something new, you want to focus on the new thing so you can perfect that aspect.

Or suppose you want to work on your loop. Against weaker players you can focus on good technique. Against a stronger player, any loop that's not strong might get smashed, counterlooped, or jab-blocked for a winner, putting pressure on you to go for stronger loops when you aren't ready to do that yet.

The other thing you can do in a practice game against a weaker player is to pit the weaker aspects of your game against their strengths. Or use simple serves and receives and try to win strictly by rallying or by attacking without the benefit of your better serve & receive. Or play nearly everything to their stronger side. In all these ways you create a stronger, more competitive opponent, and can get better practice.

You can get good drilling practice with weaker players as well. Rather than working on speed, focus on consistency and good technique. Do

longer drills at a steady pace as you develop and hone your shots. Do drills that take advantage of the weaker player's strengths. Keep the drills simple so your opponent can focus on a few things and better react to your shots. Many players improved dramatically this way despite drilling mostly with weaker players. I know—long ago I went from 1850 to 2100 in two years practicing regularly with 1800 players, and rarely getting to play anyone stronger. It's a matter of making the most of what you have—and you'll be surprised at how much a practice partner or playing opponent has if you take advantage of their strengths rather than harp on their weaknesses and lower level of play.

February 18, 2013—Learn to Play Defense

It's a common mistake for beginning players to develop their attacks, but not their defense. You need both. The problem comes about because a beginning player usually starts out learning to hit forehands and backhands, and once developed, these are primarily offensive shots. These are important shots when attacking, but what about when the opponent attacks?

Against many attacks, you can counter-attack. However, this can lead to some rather wild, low percentage shots. A little defense would be the better option. So it's important to learn to defend, such as by blocking.

It doesn't have to be passive blocking; you can block aggressively. Take the ball quick off the bounce and quick-hit the ball to the opponent's wide corners or middle (the transition point between forehand and backhand), and keep moving him around these three spots, and you'll often force a miss or weaker shot you can attack. The most common way to beat an attacker is to attack first, but if you can block, you take much of that advantage away, and turn your defense into a transition back to your own attack.

Many table tennis drills involve one player attacking, the other blocking. When you are the blocker in such a drill, take this just as seriously as you would when you are attacking. Many players treat drills as something where the two players take turns drilling. *Never!!!* A drill is a two-way thing, and whatever your opponent is doing, you are drilling against it. You learn to block by blocking, and the best time to do that is by focusing on your blocking in drills. Work on precision—if you learn to block the ball accurately and consistently in drills, this will show up in matches as well. You can also practice advanced variations, such as topspin blocks (i.e. mini-loops), dead blocks, and chop and sidespin blocks.

You can also learn other defensive shots, such as lobbing, fishing and

chopping. Lobbing is a high defensive topspin shot, usually done off a smash. It's often a desperation tactic, but in the hands of an expert, it's a valuable way to win a few points that otherwise would be lost. Fishing is a lower defensive topspin shot, where you keep the ball roughly one to four feet high. Fishing defense is central to many players' games, especially loopers, who play off the table and need an off-table shot to defend with. Fishing and lobbing, done at the higher levels (where the ball goes deep with topspin and sometimes sidespin), are basically just defensive loops. They are a bit more advanced than blocking, but if you have mobility off the table, they are valuable shots to have. Fishing and lobbing tend to go together as most players who do one also do the other.

Chopping is a more specialized defense, and while I don't recommend most offensive players to back off the table and try to chop down an opponent, it's valuable to be able to throw in a chop now and then, especially on the backhand when you are out of position. Plus, of course, many players play a chopping style, in which case chopping is central to their game.

Note that I don't include pushing as a defensive shot. A defensive shot is done against an incoming offensive shot. A push is more a sparring backspin shot against an incoming non-offensive shot, such as a backspin or no-spin push or serve. If done poorly, it's a defensive shot, but that's because it's done poorly. It should be more of a neutral shot.

Many years ago Cheng Yinghua (former Chinese team member and once the #1 player in the U.S. for a decade, winning Men's Singles at four Nationals and two Opens while making the 2000 Olympic team) said that the biggest weakness of top U.S. players were their fundamentals, in particular their defense. When players attacked against the best players in the U.S. at the time—Cheng, David Zhuang, Ilija Lupulesku—they faced great defense (blocking by the first two, fishing and lobbing by Lupulesku), and struggled to win a point. When these three attacked, opponent after opponent would crumble due to their lack of defensive skills. This is true at all levels. So learn to play defense, and make your opponents be the ones who crumble when the other player attacks.

November 28, 2011—Message to Lower-Ranked Players from Higher-Ranked Players

If you want to score more points against us, focus on consistency, placement, and steady attacks instead of wild swings. Stop hitting everything

crosscourt, go after my playing elbow more, and change directions at the last second so we don't know where you're hitting the ball five minutes before you hit it. And for God's sake, develop some good serves, both long and short ones. While you're at it, work on your receive—it takes practice, but if you focus on control, you'll get that control. If you do all this, and can put the ball away when you get an easy shot, you'll start beating us and we'll teach you the secret handshake. That is all.

CHAPTER EIGHT: SPORTS PSYCHOLOGY

September 12, 2011—The Myth of Thinking Too Much

Some players are accused of "thinking too much." There's no such thing as thinking too much. The problem is knowing when to do the thinking.

The rule is simple. You think between games and between points. When the point is about to start, you stop thinking. You blank your mind out and just let go. It is thinking during the point that causes a person to freeze up with uncertainty, often labeled as choking. Once the point begins, the conscious you is not controlling play; it is your subconscious that takes over.

Some players can't stop thinking when play begins, and try to consciously control their shots. That rarely ends well. Others are able to let go and let the subconscious take over, but they don't think between points either. That rarely ends well tactically.

Think about what actually happens when you play. Suppose your opponent gives you a backspin. Do you consciously say to yourself, "Ah, the ball has backspin, I must aim up this much to return it." Hopefully not! Instead, after facing backspins for a while—and probably messing up at the start, and telling yourself you need to aim up against backspin—your subconscious gets the message, learns just how much to hit up against varying degrees of backspin, and it becomes habit. The same is true of tactics.

How can you play tactics during the point if you aren't thinking during the point? The answer is if you spend enough time thinking about tactics, it too will get absorbed by your subconscious. If you decide you need to loop a deep serve to the opponent's wide forehand, you don't wait until you see a deep serve, and tell yourself, "Ah, a deep serve. I should loop it to the wide forehand." Instead, if you remind yourself regularly what you need to do, the subconscious will learn to get the message, and you'll do it automatically.

November 21, 2011—Remember the Good Shots

When you make a series of shots and then miss one, remember the feel of the ones that hit, not the one that missed. It's the ones that hit that you want to ingrain. Think about the miss only if you do it over and over, and then only think analytically to figure out what the problem is, and as briefly as possible. Then forget about the misses and think about the feel of the good

ones.

June 25, 2012—The Game is All Mental

Okay, let's be up front about this—the game is not all mental. Or is it? At least indirectly, everything comes from the mental side. Even physical training cannot be effective unless you push yourself—and that's mental. Even more specifically, as a member of the USA Mini-Cadet Team recently reminded me, once you are out at the table playing a match, the game *is* all mental.

To quote Derek Nie (at age 11, rated 2146, the 2012 U.S. Open Under 12 Boys' Singles Champion), "You can't improve your skills at a tournament. So at tournaments, the game is all mental." I was his coach at an Eastern Open when he said this. He was a wise fifth grader.

In the middle of a big match, you are not going to get stronger, faster, or improve your stamina. You are not going to suddenly learn how to loop if you couldn't do so before. You won't suddenly learn techniques you didn't have before. What you have is what you brought into the match, and how you use it. The former you no longer control; the latter you have complete control over, if you know how. And it's all mental.

The mental game generally breaks down into two aspects: sports psychology and tactical skills. Sports psychology is your ability to play your best despite the pressure of a match. Tactical skills come from your ability to figure out how best to use what weapons you have—and much of that comes from clear thinking that comes from sports psychology. Together, they should be your primary focus in a match. If you are able to play with relative calm and focus, and are able to think clearly and figure out how best to use your various techniques to win, you have a strong mental game. And that is why the game is all mental.

July 8, 2013—Expect to Win

If you expect to win a match, you'll do better than if you don't expect to win. It's as simple as that. You may go into the match knowing it'll be the fight of your life, but if you expect to win it, you'll have a much better chance of doing so. Even against a player who is so much stronger that you objectively have little chance, you'll do better if you expect to win. Even more, you will have the proper mindset to figure out what you need to work on so you can do even better next time.

Of course, we've all had that experience of playing someone who was much better, i.e. a "top player." But if you are practicing regularly and are about to play a "top player," ask yourself this: Are you practicing regularly to *not* be a top player? Hopefully not, in which case you are practicing to *be* a top player. So when you play a top player, it's your chance to be what you practice to be. ("Top player" is, of course relative, depending on your own perspective and goals; to some, that's a world-class player, to others it's the neighborhood or club champ.)

Here's a simple test. If when you lose a match you don't have a few seconds of disbelief that you lost, then you didn't really expect to win. This should happen even after you play a top player. If it doesn't happen, you didn't expect to win, and you are handicapping yourself both now and in the future.

Part of expecting to win for improving players is having confidence that even if you lose, you'll figure out what you need to do so you'll win next time—you may lose now, but fully expect to win next time. Here's another test. If after a match you think, "I would have won if not for [I couldn't return his serve, I missed my first attacks, I couldn't block his loop, etc.], then you have pretty much accepted your current level. If you are trying to improve, instead you should be thinking, "I can beat him next time because I will improve my [return of serve, learn to do the serve I had trouble with so I can win with it too, work on my first attack, work on my block, learn to loop so the other guy has as much trouble with my loop as I did with his, etc.]."

Often the root cause of a player not expecting to win is because the opponent does something so much better that the player thinks he can't compete. Never compare your opponent's best shot to yours; of course anyone near your level will do some things better than you, often much better in fact. But the same applies to you—against your peers, you also do something much better. Your goal is to find ways to tactically dominate more with your strengths more than they do with theirs—and expect to win as a result.

Expecting to win is a mindset you need to develop if you want to maximize your performance both now and in the future. It involves psychological, tactical, and strategic thinking. Psychological thinking is the confidence that you *can* win and so expect to win. Tactical thinking is thinking about your tactics so as to realize your expectations of winning. Strategic thinking is thinking about what you need to improve in your game

so as to meet your expectations of winning next time. Use all three types of thinking and your expectations of winning will likely become a reality.

November 4, 2013—Tournament Toughness

Playing in tournaments is quite different from playing practice matches. Here are three reasons. First, the playing conditions are generally different than you are used to—different tables, balls, floors, backgrounds, and lighting. Second, you are usually playing different players, while in practice you often play the same players over and over. Third, there's far more pressure in a tournament match than in a practice match. (There are other, lesser reasons—traveling, time zone changes, eating different foods, etc.)

To overcome these three hurdles a player needs to become "Tournament Tough." How do you do this? By playing in tournaments!

By playing lots of tournaments, you get used to different playing conditions, different opponents, and the pressures of tournament play. In fact, players who are tournament tough often play better in tournaments—they rise to the occasion and play their best, while not-so-tournament-tough opponents do not, and the contrast is often pretty blatant. How many players have you seen beat everyone in practice, but turn around and lose in tournaments? It's not the exception; it's the norm.

There are ways you can help develop your tournament toughness outside of tournaments. First, you can choose tournaments with varied conditions so you can get used to playing in any conditions. If you play in a club with perfect conditions, and only play there, then you'll be fine in tournaments with perfect conditions. In the large majority of major tournaments you'll have a problem as perfect conditions aren't so common. So get used to playing with slippery floors, poor lighting, distracting backgrounds, and tables and balls that might not meet your approval.

Play lots of different players in practice so you'll be ready for lots of different players in tournaments. Often the best thing you can do is play practice matches with weaker players with weird styles—not so you can learn to play that specific weird style, but to learn to adjust to different styles.

Finally, we get to tournament pressure. There simply isn't anything in practice like it. You'll feel it early in the tournament, and it'll only get worse as you reach the final rounds of an event you badly want to win.

I once coached a kid in the final of an age event at the Junior

Nationals. (I think it was Under 12.) The kid had been training for years and was one of the top two players of his age in the country. But before the final he was incredibly nervous. I asked why, and he said it was the first time in his life he'd been in a final. How had this happened? He and his parents had always kept him out of rating and age events where he was a top seed to protect his rating, so he had never really played in events where he was competitive, and thus was never in a final. They only wanted him to play stronger players. And so in this final he was a nervous wreck, and got clobbered in the final against a player he might have beaten—in a practice match. But he didn't have the "tournament toughness" to win a big match.

What can you learn from this? You need to play competitive events and learn how to *win* events. This means playing in age and rating events where you are among the top seeds.

This brings up a question that's been raised a lot over the years. Should under-rated players play in rating events they are eligible for, even if they are better than the cut-off? Definitely. It is irrelevant if you think your level of play is over the rating cutoff. At the U.S. Open, U.S. Nationals, or other large tournaments, you have to play a lot better than the rating cutoff to win, so usually being a lot better than the rating cutoff merely makes you competitive. Plus, who are you to say your level is better than the cutoff until you have proved so in a tournament? And finally, you need the competition. How can you be at your best in a big match until you have this big match experience? How can you get this big match experience if you avoid events where you can reach the finals?

When a player trains very hard and improves a lot, he should have that one opportunity to win those events that he was struggling to win before. When he's finally reached the point where he's good enough to win the event, he should play the event, reap the reward for his hard work, and, from battling through to win the event, gain the tournament toughness needed to win in ever higher events.

July 18, 2011—The Mental State of a Looper Against a Push

If you are a looper—and that means most players from the intermediate level on—then when someone pushes to you and you want to loop, you should be in one of four mental states. We're assuming you can loop both forehand and backhand, or (if no backhand loop) you have very fast feet for #4.

1) Loop forehand or backhand, depending on where the push goes. This means there's essentially a line from your opponent to your playing elbow (mid-point between your forehand and backhand), and if the ball is on the forehand side of that line, you forehand loop; if on the backhand side, you backhand loop.

Advantages: You are ready to loop anything, and you don't have to go out of position.

Disadvantages: Your opponent chooses if you are going to loop forehand or backhand (and presumably will have you do your weaker shot), and you might have problems deciding which way to go on pushes to the middle, especially quick ones.

2) Favor forehand, but ready to loop backhand if it's a strong push to the backhand. This means you are ready to forehand loop most pushes, including ones to the middle and weak ones, but won't force it against a good push to the backhand, which you'll backhand loop. (Of course some might just push this ball.)

Advantages: You are ready to forehand loop—presumably your stronger side if you choose this strategy—against most pushes, both strong ones anywhere except to the backhand, and weak ones anywhere.

Disadvantages: You may have a lot of ground to cover on some shots if it's a good push toward the middle. If you are ready to forehand loop and are forced to backhand loop, you may not be ready and so may backhand loop weakly or inconsistently.

3) Favor backhand, but ready to loop forehand if the push goes to the forehand side. This means you are literally setting up to backhand loop most pushes, including pushes to the middle or even slightly toward the forehand side, but are ready to rotate the shoulders to the forehand side to forehand loop if the push goes there. You are basically telling your opponent, "I'm going to backhand loop, but if you want to give me an easy forehand loop, then push to my forehand."

Advantages: Allows you to really prepare for your backhand loop, often compensating for having less power on that side. Also allows you to have less ground to cover for forehand loops. Allows you to stay in position for

most loops. If your backhand loop is stronger than your forehand loop, then allows you to maximize the chances of backhand looping.

Disadvantages: You'll be doing a lot of backhand loops, often weaker than the forehand loop. Can be caught off guard with a quick push to the forehand side if you are too quick to set up for a backhand loop. Can have trouble backhand looping pushes that go to the middle if you don't learn to step into position properly for this.

4) All-out forehand looping. You basically decide in advance that if it's humanly possible, you are going to loop with your forehand. Can only do this if your footwork is fast and technically good. Off the serve, good footwork technique and anticipation can make up for not having fast feet. (Note that the logical alternative to this, all-out backhand looping from all over the table, is rarely done since there's less range on the backhand side. There are some players who do this, but they are rare.)

Advantages: You get to use your forehand loop, presumably your stronger shot. Allows you to get into forehand position so you can do a series of forehand loops in a row. Takes the indecision out of the shot since you know what you are going to do.

Disadvantages: You have a lot of ground to cover, and so can get caught out of position, both while trying to make the shot and for the next shot. May make weak or inconsistent shots if you aren't in position quickly enough.

Conclusion: Which of the above do you use?

November 25—Mentality in a Match and in Practice

This could be a very short Tip, since the mentality in a match and in practice should be the same. So here's the short version: think of a time where you played GREAT. It could be in a tournament or a practice match, or even a practice session. The key is that you played great, and you want to play like that all the time. Now think about your mentality when you were playing great, i.e. were "in the zone." You were probably playing almost mindlessly, other than tactical thinking. In fact, you probably were more like a spectator just watching yourself react mindlessly and almost flawlessly. THAT is the mentality you want both when you practice and when you play a match.

So how do you do it? Many think that they only need to reach this state of being in the zone when they are playing serious matches. But that's like saying you only need to have a good forehand in serious matches, and so can goof off when practicing and in less serious matches. Just as you need to develop your forehand in practice and in practice matches, you need to develop this ability to get into the zone by practicing it—and that means doing so whenever you play until it becomes second nature. It is only then that you'll be able to turn it on at will in big matches, because it will then, in fact, be second nature, and just like your other best techniques. Think of getting in the zone as no different than hitting a good forehand. Both are techniques that take practice, and if you want them to be ready in serious matches, you need to practice them . . . in practice.

How do you get into the zone? Basically you have to just let go and let your subconscious take control. When someone loops to you and you block, you don't consciously set the racket angle; your subconscious does this, as well as just about everything else you do when rallying. When you practice, you are basically training the subconscious to play, i.e. setting muscle memory so that it'll react properly in a match. It's not a static thing; if your opponent does something different that you haven't practiced against, your subconscious will learn and adjust. The key in all cases is to let it do so, since the subconscious is quicker and more accurate than anything you can do consciously. If your conscious interferes by trying to guide your shots, your game will deteriorate. Other than thinking tactics—which the subconscious will pick up on and follow—think of yourself as a spectator and just admire your play. Heck, I sometimes feel guilty when I'm playing well since I feel like I'm not really doing anything other than watching as that subconscious part of me takes control. (But remember—the conscious mind has its role as the tactical leader that the subconscious will follow if you allow it. And yet, even there the subconscious will end up doing most of your tactical work since it will learn to automatically do the right tactical thing. It's smarter than you think!)

Putting aside physical limitations, there's no reason why a player can't be at his best essentially all the time—it's all in the head. When players realizes this, as most do after they've played many years, their game goes up dramatically. Do you want to wait many years or learn this now?

CHAPTER NINE: EQUIPMENT

August 29, 2011—Suggested Equipment for Beginning and Intermediate Players

I'm not an EJ—Equipment Junky—and I long ago gave up trying to keep track of the zillions of different rubbers and rackets. When I started out in 1976, the choice was basically Mark V, Sriver, or D-13, and then it was an earth-shattering event when Butterfly came out with Tackiness. So I'm not going to give specific recommendations on exactly what equipment you should get.

Good technique (from coaching and training) can take a beginner rated 500 to 2500 and beyond. Better equipment may take an 1800 player to 1825, perhaps 1850, i.e. he'll be a little better against his peers. (I'm assuming you at least have something reasonable to start with.) However, having the right equipment is important, and here are my recommendations.

1) Beginners and others not that familiar with what's out there need to go through a period where they try out the various rubber and rackets just so they know what the choices are.

2) Once you find something that fits your game, generally stick with it unless your game changes or there's a major equipment breakthrough. (Equipment breakthroughs generally take place about once every five years or so, though you'll see headlines on "new" breakthroughs every six months.) This doesn't mean you shouldn't try out the equipment of others, and occasionally change if you find something you like. But don't get into the habit of constantly changing or you'll never really get comfortable with any equipment. Most breakthroughs are for the most advanced sponges designed for advanced players, and so won't apply to you unless you are at least an advanced intermediate player.

3) Most players use rackets that are too fast. I recommend a medium speed blade for beginners, a medium to fast blade for more advanced players. Few should use the ultra-fast blades that are on the market as few can control them. (I can't.) The other key is it should simply feel right when you hit with it.

4) Most players used a flared grip. Some use a straight grip, which generally seems to help the backhand. A few use others, such as anatomic. Try them

out and see what feels right.

5) If you are playing regularly, and your racket isn't too fast, then you can use modern sponges. I don't recommend sponges with built-in glue effects for beginners, but you do want something modern and relatively fast. Later you can try out the bouncier stuff, which is mostly for looping. Start out with something in the 1.5 to 1.9mm range.

January 9, 2012—Proper Care of Your Racket

There are fewer things in life nicer than those first few shots with a brand new sheet of rubber right out of the package. This is especially true with a grippy sheet of inverted sponge, with its surface practically grabbing the ball and throwing it back at the opponent with topspin or whatever type of spin you choose.

If you take proper care of the inverted surface, your rubber can do this for a long time. However, many players do not clean their rubber. Dust and grime collects on the surface, leading to a non-grippy, often inconsistent hitting surface. The ball starts to slide on the surface, and you lose spin and consistency.

You should clean your rubber after each use. Some do so with plain water, and that mostly works, but it doesn't really get off any oils that collect on the surface. That's why the gods of table tennis created rubber cleaners! Use the rubber cleaner somewhat regularly, and wash with water at other times, and the surface will retain its grippiness. I especially use rubber cleaner in tournaments or for important matches at the club.

To use rubber cleaner, just spray it on and wipe with a towel. To clean with plain water, wet a corner of your towel and wipe the surface with that, then wipe dry with the rest of the towel.

However, it's not enough to just clean the surface between playing sessions—it gets dirty during a session as well. If you watch top players, you'll see a strange thing—many of them will occasionally blow on their racket and then wipe it off with a towel or on their pants or shirt. (Some will wipe it off with the palm of their hand near the bottom, which apparently is a non-oily part of the hand.) The idea is that by breathing on the paddle, you create slight moisture, enough to wipe off the dust and dirt. I do this regularly, usually every five minutes or so, and recommend you do so as well.

It's especially important to wipe your paddle off regularly if you have a new ball. New balls come with some sort of powder all over them, which leaves a dusty mark on your paddle which takes away the grippiness. With a new ball, I wipe the paddle off (using the breath method) every few points.

If you have a pips-out surface, wiping it with a cloth will help clean the surface of the pips, but it won't do a complete job, especially since most pips do not have flat surfaces. For pips, you might need to clean it with a toothbrush.

You should keep your racket covered when not in use. Normally you do this with a racket case. You can also keep it in a plastic bag, but that practically screams out "amateur!" If you leave the racket out, the surface will deteriorate more rapidly in the air.

If you have a long trip to the club or tournament on a cold day, keep the racket inside the car with you. You don't want the racket to get cold, which will make it dead until it warms up, which can take a surprisingly long time. I've learned this the hard way.

Take good care of your racket, and it will take good care of you!

September 24, 2012—Care of Equipment

Here are some tips of proper care of your equipment. I'm amazed at how lazy players often are on these things! (Much of this is redundant with previous segment.)

- **Racket Covering:** One of the simplest ways to keep your racket surface clean while playing is to lightly blow on it every few points and then wipe it off with a cloth. The blowing puts a very light moisture on the blade, which allows you to wipe off the surface so it's clean and dry. (Watch top players and you'll see many of them do this regularly.) When you are done playing, wipe your racket off with a damp towel, and after it dries (you can wipe it off lightly to hasten the process), cover it in a racket case or in plastic. This protects it from oxidizing with the air, and I can verify that sponges left out in the open deteriorate much faster than those covered. You might also cover the surface with plastic protective sheet, which will make it last even longer, especially if you only play occasionally. Occasionally use a rubber cleaner to wipe off grease. When the sponge begins to lose its bounciness, or an inverted sheet begins to

lose its tackiness, or a pips-out surface has broken pips (or the surface of the pips are worn down), it's time to change. Keep the racket out of extreme heat and cold. If you are driving in the cold to play, keep the racket inside the car with you, not in the trunk where it's cold. (Otherwise the racket will be rather slow and dead until it warms up.)

- **Racket:** Consider putting edge tape on the racket, if it's not already there. This is mostly cosmetic to protect it if you accidentally hit the table with your racket, as sometimes happens during play.
- **Shoes:** Generally don't wear them except at the playing hall. They are not meant for walking, and don't give as much support as normal shoes. If you do wear them outside the playing hall, be careful not to get the soles dirty. If you do, wash them off. Otherwise, not only will you lose traction when you play, you'll track dirt into the player area. Don't. If you are playing on floors that aren't grippy, wash the soles of your shoes off to add traction. (Another good way to add traction is to step lightly on a wet towel every few points. You'll see top players do this all the time when they play on cement or wood floors; try it and you'll see.)
- **Shirt:** Other than wearing something that's both comfortable and legal (see USATT rules 3.22 and 3.25) but primarily neat, not the same color as the ball, and without huge advertisements, what do I have to say here? If you have a nice table tennis shirt with a nice design on it, that design will slowly wear away with washing. To slow that down, turn the shirt inside out when you wash it. That way the water in the washing cycle will hit against the inside of the shirt rather than directly on the design, which wears it away much faster.

CHAPTER TEN: TOURNAMENTS

March 11, 2013—Practicing for Big Matches

There are two key differences between practice and important matches: **Psychological** and **Variation**.

Psychological. There is little pressure in practice, and so players are loose, both mentally and physically. However, once a game begins, it's easy to get nervous and tighten up. *RELAX!* Of course, that's easier said than done, especially in a tournament or league match. A great way to prepare for this is to drill as if it were a match. Even if you are doing a simple side-to-side footwork drill, think of it as a match, where you must outlast your opponent, in this case your practice partner. Table tennis is a competitive sport, and to prepare for competition you must do competition.

This leads to another way of preparing for important matches—practice matches. There's a lot less pressure when you play practice matches, but remember that practice is just that—practice. And so practice matches are a perfect time to practice your mental game. Pretend it's a serious match. Before the point begins, blank out your mind, and just let the shots happen. (Between points is when you think about tactics; once the point begins, you have to just let them happen naturally.) Don't worry about winning or losing practice games; just play your game until it becomes comfortable. Then do the same in tournaments and leagues, where you also shouldn't worry about winning or losing, which only puts more pressure on yourself. The more you do this in practice the easier it will be to do so in important matches.

Always remember that you have your best chance of winning if you don't worry about winning. If your goal is instead to play your best, you will maximize your chances of winning.

Variation. There is much less variation in practice drills than in a game. Most practice drills are somewhat predictable, and so you get balls you are comfortable with. For example, you might do a drill where you serve backspin, your opponent pushes it back to your backhand, and you loop (forehand or backhand). The range of variation in the pushes you'll be looping (amount of spin, speed, height, depth and placement) may be rather small. Drills like this are good to develop your shots, as are pattern drills where you practice footwork.

But in a game, when you serve backspin, your opponent's pushes will vary more. He may push to your forehand or backhand, or short, or he may

even attack the push. He may vary the spin more. So you usually have to deal with a lot more variation in a game than in practice, and so it's more difficult to prepare for or react to the many different returns.

How do you learn to react to variation in games? By incorporating that variation into your practice routines. Do drills where your opponent varies his returns. For example, the drill might be where you serve backspin, your partner pushes deep anywhere, and you loop. Or your partner may have the choice of pushing short to the forehand or long to the backhand. Or he may just push anywhere, long or short. When you are comfortable against all these, then you may go for bust, and have your partner return serves any way he wants, including attacking them. (Perhaps serve short so he can't loop, and serve low so he can't flip too effectively.)

All drills can be turned into random drills that incorporate variation. For example, instead of hitting forehand to forehand (or forehand loop to block), once you are warmed up have your practice partner move you around randomly on your forehand side. Or have your partner hit the ball randomly to your forehand or backhand (or to anywhere on the table), and you return each shot to one spot. Or do drills that combine variation with pattern play. For example, your partner may alternate between one shot to your backhand, and one random shot that goes anywhere.

Of course, the ultimate drill that incorporates all variations is a practice match. Play them like tournament matches (though sometimes you should focus on something that needs practice), and they will prepare you for the big matches. Ultimately, to play in games as well as you play in practice, you need to play lots of games—but only after you have really practiced against variable shots in practice.

March 25, 2013—Importance of Constant Competition

One thing that always stands out from years of coaching is that those who play in tournaments regularly almost always improve faster than those who do not. There are players who train and train, but do not get the constant feedback you get from playing in tournaments. As a result, the training doesn't always transfer into improvement. Also, players who do not play tournaments regularly are not "tournament tough," and so do not play as well as players who compete in tournaments regularly. (Note—when I talk about playing in tournaments, this includes league matches as well, as long as you are playing a lot of different players there.)

Why is it so important to compete regularly, as opposed to just constant training? The constant training improves your game, but you also need the constant competition to learn to compete against different players, for feedback on your game, and to become mentally stronger under pressure situations. It also gives you incentive to practice.

Some would argue that you get the same thing by playing practice matches against players at your club. While this is partially true, there are two problems here. First, you are playing the same players over and over. You get used to their serves, their receives, and their rallying shots. Then you go to a tournament, and find that everybody has different serves, receives, and rallying shots. You'll never face everything at your club, and even if you did, you'll never get used to everything. But what playing different players regularly does do is develop the *habit* of adjusting to new players. A player who plays lots of tournaments will adjust far more quickly to a new serve or other shot than a player who only plays the same players, and so isn't used to adapting to new things. The constant feedback from playing different players also shows a player what he needs to practice.

The psychological aspect might be even more important. Playing a practice match at the club just isn't the same as playing under pressure at a tournament, where the results count. To many, just the thought of losing rating points can make them forget all about their ingrained techniques while turning them into shivering jellyfish!

A third aspect is the competitive aspect, as in players who compete have stronger incentive when they train. A player who competes constantly knows what works and what doesn't work in serious competition, and so has incentive to turn the strengths into overpowering ones, and to work on weaknesses that are exposed in tournaments. Knowing there's another tournament coming up gives you a timely reason to train to excel, while those who don't have anything coming up have more of a mental battle to push themselves to excel.

You might want to take time off from tournaments for a time when you are working on something new that is central to your game. Competing when your game is in transition is often a mistake, and it can lead to falling back on old habits you are trying to overcome. For example, if you were mostly a hitter but are trying to incorporate more looping into your game, you might want to focus on training until you feel your looping is ready—but once you reach that stage, where you can confidently loop in a real match,

then you should get back to constant competition.

Think of tournaments and practice as the Yin and Yang of table tennis. They feed off each other, and one without the other is like a Yinless Yang or a Yangless Yin. Go for both, where you both practice for tournaments and use tournaments as feedback and incentive for practice, and watch your game soar.

June 18—Playing in Different Time Zones

It can be very tough playing well in tournaments after traveling, especially if you cross several time zones. For example, in the U.S., players on the east and west coast sometimes fly 3000 miles to play in the U.S. Open, USA Nationals, or North American Teams Championships. Often they play poorly, especially on the first day, and are frustrated. Sometimes they come back on day two and play well and conveniently "forget" how poorly they played the first day, and so they never really figure out how to avoid it in the future.

Travel messes up your sleeping habits, with jet lag leading to fatigue. (So does dry air and varying air pressure, which can also cause nausea, as well as the general hassle of travel.) West coast players playing in east coast tournaments struggle to play effectively at 9AM, which is 6AM their time—meaning they probably had to get up at 4AM. East coast players have little trouble playing at 9AM in west coast tournaments, which is noon to them—but when they start playing in 7PM matches that go on until 9 or 10 PM, well, that's past midnight for them. Junior players are especially vulnerable to this.

If you travel west to east and don't have morning matches, or if you travel east to west and don't have nighttime matches, then you may consider simply sticking with your own time. If you travel west to east, you might want to get something to cover the windows so bright sunshine doesn't wake you up early and mess up your plans.

Here are some ways to adjust to changing time zones.

1. One or two weeks before the tournament start adjusting to the local time of the tournament. Perhaps adjust your schedule by an hour two weeks in advance, another hour a week in advance, and a few days before the tournament you are on tournament local time.
2. Arrive at least two days before your main events begin. In some

major tournaments you can get away with arriving the day before if your main event doesn't start on the first day. In this case the first day is more or less your "warm-up" day—but beware, you might not play well at the start if you only got there the day before, and it's sometimes difficult to come back from a bad start. If you go to a really major tournament only once or twice a year, perhaps come out two nights in advance, relax and have a little practice the day before (think of it as a vacation day), and by tournament time you are on top of the world, rested and ready to go.

3. Get extra practice at the tournament site the day before. There's nothing like a good workout to energize the body. Both drills and practice matches are effective. (Don't do this too late the night before or it might affect your sleep.)
4. *If you really feel tired, go to the restroom and splash cold water on your face. It's a surprisingly simple yet effective tool. I've both done it and had students do it for years with surprising success.*

For players traveling from East to West:

1. When you first arrive, you may feel like going to bed early local time, since what's "early" locally is late in your own time zone. Resist the urge. If you go to bed too early, you'll stay in your own time zone sleeping habits, wake up too early, and if you have matches the following night you may pay the price. Related to this is that many players sleep while traveling to the tournament, making it that much harder to go to sleep at the right time. Unless you are the type who can sleep at any time, avoid too much sleeping while traveling, since it'll make it harder to sleep later on. (This might be difficult for some, since many do sleep while flying to tournaments.)
2. If you have to play nighttime matches, consider taking an afternoon nap during the tournament. Just a 20-30 minute nap will get you rejuvenated. But make sure to arrange a good practice session afterwards to get the body warmed up again.
3. One surprising solution: bright light a couple hours before the time you would normally go to bed will often change your circadian rhythms, delaying the time you'll go to sleep and get up, and more

quickly get you into local time.

For players traveling from West to East:

1. The big problem here are the morning matches. Hopefully you've been going by local time before the tournament, at least to an extent. It's probably more important doing this for west-to-east players, who otherwise will face very difficult early morning matches when their bodies are still half asleep. To help wake up, get some morning exercise. Go out for a jog before breakfast. After breakfast, get to the playing hall early for an exhilarating work-out, with the focus on drills that are physical to get the body thoroughly awake and ready to play. A huge advantage here is multi-ball training, where you can drill very fast without losing control, as often happens when two players try to rally faster than usual. Or play practice matches, which often get a player going more effectively than just drills.
2. When you first get up, expose yourself to bright light. This wakes up the body quickly. To a lesser degree, so does splashing cold water on your face.
3. The temptation will be to stay up late the night before, since the local "late" isn't so late in your time zone. (This is even more tempting if you sleep while traveling to the tournament.) But if you do that, you'll pay the price when you have to get up. On the other hand, many people can't go to bed early; if they try, they'll just lie awake. But try to find a way. Perhaps go to bed early, but read until you are sleepy, and then go to sleep. Avoid things that will keep you awake in the hours before the time you should go to bed—excessive exercise (try to get this done before dinner time), eating too much too late, alcohol, and caffeine.

Just remember what your goal is when you travel to tournaments: to play well. If you prepare yourself so that you are alert and energetic at the start and finish each day, you'll probably play well.

June 11, 2012—Dealing with Cheaters and Poor Sportsmanship

How should one deal with people who cheat or have bad sportsmanship? There is a simple answer which would make this article very

short: call for an umpire. However, umpires are not always available (and most of your matches will likely be practice matches anyway, where there are normally no umpires), so sometimes you'll have to deal with this on your own, especially if it's only poor sportsmanship, not outright cheating. Besides, you don't want to call for an umpire every time you think an opponent looks at you funny. So when possible, deal with the problem on your own.

Cheaters cheat because they want to win. There are limits to how you can deal with this short of calling for an umpire. If the opponent simply calls the score wrong, the remedy might be to simply call the score out loud every point, so the score is absolutely clear to you, your opponent, and anyone watching. Cheaters don't like this because it's hard to argue about the score when it's been called out loudly and clearly every point.

But there are other types of cheaters. They may serve illegally, use illegal surfaces, call lets on points that are not lets, claim their shot hit the edge or that your edge ball missed, and many other ways. You might be able to deal with some of these on your own. For example, if an opponent serves illegally (probably the most common form of "cheating"), politely explain why the serve wasn't legal. Ideally, catch the illegal serve and explain why the serve was illegal. If you attempt to return it, then the point counts. But between points you can still ask the opponent to serve legally.

If an opponent refuses to serve legally, and you can't get an umpire, then you are basically stuck, so deal with it. In tournaments you usually can get an umpire for this, but rarely in practice. And surprisingly, many umpires are reluctant to call many illegal serves. So you may have to learn to deal with some illegal serves. (Some illegal serves don't really give much of an advantage to the server, other than the fact that if they have to serve legally, they wouldn't be able to use their normal serves, and they'd have difficulty serving effectively. Other illegal serves give a direct advantage to the serve, such as hiding contact, throwing the ball backwards into the racket, or excessively short tosses.)

Illegal surfaces are usually easier to deal with. You are allowed to examine an opponent's racket at the start of the match. If he has an illegal surface, even if there is no umpire you can ask the referee to look at it, and let him handle it. If there is no umpire or referee (i.e. usually a practice or perhaps a league match), then you'll have to deal with it on your own, and ask him to use a legal surface, or (as often happens in practice matches), just

deal with it, and decide later whether to avoid playing that person again until he gets a legal surface. Except possibly in practice, you'll rarely have to deal with a player using the same color on both sides, but this can come up. Probably the most common illegal surface is frictionless long pips, which usually comes about when an opponent takes a legal long pips and treats it (usually with heat) to make them frictionless. Unfortunately, this is difficult for umpires or referees to judge.

Other types of cheating are harder to deal with. There's not a whole lot you can do if your opponent claims your edge ball missed or hit the side, or that his shot off the end or into the side hit the edge, or if he calls illegal lets or disagrees with your own rightly-called let. Of course, he may have just not seen what you saw, or perhaps you missed seeing what he saw, so don't be too quick to judge the opponent a cheater. Regardless of who is right, the only way to resolve a dispute like this is to call a let, which favors the one who is either wrong or outright cheating. It's up to you whether to call for an umpire (if available), using your own judgment over whether you think it will happen again.

Now the good news about cheaters: there are surprisingly few of them. Part of this is that repeat offenders get to be known, since not only opponents but people on the sidelines see it happening. Most who might cheat quickly stop rather than face ridicule. However, there are always a few players, even at tournaments, who are regular cheaters. They are often well known to referees, who often watch these players and are quick to assign an umpire if needed. I've played tournaments where well-known cheaters informally had full-time umpires assigned to their matches.

There's a large overlap between cheating and poor sportsmanship, since cheating is simply a major form of poor sportsmanship. Players with poor sportsmanship outnumber actual cheaters. At tournaments there simply are not enough umpires to deal with every problem, so unless an opponent actually cheats, try to deal with most poor sportsmanship on your own.

There are two types of people who have bad sportsmanship. There are those where poor sportsmanship is simply a bad habit. And there are those who do it intentionally to gain an edge.

Examples of poor sportsmanship are forcing you to wait for them as they show up late; taking excessive time between points; constant complaining; any type of derogatory or belittling talk at an opponent; excessive yelling; or general bad behavior. Sports can bring out both the best

and worst in people, and in many cases, it's the worst. One way to deal with most of this, if it doesn't actually break the rules, is to ignore it. Better still, become stronger because of it. If an opponent is constantly complaining or yelling, then he's obviously under great emotional stress. What a huge advantage that is for you if you are calm and relaxed!

The worst type of poor sportsmanship is when it's done intentionally to gain an edge. Suppose you show up for a match, and your opponent intentionally makes you wait for him. You can't really prove he did it on purpose, but the effect is the same: you are stuck out on the court waiting for his grand entrance. Just smile to yourself, knowing the opponent is so worried about the match he feels he needs even this tiny edge—and by doing so, you gain the edge.

The same is true of other types of bad behavior. Some opponents yell a lot between points; ignore it, or perhaps (if it is in your nature) occasionally yell yourself when you win a big point. The key here is that you don't want to feel intimidated by the opponent's yelling. Again, remember he's doing so because he's under emotional stress, and because he's worried about losing. So take it as a compliment, and turn it into your own edge.

It's when an opponent yells directly at you that he goes completely over the line. It's one thing to raise your fist and yell "Yes!" after winning a point. It's another to raise your fist directly at your opponent while looking him in the eye. There's no real rule against this, but it's poor sportsmanship, and some umpires and referees will warn an opponent against this. The worst case I ever saw of this was when a top 13-year-old was up 2-0 in games against a top U.S. player in a best of five. It was looking like a huge upset. In the third game, the top player (who was over six feet tall and towered over his opponent, who was small for his age) won the first point, walked over to the 13-year-old's side of the table, put his fist right in the kid's face, and yelled *"Yaaaaaah!"* I was coaching the 13-year-old, and called for the referee immediately. It turned out the referee had seen this, but rather than default the opponent as I requested, he only warned him. The kid I was coaching was badly shaken and could barely continue. He played on half-heartedly, and lost badly three straight games.

How can one deal with such a situation? It's very difficult unless you already were playing with a clear mind. Then you can look at it analytically, realize how scared the opponent is of losing, and turn his outburst into your advantage. Confidence usually beats nervous displays of arrogance.

Here are a three simple points to remember when dealing with cheaters and poor sportsmanship.

1. If possible, call an umpire. But be ready to deal with it on your own, if necessary.
2. Calling the score loudly every point will deter most score-changing cheaters, as well as those who simply forget the score.
3. Always remember it is their fear of you that causes them to act this way. Turn that to your advantage with your own confident play.

Last of all, there are those who read the above, and are copiously taking mental notes on how to use cheating and poor sportsmanship to gain an edge. I have one word for you: *DON'T!*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Table Tennis Hall of Famer Larry Hodges has spent most of the past two decades coaching at the Maryland Table Tennis Center in Gaithersburg, Maryland, along with co-coaches Cheng Yinghua and Jack Huang. He is certified as a National Coach, the highest level of coaching certification in USA Table Tennis. He was also one of the initial two ITTF certified coaches from the U.S. in 2010. He maintains the coaching site TableTennisCoaching.com, with numerous coaching articles, videos, and his daily table tennis blog.

He's a former chair of the USATT's Coaching committee. In 2002 he was USATT's Developmental Coach of the Year; in 2007 he won the USATT President's Award; and in 2014 he was named the USATT Doc Counsilman Science Coach of the Year. He has been the match coach for over 200 Junior Olympic and Junior National gold medalists, more than any other USA table tennis coach. He has worked with many of the best players in the country, both in Maryland and as manager and later a director and coach at the Olympic Training Center from 1985-1989. For many years he coached the U.S. National Junior Team at tournaments in the U.S. and around the world.

As of May, 2014, he was the author of over 1500 published articles in over 140 different publications, including over 1300 on table tennis, over half of them coaching articles. He has five other books on table tennis. (See next page.)

Larry began playing table tennis in 1976 at age 16. He has been ranked among the top 20 players in the U.S. and has won state championships in Maryland, Colorado and North Carolina. He was U.S. National Collegiate Doubles and two-time National Team Champion for the University of Maryland, where he received a bachelor's degree in Math and a master's degree in Journalism. Although he normally uses sponge, he also has 19 national titles in hardbat table tennis, including U.S. National and U.S. Open Singles Champion, 13-times National or Open Doubles Champion, and 4-time Over 40 Champion.

When he's not coaching, playing, or writing about table tennis, Larry enjoys reading and writing science fiction and fantasy—he's a member of Science Fiction Writers of American, with over 70 short story sales and a novel.

Table Tennis Books by Larry Hodges

See larryhodgesbooks.com

- **Table Tennis Tactics for Thinkers**

Best-selling table tennis book of 2013!

- **Table Tennis Tales & Techniques**

Lots of essays on table tennis technique, as well as tales of the sport—the funny and interesting side.

- **Table Tennis Tips**
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How to be a professional coach—attracting students, setting up and running a junior program, etc.

- **Instructor's Guide to Table Tennis**

How to coach (for beginning coaches), and the USATT coaching manual for many years. New version coming soon!

And don't forget to check out Larry's daily table tennis blog:

www.TableTennisCoaching.com