

## Contents

INTRODUCTION	2
Who is Ben Larcombe?	3
What is 'The Table Tennis Playbook'?	5
Who is it for?	6
Why am I writing this?	7
How to use it	8
Terminology	9
SERVICE PLAYS	10
Short serves	11
Long serves	15
RETURN OF SERVICE PLAYS	18
Returning short serves	19
Returning long serves	23
MY FAVOURITE PLAYS	26
NOW IT'S YOUR TURN	31
FINAL WORDS	32



#### Who is Ben Larcombe?

Hello and welcome to The Table Tennis Playbook! My name is Ben Larcombe, I'm 25 years old, and I'm a table tennis player from London.

I began playing table tennis at the age of 10, back in 1999, and I've loved the sport ever since. As a player I was a bit of a late developer. It wasn't until I was 16 that I started to practice more than once a week and I entered my first national competition aged 17. Before then I had been practising once a week, playing in local tournaments and leagues, and representing my county of Surrey. I finished the juniors ranked about 70th in England (I said I was a late developer!).

At the age of 18 I made the decision to move away from home to join Grantham Table Tennis Academy. I began a degree in sport science and was able to play table tennis every day, under the guidance of some top English coaches. Naturally, my development accelerated as I was exposed to new training methods and expert coaching. I left the academy in 2009 (aged 20), moving to Nottingham to finish my degree.

Since then I've continued my development as a player (I am currently ranked about 150th in England) and also spent three years working as a professional table tennis coach (from 2011-2014). During my time coaching I was fortunate enough to work with a number of schools, clubs, regional development squads, and privately with individuals. A particular highlight was coaching Michael Ho to a national title at the English Schools Championships in 2012.

At present, I have stepped away from coaching to focus on my own table tennis and also give myself more time to work on Expert Table Tennis and some of my other businesses. I am excited to be a part of 'Eastfield Co.', a new British table tennis brand that is launching very soon.

'I finished the juniors ranked about 70th in England (I said I was a late developer!).'

Ben Larcombe



A playbook is a notebook containing descriptions and diagrams of the plays a team or individual has practised. Playbooks are most commonly used in American Football as a way to create and modify specific strategies. They are given to players at the start of a training season to be learnt and implemented. They often contain certain codes or abbreviations used to refer to certain tactics or drills.

The Table Tennis Playbook is intended to be a comprehensive training manual for table tennis players of all abilities. The 'plays' contained within this eBook are split into service and return of service exercises. The focus is very much on match-specific practice drills, always starting with a serve, a series of shots and then going into free play (if the rally hasn't already broken down). There will be no 'regular' footwork exercises, or similar, in this playbook.

Service exercises will include a serve, the third ball, and the fifth ball, before going into free play. Receive exercises will include the return of serve and the fourth ball, before going free.



The Table Tennis Playbook is my free resource and it's available to anyone that wants it. If you would like to share it with a friend please direct them to www. experttabletennis.com/playbook where they can sign up and download it for themselves.

I would like to point out that, in an ideal world, it would be a good idea to have learnt a solid basic technique before starting on the serve and return exercises or 'plays' described in this book. Obviously this is not always possible but I believe that the best way to improve your game is to nail down the basics first, creating a strong foundation to build on. Then you can move on to using your technically correct shots in matches and match-like practice drills. Spending hours and hours practicing an incorrect technique can make it much harder to change later on.

The exercises included in this eBook assume that both players are right-handed and attacking or 'up to the table' players. If you are left-handed or more of a defensive player you will have to make some small adjustments to the drills. Don't let this put you off. The general principles of the book can be applied to all styles of play.

# Why am I writing this? *Inspired through practice, training,* competing and coaching.

My experience playing and coaching table tennis really opened my eyes to how good and bad training sessions can be. I have been to training camps abroad, in France and Denmark, and been very impressed by the wide range of exercises used to help players develop.

However, in other sessions I've heard countless players tell me they don't know what to practice or they can't think of a drill. I've also seen some very good players practice the same regular exercises over and over again until they look great knocking up but fall to pieces in a game.

My aim with this playbook is to give you ideas and to inspire you to try some new things in the training hall.

#### How to use it...

Now that you've downloaded The Table Tennis Playbook you can use it as you like. Feel free to pop it onto your iPhone or smartphone so that you can have it with you at practice sessions.

If you're quite new to these types of drills you might like to skip to the 'My Favourite Plays' section and try out some of those before creating your own.

L/FH Long forehand	S/MID Long middle	L/BH Long backhand
S/FH Short forehand	S/MID Short middle	S/BH Short backhand
S/BH Short backhand	S/MID Short middle	S/FH Short forehand

Each half of the table is split into six sections to make the plays easy to follow. In terms of practically how to use the playbook, I've split each half of the table up into six sections. As I mentioned earlier I'm setting everything up for two right handed players but it shouldn't be too hard to switch around if you're a lefty. In table tennis a ball can be either short (it would bounce twice on your side) or long (it would only bounce once on your side before dropping off the table).

Then there are three main areas; the backhand side (where you would usually play a backhand shot), the forehand side (where you would almost certainly play a forehand shot), and the middle (where ideally you would be trying to play your forehand, unless you have a particularly strong backhand). The combination of length and placement gives us six areas per side of the table.

## Terminology

I will be using various terms and shorthand to explain the exercises in this book. Please read the following list before going through the drills.

#### **Shots**

Block: a control shot usually played off a topspin ball. Counter: a topspin shot played off a topspin ball

Dig: a long/deep push.

Flick: an attacking shot off a short ball.

Open up: a topspin shot played off a backspin ball.

Return: the receive of service.

Serve: the first stroke of any point.

Topspin: a topspin shot played off a block.

Touch: a short push.

#### **Spins**

BS: backspin NS: no spin SS: sidespin TS: topspin

#### Other Terms/Shorthand

BH: backhand FH: forehand

Free: the rally goes into free-play.



## Service plays

There are thousands of combinations of table tennis service plays. I am not attempting to record every possible play imaginable. Instead, I will be splitting the plays down into groups and giving an example for each.

One 'type' of service play would be all of those that start with a short backspin serve, a dig return, and then a topspin open up. The serve could go to the backhand, middle or forehand, as could your opponents dig. You have even more possibilities once you start thinking about where you will place your third ball attack. The possibilities are (almost) endless but once you have understood the general principles, and gone through the example, you should be able to easily create your own plays. It's then up to you to tailor the drill to your strengths or weaknesses so that you get the most out of it.

# Short serves Having a good short serve is crucial once you start improving.

The majority of serves in table tennis are short. As we increase our level of play, our ability to capitalise on long serves also increases. This forces players to serve short much more often to stop their opponent from getting in first in each rally.

If the majority of your serves are going to be short it is important that you are still able to use a lot of variation and deception. You can vary the spin you impart on the ball (topspin, sidespin, backspin, no spin), your placement (backhand, middle, forehand), and the area you are serving from.

The following plays all start with a short serve, which is followed by various different returns from your opponent. Your opponent's return of service will largely determine your shot selection for the third ball. For example, if they flick your serve you won't be able to touch the next ball, you will have to topspin.

### Opening up service plays

Opening up drills will usually start with a short serve. You'll then get your opponent (the receiver) to push or dig the ball long to your forehand, backhand or middle.

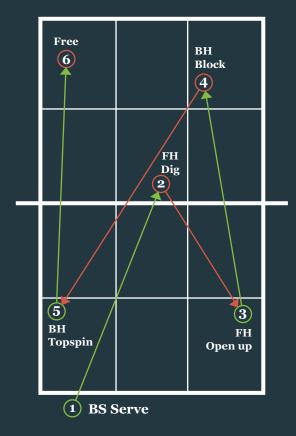
The purpose of the drill is to work on your 'third ball attack', specifically your topspin off a backspin ball. Once you have opened up you can have your partner play a block or counter topspin which you will try to attack with your fifth ball.

From there the exercise goes free and you both try to win the point. If you have got in with a good topspin loop and followed it up with a strong fifth ball you should be winning the majority of the points.

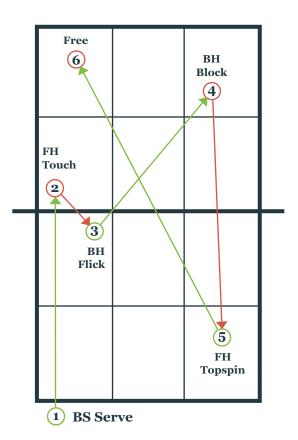
Here's an example of an 'opening up' play...

- 1. Start with a short backspin serve to the middle.
- 2. Your opponent plays a forehand dig to your wide forehand.
- 3. You play a forehand open up down the line to their backhand.
- 4. They backhand block to your backhand.
- 5. You move across and play a backhand topspin down the line.
- 6. They play free from their forehand.

"I like this play because it gives you a high amount of control over the rally. If you serve short backspin to your opponent's middle you will often get a dig to your forehand. Opening up down the line can surprise your opponent and 80% of the time they end up blocking cross court so you can get ready for a backhand winner or a well placed topspin shot down the line."



"This is a really good play. It's always a good idea to get your opponent travelling the furthest distances and here you drag them in to play a forehand touch and then flick them back out deep to their backhand side. It is also very common, if you serve short down the line, for your opponent to touch the serve back over the net to your backhand as it can be tricky to touch cross court to your forehand."



### Flicking Out Service Plays

In order to attack the third ball with a flick you'll need to force your opponent to touch return your service. Sometimes putting a bit less backspin on your serve can make it more likely you'll receive a short return. Players often choose to dig a heavy backspin serve as they are afraid to put it into the net when touching.

You can then decide whether you want to flick hard or whether you want to slowly roll the ball. Both can be effective if played correctly.

Your opponent will probably block your flick if you catch them out (especially with a hard flick) or topspin your flick if they read it well, setting you up for a fifth ball topspin.

Here's an example of a 'flicking out' play...

- 1. Start with a short backspin serve down the line.
- 2. Your opponent plays a forehand touch to your backhand.
- 3. You play a backhand flick cross court to their backhand.
- 4. They block the ball down the line to your forehand.
- 5. You move across and play a forehand topspin cross court.
- 6. They play free from their forehand.

### Short Topspin Service Plays

A short topspin serve can be extremely effective. If your opponent misreads the spin on the serve, and attempts to push, the ball will pop up and can be finished off for an easy point.

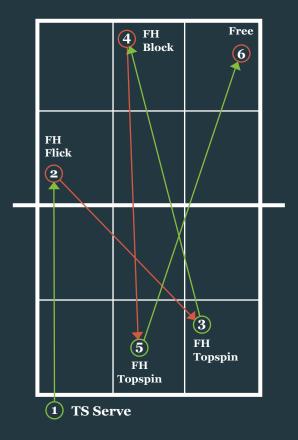
However, if they correctly read the topspin they can play a flick return which can put you on the back foot unless you are expecting it.

It's important to be ready for your opponent to flick so that you can adjust and play a topspin third ball. Topspinning a strong flick can be difficult but if the third ball is played well it can put you back in the driving seat for the rally. It forces your opponent to have to quickly get back out from the table, after their flick, to return your topspin.

Here's an example of a short topspin serve play...

- 1. Start with a short topspin serve down the line.
- 2. Your opponent plays a forehand flick wide to your forehand.
- 3. You play a forehand topspin into their middle.
- **4.** They block the ball with their forehand to your middle.
- 5. You play a forehand topspin into their backhand.
- **6.** They play free from their backhand.

"It's a good idea to practice points where you are put slightly on the defensive by your opponent correctly reading and flicking your serve. I particularly like this play because the third ball goes into your opponents cross-over, forcing them to play a softer block into the middle of the table. You can then move around a play a big forehand topspin fade into their backhand, hopefully catching them out."





Occasionally, you are going to want to throw in a long serve. A long serve can be great for catching out your opponent, especially if you've been serving predominantly short and they have started 'stepping in', assuming the serve will be short.

Just as it was very important for your short serve to be short (bouncing twice on your opponents side of the table), it's crucial that your long serves are long. Ideally you are trying to get the ball to bounce as close to the baseline of the table as possible. This will make the serve much harder to return if you opponent is standing close to the table.

A long serve must also be fast! Top players have been training to expect every serve to go long and are ready to attack it. If your long serve isn't fast enough you will likely be picking the ball up off the floor, after watching your opponent topspin the ball straight past you.

The following plays all start with a long fast serve which is usually returned with a topspin. You can also get your opponent to block the serve back but having them play a topspin will make the exercise more challenging. The pressure is then on you to play a counter topspin off the third ball. If you are prepared and play this counter shot successfully it will put you in a really good position to win the point and give your opponent little time to react.

### Long Pendulum Service Plays

A pendulum serve can be long or short. When serving long using the pendulum technique you can impart a lot of sidespin on the ball making its positioning hard to read for your opponent. You can also add in a little backspin or topspin to keep them guessing even further.

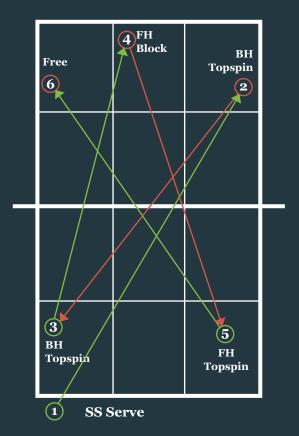
You can serve wide to their backhand or have the ball curling into their cross over point. However, you should expect your opponent to play a topspin, so you will need to recover quickly after serving.

When playing the third ball take the sidespin you put on the ball when serving into account. That sidespin can make your opponents return of service more difficult to judge.

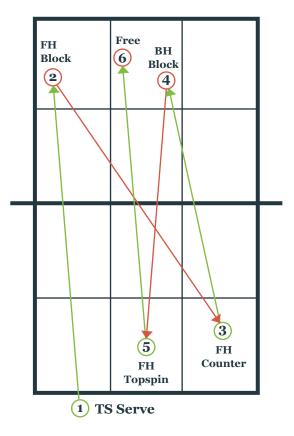
Here's an example of a long pendulum play...

- 1. Start with a long sidespin pendulum serve to wide backhand.
- 2. Your opponent plays a backhand topspin across the table.
- 3. You play a backhand counter topspin to the middle.
- 4. They block with their forehand to your forehand.
- 5. You play a forehand topspin across the table to their forehand.
- 6. They play free from their forehand.

"The fast sidespin pendulum serve, wide into your opponent's backhand, makes it very likely that you will receive the third ball on your backhand side. You will need to be confident to play a backhand counter as you don't really want to start blocking. Alternatively you could try and get round the corner to play a forehand counter topspin. Playing this counter into their crossover is a good idea."



"I like this play because it really pins your opponent at the cross over point. You play two strong forehand topspins into their middle/crossover and make it awkward for them. It's also a good idea to practice that fast, down the line serve because you never know when you'll need it. Players often don't feel confident about getting it on in a match so this kind of practice is important."



### Down the Line Service Plays

A long, fast serve down the line can be really effective. It is slightly harder to serve fast down the line so often opponents aren't expecting to have to move over to their wide forehand. Also, opponents who like to predominantly use their forehand may start stepping round the corner to try to receive all your serves with their forehand. A fast serve down the line, if disguised correctly, can win you the point outright.

As with all long serves you need to expect your opponent to attack the serve. If they read your serve and get over to their forehand side they may be able to play a very strong return of service and put you under pressure. You can expect the third ball to come to your forehand so get ready to move after the service and always look to counter topspin.

Here's an example of a 'down the line' serve play...

- 1. Start with a fast, topspin serve to your opponent's forehand.
- 2. Your opponent plays a forehand topspin to your forehand.
- 3. You play a forehand counter to the middle.
- 4. They play a backhand block to your middle.
- 5. You move across to play a forehand topspin to their middle.
- 6. They play free from the middle.

## Return of service plays

We now move on to some return of service plays. There are loads of possible combinations but I will go through five examples, three starting with a short serve and two with a long serve.

You will notice that the number of shots in the play has been decreased from six to five. As the receiver in the point you will be concentrating on your return of service (2nd ball) and your 4th ball. Your 4th ball should ideally be a very positive stroke but your return of service needs to be strong in order to set this up.



As I said earlier, the majority of table tennis serves are short. It is therefore extremely important that you can return short serves well. The difficulty when being the receiver is that you cannot be 100% sure which spin is on the serve and where the ball is headed. This is the server's main advantage but there are some things you can do to make it easier to return serves.

- 1. Watch the service action: It's no good just watching the ball. You need to keep your eyes on your opponents stance, body position, bat, arm and wrist, to fully be able to analyse the serve.
- 2. Identify your opponent's favourite serves: If you are able to work out at least two serves that your opponent likes to use you can begin to anticipate them, whilst also being alert for other serves.
- 3. Commit to your decision: If you have decided to flick the serve then flick it wholeheartedly. Even if you have misread the serve you may still get away with it. Indecision is more likely to result in an error.

### Touch & open up return plays

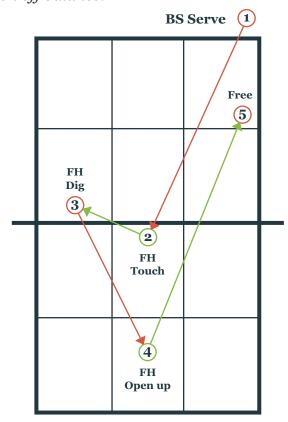
This is a very common situation when receiving service. You will often be given a short, backspin serve to your middle. This is possibly the most used serve in table tennis. It's very tight and difficult to attack. Most of the time you will have to push this serve, so it's up to you whether to go short (touch) or long (dig).

Going short with a touch return should stop your opponent from attacking the 3rd ball and will often give you an opportunity to get in on the fourth ball if they are unable to keep their push short. If you get a chance to attack the fourth ball you should be looking to play a shot that can win you points, either with heavy spin, power, or placement.

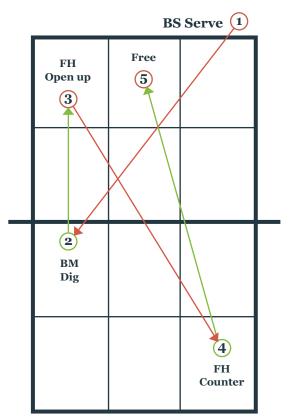
Here's an example of a touch & open up return play...

- 1. Your opponent serves short backspin to your middle.
- 2. You play a forehand touch to their forehand.
- 3. They play a forehand dig to your middle.
- **4.** You step out and play a forehand open up to their backhand.
- 5. They play free from their backhand.

"This is a very common situation when receiving serve and you must have a good tight touch in your repertoire. I particularly like this play because you first drag your opponent into the table wide to their forehand side and then hit them deep to their backhand. This movement, where you move in to the net on your forehand and then have to get back out to play a backhand, is very difficult to do successfully and there's a good chance your opponent will miss your 4th ball or at least be thrown off balance."



"If you can produce a dig that goes very wide to your opponent's forehand with lots of backspin you can expect them to have to loop the ball up and they may even take it a bit late. You can also guess that the ball will, more often than not, come across to your forehand. Make sure you are in a good position to play a forehand counter topspin and how about hitting it into their crossover? It's a great feeling when you manage to play a strong counter topspin off an opponent's open up and finish the point then and there!"



## Dig & counter return plays

Sometimes you will face a short backspin serve that you just don't fancy touching back. Perhaps it is slightly longer and you feel a touch will be difficult to keep tight or maybe you've noticed that your opponent is not particular strong at opening up and you want to put him to the test. Either way there can be very good reasons to dig (push long) your return.

However, you will need to anticipate an attacking shot from your opponent as a good player will attack a dig 90-100% of the time. Try to work out where they are likely to open up to and be ready to play a positive counter topspin if you read it well.

Here's an example of a dig & counter return play...

- **1.** Your opponent serves short backspin to your backhand.
- 2. You play a backhand dig to their forehand.
- **3.** They play a forehand topspin open up to your forehand.
- **4.** You play a forehand counter topspin to their crossover.
- **5.** They play free from the middle.

#### Flick & counter return plays

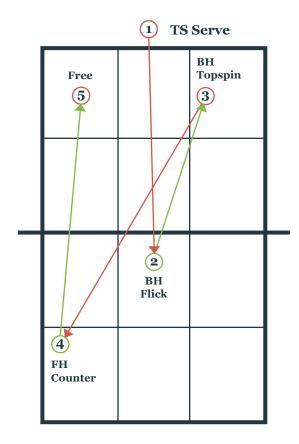
Opponents are tricky and you won't just be facing short backspin serves all the time. Occasionally they will throw in float, sidespin and topspin serves and you need to be ready to attack these, if possible. Do not get into the habit of deciding you are going to push a serve before you've seen it!

These float, sidespin or topspin serves can be flicked either hard or soft and varying your flicks is a good idea. A hard flick gives your opponent the choice to block or topspin whereas a soft flick really forces them to attack, as a block will likely go into the net. Be prepared to move and play aggressively on your 4th ball if you are flicking out.

Here's an example of a flick & counter return play...

- 1. Your opponent serves short topspin to your middle.
- 2. You play a backhand flick to their backhand.
- 3. They play a backhand topspin to your backhand side.
- **4.** You step around and play a forehand counter down the line.
- 5. They play free from their forehand.

"This play is a little risky as you are stepping round to play a forehand counter topspin from your backhand side. You need to be aware that your wide forehand is very exposed and if you move around too early your opponent will be able to just block your flick down the line and catch you out. However, if done correctly this play can be extremely effective and win the point straight off your 4th ball. It is also a good idea to show your opponent that you are able to attack with your forehand from your backhand side, reminding them that your backhand side is not a weak area they can exploit."



## Returning long serves

There are easier and harder lengths on the table, for the receive of service.

Occasionally your opponent will serve long and you need to be ready to play a positive stroke. If the serve isn't going to bounce twice on your side of the table, you must attack it. At lower levels of play you may find players that aren't even able to serve short and this should be a dream for any attacking player. At higher levels, opponents will use their serve well by usually serving short but sometimes throwing in a fast one, or a half-long one, to catch you out.

The easiest kinds of serves to attack are those that are neither particularly short or long. These are 'bad' serves from the servers point of view. The ball isn't going to bounce a second time, so we can get ready to loop, but it also isn't too deep, so we have lots of time and space to play a good shot.

'Good' long serves can be fast and deep, that give the receiver very little time to react, or half-long where the second bounce is very close to clipping the edge of the table. These serves are a little more tricky because you need to decide whether the ball will bounce twice or not. Some people call these serves 'bat breakers', for obvious reasons.

When receiving you should always expect the serve to come long. If it goes short you can adjust and step in to return. Bear in mind that if your opponent is serving long they are probably look to play a strong 3rd ball attack. To make this more difficult place your return wide or to their crossover.

### Topspin & counter return plays

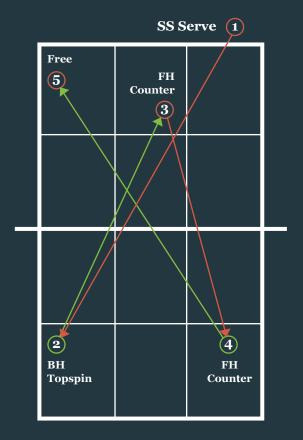
A common long serve is the sidespin pendulum serve wide to your backhand. This is seen quite regularly and if performed well can pin you really deep into your backhand side. If you are a left-handed player I'm sure you've come across this countless times as right-handed players try to catch you out wide to your forehand!

Timing can be a little tricky on this receive but you must attack. Your opponent will probably play a counter topspin for their 3rd ball so try to anticipate its direction and stay up to the table so that you can fire back another counter topspin yourself. Often it's the person who manages to stay up to the table, in these types of aggressive rallies, that manages to win the point.

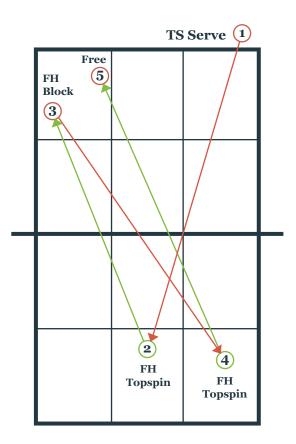
Here's an example of a topspin & counter return play...

- 1. Your opponent serves long sidespin wide to your backhand.
- 2. You play a backhand topspin to their middle.
- 3. They play a forehand counter topspin to your forehand.
- 4. You play a forehand counter across the table.
- 5. They play free from their forehand.

"I like this play because it's super aggressive. A long fast serve, a topspin receive, a 3rd ball counter topspin, followed by another counter topspin. It will help you to get comfortable playing topspin to topspin rallies up to the table and switching quickly between your backhand and forehand. There are loads of possible combinations as you can topspin to any of the three areas (backhand, middle or wide)."



"If you manage to really attack the serve and get a block from your opponent, you're in a very good place to win the point. I like attacking wide to their forehand because firstly, they usually serve from the backhand side and secondly, if they block it is likely to come back to your forehand. This makes them have to move to the block and allows me to play a big 4th ball winner."



### Topspin & topspin return plays

If your opponent is serving fast and long they will probably be expecting to play a strong 3rd ball. However, if you are able to read their serve, move into a good position and make a really strong return, you may be able to force them to block the 3rd ball.

Once you get them blocking it's really up to you to dominate the rally. You should be looking to play a very powerful 4th ball because you don't have to worry about timing your shot as much, as your opponent blocked rather than countered.

It can be tempting to try and switch the ball to their backhand but often in these situation it's better to just keep hitting hard across the table, which is usually an easier shot to make.

Here's an example of a topspin & topspin return play...

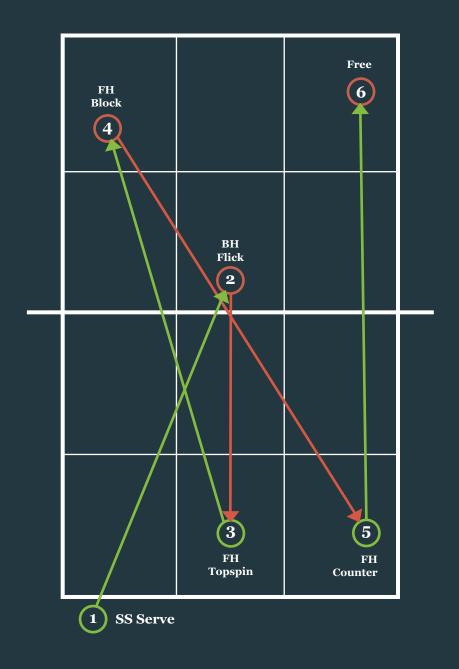
- 1. Your opponent serves long topspin to your middle.
- 2. You play a strong forehand topspin to their wide forehand.
- 3. They play a forehand block to your forehand.
- 4. You play a forehand topspin across the table.
- 5. They play free from their forehand.

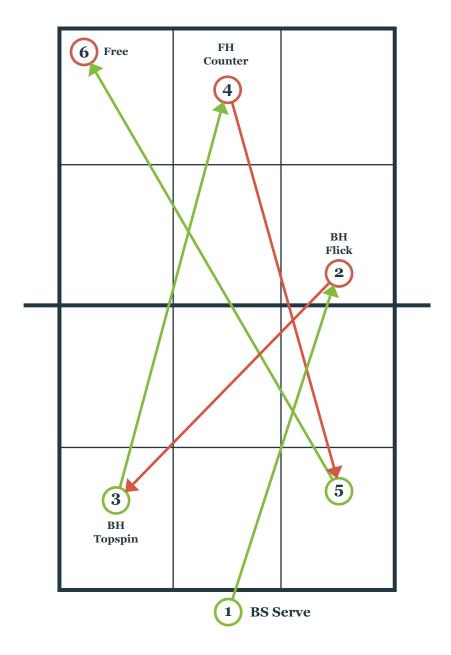
# My favourite plays

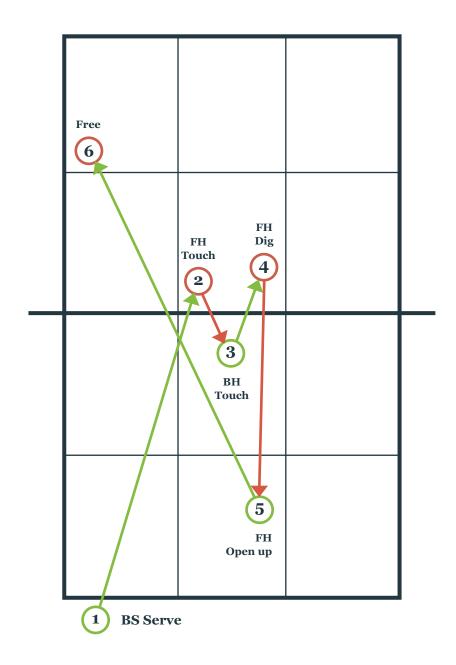
We've now covered most of the scenarios you are likely to face in a competitive table tennis game. We've looked at serving short and long and receiving short and long serves. It's now up to you to start practising and making up some of your own plays/drills.

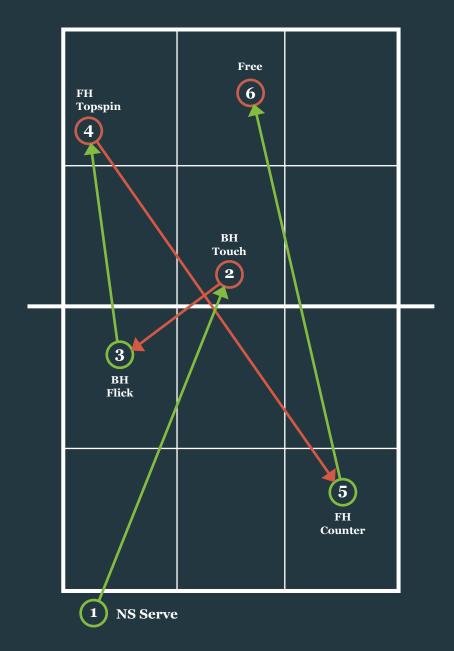
On the next few pages you'll find some of my favourite plays. Some will be similar to those you've already seen, some will be slightly different. I won't be going through them in the detail that I have previously, as I don't want to repeat myself, but I hope they give you an idea of all the possible plays available to you.

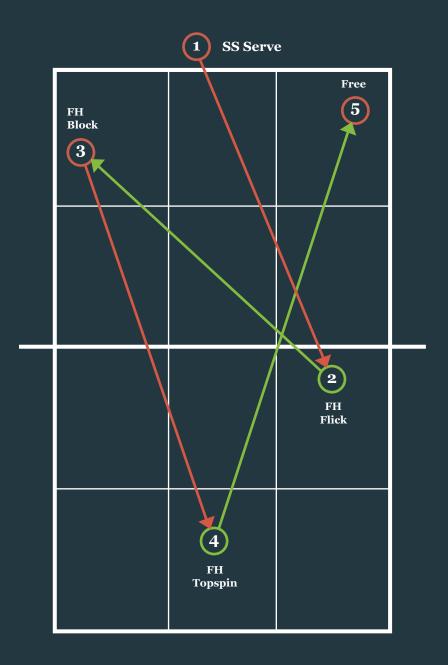
I usually try and plan the 'most likely' types of shots for each situation but it's definitely worth practicing what happens when your opponent misreads a serve or plays an unexpected shot too. Things don't always go to plan and opponents don't always play the 'correct' shots.

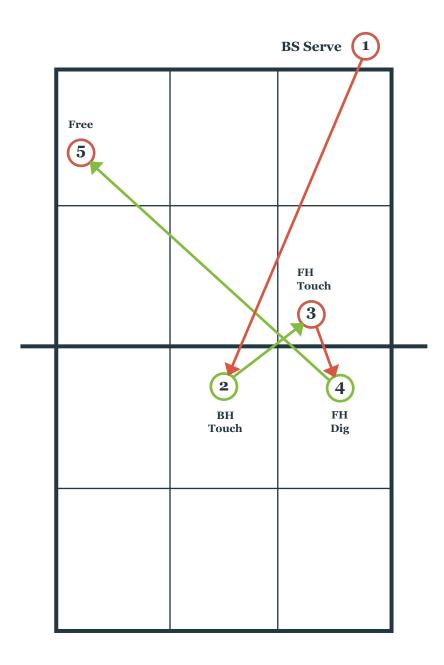


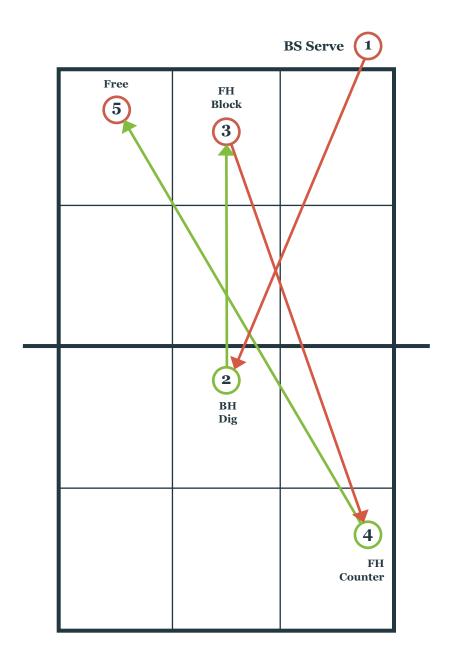


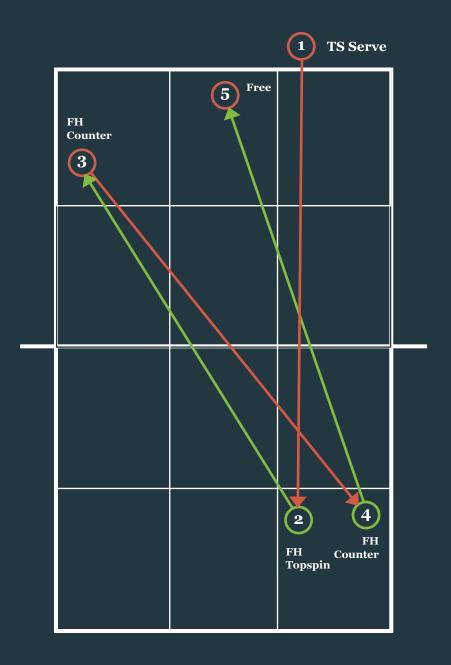












# Now it's your turn...

On the very final page you'll find a blank table tennis table and an area for notes. I wrote this eBook with the hope of inspiring you to be more creative with your training, so feel free to print some of these off, bring them to the training hall, and start designing your own table tennis plays.

If you come up with any good ones let me know and I might be able to feature you on the site.

Something else you can try out (that I didn't include in the book) is adding an element of irregularity to the plays. For example, having your opponent's 4th ball go either to your backhand or your forehand so that you have to wait and anticipate the shot before moving and playing your 5th ball. That's a great way to make the drills a bit more challenging and even more realistic to a match situation.

#### Final Words

Well, we've reached the end of The Table Tennis Playbook. I hope that you've enjoyed reading it as much as I've enjoyed writing it. For more information on The Table Tennis Playbook please visit...

www.experttabletennis.com/playbook

I am hoping to create some videos to go alongside the book and maybe even have a look at some of the world's best players and see which plays they are using to win points in their games.

I'm assuming that you are already receiving my Expert Table Tennis email newsletter. If not you can join here...

www.experttabletennis.com/academy

The Expert Table Tennis Academy is a community of over 2000 table tennis players, from all over the world, who share the same goal... to improve their table tennis.

If you would like to get in touch with me I'd be more than happy to hear from you and answer any questions you may have. You can contact me via Facebook (/experttabletennis) and Twitter (@ benlarcombe), or alternatively you can email me via ben@experttabletennis.com

All that's left to say is, please don't plagiarise any of my content from The Table Tennis Playbook (I'm sure you wouldn't anyway). Feel free to pass it to a friend if you think they would enjoy it, it's a free eBook after all, but please don't copy any of the content without my permission, pass it off as your own work or try to sell it or anything like that. I hope you understand.

Thank you so much for reading and remember you can find loads of other great table tennis content at www.experttabletennis.com!

Train hard,

Ben Larcombe

