

A Short Guide to Table Tennis

Part 3: Advanced Strokes

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Advanced Strokes

There is so much more to table tennis than just the four simple strokes: forehand push, forehand drive, backhand push and backhand drive, although these form the fundamentals essential for consistent improvement. By mastering one or more of the advanced strokes outlined below you will add complexity and depth to your game. Only the important points of each stroke are outlined. To master these strokes, it takes time, consistent practice and careful observation. But you will be handsomely rewarded for your efforts.

Loop:



Ever since the invention of reverse pimple rubber capable of imparting enormous amounts of spin, the game of table tennis was fundamentally altered. The loop is a forehand or backhand attacking stroke where the ball is given a heavy top-spin. The loop has become the nemesis of the chopper and defensive players of all sorts – they have not been able to dominate table tennis ever since. (This does not mean that *you* will beat choppers with *your* loop. Choppers are known to cause insomnia to countless hot-shot loopers)

The formidability of the loop is its versatility and variance. These two points will be discussed below:

Versatility: Played well, the loop can impart a heavy top spin upon any sort of return that leaves the table. This statement alone means that it is next to impossible to prevent a good looper from attacking. By changing the curvature of the stroke, and the angle of the bat, any ball, below or above the table with any spin can be returned by a loop.

Variance: A loop is not a static shot. Its character can be changed at will by a good looper. By changing the curvature of the stroke and the angle of the bat, a loop can be higher with lots of spin, or lower and faster with perhaps less spin. Side spin can also be imparted upon the ball. It is also relatively easy to control placement with a loop.

Wow! With all these advantages no wonder every new player is learning how to loop. If you think this is the way of the future, well it is! But looping definitely takes some time to get used to.

Short Guide to a Loop:

1. Judge the ball. Top spin – angle of bat is more flat, stroke has less curvature
No spin – angle slightly more open, stroke has more curvature
Back spin – angle open, stroke curvature has more ‘up’ than ‘forward’
2. Be in position. Very important! Use the right footwork. We’ll go over this in practice!
3. Back swing. The more back spin the ball has, the more down your back swing should be. If the ball has top spin, the back swing should be more ‘back’ with no ‘down’

4. Remember your arm does only half the hitting. Twist your waist, bend your knees. If forehand loop, then left foot forward. Backhand loops should have right foot forward.
5. Loop. Never do a half-go loop. The ball will not have a lot of spin and will generally either go off the end of the table or go into the net.
6. Your shot is not over! Recover and be ready if opponent returns the loop. They will if they know how to block!

As you can see there is not a great deal of comment on the nuances of the loop. A loop must be experienced!

But a note about the swing:

A good way to picture the loop swing is what some call 'up-side-down-banana'. The stroke follows the line of a banana with its back facing upwards. Again, remember to use the forearm not the shoulders for all shots in table tennis.



Block:

Although not as glorious as the loop, the block is nevertheless essential to the repertoire of any accomplished table tennis player. Imagine your game if you can not block and would lose every rally in which the opponent attacked. Well, you are not doomed for failure. If you have killer serves and a killer loop then you may not need to block very much. But for the rest of us – blocking is very important. (Actually, all good players can block really well. It is naïve to think that your opponent will never attack you. Sometimes good blocking can be just as effective as good attacking.)

The key to blocking is to use the speed and the spin of the attacking ball to your advantage.

Short Guide to a Block:

1. Judge the ball. Top spin – angle of bat is more closed.
No spin – angle slightly more open.
Back spin – if you get this then it is really weird. Use a chop. Or you can loop it and feel like a hero.
2. Be in position. Very important! Use the right footwork. We'll go over this in practice!
3. Back swing. Although there is not a lot here.
4. Block. Think about where you are blocking to and the speed with which you are blocking.

The horizon for blocking is filled with variation. Good blocking is actually really cool and good blockers can change the speed, rhythm, and spin of the block. This adds great adaptability and variance to the game.

Spin push:

This shot is an important complement to the ordinary push. Beyond what you might think, the push is perhaps the single most important stroke in table tennis. Good pushing will allow you not to lose points from unforced errors, allows you to return difficult serves and balls from awkward positions, return the ball in such a way that the opponent can not attack you and maneuver the opponent so that you get the chance to attack.

A spin push is just a push but this time the ball has a fair back spin to it. If the opponent does not recognize this, this return will go into the net. This will force your opponent to be cautious, because your ordinary 'not-spiny' pushes will go high if the opponent treats it as a spin push.

1. Judge the ball. Top spin – maybe you can't spin push this.
No spin – start angle slightly more closed.
Back spin – start angle slightly more open.
2. Be in position. Very important! Use the right footwork. We'll go over this in practice!
3. Back swing. Remember to use your forearm.
4. Spin push.

Here is another note about the swing:

A good way to picture the loop swing is what some call 'right-side-up-banana'. The stroke follows the line of a banana with its back facing downwards. The spin push relies on the fast movement of the wrist and the forearm. Don't use your shoulders.



Flick:

A flick is an attacking shot played on balls that do not leave the table. Generally, flicks are done on balls that do not have a lot of spin and are slightly high. Otherwise the flick is a hard shot to do.

There are several ways to do a flick:

1. 'Hit through the ball'. This strategy usually works well if the ball is fairly close to the net. Generally in this case the spin of the ball does not matter greatly if the ball is slightly high. Hit straight through the ball using mainly the wrist and a bit of forearm. The ball will land on the other side.
2. 'Spin the ball a bit'. This strategy works well if the ball has a bit more spin and is not that close to the net. Also this works well if placement is important and the goal is not to win a point immediately. A bit like a mini-loop but using mainly the wrist and a bit of forearm, impart a bit of top spin to force the short ball over the net. Often easier on the backhand and looks easier than it actually is.

A flick is useful to receive short serves and to break up prolonged pushes.

But think carefully about a flick – if it is not good, then you give the opponent a top-spin opportunity which is usually easier to attack than a backspin.

Chop:

Some players believe that this is a valid way to play table tennis. “Chop until they drop”, they’d say. If you don’t already know how to play the chopping game, chances are that you will find it pretty hard to learn. A lot of choppers are very talented table tennis players who have a great feel for the ball. Unfortunately, they didn’t get the loop/block/serve sort of training modern players get in TT101 so they kind of self taught and half invented their own game.

A chopper basically stands back from the table and chops your attacking shots back at your with varying amounts of spin. Good choppers can put all sorts of spin on the ball.

Until you know how to consistently loop you will always have a hard time against choppers and your games will probably go on forever. But after you can loop, the chopper has to be a very good chopper to win. So that is the good news and the bad.

I don’t know how to chop although I have tried to learn. They say choppers can play table tennis well into their seventies. So I’ll probably have to learn the chopping game pretty soon.

“Pimple Smash”:

Some players never loop. But they can still attack! This domain now-a-days is becoming a privileged sanctuary of pimple rubber players. Pimples don’t seem good for much else. They don’t impart a lot of spin but they are also a bit immune to spin. This is why you see a pimples player smash something that is clearly below the net.

That is pretty weird table tennis. But if they can smash you all the time then you are in trouble. Maybe you should think about attacking first or forcing the backhand. Or learn how to block.

Note: the New Zealand Open Champion for the past five years plays with pimples out rubber on both sides of a shakehand bat. He can attack any sort of chop on forehand or backhand and will smash pretty much anything too.

You would have to ask him how he does it.