

A Short Guide to Table Tennis

Part 4: The Service Game

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The Service Game:

The most important stroke of your game is not your incredible looping forehand – although it looks cool and certainly helps. More often than not, how well you serve and how you receive the opposition's serve will determine how the game will progress in your favor.

Rules of Service:

The service commences with the ball resting on the palm of the free hand.

This hand should be:

- above the table
- stationary
- flat
- with the thumb free

The player must begin the service action from above the table

The ball must be thrown vertically upwards at least 16 cm

The ball must be struck, on its descent, from behind the white baseline

It must bounce once on the server's side of the table before crossing the net

The ball shall be at all times clearly visible to the umpire

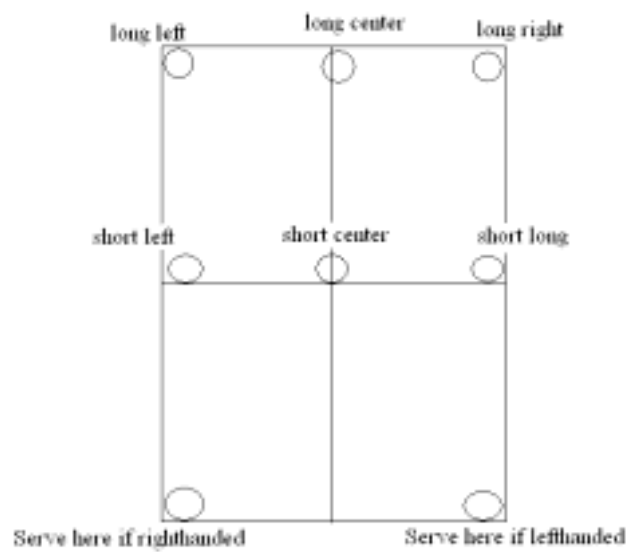
Aim of serve:

1. To win a point immediately
2. To win the point after your opponent returns the serve.
3. To intimidate your opposition so that you have a psychological advantage.

A player with a good serve will be able to do all of the above.

This is why the serve is of fundamental importance to your game. The serve is the only shot you are able to make that is under your complete control. If you have a serving advantage over your opponent, then the game is already half won.

Serving Strategies:



First, begin your serve in the correct position. For a right handed player, serving on the left corner of the table, allows him/her to cover the table with the forehand which generally has longer reach and greater attacking power. Unless your forehand is much worse than your backhand. This is where you should generally serve. Another option is to start the serve more towards the center of the table.

Distinguish between long serves and short serves. This is very important and is the basis of a tight serving game. Generally serve to the six places marked on the above diagram.

Long Serves:

The most important thing to remember is in a long serve you must bounce the ball close to the edge of the table on your side if you hope for the ball to bounce towards the end of the table on the opposite side.

These serves should be as deep as possible.

Long serves can generate a great amount of spin and can be used to effectively control the attack of an opposition. Unless the opposition has a strong backhand loop or has extraordinary footwork it is very difficult for him/her to attack a long serve to the backhand. When the ball returns, you have a chance to attack. Very occasionally use the long serve on the forehand. Many players will loop the serve back. But it is a good change to break up a game. Sometimes, a long serve down the center line is also very effective.

Short Serves:

The most important thing to remember is in a short serve you must bounce the ball close to the net of the table on your side if you hope for the ball to bounce close to the net on the opposite side.

All short serves should bounce at least twice on the opposite side if not received.

Short serves controls a player who likes playing the long game. If the serve is short (remains in the table), then unless the opposition has a brilliant flick, it is difficult for the opposition to attack your

serve. When the ball comes back, you have an opportunity to attack. The short serve to the forehand is often a good serve which works well with long serves to the backhand. It is generally harder to spin the ball as much in a short serve as in a long serve. So be wary of short serves that are high.

The Spin:

Spin plays a crucial role in the serve. Always think about what kind of spin you are putting on the serve.

Top spin this means you like to rally. Your opposition will hit the ball back to you. If you like playing the rally game then top spin shots might work well. Although it is hard to play top spin serves against most advanced players.

Back spin a defensive serve which restricts the attack of your opposition. In order to attack, the opponent must either flick or loop and this can be difficult to do. When the ball returns, it presents an opportunity for you to attack.

No spin this is one of the most effective serves in the game of table tennis. BUT it should be well disguised and used together with the back spin serve. A no spin serve will be returned high if the opposition thinks it is a back spin serve while the ball will go into the net if the opposition treats it as a top spin serve. So it is important for the opposition to deal with the no spin appropriately – by looping, flicking or by ‘half-pushing’ so that the ball is not high.

Side spin can be used to fool your opposition. But side spin is generally secondary to top spin and back spin. Decided whether you want to serve top spin or back spin, then decided whether to add side spin to complicate the serve. Some side spin serves makes it difficult for the opposition to return the serve to certain parts of the table. Thus the server can use the side spin to control the position of the return in order to set up the shot after the service return.

Flexibility:

The serve is probably the most complicated part of table tennis and advanced players put a lot of time and effort into the serve. To serve well takes practice and experience. The above are merely guidelines – there are no hard rules regarding the serve. The best server can always adapt his/her serve to the opponent and situation at hand. Whatever works is always the best serve!

To Be Good:

To serve well is also one of the hardest aspects of table tennis to master. The best way to improve is to think about every serve before you serve it. Ask yourself – ‘Why am I doing this serve?’, ‘Should I serve long or short? Top spin or back spin?’, ‘What am I hoping to achieve?’, ‘What kind of service return do I expect?’ An important source of ideas is to see how other people serve. Always think about the serve – and your game will improve markedly.