

Tactical Table Tennis Thinking

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When I first started playing this sport, at age 12, at the South Park Club in Pittsburgh, I knew very little about the tactical side of table tennis. I just played by feel, reaction and instinct. About age 17, still with no formal training, it really bothered me that there seemed to be no rhyme or reason why I played well or poorly. “Why did I win that last point?” “Why did I lose that last match?” I wanted to know. That summer I attended a Dell Sweeris camp and learned the techniques about this sport, including tactics that work and why.

I would estimate that 75-80% of tournament players do not think very much when they play – they just compete. If you incorporate tactical thinking into your play you will have a distinct advantage over these competitors and you will win more often. That’s a good thing. One warning – too much thinking can also be harmful, slowing you down and not allowing you to play naturally. I try to go by this credo: 50% conscious thought, 50% instinctive play. In other words, my strategy is to plan or anticipate certain combinations while at other times (50%) I want to stay neutral and be prepared for anything.

OK, let’s get started.....

The number one tactic is to attack your opponent’s middle; this is the switch point between forehand and backhand. This is sometimes called the pocket; if you were playing a right hander it would be their right pocket. A good loop or block to the middle can lead to indecision (as in FOREHAND or BACKHAND). They will have to move and hit and the body inhibits the proper swing. So, if you can place the ball to your opponent’s middle quickly they will have three different areas to deal with. Fast serves, quick block/pushes and loops are all weapons that can be used to exploit the middle. One note of caution: the middle is a moving target, not a stationary one. It requires skill and experience to consistently find it. When I compete, attacking the middle is my main focus.

The second tactic would be to play wide to the forehand or backhand – when the angle is there attempt to place the ball so as to break the sidelines of the table. This will force your opponent to move more and will open up the other side. For example: play a shot wide to your opponent’s FOREHAND and then the next ball wide again, but to the backhand. In general these first two tactics are all about ball placement and trying to stay out of the main FOREHAND and BACKHAND lanes.

Changing spin and speed is essential to winning table tennis. So many players spin the ball hard, hit it fast, have all the strokes yet never reach their potential. Why? You must keep your opponent off balance – changing spin and speed as well as placement is necessary to be effective in this sport. Ilija Lupulesku and Cheng Yinghua are masters at changing the amount of spin and speed on their loop drives. One block goes in the net, the next off the end. How can you learn this technique? Consciously think about it. Change the arc on your loops, mix up the speed when you attack. Use less friction and hit fake (FOREHAND) loops that your opponent will block in the net. Practice these skills; you will find them invaluable. Yes, faster is generally better but if it’s always the same your opponent can easily adjust and use the speed against you. Push with heavy spin then light spin. Changing spins and speeds combined with good placement

can improve anyone's level. The bottom line is you must use your brain during play; conscience thoughts, not just instinct.

Table tennis is like physical chess, or cat and mouse interplay. You must be thinking and be aware of what your opponent is also planning. In the beginning this will be difficult. But, you must start somewhere and you will improve this process as you gain experience. I tell my students to think because it will help them focus, make better choices and there's the added benefit when your mind is active in the "now phase" that they will be less likely to become nervous. Think about it this way – if your opponent is expecting you to attack it might be a good time to defend and vice versa.

Combination tactics: Play one ball to the middle then the next one wide or vice versa. Impart heavy spin on one ball then light spin on the next. Play short to one side then deep to the other corner.

What about playing specific styles? What to do against a power looper? Serve short and attack first. On return of serve limit the amount of pushing you do. Attack the serve or drop it short. If your opponent has a strong FOREHAND loop your strategy will be to minimize how many times he can use it, trying to take away or limit your opponent from using their best weapon is a successful tactic and always part of my game plan.

Playing a penholder: What to do? Remember these tactics are in general terms. High spinny loops to their backhand are difficult to block for the penhold player. Do not attack or counter with speed to the backhand – penhold players use this energy to block you out of position. Generally, play safe and topspin to their backhand side and when possible attack the forehand side with force. Playing the ball wide to the FOREHAND then deep to the BACKHAND or vice versa works well. Do not push slowly to the BACKHAND corner. The penhold player is excellent attacking with the FOREHAND from the BACKHAND corner.

What about the defensive or blocking style player? Be patient. Remember, they are playing this way because their offense is usually weak or inconsistent. Choose your attack carefully. Change the pace of your attacks; vary the spin and speed on your loops. When pushing or drop shotting, play to their short forehand, do not make consecutive attacks unless you are sure of the spin and your position. Exploit the fact that they probably can't hit through you. Against the defensive player, attack the middle whenever possible and of course move them in and out. The blocking player is generally susceptible on the wide FOREHAND or wide BACKHAND – not as vulnerable in the middle as attacking players are.

Other intangibles would be to scout your opponent. Particularly watch their serves; plan out your response to each of their serves. Are they stronger on the FOREHAND or BACKHAND? A strong BACKHAND position would be with the right foot forward; a closed stance. How do they return serve? When possible do your homework and try to find out what you can on an opponent. When this is not possible remember to play your game. Be ready to adjust if necessary. Having good tactics means you have to keep probing your opponent, looking for weaknesses. In an ideal situation (the one you're working towards) you would like to have your strengths attack the opponent's weaknesses. It seems simple but too often in the heat of the match we can forget unless we train (remind) ourselves to focus on this.

If you want to improve the tactical side of your game you must know your strengths, be focused, do your homework and be aware of your opponent's strengths. Have fun while you're doing this ... this is the mental challenge of table tennis. Our sport is like physical chess. You must be ready to move and choose the appropriate shot in the fraction of a second. Of course, experience is the greatest teacher. This sport is definitely a cat and mouse situation where if you

are weak mentally you end up the mouse. Lastly have fun when you play ... you will think more clearly.

Tactical Thinking Guidelines

- Keep probing opponent to find weakness.
- Serve short and attack the third ball.
- Loop the serve if it is long.
- Playing the ball wide to the FOREHAND (when possible) opens up the BACKHAND.
- Serve short and use drop shots when returning short serves.
- Use the entire table when serving.
- Have more than one option on each serve return.
- Attack & defend the middle as the number one focus.
- Change spins/speed especially when on the offense. Variation of these will improve deception.
- Have a game plan then follow and adjust when necessary. This will improve your concentration.