

## Single-sided Pips-out Penholder Play - 3. Basic techniques

Contributed by Kees  
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### 3. Basic techniques.

#### 3.1. The ready position.

You must be loose. Have your weight equally divided over your legs and stand very lightly, on the ball of your feet. Bend your knees and stand slightly bend forward, so you can see over the net about a third of the other half of the table. This will make it easier to judge the trajectory and the height of the bounce of the incoming ball. Stand with your left foot about half a foot further forward than the right foot, feet as far apart as your shoulders are wide, left hip more or less in line with the left sideline of the table, about as far back that you touch the baseline with the tip of your bat when you reach out with it. Your right upper arm hangs down; your underarm is raised forward, at an angle of about 90 degrees with the upper arm. Hold your left arm in the same way. The elbows are about 15 centimetres from your side. Your right arm wrist is loose. Your bat is pointing forward and is well above the surface of the table. Think of it this way: you must be ready to move your bat as fast as possible into the path of the incoming ball (before it drops) without hitting the table and you should be equally ready to return the ball at your left side as at your right side. If you prefer the style of controlled counter-attack, you will stand closer to the middle line and your left foot will at the most be an inch or so further forward than your right foot.

#### 3.2 Left-hand defence, right-hand attack.

Apart from the serve, there are two main techniques used by the single-sided pips-out penholder. As the same side of the bat is always facing forward, there are no backhand techniques in this style. What is called forehand with a shakehander is called right-hand here; what is called backhand with a shakehander is called left-hand here. The main left-hand technique is the block; the main right-hand technique is the hit.

The left-hand block really is the backbone of your game. Beginners should start with learning this technique. Roughly put it consists of punching the face of your blade against the incoming ball very aggressively (do not mistake defence for inactivity); generally you will do this with any ball you cannot hit at the right-hand side, which more or less means any ball that comes left of your right-hand hip.

The block is executed as follows. Be in the ready position. Make the bat face forward. Flip the tip of your bat quickly with your wrist so that it points at about 7 or 8 o'clock. Bring your hand back and down somewhat, bending your arm and drawing your elbow back, but keep your bat facing straight forward, choosing the place at the side of the table where you will land the ball and pointing your sweet spot directly towards it. Remember that you must make use of the upward motion of the ball after its bounce; decide on taking it early (incoming backspin) or somewhat later (incoming topspin), but be prepared to take it before the top of its bounce, so move your upper body towards it. Now accelerate your underarm forward in a punch-like manner towards the ball, but on contact move the bat quickly left and downward to impart backspin and sidespin; this last part of the movement is called by some 'cutting the ball'. Observe that the trajectory of the bat is not a straight line, but a curved one. Never punch quite straight, always try and cut the ball, because this way you will impart spin and gain much more control over speed and direction. Make contact when your underarm is at an angle of 90 degrees with your upper arm; when hitting extra hard, make contact at about 120 degrees; just before 90 or 120 let force rush in. Never make contact before 90 or after 120. Avoid over-stretching; do not stretch your arm beyond 150 degrees. Immediately after contact relax your arm and wrist and have your bat 'fall back'.

Contact is made at the centre of the ball and before the top of the bounce. If the incoming spin is topspin let the ball come up fairly high, so you can land it closer to the net if you want to, and impart mostly backspin (this way you will reverse the incoming topspin into backspin, so keep your punch short, or the ball will float over the table). If the incoming spin is backspin take the ball as early as possible and impart mostly sidespin (this way you will reverse part of the backspin to topspin/sidespin; if your pips reverse well, you can punch with real power, because the topspin will land the ball on the table fast).

The direction in which the tip of the bat should point depends. If the ball is near your right hip, the tip should point more or less to 6 o'clock; if it is far to your left, the tip should point to 9 o'clock.

The block is not confined to your left-hand; as the ball comes further to your right, the tip of your bat should point more towards 3 o'clock. However, at your right-hand side the punch will change into a very short striking motion, resulting from an upward flick of your wrist or a small upward motion of the underarm. This change is gradual. It is important to keep in mind that you can block any ball anywhere, since the same side of your bat will always be facing forward. This is one of the major strengths of single-sided penholder play and it will allow you to take control over the game.

You can vary the spin you impart. It is quite possible to counter incoming topspin with just sidespin, or incoming backspin with just backspin. Varying your spin is an essential part of your game, as it will keep your opponent uncertain, which enables you to take the initiative.

When learning the block, you may run into and have to deal with the following problems.

Stepping in with the right foot to get at the ball. This will destroy your balance, as you have to bend forward, reach out and punch forward at the same time. Try to be in place in time (with both feet) and move your shoulder and your upper body only.

Your ball goes high or over the table. Maybe your bat was open; keep it at the right angle by aiming with the sweet spot. Or maybe you took a topspin ball too early; heavy topspin must be taken late, at the top of the bounce. Then again, the incoming ball may have simply been too fast to block this way; from very fast balls some of the speed must be taken away &ndash; you can achieve this by not punching the ball, but blocking it passively, relaxing your wrist on contact. With very fast balls you may even move your bat an inch back at contact (the reverse of the "one inch punch"; this will kill most of the speed).

Your ball goes into the net. Maybe you closed your bat too much or you took the ball too late, after the top of the bounce, or you took on heavy backspin too early. Playing with pips your timing must be accurate.

You hit the ball but experience loss of control of direction. You haven't hit with enough venom, and imparted too little spin. Punch fiercely always, even when placing the ball short over the net.

You make contact with the ball before your underarm is at an angle of 90 degrees. You are probably too close to the table, or you have made contact too late. Adapt your position behind the table: you should be a bit further back when the incoming ball is very deep or very fast. However, never go so far back that you cannot contact the ball before it drops.

You make contact with the ball when your underarm is beyond an angle of 120 degrees. You may be too far off the table. Or you may have forgotten to bend forward, bringing your upper body towards the ball.

The incoming ball is out of reach on your far left. Take it more early, over the table.

The incoming ball is too high to punch. Take it more early, over the table.

The last two problems occur when you are playing too passively. You should always move towards the ball when playing with pips. It has been said that penholders are vulnerable to high and/or deep balls directed to their "backhand"; actually a high ball on the backhand side is difficult for a shakehander too; but no player should ever let a ball come up high at his backhand side &ndash; he should get to it in time.

Blocking accurately and fiercely will give you control over the game, so you will not lose, but that is not enough to gain victory. To win, you must attack. The right-hand hit is your means of deploying your offensive.

It is executed as follows. Stand in the ready position; then reach down just a bit, arm crooked at about 150 degrees and loose beside your body, tip of the bat now pointing to 6 o'clock, bat facing forward. After this, your hand is going to move in a curve: it is beside your right hip and will be before your face just beneath your chin (that is, it will rise to about shoulder-height; never higher). Your arm, going up, will bend from 150 degrees to about 60 degrees. Always keep your elbow pointing down and at about 15 centimetres of your side; this is very important, because you cannot keep the bat at the right angle otherwise. The bat must face forward all the time; its tip will go from 6 o'clock via 3 o'clock to 12 o'clock, so your thumb will point downward at the beginning and upward at the end. This rotation will help greatly both to keep the bat at the right angle and to impart spin. Wind back your hip and shoulder just a little to cock your body. Swing up while unwinding, accelerating your hand toward the ball, first by moving your upper arm up (picking up the speed of the rotation of your body), then by snapping in your underarm. Let force rush in, aim with your sweet spot, and contact the centre of the ball before it drops; hit with venom, even if you do not want to hit hard. If the incoming ball is low, contact the centre of the ball when the underarm is at 90 degrees with the upper arm. If the incoming ball is high, contact the centre of the ball when the underarm is at 120 degrees with the upper arm; in this case the curve your arm makes will be wider and the speed of your bat greater, therefore more speed will be imparted on the ball, which is possible because it can be hit directly over the net without lifting. Never close your bat on contact; keep it at the right angle, aiming with your sweet spot. Also resist the inclination to hit forward; your arm should always move in the plane of the face of your bat, even when you smash at full force. This is of the utmost importance. Keep in mind that the ball will leave your bat in a straight line perpendicular to the face of your bat; if you hit forward, the ball will always go over the table. Feel the bat, feel its angle, and let it guide your arm.

After making contact, relax immediately. The follow-through should bring the bat down and back to you; finish somewhere in front of and stand at the ready position again.

You have to hit the ball when it is in front of you and at your right. But you can also hit balls which are directed to your left side if you do not want to block them. For this, step out to the left with your left leg, keeping your torso as upright as possible in order to retain your balance. You will lose time in stepping out, that is, the ball will be nearer to the highest point of its bounce, so you can only do this with high balls. Balls coming to your far right may be difficult to hit because you lose too much time in getting there; don't lose more time than necessary by reaching down, but just snap your underarm in and hit it. If you haven't the time for that, block it.

When learning to hit, you may run into and have to deal with the following problems.

You hit into the net. You have hit the ball too late (after the top of the bounce) or you have closed your bat before or on impact. The latter is a common mistake with players who have turned from inverted to pips. This involves a change in attitude. You have to move fast toward the ball to be in time, you can't wait for it while getting ready to spin. If you are too late to hit the ball before it has reached its highest point, you have to use a different stroke: a small topspin stroke.

Essentially this means your stroke is more upward (in order to make a more brushing contact) and you use the snap of your wrist to produce much more friction between the ball and your rubber. Even so, keep the stroke pretty short. You can see Gao Jun do this often when she is picking up backspin balls just behind the table. On

<http://lucioping.altervista.org/Filmati.htm> you will find some videotaped matches of Gao you can download. You may have also encountered too heavy backspin; see advanced techniques below (lifting backspin). Or you may have hit the ball too close to the net; for this, see the techniques for over the table play.

You hit over the table. You have hit a topspin ball too early. Or you have held your bat too open. Or you have hit a low ball too hard. Or you have hit too much forward; this also is a mistake frequently made by players who have turned to pips from inverted.

The ball is coming up too close to you. A ball directed at your body should normally be blocked. If you do not want to do that or have made the wrong decision, make the best of it: bend your torso to the left quickly (if you have time, also step out to the left), and perform the stroke, keeping your elbow closer to your side than normal and going up with your hand sharper than normal.