

Single-sided Pips-out Penholder Play - 7. Basic tactics

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7. Basic tactics.

7.1. Cover the field. Attack the middle before attacking the wings.

You have to know what you can and what you cannot do playing single-sided pips-out penholder. Because of your pips you will not be bothered much by incoming spin, but the downside of this is that you cannot generate much spin either; therefore you must remain rather close to the table, in order to be able to return the ball before it drops. Your further weakness is a relative lack of reach at both sides, at your left because you do not have a backhand, at your right because the penholder grip takes off about 10 centimetres of your reach. You must compensate for this by taking in a basic position at the left-hand side of the table, as close to the corner as possible; to be able to reach the far right side and come back again in time you must be very quick on your feet. The necessity of staying close to the table can now be turned into an advantage; for you have to move less to reach a ball on your right if you catch up with it above or closely behind the table, than if you catch up with it away from the table (the ball will have travelled further to the right). The same is true for your left side. Therefore, in order to successfully cover the field, your first tactical rule is to take balls as early as possible, preferably over the table.

The second tactical rule must be that you hit balls in such a way that your opponent will be unable to return them where you cannot reach them. For instance, if he serves from his backhand corner to yours, you should not return the ball to the middle of the table or to the forehand side, because from there your opponent can cut the sideline at your far right. You should not return the ball to his far backhand either, trying to cut his sideline, because he may be able to return that ball cutting your left-side sideline, forcing you to move far to the left, which would leave your far right wide open for attack. In general this means that you have to "attack the middle", that is, aim for the elbow of the hitting arm of your opponent; that way he will never be able to attack your far sides comfortably.

Attacking the middle you will force your opponent to move left or right to return either with his forehand or his backhand more comfortably. If he has moved far enough, one of his wings will be open to attack. Therefore the third tactical rule is that after attacking the middle, you attack the wings.

If perchance your opponent is a penholder too, you cannot not in the same way attack the middle in order to force him to move. Since you cannot safely attack his wings, you must force him away from the table; attacking the middle now means that you hit the ball deep and into the body. If your opponent moves back, you can attack his open wing (this will mostly be his right-hand side), because he will have to move further to get to the ball.

7.2. Vary the attack. Choose your moment. Adapt.

If your opponent knows where to expect your next ball, he will be prepared. You must not allow this. Keep him in the dark, so that he will always be unprepared and cannot use all his energy for a single effective line of attack. Deception (or unpredictability) is the key to victory. You must attack the middle (if you cannot outright attack the wings), but you must vary your attack, hitting now fast and now slow, now with spin and now without, now deep and now short. Move him in and out. Wrong-foot him. Varying the attack is the fourth tactical rule.

You cannot attack before you have effectively brought down your opponents defence. Be patient. Yours is a fast game because you must stay close to the table and hit in a more or less straight line, not because you must hit a winner with your first ball. Keep the field covered by maintaining your basic position, keep up the attack of the middle, vary your attack to make it most effective, attack the wings when you can and not before. Choosing your moment is the fifth tactical rule.

You should not adhere to these rules blindly. It may be profitable to attack the wings early if one of them is weak (because of a relatively weak backhand or forehand). It may be possible to win the point by attacking the middle. It may be necessary to turn to the defence to lure your opponent close to the table. Adapting to the circumstances is the final tactical rule.