

Pips-out two-winged fast attacks style of play – 1. History and characterization

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1. History and characterization.

Covering your frame with short pips, no sponge, as the tradition-conscious hard-batters still do, once was the only way of playing table tennis. Then somebody had the idea to attach the rubber upside down; the term ‘inverted’ refers to this. Table tennis was upturned indeed. The net became less of an obstacle, which it had been intended to be, because now you could loop the ball over it. As a consequence, you could hit with much more force. As rubbers became capable of imparting more spin and sponge was used to enhance this effect, elegance, delicacy and speed gave way to raw power. Gone are the days of the rapier, we live in the age of the broadsword.

The metaphor is, I think, informative. The basic stroke with inverted rubber resembles the swinging stroke used to wield the double-edged broadsword, whereas with pips the basic stroke is essentially a punch resembling the pointed rapier’s thrust. The former needs power to be effective, the latter precision. Striking a powerful blow takes time; a precise thrust can be made quickly. With the light rapier you cannot hope to parry the blows of the heavy broadsword; the only hope you have is to deflect them and slip in your point fast between the blows, or make the kill before the sword has been even raised. Likewise, defence with short pips is precarious, since you can only block the incoming ball and have no means of landing it on the table using spin, so you have to attack as fast and frequently as possible, denying as much as you can your opponent the time he needs to perform his own attacking stroke.

The typical two-winged pips-out player is, then, someone who prefers using quick and precise action over the exertion of force. Not surprisingly, pips are used much more by women than by men. And in fact, a woman with pips stands a better chance against a woman with inverted, than a man with pips against a man with inverted, because women have less power and are therefore less able to exploit fully the possibilities of inverted rubber. In this century, all male World Champions have been power-spinners, but as yet there has been no female World Champion who used the power-spin style of play. The greatest female player of all, little giant Deng Ya-ping, three times World Champion, had pips on her backhand side – long pips, true, but she attacked with them the way short pips are used. The best female pips-out two-winged player ever, Geng Li-juan, lean, lithe, and lightning-fast, won the silver medal in 1985. No male two-winged fast attacker ever reached so high. Yet there have been successful male pips-out shakehand players, too; not many, but then there are few male pips-out shakehanders around, and excellence is rare anyway. Any boy or man who thinks of taking up this style, but hesitates to become a member of such a small minority, should take a good long look at the play of Johnny Huang, perfectly poised fencing-master behind the table, epitome of two-winged fast attack. In his mid forties now, he still is virtually unbeaten in the America’s. When in 1996 the Olympic Games were on his adopted home-ground, he peaked, reaching the quarter finals, beating with 21-15, 17-21, 21-16, 21-15 the great Waldner.

Nowadays, the style has become virtually extinct, although it lives on in the highly effective hybrid style displayed by, amongst others, Li Jia-wei, currently nr.6 of the world, who has inverted rubber on her backhand, pips on her forehand, as had Teng Yi who in 1987 won the men’s World Cup. The introduction of the 40 mm ball, which resulted in shorter and faster play with much more varied lines of attack, has been much to the advantage of the power-spin style. Using modern equipment a power-spinner can loop the ball close to the table with great force. As a consequence, a pips-out player has to be faster and more precise than ever before. The use of either an inverted rubber on the backhand or pips-out rubbers capable of producing much more topspin, are logical developments; the resulting hybrid styles are more forgiving. These days, the pure pips-out two-winged fast attack style is, though it appears to be technically simple, a very difficult style to master; more difficult even than the single-sided pips-out penholder style. Taking it up anyway requires courage, patience, and true love for beauty over power.

Below, the basic techniques and tactics of shakehand pips-out play are discussed, in stages, so that, I hope, a beginner can start to play almost immediately and develop his or her style going from one level to the next.

The style is also known as ‘pips-out hitter’, but as ‘hitter’ may to some wrongly suggest the application of force as a main characteristic I prefer the Chinese designation ‘two-winged fast attack style’. Although there are similarities between this style and the single-sided pips-out penholder style, the differences are more important. The penholder grip offers great defence at the backhand side, where blocks can be used to manipulate spin in a number of ways; in contrast, the block with the shakehand grip is less well suited to manipulate spin, but the grip allows all attacking strokes on both wings - even so, attack must be fast indeed to compensate the lack of defensive possibilities.