

Pips-out two-winged fast attack style of play - 3. Beginning play: blocks and strokes

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The following techniques can best be learned in succession, as they are presented here, since every next stroke is, as regards the required motion of the arm, a more extended version of the preceding stroke and therefore based on it.

3.1. The backhand and forehand block.

Essentially, blocking is having the incoming ball bounce off your bat in the direction you want it to go. Blocking, although you should use it either to attack or to set up an attack, is passive; you move your bat into the path of the ball and keep it there. You do not strike the ball.

For a backhand block, drop your right shoulder (supposing you are right-handed) somewhat, so you can easily move your underarm, lean forward towards the ball, and move your bat into its path. Try to be behind the ball whenever you block it.

For a forehand block it is not necessary to drop your shoulder, nor should you block the ball in front of you; you block it somewhere in front of you and to your right. Keep your bat close to the surface of the table.

Make contact with the backside-centre of the ball very soon after it bounces up from the table, but give it time to come high enough to make contact with the sweet spot of your bat. You direct the ball only by choosing the angle of your bat. If there is no or little sidespin on the incoming ball, a ball that comes straight at your bat (that is, at an angle of 90 degrees) will bounce off it at the same angle (right back, again at an angle of 90 degrees). If it comes in at an angle of 90 minus 10 degrees, it will bounce off at an angle of 90 plus 10 degrees; if it comes in at 90 minus 20, it will bounce off at 90 plus 20; and so on.

In all of the following exercises try never to stand still; keep moving, because you will have to in your matches; ask your partner to force you to move by aiming at your change-over point (which is somewhere below the elbow of the arm you use to block with) and at your wings (your far left and right); also ask him to vary the length of the balls. Keep in mind always that you are not only learning a stroke, but speed also.

Exercise 1: Block medium-paced no-spin or light topspin balls from anywhere on the table right back to your partner, aiming at the elbow of the arm he hits with; then try out changing the angle of your bat and aim for the corners of the table; after that aim to cut the sidelines. Be light on your feet and try not to reach out to your left or right to get to the ball, but instead try to be behind the ball when using your backhand, behind and closely beside it when using your forehand. When you can do this, try blocking balls incoming with sidespin; watch how they bounce off at an angle, and adjust the angle of your bat accordingly to compensate.

Exercise 2: Block medium-fast balls and ask your partner to increase the topspin. Try and make all balls go low over the net, aiming at the elbow of your partner. It will be necessary to close your bat somewhat; more against heavier topspin. If you can do this, aim for the corners; then try cutting the sidelines. Then ask your partner to hit fast balls. You will discover that you are unable to get really fast balls with heavy topspin to land on the table; they will go over it. As you cannot close your bat more (you would block the ball into the net that way), you have to take off the pace of the ball; you do this by relaxing your wrist when blocking. Against very fast balls, even pull back your bat a centimetre or so on impact (“pull-back block”). Try to get a feel for this so you will be able to change the pace of the ball at will when returning it.

Exercise 3: Block slow backspin balls. Again, try to keep them low. You may have to open your bat somewhat, or even a great deal with heavy backspin; for this, you shove your bat under the ball directly after it has bounced off the table (this is an “open block”).

3.2. The backhand punch.

This stroke is simply an active backhand block. Instead of holding your bat still on contact, you make a very short, fast movement straight forward. For this use only your underarm, pivoting around the elbow; do not ever use the wrist, although this may be very tempting. Drop your right shoulder a bit and lean forward towards the ball, so that you have room to move your underarm to your belly; bring it down slightly, going towards your belly, then up and forward, in a semi-circular motion, accelerating towards the ball when you are about an inch before making contact with it. Keep your blade vertical (against backspin) or slightly closed (against topspin). Hit the ball at the backside-centre with force, but relax immediately after making contact and follow through as little as possible, in the direction of the ball. The stroke must really resemble a short, dry punch. Against incoming heavy topspin, you must close your bat.

Exercise 4: Punch medium to fast incoming topspin balls, first to the elbow, then to the corners. Make contact just before the top of the bounce; that way you can punch them over the net more easily. When you are comfortable with that, find out how much more early you can punch them and still land them on the table. The heavier the topspin, the more early

you can take them on. But heavy topspin will also reverse more easily because of your pips into backspin; balls will get the tendency to float and you cannot punch them hard. Find out how hard you can punch them anyway.

Exercise 5: Punch incoming backspin balls, holding your bat vertical. Make light and fast contact; this may reverse the incoming spin into topspin so that you can land the ball on the table sooner and punch with more force. Make contact on the top of the bounce. If you would do it earlier, you would have to open your bat more and therefore not be able to punch at all (the stroke would be a push).

3.3. The forehand drive & hit.

This is your main stroke, for now. It is your means of attack. It must be flawless, or you will miss with it. The ball must be struck when it is to the right and in front of you, a bit more than half an arm's length away; this means you must get ready to hit it when it is still at the other side of the net. Rotate your upper body slightly by bringing your right hip and shoulder backwards; take care: do not lean to your right to do this, and do not drop your shoulder, but stay balanced as you are. Keep your elbow rather close to your side (about 15 centimetres away) and raise your underarm, bringing it beside you, making an angle of about 90 degrees with the upper arm. Stretch your arm to about 120 degrees while going quickly down a little bit (maybe 10 centimetres); doing this, cock your wrist, bringing the tip of your bat downward; bring your arm up and forward, now unwinding shoulder and hip, and get the bat behind the ball on or before the top of its bounce. This small curved motion replaces the upswing you would make when using an inverted rubber; it gives you time to adjust the angle of your bat and to build up some speed. Make sure your bat is coming really straight towards the ball in the last centimetres of the semi-circle. Accelerate in an almost horizontal line fast towards the ball when your bat is an inch or so away from it. Only use your underarm for this, pivoting around the elbow, swinging from an angle of about 120 degrees with your upper arm to an angle of about 60 degrees. Straighten your wrist, hitting the ball dead-centre; hit it with venom, even if you do not want to produce a fast ball – all the force you use must be generated in the short and straight part of the motion, that is, in about an inch or so. Even so, never open your attack at more than 70% of your power and never hit at more than 90%. Follow through, relaxing, by swinging your underarm to the left, still only pivoting around the elbow. Stop somewhere in front of you and have your arm fall back. The follow-through will be slightly upwards because you are relaxing your muscles. Against heavy topspin you have to close your bat.

In general, you must prevent the upper arm from following this motion; instead, when you hit a higher ball hard, increase the rotation of your upper body, winding further back and faster forward. Keep your upper arm to your side, do not allow it to go backward or forward, for this would impair severely the accuracy of your stroke. The best way to achieve this is to keep your neck, back, shoulders and upper arms completely relaxed when rotating and hitting. Let your underarm do all the work. Feel light, fast and precise. Also, appreciate the beauty of the movement, of how the small vertical curve flows with fierce elegance into the wider horizontal one; experiencing the beauty will help to cancel the basic impulse to use raw power. You must be the fencing-master, both elegant and lethal!

In the following exercises, ask your training-partner to aim more or less at your forehand, but start moving from side to side yourself as soon as you are somewhat comfortable with the stroke. Stepping around your backhand (that is, moving to the left in order to take a ball with your forehand instead of with your backhand) is an important part of your style of play. Take care and watch the ball, because you should hit it before it drops; this isn't easy when stepping around your backhand, since stepping around takes time. Also watch the result. Against topspin a well hit ball will be almost without spin (knuckle ball) and go low over the net, then drop suddenly on the table. Against backspin it will go low over the net and drop fast, bouncing low.

Experiment with varying the angle of your bat and your stroke. A vertical bat will produce maximum spin-reversal when you refrain from using your wrist; when you do use your wrist you will more likely produce knuckle balls. Higher balls, if hit with a somewhat closed bat will go faster down to the table, provided your stroke is somewhat more upward.

Exercise 6: Drive medium to fast incoming topspin balls, first to the elbow of your partner, then to the corners. Make contact just before the top of the bounce; that way you can hit them over the net more easily. When you are comfortable with that, find out how much more early you can contact them and still get them over the net and land them on the table. The heavier the topspin, the more early you can take them on, because they will bounce up from your pips. But because of your pips, heavy topspin will also reverse more into backspin; balls will get the tendency to float and you cannot hit them very hard. Find out how hard you can drive them anyway. Keep in mind that taking the ball on early is necessary for your fast style of play.

Exercise 7: Do the same with backspin balls. Backspin may be reversed into topspin by your pips, so, again, try and find out how low, how early and how hard you can hit.

If you have used inverted rubbers for topspin before you adopted pips, this stroke will feel very strange, awkwardly short and flat. You may even feel cramped because of this. It will be very difficult to unlearn the upswing toward the ball, but you have to get rid of that. Keep in mind that the stroke with inverted rubber serves two purposes: it has to produce speed and it has to produce spin. With pips you only have to produce speed. So you can do away with half of the stroke, so to speak. Furthermore, with inverted rubber you have to produce a lot of speed, because the spin curves the trajectory of the ball, so if you want a fast ball, it will have to go real fast. With pips the trajectory is straight and a ball will be fast even with not too much speed. That means you can do away with another quarter of the stroke. Really, what remains is a

quarter of the stroke you would make when using inverted rubber. Now with this in mind try the following exercise. Ask your trainings-partner to drive and loop medium fast balls diagonally over the table to your forehand and return them this way: keep your elbow about half a foot from your side, keep your arm crooked at about a 100 degrees, be very loose all the time, and bring your bat (barely closed) without any kind of upswing behind the ball, then, making kind of softly contact with the ball to your right and in front of you, try to catch the ball on your rubber, and "drag" it over the net by moving your bat not too fast in a semi-circle about ten to fifteen centimetres wide, going no more than five centimetres upward (your arm will do this by itself, if you do not hit upwards). Use your underarm only, pivoting around the elbow! The ball should land somewhere in the middle of the other half of the table. If you can do this consistently, pick up speed and make the movement somewhat longer, but keep it as flat as before. Place the ball deeper. Make the stroke snappy. But always try to retain the feeling of "dragging" the ball, more than hitting it.

3.4. Serve.

Serving with pips is the same as serving with inverted, but since your style demands speed it pays off to use a kind of serve that will allow you to have your bat ready for attack in no time at all. This means you should not alter your grip for serving. It also means you want your bat to go forward when serving, not backward.

The simplest serve to start with is the backhand side-spin serve. Stand behind the left half of the table in your normal ready position. Hold the ball in front of you on the palm of your left hand and hold your bat between you and the ball, somewhere in front of your left hip, blade vertical or slightly open. Toss the ball up and when it drops graze it from left to right with your bat. Keep the ball low and short, so have it bounce on your half of the table pretty close to the net. Because of the sidespin the ball will bounce off your opponent's bat to your right, if he doesn't adapt. If you serve short and to the right, the ball may even go off the table when returned; this is the safest way to start with. Serving short to the left is inviting your opponent to return it to your forehand, so that you can make a 3rd ball kill. You can vary this serve by varying the amount of side-spin (grazing the ball fast or less fast); if you open your bat more, it will also have some backspin. Make your movement hard to read by keeping it small or by deception (for instance, graze the ball fast but touch it very lightly to produce less side-spin than your opponent will think you do). Surprise your opponent by sometimes serving fast down the line.

It is possible to produce lots of spin with pips when serving, but to achieve this you have to practice long and hard. You can do this anywhere, because you just have to learn to use your wrist and underarm. Practice daily for at least a quarter of an hour. That way, behind the table, you can concentrate on keeping the ball low and short.

3.5. Tactics for beginners.

Even with a very few techniques, viz. the backhand block and punch, and the forehand block and drive, and a simple serve, it is quite possible to start playing competition. In my opinion, you should. The strokes are technically not that difficult to master, but the need of speed and the necessity to be the first to attack demand an understanding of the reality of the game, so that you will be able to anticipate (which facilitates speedy and precise reaction) the moves of your opponents. Experience is very important; so is reflection. Start playing competition with this style as soon as you can and keep track of the way matches are going for you. Consider every match to be a training-session. Winning is not important – your development is.

If you have learned the techniques described above, you are ready to play. It is well to keep in mind that playing against opponents who use inverted rubbers you will be at a disadvantage at first, because developing your style will take time. Do take that time.

The main idea of your tactics is denying your opponent the time and the balance he needs to produce spin. Your main line of attack is directed at the vulnerable middle (his change-over point); think of it as going for the heart. Keep things very simple initially, but try and play fast from the beginning. Dictate the pace. Be loose and light on your feet when you play; strike fiercely; relax and rest between points. When receiving, return the ball fast and deep into the body; if it comes back high enough, attack it, into the body again, or go for the corners or sidelines if your opponent is out of position enough so he will have difficulty in reaching the ball. When serving, keep it short and unpredictable, serve a fast one down the line sometimes, and try to have your forehand ready for the return so you can start to attack. Step around your backhand when you can, but bring into play your backhand punch if you must. Blocking is essential and a lot of beginners block too little or too much. Block a ball if it is too fast to attack, and use the time you gain by this to get ready to attack the next one. Think of blocking as deflecting the blow of a broadsword with your rapier – even the best swordsman will need a moment to retrieve his blade and his balance after that blow, and in this moment your rapier must slip into his heart.