

Pips-out two-winged fast attack style of play - 4. Advanced play

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You will know that you are ready to go to the next level when you can perform blocks, punches and drives comfortably in your matches and when your footwork has developed to the point where you do not miss any balls anymore because you are too late; this means you will now, when playing, have the time to execute more intricate techniques. In this chapter will be discussed advanced attacking techniques; after that, the defensive strokes, which you will use as little as possible. In the final paragraph will briefly be discussed advanced tactics and the way in which you should develop a personal style.

4.1. The backhand drive & hit.

This stroke is the mirror-image of the forehand drive, but ideally is executed right in front of you. The ball must be struck when it is still a bit more than half an arm's length away; this means you must get ready to hit it when it is at the other side of the net. Step out so that you will be behind the ball. Drop your right shoulder slightly and bend a bit forward to make room for the movement of your underarm, but stay balanced as you are. Bring your arm in front of you as you would do with a backhand block. Go quickly down and back a little bit (maybe 10 centimetres), cock your wrist, moving the tip of the blade downward, and bring your arm up and forward again, bringing the bat behind the ball on or before the top of its bounce. Make sure your bat is coming really straight towards it in the last centimetres of the semi-circle. Accelerate in a horizontal line fast towards the ball when your bat is an inch or so away from the ball. Only use your underarm for this, pivoting around the elbow. Straighten your wrist when you hit 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. Follow through, relaxing, by swinging your underarm to the right, still only pivoting around the elbow. The follow-through will be slightly upwards because you are relaxing your muscles.

Exercises: adapt exercise 6 and 7 – perform them with your backhand.

4.2. The backhand and forehand flip.

The flip is a short active block absolutely anywhere over the table, against backspin, no-spin or topspin. Against backspin, it should continue the spin on the ball, reversing it; by executing this stroke you avoid playing a defensive block or push. It is a short, almost completely upward stroke, used as the main stroke in fast, short, over the table play. With pips you cannot drag the ball upward and over the net, so you have to use its own upward motion again. Lift your arm, then bring the blade down to catch the ball when it bounces; keep your blade vertical, or, against heavy backspin, open it slightly, go straight up with it again, closing your bat a bit to help the ball over the net. If you want to produce a fast, deep ball, you go up and slightly forward, making a brushing contact with the centre of the ball; if you want to produce a slow ball, do not go forward at all, just aim and go up. Coming in at the ball from above must be done in order to avoid imparting too much forward motion on the ball (you would hit into the net if you came at it horizontally). When you perform a forehand flip you have to bend your wrist backwards considerably to get your blade squarely behind the ball.

Exercise 8: Ask your partner to do backspin and no-spin serves, anywhere on the table, and flip them back, first aiming at his change-over point, then going for the corners and the sidelines.

4.3. The backhand and forehand smash; the backspin smash.

The smash is a drive or hit at full force (which with pips means never more than 90% of what you are able to muster), possible because the ball has bounced high enough to return it directly, that is, in a straight line, onto the other half of the table. If there is heavy topspin on the ball, it doesn't need to bounce as high, because the spin will help bounce it up off your bat; with pips you can smash relatively low balls. The stroke is performed as a normal drive, but the first, vertical semi-circle is made wider, though not much, and you have to rotate your upper body further and unwind it with more force. The second curve, the follow-through, is also wider. You must, however, avoid over-hitting. Applying too much force will impair your aim and is not necessary with pips. Build up tension by rotating your upper body back, and unwind, then swing in your underarm. Always hit the ball dead-centre; this means that high bouncing balls must be hit coming in from above.

With your pips you can help reverse incoming topspin in backspin; with smashing, this is done by pulling your bat downward when hitting the ball, so that it grazes the backside of the ball. A ball hit this way will still go down in a straight line, but has at the same time the tendency to float, so it will be a bit less fast; you have to hit it with less force and you have to aim carefully, or it will go over the table. If it lands on the table, however, it will be very difficult to lift for your opponent.

Exercise 9: Ask your trainings-partner to produce balls that bounce about three times the height of the net and smash them. Then try out how low a ball you can still smash.

4.4. The roll and the traditional lift against backspin.

Attacking backspin balls, dead balls, or very low topspin balls, that are just long (that is, just bounce off the table) can be done by rolling. Rolling is important, because one tactic that will be used almost certainly against you is intended to force you to go away from the table by feeding you deep balls; you can stay close to the table by rolling them back. Together with the flip, the roll is your main stroke in short play, used to open up your attack with.

Essentially a roll is a flip behind the table instead of over it; in this case, however, you do not have to bring your arm up and come down behind the ball in order to avoid imparting too much forward speed, since you are far from the net. Open your bat a bit, catch the ball and bring your bat quickly up, in a short curve, while closing it a bit.

The roll is well suited to open up your attack with; do not hit with too much force, though (never go above 70% of what you can muster).

Exercise 10: Ask your trainings-partner to serve long, producing backspin, no spin, or mild topspin, and roll the balls back; again, aim for his elbow first, after that try to get the ball in the corners and cut the sidelines.

Heavy backspin is better lifted and attacked in the traditional way, by bringing your bat deep down, opening it slightly, then bring it fast high up by swinging in your whole arm from knee-high to over your head, snapping in your underarm just before you make contact with the ball, grazing the ball just below its centre. It helps if you actually bend your knees and straighten them when you swing up.

Exercise 11: Ask your trainings-partner to hit heavy backspin balls, and use the stroke described above. Aim for the elbow, the corners, the sidelines. Spin-reversal with this stroke should be good and as a consequence you will be able to attack with short, very fast balls.

4.5. The backhand and forehand sidespin stab.

Even with pips incoming spin is best avoided when it cannot be turned against the opponent. The best way to minimize the influence of backspin or topspin is making contact with the ball at its side, as the side centre of the ball is one end of the axis the ball is rotating around. A point close to the axis will move far less than a point far from the axis. You can do this in flipping, but also in blocking.

A sidespin stab is executed as follows. Keep your bat vertical and point it towards the ball; come right at it, then make contact shortly after the bounce as far at its right-hand or left-hand side as you can. Have the ball bounce up and off your bat, at the same time stabbing at it (in order to produce sidespin) and (guiding the ball a bit) bringing your bat up and slightly into the direction you want it to go. This is a touch-shot, so perform it delicately; yet the upward/forward (brushing) motion should be sharp and with venom. You can also bring your bat downward/forward to impart backspin. The sidespin stab is a good technique for cutting the forehand sideline returning a short serve from the backhand side.

Exercise 12: Ask your trainings-partner to serve heavy backspin from both the forehand and the backhand corner and return the balls out of his reach using the sidespin-stab.

4.6. The smother-block.

Incoming speed can be curbed too. Blocking a smash or lob, smothering the ball, is a useful technique if your opponent is far from the table. Perform a pull-back block with a closed bat.

Exercise 13: Hit a ball to your trainings-partner which he can return either with a smash or with a lob. Smother the ball. Concentrate first on taking the pace out of it by keeping your wrist very relaxed and pulling back your bat a centimetre or so. If you are able to kill the speed, concentrate on the angle of your bat necessary to land the ball closely over the net, or at least out of the reach of your opponent.

4.6. Serves.

On an advanced level you will serve with your forehand from your backhand corner, because this will offer you the whole breadth of the table for your forehand attack. Any good serve will do, but keep in mind you will want the ball returned to your right; you serve to set up your forehand attack.

4.7. The backhand and forehand push.

Against backspin balls you can instead of block also push, although this is a defensive technique. Against heavy backspin balls that bounce low and close to the net you should push when you are not certain that your flip will be dangerous enough. You can push slow by simply putting your bat (face up at an angle of about 45 degrees) under the ball, very shortly after the bounce in order to make good use of the upward motion of the ball; hold your bat still, that is, avoid imparting forward motion and do not lift it yourself; just have the ball bounce off your bat over the net. Make contact fairly high on your bat, that is, between the middle and the grip; this makes it a lot easier to produce flat returns. The ball

should go almost straight forward and spin should be reversed to some degree.

Exercise 14: Push slow against backspin serves. Try out your pips to see how much spin they will reverse. Also vary the angle of your bat (very flat to just slightly open) and see what happens. If you are unable to predict the outcome, this is a risky shot.

Pushing fast is more reliable, because the result is more predictable. Do the same as with the slow push, but now really push against the ball. The motion should be forward, and slightly downward, not upward. This way your pips will brush the underside of the ball, imparting heavy backspin.

Exercise 15: Push fast against backspin serves, varying the angle of the bat; also vary the speed you are pushing with. Find out how to push the ball deep or short, and keep it low. Generally if your returns pop up, you have to hold out your bat less open or take the ball higher on your bat.

4.8. The backhand and forehand chop.

The chop also is a defensive shot and not normally used. Chopping with short pips can be done very effectively, but is generally hard because the rubbers and the frame are so very fast. Bring your hand up to shoulder height and have the tip of the bat pointing upwards. Chop down at the ball in a curve, moving downward and forward, making contact with the ball at hip height, grazing it well below its centre, snapping in your wrist just before you make contact.

Exercise 16: Chop fast backspin and fast topspin balls. This stroke is an emergency measure; after you have learned it, perform it under difficult circumstances – force yourself to reach, to do it on the run, etc.

4.9. The lob and forehand sidespin loop.

If you find yourself where you should not be, far behind the table trying to recover a dropping ball, you can lob, catching the ball on your half-open bat, hitting upward while closing it to a vertical position and following through high above your head. This is a desperate measure and results will be dubious, for the ball, even if hit correctly, will bounce very high on the other half of the table but virtually without spin.

You may prefer to try and get back into the rally by performing a sidespin loop. Reach far down, keep your bat slightly closed and make contact just below the centre of the ball and a bit to its side while moving your bat very fast in a narrow curve to the right and forward. The brushing contact will be prolonged slightly because of this curve (you sort of catch the ball in your moving rubber) and you will be able to produce a considerable amount of sidespin, curving the trajectory of the ball.

After using desperate measures like these you should be back at the table as fast as you can.

Exercise 17: Stand at the backhand side of the table and ask your partner to hit a fast one down the line at the forehand side. Try and get to it, going away from the table, and lob or sidespin-loop it back. See if you can sidespin-loop it bending it around the net and have it skid off the table...

4.10. Advanced tactics & developing a personal style.

Tactics on an advanced level are essentially the same as on a basic level, but attack should be much more diverse and unpredictable. Opening the attack aggressively over the table (flip) or close behind it (roll) is essential, in order to play fast and short, as you must. Only when the ball bounces up enough, you can start driving and hitting, to make the kill. You should be aware of your vulnerability for attacks aimed at your change-over point and fast deep balls at your backhand; develop flawless footwork so you can side-step such attacks. The feint should be an important part of your play now, to mess up the balance of your opponent; pretend to hit hard when you do not, to hit to the left when you hit to the right, change the rhythm of the game; always follow up a good feint with an attack.

But it is maybe even more important to develop a personal style. A personal style is built around the stroke (or strokes) you are especially good at, the strokes you like. You may like to hit the winner with your forehand or with your backhand and set up the attacks accordingly. You may even like blocking and use it cunningly to gain time to hit with real force. However, keep in mind that you should not be predictable and that you should be ready to attack along every line that presents itself.

A personal style also includes a personal choice in equipment, for instance concerning the thickness of sponge (you may like thickness less than the average 1.5 mm, or more than 2.1 mm), or the properties of your pips (less spinney or more spinney). Preferring speed over spin, you may nonetheless resort to using a certain degree of topspin to land faster balls on the table. The style should be made to fit you, not the other way round!