

Modern Defense - techniques and tactics

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CLASSIC & MODERN DEFENCE – BASIC TECHNIQUES AND TACTICS.

1. Introduction.

Defending away from the table, made famous by masters of the art such as Ding Song, feared for his supreme staying-power and his ferocious attacks, or willow-waisted Tong Ling, who seemed to win her matches lightly dancing an intricate ballet, is the most spectacular as well as the most demanding style in table tennis. The classic defender mainly chops from about two paces or more behind the table, coming in fast regularly to push short returns or attack weak ones; the modern defender alternates even more between defending and attacking. A defender has, therefore, to be able to move very quickly from side to side, covering a considerable distance since six feet behind the table balls tend to travel fast out of reach, and at that he has to be able to move quickly in and out. Moreover, at the end of every rush he has to be able to poise himself perfectly and then flawlessly chop, push, block, loop or smash. Not only fleet feet and a great sense of balance are absolutely necessary assets in this style, but the defender must be able to execute each and every attacking stroke as well as all defensive techniques. After three years of ardent practice an attacker will be more or less completely skilled, but at that point the defender's education will have just begun. Defence, be it classic or modern, is the high-school of table tennis and if you wish to attend its classes you should be aware that you will have to do so for a considerable time and spend a lot of effort.

You might well ask if all this labour is worth it. As a defender will you eventually be more than a match for attackers? Theoretically, yes. Backspin as a means to defeat your opponent is superior to topspin. Firstly, because topspin is produced by swinging upward, against gravity, using groups of muscles which are normally less strong than the groups of muscles used to hack downward, assisted by gravity, in order to produce backspin (try to fell a tree hacking head-high; then try felling it knee-high; and see what you like best). Secondly, because topspin can be used against the player producing it, for it can be actively blocked and redirected; but against backspin, using inverted rubber, one can either push or try to counter by producing at least as much topspin, so your opponent will have to give up the initiative or spend more energy than you did to try and gain it. Thirdly, your opponent cannot really afford to return heavy backspin balls when they are dropping; this severely limits his reaction-time and therefore cramps his style, whereas the defender prefers to take the ball when it is dropping and therefore has all the time in the world to play his game.

In practice, however, the advantage of the defender over the attacker is not as clear-cut. The defender will chop mostly well away from the table and as a result the ball will travel farther than a ball hit by an attacker who is typically standing close to the table. The defender's ball will, therefore, in general lose speed and spin more than the ball hit by the attacker. The loss of speed is not much of a problem; the loss of spin is. Moreover, the introduction of the 40 mm ball, which loses spin and speed faster than the 38 mm ball, has been to the advantage of the attacker in this respect. It is still possible to deliver more chop than an attacker can handle, though, if the defender stays somewhat closer to the table than Ding Song used to do in his glorious days. Modern defensive styles as adopted by e.g. South-Korean female player Park Mi Young or Svetlana Ganina from Russia display this change in basic position. Seemingly a disadvantage, it has been turned into a gain, because attacking from this shorter distance is easier. As a result, the modern defender now may be more dangerous than ever before.

How is it then, you might ask again, that there are so few defenders among the world's top-players? There are two answers to this question. The first answer is that the number of defenders amongst top-players actually is disproportional high: 3 in the top 15 of men, 7 in the top 40 of women, if I counted right. That is 1 in 3 and 1 in 6 respectively, whereas I would estimate the rate of defenders to attackers in the total population of table tennis players to be more like 1 in 20 or 30. The second answer is that one probably would find even more defenders at the top, if more young players would choose to adopt this style. However, defensive styles are unpopular because it takes quite a long time to master them – much longer than attacking styles. Ours is an era of impatience; success has to come quickly or people will turn away to find other opportunities. Typically, it will take more than a year to make an accomplished defender out of an accomplished attacker. Most players who set out at this course quit after about three months; this is known as “the defender's dip” and is caused by the grim fact that stepping up from attack to defence will initially mean you lose most matches you would have won before. You will start to win some after half a year of backbreaking training and again half a year further on you may be almost back on the level of competition you were used to.

After that, however, you will start to shine. And defenders generally outlast attackers, so you may shine for a long, long time. Becoming a defender, then, will be far from easy and the choice should not be made light-heartedly. But if you are willing to dedicate yourself completely to the sheer beauty of this style, you will reach the apex of table tennis.

2. The essence of defence. Outline of the style.

If you want to defend, you must be attacked. Think of yourself as a city; having an impregnable wall is not enough to defeat your enemy – your opponent must be provoked to try and breach it or his weaknesses will not be exposed and you will not be able to exploit them and bring him on his knees. The idea of classic defence is to be besieged in such a way that the enemy attacks in vain and in the end is worn out, either to die in the field or to receive your coup de gr ce. The idea of modern defence, however, is to be besieged in such a way that the enemy attacks in vain and while doing so rapidly becomes vulnerable for quickly mounted counter-attacks. Modern defence is generally faster, more deceptive and less safe than classic defence, because it is more provocative – it needs to be, because modern enemies are often so heavily armed (fast frames with fast rubbers generating massive spin) that they will breach your wall if you let them go on blasting at it.

Whether you are a classic or a modern defender, your wall of defence should be equally perfect. No cracks, no fissures, no flaws. In table tennis this means you have to be able to bring back every ball. Furthermore, as any wall may be broken in time if the enemy is allowed a concentrated attack on it, you have to scatter his force and disrupt his assault – time and again. This means you must deny your opponent the opportunity to fully deploy his topspin and, if he succeeds in deploying it nonetheless, counter it in such a way that he will not have another opportunity to fully deploy it. Impregnability and disruption are the keys to a successful defence. An unsuccessful enemy will weaken and get exhausted; yet you may have to finish him off and this is the only instance in which a classic defender should actually attack. Behind the table this means you will wait for your opponent to miss and use his mistakes to win the point yourself. The more modern you are as a defender, the more you will try to force errors and use them.

From all this it can be seen why your main tool is backspin. Firstly, because against no-spin and topspin the full force of topspin can be used for the attack; since there is no need to lift the ball, all energy of the stroke can be used for spin and forward speed. But against backspin part of the energy must be used to lift the ball; the result is less forward speed, so the attack is half-smothered. Using backspin means draining the opponent's energy. Secondly, lifting a backspin ball is even harder (more likely: unsuccessful) when it is dropping after the bounce. This limits the possibilities the attacker has; he will have to hit the ball on the rise. Therefore using backspin cramps his style. Thirdly, using backspin against a topspin ball means (if it is done correctly) you are continuing the spin, instead of trying to stop it and replace it with spin of your own. So, all in all, using backspin means you are not only redirecting and draining your opponent's energy, you are actually tapping it, turning the force of his attack against him. Nevertheless, a classic defender may still use topspin, but will do so merely for the coup de gr ce. A modern defender will use topspin attacks far more frequently, to disrupt his opponent's play and force him to make errors.

Now, for a rough outline of the defensive styles it is useful to discern between three zones of defence: you have to return balls from between the net and the middle of the table (first zone of defence), or between the middle of the table and its end or close behind it (second zone of defence), or from (much) further behind the table (third zone of defence). In the first zone you will kill the occasional high ball, but almost always balls in this area will be low and you will push them aggressively, placing them deep to provoke the half-smothered topspin attack (mentioned above) in the second or, preferably, the third zone. At that, a modern defender may decide to go for a flip every once in a while. The third zone is where your strength really lies if you are a classic defender, since away from the table you are able to chop with full force. Here you will almost always chop, because chopping means making full use of your opponent's attack, continuing his topspin as backspin and if possible adding to it. A ball too high to chop, here, will be a ball to kill. But the modern defender may also decide to loop aggressively in this zone. In the second zone you will again kill a high ball and for the rest either chop-block or chop-push (I will explain this term later on), placing the ball deep in order to provoke a topspin ball in the third zone. For the modern defender, looping is an option.

From this it will be clear that not only you will have to move to the left and to the right in order to get to the ball, but that you will also move to the table (in) and away from it (out) a lot; in fact, as a classic defender you will move in to move out and as a modern defender you will be all over the place. This determines your basic position behind the table: you should stand at a point from which you can comfortably reach balls in all three zones. Too close to the table means you will have problems going away from it in order to chop; too far away and you will not reach the balls in the first zone. Your basic position as a classic defender is, therefore, about a yard from the table, with your right hip behind the middle line (if you are right-handed; because your reach at the backhand side is somewhat less than at the forehand side). During play you must always be able to reach any ball, so you have to come back to this position after every move you make. It is useful to imagine a rectangle, occupying the court from one small step to your right to one small step to your left and a good step backward; your basic position is in the middle of the front line of this rectangle and, moving around the court, you should try and keep at least one leg inside it at all times. If your defensive style is more modern, your basic position is (for right-handed players) more to the left and closer to the table; this will give you more room to use your forehand attack strokes.

3. Moving around the court.

As a defender you have to move in the right way or you will be caught in a position from which you cannot confidently return the ball.

Stand in the basic position, feet somewhat apart (about as wide as your hips or even a bit less), your weight equally divided over them, knees slightly bend to make you stand springy, crouching a bit, holding out both your arms crooked (about 90 degrees) in front of you, your bat pointed half upward, half to your opponent. Stand balanced, relaxed, very lightly, ready and eager to move in any direction.

Going in for the fast push or occasional flip, you step forward, always with your right leg (if you are right-handed) bringing your right foot just under the table. At the same time you move your weight forward; you catch it on your right leg, bending it. Instantly find your balance. While you were moving forward you stretched your arm; now you reach out even further and perform the stroke aggressively. Then, withdrawing your arm, you straighten your leg pushing back your weight, and you bring your leg back to the original position. Again, instantly find your balance and be ready for the next move. Note that going to the right, the middle or the left, you step out with your right leg! Always keep the other leg where it is! Think of moving in and back as one single flowing motion.

Going out for the chop to the right you step out to the right and backwards, one not too big step, with your right leg. At the same time you move your weight in the same direction; you catch it on your right leg, bending it, and instantly find your balance. Moving this way you have turned your body half away from the table and you have raised your hand, bending your arm sharply upward (your bat should be more or less in your neck). The moment you have found your balance, you begin chopping down, bending your leg even more; have your upper body follow the stroke downward (so you are leaning over, but retain your balance) and forward, so that you will end up face forward. The stroke itself resembles a deep scoop, going at first (still high up) a bit backwards, then mostly down, then down and sharply forwards; your bat should come in one flowing motion under the ball. You hit the ball, relax, and follow through downward and forward a short way, then upward, in one single flowing motion, pushing your weight upward straightening your leg and return to your original position. It is important that you push up your weight energetically, offsetting the upwards motion against the vigorous downwards motion of the stroke; if you do this your right leg may lose contact with the floor for a moment and the result is a floating sensation, a kind of hop. This hop facilitates bringing your right leg back forward. Do not exaggerate it, though! It is far better to keep ever so lightly in touch with the floor, because that way you will be able to move suddenly if you have to – you cannot move when you are in mid-air.

If you have to go further out to get to the ball, step out to the right and backwards, bring in your left foot until you are standing with your feet as much apart as before, step out to the right and backwards again. If necessary, repeat this gliding step. Do not lose contact with the floor with your left foot! Return to your basic position the same way, in reverse. Now do not lose contact with the floor with your right foot!

Going out for the chop to the left you do the same, but have the left leg do what the right leg did going out to the right, and have the right leg do what the left leg did. Also turn your upper body more; because your arm has to move across your body now, you may actually have to turn your back to the table! Still, you should keep your balance, which means that, if necessary, you should bring your right foot in front of your left foot so that for a very brief moment the line of your hips is at rectangles with the back of the table – doing this, just touch the floor with your right foot, nothing more, while you are quickly and energetically performing the stroke, then bring the right foot back. Again, the vigorousness of the motion downward and upward as one whole should result in the little hop which facilitates returning to your original position.

You will have noted that moving this way you will mainly, if not exclusively, move diagonally across the court – both towards the table and away from it. This is necessary, because it will put you in the correct position for the main strokes, viz. the push and the chop. It will, by the way, also put you into the right position for a fast loop or smash. Furthermore, the hop is an intrinsic part of the motion, again connecting the way you move and the way you strike the ball. Therefore, moving around the court and performing your strokes should form a single lively flowing harmonious whole!

Of course, it will not always be possible to move diagonally in and out, returning always to your basic position. Sometimes you will have to stay back; in this case it is important to try and have at least one foot still in the rectangle described above. If you go or stay too far back, chances are that you will have to come in for a short ball so quickly that you can only run to get it, and you will lose the chance to get into the correct position for hitting the ball.

The modern defender may, as has been noted, choose a different basic position, standing more to his backhand corner of the table. Some modern defenders stand as far to the left as do attackers. This, however, is only their basic position for serve and return of serve, or for attack. As soon as the rally is underway and they are going to defend, their basic position will be the central one of the classic defender. This means that for the modern defender the basic position is continuously shifting. Yet the pattern of movement remains the same; the modern defender will still move diagonally in and out. As the centre of motion shifts from left to right and back again, this diagonal motion becomes a criss-cross. It may seem, therefore, that the movement of e.g. Joo Se Hyuk, who at times attacks more often than he defends, is erratic; but actually he is moving systematically around this changing basic position. For the beginning defender following this extreme example would be unwise; it is best to start in the classic style moving around one centre, the basic position in the middle, and only after having mastered this completely, to step up to the next stage, viz. that of the modern defender.

Exercise 1. You can practice moving around the court very well at home; actually, it is advisable to do this every day until it has become a complete habit. Take 4 dishes and 10 table tennis balls; put 2 dishes 1 good step in front of you and about 1.5 metres apart on a table or on 2 separate chairs, put the other 2 on the floor 1 step behind you and also about 1.5 metres apart. Put 10 balls in the dish to your left on the table or the chair. Your basic position is in the centre. You get the idea: you're mimicking an actual rally this way. Move in to your left as described above, pick up a ball, move back to the basic position, move out to your right, put the ball in the dish there, return to the basic position; repeat this 4 times; then put the other 5 balls in the dish on the floor to your left; take a short break; now in the same manner bring all the balls to the dish on the table or the chair to your right. Don't forget the hop coming up from reaching down to the dishes on the floor! You can vary, bringing balls to different dishes. Start out simple, though, and in a moderate

tempo; speed up and move in more intricate patterns as you get better at this. Try to float...

4. Basic strokes.

I will try and describe the basic defensive strokes here. There is a catch, though; as a defender, you are likely to use some sort of pips on one side of your bat. Some strokes need to be performed a little differently when using pips; some strokes may be ineffective with pips; I will indicate this with every stroke. Still, in my view, it is best that you learn this style of play using two inverted rubbers, not too thin, not too slow, on a defensive frame, since most likely you will not be able to execute a stroke with pips if you are unable to perform it with inverted and you will have to use inverted anyhow.

To describe the point of contact with the ball I will use the terms 12 o'clock for the top of the ball, 3 o'clock for its back, 6 o'clock for the bottom, and so on.

With the strokes that are part of the attacker's stock, I will not go into much detail; this means that the main topic below will be the chop.

4.1 First zone strokes.

The three main defensive strokes to perform over the table are the push against backspin, and both the chop block and the backspin block against topspin. All of these are used to get the ball deep on the other side of the table, in order to provoke an attack, but carrying enough backspin to half-smother that attack. You want your opponent's return to go into the third zone, where you can fully exploit the potential of your chopping game; therefore, it is important to return to your basic position immediately after performing these strokes, so that you are ready to move out and chop.

For a good push you open your bat almost completely, catch the ball very shortly after the bounce, making contact at about 5 o'clock, and bring your underarm forward shortly and vigorously. Relax and withdraw immediately. For a forehand push, bring your right shoulder (if you are right-handed) down and forward, so that you can get your bat as comfortably under the ball as with the backhand push; leaning a bit to the right helps.

Pushing with short pips is easier, because they are less sensitive to the incoming spin; you should keep your bat a bit less open. Pushing with long pips is a problem; if they are without much grip you may reverse backspin into topspin and give your opponent an easy ball to attack; if they have more grip you may produce some backspin or a lot of it, have trouble keeping the ball low or have no trouble at all; this depends on the kind of long pips you use. If you use long pips that reverse spin when pushing, you should probably not push at all, but chop-block against backspin – be warned, you may produce a fairly dead ball this way which for an experienced opponent is easy to kill. With long pips, the best solution is to twiddle when necessary and receive backspin always with the inverted rubber.

Using the chop block is generally a safe way to deal with topspin over the table. Keep your bat somewhat closed, catch the ball on the top of the bounce, making contact at about 3 o'clock, and chop downward fast. Aim deep. You can add speed by going forward while chopping down or kill part of the speed by going backward (you should relax your wrist when doing this). Blocking with short pips is easier; you can keep your bat almost vertical. Some short pips may reverse the incoming topspin into backspin, so you can produce heavy chop this way. The outcome of chop blocking with long pips again depends on the kind of pips used, but in most cases you will be able to produce heavy chop.

The backspin block against topspin is executed like a normal passive block with a closed bat, but you close it a little bit less and just before making contact with the ball (shortly before the top of the bounce) you press lightly down; on making contact you retract your bat, all in all moving it down and to your body; this motion must be minimal, but very quick. The ball will go up because of the topspin it is carrying in, but it will get backspin because of the quick downward/inward pressing gesture. This block is hard to do, but effective; it is also deceptive, since your opponent might miss that little gesture you make – if he does, his return will go into the net. You can perform a backspin block very well with short pips, but not with long pips.

With long pips that reverse topspin well, however, you can push against topspin, producing a backspin ball.

Attacking over the table will consist in performing a flip or, if the ball is especially high, a smash. Keep in mind that when attacking over the table you must be sure to win the point or you will be in difficulty – attacking will mean feeding a topspin ball to your opponent, which is the kind he likes best! Keep also in mind that a high ball coming from a push will carry backspin, probably even a lot; with your flip or smash you have to compensate for this. The motion of the bat should be firmly upward! Theoretically it is also possible to perform a backspin smash over the table, but you need an exceptionally high ball for this. As backspin smashes tend to drift over the table, you will probably be better off performing a normal smash.

4.2 Second zone strokes.

Balls bouncing off the table nearer to its end should be treated differently. You can chop-block against topspin more aggressively because you now have more room to chop down. Pushing against backspin can also be done more aggressively; I like to call this stroke a chop-push. For this, you cock your wrist, come in under the ball from the side, catch it when it is near the top of the bounce, make contact at about 5 o'clock and snap out uncocking your wrist and underarm. For a backhand push bring your right shoulder downward and forward and lean to the right; it should feel as if you are getting your whole body under the ball. The stroke resembles an almost horizontal chop. It is very important to get under the ball lightly, that is without forward motion, or else it will bounce up off your bat. The stroke effectively

begins when the bat is under the ball.

With short pips these strokes are more or less performed in the same way. With long pips they can be executed successfully too, but in chop-pushing you will get the maximum result only with grippy long pips.

The second zone is ideal for your counter-attacks: loops or smashes. Smashing or looping with long pips is in most cases dubious; you are probably better off using your inverted rubber for this. But short pips will do just fine.

4.3 Third zone strokes.

Looping or even smashing in the third zone, that is, well away from the table, is only possible with fast short pips or fast inverted rubbers and/or a fast frame; adding sidespin to your loops will make them more dangerous. Blocking here is risky, since the ball will probably be too slow and therefore too easy to attack. Lobbing is generally ineffective with the 40 mm ball. All in all, the main stroke here is the chop.

Chopping, you need to know how backspin is produced against topspin. Imagine a bike standing upside down, one wheel still spinning. If you want to increase the spin you have to grip the wheel and move it into the same direction it is rotating, without obstructing its rotation. This means your hand must move at least as fast as (better still, faster than) the wheel already is moving. This is the very picture for chopping with inverted rubber against topspin; the rubber grips the ball and has to yank it on, moving as fast as or faster than the ball is spinning. If the rubber moves slower, the ball's topspin will make it bounce up off the bat; you will lose control. To ensure this doesn't happen, the speed of your arm, wrist and hand chopping down must at least equal the speed of your opponent's. Chopping with pimped rubbers means having less grip on the ball; obstruction of the ball's rotation will be equally less. Chopping will, therefore, be easier and safer with pips. With a smooth rubber this would mean that adding to the ball's rotation would be more difficult, but this is not necessarily the case with pips. Short pips do not grip the ball, but sort of stab it with the pips' edges, going in the direction of the rotation; the rotation will not be obstructed and the pressure of the pips' edges will add to it. Long pips, on the other hand, bend in the direction of the rotation of the ball and then flip back, thus obstructing it (if they are grippy). Therefore, if you have a ball bounce off a grippy long pimped rubber, the result will be a fairly dead ball. This will still be the case if the rubber is grazing the ball, equalling in speed its rotation. But if it grazes the ball moving faster than the ball rotates, the pimples will bend to the other side, and then flip back in the direction of the rotation, thus adding to it.

In short, with inverted rubbers and grippy long pips you have to chop faster than your opponent spins. With short pips you do not have to do this; but if you do it anyway, you will produce heavy backspin.

In order to perform a forehand chop you move out to the right and turn your body as indicated in paragraph 3. Remember to raise your arm, bending it more than 90 degrees, and cock your wrist. Wait for the ball to drop until it is about knee-high or at least well below the table-level; it should be beside you when it does that. Chop down, confidently and energetically, fast while turning your upper body back to face the table. Make contact with the ball as near to 6 o'clock as you possibly can and snap out your underarm and wrist. Follow through downward and forward before coming back up. Hop!

In order to perform a backhand chop you do the same, to the left. This time turn your body even more and, if necessary, put your right foot before the left when chopping down. Follow through downward and forward before coming back up. Hop!

Different things can go wrong with this.

The ball may sail over the table. In this case your chop has been going too much forward, because you have made contact too early and too high. This is actually a mistake frequently made by beginners; they tend to feel a little awkward when going down and hopping, and as a result their chops are too shallow. Try and go really down after hitting the ball, before you are coming up.

The ball may sail high (and be killed). Again, your chop is probably too shallow; go deep. Or you may have chopped with not enough venom, in which case the incoming topspin makes the ball bounce off your bat; chop energetically and with confidence.

There is not enough backspin in the ball. Same story: your chop needs more vigour and depth. Go for it! The hop really helps here...

A cause of these three defects may also be the wrong use of long pips. Only the grippiest of pips will produce significant backspin of its own, which means that you should not use your long pips if you are not quite certain that on the incoming ball there is a lot of topspin which can be reversed into a lot of backspin.

If the ball lands on your side of the table, you will probably have made contact too much on its backside, or you have made contact with its bottom but you did not chop with enough energy.

If your backhand chop isn't going well (not enough backspin, landing short, or bouncing high) you may not be really putting your weight on your left leg and as a result chop too shallow.

You may also run into another problem: the incoming ball may be so fast that it doesn't drop in time and you have to deal with a high ball. This is awkward if you cannot smash, drive or loop it; attack is the best option here, but if you must defend you should perform a chop block. Chop right down with much force and try to graze the backside of the ball (at about 4 o'clock). Follow through as well as you can. Long pips offer another option in this case: block hitting simply straight forward; with grippy pips you will produce a fairly dead ball, with less grippy pips maybe some backspin; in any case be prepared for the next incoming fast topspin ball and chop this one!

Finally you may have to deal with a ball aimed at your body. Step aside left or right, depending on whether you prefer to chop with your forehand or backhand (it is useful making this choice a permanent one, so you will not hesitate) and chop it. If there is no time for this, perform a backhand chop-block in front of you; make the downward motion very fast.

5. Equipment.

A beginning defender is best off (in my opinion) using slow, very spinny inverted rubbers on both sides of a defensive frame. In time you may come to prefer faster rubbers on the same frame, because they will upgrade your attacks. Using a medium fast short (or medium long) pimped rubber (e.g. Friendship 799 or 802, 1.0 or 1.5 mm) on one side is a good choice too; contrary to popular belief chopping with short pips is easy and generates loads of backspin if done sufficiently fast.

Long pimped rubbers are (again, in my opinion) an option for the advanced player. They are a mixed blessing. More or less insensitive to incoming spin, they may minimize the risk of balls bouncing off your bat upwards, making it easier to keep your returns low, but with less grippy long pips you need to know when to make use of the side of the bat with long pips or you will be in trouble; and with grippy pips (most effectively on relatively thick sponge) the difference with short pips is small to non-existent. Their most useful quality is the relative ease with which they can vary your outgoing backspin, that is, their deceptiveness.

If you want to use long pips, you should also learn how to twiddle (turning the bat in your hand, so you can use either side at will). If you want to use short pips, this is not necessary, as short pips can generate spin of their own.

6. Basic tactics & exercises.

To outline the basic tactics for the classic defender: the objective is to wear down the attacker and expose his weaknesses, using them to win the point. You have to provoke attacks for this, but in such a way that you are able to defend yourself against them using your strongest stroke, the chop. This means that you must force your opponent to produce long, arched topspin balls; they must be long in order to get them in the third zone, where you can chop at your hearts desire; they must be arched in order to get them to drop quickly enough, or else you will be forced too far back and your returns will be less effective, having lost part of the backspin. In order to achieve this, you must place your returns deep on the table, close to the baseline, and keep them low; this way your opponent is forced to play heavy topspin strokes which have to lift the ball, arch its trajectory considerably and make it drop fast. Furthermore you will want to limit the amount of footwork you have to do in retrieving the ball; to keep it within reach, you must deny your opponent sharp angles and this means placing not only deep, but somewhere in the middle. If your returns go to the corners, for variation, you will have to anticipate a more angled attack.

In practice you have to return a backspin serve deep with sufficient backspin; you push it into the body, because this will provoke a cramped forehand stroke, or to the forehand, to provoke a long topspin ball. You do not push it to the backhand, for chances are it will be pushed back to you and short play is not what you want. If the serve is no-spin, you attack it, of course. If it is long with topspin, you can start chopping.

Your own serve should be a forehand or (generally easier) backhand backspin serve from your basic position, placed deep to the forehand or body. Another, more risky possibility is a topspin serve to the forehand, provoking immediate attack. Try and mix in some covert no-spin balls to the backhand which will result in returns that pop up and can be killed. If you have secured your chopping rally, try and draw errors. Place a number of balls deep in the middle, then one into the body, forcing your opponent to his backhand corner, then the next one to his forehand corner; he will have to move to get that last ball, so he may be too late to lift it properly, or hit less precise. You can also vary the depth, placing a ball less deep to the forehand (not to the backhand; it will be pushed), but take good care in keeping such a ball very low; the closer to the net, the lower your balls should be. Another way to draw errors is to start out chopping as hard as you can, then after two balls chop a little less hard, keeping the ball low nonetheless (for instance by taking it later, lower), then harder again.

If you spot a weak return (less spin, too high), attack.

For a modern style, you attack more often, not always waiting for the ball to drop, but looping it instead.

Exercises should consist of parts of your game. Below are given some suggestions about how to become more comfortable with the style. It may be difficult for you to find a willing training partner, but if you cannot find a defender to practice with, you can promise an attacker his skills will be very much improved when training with you; and this is perfectly true. Being able to play against defenders is a necessary skill. While I am writing this down, the World Team Champions in Guangzhou (China) are being played. Yesterday Li Jia Wei of Singapore, a first rate attacker, was to play a match against Li Jie, a Dutch defender; sadly Li Jie had to give up after the first game because of a sprained ankle. Afterwards Li Jia Wei told reporters not only that she was truly sorry for her opponent's misfortune, but also that she had prepared herself meticulously for the match, practicing play against backspin. Even the world's top players have to practice like this. In my view, any attacker refusing the chance to spar with a defender is, to put it mildly, not exactly furthering his interests...

Exercise 2. Push aggressively for at least 5 minutes every training session, placing the ball anywhere on the table. Come in to the table and step back to your basic position time and again. You should do this in order to keep up your skill

in short play; no one should be able to out-push you!

Exercise 3. Against a backspin serve to your backhand, move in from your basic position, push deep to the forehand, move back to your basic position, then out to the right to chop the topspin return to the backhand corner, from where it should be pushed to your backhand; and so on; repeat this cycle a number of times. Then vary the cycle. For instance, against a serve to your forehand, push back to the forehand, and so on. Or against a serve to your forehand push back to the body, chop left to the backhand, and so on.

Exercise 4. Serve no spin and have it attacked; see how fast and how close to the table you can perform an effective chop-block which enables you to chop the return. Have the attack aimed at your forehand; then at your backhand; then at your body.

Exercise 5. Do exercise 3, but now attack after 2 chops, coming in to loop aggressively; loop no more than twice; if you did not win the point, move out and chop. Repeat this cycle. Vary the line of attack (diagonal, parallel, into the body).

Exercise 6. Serve backspin, attack the pushed return. Find out how good you are at attacking backspin and gain a realistic idea of what kind of push you are able to attack. After that, return a backspin serve to the forehand, chop to the backhand, and attack the pushed return; now you have to move more before you can attack. Make sure you move in the right way.

Exercise 7. Multiple ball training is very useful. Ask your partner to hit fast topspin balls to your forehand; they should be so fast that you have difficulty in reaching them; return the first one with a quick loop or topspin block (if you have to reach out really far), chop the second one, loop the third, and so on. Then do the same with your backhand. Ask your partner to hit his next ball when your return lands on his side of the table, so you will have to react faster than normal; this will increase your reflexes.

Exercise 8. Do exercise 7, but now instead of alternately looping and chopping you chop the first ball at hip height, then move out to chop the next at knee height, move in again to chop fairly high, and so on.