

## **How to practice the service return in Table Tennis**

Considering various table tennis combinations in competitions, like service-and 3rd-ball-attack or attack-and-counterattack, service return is the most difficult. The reason is that the server controls the service fully, and the receiver doesn't have any method to influence the server, so the receiver can not predict easily in which way will the server serve.

In modern table tennis competitions, taking initiative as early as possible is a general playing tendency. Based on this premise, service return reflects the most common situation during competition to transfer from defense into attack. In relatively passive situation to gain control, to reach stalemate, and then to work hard to shift into own attack, and fight for own initiative should be basic guiding idea. Specific technical tools are as follows:

### **I. Prediction**

Proper prediction in service return is the most important element.

#### **1. Evaluation of the spin**

In table tennis most often the spin is left or right with topspin or backspin, or it is ball with or without spin. The server uses various service techniques produced as forehand, backhand or squat services. The following aspects should be taken into consideration in order to properly predict the kind of spin:

(1) **The position of the racket:**

When it is topspin service the racket is more closed, whereas when it is backspin service, the position of the racket is more open. This characteristic is closely related to the point of impact ball-racket when server is hitting the ball. When executing spin and non-spin services, server hits the middle part of the ball for non spin ball, upper part for topspin and middle-low or even bottom part of the ball for backspin ball.

(2) When playing topspin and non-spin services, the swing of the wrist is usually not big, but very often is mixed with fake movements; when playing side backspin and backspin services, the swing of the wrist is relatively bigger. However the spin of the ball can be misjudged if the server adds to his swing some fake movements.

(3) The ball trajectories of topspin and non-spin balls are lower, the balls are rather quick and make an impression of 'leaping forward'. When serving topspin or non-spin ball it is easy to serve long, the trajectory of the ball lowers. Trajectory of a backspin ball is rather smooth and high, it is easier to serve short with backspin.

(4) **Speed of the swing:** when serving topspin or non-spin services the swing is rather quick, the movement is vague; when serving backspin service the swing is relatively slow, so to increase the friction time ball-racket and enable the server to produce enough spin.

(5) **Distribution:** when returning the service of your opponent, it is very important to study how she/he distributes various sorts of services, and what are her/his serving habits, especially when you are not sure about the nature of the coming service. Usually the server has some spin and some non-spin services, some side-topspin and side-backspin services and normally she/he uses them all at the beginning of the match. It is important to learn which services he/she likes when opening a new game, which services he/she likes to serve in deciding parts of the match. Without any doubt, to be competitive on the World scene, playing against servers with big variety of service techniques, the receiver's guess is essential. If you want to be able to predict every service clearly, you need to get to the next level in service return skills.

## **2.Prediction of speed and placement of the service:**

(1) Evaluation of the fast long serve: in normal situation, when server wants to serve very long, the first bounce of the ball will be near his own end line of the table. If the power is approximately the same, then ball speed of side-topspin or non spin service will be faster than of side-backspin or backspin service. The receiver must be aware that side-topspin or side-backspin cross-court services have a specific trajectory, a side-spin curve. If it is A long service down-the-line can be very fast, specially when it is a flat service. Such services with good wide angle can create great difficulties to the receiver.

(2) **Evaluation of the short service:** if the server wants to serve short, he/she can't use own full power, must slow down a bit, so it is very difficult to produce short service with high speed, more important elements are placement and spin. When executing short service, the first bounce must be closer to the net area - according to the first bounce the coming service can be predicted as short or long. When returning short service, you need to pay attention not to move your playing hand over the table too early and avoid swinging up against short side-topspin ball and losing control of the ball. The coming ball can be long, and you need to be ready to return it as well.

(3) **Evaluation of half long services:** evaluation of half-long services is very difficult, because such services easily create hesitation and confusion of the receiver. When evaluating such balls, you must pay full attention to the type of the spin. Side-topspin and non-spin balls can be longer than backspin or side-backspin services. From the other hand, you need to study the server carefully, which services (forehand or backhand?) are more often played half-long, and which services are more often played short or long. Such a study of the opponent may help you in choosing the right methods to deal with his services. In addition, when returning half-long service when prediction was not clear, you must be prepared as well for a long ball and then act resolutely if such a ball comes. This way you can increase pressure on the server so he/she won't play many half-long balls, you will be able to control the level of own power more easily, difficulty of service will be lowered, and service return will be easier.

## **II .METHODS OF SERVICE RETURN**

### **1. Flicking**

Flicking is one of the methods to return short ball. You can play forehand flick and backhand flick. Considering the best players of modern table tennis, backhand flick is used mainly by shake-hand grip players. Main basic technical aspects of flicking are: when the ball is crossing the net, move your playing hand with the racket over the table, and toward the net; at the same time watch the ball carefully; use your feet accordingly, considering the placement of the ball step forward. Let's take an example of right-handed player - if there is forehand ball move with the right foot, if it is backhand ball, use backhand flick with using the same foot to step forward. If you want to play with

forehand pivot step with the left foot, and adjust slightly the position with the right foot; hit the back-middle part of the ball at the highest point, using mainly power of the forearm; when hitting the ball move the wrist slightly with inside rotation (forehand), or with outside rotation (backhand) giving the ball additional friction and ensuring preciseness of the shot. Flicking is active method to return short ball, if you play it fluently, you can immediately change your position from passive into active, and create the opportunity to continue attacking. Nowadays many players return short service mainly with pushing, but with more and more training of flick, the proportions are changing, and probably in future the flick will be used more and more.

## **2. Pushing**

Pushing return is mostly used to return a short service. To avoid opponent's attack it is generally not recommended to push long ball. This is also a characteristic of Chinese table tennis style. Pushing technique is executed with short movement, with fast swing, with hiding the intention of the stroke. It requires long-term practice. The player, according to own individual playing style, must develop fast push, slow push, short push (drop-shot), long push, side-spin pushes etc.

### **(1) Short push (drop-shot)**

Drop-shot is one of the fast push methods. Its basic characteristic is: fast swing, high unexpectedness. Short push can effectively restrict the opponent's looping or attacking. When using drop-shot you need to pay attention to three important points: first – hit the middle-low part of the ball during rising period, so the drop-shot will be quick; second – arm should be close to the body, if it is far, you can't properly control such a fine movement, it negatively influences preciseness and quality; third – you shouldn't move the arm over the table too soon, in this case you wouldn't create the right rhythm and it would be hard to swing fast. Beginners need to develop their skills remembering the above quoted 3 points.

### **(2) Long push**

Current top players use fast long pushes, mixing them with drop-shots. Top players use long pushes with speed and unexpectedness. When pushing long, the swing should be as much as possible similar to that of drop-shot, using mainly power of forearm, the swing of the wrist shouldn't be too big, to avoid losing control of the ball. During practice, beginners must keep in mind to hit the ball in the rising part of ball trajectory.

### **(3) Side-spin push**

Side-spin push is mainly used as forehand pivot push cross-court combined with forehand pivot flick down-the-line, to prevent opponent from forehand pivot attack, and continuing own threatening forehand attack. When executing side-spin push, hit the ball at the highest point, contact the back-middle-low part of the ball; make with the wrist slight outside rotation in left-forward-down direction to create some additional friction, to create left-backspin, and send the ball wide with the outside turn, to make the ball difficult for pivot attack.

Learning push return, beginners should first acquire fast and slow push techniques, only after that, according to own playing style and individual qualities, they should develop other techniques.

## **3 Looping**

Looping is generally the method of attacking long service. When looping, you need to pay attention to the timing (the first and the second) and timing distinctions. Hitting the ball at the height of the table, is usually considered as 'the second' timing, whereas hitting the ball over the table is considered as 'the first' timing. Hitting the ball over the table ('the first timing') is more offensive, ensures the power and accuracy to get initiative. Hitting the ball behind the table, requires attention to send the ball not too high, and also make sure your loop has a good placement to control your

opponent. When the beginners start practicing loop return it is very important to start with the first timing, and only after the player has got a good ball control and is able to produce good spin, the beginner should start practicing loop at the second timing.

#### 4 Attacking

Attacking the service (fast attack) is one of the most difficult techniques, it is a very important mean to deal with long ball. In modern table tennis competition, the spin of the service is very strong, unexpectedness and speed is much higher than in the past; it creates very high requirements for fast attack techniques, so that using fast attack once among 10 returns can be considered as not so bad. However even in this high level of difficulty, you shouldn't neglect practicing fast attack. Fast attack is still one of very important table tennis techniques, and still plays important role during competition. It is even said, the higher difficulty, the higher threat for the opponent can be produced.

#### 5 **Returning half-long-off-the-table-ball**

It is especially worth stressing technical and mental importance of returning half-long-off-the-table service. The main tactical principle here is that you can loop, but not push; you can flick, but not push with side-spin. Pushing such ball is very passive. When executing loop return, make sure your swing is not too big, the arm should be close to the table, hit the ball on the level of the table or higher, raise your centre of gravity a bit up, use mainly the power of the forearm and the wrist, make sure that the whole movement should be not too big. When playing flick return make sure to give the ball enough power, so you can overcome the spin of the coming ball, and gain the aim of the flick. Fast attacking stroke against backspin ball is used mainly by fast attacking style players.

*By courtesy of "World Table Tennis Magazine of China"*

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