

Service and Spin

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In this article we are going to explore the philosophy behind the modern service and how you can start to develop effective service strategies. We will assume that the reader knows at least how to serve correctly and is familiar with the rules of service; if not please refer to section 2.6 in the Laws of Table Tennis.

The service in modern Table Tennis is a major weapon to try and win a point, or at least put the server in control of the rally from the start so that they can follow it with a big attacking stroke. You should be aiming to win most of the points on your own service.

The key is to be able to vary the spin, speed and placement of the ball to keep your opponent guessing. If you can disguise what you are doing by making the service action almost identical for totally different serves, then even better!

At the basic level there are two serves to master:

a) A long topspin service which is deep, low and fast – note the contact point of the bat on the ball is only 1 – 2 inches above the table, the ball hits the table within the first few inches of the baseline (aim for 1 – 5 inches at most), and then lands very near to the opponents baseline.

Take a look at the following clips for some classic examples of the long, fast service.

b) A short backspin service which is low and bounces twice on the opponents side – contact point of bat on ball should be at about net height (16 centimetres above the table), and the first bounce on your side should be roughly two thirds up the table.

Note in these examples that if the opponent were to let the ball bounce twice on their side of the table, the second bounce would be very near the white end line. This is very effective as it induces indecision in the opponent as to whether they can attack it or not, and is also more difficult for them to keep the return 'tight', meaning it is easier for the server to attack the return.

You should be able to do these basic serves to various places on the table using a legal service action.

Practice the service with both forehand and backhand, and find out which comes most naturally to you. Most of the top players in the world mainly use the forehand for service, as generally it is easier to vary and disguise the spin, but it's good to be able to do both, as you may want to change for tactical reasons against a specific opponent.

Principles of producing spin

For both forehand and backhand you will need a relaxed grip and wrist, so that you can move the bat quickly and freely. To impart spin on the ball, the principle is the same as spinning a top – you have to brush the ball quickly.

The graphic illustrates this simply.

- Brushing the ball between 3 and 12 o'clock in an upward direction creates topspin.
- Brushing the ball between 3 and 6 o'clock in a downward direction creates backspin.
- Brushing the ball between 3 and 9 o'clock in a sideways direction creates sidespin.

Backhand Service Technique

Use the normal shakehand grip (see September article), but ensure your hand and wrist are relaxed.

The right foot (for right-handers) should be nearer the table so you are slightly sideways on. As you become more proficient, this will allow you to rotate from the hips and shoulders enabling more control, spin and power to be produced. The contact point between bat and ball should be in front of the body.

To produce different spins, brush the ball:

- Underneath for backspin
- Up the back for topspin
- Across the back for sidespin

A useful variation is also to sometimes hit through the back of the ball so there is no spin (float). On the face of it, this sounds like a gift to your opponent, but if they are expecting a ball loaded with heavy spin it can cause great confusion!

Take a look at these examples of classic backhand serving.

Forehand Service Technique

At the higher levels of the sport, the majority of players use a forehand service because generally it is possible to produce many more variations of spin. This is as a result of being able to have a much looser grip, with the bat only held between thumb and first finger, with the other three fingers just resting against the handle, allowing more flexibility in the wrist. Together with there being more freedom to swing the arm, this means it is possible to change the bat angle and direction of movement more freely, resulting in many more variations in the contact between bat and ball, and also the ability to disguise that contact.

Make sure that as an integral part of your service action serve you recover into a good ready position to give yourself the best chance of playing a strong shot when (if!) the ball comes back. Here are some classic examples of a good forehand service. Watch the position of the feet, movement of the body, and recovery for the next shot.

We will expand on the service in future articles, but in the meantime, try to use your imagination to think what different spins you could produce by varying the contact point on the ball, the direction of travel of the bat, and where on the bat surface you make contact with the ball. Happy serving!

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