

Coaching – Grip & Ready Position

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Welcome to the first of our new monthly look at coaching. This aims to provide top tips and advice to help you play better and train smarter. If there are any areas you really want us to cover or if you have questions you would like to put to our expert coaches please write them in the comments box at the bottom of the page.

Grip and ready position

If you are aiming to play like the professionals, there are a few basic skills you need to be aware of and master before looking at the strokes and tactics of the game.

The first of these is the way in which you grip the bat. This may seem fairly obvious, but it will have a major influence on your ability to play effective strokes. The most commonly used grip is the 'shakehands'.

The key points about this grip are:

Your thumb and first finger should lay along the playing surface roughly parallel with the straight edge of the rubber.

Your other three fingers should be relaxed around the handle of the bat – do not grip too tightly as this will 'lock up' the muscles in your arm, and inhibit your touch, the speed of your strokes and the amount of spin you can impart on the ball.

The shoulder of the blade should lay in the 'V' between your first finger and thumb, so that if you drew a straight line extending from the top edge of the blade, it roughly would be in line with your forearm.

This grip will give you the ability to develop good control of the bat angle, and the 'feel' of the ball on the bat – both essential to become a top player. It will also enable you to play strong strokes on both the forehand and backhand equally without changing your grip – again this will improve your control of the ball, especially in the early stages of your playing career.

There are variations to the shakehands grip, but you should master the basics before considering these. There are also the Penhold grips, used predominantly in Asia, but this series of articles will focus mainly on the European style of play.

Ready position

The next thing to get right is the 'Ready Position'. A good ready position will enable you to move quickly into position and to stay balanced whilst playing powerful strokes. The key points about the ready position are:

Your feet should be slightly wider than shoulder width apart. Too close together and you will be off balance; too far apart and your ability to move quickly sideways will be inhibited.

Your knees should be bent.

Your upper body should lean forward from the waist, so that your head is slightly in front of your knees – this should bring your weight onto the balls of your feet.

Your body should be facing where the ball is coming from with your bat and playing arm pointing along the line of the ball's travel.



Ready Position


The basics

Novices should try to develop the habit of returning to the ready position after every stroke. In reality the only time you will be standing relatively still in the ready position is when you are waiting to receive service. In between strokes you will be constantly moving – adjusting your position in anticipation of what your opponent is about to do. Many novices make the mistake of standing in line with the centre of the table to receive the ball. In fact, where you should stand is dictated by a couple of factors. The first of these is the line of play, i.e. where the ball is coming from (forehand side, backhand side, down the middle of the table, etc).

Technically at the basic level, you should stand so that your bat bisects the centre line of the range of angles that your opponent could play. That makes more sense if you can see it visually as in the following diagrams which are drawn assuming right-handed players.

Position diagram

The two wide dotted arrows show the widest angle of shot available to the opponent, and the centre dotted line shows the line on which your bat should be in the ready position, with your feet positioned to the left of it (to the right for left-handers).

 As you can see, your ready position will be constantly adjusting throughout a rally, depending not only on your opponent, but also where you played the last ball to on the table.

Next steps

Once you have mastered the basic concept of the ready position and getting into a position relative to the line of play, you can then make adjustments depending on your style of play:

An all out attacker with a powerful forehand will stand more biased to the backhand side of the table, to allow them to cover more with the forehand.

An all-round attacker that likes to attack both forehand and backhand equally will adhere more to the principles outlined in the diagrams.

A defensive player may take up a more central ready position.

These concepts can be seen in the following video clips – Watch carefully the positioning of the players.

Video examples

The first two video clips show Kalinikos Kreanga (Greece) vs Aleksandr Didhuk (Ukraine) and Danny Reed (England) vs Erik Illas (Slovakia) respectively; both matches involve right-handed attacking players, whose main attacking weapon will be their forehand topspin. You can see that when waiting to receive service, the receiver's ready position is significantly biased towards the backhand side. A piece of advice here – your footwork will need to be very good to cover the angle wide to the forehand!

The next video clip is of Darius Knight playing Daniel Zwickl. As Darius is left-handed, he is serving from the opposite corner to that which a right-hander would use, so has opened up the angle wide to his opponents forehand. Therefore Zwickl has moved his ready position to be further towards the forehand side to cover that angle, but note his body position is still on the backhand side of the table.

Another example of right hander playing a left hander is Paul Drinkhall vs Loic Bobillier (France). Again, note Paul adjusting his ready position for the service to cover the wide forehand angle.

Finally, we can look at a few of examples of a defenders ready position. In the first, Paul Drinkhall is playing Panagiotis Gionis of Greece, Paul Drinkhall (England) vs Sas Lasan (Slovenia) and then Jo Parker (England) is playing Asya Kasabova (Bulgaria). Note how Gionis', Lasan's and Parker's ready positions when receiving serve is much more central than the attacking players.

Understanding the angles of play, anticipating your opponents next move, and recovering to an appropriate position to give yourself the best chance of playing a strong stroke are key skills if you want to be a top player. We will return to this topic in future articles!

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