

Step 1 Grip and Racket Control

How you play is determined in part by how you hold the racket. There are a limited number of standard grips, with an infinite number of variations. Once you've settled on which grip to use, you should use that grip for all shots.

These are the three basic grips:

- *Shakehands grip.* This grip is the most popular worldwide. It gives you the best all-around game as well as the best backhand. Currently among the best players, 9 of the top 10 (and 16 of the top 20) use the shakehands grip.
- *Penhold grip.* This is the second most popular grip. It gives you the best possible forehand but makes the backhand more difficult. A player using this grip should have very quick feet that enable her or him to play mostly forehand shots.
- *Seemiller grip.* This is a variation of the shakehands grip. With it you hit all shots with one side of the blade, leaving one side free as an alternate surface that can be used for surprise. This grip gives the best blocking game but has various technical weaknesses in both the forehand and backhand drives. These weaknesses show up mostly at the advanced level. This grip is for a player who has very quick hands and who likes to use deception (with the alternate surface).

Unless you already use or have a strong preference for a different grip, I recommend that you use the shakehands grip.

Throughout this book, I'll introduce all strokes initially for the shakehands grip. Most strokes are executed the same for the three grips, but wherever there is a difference, I'll have a separate section describing it.

WHY ARE PROPER GRIP AND RACKET CONTROL IMPORTANT?

As you progress in table tennis, you will see many variations in grips. But you'll find that the best players use only a few variations.

Most improper grips will not allow you to properly execute all the shots. For example, you may be able to hit a proper forehand with one improper grip but be unable, because of the body's mechanics, to hit a backhand properly. A poor grip will limit your game and your development.

After proper grip you need racket control. You have to be comfortable aiming the racket in different directions for different shots, adjusting racket angles to account for the incoming ball's speed, spin, and direction of flight. These little adjustments in racket control are the difference between keeping the ball in play and missing it.

SHAKEHANDS GRIP

The shakehands grip is the most versatile, the most popular, and the most recommended. Here is how to grip the racket, shakehands style:

1. With the blade perpendicular to the floor, grasp the racket as if you were shaking hands.
2. Extend your index finger along the bottom of the blade surface, with the thumb on the surface on the other side.

The thumb should be slightly bent and should rest so that the thumbnail is perpendicular to the hitting surface (the fleshy pad of the thumb is not touching the racket). The blade should rest in the crook of the thumb and forefinger, about a quarter-inch to the index-finger side, although this can be varied. The index finger should be near the bottom of the racket and not sticking up toward the tip. The thumb should not stick up on the racket too much (although some players do so to hit a backhand, switching back for the forehand).

With this grip you now have two anchors—the thumb and index finger, and the last three fingers around the handle. Also, the blade should rest on the middle finger for further support. With these anchors in place, the blade is very stable.

Your thumb is resting on the *forehand side* of the racket (Figure 1.1a); your index finger is on the *backhand side* (Figure 1.1b).

When you're hitting a backhand, the thumb gives the racket a firm backing; for a forehand, the index finger does this. This, along with the two anchors, creates good racket control.

Most people find a compromise between the forehand and backhand grips by holding it somewhere in between, which is called a neutral grip (Figure 1.1c). But it is important to distinguish between both types of rotation. If, while holding the racket in front of you (in a shakehands grip), you rotate the top of the blade toward you, then

you'll have more power and control on the forehand side (Figure 1.1d), and the reverse for the backhand. If you rotate the top of the racket away from you, you'll have a backhand grip (Figure 1.1e). This will give you more power and control on the backhand side, but does the reverse for the forehand. Generally, I don't recommend changing grips in a rally, but some players do so.

Shakehands Grip

Strengths

- Most versatile grip

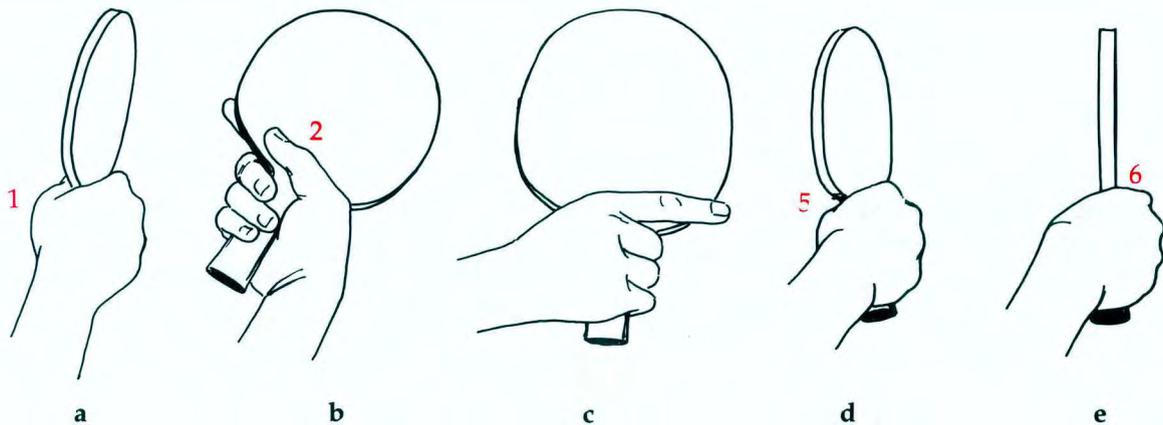
- Only grip that allows an effective backhand loop (see Step 8)
- Best grip for backhand
- Best grip for off-the-table play
- Best grip for defensive play
- Very strong on shots to the corners

Weaknesses

- Weak against shots to the middle
- Difficult to use wrist on some shots

Figure 1.1 Keys to Success: Shakehands Grip

Preparation Phase



1. Blade rests in crook between thumb and forefinger ____
2. Thumbnail perpendicular to racket surface ____
3. Index finger near bottom of racket ____
4. Loose grip ____
5. To strengthen forehand, rotate top of racket toward you ____
6. To strengthen backhand, rotate top of racket away from you ____
7. For best balance of forehand and backhand, grip somewhere in between. You should be closer to Figure 1.1a. ____

Detecting Shakehands Grip Errors

Players can play reasonably well with an incorrect grip. However, many matches will then revolve around players' attempts to compensate for any

weaknesses in their grip. If you start out with a correct grip you will have an advantage. So, make sure you aren't guilty of any of the following errors.

ERROR

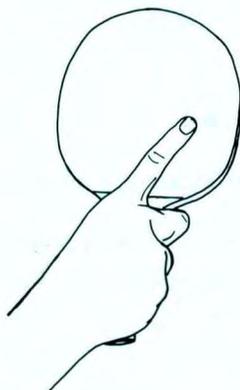


1. Either your forehand or backhand shots feel erratic or unstable.

2. The soft part of your thumb touches the racket.



3. Your index finger sticks out onto the surface on backhand side of the racket.



4. Your grip is too tight.

CORRECTION

1. Rotating the top of the racket forward (when holding the racket in front of the body with a shakehands grip) will make the backhand more stable but the forehand less stable; rotating it backward will do the reverse. Most players find a compromise between the two extremes.

2. This gives you an erratic forehand as well as less power on the backhand. Your thumbnail should be perpendicular to the racket. Review Figure 1.1.

3. This gives a good forehand, but an unstable backhand. It also gives less hitting area for the backhand. Keep your index finger near the bottom of the blade.

4. Relax your grip. Holding the racket too tightly costs you both power and control. A good way to tell if you're holding the racket too tightly is to imagine someone sneaking up behind you as you play and grabbing your racket. If the person would have trouble pulling it from your grip, you are holding the racket too tightly.

PENHOLD GRIP

The penhold grip gives the best possible forehand but the weakest backhand. You should only use it if you're very quick on your feet, because players with this grip are often forced to use the forehand from the backhand side to compensate for the weaker backhand. There are, of course, exceptions to this, but a penholder who is slow on his or her feet usually will not be able to do more than keep the ball in play with his or her backhand.

With the penhold grip, one side of the racket is used for all shots. The other side may have an alternate hitting surface but the nature of the grip makes it hard to switch in the middle of a rally. Here is how to hold the racket, penhold style:

1. Hold the racket upside down, handle up (Figure 1.2a). Grasp the racket where the handle meets the blade with your thumb and forefinger. This is similar to holding a pen (hence the name).
2. Either curl the other three fingers on the other side of the blade (Chinese penhold grip, see Figure 1.2b) or extend them straight down the back of the racket, fingers together (Korean penhold grip, see Figure 1.2c).

With both versions of this grip, the racket is held between the three fingers on the back and the thumb and index finger on the front. The three fingers on the back give the racket a firm backing on all shots.

Note that with this grip, the forehand and the backhand side of the racket are the same because only one side of the racket is used to hit the ball.

Penhold Grip

Strengths

- Best possible forehand
- Quick backhand
- Easy to use wrist on most shots, especially serves
- No center weakness

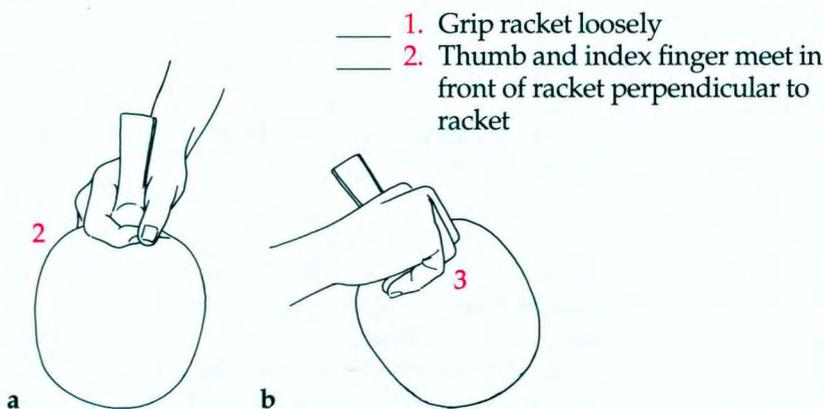
Weaknesses

- Backhand somewhat cramped, more limited
- Not as good for defensive shots except blocking
- Backhand weak away from table

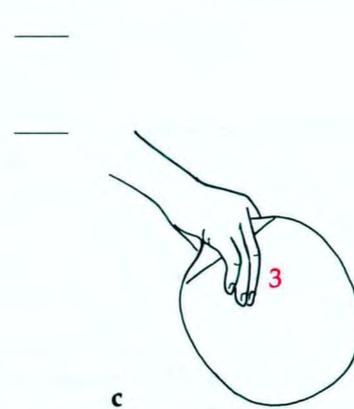
**Figure 1.2 Keys to Success:
Penhold Grip**

Preparation Phase

Chinese Penhold Grip



Korean Penhold Grip



3. Curl three fingers on back of racket

3. Extend three fingers on back of racket

Detecting Penhold Grip Errors

If you choose to use the penhold grip it is important you master it. Otherwise you may be at a disadvantage. Try to avoid the following errors.

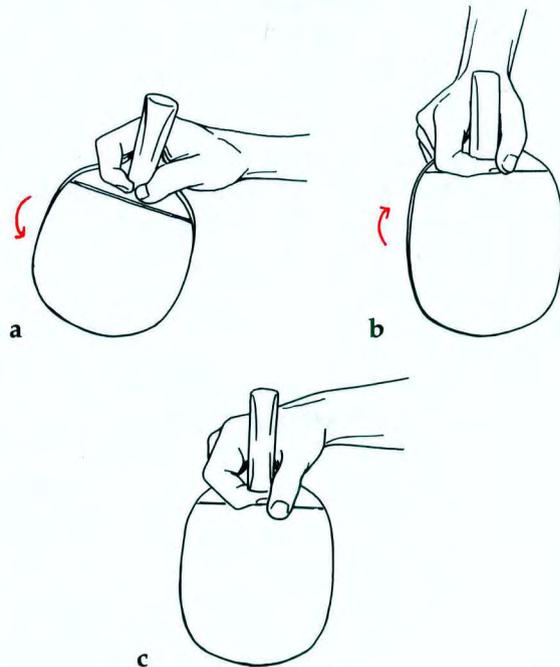
ERROR



1. Either your forehand or your backhand grip feels weak or erratic.

CORRECTION

1. Rotate the right side of the racket forward to make your forehand stronger (see Figure a); rotate the right side of the racket backward to make your backhand stronger (see Figure b). It's usually best to compromise between the two with a neutral grip (see Figure c).



2. Your grip is too tight.

2. See number 4 under "Detecting Shakehands Grip Errors."

SEEMILLER GRIP

The Seemiller grip, also known as the American grip, is a version of the shakehands grip. It has been used for many years, but it was first used successfully in the 1970s and 1980s by five-time U.S. National Champion Dan Seemiller. Some coaches consider it an inferior grip because they believe that you cannot have both a good forehand and a good backhand with it, but many disagree. If you already

use the grip, you don't need to switch. Just make sure to do it correctly.

As with the penhold grip, only one side of the racket is used for striking the ball. This gives an alternate hitting surface that you can use in the middle of a rally by flipping the racket. Most players using the Seemiller grip use inverted sponge on one side and antispin sponge on the other.

Here's how to hold the racket, Seemiller style:

1. Grip the racket with a shakehands grip.
2. Rotate the top of the racket from 20 to 90 degrees toward you, see Figure 1.3a. (The more you rotate, the stronger your backhand shots will be and the weaker the forehand, and vice versa.)
3. Curl the index finger around the edge of the racket, see Figure 1.3b.

With this grip, the racket is held by two anchors: The index finger and thumb hold the racket face itself between them, and the racket handle is held by the last three fingers.

Because you're using only one hitting surface (except when you flip the racket), the hitting surface usually will face your opponent. So, your thumb will be facing your opponent. This gives the effect of a windshield-wiper motion when going from the backhand to the forehand shot, and vice versa. Try it and you'll see. (With this grip, like the penhold

grip, the forehand and backhand side of the racket are the same.)

Seemiller Grip

Strengths

- Gives a player an excellent blocking game
- Allows player an alternate surface to use as a variation
- No center weakness
- Allows a lot of wrist motion on many shots, especially the forehand loop

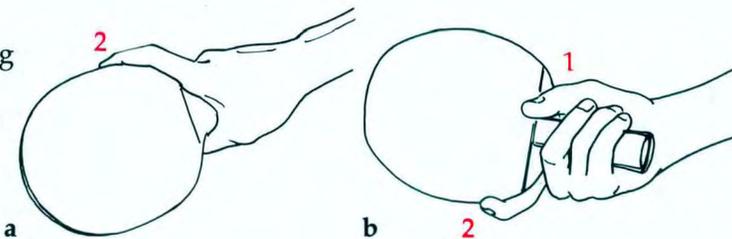
Weaknesses

- Weak against well-angled shots
- Depending on how racket is rotated either forehand or backhand can feel awkward, especially on shots to the wide corners
- Generally not as good for defensive shots, except blocking
- Backhand weak away from table

Figure 1.3 *Keys to Success: Seemiller Grip*

Preparation Phase

1. Point thumb in same direction as hitting surface ____
2. Index finger touches racket only on the edge ____
3. Loose grip ____



Detecting Seemiller Grip Errors

If you choose the Seemiller grip, it will be to your advantage to do it correctly and with strength. Avoid the following errors by following the correction illustrations.

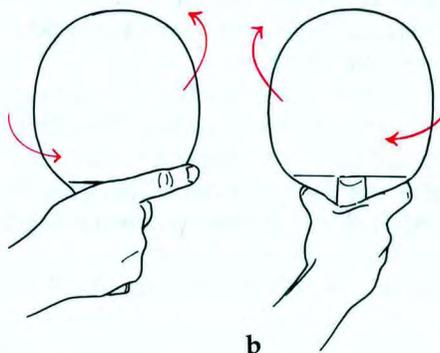
**ERROR**

1. Either your forehand or your backhand grip feels weak or erratic.

2. Your grip is too tight.

CORRECTION

1. Rotate the top of the racket forward to make your forehand stronger (see Figure a); rotate the top of the racket backward to make your backhand stronger (see Figure b). It's usually best to compromise between the two with a neutral grip.



2. See number 4 under "Detecting Shakehands Grip Errors."

RACKET CONTROL

You could start practicing ball control right away at the table with an opponent, but at the start you want a slightly more predictable environment. A good way to develop faster is with ball bouncing (see Figure 1.4).



Figure 1.4 Practice bouncing a ball up and down on your racket.

Ball bouncing allows you to hit a ball that is moving more predictably than it would in a normal rally. It enables you to learn to hit the ball with the center of the racket consistently (the "sweet spot"). Just bounce a ball up and down on your racket, learning to hit the sweet spot every time. This will help you later when you start practicing at the table. There will be several drills involving ball bouncing in the drills section.

Much of your racket control is done by the wrist. Many players hold their rackets too firmly in their hands. This takes away wrist snap (and therefore power) and reduces your ability to easily change racket angles. It is important to always hold the racket rather loosely and relaxed.

A general rule about using the wrist in table tennis shots is this: If the incoming ball is traveling slowly, use more wrist. If it's traveling fast, use less or none. Some players use wrist in nearly all their shots, but that can be difficult to control.

Grip and Racket Control Drills

Note: For all drills, you should use the grip you have chosen. You may, however, use the drills to help decide which grip is most comfortable for you. You don't need a table to practice the following drills.

1. Up-and-Down Bouncing

The purpose of this drill is to learn to hit the ball in the center of the racket consistently. This will develop your awareness of the sweet spot that you will later use to your advantage in an actual rally. Using your normal grip, bounce the ball on the forehand side of the racket as many times in a row as you can, about a foot high each time. Try to make the ball hit the sweet spot every time. Then try to do the same thing with the backhand side of the racket.

Success Goal = 30 consecutive bounces on each side of the racket

Your Score =

(#) _____ consecutive forehand bounces

(#) _____ consecutive backhand bounces

2. Up-and-Down Wrist Bouncing

The purpose of this drill is to learn to control the racket with the wrist, again to enhance your ability to do so in an actual rally. Hold your racket hand just above the wrist with your free hand, so that you can only move the racket with your wrist. Don't move your arm during this drill! Using only the wrist, redo the previous drill.

Success Goal = 8 consecutive bounces on each side of the racket, using only wrist

Your Score =

(#) _____ consecutive forehand bounces

(#) _____ consecutive backhand bounces

3. Alternate Bouncing

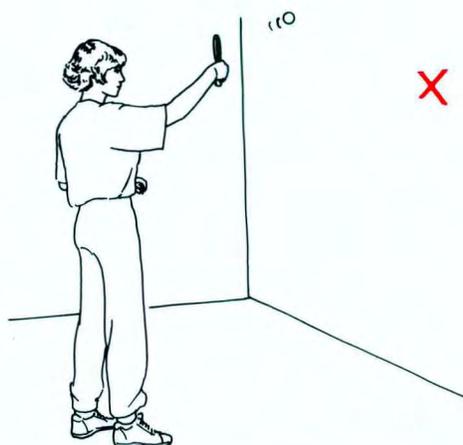
Bounce the ball on the racket, this time alternating between hitting with the forehand and the backhand side. This will help you learn to hit the ball in the center of the racket while moving the paddle about, as you will have to do in a rally.

Success Goal = 30 consecutive alternating bounces

Your Score = (#) _____ consecutive alternating bounces

4. Wall Bouncing

Using the backhand side of your racket, bounce a ball against a wall as many times in a row as you can. Stand about 2 to 5 feet away from the wall and do not let the ball hit the floor. Hit the ball with a backhand stroke, facing the wall; hit the ball directly in front of your body. Try to make the ball hit the same spot on the wall each time, about shoulder height. (You might want to draw a chalk line to give yourself a target.) Consistency is especially important here—don't hit one shot shoulder-high, and the next way above your head. You're learning to do a repeating shot—the same stroke over and over. If you mis-hit a shot in this drill, the return from the wall will be off and you'll have trouble keeping the "rally" going. Try to develop a rhythm, hitting your shots the same way, over and over, always in the center of the racket. Next, try to do this with the forehand side of the racket, hitting the ball with a forehand stroke. Contact should be to the right of the body (for right-handers).



Success Goal = 15 consecutive wall bounces on each side of the racket, hitting the same spot

Your Score =

(#) _____ consecutive backhand wall bounces

(#) _____ consecutive forehand wall bounces

5. Pepper

This drill is named after a similar baseball drill. One player tosses a ball at a partner randomly, side to side. The other player has to hit each ball back at the tosser, who catches the ball and immediately tosses it again. The tosser shouldn't throw the ball too hard or too far away—the ball should stay within reach of the hitter. The hitter hits the ball after it has bounced once on the ground, not on the fly. The hitter shouldn't hit the ball hard. The purpose is to develop ball control, so the goal is to hit the ball as accurately as possible to the tosser. In this drill you'll learn to adjust to a moving ball and hit it where you want to. Make sure you always hit the ball in the center of your racket.

Success Goal = 15 consecutive accurate returns by the hitter

Your Score = (#) _____ consecutive accurate returns

Grip and Racket Control Keys to Success Checklists

Developing racket control now will make it far easier for you later on when you are trying new techniques. In this section you have learned how to grip the racket and control it. A good grip will save you from endless headaches later on, while racket control will help you learn each step more quickly.

Use the proper Keys to Success checklists (see Figures 1.1 through 1.3) to decide which grip you are going to use. Ask the observer to verify if you can consistently bounce the ball in the center of the racket. Have your coach, instructor, or practice partner use the checklists to critique your grip and racket control.