

Step 13 Playing Styles and Rallying Tactics

Playing styles and rallying tactics go together because your playing style dictates how you want to rally. As you learn your playing style, you learn the proper rallying tactics for your style, and when you play against a specific style, you'll use specific rallying tactics that work against that style.

There is no such thing as a pure style. Everybody uses a little bit of several styles, and usually a lot of one. Loopers are called loopers because they loop a lot, but they generally block or hit on occasion as well. Similarly, there are no rules carved in granite on how to play specific styles; everyone plays a little different and has different strengths and weaknesses. However, you can divide most players into some combination of the following:

- Loopers
- Hitters
- Counterdrivers
- Blockers
- Choppers
- Lobbers
- Combination racket users
- Doubles players—all combinations of the preceding styles, except now there are *two* different styles to take into account!

You also have to take into account the various types of grips and rubbers available. That's a lot of combinations! Without a lot of thought, there is no way you can make the most of your game. That's why it is so important to know both your playing style and your opponent's, and to know what tactics you should use.

However, the following guidelines should help in either playing with or playing against a given playing style. If the rule says serve short to a looper, try it! But if your opponent flips winner after winner against it, be flexible: Try something else. Ultimately, it's up to you to match your strengths against your opponent's weaknesses so that you end up with 21 points first.

While reading this section, look at both sides of the fence. Recognize your own style and how others should play you. Then learn how to combat that with your own personal inventory of shots.

LOOPERS

Loopers come in many varieties. Some like to loop kill the first ball while others will loop 10 in a row to win 1 point. Some run all over the court looping only with the forehand while others cut down on the footwork by backhand looping as well. Some let the ball drop below table level before lifting it in a sweeping but often defensive topspin while others practically take the ball as it bounces on the table. And then there are those who combine looping with some other shot such as chopping or hitting. There are very few set rules for loopers.

As a looper, you want to loop as early in the rally as possible; serve with that in mind. Then keep looping until the rally is over or you get an easy kill—which you may loop kill.

A loop that lands short is easy to kill or block at a wide angle if it's taken quickly off the bounce. Therefore, a looper should loop deep unless the opponent is too slow to react quickly to a short one. Most players are weaker blocking on one side, often the forehand, and most loops should go to that side. Try to get into rallies that let you loop over and over with your forehand into the opponent's weaker blocking side. An alternate strategy is to loop over and over into the stronger side, then looping an easy winner through the weak side. This will work if the stronger blocking side is more consistent than fast, giving you the opportunity to keep looping. A favorite strategy of loopers is to loop over and over with the forehand from the backhand corner, usually into the opponent's deep backhand court.

When an opening appears, loop kill to either side or the middle. Don't always loop to the corners. Many players are weak blocking from the middle due to indecision as to whether to use the forehand or backhand. But others are strong there, and weak covering the wide corners. Find out the weakness and go there.

Note that if you loop to a corner, the opponent can block back at a wide angle. By going to the middle, you take away the extreme angles. It does give your opponent an angle down both sides, but if you keep your loop deep, your opponent won't be able to get a good angle, and you'll probably be able to keep looping forehands.

Another thing to take into account is variation. Most players will get into a rhythm against your loop if you always do it the same. Loop at all speeds—fast, medium, and slow. A slow loop is surprisingly hard to block effectively—in fact, it's usually either attacked hard or returned very poorly.

Loopers have three basic weaknesses:

- They can't loop a ball that doesn't bounce past the endline on the first bounce.
- They must take longer strokes that slow them down somewhat.
- Because they use some power to put spin on the ball, some shots lose speed.

What if you're playing against a looper? The most obvious way to beat one is to not let him or her loop. Serve short and push chop-serves back short, and what is a looper to do? A smart one will flip the ball and try to loop the next one, but if you serve and push low (and short), the flip will be soft and you'll be able to attack it.

Of course, if the looper does flip or serve topspin, take advantage of Weakness #2: the longer stroke. Flip the topspin serve aggressively or attack the flip quickly to force your opponent back from the table to have time to loop, taking away much of the loop's effectiveness. And once the looper is away from the table, he'll have difficulty looping winners—not only do you have more time to react to the shot, but Weakness #3 comes in: Speed is sacrificed for spin. You can plain outlast the looper who can't get the ball past you, as long as you can handle the topspin.

Of course, some loopers look like they just got out of a powerlifting meet and if they lose power to spin, it's not noticeable. Against these Herculean players you must be careful not to give an easy shot. Let them loop 100-mile-per-hour zingers. If they don't hit, you win! If they do, well, work on making stronger shots yourself so they can't keep on zipping in shots. You might also use their own speed against them. If you block a fast loop, it'll probably go back so fast your opponent won't be able to react to it!

A one-sided looper rushes all over the court trying to use a forehand. Don't make the mistake of going to the backhand over and over. A looper's strongest loop is often the forehand from the backhand corner. Instead, go to the wide forehand first, then come back to the backhand. Your opponent will probably have to return the second shot with a weaker backhand. Attack it.

If the looper seems a little slow, go wide to the backhand, which forces either a weaker backhand or a step around. Then a quick block to the looper's wide forehand will often win the point or set you

up to end it. Even if it doesn't, a quick return to the wide backhand will make your opponent use a backhand.

A two-sided looper stands in the middle of the table and loops both backhands and forehands. The key here is to find the opponent's weaker side and play to it, usually the backhand. (Or, of course, just don't let him or her loop!) Move your opponent in and out—backhand loopers are especially vulnerable to that movement. A hard block followed by a soft one is usually more effective than two hard ones in a row because it breaks the looper's rhythm. Also, note that most two-sided loopers are relatively weak in the middle against a hard block. Unlike a forehand looper, a two-sided looper has to decide which side to loop with. Remember that a two-sided looper's middle is wherever his or her playing elbow is.

A consistent looper just keeps looping until you miss or return an easy shot. Loopers usually loop from both sides, but not always. You must move a looper around as much as possible, both side to side and in and out. Although you hope a looper will miss, don't count on it. Usually you'll have to earn the point by attacking a weak loop or ending the point before your opponent loops. Force a looper off the table with your own aggressive attack, whether it be blocking, hitting, or your own looping. If you see a winner, go for it. If not, keep moving your opponent, attacking whenever you can. But watch out for spin. If you make too many mistakes against it, you'll lose. This is true against all loopers.

General Tactics

For loopers:

- Loop as early in the rally as possible.
- Keep loops deep.
- Loop to wide corners and opponent's middle.
- Vary speed, spin, and placement of loops.

Against loopers:

- Keep serves and pushes short.
- Attack first.
- Hit shots quick off the bounce.
- Move opponent in and out.

HITTERS

In general, there are three types of hitters. There are pure forehand hitters, often pips-out penholders. There are two-sided hitters, hitting winners from both sides. And there are hitters who loop to set up their smash.

There are two common tactical mistakes hitters tend to make. Some are too tentative and don't let

themselves go for the shot. Hitters must be somewhat reckless, or they'll find themselves constantly trying to decide what to smash. There's no time for that! All hitters must accept the fact that sometimes you must go for a dumb shot to make sure you don't miss an opportunity to smash. But, surprisingly, many of these "dumb" shots actually go in!

The other common mistake is just the opposite—trying to hit too much. A hitter should hit right from the start of the rally, and also use some judgment. Rather than hit the first ball for a winner every time, why not hit an aggressive drive first and smash the next ball, which might be easier?

A hitter wins by quickness and speed. Accordingly, hitters should stay close to the table, take the ball quickly off the bounce, and hit the ball as fast as they can consistently do so.

A hitter should find out which side an opponent is weaker on and go to that side over and over, always looking for a ball to put away. Hitters should go to the strong side only when they can make a strong shot or when the opponent is out of position.

A hitter who mostly likes to hit with one side will have to be especially reckless. The longer the rally goes on, the more opportunities for shots to be made from the weaker side and the more likely there will be a mistake. Go for the shot!

Two-sided hitters can be more picky and play longer rallies because they are a threat to hit from both sides. Although two-sided hitters should end the point as quickly as possible, they're under less pressure to do so. Two-sided hitters can hit strong drives (instead of smashing) knowing that there is no worry about a return to a weaker side—there isn't any.

Hitters with a good loop have a tremendous advantage if they are able to get both shots going. They should loop the ball as deep and spinny as they can, but not too fast. A slower, spinnier loop will set up the smash more while a faster one usually is blocked back faster, giving you little time to get into position to smash.

A hitter is probably the most mentally demanding style to play against. No matter what you do, it seems hitters are able to hit winners. Yet keep in mind that a hitter's shots often miss. Don't be intimidated—it's the quickest way to lose, and hitters thrive on it. Hitters simply cannot win if they don't get enough good balls to hit. It's up to you to deprive them of that. All-out forehand hitters have few shots to set up their smash. But they make up for it in the simplicity of their game. They've often grooved their one winning shot so much that no one thing you can do compares to it.

The key to beating a hitter is versatility. Hitters can only beat you one way; you can beat them a dozen ways. Find the way that works. You might force them to go backhand to backhand with you, or loop everything, or just mix up the spins. You can keep changing until you find something that works; the hitter can't. Take advantage of it.

If a hitter gets into a groove, the game's over. After all, the hitter has mastered the most powerful shot in the game; if you can't stop it, you're going to lose. Keep the hitter out of the groove by constantly changing your shots, making your opponent hit different types of balls over and over.

A smash has a much smaller margin for error than just about any other shot. Keep that in mind at all times. A hitter might hit five winners in a row and then miss five in a row, so never give up.

Hitters like to start off the point with a quick serve and smash. They'll often serve fast and deep, trying to catch you off guard with an easy winner. Be ready for it. Attack the serve and hitters will get very uncomfortable. Often they'll still smash, but as long as they must go for risky smashes, you're in control. Watch to see if they step around the backhand corner too much. If so, return the fast serve wide to the forehand with a quick drive or block.

You can also throw hitters off by moving them around. Like loopers, they're often strongest hitting forehands out of the backhand corner. In general, you should either try to pin them upon the backhand or you should go side to side, making them hit as many backhands and moving forehands as possible. Because they stand so close to the table, hitters often cannot react to a quick block to the wide forehand after stepping around. Of course, the problem here is that the forehand shot from the backhand corner may already have been a winner, or at least strong enough to keep you from making a good return! (And if they do get to that wide forehand ball—watch out!)

Since hitters want to hit everything, if you attack first (especially with loops), they are forced to either go for low percentage hitting, or to abandon their game. The best defense is often a good offense.

Two-sided hitters can hit from both sides, so moving them around pays off less. However, like two-sided loopers, they're often weak in the middle where they must decide which side to hit with. But only go there aggressively. A weak shot to the middle gives a hitter an easy winner.

Find a two-sided hitter's weaker side and go there until you find an opening to the other side. Combat the hitter's speed with your own drives, and try to be more consistent than your opponent. Play to the hitter's weaker hitting side.

Since two-sided hitters are trying to hit from both sides, they often are erratic because they don't have time to set up their shots on both sides. They often hit hard but cannot all-out smash until an easy ball comes, because they're trying to do so much on both sides. Also, most two-sided hitters are slower on their feet; they don't need to step around often. Try to take advantage of this whenever they move out of position. Two-sided hitters are often weak against backspin because they usually specialize in hitting topspin.

Looper/hitters use the loop to set up the smash. Usually they'll loop backspin and smash topspin. Because they only need to smash against one type of spin, their smashes are often more consistent. And unlike an all-out hitter, they have a loop to set up the smash.

The basic weakness of looper/hitters is that they're trying to do too many aggressive shots. It's very hard to learn to both hit and loop well, and even harder to get both in a groove at the same time. Looping is basically a lifting shot while hitting is a forward shot, and trying to perfect both modes at the same time can create havoc with your timing. This leads to many missed shots. Only the fact that they smash one type of ball (topspin) saves them.

Most looper/hitters loop softly and then smash. Attack the soft loop. If you just block it passively, you're playing right into their game. From the hitter's point of view, a slow loop has more spin than the fast loop and forces more setups, while giving more time to get into position for the smash. Make hitters loop more aggressively by attacking the slow loop. They'll have less time to react to the next shot, they'll make more mistakes on the loop, and they'll have to concentrate more on the loop and less on the smash, leading to more missed smashes. There's nothing looper/hitters hate more than someone who can attack their loops.

General Tactics

For hitters:

- Find balance between recklessness and tentativeness.
- Try to get a smash into a groove.
- Stay close to table and hit shots quick off the bounce.
- End points quickly.

Against hitters:

- Don't be intimidated by smashes or recklessness.
- Play high percentage shots.
- Attack first.

- Vary shots.
- Attack weaker side.

COUNTERDRIVERS

Counterdrivers like to stand in the middle of the table and just stroke back whatever you hit to them. They usually take everything at the top of the bounce and smash given the first opportunity, especially on the forehand side. They seemingly can counter your best shots and go on doing so all day. It's a simple game, with placement, consistency, and speed of drives the most important elements.

To be a counterdriver your basic strategy is to drive balls mostly to your opponent's weaker side. If the backhand is weak, your basic goal is to keep the opponent from stepping around and using a forehand. If the weaker side is the forehand, hit hard enough to it so your opponent cannot smash the return. If the opponent tees off on your shots, you have to pick up speed. If you start missing, slow down. And always be on the lookout for balls to smash.

The weakness of a counterdriver's shots is that they are neither quick, fast, or spinny. Just as counterdrivers can drive back whatever you throw at them, you should be able to do the same. It usually comes down to whether your attack is more consistent than the counterdrive.

To play against a counterdriver, concentrate your attack at the weaker side and to the middle. Most counterdrivers are very strong from the corners, although they are often weaker or softer on one side. Take your time attacking. Pick your shots, and make sure that the winners that you go for are just that. It takes sharp judgment, but you must avoid going for the wrong winners, a temptation when playing counterdrivers. Remember—if they can't put the ball past you, you're under no pressure to force the attack.

On the other hand, don't take too long. Counterdrivers will be more consistent than you at their own game, and if you rally too long, you risk too many careless mistakes. However, you might counter just until you see a chance to smash, either forehand or backhand. Another way to play the counterdriver is to end the point before the chance to counterdrive. The key here is good serves and a good attack. Against aggressive players, it is dangerous to overanticipate a third-ball kill when serving—a good receive catches you off guard and the receiver ends the point instead. But because a counterdriver is usually less of a threat on the attack, you can play a flexible all-out attack. Look to put the first ball away, but if the shot

isn't there, fall back on rallying and looking for a better shot.

General Tactics

For counterdrivers:

- Be consistent.
- Counter mostly to opponent's weaker side.
- Build up a countering rhythm.
- Force countering rallies early.

Against counterdrivers:

- Be patient and pick shots.
- Attack middle and weaker side.
- Don't try to beat counterdrivers at their own game.
- Use topspin and backspin to break up rhythm.

BLOCKERS

Blockers are similar to counterdrivers except that they contact the ball right after it hits the table. They tend to be as consistent as a counterdriver but are constantly putting pressure on you by rushing you. This means that they can even go to your stronger side knowing that you won't have time to go for a strong shot.

A blocker can either block every ball quickly to the opponent's weaker side, exploiting it to the fullest, or block side to side, making the opponent move about and hit on the run. A blocker has to be ready to smash when a weak ball comes, or all an opponent has to do is keep the ball in play. Blockers have to anticipate weak returns so as to have time to smash, or even designate one side (usually the forehand) as the side to smash whenever possible. Many players combine a backhand blocking/forehand smashing game. A quick backhand block will often set up the forehand smash.

The weakness of blockers is their own quickness. To take the ball so quickly they must stand right at the table. They have little time to decide what shot to use, and so even if you make a weak shot, they'll often just block it. This is why a blocker needs to anticipate weak balls to be ready to kill them. Blockers will also make a lot of mistakes by their own attempts to be quick.

Some blockers are very strong in the middle but weak to the corners, where they have to move their racket farther. Others are the reverse, being weak in the middle because they have to decide which side to block with. Find out early in a match which type you're playing. There are basically two types of blockers: aggressive ones and consistent ones. Aggressive ones want to block the ball hard and quick, forcing you away from the table and into

mistakes. If they succeed in forcing you away from the table, they have extra time to watch your incoming shot and so they become quicker. Worse, it gives them time to go for more smashes.

What you want to do against aggressive blockers is attack so aggressively that they make mistakes trying to block aggressively or are forced to slow down their blocks so that they can keep their own shots on the table. Once they've slowed down their blocks you have time to really go on the attack.

A consistent blocker tries to keep the ball in play until you make a mistake. He or she can be like a brick wall, getting everything back until you almost drop from exhaustion. His or her shots are usually passive, but they're quick enough to prevent you from teeing off on them. And when you do, they often keep coming back!

Consistent blockers' weakness is their own passiveness. They put so much effort into getting everything back that they can't do much else. You can slow down your own shots, giving yourself more time to set up for the next shot. Take your time, look for the right shot, and then end the point fast at their weakest point.

Don't make the mistake of letting a consistent blocker get into a rhythm. Don't always attack at the same pace. Surprisingly, a blocker usually has more trouble blocking slow, spiny loops than faster ones. The spin on a slow loop grabs the racket more and jumps out more. The blocker will often pop them up or miss them outright. The slowness of your own shot makes his shot slower, and the slowness of both shots gives you more time to get into position for your own more aggressive strokes. A fast loop just comes back faster and should be used with discretion until you can put it past your opponent.

Many blockers like to push to your wide backhand over and over, waiting for you to step around with your forehand. Then they give you a quick block to the wide forehand. (It's almost a style by itself, sort of a pusher/blocker style.) You have five ways of combatting this. First, you can attack with your backhand, and never go out of position at all. A backhand loop is ideal for this. Second, you can loop the push itself for a winner. You have to judge whether you can do this consistently enough. Third, you can be quick enough to get to that block to your wide forehand. Fourth, if the blocker has a passive forehand, you can push to his forehand to take away the angle into your backhand, and attack his return. Or fifth, you can use your forehand but loop slow and deep. The very slowness of your shot gives you time to get back into position, and

the depth keeps the blocker from contacting it too soon.

General Tactics

For blockers:

- Hit shots quick off the bounce.
- Block to the weaker side.
- Always be ready to smash.
- Vary pace and placement.

Against blockers:

- Attack all parts of the table.
- Be patient and pick shots—not too aggressive.
- Use slow, spinny loops.
- Keep ball deep.

CHOPPERS

Choppers are defensive players who win mostly on your mistakes. They go 15 feet or so away from the table and return each of your aggressive topspin shots with backspin, making it difficult to attack effectively.

A chopper doesn't simply get the ball back. Chopping is probably the most tactical of games because to win a point, choppers must fool their opponents into making a mistake in some way. This can be done by outlasting them, by heavy spin, by spin variation, by pick hitting, or by keeping every ball low until they get frustrated and go for reckless shots.

If you're a chopper, you have to decide which of the above tactics will work best against whoever you're playing. If the player is mistake-prone or not very powerful, concentrate on keeping the ball in play until he misses. Change the spins only when you see an easy chance to.

If an attacker has trouble with heavy chop, give it to him. If an attacker has trouble reading spin, change the spin over and over, even if it means popping up a few balls. (If an attacker has no trouble hitting them, he or she's then reading the spin and you should change strategies.)

As a chopper, you should put pressure on your opponent by attacking whenever possible. Because you pick which shots you'll attack (called "pick hitting") instead of attacking over and over like an attacker you should make the most of them. Go for immediate winners when you do attack—if you were as effective attacking for several shots in a row you'd be an attacker, not a chopper. It's the surprise of a chopper's attack that makes it effective; after one or two shots, the surprise wears off.

Some players are emotionally incapable of playing a steady chopper. Even if they have the shots to

win, a chopper can beat them by playing on their impatience. The chopper keeps the ball as low as possible and watches them swat shots all over the court!

A chopper should be aware of the expedite rule. (See explanation in Step 10.) Some players will push with a chopper for 15 minutes and then win in the end. To end a game before the 15-minute time limit you might have to take the attack. Once in the expedite rule, of course, you have to attack whenever you serve. Keep in mind that you don't have to rush the attack, even in expedite. Very few rallies actually go 13 shots, so pick your shots carefully. It's better to hit a winner on the 10th shot than miss the 1st shot.

The natural weakness of choppers is that they must rely on your mistakes. They can pick hit when they see the chance, but basically they must score most of their points on your misreading their spin or just making a careless mistake. In theory, you should be able to dominate against a chopper—after all, if you can't attack a given ball, you can push it and attack the next one instead. Any time you're not sure of the spin you can do this. So how does a chopper win?

From an attacker's point of view, an attacker is in control of the rallies when they attack. But from the chopper's point of view, the chopper is in control. Against a low chop or push, an attacker can only attack so hard and still be consistent. If the chopper can chop that shot back effectively, he or she's in control.

Of course, the attacker could just push. But choppers are usually better at pushing and can do so forever. They can also catch the attacker off guard by attacking when they see the chance; the attacker can't do the same because the chopper is expecting it.

In general, if a chopper can return your best drives without giving you a high ball, you're going to lose. But there are ways to make your drives more effective.

A common misconception about playing choppers is that you have to overpower them. Nothing could be further from the truth. If you can beat choppers on pure power, then you would beat them by even more points if you choose your shots more carefully.

After a chopper has made one return of a strong drive, he or she'll probably return the same drive over and over again. Choppers can adjust to just about anything if they see it enough. What does give them trouble is change. Changing the spin, speed, direction, depth, or even the arc of the ball can create havoc to their timing and lead to misses and high returns.

Choppers are strongest at the corners unless you can force them out of position and ace them to a wide angle. They're weakest in the middle, where they must decide whether to chop with the forehand or the backhand and then get into position for a proper stroke.

When playing a chopper, constantly change depth and direction. Loop (or hit) one deep, then go short and spinny. Draw a chopper in close to the table and then attack hard before he or she can react to it. Force a chopper away from the table and then drop shot the ball, followed by another hard attack. Have patience, but when the shot is there, take it. If you have trouble reading the spin, push one or attack it soft. Don't attack to the corners too much—concentrate on the chopper's weaker middle. Put as much pressure on a chopper as you can in order to elicit mistakes. Often the mistakes aren't obvious. An outright miss or a high ball are obvious mistakes, but a chopper might also chop too short. A chop that lands midway between the net and the endline is usually easy to loop kill or smash (for a hitter) even if it's low. Take advantage of all mistakes, limit yours, and you'll probably win.

Another way to play choppers is to push with them very patiently, looking for a good ball to attack. Push 10 balls, then wham! They won't know when you're going to attack and might get stuck too close to the table to return your shot. You can even push until the expedite rule takes effect and then you'll have an advantage, because an aggressive player can win the point quickly under expedite better than most choppers can.

One common mistake against choppers is to go for too many drop shots (as opposed to regular pushes). A drop shot is an excellent way to win a point if you can catch your opponent too far from the table, but it's risky. There are three reasons for this. First, a drop shot is a very delicate shot and is easy to miss. Second, it's easy to pop a drop shot up, giving the chopper an easy ball to pick hit. Third, it's difficult to do a good drop shot against a deep chop; if the ball lands any shorter it should be easy to attack and so you wouldn't want to drop shot. (Unless, of course, it lands so short that it would bounce twice.) Another mistake is to drop shot when you aren't sure of the spin. The worst thing you can do when you don't read the spin is to drop shot because you'll invariably either put the ball in the net or pop it up. Choppers are notoriously good at swatting in high drop shots, even on the run. If you aren't sure of the spin, just use a normal push or attack softly. If you are sure of the spin, and the chopper is far from the table, then by all means drop shot.

General Tactics

For choppers:

- Be patient and confident.
- Vary degree of backspin.
- Always be ready to attack, especially on serve.
- End points quickly when attacking.
- Take every shot seriously, even pushes.

Against choppers:

- Attack middle.
- Move in and out.
- Be patient.
- Vary all shots.
- Don't overdo drop shots.

LOBBERS

Most players use the lob only as a variation or desperation shot. But some players use it over and over, and if they find you have trouble with it, they'll use it even more. Lobbers have to be strong on both sides or their opponent will simply smash to the weak side. Most lobbers are stronger on the forehand side; they can counterattack easier on that side, so it's a good idea when lobbing to lob to the hitter's forehand side, tempting your opponent into smashing the easy way, crosscourt to your forehand. But if your opponent is smart, he or she won't fall for it, and you'll mostly lob with your backhand (which might be what you want, if that's your stronger lobbing side). The most important thing to remember when lobbing is depth. As long as your lob goes deep, you're still in the point. A short lob can be smashed at such a wide angle that there's nothing you can do to get it back.

When lobbing, don't just throw the ball in the air. Try to put topspin and sidespin on the ball to force mistakes. Vary the height of the lob—sometimes lob high, other times lower. Short players especially will have trouble with high lobs.

A lobber should always be on the lookout for a chance to get back into the point. Countersmash every chance you can. If the smash is weak, you might even chop it back.

There are two ways to hit a lob. A smother kill is most effective if it hits, least effective if it misses. You have to judge for yourself. Some players smother kill all lobs, others never do it. A good balance is to smother kill only against lobs that land short, near the net, close to your target.

Regardless of how you hit the lob you should follow one fundamental rule when playing lobbers: Smash mostly to the backhand. (Of

course, there's an exception to this rule out there somewhere and you'll no doubt encounter it in your next match.) The forehand lob is usually spinnier, and it's far easier to counterattack with the forehand than the backhand. So just smash to the backhand over and over until you force either a miss or a weak return. When the weak ball comes (one that is short or less spinny) go to the forehand only if you can smash an ace or at least force a leaping return. Why take chances? When in doubt, keep going to the backhand.

If your opponent isn't a great threat to countersmash, go for the middle. Many lobbers have trouble lobbing from that spot.

When the ball lands short, end the point. You can angle the ball to either side. Unless your opponent can anticipate (or guess) which side you're going to, you should be able to put it past him. Don't decide which side to go to until your opponent has committed to one side. If there's no commitment, then both wings should be open. (And with both sides being equal, you should go to the backhand, just in case.)

Often you'll be faced with a relatively easy lob to smash. Make sure to use good form; shots like this are often far trickier than they look.

You should rarely drop shot against the lob. If the ball is deep, an effective drop shot is nearly impossible, and if the ball is short you should be able to put it away. A drop shot against a lobber usually just lets your opponent back into the point. One exception to this rule is when your opponent has gotten into such a rhythm that you cannot smash past your opponent in the rally. A drop shot might be effective just to throw off your opponent's timing, but don't do it too often.

General Tactics

For lobbers:

- Keep ball deep and spinny.
- Lob to spot diagonally opposite stronger lobbing side.
- Look for balls to counterattack.
- Avoid lobbing except when forced.

Against lobbers:

- Smash mostly to backhand side unless ready to end point on one shot.
- Consider smashing at the middle.
- Against a good lobber, smother kill short lobs.
- Use good form no matter how easy a shot looks.
- Rarely drop shot.

COMBINATION RACKET USERS

One of the first problems you'll face when you begin playing in USTTA-sanctioned tournaments is "junk rubber." The two types of rubber usually classed as junk are long pips and antispin. Hard rubber and short pips-out sponge are also considered junk by some players. Basically, since most players use inverted sponge, anything else is different and therefore junk.

Junk rubber is called such by many players not because it is of lesser quality, but because the racket's characteristics are very different from most types you will face. They can be difficult to play against unless you regularly play opponents who use the stuff. However, it must be noted that as hard as it can be to play well against them, it's equally hard to learn to use them effectively.

Before the different color rule came into effect in the early 1980s, many players used different surfaces on each side of the racket, and by flipping the racket, they could make it difficult for opponents to tell which side they were hitting with. This led to many unforced errors (due to the different playing characteristics of the different surfaces) and many cries of "foul," with some justification. But the color rule made it illegal to have both surfaces the same color: Now you always know what surface is being used, by seeing the different colors, so there's no excuse for making mistakes against the so-called junk rubbers. At the start of the match, find out what color each surface is. It's just a matter of learning to play each type. If you lose to a player because you can't handle long pips, it's just as much a loss as if you lost to someone because you couldn't handle the loop.

Antispin and Hard Rubber

Antispin rubber was first introduced in the early 1970s. It's actually a variation of inverted sponge. The major characteristic of antispin is its slick surface. When the ball contacts it, it slides, and spin barely affects it. This makes it easy to handle spinny shots, and it's primarily used to aid in the return of loops and serves. Most antispin rubbers have a very dead sponge underneath, which makes it easy to return hard drives. With its slick surface and dead sponge, an antispin player can seemingly return anything!

Hard rubber is primarily like antispin except that it puts slightly more spin on the ball and reacts to spin slightly more. Hard rubber is simply a sheet of pimped rubber with no sponge underneath—exactly like pips-out sponge without the sponge. It's usually (but not always) slightly faster than antispin.

Most hard rubbers are easier to attack with than antispin. These two surfaces have primarily the same characteristics.

A ball hit with antispin or hard rubber has less spin than a ball hit with inverted or pips-out sponge. Players often react as if there were more spin on the ball than there actually is. If you play against antispin or hard rubber, you'll learn to react to its different characteristics.

The weakness of antispin or hard rubber is that their returns are generally weak and easy to attack. They take spin off the return, so all their returns are relatively spinless and easy to handle. They're also more difficult to attack against topspin, although backspin can be attacked effectively. This makes antispin and hard rubber very limited surfaces unless used in conjunction with a different type of surface, usually a grippy inverted; this racket can be flipped to use either surface. The important thing to remember is that antispin and hard rubber cannot generate much spin, and they usually deaden what spin there was on the ball. Also, balls hit off antispin or hard rubber tend to land shorter on the table, because these surfaces are slower than most surfaces.

Antispin and hard rubber are primarily used by two styles, choppers and blockers. Choppers use them to return loops consistently, sometimes winning by getting so many balls back that the opponent tires and gets impatient. But the returns are easy to attack by a good player, and there are fewer and fewer choppers using antispin or hard rubber these days. Those that do use antispin or hard rubber almost invariably have inverted on the other side, and most flip their racket to confuse their opponent. Most choppers find that long pips are more effective in conjunction with inverted sponge.

Blockers sometimes use antispin to return serves and block loops and drives. The antispin makes it easy to push serves back short, stopping an attack, and its slick surface makes spinny serves easy to return. It's also easy to block a loop with antispin, but the return is easy to attack if anticipated. Most blockers who use antispin use the Seemiller grip so that they can use either inverted or antispin on both sides at all times. They'll push the serve back short with the antispin, flip back to inverted to play out the point, and then suddenly flip back to antispin to block a ball short, often catching the opponent off guard.

General Tactics

For antispin or hard rubber users:

- Use antispin and hard rubber sparingly, if possible.

- Use to return serves (especially short ones) and drop balls short.
- Attack backspin.
- Flip racket—use combination racket.

Against antispin or hard rubber:

- Recognize lack of spin.
- Play into antispin and hard rubber and attack return.
- Stay closer to table.
- Serve deep.

Long Pips

The long pips surface is a type of pips-out sponge with pips that are much longer and thinner than conventional pips. This lets the pips bend at contact with the ball, which creates an interesting effect. If the ball has spin on it, it continues to rotate in the same direction. But because the direction of the ball has changed, the spin has changed. A topspin ball continues to spin in the same way but because its orientation has changed (it's now going toward your opponent), it now has backspin. Imagine a topspin ball coming at you, with the top of it rotating toward you. If you hit it back without changing the rotation, the top will still be rotating toward you, or away from the opponent. This makes it a backspin return. Likewise, backspin can be returned as topspin.

If you were to block a topspin ball back with conventional surfaces, your return would have a light topspin. The same block with long pips will have backspin. Even if you use a topspin stroke with long pips, against a topspin you'll return the ball with either a backspin or at most a very light topspin. However, if you attack backspin you'll get topspin because the ball is already rotating in that direction, but the topspin will still be less than with other surfaces.

If you chop a topspin with a long pips surface, you'll return all the spin as backspin. Against a spinny loop you'll give back a very spinny chop, spinnier than is usually possible with any other surface. Against a light topspin, however, all you can return is a light backspin. And against backspin, a long pips push will either return a light topspin or at most a very light backspin. (Weak players constantly hit this off the end, expecting more backspin; good players go for winners against it.) Note that the longer and thinner the pips, the greater the long pips effect. No sponge or thin sponge also increases it. Basically, conventional surfaces put their own spin on the ball. Antispin takes the spin off. But the long pips surface returns and reverses the spin, something most players are

not used to. The amount of spin you receive from long pips depends more on the spin on your previous shot than on the long pips stroke itself. This is what makes the long pips surface the hardest surface to play against. But don't despair. It's also one of the hardest to control.

Against a ball with no spin, a long pips user can only return no spin or at most a very light spin. This makes it easy to attack against, at least for one shot. To keep attacking effectively, you must understand the way the long pips surface returns different shots and be prepared for the spinless return (or the reversal of spin in other shots) regardless of the stroke used by the long pips user. It can completely throw off your reflexes because the spins of the returns go contrary to what you're used to. But they are predictable and you should be able to adjust to them.

The long pips surface is difficult to attack with, especially against topspin. Against chop, it's easier to attack with, but the effectiveness of the attack is mostly due to the weirdness of the playing characteristics of the surface. Most balls attacked with a long pips surface with a topspin stroke will have less spin than expected and so are often returned into the net. But once you have adjusted to the lack of spin of a long pips surface attack, it should give you no more trouble. (Against a very heavy push, a topspin shot made with a long pips surface will have considerable spin, however.)

Two features of the long pips surface that make it attractive to choppers are the ease in returning loops and drives and the heavy backspin returns against loops. Next to antispin (or possibly hard rubber) the long pips surface is the easiest surface to chop a loop back with because the spin doesn't take on it. And since loopers get all their spin back, they have great difficulty in continuing an attack. Thus the long pips surface is especially effective when chopping against loops. The only problem is that if the looper pushes your chop return, you might have to push. If you do so with long pips, your return not only will have little spin and be easy to attack but will also be difficult to keep low. A backspin ball travels in a straight line and so spends a good portion of its time at just above net height, if done correctly. This gives you a large margin for error—all you have to do is make sure it crosses the net while at that height. But a spinless push with long pips arcs more, spending only a short time at the proper height, and is difficult to keep low. Only a good touch and a lot of practice will enable you to do so. One solution is to have inverted sponge on one side and learn to flip. Even if you can't flip fast enough to always use the side you want for every shot, at

least your opponent can't get into a rhythm, expecting a weak return every time you push.

Some blockers use long pips without any sponge underneath. This makes it easy to block topspin and somewhat easy to attack backspin. The long pips surface's effect is at its most extreme with no sponge. But you'll always be at the mercy of your opponent with this combination. It will be very difficult to push with, and almost impossible to attack a topspin, even a light one. Yet some players have found success this way, usually with the long pips on the backhand and an attacking forehand. They'll attack backspin to keep you off guard but basically rely on the long pips to keep the ball in play until you make a mistake. Note that if you take up this style, against topspin you shouldn't just block with the long pips. At contact, you should chop down on the ball, sort of a chop-block. This gives your opponent maximum backspin and maximum difficulty. Also note that the problem with pushing can be partially solved by staying close to the table, as blockers do, and pushing right off the bounce. This enables you to be as close to your target as possible, which makes it easier to keep the ball low. It also rushes your opponent.

General Tactics

For long pips:

- Use mostly to chop, block, and attack underspin.
- Use combination racket and flip, especially when pushing.

Against long pips:

- Be prepared to get your own spin returned.
- Serve deep to long pips.
- Deep no-spin balls are difficult to return with long pips.
- Push quick and deep to long pips, and attack return.
- Don't loop over and over to long pips.
- Stay closer to the table.

Short Pips

This surface is similar to inverted except that it gives less spin on each shot.

Balls struck by short pips will have little spin, but they will come out as expected—that is, a topspin stroke produces predictable topspin and a chop stroke produces predictable backspin. The difficulty in playing short pips is that there is always less spin than the inverted sheets you're probably more used to playing, leading to many balls going into the net or off the end (not only

because you misread the spin but also due to overcompensation). You will simply have to adjust to them.

The short pips surface (also called pips-out sponge) is especially useful in attacking spin shots. But keep in mind that although pips-out players can attack spin shots well, they cannot produce as much spin as players using inverted surfaces. You should take advantage of this. They cannot loop, push, or serve with as much spin. They should have more trouble against heavy inverted spins more than inverted players have against a pips-out player's lighter spins.

Note that every legal surface except inverted has been covered in this section on junk rubbers. Yet there was a time when inverted was the junk. Until the 1950s, nearly everyone used hard rubber, and even in the 1960s there were as many pips-out and hard rubber players as inverted ones. When players were first faced with the inverted surfaces, there was an outcry against the surfaces for being "different." It's only in the last 25 years that most tournament players have gone to inverted sponge. In most of Asia, there are still nearly as many pips-out players as inverted, and the 1985 and 1987 World Champion, Jiang Jialiang of China, used pips-out sponge.

General Tactics

For short pips:

- Develop smash.
- Stay close to table and hit shots quickly off bounce.
- Don't be afraid to hit against any type of spin.
- End point quickly.

Against short pips:

- Push heavy and deep.
- Use heavy topspin shots.
- Recognize lack of spin on returns.

DOUBLES

The rules for doubles are similar to singles. The three major differences are (1) players must always serve from the right side crosscourt, (2) partners alternate shots, and (3) the order of service. The order of serving is set at the start of the match, with the team order changing after every game. For example, if players A and B play Y and Z, the first game order might be A serving to Y, who serves to B, who serves to Z, who serves to A, and so on (see Figure 13.1, a-d). In the second game, the order would be A to Z to B to Y to A. (If A or B served first in the first game, then Y or Z serves first in the

second game. Either player on the team can serve first as long as the correct team is serving.)

Tactics in doubles can be complex. It's like singles except now you have four styles to worry about instead of just two. The points are usually shorter, and serve and receive become more important. Placement also becomes more important; it's easy to win points by catching an opponent out of position. Generally, the more aggressive team wins because one hot player can carry a team.

A left-hand and right-hand pair (lefty/righty) combination has an inherent advantage, assuming each player favors the forehand. They can stand in their respective backhand corners, their natural ready position, without getting in each other's way. A lefty/righty combination can play almost all forehand shots while two right-handers (or two left-handers) have to move quickly to keep up a forehand attack. However, although lefty/righty teams do dominate many tournaments, many same-handed teams have become very good, including some world champion teams. It just takes good footwork.

The simplest footwork method is for each player to take the shot, and then move backward and slightly off to the side. This takes each player out of the partner's way and keeps each player in position for the next shot. If a player were to simply go off to the side, the opponents would quickly hit to that side, and the player would be in his or her partner's way. Even if the player's partner makes the shot, he or she'll be way out of position for the next one, which will undoubtedly be to the far side and out of reach.

Because your opponent knows where you are serving (into the opponent's forehand corner), deep serves are rarely used in doubles except as a surprise. They're too easy to attack. Most teams favor short chop or no-spin serves, or short topspin/sidespin serves. The problem with short topspin/sidespin serves is that they can be flipped to a wide angle very easily and if placed well can cause the serving team to get in each other's way. Chop serves are harder to flip aggressively.

Receivers should set up to receive with their strongest side, usually the forehand. If they are stronger on the backhand, then they should receive backhand, even though the serve is going to the forehand corner. When receiving in doubles, be ready to attack (especially by looping) any deep serve. Vary the receive against short serves, but don't push deep too often or your partner will be faced with a strong attack. Mix in flips and short pushes with occasional deep pushes.

Doubles rallies are similar to singles rallies except

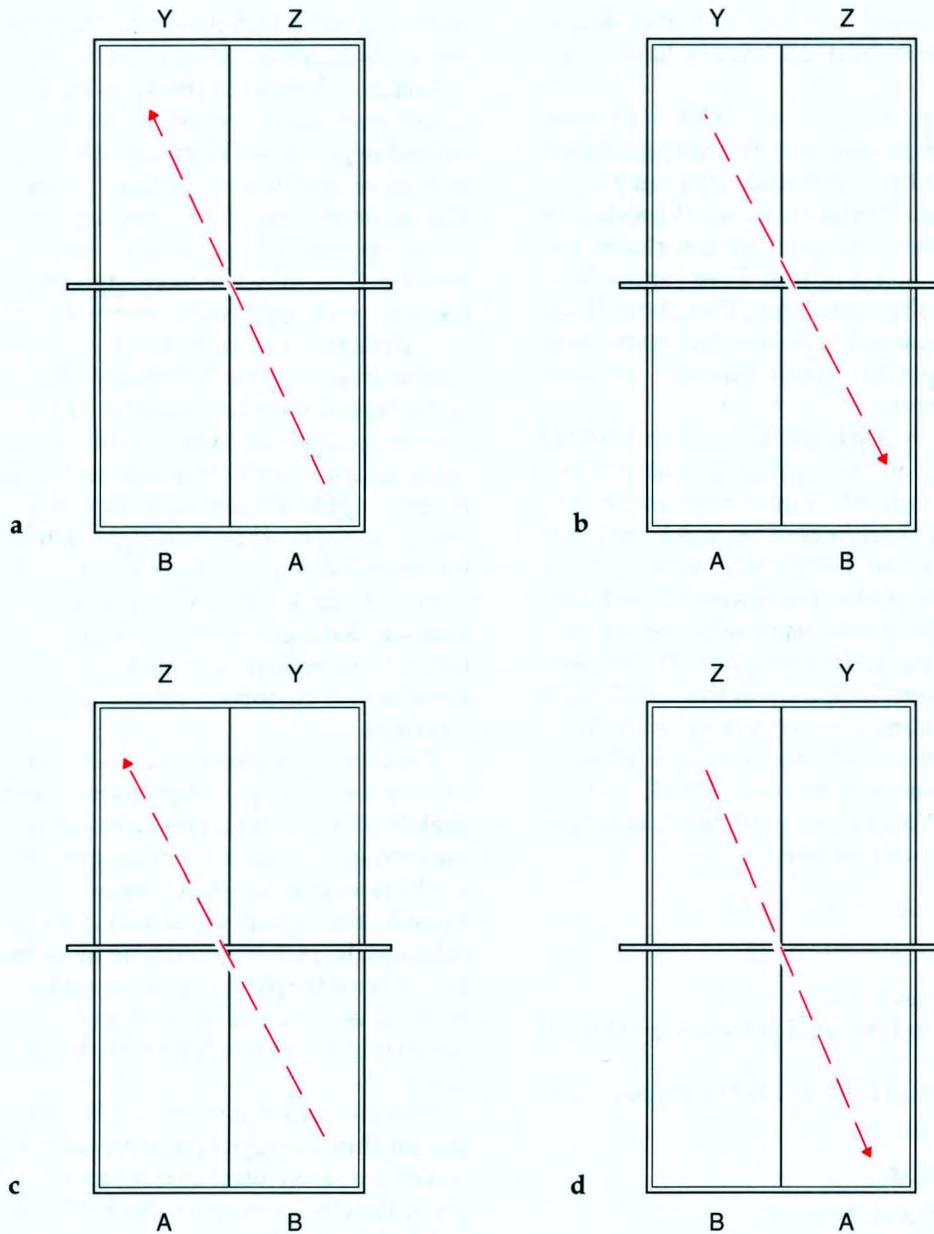


Figure 13.1 In doubles serving use the following order: A serves to Y (a), Y serves to B (b), B serves to Z (c), and Z serves to A (d).

that each player has to take into account the partner's playing style and abilities. For example, a defensive player might be perfectly at home letting the other team attack, but if his or her partner is an attacker, then there might be mixed signals as to how to handle the opponent's attack.

The most important rallying tactic in doubles is to hit the ball back at the opponent who hit the ball before the opponent has a chance to get out of his or her partner's way.

General Tactics:

- Serve short.
- Attack first.
- Receive with stronger side.
- Team up left-handed and right-handed partners when possible.
- Play as a team, not as an individual.
- Return shots back at person who hit to you.

Playing Styles and Rallying Tactics Drills

1. *Personal Styles and Strategies*

Play a practice match with your partner, two out of three games to 21 points. Afterward, analyze the match and discuss it with your opponent. Write out the following:

- a. Your best rallying shots during the match
- b. Your weakest rallying shots during the match
- c. How you can improve your weakest rallying shots

Success Goal = Name your 3 best rallying shots and 3 weakest rallying shots; decide how you can improve your weakest rallying shots

Your Score = Your answers to the questions

- a. Best rallying shots:

- b. Weakest rallying shots:

- c. Improvement goals:

2. *Playing Style*

Based on what you have learned so far, and from all previous match experience, describe your playing style in a few sentences. Some things to decide: Are you an offensive or defensive player? Are you better at the start of the rally against backspin or topspin? Do you favor attacking by hitting or looping? Keep in mind that table tennis is not a game where everything is black and white; you can be both a looper and a hitter, for example.

Success Goal = Ability to pinpoint your personal playing style

Your Score = Write out your thoughts

3. *General Tactics*

Think about each style of play and racket surface mentioned in this step. Then think about how you play. How would you, with your playing style, play against each different style? It's often better to think about these things, and figure them out for yourself (even if you get it wrong at first) than it is for someone to simply tell you what to do. After all, no two players play the same. If you want to become a top player, you've got to become the top authority in the world on how you personally play. Reread this step if you have any trouble deciding how to play any of the styles below.

Success Goal = Identify at least two tactics against each style

Your Score =

- (#) _____ tactics against a looper
- (#) _____ tactics against a hitter
- (#) _____ tactics against a counterdriver
- (#) _____ tactics against a blocker
- (#) _____ tactics against a chopper
- (#) _____ tactics against a lobber
- (#) _____ tactics against antispin or hard rubber
- (#) _____ tactics against long pips
- (#) _____ tactics against short pips

4. *Playing Different Styles*

Find players about your level who could be classified as loopers, hitters, counterdrivers, blockers, choppers, lobbers, or some combination of these styles. Plan out a strategy for playing them, and play games with them.

Success Goal = Win at least half the games played

Your Score =

- (#) _____ games won, (#) _____ games lost against looper
- (#) _____ games won, (#) _____ games lost against hitter
- (#) _____ games won, (#) _____ games lost against counterdriver
- (#) _____ games won, (#) _____ games lost against blocker
- (#) _____ games won, (#) _____ games lost against chopper
- (#) _____ games won, (#) _____ games lost against lobber

5. *Combination Rackets*

Find players about your skill level who use antispin, long pips, short pips, or hard rubber. Or have your partner use these surfaces so you can practice against them. Play games, making sure you understand what you have to do differently against each surface.

Success Goal = Win at least half the games played

Your Score =

- (#) _____ games won, (#) _____ games lost against antispin
- (#) _____ games won, (#) _____ games lost against long pips
- (#) _____ games won, (#) _____ games lost against short pips
- (#) _____ games won, (#) _____ games lost against hard rubber

6. *Centerline Weakness*

You've been told that most players are weak in the middle. Now you get to see for yourself! Have your partner hit everything at your elbow. You decide whether to use a forehand or backhand, and drive the ball back to your partner's backhand. If you use one side too often (for example, too many backhands), your partner should aim a little to the other side. This drill should illustrate the value of ball placement.

Success Goal = 15 consecutive drives against balls hit to middle

Your Score = (#) _____ consecutive drives against balls hit to the middle

7. *Doubles*

You and your partner play a practice match, two out of three to 21 points, against another doubles team. During the match, concentrate on two items: (1) hit the ball back to the player who hit it at you, and (2) make sure to move mostly backward to get out of the way of your partner, not off to the side. See if the first strategy gets the opposing players in each other's way, and if the second tactic keeps you and your partner out of each other's way.

Success Goal = Win at least half of the games played.

Your Score = (#) _____ games won, (#) _____ games lost