

## Step 14 Advanced Service and Receive Strategy

To play your best, you must learn the proper tactics for your personal playing style. For example, if you're a hitter, you wouldn't want to be serving the types of serves a looper would use! All players are different, and although there are many "golden rules," there are always top players who routinely break them with success. It comes down to knowing which ones you can break and when. That cannot be taught here—only experience and intelligent thinking can do that.

### SERVICE STRATEGY

The type of serves you'll use depends on your strengths and weaknesses. For example, if you're weak against backspin you wouldn't want to serve backspin; a smart opponent will simply push them all back! You'd probably serve topspin. (Of course, if your opponent is a chopper, you're in trouble!)

When preparing to serve, watch your opponent. See how he or she sets up. Does your opponent stand way off in the backhand corner? Your opponent probably wants to return with a forehand. A few fast serves to your opponent's wide forehand corner might make your opponent set up more in the middle, and then you can serve into your opponent's backhand. You can ask yourself dozens of questions like this. Does your opponent seem to be getting ready to attack the serve or just get it back? How has your opponent returned your serves in the past? Most important, how do you want to follow up your serve? This is what should be going through your mind as you prepare to serve. It's before you serve that you must do your thinking—once the rally begins, it's too late.

Most players develop certain surprise serves that can be used to win a point outright but are risky if used too often. A good example of this would be a sudden fast down the line serve to an opponent's forehand, catching your opponent off guard and winning the point outright. The problem with serves like this is that if the opponent is not caught off guard, these types of serves are often easy to attack. If the fast down the line serve doesn't win the point outright, the return will probably be an aggressive topspin shot, and the server is already on the defensive. So don't rely too much on this type of serve.

You shouldn't make a habit of using these surprise serves every time the score is close, for example. You might have one or two that you hold back until you really need it, but it's best to space these serves out over the course of a game, and then the score might not ever reach deuce. Examples of surprise serves are sudden fast serves, very short serves after serving long many times in a row, a serve that looks like it has a lot of spin but really has no spin, or a serve with a jerky motion or exaggerated follow-through to disguise the spin.

Serves can be divided into two categories: deep and short. Each is strong against certain types of players and weak against others. They will each allow your opponent only certain types of returns.

### Deep Serves

Deep serves (also called long serves) are ideal for hitters, blockers, and counterdrivers. They will set you up to hit or block, and if that's your style, you should use them frequently. Other styles shouldn't use them as frequently. If you're a looper, the serve usually won't set you up for a loop, so you should use a different serve. However, if your opponent returns deep serves passively, by all means use them.

A fast deep serve is best done to the wide backhand corner, as fast and as deep as possible. You should vary the spin on it, but flat serves, as discussed earlier, are usually very effective when serving fast. Try not to telegraph your intentions—surprise is important.

Although top players can get full spin on the ball and keep it short, that can be difficult. Rather than take some spin off the ball to keep it short, it's often better to go for full spin and let the ball go deep.

Serving deep is also effective in backing players off the table, keeping them from hitting the next shot too quickly off the bounce. Deep serves also force opponents to return the ball from as far away from their target as possible (your side of the table), thereby forcing mistakes. Deep serves also cut off the wide angles on the return.

When using deep spin serves, remember that your opponent has more time to react and move into position to return the serve, and a good player will often attack it with the forehand. Deep spin

serves usually aren't effective against a good looper, but if your opponent has trouble attacking the serve or is too slow to cover the wide forehand (after looping with the forehand from the backhand corner), then deep spin serves to the wide backhand are about the best serves to use.

When serving deep sidespins, note that a spin that breaks away from a receiver is usually more difficult to return than one that breaks in to the receiver. This means that a forehand pendulum (or high toss) serve, which breaks to the receiver's left, is usually more effective served to the backhand than a backhand sidespin serve would be, and vice versa. (The same goes for short serves.) Don't overuse this, however—learn to use both types of sidespins to both sides.

By serving to the wide backhand, you can keep most players from looping. If they do step around and use a forehand from the backhand corner, they'll be out of position, and a good block to the forehand will often win the point. However, if your opponent is fast enough to step around and still cover the wide forehand, you should probably use another serve. If your opponent is anticipating your serve and stepping around too soon, a fast serve to the wide forehand will win a quick point and prevent your opponent from moving too soon next time. In general, don't serve deep too often or your opponent will get used to it. If your opponent starts attacking the serve hard with a backhand drive, it's time to try another serve!

### **Tactical Reasons for Using Deep Serves:**

- To set up smash
- To back opponent off table
- To force opponents to contact ball at a distance from their target (your side of table)
- To allow full spin on serves
- To cut off angles on return

### **Short Serves**

A short serve is more difficult to attack than a deep serve, and most top players serve mostly short. Unless your opponent has a good flip (or a good short push against a short chop serve), a short serve will set you up for an attack.

Short serves are used by almost any style of play. They're most effective at stopping loopers from looping. (Because the vast majority of top players loop, this is very important.) Loopers especially like to serve short to set up their loops.

Short topspin or sidespin serves are usually returned similarly, so they are covered together. A sidespin serve will tend to force your opponent to

return the ball to the side, but a good player will adjust, so you can't count on it. However, a sidespin is important because it makes the timing difficult for the receiver. Note that when a player has to reach in over the table to return a short serve to the forehand, the natural racket angle is to go crosscourt. If you give your opponent a sidespin that makes the ball go even more crosscourt (such as a backhand sidespin) you will increase the return difficulty more than using a sidespin going the other way. The same goes for a short serve to the backhand.

A short serve is a good way to bring a player in over the table. Opponents may then have trouble with your follow-up shot, if aggressive—they'll be too close to the table to react. They might also be in an awkward position if they're caught off guard by the short serve and have to reach for the ball (instead of stepping in).

Although you should vary your placement, a short serve is often most effective to the forehand side. It's more awkward to return a short ball with the forehand than with the backhand. The disadvantage is that the opponent can then flip the ball wide to the forehand, forcing you out of position. The same, of course, is true of a short serve to the backhand, except that here the angle is into the backhand, which is easy to handle but takes away your forehand attack. If your serve is being flipped to wide angles, try serving to the middle—it takes away the extreme angles and makes your opponent decide whether to return with a forehand or a backhand.

Short topspin or sidespin serves will nearly always be returned long, usually by a flip. You don't have to worry too much about them being returned short by most players, and of course they can't be looped. A good attacker can serve and then just wait for the deep return to attack. But if your opponent is flipping the serve well, you might have to change serves, probably to a short chop.

A short chop serve can be pushed back short or long, or it can be flipped. If you have a good loop, a short chop serve will set you up over and over to loop against many players who simply push it back deep. Of course, as you play better players, more of them will either push it short or flip it. If you mix in chop and no-spin serves, your opponent will have a hard time adjusting to both. (A very low no-spin serve is surprisingly hard to push or flip effectively.)

A short push against your short chop serve will take away your serve advantage unless you move quickly and flip it. But a good flip against your serve gives your opponent an advantage, so you should try not to let him do it effectively. Keep the serve

very low and an aggressive flip return becomes difficult. Chop serves, especially heavy ones, are more difficult to flip than sidespin or topspin ones and should be used if the opponent is flipping well. In that case, you might even consider serving deep.

### Tactical Reasons for Using Short Serves:

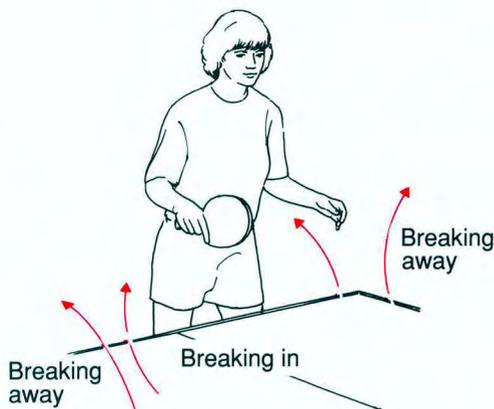
- To stop opponent from attacking, especially with loops
- To draw a player in close to the table
- To force opponent to reach for the ball

## RECEIVE TACTICS

How you return serves depends on your playing style, especially against a deep serve. Obviously, an attacker wants to attack the serve or at least set up to attack the next ball, while a defensive player will return the serve more conservatively. However, regardless of how you plan to return the serve, your opponent has an advantage when serving. If you can break even on your opponent's serve, you'll win for sure. If you average 2 out of 5 points on your opponent's serve, it will probably be a close match.

The most important things to consider are the spin on the serve and the depth. When receiving you should divide sidespins into two types of sidespins: those that break away from you and those that break into you (see Figure 14.1). A typical backhand sidespin serve will break into you if served to your backhand, but break away from you if served to your forehand side. In both cases the spin is the same, and the ball breaks the same way—it simply is served to the opposite side of your body, so the orientation changes.

If a serve is breaking into you, you'll have to contact the outside of the ball—the far side of the back of the ball. If the serve is breaking away from



**Figure 14.1** When receiving, divide sidespins into two types, depending upon your midline.

you, you'll have to contact inside the ball—the inside back of the ball. These two adjustments will make the ball go in the direction you're aiming. It's generally far easier to return a ball that is breaking into you (where you contact on outside of ball) than away from you (where you contact on inside of ball).

### Returning Deep Serves

Unless you're a chopper, there's one rule of thumb when returning deep serves: Attack! It doesn't matter whether you attack by hitting or looping, but you must attack. The reason is simple. You're hitting the ball from farther away than you would against a short serve. This gives your opponent more time to react to your receive. If you return passively, your opponent can just tap-dance into position, take a big windup, and WHAMMO! Point's over.

Because it's so important to attack deep serves, it's fortunate that they're easier to attack than short serves. If they weren't easy to attack, everyone would serve deep. The table isn't in the way, and you have more time to react to the ball, so there's no excuse for not attacking a deep serve (unless you don't do it for tactical purposes, or if you're a chopper).

Generally, if the serve isn't too fast, you want to attack the deep serve with your forehand. If you can loop, this is your chance. There's nothing like a good loop to take away a server's advantage. You can even stand off to the backhand side some, looking for chances to use a forehand loop return. Of course, don't stand too far to the side, or you might watch a service ace to your wide forehand. You might want to backhand loop deep serves to the backhand to save yourself the stepping around.

If you can't loop the serve, then drive it, either forehand or backhand. Then get set to smash, counterdrive, or block, whatever your style is. If the serve is fast and deep, use the speed of the ball to counterdrive it.

### Tactics Against Deep Serves:

- Attack!
- Loop if possible.
- Against fast serve, use speed to return ball quickly.

### Returning Short Serves

There are three ways to return a short serve. You can push it long, you can push it short, or you can flip it. If the serve has topspin, the most common

receive is to flip it. You can also learn to “chop block” the ball. Some top players can even chop block a short topspin or sidespin serve back short, similar to a short push. A chop block is simply a block where you chop down at contact to create backspin.

Against chop, the simplest return is a long push. At the lower levels, it’s the most common and most effective return, but at the higher levels it’s used mostly as a variation. The problem is that it gives your opponent an easy chance to loop or hit. It almost always gives the server the initiative. The advantage, of course, is that it’s easy to do, so you won’t be giving away points on missed returns. Some players, even good ones, have trouble with a low, heavy push, and even those that are good against it can be caught off guard if you throw it at them now and then. Also, sometimes your opponent is just too slow to step around the backhand and attack against it. Or he might be a defensive player. In either case, all you need to do is push deep to the backhand (use a fast or spin push) and you’re safe.

One of the most effective returns of serves against short chop serves is a short push. It keeps your opponent from looping and, if kept low, is difficult to flip well. Done properly, it takes away the server’s advantage. It’s the most common receive at the highest levels against a short chop serve. The dis-

advantage, of course, is that it requires far more touch than a long push, and you’ll make more mistakes. Unless you’re a very good blocker, a short push is extremely important.

A more aggressive receive is the flip. It can be done against any type of short serve. A good flip is a must for everyone. It allows you to attack the short serve (or a short push) and take the initiative from the server in one shot. Of course, it’s even more risky than a short push, and the penalty for trying to get the initiative on the opponent’s serve is that you will give some points away if you flip too aggressively and miss. You have to judge how often to flip. Done too often, the opponent gets used to it and might even attack it back. It’s best to vary your receive, using all three receives against short chop serves, and also vary the placement and speed of your flip versus short topspin or sidespin serves. And keep in mind that the very threat of a flip is often enough to keep your opponent from attacking a more passive receive effectively. He has to guard against your attack and can’t anticipate your receive.

### **Tactics Against Short Serves:**

- Push suddenly to wide angle.
- Push short.
- Flip at wide angles.

## **Service and Receive Strategy Drills**

### **1. Setup Serves**

What serves will set you up for your best attacking shots?

**Success Goal** = List at least 3 types of serves that set you up for your best attacking shots

**Your Score** = (#) \_\_\_\_\_ serves listed that will set you up for your best attacking shots

- a. \_\_\_\_\_
- b. \_\_\_\_\_
- c. \_\_\_\_\_

## 2. *Serve and Attack Game*

Play games with your partner where you use only the three serves you chose in Drill 1. Your goal is not only to win the point, but to do so by attacking after each serve, if possible. In a real match situation, you wouldn't want to be so predictable, but here you're familiarizing yourself and practicing against all the possible returns against your favorite serves.

**Success Goal** = Win at least half the games you play with your favorite serves

**Your Score** = (#) \_\_\_\_\_ games won with your favorite serve

## 3. *Surprise Serves*

What serves do you have that will often win you the point outright, or give you an easy winner, by surprising or catching your opponent off guard?

**Success Goal** = List at least 2 surprise serves

**Your Score** = (#) \_\_\_\_\_ surprise serves listed

- a. \_\_\_\_\_
- b. \_\_\_\_\_

## 4. *Surprise Serves Games*

Play games with the score starting out at deuce, 20-20. (Remember—you have to win by two.) The server should try to win the point with a surprise serve of some sort.

**Success Goal** = Win at least half the games played

**Your Score** = (#) \_\_\_\_\_ games won, (#) \_\_\_\_\_ games lost

## 5. Receive Strategy

Ask a partner to randomly serve a variety of serves to you. Identify at least two types of receives that you find effective against each serve. Reread this step if you don't remember your options!

**Success Goal** = Identify at least 2 types of receives against each type of serve

**Your Score** =

- (#) \_\_\_\_ receives against a deep side/topspin serve to forehand
- (#) \_\_\_\_ receives against a deep backspin serve to forehand
- (#) \_\_\_\_ receives against a deep side/topspin serve to backhand
- (#) \_\_\_\_ receives against a deep backspin serve to the backhand
- (#) \_\_\_\_ receives against a short side/topspin serve to forehand
- (#) \_\_\_\_ receives against a short backspin serve to forehand
- (#) \_\_\_\_ receives against a short side/topspin serve to backhand
- (#) \_\_\_\_ receives against a short backspin serve to backhand

## 6. Receive Strengths and Weaknesses

Play a match with a partner. Answer the following questions:

- a. What types of serves are you strong against?
- b. What types of serves are you weak against?

**Success Goal** = Name at least 2 serves that you're strong against and 2 that you're weak against; decide why you are weak against certain serves and take measures to improve

**Your Score** =

- (#) \_\_\_\_ serves that you are strong against
- (#) \_\_\_\_ serves that you are weak against
- (#) \_\_\_\_ serves that you are weak against, but understand the reason why, and so will improve