

Step 2 Spin and Racket Angles: It's a Game of Spin

Table tennis is a game of spin. Nearly every stroke and serve imparts some type of spin to the ball, and to understand them you have to understand each type of spin.

WHY IS SPIN IMPORTANT?

All good players put spin on their shots. An attacker uses topspin to control her or his attack, a defender uses backspin to control his or her defense. Nearly all players use sidespin on their serves to keep their opponents from making a strong return. Without spin, the game would be very different and a lot less exciting.

Because your opponents will be using spin, you must also. The types of spins you use against various shots will depend on what type of style you develop. But it's a given that if you wish to develop your game fully, you must learn how to use spin and how to play against it. To do this, you must first understand the various types of spins.

There are three basic types of spin: topspin, backspin, and sidespin (see Figure 2.1). You can use combinations of them, or use no spin at all ("no-spin").

Characteristics of topspin:

- The ball travels in a downward arc (see Figure 2.2). This means that a hard-hit ball that would normally go off the end of the table can still hit the table. This makes topspin ideal for attackers because you can control the attack by forcing the ball down.
- The ball jumps after it hits the table, throwing off an opponent's timing and making it difficult to return. This may cause the opponent to miss the return because the opponent cannot adjust.
- The ball will be returned high or off the end of the table if the spin is not taken into account.

Some players go for excessive spin, using topspin as a weapon by itself. This type of player is a *looper*. Others use just enough topspin to control their hard-hit drives. This type of player is a *hitter*. In general, the stronger a player is, the more he or she is physically suited to looping. The quicker a player is, the more he or she is suited to hitting. However, serious players need to do both.

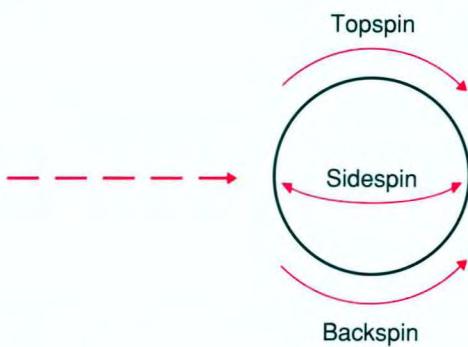


Figure 2.1 The three basic types of spin.

TOPSPIN

If you hit the ball so that the top half of it rotates away from you, you create topspin. This is done by hitting the back of the ball (usually toward the top) with an upward stroke.

BACKSPIN

If you hit the ball so that the bottom half of it rotates away from you, you create backspin (also known as underspin or chop). This is done by hitting the back of the ball (usually toward the bottom) with a downward stroke.

Characteristics of backspin:

- The ball travels in a line (see Figure 2.2). This keeps the ball at the same height for a longer period of time than other balls, which makes it easier to keep the ball low. This makes backspin ideal for defensive players. (Actually, backspin makes the ball curve upward—but this is balanced out by gravity pulling the ball down, so the ball tends to go in a line.)
- The ball will be returned into the net if the spin is not taken into account.
- The ball will slow down after it hits the table, throwing off an opponent's timing and making it difficult to return.

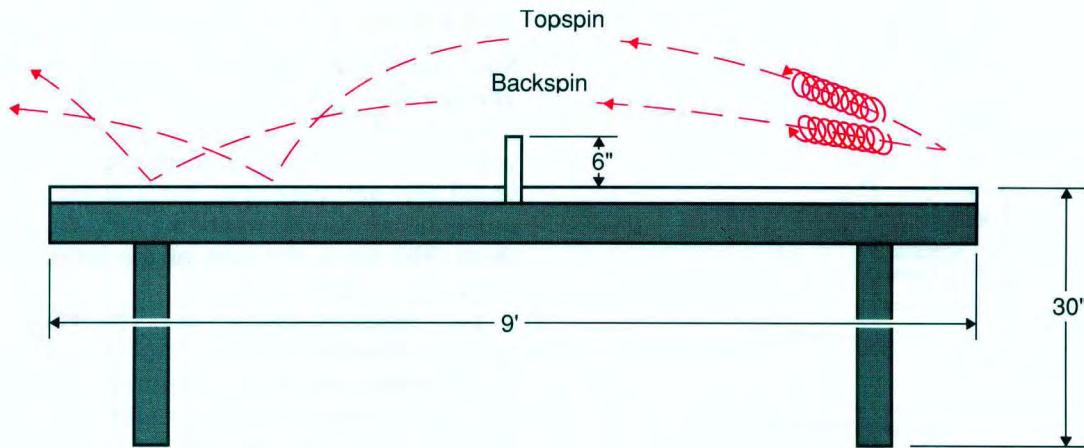


Figure 2.2 Differences between topspin and backspin ball arcs.

- A good backspin serve usually will keep an opponent from attacking the serve, often forcing a backspin return that can be attacked.

Backspin is used primarily as a defensive or passive shot. It's used to keep the ball low and difficult to attack. Some defensive players ("choppers") will back up 15 feet or more to return topspin drives with backspin. Backspin can lead to pushing, which is returning a ball that has backspin with your own backspin.

SIDESPIN

If you hit the ball so that the side of it moves away from you, you create sidespin. This is done by hitting the back of the ball (usually toward the side) with a sideways stroke. The ball spins like a record on a record player.

Characteristics of sidespin:

- The ball curves sideways. This can throw off an opponent's timing.
- The ball will bounce sideways when it hits the table, throwing off an opponent's timing and making it difficult to return.
- The ball will be returned off to the side if the spin is not taken into account.
- Sidespin is especially effective on serves. A good sidespin serve can force an opponent into an error.

NO-SPIN

A ball without spin is also a good variation, especially on the serve.

Characteristics of no-spin:

- Unless the ball is very low, it can be attacked easily if read properly.
- A short no-spin ball will often be mistaken for backspin, with the result that it is popped up; or it can be mistaken for topspin or sidespin and put in the net.
- Any spin shot can be done without spin as a variation.

RACKET ANGLES AGAINST SPIN: CLOSED AND OPEN

When your racket is pointing downward, so that the top of the racket is tilted away from you, the racket is closed. When your racket is pointing upward, so that the top of the racket is tilted toward you, it's open. Your racket angle will vary according to your position and shot and the incoming ball's spin and speed.

At first, you may have trouble returning spin. But you can quickly learn to adjust your racket angle to compensate. Here's how:

- To return a topspin, the racket must be closed (see Figure 2.3).
- To return a backspin, the racket must be open (see Figure 2.4).
- To return a sidespin, the racket must turn the opposite way that the ball is coming.

Generally, if you hit the ball off the end of the table, your racket is too open. If you hit the ball into the net, your racket is too closed.

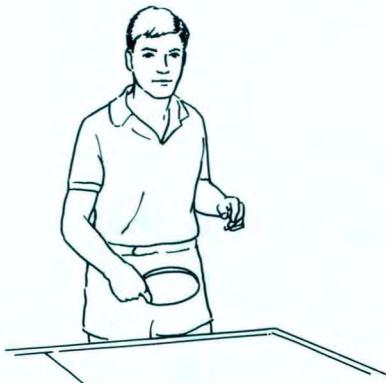


Figure 2.3 Keep your racket closed to return a topspin ball.

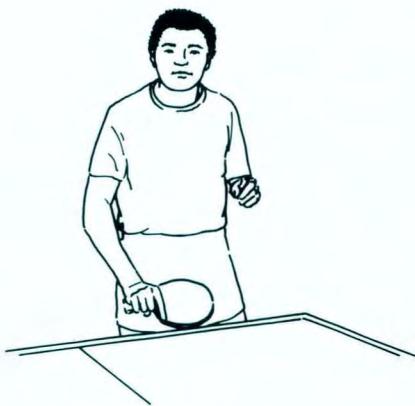


Figure 2.4 Keep your racket open to return a backspin ball.

CREATING SPIN

Maximum spin is produced by just grazing the ball. The more the ball is grazed and the faster the racket is moving at contact, the more spin there will be. If you contact the ball toward the tip of the racket, you'll also get more spin, because the racket tip moves faster than the rest of the racket in nearly all shots. The tip is the part of the hitting surface farthest from the handle.

To achieve maximum spin, you should use a "grippy" inverted rubber. But beware that the grippier the surface is, the more a spinning ball will take on it, and the harder it will be to return a spinning ball. Beginners are urged to use only a moderately grippy surface.

The opposite of grazing the ball is hitting it "flat." If you hit the ball flat, that means the ball sinks straight into the sponge. The ball should hit the racket in a near perpendicular line and shoot out with only light spin, usually a light topspin. The basic forehand and backhand drives are both flat shots.

Detecting Errors Against Spin

One of the most common and basic errors in table tennis is misreading spin. For example, if your shot goes into the net, there probably was either more backspin or less topspin than you thought—so open your racket. A ball that doesn't go where you aim it is a symptom. Reading spin (and adjusting your racket angle) is the cure. You must watch how

the racket contacts the ball and judge whether it hit it solidly or just grazed, how fast the grazing motion was, and in what direction. The faster the racket speed, and the more it grazes the ball, the more spin it will have. You will have to adjust to the spin accordingly. Practice and precision will help you improve as well as the following tips.

ERROR**CORRECTION**

1. You return opponent's backspins into the net.
2. You return opponent's topspins off the end.
3. You return opponent's sidespins off to the side.
4. You misread the amount of spin on the incoming ball.

1. Open your racket more and aim higher. Read degree of spin—see 4 below.
2. Close your racket more and aim lower. Read degree of spin—see 4 below.
3. Make sure you're reading which type of sidespin your opponent is using, and aim in the opposite direction that the ball is coming. Read degree of spin—see 4 below.
4. Watch your opponent's racket just before and after contact. Try to judge racket speed at contact and speed of the incoming ball. Racket speed converts to speed and spin, so the slower the incoming ball is (relative to racket speed), the more spin it has. Also take into account your opponent's racket surface—grippy surfaces transmit spin more efficiently. Watch the ball carefully as its arc can also tell you how much spin it has—topspins drop quickly, backspins float.

Spin and Racket Angles Drills

1. Topspin Usage

Pretend you are playing a fast-paced game of table tennis. Your opponent gives you a backspin shot. You decide to return the ball using topspin. What are three possible outcomes of using topspin? (Refer to the characteristics of topspin discussed earlier in this step.)

Success Goal = Identify 3 outcomes of using topspin

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. _____

Your Score = (#) _____ outcomes of using topspin

2. Backspin Usage

Imagine you are playing a practice game. Your opponent serves backspin. You decide to return the ball using backspin. What are three possible outcomes of using backspin? (Refer to the characteristics of backspin discussed earlier in this step.)

Success Goal = Identify 3 outcomes of using backspin

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. _____

Your Score = (#) _____ outcomes of using backspin

3. Sidespin Usage

Pretend you are still playing your practice game. You decide to serve sidespin. What are two possible outcomes of using sidespin? (Refer to the characteristics of sidespin discussed earlier in this step.)

Success Goal = Identify 2 outcomes of using sidespin

- a. _____
- b. _____

Your Score = (#) _____ outcomes of using sidespin

4. No-Spin Serve

Pretend you and your opponent are tied. You decide to fool your opponent by using a no-spin serve. What could be two possible outcomes? (Refer to the characteristics of no spin discussed earlier in this step.)

Success Goal = Identify 2 outcomes of serving with no spin

- a. _____
- b. _____

Your Score = (#) _____ outcomes of using no spin

5. Producing Topspin and Backspin

Away from the table, toss the ball up and hit it with the forehand motion. (If you do it against a wall, it'll bounce back to you so you can catch it and do it again.) Graze the ball at contact with an upward motion to produce topspin. Don't worry where the ball goes right now. Repeat, producing a backspin with a downward grazing motion. Next, use a backhand motion first with an upward grazing motion, then with a downward grazing motion.

Success Goal = Put topspin on the ball at least 10 times with both the forehand and backhand side of your racket; do the same with backspin

Your Score =

- (#) _____ topspins with a forehand motion
- (#) _____ backspins with a forehand motion
- (#) _____ topspins with a backhand motion
- (#) _____ backspins with a backhand motion

6. Racket Angles

Pretend you are playing a game, and you want to practice returning topspin, backspin, and sidespin. When preparing your returns you must think of how you will angle your racket. List the three different racket angles you would use for returning topspin, backspin, and sidespin.

Success Goal = Identify 1 angle for topspin, 1 angle for backspin, and 1 angle for sidespin

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. _____

Your Score = (#) _____ angles correctly identified to adjust to different spins

7. Producing Sidespin

Toss a ball up about a foot or two and hit it with either side of your racket with a sideways grazing motion to produce sidespin. The ball should bounce sideways when it hits the floor. Draw a target on the floor about 3 feet from a wall. Stand about 3 feet from the wall and hit the ball so that it travels parallel to the wall until the sidespin makes it curve around the target and hit the wall.

Success Goal = Curve the ball around a target at least 10 times

Your Score =

- (#) _____ sidespins with forehand side of racket
- (#) _____ sidespins with backhand side of racket

8. Backspin Return Drill

Away from the table, toss the ball up and stroke it with a grazing motion to produce backspin. (Make sure to contact the bottom of the ball with a very open racket.) The ball should hit the floor and, after a few bounces, either come to a stop or, if it has good backspin, bounce or roll back toward you. Draw a line on the ground with chalk (or use a line that's already on the floor) and try serving so the ball passes the line and comes back across it. (If you have trouble making the ball come back, try to make the ball at least come to a stop, and count that as your success goal.) If you have a partner, see who can make the ball come back the most.

Try another contest to see who can make the ball come back the most, with the ball having to bounce at least once past the line before coming back. Each player gets five tries, and the ball that comes back past the line the most wins.

Success Goal = Make the ball go past the line on the floor and come back at least 5 times

Your Score = (#) _____ times you make ball go past the line and then return

Spin and Racket Angles Summary

In this step you have learned how to produce topspin, backspin, sidespin, and no-spin. You have also learned how to angle your racket (closed, open, side) in order to return a topspin, a backspin, and a sidespin, respectively. By knowing how to create and read spin, you can adjust to your opponent's maneuvers and better control the game.

Answers to Step 2 Drills

Topspin Usage (#1)

- a. You can control your attack.
- b. You can force a miss because your opponent can't adjust to the ball's bounce in time.
- c. You can force your opponent to return the ball high or off the table.

Backspin Usage (#2)

- a. You can keep the ball low so it barely arcs over the net.
- b. You can force a miss because your opponent doesn't adjust to the ball's bounce in time.

- c. You can force your opponent to return the ball into the net.

Sidespin Usage (#3)

- a. You can force a miss because your opponent can't adjust to the ball's bounce in time.
- b. You can set up your next shot by forcing your opponent to return to one side or completely offside.

No-Spin Serves (#4)

- a. Your opponent could return the ball high if he or she thinks the ball has backspin.
- b. Your opponent could return the ball into the net if he or she thinks the ball has topspin.

Racket Angles (#6)

- a. Close your racket against topspin.
- b. Open your racket against backspin.
- c. Turn your racket to the opposite direction that the ball is coming for sidespin.