

Step 3 Ready Stance and the Forehand and Backhand Drives

Before you can properly execute any table tennis shot, you need to learn a correct ready position. You'll learn that in this step. You'll also learn the forehand and backhand drives, the backbone of your game. The drive is an aggressive topspin shot.

The forehand drive is generally the strongest shot in the game, because, unlike the backhand, the body is not in the way during the shot. Also, the muscles used in the shot are generally better developed than those used in the backhand. The forehand smash, which is simply a forehand drive at full speed, will likely become your most powerful shot. It's done pretty much the same way with all three grips.

The backhand can be done against backspin, but it's usually better against topspin. It's usually not as powerful as the forehand (although it can be), and so consistency and quickness are generally more important. The backhand is done differently with all three grips. I'll also cover the smash, which is simply a very hard backhand or forehand.

WHY ARE THE DRIVES IMPORTANT?

The forehand drive (an aggressive topspin shot) is important for three reasons. First, you need it to attack shots to your forehand side. Second, it will probably be your primary attacking shot. Third, it's the shot you'll use most often to smash. Forehand shots are generally stronger than backhand shots, because the body is not in the way when you backswing and the muscles used are generally stronger.

The backhand complements your forehand in covering the table. It is needed to return drives to your backhand side and is used to force errors with quick returns. As your backhand gets better, you can use it more aggressively. Many players have weak backhands, so if you can learn to attack strongly with your backhand, you'll have a big advantage. Jan-Ove Waldner and Jorgen Persson of Sweden, the 1989 and 1991 World Men's Singles Champions, won on the strength of their attacks from both sides. Try to develop the backhand and forehand equally, or your opponent will always have a weak side to play to. Some players have had great success by making the backhand their main

power shot; they often win matches because their opponents simply aren't used to playing someone with a good backhand.

READY STANCE

Imagine a top tennis player standing flatfooted and slouching, but attempting to hit a strong forehand. She'd either hit a very weak shot or fall flat on her face!

The same goes for table tennis. You can't hit a strong shot unless you have a good stance. You have to be well balanced and coiled like a spring (see Figure 3.1).



Figure 3.1 Ready stance.

Most players automatically stand facing the endline (i.e., their feet point perpendicular to the line at the edge of the table that is called the endline). This is correct for players who favor their backhand, but most advanced players either favor the forehand or play both sides equally, and for them the proper stance is with the right foot slightly back, but the body still facing the table (or incoming ball). This puts you in a good position to hit either a backhand or a forehand. Your weight should be on the inside balls of the feet, evenly distributed. Try not to let your heels touch the ground. Your knees should be bent, with your body in a slight crouch. The taller you are, the

more you need to bend your knees. This brings you down to the playing surface and enables you to spring in either direction very quickly.

Your racket should point at your opponent. This allows you to move it in both directions equally and quickly. Use your free hand as a counterbalance. It shouldn't just hang there! Keep your wrist above your elbow at all times.

Now relax. No hunched shoulders or clenched teeth or fists allowed! But don't relax *too* much; don't slouch. It's unnecessary tenseness that should be eliminated.

EXECUTING THE FOREHAND DRIVE

Start out facing the table, your right foot slightly back (see Figure 3.2a). Rotate your body to the right at the waist, with the hand swinging outward. Keep your elbow near your waist. Rotate your weight to your right foot. During the backswing, keep the racket perpendicular to the floor. The racket tip and arm should point slightly down, with your elbow at about 120 degrees (see Figure 3.2b).

Start the forward swing by rotating your weight forward onto your left foot. At the same time, rotate your waist and arm forward, keeping your elbow almost stationary. Elbow angle should decrease to about 90 degrees (see Figure 3.2c). Backswing and forward swing should be one continuous motion.

Make contact at about the top of the bounce, in front and slightly to the right of your body. The racket should rotate around the top and back of the ball, creating topspin. For a hard-hit forehand or against topspin, the racket should be closed and contact on the back of the ball toward the top. For a softer forehand, or against backspin, the racket should be open and contact more under the ball. Against backspin, stroke slightly up. Make sure to "stroke through" the ball—do not stop at contact;

use the upward and forward motion of the racket to sink the ball into the sponge.

Follow through with the racket going roughly to your forehead or a little to the left, similar to a salute. Taller players should follow through lower, shorter players a little higher. Your weight should be transferred to the left leg, with your shoulders and trunk rotated to the left (see Figure 3.2d). Return to the ready position.

EXECUTING THE BACKHAND DRIVE

Rotate your forearm toward your waist (see Figure 3.2, a and b). Racket and arm should point sideways, with your elbow at about 90 degrees. During the backswing, the racket should be perpendicular against topspin, slightly open against backspin. Keep your elbow stationary.

Start the forward swing by rotating your forearm forward. Move your elbow forward just enough to keep the racket going in a straight line (see Figure 3.2c).

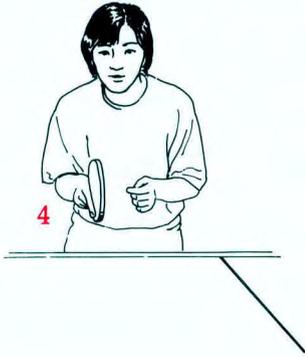
At contact, snap your wrist forward and over the ball, closing the racket. The racket rotates around the ball, creating topspin (see Figure 3.2d). For extra power, stroke straight through the ball with less spin, sinking the ball straight into the sponge and wood. For a hard-hit backhand, or against topspin, the racket should be closed. For a softer backhand, or against backspin, the racket should be open. Against backspin, stroke slightly up.

Extend your arm forward and slightly up, with your elbow extending forward to keep the racket going in a straight line until the very end of the follow-through. At the end of the stroke, the racket should point a little to the right of the direction the ball was hit. Your arm should be almost fully extended.

**Figure 3.2 Keys to Success:
Forehand and Backhand Drives**

Preparation Phase

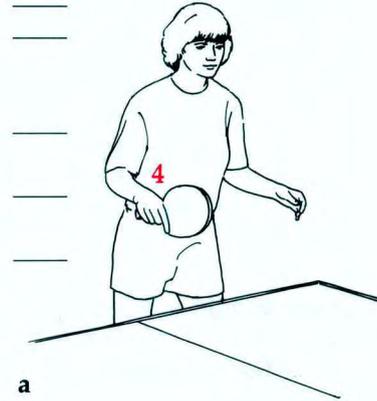
Forehand Drive



a

- ___ 1. In ready position
- ___ 2. Arm relaxed
- ___ 3. Racket slightly open against backspin, slightly closed or perpendicular against topspin
- ___ 4. Wrist loose and cocked slightly down
- ___ 5. Move into position, right foot slightly back for forehand

Backhand Drive

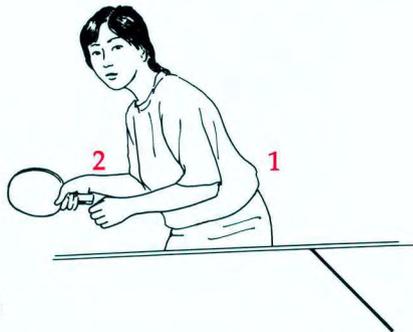


a

Execution Phase

Backswing

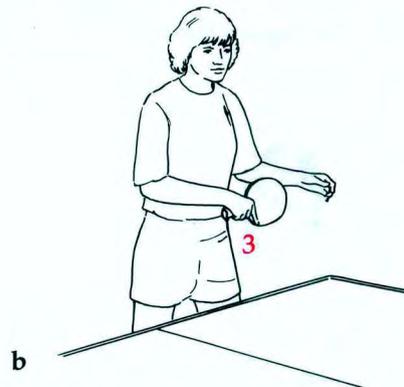
Forehand Drive



b

- 1. Rotate body backward at waist and hips ___
- 2. Rotate arm backward at elbow ___
- 3. Rotate weight to back foot ___
- 4. Against backspin, racket should start out slightly lower ___

Backhand Drive

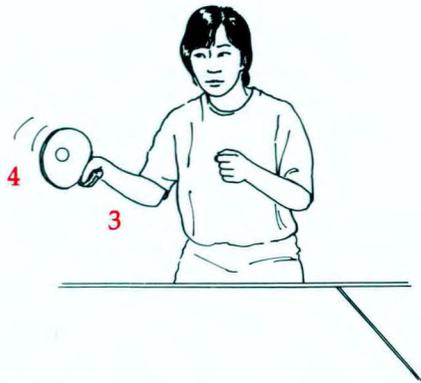


b

- 1. Bring racket straight toward the waist ___
- 2. Against underspin, bring racket slightly down ___
- 3. Cock wrist backward ___
- 4. Racket perpendicular, or slightly closed, against topspin; slightly open against backspin ___

Forward Swing

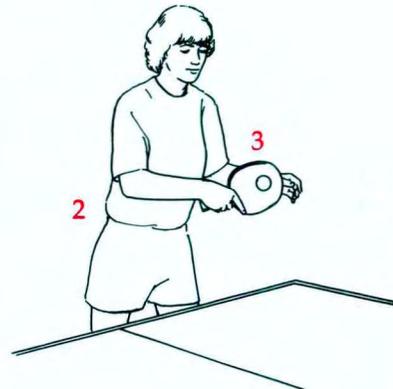
Forehand Drive



c

1. Rotate weight to front foot ____
2. Rotate body forward on waist and hips ____
3. Rotate arm forward from the elbow ____
4. Contact made in front and to the right side of body ____

Backhand Drive



c

1. Racket moves straight forward ____
2. Elbow moves slightly forward ____
3. Contact made in front and slightly to left side ____
4. Turn top of wrist down at contact so it faces the table, closing the racket ____

Follow-Through Phase

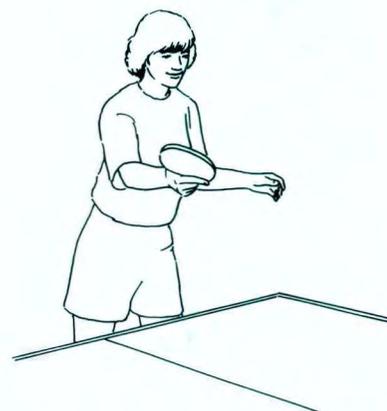
Forehand Drive



d

1. Racket goes forward and slightly up naturally ____
2. Return to ready position ____

Backhand Drive



d

1. Racket goes in general direction ball is hit ____
2. Return to ready position ____

BACKHANDS WITH OTHER GRIPS

When doing a backhand with the Seemiller grip, remember that you use the same side of the racket to contact the ball as you would when hitting a forehand (see Figure 3.3). The racket should rotate between the forehand and the backhand like a windshield wiper. Notice that with the Seemiller grip your palm faces away from the body while with the shakehands grip, it faces toward the body. Remember to stroke the ball; don't just stick the racket out and block the ball. The stroke itself is almost identical to a shakehands backhand.



Figure 3.3 The Seemiller grip for backhand.

With the penhold grip, the backhand becomes more difficult. It's a very cramped stroke, at least for a beginner. (Advanced players can do the stroke quite smoothly, almost as well as the best shakehands players.) As with the Seemiller grip, the same surface is used for hitting both the backhand and the forehand. The stroke itself is rather simple (see Figure 3.4, a-c). It's the cramped nature of the stroke that makes it more difficult. Many penhold players don't really stroke the backhand; they block it. This is okay, as long as they develop the forehand and the footwork to use it. Other penholders take a full stroke and swing at the ball (especially those with the Korean grip).

SMASH

A smash is simply a very hard forehand or backhand. Use a longer backswing to generate more power. Use more wrist for backhand smashes, and throw your body into the shot on forehand

smashes. Use a vigorous quick forearm snapping gesture from the elbow on all smashes. Contact the ball straight on with no spin (very flat), and sink the ball through the sponge to the wood. Follow through longer than normal.

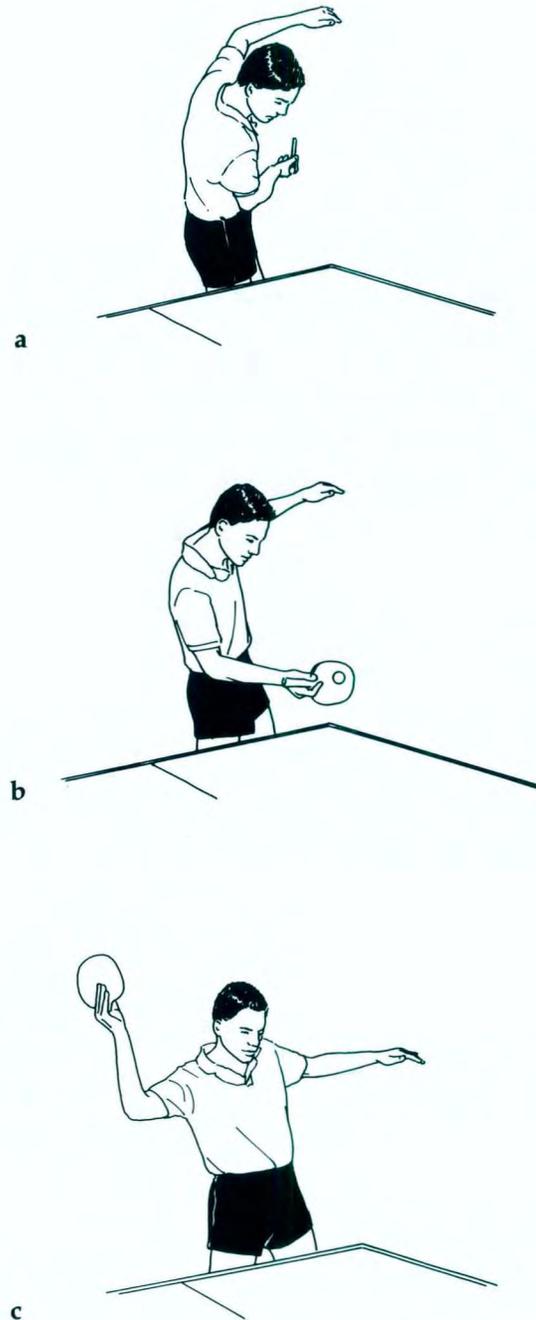


Figure 3.4 Backswing (a), forward swing (b), and follow-through (c) phases. (Penhold grip backhand kill.)

Detecting Forehand and Backhand Drive Errors

Some of the more common errors are shown below. Even advanced players make some of these mistakes, but there's no reason why you should!

ERROR



1. The ball goes into the net or off the end.
2. The shot feels strained or erratic.
3. No power.
4. You're off balance during the shot.

CORRECTION

1. Read the spin and adjust racket angle. If you're going into the net, aim higher and contact more under the ball. If you're going off the end, aim lower with a closed racket.
2. Make sure you're executing each part of the forward swing in the correct sequence. On the forehand shot, the order should be weight transfer, hip and waist rotate, then forearm snap. On the backhand, the order should be forearm snap, then turn the top of wrist over so it faces the table. Make sure your muscles are relaxed.
3. Accelerate the racket into the ball more, using all parts of the stroke. Make sure you have a strong elbow snap. On the forehand, use more weight shift. On the backhand, increase the length of the backswing. Relax your muscles.
4. Move to the ball, don't reach.

Forehand and Backhand Drive Drills

Whenever starting a forehand or backhand drive drill in this section, the server should serve topspin if he or she knows how. If not, the player should simply serve to get the ball in play, without putting any spin on the ball. Follow basic service rules given in the "Table Tennis Today" section on service rules. Make sure the ball hits both sides of the table when you serve.

1. Ready Stance

Get into a ready position. Make sure to stay relaxed. Imagine yourself about to hit a ball. You should feel like a coiled spring. Then relax (as if it were between points), and go into a ready stance again. This drill simulates a game situation where you would go into a good ready position at the start of each rally. Experiment with different ready stances until you find one that feels comfortable to use with both the forehand and backhand shots. Note that regardless of whether the stance favors one side, you should be equally ready to hit a forehand or a backhand with any stance. (Favoring one side means that your body is in a better position to hit on that side, not that you are expecting that shot.)

Success Goal = Go into your ready stance at least 10 times

Your Score = (#) _____ consecutive times into ready position

2. Forehand and Backhand Drives

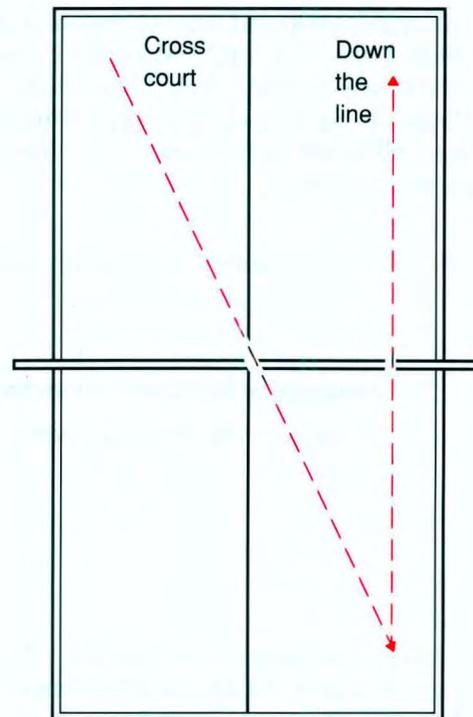
Have your partner hit forehand crosscourt to your forehand. Return it with a forehand drive. Your partner should catch the ball and repeat. Repeat with backhand. Make sure to get in a ready position after each shot.

Success Goal = 20 consecutive forehand and 20 consecutive backhand returns

Your Score =

(#) _____ consecutive forehand returns

(#) _____ consecutive backhand returns



3. *Crosscourt Hitting*

Hit forehand to forehand, crosscourt, with a partner. Go slow at first until you find a good pace. Try to hit each ball exactly the same and to keep the ball in play. Do the same backhand to backhand. These are your first true rallying drills, and the most common way to warm up at the start of a playing session. Practicing these shots in this manner is the first step toward perfecting them in a game situation.

Success Goal = 20 consecutive forehands and 20 consecutive backhands

Your Score =

(#) _____ consecutive forehands

(#) _____ consecutive backhands

4. *Forehand and Backhand Down the Line*

This drill enables you and your partner to drive the ball down the line rather than always crosscourt. You hit forehand from the forehand corner down the line to your partner's backhand, who drives the ball backhand down the line to you. Make sure to contact the ball at the exact point opposite the direction you want the ball to go. For example, if you want the ball to go to the left, you should contact the ball on its right side. You will be hitting forehands down the line with topspin while your opponent does backhands down the line, and vice versa.

Success Goal = 20 consecutive forehands and 20 consecutive backhands down the line

Your Score =

(#) _____ consecutive forehands down the line

(#) _____ consecutive backhands down the line

5. *Smashing*

Hit forehand crosscourt to your partner, who returns the ball with a weak drive. Smash the return. Do the same with the backhand. (You might want to use a bucket of balls for this drill rather than keep picking up the ball.)

Success Goal = 10 consecutive smashes

Your Score =

(#) _____ consecutive forehand smashes

(#) _____ consecutive backhand smashes

6. *Random Drill*

Your partner backhand drives the ball to either your forehand or backhand side randomly. You drive each ball back with either forehand or backhand, depending on where your partner hits the ball. Continue to rally in this way for 15 consecutive drives. Your partner should drive the ball toward the corners, but not so wide as to make you move around too much. The purpose of this drill is to make a decision as to whether to use a forehand or a backhand shot. You'll have to move some to get to each shot, but that's not the focus of this drill. Make sure to get into a ready position after each shot, otherwise the drill will be nearly impossible. Be ready for shots on either side. Don't overanticipate where the next shot is going—wait until your partner is committed on direction before you react. This means waiting until your opponent contacts the ball or a split second before.

Success Goal = 15 consecutive shots, forehand or backhand

Your Score = (#) _____ consecutive forehands or backhands

7. *Backhand-Backhand Game*

Play a game with your partner, backhand to backhand drives only. Only shots that land on the backhand side of the table count—misses are a lost point. (If you both disagree as to whether shot was in, it is a “let”—take it over.) Play games to 11; you have to win by 2. Experiment: Are you more successful playing consistently or aggressively?

Success Goal = Win at least half of the games played

Your Score = (#) _____ wins, (#) _____ losses

Forehand and Backhand Drives Keys to Success Checklist

Have your instructor or practice partner critique your forehand and backhand drives with the Keys to Success checklist in Figure 3.2. Verify that you're ready to hit both forehand and backhand drives

from your ready stance by having an observer critique your progress. Your observer should pay close attention to whether each part of the stroke is done in the proper order.