

Step 4 Beginning Serves: Getting the Initiative

Before you play regulation games, you need to know how to put the ball in play—how to serve. There are four serves that you should learn right from the beginning: forehand topspin, backhand topspin, forehand backspin, and backhand backspin.

These serves are the foundation. Learn them and you'll be ready to develop serves that will really give your opponent problems!

WHY ARE THESE SERVES IMPORTANT?

You could just pat the ball high over the net when you serve, just to get it into play. But this would give your opponent an easy shot to start the rally off with. Since your opponent no doubt has spent many hours perfecting her serve, she'll be taking the initiative when she serves, and you'll be at a severe disadvantage if you can't do the same.

By taking some time to practice your own serves, you won't give your opponent a good ball to start the rally off with when you serve. If your opponent is strong against one serve, you'll have others to use instead. You'll get the first strong shot.

Topspin serves enable you to serve faster than other serves. They are favored by players who like to go for hard drives against topspin right from the start of the rally. Topspin serves can be done very fast to any part of the table, and the topspin will often force a high return. The risk, however, is that topspin serves are easier to attack than other serves. Topspin servers should be ready to hit or counter-hit right after the serve. Most players will return a topspin serve with a topspin drive of some sort.

Backspin serves are used to set up a heavy topspin attack. They're a safe way to serve, because backspin serves are difficult to attack, especially if they land short on the table. When serving backspin, you'll probably get a backspin return. Backspin servers usually attack with heavy topspin, because the likely backspin return can be attacked with heavy topspin very easily.

Don't just serve to put the ball in play: Serve with a plan. Try to use serves that will give you returns that you're comfortable with. For example, if you like to attack against backspin, serve heavy backspin, especially to your opponent's backhand

side, and you'll probably get a backspin push return—just what you wanted (explained in Step 6). If you like to drive the ball against topspin, serve topspin and you'll usually get a topspin return. If you aren't sure which type you like yet, learn both types of serves, and later on you'll find which type you favor.

If your opponent is weak against a certain serve or shot, play into it. If he has trouble returning serves to the forehand, you know where to serve. If she doesn't like topspin rallies, serve topspin. Remember—the server starts the rally, and he gets to choose what type of rally will start out.

In doubles, players serve from the right-hand court crosscourt to the opponent's right-hand court. In singles, however, you may serve from anywhere on your side of the table to anywhere on your opponent's side. However, you must contact the ball behind your endline when serving.

Before you learn to serve you have to know the service rules (see Figure 4.1). They are as follows (see the section on rules in "Table Tennis Today" for a more thorough treatment):

1. Ball in palm
2. Palm flat and stationary
3. Fingers together and thumb free
4. Racket and free hand above table
5. Racket and free hand behind endline
6. Toss ball six inches or more
7. No spin imparted by toss
8. Contact ball as it drops
9. Ball bounces once on each side of table



Figure 4.1 Beginning position for serving.

You also need to know some terminology. A *short* serve, if given the chance, bounces twice or more on the opponent's side of the table. A *long* serve only has the chance to bounce once on the opposite side of the table. A *crosscourt* serve goes diagonally from one corner to the other. A *down the line* serve travels from corner to corner on one of the two sidelines. These terms also apply to shots other than serves.

HOW TO EXECUTE A TOPSPIN SERVE

You can serve a topspin serve with either extreme topspin or extreme speed, depending on whether you hit the ball with a grazing motion or contact it straight on (flat). Learn both, because many players will have trouble with one but not the other.

For maximum spin, contact the ball with an upward grazing motion. For maximum speed, serve mostly crosscourt to give the ball more time to drop. Practice your serves both crosscourt and down the line, however.

Start by standing in position, usually toward your backhand side. For a forehand topspin serve, face slightly to the right; for a backhand topspin serve, face the table (see Figure 4.2a).

Pull your arm back and toss the ball up at the same time. For extra speed, pull the racket straight

back; for extra topspin, pull it a little down (see Figure 4.2b). As the ball starts to drop, pull the racket forward at your elbow. Contact the ball low to the table, very flat for speed, with an upward grazing motion for extra topspin. At contact, snap your wrist—upward for spin, forward for speed (see Figure 4.2c). The racket should be perpendicular to the floor or slightly closed at contact. Follow through naturally, with your wrist turning over (see Figure 4.2d).

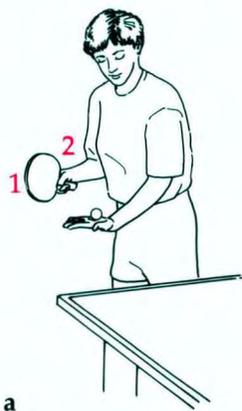
The ball should bounce first on your side of the table very near your endline. The second bounce should be near the opponent's endline—very deep. This gives the ball the most time to drop between bounces, letting you serve faster, because the major limit to speed on the serve is getting the ball to drop quickly enough to hit the other side. Serving so the ball lands near your opponent's endline also makes the opponent return the ball from as far away as possible from her target (your side of the table), making the serve more difficult to return effectively.

Make sure the ball crosses the net very low. If it goes high, you're hitting down on the ball too much at contact.

Figure 4.2 *Keys to Success: Topspin Serves*

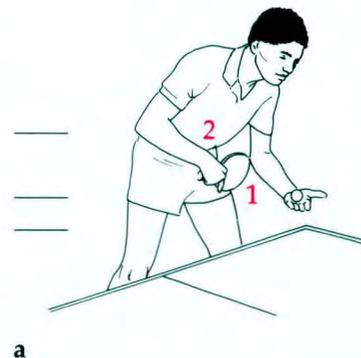
Preparation Phase

Forehand Topspin Serve



- 1. Racket roughly perpendicular to floor
- 2. Wrist loose and cocked slightly down
- 3. Arm relaxed

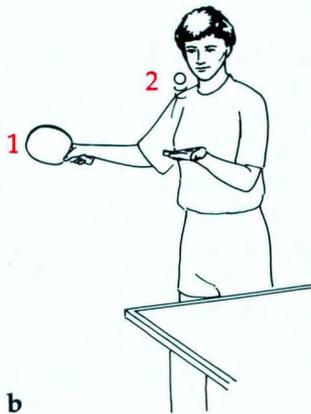
Backhand Topspin Serve



Execution Phase

Backswing

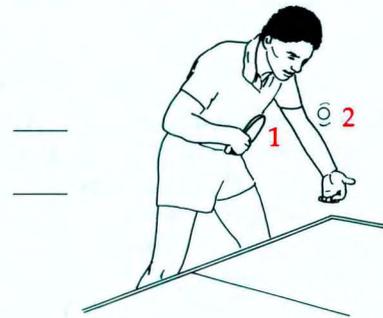
Forehand Topspin Serve



- 1. Draw racket back roughly 1 foot
- 2. Toss ball upward between 6 inches and eye level

b

Backhand Topspin Serve



b

Forward Swing

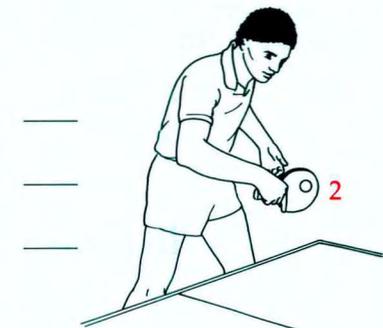
Forehand Topspin Serve



- 1. Racket moves forward
- 2. Graze the back of the ball upward for extra topspin
- 3. Contact the back of the ball very flat for extra speed

c

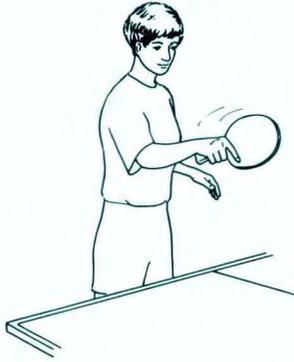
Backhand Topspin Serve



c

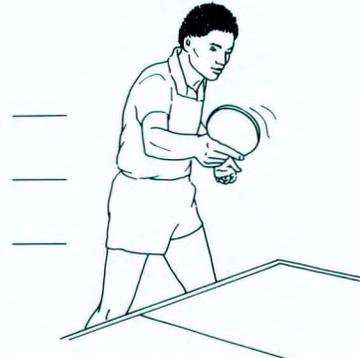
Follow-Through Phase

Forehand Topspin Serve



- 1. Follow through naturally
- 2. Follow through slightly up for extra topspin
- 3. Follow through straight forward for extra speed

Backhand Topspin Serve



HOW TO EXECUTE A BACKSPIN SERVE

The backspin serve is similar to the topspin serve with these differences: Your racket should be open throughout the serve (see Figure 4.3a). Bring the racket slightly upward during the backswing, with your wrist cocked up (see Figure 4.3b). Then bring the racket down to the ball, contacting the back bottom of the ball (as much under as you can) with a grazing motion, snapping your wrist at contact (see Figure 4.3, c and d). The ball should travel slowly, because most of your racket speed causes backspin on the ball, not speed.

At first, your serves will probably go long. Serving with good backspin is more important than depth control at this point. However, if you can

learn to serve a backspin serve so it goes short, it will be harder for your opponent to attack it. A short serve is one where the ball bounces twice on the opponent's side of the table. It is easier to serve backspin and no-spin short than other spins. To serve short make sure the first bounce (on your side of the table) is near the net. Contact the ball with a fine grazing motion so there isn't much forward motion and try to make the ball bounce twice on the other side (assuming your opponent doesn't hit it). However, don't sacrifice spin to keep the ball short. If you keep the bounce low (as you should for all serves), the ball will also go shorter. Serving crosscourt also gives more table room to keep the ball short.

Figure 4.3 Keys to Success: Backspin Serves

Preparation Phase

Forehand Backspin Serve



- 1. Racket very open
- 2. Wrist loose and cocked slightly up
- 3. Arm relaxed

a

Backhand Backspin Serve



a

Execution Phase

Backswing

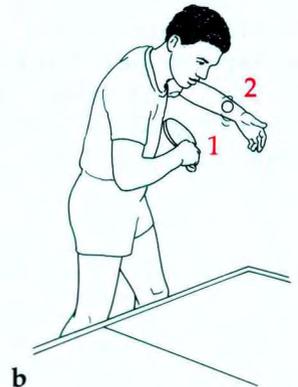
Forehand Backspin Serve



- 1. Draw racket back and slightly up
- 2. Toss ball upward between 6 inches and eye level

b

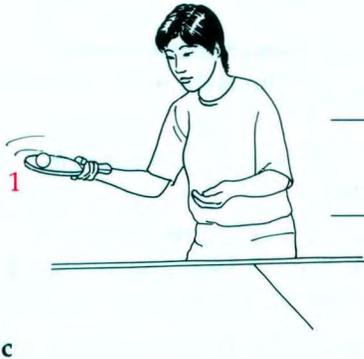
Backhand Backspin Serve



b

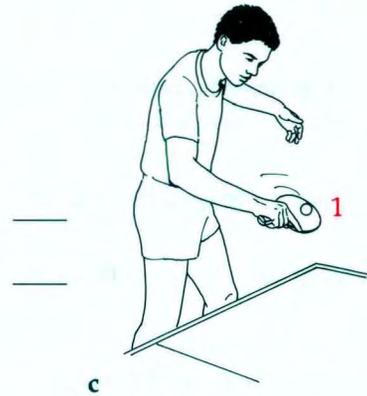
Forward Swing

Forehand Backspin Serve



- 1. Graze back bottom of the ball with a forward and slightly downward motion
- 2. Contact the ball with a fine grazing for more backspin

Backhand Backspin Serve

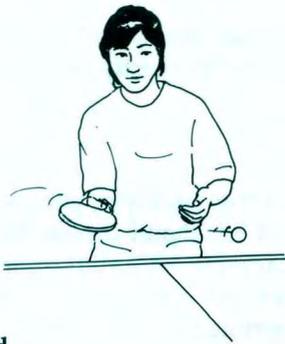


c

c

Follow-Through Phase

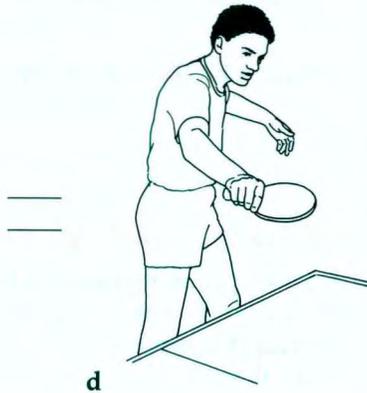
Forehand Backspin Serve



- 1. Follow through naturally
- 2. Try to make the ball land short

d

Backhand Backspin Serve



d

Detecting Topspin and Backspin Serve Errors

Even if you can't make great serves overnight, you can at least make good ones very quickly by following some basic principles. A few common errors account for most service problems, and addressing them will greatly enhance your serves.

**ERROR**

1. Your serve bounces too high making it easy for your opponent to attack.
2. Your serve goes into the net.
3. Your serve goes off the table.
4. You miss the ball entirely.
5. You're not generating enough spin.
6. Your serves are erratic.
7. You can't keep your backspin serve short.
8. You can't hit the topspin serve fast enough.

CORRECTION

1. Contact the ball lower and make sure not to hit downward at contact. This is the most common cause of a high bounce.
2. Make sure your first bounce isn't so close to the net that it can't rise.
3. Either you're serving too fast or your serve is bouncing too high. The ball doesn't have a chance to drop on the other side.
4. Keep your eye on the ball. Toss the ball slightly higher so you have more time to watch it and time your contact.
5. Make sure to graze the ball. Generate racket speed with loose muscles, longer backswing, and wrist.
6. Make sure the stroke and contact are the same each time. Make sure your arm is relaxed.
7. Graze the ball more. Make the first bounce near the net and very low.
8. Make sure your arm is loose. Snap your forearm and wrist into the shot and hit mostly forward.

HOW TO RETURN SERVES

At this point, your opponent (if he or she's learning from this book) has two main types of serves: topspin and backspin. You now need to know how to return them.

When your opponent serves topspin, use the forehand or backhand drives learned earlier. Place the ball so your opponent can't use his or her stronger side—if he or she's weak on the backhand, for example, that's where you should return most serves.

When your opponent serves backspin, you can also use the forehand and backhand drives. Remember to adjust for the backspin—it's a little more tricky than adjusting for topspin because you have to hit upward while still getting the ball to drop on the other side. Later on you'll learn other ways to return backspin serves, but it's important that you learn how to topspin drive them back first.

Beginning Service Drills

For the following drills, you'll need either a bucket of balls or a partner. Serious players always have a bucket of balls around to practice serves when they have no partner.

1. Topspin Serves

Serve forehand topspin serves. Do them from both the left and right sides of the table. Concentrate on serving with good topspin, as low as possible. Repeat with backhand topspin serves. Repeat the entire exercise, this time using fast topspin serves, emphasizing speed instead of spin. Serve mostly crosscourt (because it gives you more room to serve). This drill should give you both the ability and the confidence to perform all types of topspin serves—forehand, backhand, fast, and increased spin serves.

Success Goal = 30 consecutive forehand topspin serves and 30 consecutive backhand topspin serves emphasizing spin, then speed

Your Score =

- (#) _____ consecutive forehand topspin serves
- (#) _____ consecutive backhand topspin serves
- (#) _____ consecutive fast forehand topspin serves
- (#) _____ consecutive fast backhand topspin serves

2. Backspin Serves

Serve forehand backspin serves from both forehand and backhand sides of the table. Concentrate on getting good backspin and keeping the ball low. Repeat with backhand backspin serves. This drill should help you learn how to perform forehand and backhand backspin serves to all parts of the table with confidence.

Success Goal = 30 consecutive forehand backspin serves and 30 consecutive backhand backspin serves

Your Score =

- (#) _____ consecutive forehand backspin serves
- (#) _____ consecutive backhand backspin serves

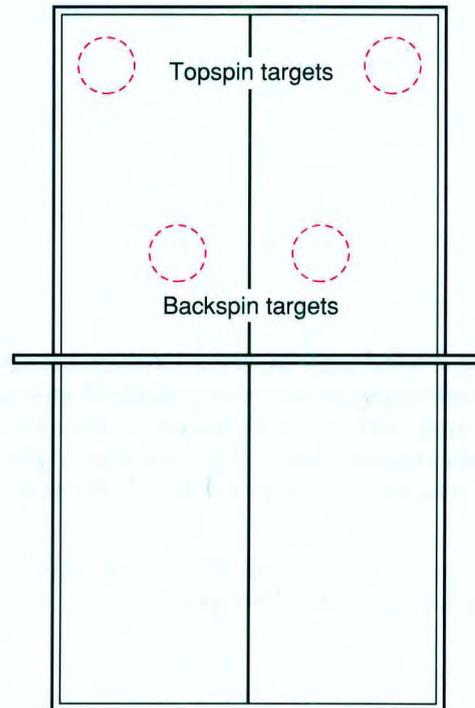
3. Service Accuracy

Put a small target on the table, such as the lid to a jar or a broken ball. Try to hit it with one of the serves you've learned. Put the target a few inches from the far corner of the table for topspin serves, somewhere in the middle of the table for backspin serves. Do this with forehand and backhand topspin and backspin serves. This drill will teach you accuracy so that you can serve the ball where you want to.

Success Goal = Hit the target 5 times with all four types of serves

Your Score =

- (#) _____ hit targets with forehand topspin serve
- (#) _____ hit targets with backhand topspin serve
- (#) _____ hit targets with forehand backspin serve
- (#) _____ hit targets with backhand backspin serve



4. Side to Side Accuracy

Play an accuracy game. Put four targets on the table, one near each far corner, one in the middle backhand area, one in the middle forehand area. Serve two consecutive topspin serves deep (that is, the ball should bounce near your opponent's endline), aiming for the corner targets, then two consecutive backspin serves, aiming for the two closer targets. Do this in a circuit. See who can hit the most targets in the circuit in a given amount of repetitions. Use both forehand and backhand serves.

Success Goal = Hit more targets than your partner at least once

Your Score = (#) _____ targets hit in 1 circuit

5. Short Backspin

Serve a backspin serve short. The ball should bounce twice on the other side of the table. Make sure to graze the ball so it will travel slowly; make sure the first bounce on your side is near the net. You might have a contest to see who can make the most short serves in a given amount of time. Review Figure 4.3a-d to hit a successful short backspin serve.

Success Goal = 10 short forehand backspin serves and 10 short backhand backspin serves

Your Score =

- (#) _____ short forehand backspin serves
- (#) _____ short backhand backspin serves

6. Service Accuracy Game

Put several paper cups or similar light objects at the edge of your side and your opponent's side of the table. Each player takes turns serving the ball, trying to knock a cup off the table. Whoever knocks off all the cups first wins. (You can continue rallying after the serve.) Try to use the different serves you have learned in this step for each turn.

Success Goal = Knock off all the cups first at least once

Your Score = (#) _____ times knocked all the cups off first

7. Backhand-Forehand Game

Play an 11-point game with these rules: Server always serves backspin forehand or backhand to partner's backhand. Partner returns with a backhand drive to server's backhand. Rally continues, backhand to backhand, until one player suddenly goes down the line to the opponent's forehand. Whoever gets the forehand shot has to smash; then it's open play until the point is won (if the smash is returned).

Success Goal = Win at least 1 game with these rules

Your Score = (#) _____ times won

8. Topspin Serve and Attack Game

Play to 11 points. Serve topspin to any part of your partner's side of the table. Your partner drives it back with a forehand or backhand drive, and you attack (hit harder) with forehand or backhand drives. In this game, the server has to be the aggressor, trying to end the point as quickly as possible, while the receiver plays consistent drives. Then repeat, serving backspin, with your partner returning with a forehand or backhand drive. (If your partner knows how to do backspin returns—pushing—your partner can push, and you can make the first topspin drive.)

Success Goal = Win at least 1 game at topspin serve and attack and at least 1 game at backspin serve and attack

Your Score =

(#) _____ times won at topspin serve and attack

(#) _____ times won at backspin serve and attack

Beginning Serves Keys to Success Checklists

Have your instructor or practice partner observe your serves and verify that they are being done properly, using the Keys to Success checklists (see Figures 4.2 and 4.3). Have them observe that you are doing all four major serves correctly—forehand and backhand topspin and backspin serves. They

should verify that you're getting good spin on all four serves, and figure out why if you're not. Pay particular attention to the contact on each serve—make sure you're grazing the ball and accelerating into the serve, not just going through the motion.