Step 5  Positioning and Footwork: How to Move to the Ball

How you position yourself at the table often sets the tone for your future efforts. If you position yourself correctly, you'll tend to play correctly. If you don't, you cannot possibly play correctly. You'll have to learn the correct methods to move into position and execute any necessary shot if you wish to improve. In this step you will first learn correct positioning, then correct footwork using the two-step method.

Positioning is where you stand. Footwork is how you get into position. Without good footwork, you won't be in position for most shots.

WHY POSITIONING AND FOOTWORK ARE IMPORTANT

You can't return a ball if you're 5 feet away as it whizzes by! The better your positioning is, the less distance you'll have to cover when moving to a shot and the less rushed the shot will be. You have to be able to put yourself in a position that allows you to get to any shot made by your opponent.

Some players stand in one area and just reach for each shot. This means that they hit a ball from their middle forehand, wide forehand, and close to the body forehand differently, as well as all shots in between. The same goes for the backhand. It's impossible to learn to hit all these different types of forehands and backhands as well as you could learn to hit just one type of forehand and one type of backhand. Reaching instead of moving means you'll always be off balance when you hit the ball.

POSITIONING

Many players automatically position themselves in the middle of the table. This is incorrect. Your ready stance should be somewhat to the left of the centerline (see Figure 5.1). (Note that this is for right-handers. Here, and elsewhere in the book, left-handers reverse.)

Three things must be considered when you position yourself; they must be done automatically:

- The playing elbow marks the midpoint between the forehand and the backhand, so you should keep your playing elbow near the center of the table. This moves your whole body to the left. (When a player hits to the “middle,” he isn’t hitting to the middle of the table—he’s hitting to the opponent’s middle. This is defined to be his playing elbow, which is in the middle of his forehand and backhand contact points.)
- Many players have a stronger forehand than backhand and should therefore favor it whenever possible. (Note that if a player has a stronger backhand than forehand, she probably should not use it from the forehand court—the backhand has limited range.) If a player does favor the forehand, she should intentionally stand as far to the left as possible, covering as much ground as possible with the forehand. A good rule for a forehand-oriented player is to stand as far to the left as possible and still be able to just cover the wide forehand corner effectively.
- Your opponent’s position has to be taken into account. For example, if your opponent moves to the left, you have to move to the right to cover the angle to your right.

Figure 5.1 Correct positioning.

Many players have difficulty with a ball hit at their playing elbow, their middle, because they have to make a quick decision on whether to use the forehand or backhand. A general rule to follow is if the ball is hit to your middle, it’s usually best to use a backhand to return hard-hit shots if you’re close to the table. Use the forehand against weaker shots or when you’re away from the table.
You should start every rally in the ready stance. Between shots, even if you’re way out of position, you should be in your ready stance as the opponent hits the ball.

**FOOTWORK**

The table is only 5 feet wide, which doesn’t seem like much. But when the ball starts traveling at speeds close to 100 miles per hour (and long before it gets that fast) you’ll have to know how to get into position for each shot.

The key is to move into a position that allows you to hit any given shot at the same point in relation to the body. For example, good players will always make contact on their forehand at about 2 feet to the side (depending on the length of their arm), but whatever distance it is, they’ll always hit at that distance.

Sometimes you will be close but not quite in position. Don’t be lazy—move. You want to be in perfect position for every shot. The move is very small, you can make it by moving only one leg, especially with the backhand. For example, if the ball is to your wide backhand and you don’t have much time, take a short step with your left leg (see Figure 5.2b). This puts your legs farther apart and starts your momentum. Pull with the left leg, letting your weight transfer onto it. Move both feet to the left. Use the momentum from the short shuffle step to pull your body to the left. Both feet should move, coming closer together in the middle of the motion (see Figure 5.2c) but ending up with your feet the same distance apart as at the start of the motion (see Figure 5.2d). Your right foot should end up about where the left foot was after the short step.

To move to the right, use the same motion except switch left and right. If you’re moving into position to hit a forehand, you should pull your right leg back slightly so as to be in a proper forehand position when you arrive.

Suppose you’re too far away from the table to make a good shot. You can use two-step footwork to get closer to the table. If you want to hit a forehand, move as if you were going to the left except move your left leg forward, following with your right leg. For all in and out motions, lead with the foot that puts you in the best position for the stroke. If you have to cover more ground than one application of two-step footwork would allow, run.

Sometimes you’ll need to cover a lot of ground (side to side) in a hurry, especially after hitting a forehand from the backhand corner. You have to be able to cover that almost inevitable quick block to the wide forehand. You can use two-step footwork to do so, but to cover the extra ground you may have to do two-step footwork twice in succession, without the short step on the second one.

Two-step footwork is used in moving sideways in either direction. You can use it to cover the wide forehand with the forehand, the forehand out of the backhand corner, and to cover the wide backhand with the backhand. A version of it is also used to move to and away from the table.

Get into your ready position (see Figure 5.2a). Let’s say you’re moving to the left. Start by taking a short step, about 4 to 6 inches long, with the left leg (see Figure 5.2b). This puts your legs farther apart and starts your momentum. Pull with the left leg, letting your weight transfer onto it. Move both feet to the left. Use the momentum from the short shuffle step to pull your body to the left. Both feet should move, coming closer together in the middle of the motion (see Figure 5.2c) but ending up with your feet the same distance apart as at the start of the motion (see Figure 5.2d). Your right foot should end up about where the left foot was after the short step.

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Figure 5.2  Keys to Success:  
Two-Step Footwork  
(Moving to the left—reverse left and right to move to the right)

**Preparation Phase**

1. Knees slightly bent  
2. Weight evenly distributed between both legs  
3. Weight on inside balls of the feet  

**Execution Phase**

1. Left foot takes a short step  
2. Weight begins to shift to left  
3. Left leg pulls  
4. Both feet shuffle to left  
5. Feet come together in middle of motion
Follow-Through Phase

1. Left leg moves to the left
2. If preparing for forehand, right leg pulls back slightly
3. End in position for stroke
4. Start backswing stroke immediately after footwork

GETTING BACK INTO POSITION

After hitting any shot, don’t stand around admiring it. It just might come back! Always expect it to. You have to get back into position.

To do so, push with your right leg to go left, your left leg to go right. If you’re way out of position, get back as far as you can, but never be in motion when the opponent hits the ball. It’s better to be ready to cover most of the court and hope she doesn’t hit a strong shot to the part you can’t cover. If you’re in motion, you won’t be able to effectively cover the part you’re moving away from, and even a weak shot there will give you trouble.

Detecting Footwork Errors

Many players with seemingly poor strokes actually suffer from footwork problems. Poor footwork can make anybody’s shots look poor; good footwork will carry poor strokes a long way. Footwork is the most tiring part of the game to practice, but top players consider it the most important practice of all. Even a player with slow feet can improve immensely by using correct footwork and avoiding some of the more common errors.

ERROR

1. Your feet bounce too high or lift off the ground.
2. You’re not in position at the end of the movement.

CORRECTION

1. Your feet should stay low to the ground, almost sliding.
2. Make adjustments during and after the movement.
3. Your weight should be on the inside balls of your feet.
4. Try not to reach for the ball, but instead use the two-step footwork. Move the leg that is in the direction you want to go and follow up with the other leg.

Positioning and Footwork Drills

1. Positioning and Shot Selection

Write down the answers to the following:

a. When your opponent moves to the left, which side of the table do you cover?
b. If your opponent moves to the right, which side of the table do you cover?
c. When a player hits the ball to your middle (your playing elbow), when would you use your forehand?
d. When a player hits a ball to your middle, when would you use your backhand?

Success Goal = Respond to the questions

Your Score = Answers to the questions

a. If your opponent moves left, you cover the ________ side
b. If your opponent moves right, you cover the ________ side
c. Use forehand: ________________________________
d. Use backhand: ________________________________

2. Two-Step Footwork Practice

Practice moving side to side with two-step footwork. Start slow and build up speed. Keep your feet low to the ground. If you do this by a table, touch the right corner with your left hand when you move right; touch the left corner with your right hand when you move left. Do this drill to help you monitor how far you need to move in each direction. This will also develop two-step agility.
Success Goal = Side to side 50 times correctly

Your Score = (#) ____ correct repetitions

3. One-One Footwork Drill

Have your partner hit forehands side to side, alternating one to your wide forehand, one to the middle of the table. Return them all with your forehand, using two-step footwork. As you get better, try covering two-thirds of the table.

Success Goal = 20 consecutive repetitions of one-one footwork drill

Your Score = (#) ____ consecutive repetitions of one-one footwork drill

4. Figure Eight

One player hits everything crosscourt, alternating forehands and backhands. The other player hits everything down the line, also alternating forehands and backhands. The ball travels in a figure eight. Players move side to side for each shot, using two-step footwork. Then repeat, with each player reversing roles.

Success Goal = 20 consecutive shots, both crosscourt and down the line using two-step footwork

Your Score =

(#) ____ crosscourt figure eight shots using two-step footwork
(#) ____ down the line figure eight shots using two-step footwork

5. Forehand/Backhand Footwork

Have your partner hit backhands to your backhand corner, crosscourt. You alternate forehand and backhand drives from backhand corner, moving side to side with two-step footwork.

Success Goal = 20 consecutive repetitions of forehand/backhand footwork

Your Score = (#) ____ consecutive repetitions of forehand/backhand footwork
6. **Two-One Footwork Drill**

Your partner hits only backhand drives, two to your backhand side, one to your forehand side, over and over. You hit a backhand from your backhand corner, then use two-step footwork to step around and hit a forehand drive from the backhand side. Then you use two-step footwork to cover a wide forehand with your forehand. Then use two-step footwork to get back into position to hit a backhand drive from your backhand corner. Rally continues.

**Success Goal** = 15 consecutive rounds of two-one footwork drill

**Your Score** = (#) consecutive rounds of two-one footwork drill

7. **Figure Eight Game**

Play games, using the figure eight path described in Drill 4. One player hits everything crosscourt, the other down the line. If a player hits to the wrong side, it's a lost point. The middle line tells whether the ball is hit on the correct side or not. Play best-of-three games to 21 points (a match), with each player hitting crosscourt one game, down the line one game, and trading roles as soon as a player reaches 10 points in the third game.

**Success Goal** = Win at least 1 best-of-3-games match

**Your Score** = (#) matches won

8. **Two-Step Footwork Race**

Set up two tables side by side, about 7 feet apart (closer if players are short). Fill two buckets with an equal amount of balls; put them on one table on opposite sides near the endlines. Put two empty buckets on opposite sides of the other table. Players use two-step footwork and go back and forth, picking up the balls in the full bucket and putting them in the empty bucket. Players can only handle the balls with their playing hands. Two or more can race each other in this game (you need more buckets and possibly more tables if more than two race at one time). Whoever moves all the balls from one bucket to the other first wins.

**Success Goal** = Move all the balls from one bucket to the other first

**Your Score** = (#) times moved all the balls from one bucket to the other first
The importance of footwork in table tennis cannot be overemphasized. The difference between hitting a ball while in position, and trying to do so while reaching, is the difference between a successful and an unsuccessful player. Discuss with your instructor, coach, or practice partner the proper positioning for different circumstances, especially pertaining to how your opponent’s position affects yours. Then have your partner or coach observe your two-step footwork and make sure it’s being done properly, using the Keys to Success checklist (see Figure 5.2). Pay particular attention to staying balanced, knees slightly bent, and doing each step in a smooth progression. Make sure you’re ready to start your stroke as soon as you get into position.

**Positioning and Footwork Keys to Success Checklist**

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**Answers to Drill 1**

a. Cover the right side.
b. Cover the left side.
c. Usually use your forehand if the ball is hit softly or if you are far away from the table.
d. Usually use your backhand if the ball is hit hard and you are close to the table.