

Step 7 Blocking: Close-to-the-Table Defense

A block is a simple way of returning a hard drive. It is simpler than a drive, and many coaches teach it first for that reason. However, I prefer to teach it after a player has learned the drive because a drive is usually more effective against topspin than a block. A block should be used when an opponent's strong drive makes a drive return risky. Remember that a drive is an aggressive shot while a block is a more defensive return of a strong drive.

A block can be done either forehand or backhand. The stroke is similar to a drive except that there is no backswing and very little follow-through. There is also no weight shift. A block is best described as just that—a block. Just stick the racket in the way of a hard-hit ball. If the racket angle and contact are correct, the ball will go back low and fast.

Another difference between the block and the drive is that you should contact the ball earlier in a block. Take it right off the bounce. The block is most effective as a way to return an opponent's drive as quickly as possible so as not to give your opponent a chance to keep attacking.

In many of the drills you have done so far, both players used forehand or backhand drives in accomplishing the drill. However, as the pace of the rallies gets faster and faster (as you and your partner get better and better), it often becomes necessary for one player to drive, while the other blocks. At the higher levels, usually one player will block while the other player does a driving or footwork drill.

WHY IS THE BLOCK IMPORTANT?

Whenever possible, you want to use aggressive shots in table tennis (unless you're a defensive player). However, even an attacker is often faced with an opponent's attack, and if your opponent makes a strong enough attack, you won't be able to counterattack with your own drive. You'll have to block the ball. You just don't have time to do anything else.

This doesn't mean you're in trouble. Quick and well-placed blocks will win you many points. For example, if a player plays a forehand drive from the backhand side of the table, a quick block to the wide forehand will often win the point. In general, the goal is to return the ball so quickly, and so well-placed, that your opponent can't react or move quickly enough to continue the attack.

HOW TO EXECUTE THE BLOCK

Move into position—don't reach except as a final adjustment (see Figure 7.1). There should be no backswing. Just get the racket into position so that the incoming ball will contact it. To block successfully, use your opponent's speed and spin to return the ball. Contact should be made right after the bounce. Quickness is the important factor—you don't want to give your opponent time to make another strong shot. Hold the racket with a relaxed grip and let the ball sink into the sponge and trampoline back, usually with a light topspin. Try to contact the ball with the very center of the racket. At contact, move the racket forward a little, more so against a slow ball than against a fast one. Contact should be on the back of the ball, or slightly above. The quicker off the bounce you take the ball, the less you have to close your racket. Against heavy topspin, make sure to close the racket.

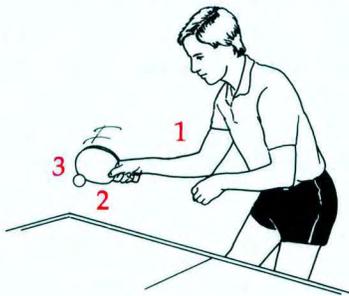
Follow-through should be short. Just move the racket forward naturally. Return to ready position. When blocking, you won't have time to execute two-step footwork. Instead, step directly toward the ball with your nearest foot.

One common variation of the block is the chop block. A chop block is just like a regular block except that at contact, you chop down on the ball to put some backspin on it. The chop block is a soft-touch shot, so hit the ball slowly. It's used both as a change of pace in a rally and as a return against a topspin serve.

Figure 7.1 *Keys to Success:*
Forehand and Backhand Blocks

Preparation Phase

Forehand Block



Backhand Block



- | | |
|---|-----|
| ___ 1. Move into position | ___ |
| ___ 2. Close racket against heavy topspin | ___ |
| ___ 3. Racket tip slightly up | ___ |

Execution Phase

Forehand Block

- | | |
|------------------------------------|-----|
| ___ 1. Contact quick off bounce | ___ |
| ___ 2. Contact very flat | ___ |
| ___ 3. Contact in center of racket | ___ |

Backhand Block

- | |
|-----|
| ___ |
| ___ |
| ___ |

Follow-Through Phase

Forehand Block

- | |
|----------------------------------|
| ___ 1. Very short follow-through |
|----------------------------------|

Backhand Block

- | |
|-----|
| ___ |
|-----|

Detecting Forehand and Backhand Block Errors

More than any other shot, the block is a simple stroke. Follow the guidelines in Figure 7.1, watch out for the following errors, and your technique will improve. From then on, it's just a matter of timing, reflex, racket angle, and proper contact.



ERROR

1. The ball goes into the net or off the end.
2. You're taking the ball too late so that your opponent has plenty of time to plan the next shot.
3. You're off balance.
4. You're inconsistent, with shots going off the end or into the net.

CORRECTION

1. Read the spin and adjust your racket angle.
2. Stay close to the table and move to the ball—don't wait for it to come to you.
3. Move to the ball. Don't reach.
4. Keep your eye on the ball, and let the ball hit the center of the racket. Hold the racket with a relaxed grip and contact the ball at the center of the racket so that it sinks straight into the sponge, then trampolines back.

Blocking Drills

Note: Unless otherwise specified, players should always start rallies by serving topspin when doing blocking drills. Also note that although players need to be able to block on both the forehand and

the backhand, it is more important to develop a very good backhand block, because it's easier to counterattack with your forehand.

1. Backhand and Forehand Blocks

Have your partner attack with either a forehand or backhand drive into your backhand. Your partner should hit relatively hard but not smash. Block the drive with your backhand. Try to contact the ball as quick off the bounce as possible. Then do the same with your forehand block. This is similar to the types of rallies you'll face in a match situation, where one player is attacking while the other is fending off the attack by blocking.

Success Goal = 20 consecutive backhand and 20 consecutive forehand blocks

Your Score =

(#) _____ consecutive backhand blocks

(#) _____ consecutive forehand blocks

2. *Blocking Side to Side*

Block to the forehand and backhand sides of the table with your backhand, one to the right, one to the left. Your partner attacks each ball into your backhand with either a forehand or backhand. You can also do this drill with your forehand block. However, you don't want to get in the habit of blocking too much with the forehand because it's better to go for more aggressive shots on the forehand side.

Success Goal = 20 consecutive backhand blocks, side to side

Your Score = (#) _____ consecutive backhand blocks, side to side

3. *Random Blocking*

Have your partner attack to all parts of the table. Return each shot with either your forehand or your backhand block. Here, you're learning the transition between your forehand and backhand shots. On balls hit to the middle, you'll have to decide which side to use, but generally, when close to the table, use your backhand against strong shots to the middle.

Success Goal = 15 consecutive blocks, either forehand or backhand

Your Score = (#) _____ consecutive blocks, either forehand or backhand

4. *Block Against Forehand Attack*

Play a game to 11 with these rules. Your partner serves topspin to your forehand. You block. Partner then attacks with her forehand into your forehand block. She should hit hard, even smash, while you block the ball back. Then play a game where your partner hits forehands from the backhand corner into your backhand, also starting with a topspin serve. This simulates what is probably the most common type of rally in table tennis—one player attacking with the forehand into the other player's block.

Success Goal = Win 1 game blocking against forehand attack with the forehand or backhand block

Your Score =

(#) _____ games won using the forehand block

(#) _____ games won using the backhand block

5. *Forehand Hit Against Block*

Redo the previous game, except you do the forehand hitting while opponent blocks.

Success Goal = Win 1 game using the forehand attack against your partner's block

Your Score = (#) _____ games won using the forehand attack

6. Quick Blocking

Quick block backhand to backhand as many times as you can. Concentrate on blocking as quick off the bounce as possible. Then do the same with the forehand. This drill teaches you to block quickly against a slow opponent.

Success Goal = 20 consecutive backhand and 20 consecutive forehand quick blocks

Your Score =

(#) _____ consecutive backhand quick blocks

(#) _____ consecutive forehand quick blocks

7. Middle Drill

Your partner hits either forehands or backhands (his choice) over and over to your middle. (Your partner should aim for your playing elbow.) You have to choose each time whether to block with your forehand or backhand. Block each ball back to the same spot for your partner.

Success Goal = 10 consecutive blocks from middle

Your Score = (#) _____ consecutive blocks from middle

8. Hard-Soft Drill

Hit forehands to your partner's forehand or backhand block. Alternate between hard and soft hits. Then repeat with the backhand. In this drill you learn to adjust to different ball speeds during a rally.

Success Goal = 20 consecutive alternate hard/soft forehand hits

Your Score =

(#) _____ consecutive alternate hard/soft forehand hits

(#) _____ consecutive alternate hard/soft backhand hits

9. Wide Forehand Game

Play a game with the following rules. Server serves backspin to receiver's backhand. Receiver pushes to server's backhand. Server uses two-step footwork and steps around the backhand corner, attacking push with forehand drive to receiver's backhand. Receiver quickly backhand blocks the ball to the server's wide forehand. Server then uses two-step footwork to cover wide forehand with forehand drive or smash. Play out point. Game is to 11 points.

Success Goal = Win at least half of the games

Your Score = (#) _____ games won, (#) _____ games lost

Blocking Keys to Success Checklist

When you develop a good blocking game, you will have confidence that you can handle any attack by your opponent. This lets you concentrate on playing your own shots, rather than worry about your opponent's shots. Remember that, in general, you don't want to block too much. Block when your opponent forces you (with a strong attack), or against an opponent who can't react to a quick block. Use drive shots whenever possible.

Have your instructor or practice partner use the Keys to Success checklist (see Figure 7.1) to verify that you're doing both forehand and backhand blocks correctly. Pay particular attention to adjusting to different speeds and spins, quickness off the bounce, and contacting the ball in the center of the racket.