

Step 8 Looping: Topspin Attacking

The loop is probably the most important shot in table tennis. It's a heavy topspin shot done by just grazing the ball upward and forward. There are many types of loops—forehand and backhand, against backspin and topspin, counterloops (loops versus loops)—and they come in all speeds. Not only must you learn to loop, but you must learn to return the loop, most often with a block.

The topspin of a loop does three things:

- Makes the ball jump when it hits the table
- Makes an opponent who doesn't adjust to the topspin hit high or off the end of the table
- Pulls the ball down in flight, letting you hit the ball faster but still hit the table

There are three looping speeds: slow, medium, and fast.

The slow loop is the slowest, spinniest loop. You stroke mostly up and just barely graze the ball to give the most topspin but the least speed. The slow loop is an excellent way to set up a kill shot (a ball hit with enough speed so your opponent cannot make a return) on the next shot. But some opponents may be able to attack it. Because of the grazing contact, you may miss the ball entirely in attempting the slow loop. The shot is done mostly against backspin.

The medium loop is the safest loop, with medium speed and medium spin. It's easier than a slow loop because the contact doesn't have to be as fine. To do a medium loop, you should sink the ball into the sponge a little more than with a slow loop, creating more speed but less topspin. The stroke is more forward than the slow loop. A good setup shot, it's also a good rallying shot.

The fast loop is the most powerful and most difficult loop. A put-away shot, this loop is mostly speed but still has a lot of topspin. The ball sinks more into the sponge than with other loops, and the stroke is more forward.

With fast loops (as with all other strokes), you have to stroke more up against backspin, or more forward against topspin. Also note that against backspin, a player can use the incoming spin to create more topspin. Against topspin, the very same loop will have less spin but more speed because the incoming topspin will make the ball bounce off the racket faster.

A loop is best done with an inverted sponge, preferably a relatively new sheet. You can loop with pips, especially against backspin, but you'll have less spin than is possible with an inverted sponge.

The loop is best done with the forehand, but it can also be done with the backhand. Most players do not generate as much power on the backhand side and the shot itself is more difficult. So, in this step you will first learn the forehand loop, then the backhand loop. After you know those loops, you can try counterlooping. Then you will learn cross-over footwork to cover your wide forehand.

WHY IS THE LOOP IMPORTANT?

Topspin pulls the ball down and forces opponents into errors. On a normal drive, topspin is moderate, so the effect is moderate. However, with a loop, the spin is extreme and the effect becomes maximal.

With a small amount of topspin, any ball can be hit hard. However, precision is needed on a hard shot, and it is easy to make mistakes. Even if the shot hits, an opponent who reacts fast enough will probably return it.

A loop gives you far more margin for error. The extreme topspin pulls the ball down, so even if you mis-hit, the ball may still hit the table. And your opponent has to deal not only with the speed of the ball but also with the spin.

EXECUTING THE FOREHAND LOOP

Start by facing the table, your right foot slightly back (see Figure 8.1a). Rotate your hips, waist, and shoulders backward, bringing racket and arm back. Straighten your arm until it points back and down, with your wrist cocked down. Against backspin, your arm should point more down and your knees should bend even more. Drop your right shoulder against backspin. Against topspin, point your arm more backward and slightly down. Shift your weight onto your right foot (see Figure 8.1b).

Start the forward stroke by rotating your hips and waist forward. Rotate your shoulders, pulling with the left. Just before contact, snap your forearm

into the ball smoothly but vigorously. Against backspin, snap your wrist at contact. (Advanced players sometimes use wrist against topspin as well, but it's harder to control.)

Contact the ball as it drops for maximum spin and control, at the top of the bounce for faster, more aggressive loops. Contact is made in front and to the right of your body, immediately after shoulder and hip rotation. Whip the racket around the outside of the ball, closing it as you do so to create spin

(see Figure 8.1c). Contact is a grazing motion. Contact should be made on the top half of the racket, toward the tip. Against backspin, contact the back of the ball. Against topspin, contact the back top of the ball.

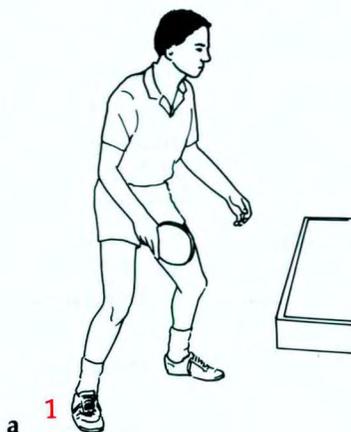
Arm should continue up and forward, finishing with the racket somewhere around the forehead or higher (see Figure 8.1d). Transfer your weight to your left foot. Return to ready position.

Figure 8.1 *Keys to Success: Forehand Loop*

Preparation Phase

Against Backspin

Against Topspin



- 1. In ready position, right foot slightly back

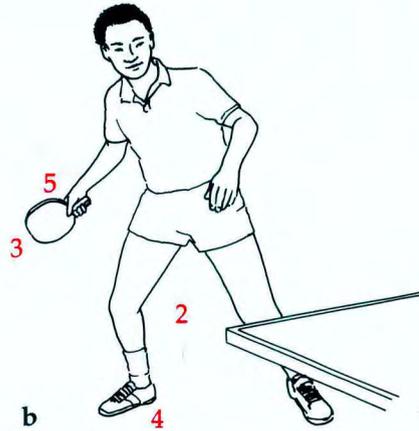
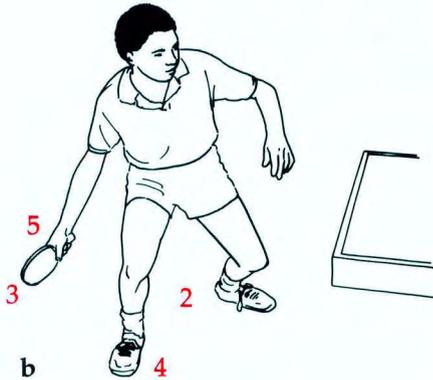
Execution Phase

Backswing

Against Backspin

Against Topspin

1. Rotate body back and down on waist, hips, and shoulders



2. Both knees well bent, with back knee bent more than front knee
 3. Racket tip and arm point mostly down

2. Both knees only slightly bent
 3. Racket tip and arm point backward and slightly down

4. Weight shifts to back foot
 5. Wrist cocked slightly down

Forward Swing

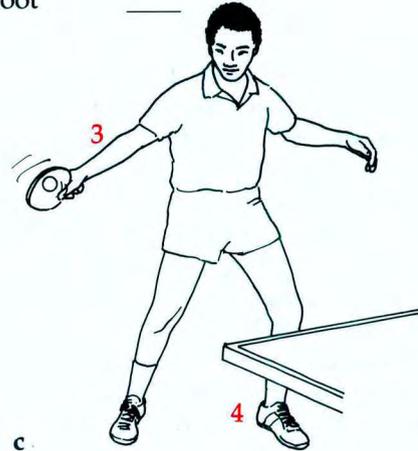
Against Backspin

Against Topspin

1. Push up and forward with legs

1. Push forward with legs

2. Rotate hips, waist, and shoulders forward
 3. Snap arm at elbow
 4. Weight transfers to front foot



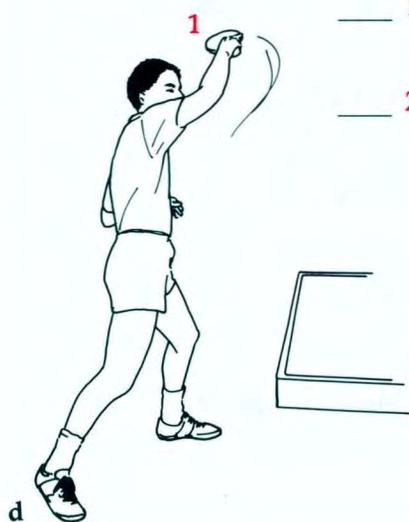
Against Backspin

5. Snap wrist at contact ____
6. Power should be aimed mostly upward, especially for extra topspin; more forward for speed ____
7. Contact ball on the drop ____
8. Graze ball at contact ____

____ 9. Accelerate throughout shot ____

Against Topspin

5. Optional wrist snap ____
6. Power should be aimed mostly forward ____
7. Contact ball on drop or top of bounce ____
8. Graze ball at contact somewhat, but ball sinks into sponge ____

Follow-Through Phase*Against Backspin*

- ____ 1. Follow through naturally, upward and forward, with racket continuing the motion
- ____ 2. Return to ready position

Against Topspin**EXECUTING THE BACKHAND LOOP**

Start by facing the table (see Figure 8.2a) with your legs slightly wider than normal. Against backspin, backswing almost straight down between your legs, tip down, and bend your knees. Against topspin, backswing to your left hip.

Drop your right shoulder slightly. Rotate your hips to the left, shifting some weight to your left foot. Lean your upper body forward slightly. Cock your wrist back (see Figure 8.2b).

Let the ball drop some, especially against backspin. Against backspin, begin your forward swing by lifting your upper body; this lifts your arm. Against topspin, begin your forward swing by rotating your hips forward.

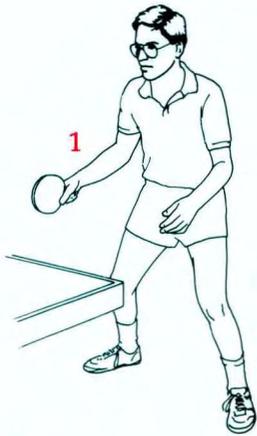
Pull the racket forward using first your shoulder, then your elbow (see Figure 8.2c). Snap your wrist into the ball at contact. Rotate the racket around the ball, closing the racket as you do so to create topspin. The more you graze the ball, the more spin and the less speed you get, and vice versa. Make contact on the top half of the racket. Shift your weight to the right foot. Against backspin, contact the back of the ball. Against topspin, contact the back top of the ball.

Follow through naturally, letting the racket go forward and up (see Figure 8.2d). Racket should point a little to the right of where the ball is going. Return to ready position.

**Figure 8.2 Keys to Success:
Backhand Loop**

**Preparation
Phase**

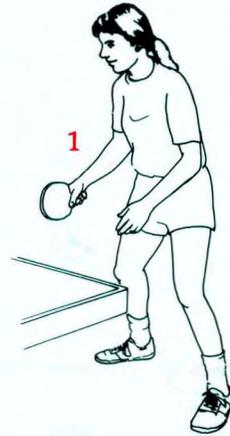
Against Backspin



a

- _____ 1. In ready position
- _____ 2. Arm relaxed
- _____ 3. Move into position, facing ball

Against Topspin

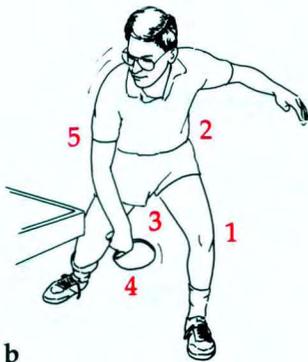


a

**Execution
Phase**

Backswing

Against Backspin



b

- 1. Bend knees _____
- 2. Rotate hips slightly to left _____
- 3. Drop arm between legs _____
- 4. Racket tip points down _____
- 5. Drop right shoulder slightly forward and down _____

Against Topspin

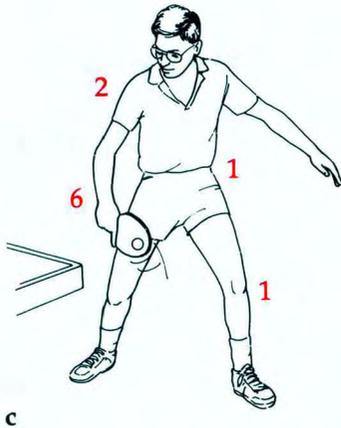


b

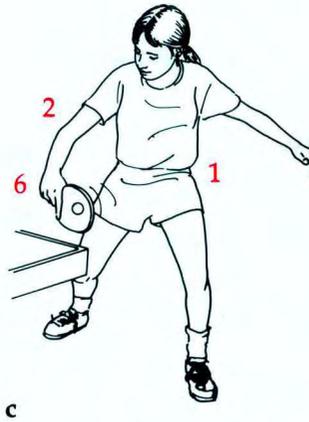
- 1. Rotate hips slightly to left _____
- 2. Racket backswings to left thigh _____
- 3. Racket points down and back _____
- 4. Drop right shoulder slightly forward and down _____

Forward Swing

Against Backspin



Against Topspin



1. Push up with legs and waist _____
2. Drive racket upward and forward with arm and shoulder _____
3. Contact ball on drop _____
4. Graze ball _____
5. Power should go mostly upward _____

1. Rotate hips forward _____
2. Drive racket forward with arm and shoulder _____
3. Contact ball on the drop or top of bounce _____
4. Graze ball at contact somewhat, but ball sinks into sponge _____
5. Power should go mostly forward _____

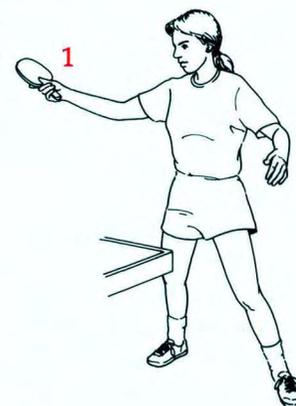
- | | |
|---|-------|
| _____ 6. Snap wrist just before contact | _____ |
| _____ 7. Accelerate throughout stroke | _____ |

Follow-Through Phase

Against Backspin



Against Topspin



- _____ 1. Follow through naturally, upward and forward
- _____ 2. Return to ready position

d

d

COUNTERLOOPING

The counterloop is a loop against a loop. It's more difficult (and therefore more fun!) to learn, and it's widely used at the highest levels. It can be done either forehand or backhand, but it's more difficult and challenging to do backhand. To counterloop, just use a normal loop against topspin as described earlier, only you'll be doing it farther away from the table than normal, against a much heavier topspin. If you do contact the ball farther away from the table than normal, topspin

and gravity will have more time to pull the ball down, increasing your consistency but giving your opponent more time to react.

At first, take the ball well after the top of the bounce. Go for as much spin as possible. As you get better, try taking the ball a little closer to the table. The closer you are to the table when you counterloop, the more trouble your opponent will have in returning it. Some players have even perfected looping right off the bounce.

Detecting Loop Errors

Looping is one of the most complex of table tennis strokes. Therefore, it's especially important that you examine the way you're doing the shot. More than with any other shot, if you do one part of the loop wrong, you'll do the rest of it wrong. When done correctly, the loop is one of the most natural of shots.

ERROR



1. The ball goes into the net or off the end.
2. You're off balance.
3. You're not getting enough spin.
4. You're missing the ball completely.
5. You're hitting the racket edge.
6. You're having trouble overcoming the backspin and lifting the ball over the net.

CORRECTION

1. Read the spin and adjust the racket angle. Stroke up more against backspin.
2. Move to the ball, don't reach.
3. Make sure you're grazing the ball. Accelerate into the ball, using all parts of the stroke. Relax your arm for more acceleration.
4. Due to the grazing motion, this will happen sometimes. Make sure the grazing motion isn't too precise. Keep your eye on the ball.
5. Approach the ball with a slightly more open racket; close it at contact.
6. Bend your knees, get down low, and aim your power upward with a more open racket. Relax your muscles.

CROSSOVERS

Since a looper is often several steps away from the table (unlike a hitter, who usually stays close), a looper has more ground to cover. Often a looper will forehand loop from the backhand corner, and if the opponent blocks this to the wide forehand, the looper has a long way to go. A looper could use regular two-step footwork, but a more efficient method in this case is crossover footwork.

Crossover footwork is good for covering a lot of ground, especially toward the forehand side. It puts you in perfect position to use full power on the forehand shot, whether it be a loop or drive. Crossover footwork may leave you in poor position to hit the next shot compared to two-step footwork, so returning to ready position quickly is important. (However, this is offset by the fact that crossover footwork enables you to put so much power into the shot that the ball usually doesn't come back.) Crossover footwork is used successfully by most top players, especially loopers with strong forehands. Hitters also use crossover footwork sometimes, but since they usually don't have as much ground to cover, they use it less often, and many

don't use it at all. Nearly all high level players who loop use crossover footwork.

HOW TO EXECUTE CROSSOVER FOOTWORK

Crossover footwork is used mostly after hitting a forehand from the backhand corner. You are now way out of position and vulnerable to a quick shot to the wide forehand. You could use two-step footwork, but that might not cover enough ground.

Instead you may elect to use a crossover. To do so, start with a short step with the right foot as with two-step footwork (see Figure 8.3). Then simply cross your left foot over your right, pivoting your body so your legs don't actually cross. Try it and you'll see.

Your body should be rotated so that it points sideways or even a little backward. Uncoil your body as you rotate into the shot, and you'll get surprising power. After taking your shot, get back into position as fast as possible because you're now vulnerable on the backhand side.

Figure 8.3 *Keys to Success:* *Crossover Footwork*

(Moving to the right—reverse right and left to move to the left)

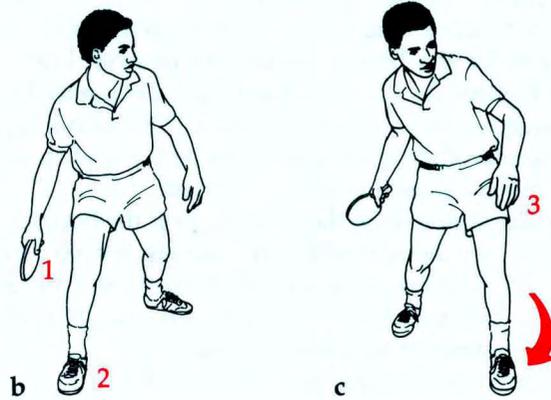
Preparation Phase

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



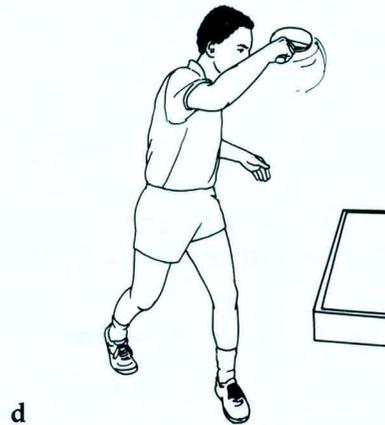
Execution Phase

1. Right foot short steps _____
2. Weight shifts to right foot _____
3. Entire body pivots to right as left leg crosses over _____



Follow-Through Phase

1. End in position for stroke _____
2. Start stroke immediately _____



BLOCKING THE LOOP

Earlier, you learned how to block. However, when you first try blocking the loop, you'll undoubtedly block the ball off the end. This is because of the heavy topspin. You'll have to close your racket.

Aim for the bottom of the net or even lower (see Figure 8.4). The ball should sink deep into the sponge, all the way to the wood. The incoming topspin will make the ball jump off the racket, so not much forward motion is needed.

Make sure to take the ball quick off the bounce. Otherwise, the ball will jump too fast for you to react to it. By taking it quickly, the ball can't jump too far too fast. Also, a quick return doesn't give your opponent much time to react.

When blocking the loop, remember to

- close the racket,
- take the ball quickly, while it's rising, and
- use the incoming topspin to produce speed.



Figure 8.4 Aim low when blocking the loop.

Looping Drills

1. Loop Against Bounced Ball

Standing on your side of the table, drop a ball on the floor so that it bounces about waist-high. Loop the ball on the table. This is an easy way to practice the loop stroke against a predictable ball.

Success Goal = 15 consecutive forehand loops, 15 consecutive backhand loops

Your Score =

- (#) _____ consecutive forehand loops against bounced ball
 (#) _____ consecutive backhand loops against bounced ball

2. Loop Against Backspin

Serve backspin to your partner. Have him push it back to your forehand. Loop the ball with your forehand. Your partner blocks the ball back; you catch it and start over. Then do the same with the backhand loop, with your partner pushing to your backhand side. Then do the same, this time looping your forehand out of your backhand corner against your partner's push. This is not only a good way to practice your loop against backspin, it's the most common way rallies start in a game—one player serves backspin, the other pushes it back, and the server loops. (The most common thing a coach tells a player is to serve backspin and loop,

because most players are unable to push short consistently and are unwilling to flip the ball—an aggressive return of a short ball and a higher-risk shot—see Step 9).

Success Goal = 15 forehand loops from forehand side, 15 backhand loops from backhand side, and 15 forehand loops from backhand side

Your Score =

- (#) _____ forehand loops against backspin from forehand side
- (#) _____ backhand loops against backspin from backhand side
- (#) _____ forehand loops against backspin from backhand side

3. Loop Against Block

Serve topspin to your partner's forehand, or have your partner serve topspin to your forehand. Your partner blocks while you loop forehands crosscourt. Then do the same thing with the backhand loop, this time going crosscourt backhand to backhand. (You can also do this drill down the line.) This drill will help you develop a consistent loop stroke that can be used in a match situation.

Success Goal = 15 consecutive forehand and 15 consecutive backhand loops against block

Your Score =

- (#) _____ consecutive forehand loops against block
- (#) _____ consecutive backhand loops against block

4. Blocking the Loop

Have your partner loop over and over to your backhand with either a forehand or backhand loop. (Forehand loop can be done from either the backhand corner or forehand corner into your backhand.) Then have your partner loop forehands from his or her forehand corner to your forehand. You should return the ball by using a block. This drill will help you develop a consistent block against heavy topspin.

Success Goal = 15 consecutive backhand and 15 consecutive forehand blocks

Your Score =

- (#) _____ consecutive backhand blocks
- (#) _____ consecutive forehand blocks

5. Loop Against Backspin/Topspin

Serve backspin. Your partner pushes to your forehand. Loop your forehand crosscourt. Your partner blocks crosscourt; rally continues, with you looping and your partner blocking. You can also try this with the backhand loop, but that's more difficult. This drill teaches you to adjust your racket angle when looping against different spins and shots.

Success Goal = 15 consecutive forehand loops, starting against backspin and continuing against block

Your Score = (#) _____ consecutive forehand loops

6. Crossover Footwork

Your partner hits to your wide forehand. Starting in your backhand corner, do a crossover. Walk back to your backhand corner and repeat. This will help you become familiar with the crossover.

Success Goal = Move to wide forehand 10 times correctly, using crossover footwork

Your Score = (#) _____ correct repetitions

7. Crossovers Against Block

Stand in your backhand corner and serve topspin to your partner's forehand. Your partner drives medium hard to your wide forehand. Use a crossover to get to the ball. While you're relearning the crossover, use a drive. When you're comfortable with the footwork, combine it with looping, and loop your partner's drive. Play out the rally. This simulates the situation you will often face after attacking with your forehand out of your backhand corner.

Success Goal = 10 returns in a row with a crossover

Your Score = (#) _____ returns made consecutively after crossover

8. Crossover and Loop

Play a game with the following rules. The rally starts with the server serving backspin to receiver's backhand. Receiver pushes it to server's backhand corner. Server steps around with two-step footwork and loops forehand to backhand corner. Receiver blocks the ball to server's wide forehand. Server uses a crossover to get to the ball and loops it. Play out the point. Games are to 11 points.

Success Goal = Win at least half the games played

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

9. *Random Backspin Serve and Loop*

Play a game with the following rules. You serve backspin. Your partner pushes it back anywhere. You loop either backhand or forehand, depending on where the push goes. Play out the point. More rallies start with this sequence than any other way. One of the quickest ways to improve at table tennis is to perfect a serve-and-loop game, with most of your serves being short backspin combined with sidespin.

Success Goal = Win at least half the games played

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

10. *Alternate Forehand and Backhand Loops*

Partner blocks side to side (left and right) while you loop. Some players may wish to loop the forehand and drive the backhand.

Success Goal = 15 consecutive repetitions of forehand and backhand alternate loops (or backhand hits)

Your Score = (#) _____ consecutive repetitions of forehand and backhand alternate loops (or backhand hits)

11. *Loop and Smash*

Serve backspin. Your partner pushes to your backhand corner. You loop either forehand or backhand to your partner's backhand. Your partner blocks the ball back to your backhand. You smash, either forehand or backhand. See how many you can make in a row.

Success Goal = 10 consecutive loop/smash combinations

Your Score = (#) _____ consecutive loop/smash combinations

12. *Forehand Counterloop*

Both players loop forehands back and forth. (This is a more advanced drill.) Try for consistency by backing off the table and taking the ball as it drops. If you go off the end, remember not to lift—the ball has heavy topspin. (This is a common type of rally among advanced players.)

Success Goal = 5 consecutive forehand counterloops

Your Score = (#) _____ consecutive forehand counterloops

Looping Keys to Success Checklists

The biggest difference between looping against backspin versus looping against topspin is the direction of force. Against backspin, your force goes mostly upward and a little forward. But against topspin, or block, it goes mostly forward and slightly upward. Don't fall into the habit of learning one but not the other.

Remember to keep your arm loose and make a complete stroke. When learning a new stroke, many players tense up, and this will especially hurt your loop stroke. Players who have trouble looping at first often shorten their new stroke. This is a big mistake because it severely limits the

amount of topspin you can produce.

Have your instructor or practice partner use the Keys to Success checklists (see Figures 8.1 and 8.2) to verify that you are doing both the forehand and backhand loops correctly. Pay particular attention to the differences between looping against backspin (as opposed to topspin), to contact, and to the sequence of motions in the strokes, all of which have to be done smoothly and in the proper order. Use the Crossover Keys to Success checklist (see Figure 8.3) to make sure you're moving to the wide forehand properly.