

The Service Game:

The most important stroke of your game is not your incredible looping forehand – although it looks cool and certainly helps. More often than not, how well you serve and how you receive the opposition's serve will determine how the game will progress in your favor.

Rules of Service:

The service commences with the ball resting on the palm of the free hand.

This hand should be:

- } above the table
- } stationary
- } flat
- } with the thumb free

The player must begin the service action from above the table

The ball must be thrown vertically upwards at least 16 cm

The ball must be struck, on its descent, from behind the white baseline

It must bounce once on the server's side of the table before crossing the net

The ball shall be at all times clearly visible to the umpire

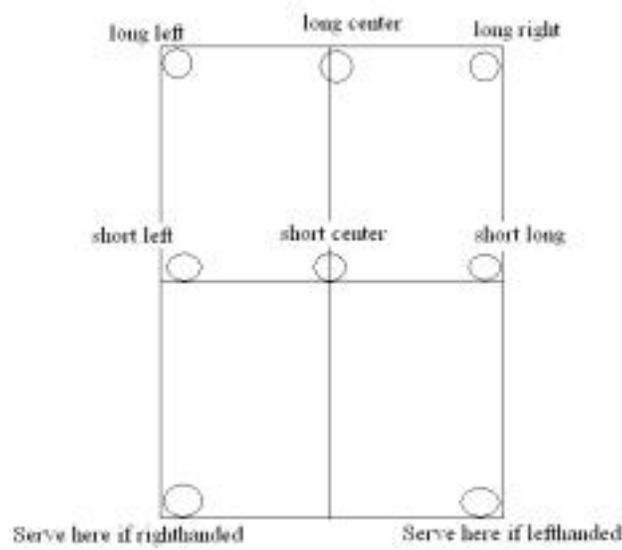
Aim of serve:

1. To win a point immediately
2. To win the point after your opponent returns the serve.
3. To intimidate your opposition so that you have a psychological advantage.

A player with a good serve will be able to do all of the above.

This is why the serve is of fundamental importance to your game. The serve is the only shot you are able to make that is under your complete control. If you have a serving advantage over your opponent, then the game is already half won.

Serving Strategies:



First, begin your serve in the correct position. For a right handed player, serving on the left corner of the table, allows him/her to cover the table with the forehand which generally has longer reach and greater attacking power. Unless your forehand is much worse than your backhand. This is where you should generally serve. Another option is to start the serve more towards the center of the table.

Distinguish between long serves and short serves. This is very important and is the basis of a tight serving game. Generally serve to the six places marked on the above diagram.

Long Serves:

The most important thing to remember is in a long serve you must bounce the ball close to the edge of the table on your side if you hope for the ball to bounce towards the end of the table on the opposite side.

These serves should be as deep as possible.

Long serves can generate a great amount of spin and can be used to effectively control the attack of an opposition. Unless the opposition has a strong backhand loop or has extraordinary footwork it is very difficult for him/her to attack a long serve to the backhand. When the ball returns, you have a chance to attack. Very occasionally use the long serve on the forehand. Many players will loop the serve back. But it is a good change to break up a game. Sometimes, a long serve down the center line is also very effective.

Short Serves:

The most important thing to remember is in a short serve you must bounce the ball close to the net of the table on your side if you hope for the ball to bounce close to the net on the opposite side.

All short serves should bounce at least twice on the opposite side if not received.

Short serves controls a player who likes playing the long game. If the serve is short (remains in the table), then unless the opposition has a brilliant flick, it is difficult for the opposition to attack your

serve. When the ball comes back, you have an opportunity to attack. The short serve to the forehand is often a good serve which works well with long serves to the backhand. It is generally harder to spin the ball as much in a short serve as in a long serve. So be wary of short serves that are high.

The Spin:

Spin plays a crucial role in the serve. Always think about what kind of spin you are putting on the serve.

Top spin this means you like to rally. Your opposition will hit the ball back to you. If you like playing the rally game then top spin shots might work well. Although it is hard to play top spin serves against most advanced players.

Back spin a defensive serve which restricts the attack of your opposition. In order to attack, the opponent must either flick or loop and this can be difficult to do. When the ball returns, it presents an opportunity for you to attack.

No spin this is one of the most effective serves in the game of table tennis. BUT it should be well disguised and used together with the back spin serve. A no spin serve will be returned high if the opposition thinks it is a back spin serve while the ball will go into the net if the opposition treats it as a top spin serve. So it is important for the opposition to deal with the no spin appropriately – by looping, flicking or by ‘half-pushing’ so that the ball is not high.

Side spin can be used to fool your opposition. But side spin is generally secondary to top spin and back spin. Decided whether you want to serve top spin or back spin, then decided whether to add side spin to complicate the serve. Some side spin serves makes it difficult for the opposition to return the serve to certain parts of the table. Thus the server can use the side spin to control the position of the return in order to set up the shot after the service return.

Flexibility:

The serve is probably the most complicated part of table tennis and advanced players put a lot of time and effort into the serve. To serve well takes practice and experience. The above are merely guidelines – there are no hard rules regarding the serve. The best server can always adapt his/her serve to the opponent and situation at hand. Whatever works is always the best serve!

To Be Good:

To serve well is also one of the hardest aspects of table tennis to master. The best way to improve is to think about every serve before you serve it. Ask yourself – ‘Why am I doing this serve?’, ‘Should I serve long or short? Top spin or back spin?’, ‘What am I hoping to achieve?’, ‘What kind of service return do I expect?’ An important source of ideas is to see how other people serve. Always think about the serve – and your game will improve markedly.

Returning Spin Services:

We stand trembling while our opponent winds up, throws the ball three meters into the air, ties his/her body into knots, twists the bat in every conceivable direction, utters a fearful grunt, and, biceps bulging, serves with such vicious spin that the ball is almost humming as it wobbles towards us. Our doubles partner pulls up a chair while we prod tentatively forward, wondering whether this time the ball will bury itself in the net, land on the next table, or fly over our smirking opponent's head and disappear over the horizon.

For us, there are only two kinds of serve: the ones we can get back, and the ones we can't.

How to return difficult spin serves in one easy lesson

There is one prerequisite to the lesson. The chances of your mastering the art of returning spin serves are minimal if you have not learned to use spin in your own shots. And you'll find things easier still if you have experimented with some spin serves of your own.

That much understood, you've only got two things to learn: how to read the spin: and how to compensate for it.

Reading the spin

The ball does not spin by itself. It's not spinning when it's thrown up, and the direction in which it's spinning can't change after the ball leaves the bat. So to establish the direction of the spin, simply watch the bat as it makes contact with the ball. The direction in which the bat is moving at that moment is the direction in which the ball will be spinning.

Don't be fooled by the bat being waved in other directions before and after contact - you're concerned only with the moment when the bat strikes the ball. And you have the opportunity to verify your judgment by watching the way the ball bounces when it hits the table.

Establishing the speed at which the ball is spinning is somewhat more complex. Factors include:

1. How high the ball is thrown (a high ball will be traveling faster when it finishes dropping so a faster spin will be imparted by the bat stroke).
2. Bat speed across the ball, readable not only by physically watching it but also by observing the follow-through.
3. The point of contact on the bat (the ball which hits the bat near the edge closest to the table will receive more backspin because it has more bat-face to roll over; and the ball that hits the bat near the edge furthest from the handle will spin faster if a pivotal wrist action is used, because that end of the bat moves faster than any other part).
4. How firmly the bat actually makes contact with the ball (among the most difficult to read, but verifiable by the bounce on the table).
5. The length of the serve (a ball landing deep on your half of the table is likely to be spinning faster than one which falls shorter, except in the case of backspin).

Having sorted out what's coming towards you, all that remains is to safely return the serve.

Compensating for the spin

You do this by simply holding your bat at the "wrong" angle. A conscious effort and a good measure of confidence are required because your internal instinct will be screaming at you to hold your bat in its normal position. As a rule of thumb, angle your bat in the direction from which the server's bat started its movement across the ball. If your opponent's bat swings from left to right (as seen from your end of the table) angle the face of your bat to the left. If the bat begins above the ball and finishes below it, angle your bat in an upward direction. How far to angle it, and how firmly to stroke the ball depend on the speed you have assessed the ball to be spinning at. But to control any spinning serve, the ball must be stroked. Prodding or blocking belong in the hit and miss department.

Some people work on the premise that even if you're not sure exactly what spin is on the ball, you can return it by giving a firm push behind and under the ball. Although this can be useful as a last resort, it is less than satisfactory in that you can easily push the ball too high; and you are also taking most of the spin out of the ball. By accurately reading the spin and compensating for it, you are not only thumbing your nose at your opponent's brilliant serve by decisively returning it but you have also kept the original spin on the ball. Now your opponent has to cope with it.

Beware the Hollywood Actor

Just because someone tosses the ball up four meters; winds their leg around their neck; jumps in the air and emits a contorted grunt on impact with the ball, don't automatically assume that the ball is spinning. If the bat-face doesn't move across the ball, you can expect a flat serve, whatever the accompanying antics. But flat serves, like any other, still have to be handled correctly. There is no compensatory angle to worry about, but the ball must be stroked more firmly than usual if you don't want to see it float harmlessly off the end of the table.

Conclusion

Just as we began with two categories of serve, we conclude with two ways of coping with the heavily spun serve.

One, carefully assemble all the information required to play a shot which correctly compensates for the spin. This includes observing the height of the throw; the length and direction of the serving stroke; the point of contact on the bat; the degree of touch; whether the whole forearm or just the wrist is used and the depth of the ball at your end of the table. Don't be distracted by "shamming" or multiple bat movements, and don't forget to also take into account the type of rubber, and the condition of it, on both your opponent's bat and your own (not gone into here, as that's a whole story in itself). You are now ready to return the serve. *or*,

Two, if you find that you are unable to establish, collate and apply all the foregoing data in the time available (approx 1/4 second), then you may have to do what everyone else who has learned to return difficult spin serves had to do to begin with: practise, and keep practising - until the art of reading spin becomes instinctive.

The point is, other people have learned to cope with difficult serves, so why not you? It may take weeks or months of practice but if it's going to save eight or nine points in a game, it's surely worth the trouble.

From there it's only a matter of time before you have devised a range of horrific serves of your own and we'll be the ones standing trembling at the other end.