

What about my feet?

Now that you've learned all about forehands and backhands, loops and pushes, service and service returns, you might be wondering how to piece all of those together; in particular, you just might be wondering what in the world to do with the rest of your body, including your feet. There are two very important concepts besides strokes that every good table tennis player must be aware of and pay attention to: first, the ready position, and secondly, footwork.¹

¹ In these descriptions, I assume a right-handed player. Lefties should replace all occurrences of "right" with "left" and vice versa. ✍

The Ready Position

You can keep practicing all those strokes and keep developing your technique to perfection, but all that won't do you any good without a proper ready position. The ready position refers to the stance that a player assumes when receiving serves. It is the same body posture to which a player ideally would like to return after each shot, although few actually return to the position in game play.

A correct ready position is crucial for effective play. In a game situation, you can never be certain about what kind of shot is coming. Even if receiving a serve, you may get a short underspin ball, a fast serve down your forehand corner, or a high lob in the air, so you have to be ready to push, to block or to attack. Few shots are completely predictable and thus you must be ready for anything. In order to do so, after each shot, it is important for you to return to your neutral ready position to prepare for the next ball. The faster you recover to your ready position, the better you can deal with your opponent's following shot. Once you return to your ready stance, you will have more time to react to the kind of shot that your opponent is making.

A good ready position is one from which you can make a quick start. Thus, the right stance may vary from player to player according to style. But there are a few general characteristics that good ready positions share:

- The position should be flexible, relaxed and natural. There is no need for rigidity or awkward positioning.
- The upper arms should be kept close to the body, and the racket should be up, at least at the level of the table.
- The knees should be bent and the body should be a bit crouched, ready to pounce on the next ball.
- The right foot should be diagonally behind the left foot, forming an approximately 45-degree angle with the table.
- Weight should be on the balls of the feet, almost on the toes, and feet should be approximately shoulder width apart.
- The position should be maintainable and composed in order to give oneself a calm state of mind, especially when returning serves.
- The position should be one from which it is possible to quickly execute any of the basic shots, including forehand and backhand drives, loops, blocks and pushes.

The ready position should always be assumed when receiving serves. When returning shots, however, there is seldom enough time to return fully to the ready position, so most players just aim to return to a position that is neutral between the forehand and the backhand. Achieving such neutrality is sufficient.

NOTE: Beginners should be careful not to focus too much attention on recovering their basic stances too quickly. The reason is that often players forget to finish their strokes and complete their follow-through's before trying to return to a neutral position. You must be sure to complete your stroke before returning to the ready position.

Footwork

The second key to a player's movement is the synchronization and coordination of leg movements, known as footwork. No matter how good a player's technique is, if he doesn't have good footwork, his performance will forever be limited. Typically, when a ball is not right next to them, beginners and intermediate players just stretch out their arms and try to swing at it. Although in theory simply stretching out your arm is easier, it does not mean it is correct. Instead, you should first get into the right position and *then* do your stroke. When you use correct footwork to get to the right position relative to the ball, you then gain the ability to use your weight effectively and to manipulate the ball more easily and accurately.

There are three main points that come to mind when thinking of correct footwork:

- (1) Sidesteps. In table tennis, footwork consists of small sidestepping. If moving to the right, the right foot leads by taking half a step, the left then follows, and then on the third step (with your right foot) you will typically be in position for your next shot.
- (2) Right foot. The **right foot** is always the foot used to **step into the table**, whether the ball is on the forehand or backhand side.
- (3) Knees. The knees should always be bent and the weight should always be on the balls of the feet, practically on the toes.

According to Dimosthenis E. Messinis in his book *Table Tennis: From A to Z*, four factors are basic for satisfactory footwork:

- (1) Knowledge of the Steps. Footwork both close to and far from the table is characterized by small side steps. Quick side-stepping movements give the player the ability to react faster and beat the ball more easily without losing balance. Drills for learning correct footwork are discussed below.
- (2) Foresight. Good footwork also involves a certain degree of a player being able to anticipate the direction of the ball. This is the basic factor that distinguishes high level and low level players. A player can improve his skill in this area by not over-focusing on a ball at any point. The player must give equal attention to the opponent and his racket so that he can move simultaneously with his opponent's stroke or slightly before it.
- (3) Return to the Ready Stance. As mentioned above, returning to the ready stance is crucial to being an effective player. Footwork helps one return to that stance. Also, a player can anticipate her opponents' position by observing his ready stance and assume her own ready stance accordingly.
- (4) Physical Fitness. Finally, physical fitness is an essential factor for successful footwork as well. Strength in both legs helps a player move quickly from side to side and take the best position for the next stroke. Waist flexibility helps the player keep body balance during more difficult shots.

Footwork Drills

Although most of practice is spent doing drills that inevitably train better footwork, there are some exercises that can be done that focus solely on footwork. These "shadow-stroking" drills are done with just a racket, without a ball or a partner. Footwork drills are fun and extremely useful, so I really recommend everybody takes a few minutes at the end of practice or before a break and does a few of these. Each drill should last between 1 and 2 minutes, depending on your fitness level, and repeated 2 to 3 times.

Drill 1: The ball has gone wide to your forehand, at the most acute angle you have ever seen. You shadow stroke and hit it with your FOREHAND. Then, wowzers, your opponent has countered with a shot wide to your backhand, again at the most acute angle you have ever seen. You move your feet rapidly, sidestepping to the left all the way and shadow stroke another FOREHAND. Repeat until end of drill.

Drill 2: A short ball is dropped short to your forehand and you begin by stepping into the table with your **right foot** and performing a FOREHAND FLIP. Your opponent quickly makes a strong shot deep to your forehand, and you stroke a FOREHAND. Next, a short ball is dropped short again, this time to your backhand. Again, you step into the table with your **right foot** and perform a BACKHAND FLIP. Your opponent quickly makes a strong shot deep to your backhand, and you hit a BACKHAND. Repeat until end of drill.

Points to remember:

- 1) **Do not shadow stroke until your feet are in the correct position for the stroke.**
- 2) **Always move first before making your stroke.**

TWO STEP FOOTWORK

By: Larry Hodges, USATT Certified National Coach

Illustrations courtesy of Tamasu Co., copyright 2001.

There are several styles of footwork for various types of moves, but the most popular and versatile is called two-step footwork. It can be used for nearly all moves, especially side to side, and is used by most of the best players in the world as the easiest and most efficient.

Before we get into the nitty-gritty about two-step footwork, a few general principles for all footwork should be noted. First, weight should be on the balls of the feet. This keeps the player ready to move in all directions. Second, stay in a slight crouch, knees slightly bent. This enables a player to spring in any direction very quickly.

Two-Step Footwork

Two-step footwork is ideal for moving side to side to get to the ball. It can be used to cover the wide forehand corner with the forehand, to cover the wide backhand corner with the backhand, and to cover the wide backhand corner with the forehand. (Note that when covering the wide backhand with the backhand, a single step with the near foot will usually do.)

Two-step footwork is pretty much identical whether you are going to the left or to the right. Here we will explain how a player moves to his left. To move to the right, just reverse left and right.

Start by taking a short step, about six inches or so, with the left foot. This puts your legs farther apart and gets your momentum going.

Now pull with the left leg, letting your weight transfer onto your left leg. Move both feet together to the left, remembering to pull with the left leg instead of pushing with the right. (Of course, since most of your weight is on the left leg, you can't push with the right leg without putting weight on it.) Use the momentum from the short step to pull your body to the left.

Both feet should move together, coming closer together in the middle of the motion but ending up with your feet at the same distance apart as at the start of the motion. Your right foot should end up about where the left foot was after the short step.

The whole movement might also be called a "step-jump," since if you are doing it correctly the second part of the movement is essentially a jump. With practice, it should feel natural.



FOOTWORK

Excerpts from Larry Thoman's Newgy Robo-Pong 2000 Player's Instructional Manual

This chapter is intended for those who need assistance in moving to the ball. If you can perform a stroke well while keeping your feet in one spot, but you lose consistency when you start practicing the stroke with foot movement, then you need to improve your footwork. When learning footwork, slowly shadow practice several sets of the described footwork until you get the hang of it. Then combine practicing footwork with a particular stroke or combination of strokes using the robot to deliver balls to different points on the table.

Having proper footwork greatly assists in executing good strokes. With proper footwork, a player will move into good position and then execute his strokes from a solid, balanced stance. This leads to consistency, quickness, and being able to use full power. Without good footwork, a player will reach, lean, and hit the ball from an unbalanced position. Strokes end up being jerky and erratic, more like slaps than strokes.

In table tennis, you won't have to cover a lot of ground, but you **will** have to move to a spot very quickly. Therefore, most table tennis footwork consists of one or two steps, usually fairly short. During all footwork, it is crucial to stay balanced. Always start your foot movement from the **balanced ready position**.

Place your weight on the balls of your feet with your heels lightly touching the ground. Keep your shoulders centered over your knees. Eliminate any up and down movement. Move the instant the opponent has committed to his shot, not before. Move to where the ball will come before starting your stroke. Avoid stroking while moving.

For side-to-side movement, you may use one-step, two-step, or three-step footwork.

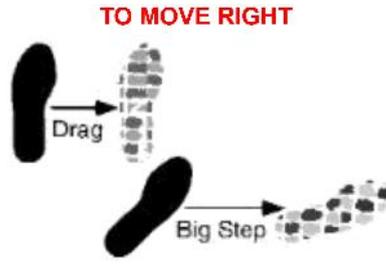
One-step footwork is normally used for short distances, two-step for medium distances, and three-step for long distances. One-step footwork is very common when moving left to cover a wide backhand. It is performed by simply shifting your weight to your right leg and pushing your left foot further to the left. Vice versa if you want to go to the right. One big disadvantage of one-step footwork is it can leave you in a "stretched out" position if you have to move more than a foot or two. Once stretched out, it is difficult to get ready for the next shot.

The two-step footwork is the most common form of footwork. It is used to get into forehand position for balls to your wide forehand two-step footwork, you lean on your right leg, pull your left foot toward your right foot, then quickly shift your right foot to the right. You end up with your feet in the same relative position as when you started the movement except 2-3 feet further to the right. It is a side-skipping type of movement.

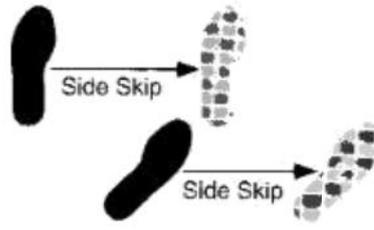
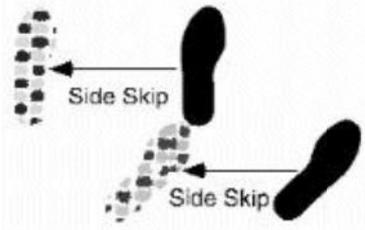
Three-step footwork is used to cover shots hit deep to the forehand corner, angled off the wide forehand sideline, or to step out wide on your backhand side to hit a forehand. It is very similar to the two-step except an additional small step is made before both feet are shifted. To move right, take a small step with your right foot to the right (6 to 8 inches), shift your weight to your right leg, then perform a two-step movement.

Figure O: Footwork Diagrams

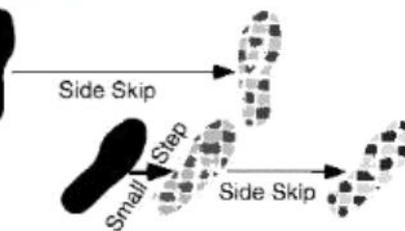
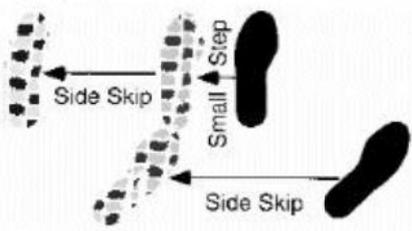
Below are diagrams showing how to place and move the feet for one-step, two-step, and three-step footwork. The diagrams are for a right-handed player. You should practice these patterns until they become second nature. When practicing, remember to stay balanced and in a good ready position. Strive to keep your shoulders level and on the same plane (no up and down movement of the body and no dipping or raising of one shoulder).



One Step Footwork



Two Step Footwork



Three Step Footwork