

A Short Guide to Table Tennis

Part 5: Service Returns

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Returning Spin Services:¹

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.

¹ Article by John Kiley. Table Tennis New Zealand Inc.

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.