

FOREHAND COUNTER-TOPSPIN OFF THE BOUNCE

By Richard McAfee, USATT National Coach & Hall of Fame Member



To play an effective topspin attacking game, it is imperative to be able to execute topspin strokes from any distance from the table. When two topspin style players exchange counter-topspins, the player that can stay closer to the table often can dominate the exchanges. To counter-topspin the ball from a position close to the table requires the ability to contact the ball while the ball is still on the rise, before it reaches the top of the bounce. The advantage of this stroke is that it is much more aggressive than a block, putting the opponent under great time pressure, often forcing an error or in driving the opponent back from the table.

Let's take a look at the basic elements for the forehand counter-topspin when played off-the-bounce.

1. When to contact the ball (timing) – Contact the ball quickly after the bounce while it is on the rise.
2. Where to contact the ball – Your racket should contact the ball, above the center of the face of the ball. The face of the ball is the part of the ball facing the direction of travel. As the ball is traveling forward and upward, the face is in a very high position.
3. How to contact the ball – If the ball is fast moving, you can redirect the ball by simply adding some topspin – for this stroke contact is mostly friction contact. Against a slower moving ball, you can add power to this stroke by contacting the ball with a mixture of force and friction contact.

Effective execution of this stroke does require a change in the normal forehand topspin technique. The normal forehand topspin stroke is executed with the elbow close to the body and in a low position. This allows the forearm to snap, forward and up, at contact allowing the power generated from the lower body to be transferred into the ball. This forearm snap is critical to a proper stroke.

Picture 1 (upper right) shows the normal low elbow position when counter top-spinning a ball at the top of the bounce. However, with the elbow in a low position, it is difficult to contact the ball above the center of the face of the ball while it is on the rise.

Special technique – To allow your racket to contact the ball correctly when counter top-spinning off the bounce, try lifting your elbow a few inches, as shown in picture 2 (lower right). You can now contact the ball at the correct position and also still have the same forearm snap you had in the low elbow position.

When learning this stroke, have your practice partner (or robot) feed you steady topspins to your forehand. Start by counter top-spinning from a few feet back from the table and then gradually move closer to the table and try to contact the ball while it is on the rise. Remember to lift your elbow a few inches and stroke over the ball.

(Helpful hint) Watch the speed of your opponent's swing to help you time your own counter-topspin strokes.



THE APPLICATION AND REDIRECTION OF ENERGY

By Richard McAfee

Author's Note: This article was originally published more than ten years ago. However, with the recent ban on speed glue, it is even more relevant now than when it was originally written. The mechanical advantage that speed gluing presented led to an era where even strong attacking strokes could be counter-attacked. With the recent ban of these glues, shot selection has once again become very important.

Imagine this: you are watching a match between two attacking players. Player A seems very powerful, hitting and looping each ball harder and harder. Player B seems to be just holding on, just returning the ball; and occasionally scoring on a well-placed drive or block.

As you watch, it becomes obvious that Player A is in control, yet when the match is finished, you see Player B, clipboard in hand, heading for the scorers table. What happened? How could Player A have lost? He so obviously controlled the match, or did he?

To understand this example is to understand one of the most important concepts of the game.

THE PRINCIPAL OF THE APPLICATION AND REDIRECTION OF ENERGY

This principal states that if the on-coming ball carries a great deal of energy you should simply redirect that energy against your opponent. On the other hand, if the on-coming ball has little energy, you should apply your own.

Getting back to our example, Player A may have looked great with his powerful strokes: but in reality Player B who simply redirected A's energy was in control. Occasionally when Player A did not supply energy to the ball, Player B would, and often would score as A tried to hit even harder.

The Chinese have long been the masters of this concept of energy flow, the Ying and Yang, of our sport. Taking the ball early, they often just use their opponent's energy against them with their short compact strokes. Preferring to hit harder only when their opponents were forced into weak shots.

You can put this principle to use in your own game. Here's how:

1. Try to become aware of how much energy your opponent has put into each shot. Energy can be applied as spin or speed (usually a combination of both). Watch your opponent's speed of swing and acceleration on contact.

2. Avoid over hitting. To many players get caught up trying to hit every ball harder than their opponent did. If you see a lot of energy in your opponent's swing, shorten your stroke, take the ball early, and redirect the energy against him.

3. Look for opportunities to apply energy. When there is little energy on the ball, apply your own to win the point.

To really understand the sport, you must not only be aware of what you are doing to the ball: but also what your opponent is doing to the ball. Master the concept of the *application and redirection of energy* and you will learn how to control your opponents, leaving them wondering how you did it.

PRACTICE TIP: Before trying this concept out on the table, try viewing videotapes of matches. As you watch, try to recognize who is applying energy and who is controlling the flow during points. Even while watching tapes that you have viewed many times before, watching with this new concept in mind, will bring about an increased understanding of how matches are won and lost.