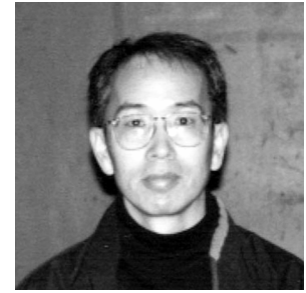


## **Dominate With Serve & Receive**

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In this article, I will go over the importance of serves and the receiving of serves as two of the top technical training priorities for future Champions.

In virtually every racket sport, serves and the ability to return them effectively are dominating factors in the outcome of any match. Besides table tennis, tennis is another example of a sport where this is true. Whether it is the men's or women's division, the big serve sets the tone of the match; if you serve well, you play well. On the other side, the player who can receive well can stay in the point until it is his or her turn to serve.

Conceptually, the serve and return of serve is the same in our sport as it is in tennis except, I maintain, it is more difficult to receive in table tennis because of the complexities involved. In tennis, the variety of serves is limited to such elements as speed, variations of topspin, placement and cross-court serves only. In table tennis, in addition to the above, there is variation of spins, dead balls, all of the court being open and most deadly of all, deception — the disguising of the type of spin and speed generated and the placement of it.

### **The Serve**

Ever since the sponge revolution in table tennis in 1952, the basic tactic of the serve has not changed: to gain an immediate offensive advantage. The most effective deception technique which transformed tactics of serving started about 30 years ago when Cai Zhenhua's (1975-77 World Men's Team Champion) executed racket flipping serves using anti-spin on one side and inverted rubber on the other. The two-color rule was not in effect at that time.

During that period, the use of combination rackets was not new, but he was the most effective in using the tactic of disguising which side was being used and how to gain an immediate offensive advantage. The two-color rule for rackets was enacted soon, when powers that be deemed the technique more trickery than skill. But coaches and players continued to find new methods of deception. In the 1980's, the "hidden serve" came into play: in which the body or the arm tossing the ball hides the point of contact with the ball. The player who first developed it is debatable, but Swedish players during their domination in the late 1980's through the 1990's were very effective in its employment and they influenced generations of new players.

In table tennis, as in tennis, the impact of a strong serve is undeniable. Tennis also struggles with the consequences of "big" serves leading to shorter matches, a direct result of the technological evolution of stronger and faster rackets and athletes' physical development through strengthening programs. This trend, whether in tennis or table tennis, will not change. Overall tactics, equipment and even rules regarding the serve have been evolving, but the basic tactic of the third ball attack remains constant – first ball is the serve, the second is the return of serve, and the third is attacking that return with some variation of strong topspin or speed to establish an offensive advantage. Some of the best exponents of this, and my favorites, are Guo Yuehua, Cai Zhenhua and, of course, Jan-Ove Waldner.

Recently, the service rule changed again to outlaw the "hidden serve," ostensibly to improve the image factor of table tennis by allowing longer rallies. But the reality is, and statistics prove,

that most points are over by the fifth ball. If history is an indicator of the future, coaches and players will continue to find other means, within the rules, to execute the goal of the server. The loss of the hidden serve doesn't mean you lose deception. You need to get creative in your execution of deception.

The key point is in the execution of deception. Disguising what serve and where you are going to place it, freezing or causing a hesitation by the receiver with sudden change of spin, direction, depth and speed. As an example, for one style of serve like forehand serve from your backhand court, contact should be made at the last split second after you decided on a particular serve, keeping your service motion exactly the same each time.

### **Return of Serve**

The consequence of the inability of a player to return deceptive and innovative serves is obvious from bottom levels of play to the top. Events at beginner levels to world championships are often won or lost by margins of just a few points, and these points are won and lost mainly by effective serves or returns of serve.

The significance of the ability to effectively return serves was demonstrated clearly by Sweden's domination of China (Men's division) in the late 1980's through the 1990's. China, with their massive talent pool and infrastructure, has a history of producing innovative serves, playing styles and tactics when faced with challenges. When Stellan Bengtson won the world championships in 1971, they came up with Huang Liang. When Hungary won the teams (1979), they came up with great servers in Guo Yuehua, Cai Zhenhua, and the acrobatic Chen Zhenhua, followed by the team of Jiang Jialiang, Teng Yi and Chen Longcan, and won the next four championships.

However, Sweden in the ensuing period found a technique to overcome then world champion China's mainly short pips players Teng Yi (who used pips on the forehand and inverted on backhand), Jiang Jialiang and Chen Longcan, who are all close-to-the-table hitters, by attacking their short serves with quick flips and countering their attacks by using shorter looping strokes than before. The other contributing factor was the introduction of speed glue and Sweden's new generation of talented and diverse-style players exemplified by Applegren, Waldner, Persson and Lindh. Sweden went on to win the next three world championships.

Like anything else in life, prioritizing the training program is a critical factor in maximizing one's available time. An accurate and realistic assessment of a player must be done before any formation of a training regimen. For important elements, such as serve and return of serve training, there is a need for much dedication and discipline, because these drills are not *fun* like some of the others.

The intricacies of serve and return of serve require absolute timing. It means developing the ability to time contact with the ball and consistently execute basic shots, like flipping or rolling and loops, along with enhanced anticipation to *read* the serve and have the physical flexibility, adaptability and the technical skill to cope with the ensuing sequence of shots.

Here are some basics: the goal of the receiver is to take the initiative away from the server and gain control of the point. The major method to gain control is to attack the serve whenever possible, usually by looping long serves and flipping short serves. Another method is to push and jockey for position. Tactically, pushing can be safe and also used as an advantage if done tactically. For example, push short if their short game is poor, or push deep with heavy backspin to invite them to attack if you know their loop is weak and you have a good counter-attack or block.

These are basic fundamentals. Serve and return of serve must be a training priority because the basic offensive-oriented strategy in our sport will not change in the foreseeable future. At higher levels, it is the player who is able to attack first and establish the momentum and the receiver who has the know-how and the courage to use offensive tactics who determine the outcome of these matches.

### **Ways to Dominate with Serve & Receive**

#### **SERVE**

- Deceptive motions that disguise the type and amount of spin, freezing an opponent and forcing mistakes or passive returns that can be attacked.
- Sudden changes of spin, direction, depth and speed that catch opponents off guard.
- Short sidespin/topspin serves that force an opponent to return serves deep, letting the server attack.
- Short backspin serves that are difficult to attack, forcing passive push returns that the server can attack.
- Short no-spin serves that are difficult to either flip aggressively or push short, giving the server the attack.
- Deep serves that break away from the opponent, catching them off guard as they reach for the ball.
- Fast down line serves that catch an opponent who tries to use the forehand from the backhand corner.
- Fast, dead (spinless) serves to the middle and wide backhand, catching opponents off guard as they put the ball in the net or weakly lift the ball up.
- “Tweeny” serves where the second bounce is right at the endline, so receivers hesitate, not sure if they can loop it or have to go over the table to return it.

#### **RECEIVE**

- Taking control against deep serves by looping.
- Taking control against short serves by mixing up various returns, including:
  - Dropping them short, stopping the server’s attack.
  - Flipping, either aggressively or deceptively, with good placement, catching the server off guard and giving the receiver the initiative.
  - Sudden quick, deep pushes, catching server off guard.
- Keeping the server off guard by varying the type of return.
- Aim one way, go another.
- Placement, placement, placement!