

Develop a Winning Playing Style

By Carl Danner, USATT's "Tip Of The Week" Online Coach

Note: Helpful comments were provided by John Allen and Larry Hodges



So you've taken your table tennis seriously for a while, and started to develop some reasonable strokes. But in matches, you struggle to win points by any means possible, and never achieve the flowing game the better players seem to have. What you need is a winning playing style – both to raise your playing level, and to make your matches more enjoyable.

Indeed, there is an interesting contradiction evident in top world-class play. On the one hand, such players can presumably execute any stroke, probably quite well. Their choice of shots would appear limitless. On the other hand, world-class players use distinct styles that depend on the repeated execution of a few key strokes they seem to have mastered. How they decide what those shots are, and how they compel their opponents to allow them to take those shots, are the key elements that they (and you) need to address in developing a style that will deliver more wins, and fun.

Let's go through the process of developing a playing style. These basics are useful both for relative newcomers trying to get started in the sport, as well as for intermediate or advanced players who aspire to further improvement. Even experienced tournament players sometimes have trouble pulling it all together, and might benefit from a refresher.

1. What is a playing style, and how does it work?

Generally, a style has two parts. First, a style is built around a particular, reliable way to win points. It might be, for example, a strong forehand loop. It might be consistent underspin (or "chopping") defense to force opponents into errors. Perhaps you want to throw repeated topspins at your opponents until they miss. Because modern table tennis rackets let players hit a wide variety of shots, there are numerous ways in which points can be won – a subject we address further below. But for an effective style, you need to pick one shot (or shot sequence) as your goal for how most points should end.

Second, a style uses all the shots you hit in a point to encourage your opponent to feed into your point-winning play. Conversely, a style also eliminates from your game other shots that encourage returns from your opponent that don't feed into your winning approach. For example, if you prefer to attack your opponents' topspin shots, then you will want to use serves that encourage such returns – and perhaps even give up the use of other serves that don't, even if those serves sometimes win points outright. Likewise, a looper who wants underspin pushes to attack is better off serving low and short, rather than using deeper serves that will let your opponent topspin first.

2. Choosing a style to develop

For some players a style seems to develop on its own, while others may have to make a conscious choice of which one to use. Either way, at some stage it will benefit you as a player to decide what your style is, or should be.

As a starting point, consider a winning stroke that's already comfortable for you. Perhaps you have a strong loop, when you get a chance to hit it. Maybe fast hands make your backhand

counterdrive solid. Some players take pleasure in maneuvering their opponents around with steady shots that are hard to attack. Defense is still a viable option in the era of the bigger ball. Chances are that some combination of your best current shots and your personal preferences (how you really want to play) will make a good starting point for your style. Your regular opponents are another source of information about which aspects of your game seem promising, or hard for others to handle.

Here are some typical point-winning plays that top players have used as the foundation of a winning style:

- Looping forehands for winners;
- Counterdriving steadily until opponents make errors;
- Quick, well-placed blocking
- Topspinning consistently from both forehand and backhand sides to outlast opponents;
- Outlasting opponents through consistent, passive defense (retrieving);
- Aggressive defense using spinny chops and aggressive counterloops;
- Pips-out flat hitting;
- Looping aggressively (off the bounce) at the table for winners from both forehand and backhand sides;
- Counterdriving to set up a consistent forehand smash;
- Bat-flipping (using a combination racket with one dead and one spinny side) for a mix of defense and offense.

How can you choose from so many interesting possibilities? Physically, the relative quickness of your hands and feet are important. Quick hands are good for the close-to-the-table work of styles such as counterdriving, flat hitting, or quick off-the-bounce looping. By contrast, fast feet are a necessity for a big forehand loop, any kind of defense, and consistent topspinning. You should enjoy your preferred style, just for the fun of it and to help motivate the practice needed to pull the pieces together. So again, feel free to pick one you like.

3. Turning style into strength

Having chosen a style, it's time to build it into a winning approach. To do so requires you to develop and perfect your weapon(s) of choice, while constructing the rest of your game to create opportunities to use that weapon. Let's start with your winning play before turning to the other shots and rallying techniques that will let you use that play as often as possible.

Refining your weapon

It's critical to develop your winning shot, or sequence of shots, into reliable weapons. It is important to develop tactics around the first three to seven strokes of any point as most rallies end within this number of strokes. Opponents around your playing level should almost always lose the point if they fall (or can be pushed) into the shot(s) you want to play. This means that your winners should not just be powerful, but also that they must be highly dependable. Remember – top players rarely miss their signature shots! For example, you should be able to make your loop kill or forehand smash (to use two possible examples) virtually every time they are available. As another example, if defense is your game, then your chopping, retrieving and/or pick hitting must be rock solid against the normal kinds of attacking shots you might

encourage from opponents. By contrast, many players overlook the importance of reliability, and take high risks in trying for winners. A big swing that misses is no threat, just a lost point.

To build a consistent weapon requires an unusual kind of practice – that of hitting repeated winners, or playing repeated winning sequences. For example, a looper should practice looping pushes and service returns for winners, a hitter should smash numerous forehands, a steady spinner should play long topspin rallies to conclusion, and so on. Or if serve and attack is part of your strategy, a significant part of your practice time should be spent serving and looping winners off the returns. Executing your winning shot or play should become second nature, and should be practiced frequently. Because so many points end just a few shots after the serve, it's helpful to start practice points with a serious serve and return. Handling the transition from a serve and/or return into your attacking shots is a critical part of the modern game. The little touch shots that go along with this effort (such as a short return of serve, or a flip shot against a short serve or push) are also important to start the attack, and to keep your opponent from starting his. Such “short game” skills often determine the outcome of matches between highly-skilled opponents.

This is also an area where good coaching can be important. It's worth making sure of your technique for your winning shot, including paying an expert coach from time to time for a tune-up. If such assistance is not available in your area, consider approaching a top coach for some help during a free moment at a regional or national tournament.

Who opens, and how

To “open” in a rally means to hit the first offensive shot (usually with topspin). For some styles, it's critical to open first. Strong loopers, for example, want to take the first swing, as do most hitters. By contrast, counterdrivers and defenders may prefer opponents to open, albeit against balls that can't be hit for immediate winners. Players with quick hands may even invite attacking shots they can block back forcefully.

In any event, you need to decide which player you want to open first, given your style. If it's you, then you need to emphasize short, low serves and service returns, a good short game in general, and learning to attack every long serve (i.e., one that doesn't bounce twice). If it's just as well for your opponent to open first, then you can use more long serves (and long topspin serves especially), push a little deeper to your opponent's weaker wing, and learn to roll the ball (a gentle topspin) deep to the location from which you would like your opponent to make a topspin return.

By contrast, many problems occur if there's a clash between your style and your strategy for opening points. For example, a blocker with a weak loop may not want to serve underspin or push very much, because it just sets up opponents to tee off on big shots. Instead, blockers might want to serve topspin to start their kind of rally immediately. As another example also noted above, a looper usually should serve and push short, and refrain from serves or deep pushes that let their opponents open first.

Beyond these basics, there are many fine points of matching style and opening that can best be learned by watching high-level play. Select a top player or two who uses your preferred style, and observe carefully how he or she serves (and opens) to get the most helpful returns. It's even worth taping some matches so you can go back to verify, as questions arise, how a player of your style should handle a given shot.

Regaining control of the rally

Anything can happen when a rally gets going, and you can't always play points the way you would like. But you can try to force the flow of the point back into your strengths.

Basically, you have three choices when your opponent succeeds in starting the type of rally she wants (as opposed to the one you want). First, you can escalate your shots and try to win the point immediately. Second, you can play along and hope to prevail even on your opponent's terms. Third, you can try to reset the point, using a neutralizing shot to shut down the rally and let you try again for the opening play you prefer.

Of these options, the first can be worth trying if your opponent is very consistent, and highly likely to earn points played according to her style. In that case, you might have to take your first decent shot at a winner, even if the percentages are not favorable. More often, however, it's better to de-escalate the rally through a neutralizing shot – such as a low soft block, a deep consistent topspin to your opponent's weaker wing, or even a simple chop that forces your opponent to open again or push. That way, you can slow things down and give yourself another chance to get in position and bring your weapons into play.

As with the above discussion of opening the point, space doesn't permit a full description of how players of different styles can use neutralizing shots. But watching how they regain control of rallies is another key technique to observe among top players who play the style you want to learn.

4. Conclusion: Pulling it all together

If you have followed the steps described above, you will have chosen your preferred style and method of winning points; you will have practiced your best shots until they are highly reliable; and you will have structured your serve, short game and recovery shots to promote the kinds of returns you want in order to execute your preferred tactics. These elements of a winning playing style should let you approach matches at any level (basement, club, or tournament) with the confidence of having a plan and the means to carry it out.

Indeed, if you are like most players, you may find yourself spending many months or years working on your personal style, picking up tips from like-minded competitors, and even debating the merits of various styles with your friends. It's all part of a varied and interesting sport, so have fun with it!