

TABLE TENNIS A TACTICAL MASTER CLASS



By Tara Fusco



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Introduction to Tactical Awareness in Table Tennis

Tactical awareness is a very important factor in becoming not just a good table tennis player but a great one. Being tactically aware means that you have the ability to think about how you want to play against a particular opponent.

When you start out learning to play the game, your focus is on getting the ball onto the table and improving your technique, but as your technique and consistency improve, you need to look at other ways to improve and to gain a competitive advantage over your opponents. One of these ways is to improve your tactical awareness.

To explain tactical awareness in table tennis, I would like to compare it for a moment to the game of snooker. A good snooker player does not look to just pot one ball and then hope for the best on the next shot. They aim to pot the ball and make sure they get the cue ball into a good position to play a good shot on the next ball. The snooker player is always thinking two or three shots ahead. The same can be said of the tactically aware table tennis player.

So how do you improve your tactical awareness?

1. Know how your shots affect your opponents' returns
2. Know your own strengths and weaknesses
3. Plan shot sequences to get the desired results
4. Get to know your opponents – their strengths, weaknesses, equipment they use and tactics they employ
5. Be aware of your surroundings / playing conditions
6. Always have a Plan B to fall back on

How your shots affect your opponents returns

If your opponent is predominately an offensive, attacking player, a topspin ball played by you is most likely to be returned with a block. You will hope that your opponent does not read the spin well enough and the ball comes back high enough for you to smash. You need to be prepared and ready for this outcome.

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If your opponent is a high quality advanced player, they may be able to return it with counter topspin, in which case you may be forced to block.

If your topspin shot drops a bit short and sits up a bit high, it is possible that your opponent could hit through your spin and the ball will come back very hard and fast to you. It is therefore important to try to keep your topspins low over the net and to get as much length as possible.

Only if your opponent is a defensive player, is a chop a likely return off a topspin ball.

If you on the other hand play a push or backspin shot, the likely response of your opponent is either a counter push or a topspin or flick. You need to be ready for any of these options. A smash or flat hit is unlikely in this situation unless your opponent plays with pimples and can hit through your backspin.

Finally if you play a flat shot with very little spin, it is most likely that your opponent will return your shot with a similar flat shot or will impart some topspin to lift the ball back over the net.

Knowing how your shots affect your opponents returns helps you to be prepared for what type of shot may come back to you.



Know your own strengths and weaknesses

The most important tactic in any table tennis match is to play to your strengths and away from your weaknesses. You must try to plan the game so that you can use your best shots as often as possible and your weakest shots as little as possible. First of all you need to be consciously aware of where your strengths and weaknesses lie.

For example if forehand topspin is your strength, you should stand to the left of the centre of the table (for a right hander), so that you can cover the majority of the table with your forehand. You could also use a side spin serve to make it difficult for your opponent to return the ball anywhere other than the forehand side of the table.

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If your first backhand topspin is your favourite shot and one which gets you a lot of advantage, you should use your backhand to serve so that you are positioned should the opponent return to your backhand. Ideally you are hoping for them to push long to your backhand so that you can get the optimum amount of topspin on your shot. Make it more difficult for your opponent by playing your backhand topspin down the line or into their cross-over point.

Using spin and ball placement as well as adjusting your stance position at the table can result in the ability to utilise your strengths more whilst avoiding your weaknesses. Be aware of course that if your opponent is tactically aware, they will be doing their best to find your weaknesses.

Plan shot sequences

Planning shot sequences rather than just “going out and playing” is the basis to having a good game plan against a particular opponent. Against every opponent you should have a game plan and visualising it over and over in your head before the match is vital so that you know what you need to do. We will look in more detail at game planning in Chapter 3.

Shot sequences can be planned in advance to gain advantage. For instance it is a good tactic to play a ball down the line to surprise your opponent and if they return it, play the next one wide to get them out of position. Alternatively you may decide to play a long fast ball to the crossover point which should result in a weak return allowing you to smash or play aggressive topspin to either angle. If you know your opponent is weak wide to the forehand, you could play the first ball wide to forehand which will take your opponent out of position giving you the whole table to play into. By planning shot sequences you know what you need to do with the next ball rather than making a split second decision on the spot. Do remember however that it is important to use variation. If you use the same shot sequences over and over, the opponent will soon get used to them and will know where the ball is coming.

Get to know your opponents

It is not possible to make a game plan unless you know your opponent. If you play the same people on a regular basis, you will know their style of play (attacking or defensive), the equipment they use (live rubber, pimples, anti etc) and you will also get to know their strengths and weaknesses. If you are playing someone for the first time you might need to watch them play another match before you play them or if this is not possible, you will have to try to quickly find out in the early stages of the match what you think their strengths and weaknesses are. We will look in more detail at how to analyse your opponent's strengths and weaknesses in Chapter 2.

Once you know a bit about how your opponent plays, you can create a game plan around that, focusing on gaining advantage from their weaknesses.

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Over time as you play the same opponent more regularly, you will learn what tactics they employ against you as they try to gain advantage from your weaknesses. Consider this also in the development of your game plan.



Be aware of your surroundings & playing conditions

Playing conditions can affect the tactics you employ in a given match or competition. If the light is less than ideal, you might need to stay closer to the table so you do not lose sight of the ball. Similarly if the background is light reflective, you may need to stay closer to the table. The size of the playing area may also mean you need to stay closer to the table, this can be particularly problematic for a defensive player.

If the floor is slippery under foot, make sure you bring a damp cloth to the table so you can dampen the soles of your shoes to add grip.



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Always have a Plan B

I mentioned already the importance of having a game plan before every match. However, sometimes things do not go according to plan and your game plan does not seem to be having the desired result. For this reason it is always important to have a Plan B to fall back on. As a player and a coach I have experienced many occasions when a change of tactics has been needed in order to change the course of a match. Discuss with your coach/player at the end of a set or during a time out. Make sure you do not leave it too long to bring in a change of tactics, if you think it is necessary. 10-5 down in the last set might be a little bit too late!



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About the Author



Tara Fusco was born and lived all her young life in Dun Laoghaire Co. Dublin. She is now married with two children and lives with her family in Bray, Co. Wicklow. Tara is an ex Irish International table tennis player, who represented Ireland at 5 World Championships and 7 European Championships during her 13 year International career. She played in Germany on a semi-professional basis between 2006 and 2009. She has won every domestic tournament in Ireland and was National singles champion on two occasions.

Tara has been a Level 2 Table Tennis Coach for over 25 years and has many years of experience coaching in clubs, schools and at International level. Tara continues to play to a high level representing Dun Laoire Table Tennis Club in the Women's British League.

In recent times she has started focusing on the importance of fitness in table tennis and has also undertaken Business Diplomas in Sports Nutrition and Sports Psychology. She recently set up a website www.ttfans.ie, an online resource offering table tennis players of all standards expert advice on all aspects of table tennis from technique, fitness, tactical awareness, psychology and nutrition.

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Her latest project is the creation of a Master Class series of E-Books, of which this one “Table Tennis – a Tactical Master Class” is the second. If you missed the first in the series? "A Step by Step Guide to Improving Your Technique" it can be downloaded here.

Coming soon in the series, E-Books focusing on fitness, nutrition and psychology.

Logon to www.ttfans.ie or follow Tara on Social Media for further updates

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