

Block variations part II: The passive forehand block

In the last Butterfly News we had a look at the passive backhand block of the Japanese Kenji Matsudaira. We described not only the tactical meaning of this block variety but also its necessity as one of the basic techniques. The passive block demands an enormous amount of feeling and anticipation and is no technique for beginners. Right the opposite, even in top table tennis it is used in special game situations. In this newsletter we are dealing with the passive forehand block. Again the Japanese national player, Kenji Matsudaira, the number 114 of the WRL is going to be our teacher.

The classic block can not be divided into three phases so that we concentrate fully on the movement when contact with the ball is made. The pictures 1a – 4a (front view) and 1b – 4b (from the side) show Kenji's passive forehand block.

On pictures 1a and 1b we see Kenji expecting the ball. He is in the typical basic low position: feet parallel and a little bit more than shoulder wide apart with the usual angles at his feet, knee and hip joints. By this he achieves perfect balance and can move his upper body forwards to get above the ball without falling backwards. The shoulder of his playing arm is slightly opened towards the forehand side.



14 Technique tips

Kenji is watching the approaching loop precisely and adjusts the angle of his bat according to the anticipated spin of the ball. Simultaneously he turns his upper body slightly towards the forehand side so that his playing arm can be moved easily to meet the rising ball at the sideways in front of his body (picture 2a). The view from the side of his body (picture 2b) shows additionally that Kenji is lowering his body weight slightly towards the point of contact with the ball.



Especially important is the timing with the passive block (Pictures 3a and 3b). On the one hand the ball must not be taken too early – directly after bouncing – (danger of blocking the ball into the net), on the other hand it must not be taken too late because it is difficult to control it. The perfect place to receive the ball should be just like with the other forehand strokes at the side of the body when the ball is rising which means in the extension of the right knee/leg (dotted red line picture 3a). The elbow of the playing arm is at a right angle. The wrist is slightly bent downwards (picture 3b, red line) so that the head of the bat is pointing to the side and not to the top. That way the angle of the bat may be adjusted perfectly.



15 Technique tips

If we now compare the pictures 3a with 4a and 3b with 4b it becomes clear that there is no actual stroke movement at the moment of making contact with the ball but that the speed and rotation of the coming ball is used for the return.

The pictures 5 and 6 show a typical game situation for the use of the passive block. The opponent loops with his forehand from the far backhand side and his whole forehand side is wide open. Why should the returning player now take the risk of smashing or counter looping the ball if the return is just as effective when it is blocked precisely diagonally to the far forehand side. Kenji recognizes the situation reacts speedily with a wide step to the anticipated place where the ball is going to bounce and blocks the ball safely back. At this point it becomes clear that the word „passive“ is not meant tactically but from the point of movement.



16 Technique tips

Let's now have a look at possible mistakes and Kenji demonstrates them slightly exaggerated.

No1: Kenji meets the ball too upright and too late. The bat angle could be a bit more closed. A comparison to picture 3b shows the difference.

No2: Kenji is standing far too upright and is not above the ball. He hits the ball too late and much too high. He has no chance to play a block.

No3: Kenji reacts to the coming topspin ball with his arm stretched. Despite the fact that he has got time he does not move towards the ball. His position is poor and he lacks the necessary balance for a good block. It is even though possible in certain game situations to play a successful return without standing in the right position. The Chinese Ma Lin, Olympic Champion in 2008, has tried once while he was falling down to get his bat to the ball somehow and one way or the other managed to block the ball back on the table. Everybody was cheering because something like that doesn't happen every day.



17 Technique tips

No4 and No5: Kenji shows us a mistake which is quite common: A player turns his hip too much to the forehand side and is standing almost square to the table. The result is that he is hitting the ball too late and at the side of the body and has difficulties to control it.

No6: This mistake is almost a mistake made by new beginners. The player wants to block the ball with his arm stretched. Then he will get into problems with his bat angle, timing and stroke consistency. So avoid that by all means.

