

Block variations part III: The active block as a spin or counter variety

In the previous Butterfly News we looked at the passive block. Now we are taking a closer look at the active block. Again Kenji Matsudaira is demonstrating the technique. The 19 year old national player is one of the Japanese generations of players who managed to get to the top of the world and proved this impressively at the World Championships in Yokohama. Kenji's both sided offensive game is attractive and powerful, his blocking game has a lot of varieties. Let's now have a look at his active backhand block.

The main difference is that the active block in opposition to the passive block includes an active stroke movement which is supposed to speed up the ball. That is achieved by two possibilities:

- by a counter and kick movement
- by a spin movement

You can differ between those varieties only by watching them precisely. From the outside there is not a big difference between the active backhand block and the backhand counter hit. This applies also to the spin variety. Basically it is decided at the moment of making contact with the ball if the counter hit or spin variety is used. With the spin block the ball is hit more tangential and the player accelerates more from the forearm and wrist. The bat angle is much closed. With the counter hit variety the ball is being hit more centrally and is pushed down more that way. If the ball is kicked with the wrist it is being hit centrally. This variety is often used as a final smash. Let's now look more closely at Kenji's backhand block. The pictures A-D show Kenji from the front, the pictures E-H from the side.

Pictures A+E – starting position: Kenji is standing on backhand side slightly square to the table (picture A, green line). That way he can put more pressure on the ball diagonally. His feet are more than shoulder wide apart and his upper body is slightly bent forward. He has perfect balance in this position. Noticeable - and that against many opinions of the teaching books – is the position to the table. He is not standing very close to the table (picture E). So he is flexible when receiving the ball because he can also return long balls with pressure. On top of that he has more freedom of movement for his active block. The length of the stroke becomes longer and the speed of the stroke increases. The block can be played very aggressively.



13 Technique tips

Pictures B+F – preparation phase: Kenji lowers his main body weight by bending his knees and his upper body (picture E). He moves the shoulder of his playing arm slightly forwards (picture B). The view from the side and the view from the front show clearly the use of his wrist and the tension in his forearm. The wrist is bent backwards and down. The top of the bat points sideways down and the bat angle is closed.



Pictures C+G – main phase: Kenji hits the ball in front of his body when the ball is still rising. The path of the stroke is sloping upwards and not too flat. The bat angle is much closed. The topspin of the approaching ball is neutralized and turned into an opposite spin by the acceleration of the bat caused by wrist and forearm movement. The speed of the bat and the angle must be very accurate. A lot of training is necessary to play this spin block with high consistency and vary it concerning speed.



14 Technique tips

Pictures D+H – backswing: Kenji stretches the arm at the end of the backswing forward and up. The arm is nearly stretched at the elbow (picture D). Picture H shows clearly that Kenji has executed the stroke slightly upwards (compare picture E with H).



Comparison of counter and spin block

A comparison of picture C (spin block) and C1 (counter block) is worth while. The top of the bat points square upwards at the moment of contact with the ball when playing the counter hit block because the ball is pressed down. When using the spin block the top of the bat points square backwards. Additionally the elbow is down with the counter hit block. Only this makes a fast stroke movement forwards and up possible. Apart from the passive block players should be in command of both active block varieties. The variability of the game increases but also the feeling for the ball and the timing. The one who is able to play all three varieties is surely a long way ahead to become a top player.

