

Table Tennis Equipment

Four pieces of equipment are needed to play table tennis: the table, the net, the ball, and the racket. The racket is really two pieces of equipment—the racket itself and its covering. In addition, players must choose proper playing attire plus any of the many table tennis accessories available—table tennis glue, head and wrist bands, net measurer, racket holder and playing bag, and weighted rackets.

THE TABLE

The table is 9 feet by 5 feet, with the surface 30 inches from the floor. It is usually a dark, nonreflecting green, with a 3/4-inch white line running along the edge. There is also a 1/4-inch line running down the middle that is only used in doubles. (It doesn't invalidate the table for singles play.)

The way the ball bounces when it hits the table must meet certain standards. It should have a uniform bounce whether the ball is hitting near the edge or in the middle. It should bounce roughly the same on all legal tables. (When dropped from a height of 12 inches, the ball should bounce between 8-3/4 and 9-3/4 inches.) You won't be able to develop proper timing on a table that gives variable bounces. If at all possible, use tables that are either USTTA or ITTF approved.

Tables range from beat-up ones with gaping holes in the middle and bounces that defy gravity to thousand dollar ones that are scientifically designed. Try to use ones that are somewhere in between.

You'll need room to play. A legal playing court is at least 20 by 40 feet, but you may have to compromise on this depending on the size of your facility. Beginners don't need nearly as much room as more advanced players. If at all possible, the ceiling should be at least 12 feet or higher, but this isn't necessary for beginners. (You can't lob with a low ceiling, but lobbing is a rather advanced shot.)

The background should be dark enough so that the ball (usually white) can be seen clearly. Make sure there are no glares. Table tennis is a vision-oriented sport, and a white background or a glare from a window can ruin the game.

The floor should not be slippery, for obvious reasons. Most top players consider a wood floor (or something similar) best, because extensive play on a hard surface can hurt your feet and legs.

THE NET

The net is 6 inches high and stretches across the middle of the table. It should extend 6 inches on each side of the table—this is to keep players from hitting the ball around the net, something some top players can do.

If the net isn't the correct height you won't get a feel for proper ball trajectory. If you play with a net that is too low, you'll get in the habit of hitting the ball too low, and when you go to a regulation net, you'll hit into the net. If you play on a net that is too high, you'll hit the ball too high when you go to a regulation net.

Nothing is more irritating than a net that keeps falling over or that sags in the middle. Make sure the net being used is securely fastened and relatively taut.

THE BALL

Balls are usually white, but some are orange. They vary in price from cheap 10-cent balls that break on contact with a racket to three-star quality balls that cost nearly a dollar each. A poorly made ball tends to be lopsided, with soft spots, so that it not only breaks easily, it doesn't bounce the same way each time. You should probably go for the expensive three-stars. They bounce better, and in the long run they're cheaper because they last much longer. Balls are usually marked either one, two, or three-star. Get the three-stars. If there are no stars, avoid them.

THE RACKET

Choosing a racket consists of two parts. First you must choose the blade itself (a racket without the covering). Then you must choose the covering for the hitting surface. You'll want to pick the correct racket and covering for your particular style of play.

A blade is made of wood, although a small amount of carbon fiber or similar fibrous material is permitted. Most tournament players use plain wood but some use expensive (over \$100) carbon fiber blades that give a more even bounce on different parts of the racket—a larger "sweet spot." Many players complain that carbon rackets have less "touch," which is why they are still less popular than plain wood.

When selecting a racket, you must consider your grip, playing style, price, and what feels comfort-

able. If you use the penhold grip (see Step 1, "Grip and Racket Control") then make sure to get a penhold racket.

Some beginners think it's "macho" or cool to use a fast blade. This is a mistake. A medium-speed blade will enable you to control the ball and develop your shots far more effectively. As you advance, you may want a faster blade if you develop an attacking style. If you develop a more defensive style, you may want a slower blade. The speed of most table tennis blades is usually marked on the package, ranging from "slow" to "very fast."

Ultimately, the deciding factor when selecting a blade (other than price) is the "feel." If it feels right, it's probably the best blade for you.

THE RACKET COVERING

The racket covering is even more important than the racket itself. There are five basic types: inverted, pips-out, hard rubber, long pips, and antispin. (Sandpaper and plain wood are also sometimes used, but they are illegal surfaces and should not be used. They were made illegal because they damage the ball.)

All racket coverings include a sheet of "pimpled" rubber, a sheet of rubber covered with conical "pips." These pips help grab the ball and put more spin on it.

Make sure to use some sort of sponge rubber covering (see Figure 1, a-c). A sponge racket is covered with a thin layer of sponge, with a pimpled rubber surface. There are basically three types of surfaces, two of which have sponge.

- **Inverted sponge:** The sheet of pimpled rubber is inverted. The pips face inward, toward the racket. This leaves a smooth surface. On some types of inverted sponge, the surface is sticky, which helps when spinning the ball but causes a loss of control. Sticky inverted is the best surface for putting spin on the ball, while less sticky inverted is best for all-around play. I recommend that beginners get a less sticky inverted surface.

- **Pips-out sponge:** Here the pips point outward. This type of surface is ideal for smashing but is not as good for spinning or all-around play. You can't spin the ball as well with this surface, but you have more control against spin.
- **Hard rubber:** Hard rubber is a sheet of pimpled rubber, pips outward, without any sponge under it. Before sponge rackets were invented in the 1950s, this was the most popular surface. A player with a sponge racket can keep the ball in play at a faster pace than with a hard rubber racket and can attack far more effectively. A player using hard rubber is at a severe disadvantage against an opponent with sponge, so I strongly recommend that you use a sponge of some sort.

Two other types of racket surfaces are occasionally used: "antispin rubber" and "long pips." These surfaces are different in their playing characteristics than other surfaces and are for special styles of play, mostly defensive. They will be covered in detail in Step 13, "Playing Styles and Rallying Tactics." I don't recommend these surfaces for beginners. As you learn more about the game, you may wish to try them out.

SPEED GLUES

Many top players now use some sort of speed glue, which makes the racket surface faster and "spinnier." The glue must be put on before each playing session because the effect wears off after a few hours. The glue adds a slingshot effect when hitting the ball, shooting the ball out. The effect only lasts until the glue hardens, which takes from 3 to 10 hours, depending on the type and the amount used.

Speed glue is especially useful for players who attack with topspin. The speed glue could more correctly be called "spin glue" because it really adds more spin than speed. Players who try speed glue usually have trouble controlling it at first, but they quickly adjust. Although speed glue does add more power to your game, it reduces your control.

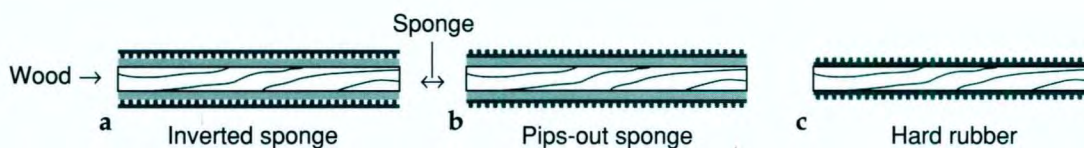


Figure 1 (a) Inverted sponge: a sheet of pimpled rubber is inverted. The pips face downward, toward the racket. (b) Pips-out sponge: the pips point outward. (c) Hard rubber: a sheet of pimpled rubber, pips outward, without any sponge underneath the rubber.

It is not recommended until players reach at least an intermediate level.

CARE OF YOUR EQUIPMENT

Table tennis equipment needs very little maintenance. However, if you use inverted sponge, you'll need to clean the racket surface. There are special rubber cleaners on the market that clean extremely well, but constant use of them will wear down the rubber. It's better to wash an inverted sponge with plain water and a towel. Use rubber cleaner mostly in tournaments.

All table tennis sponge wears out. The tiny bubbles in the sponge pop and eventually the sponge goes dead and should be replaced. The higher the level of play, the more often the sponge should be changed.

Inverted sponge surfaces also wear out, usually before the sponge does. If you like to spin the ball, you shouldn't use an old surface that is no longer grippy.

Sponge surfaces come in squares that have to be glued to the racket and cut. There are special table tennis glues for this, but you can also use rubber cement. The only disadvantage of rubber cement is that it is slightly thicker than table tennis glue and will create lumps under the surface if not put on properly.

You will need to know how to put on a fresh sheet of sponge. Here's how:

1. Apply a thin layer of glue to both the racket and sponge, and let it dry. (Bubbles may form under the sponge if you don't let it dry before continuing.)
2. Carefully put the sponge on the racket, starting at one end and rolling it over the surface.
3. Check the surface for bubbles. If there are any, squeeze them flat with either a roller of some sort or your fingers.

4. Put a piece of paper on the surface and then stack some books on top. Let it sit for 5 minutes or so.
5. Remove the books and cut away the excess sponge with scissors or razor blade.
6. Play!

SHOES AND CLOTHING

You should wear rubber-soled athletic shoes with athletic socks. Don't use running shoes; they're not designed for the sudden side to side movements needed in table tennis and can lead to sprained ankles. There are specially made table tennis shoes, but they aren't really necessary until you reach the higher levels. Volleyball shoes are ideal for table tennis.

Solid-colored, nonwhite shorts and shirts finish out your table tennis outfits, with warm-ups optional. (White outfits are illegal because an opponent can lose the ball against the white background. Likewise, orange clothing is illegal if an orange ball is used, in which case white clothes are legal.)

OTHER ACCESSORIES

There are a number of other items that you may choose to use. Here's a short list:

- Head and wrist bands
- Net measurer
- Racket holder
- Spare racket
- Playing bag
- Weighted racket, for shadow practice (or simply leave the cover on your regular racket)