

# TABLE TENNIS

## WITH TIMO BOLL



MORE THAN 50 INSTRUCTIONAL  
PHOTO SERIES

HIS GAME, HIS TECHNIQUE,  
HIS KNOW-HOW

PREMIUM

BERND-ULRICH GROSS | TIMO BOLL

MEYER  
& MEYER  
SPORT

## Table Tennis with Timo Boll

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Bernd-Ulrich Groß | Timo Boll

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MORE THAN 50 PHOTO SERIES

HIS GAME. HIS TECHNIQUE. HIS KNOW-HOW

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND FOREWORD

Dear Readers,

It has long been my dream to write a table tennis textbook not just about, but with Timo Boll, the most successful German table tennis player in history. The credit for this dream finally being realized of course goes primarily to Timo, who, armed with all his knowledge and experience, offered to hold extensive interviews with me in order to provide you with many valuable analyses, tips, and suggestions for your practice, whether you are a player or a coach. Timo really got into it—just like he plays! After our first interview in Düsseldorf, Germany, I asked if he had enjoyed the photo series and he answered with a short and crisp: “Super!” Many thanks, Timo! I had lots of fun working with you and learning even more about table tennis.

A special thanks also goes out to Hans-Wilhelm Gäb and Bernhard Schmittenbecher, Timo’s management team, who strongly supported the project in spite of Timo’s incredibly busy schedule. Finding interview dates was almost the most difficult part of the project.

Of course this book would be unimaginable without the help of the world’s leading table tennis manufacturer, Butterfly, who has supported Timo from a young age as a material sponsor and promoter. We were able to choose from hundreds of photos taken between 2005 and 2015, and nearly all of the 50 photo series came from the Butterfly trade magazine, *Table Tennis Report*. The current European general manager, Taisei Imamura, made sure that the editorial office in Tokyo provided these photos and his predecessor, Hideyuki Kamizuru, helped with translations from the Japanese *Table Tennis Report*. Many thanks!

My sincere thanks also to the sports and table tennis photographer, Dr. Stephan Roscher, who has been photographing Timo Boll for many years and whose impressive photos enhance this book.

This book required a lot more of my time and strength than I ever imagined, and so I finally want to wholeheartedly thank my wife, Mechthild, and my children, Sophia and Luisa, as well as Mark for their understanding and strong support.

### **The book's objective and how it works!**

This book is intended for players and coaches. The idea is this: "Don't copy—study!" The point isn't to copy Timo's technique or moves with the help of this book—that wouldn't work anyway nor does it make sense, since every player has different physical and mental abilities. Instead, it is about closely studying Timo's technique and moves in order to learn from them. Copying one of Timo's serves or topspins is unlikely to be successful, but trying and adopting some of the elements and principles of his technique to improve one of your own techniques is entirely possible. It doesn't matter that Timo is left-handed; I am right-handed myself and the photo series taught me that after a short while, the switch from the left hand to the right happens automatically.

In the course of his career, Timo has continued to perfect two-sided topspin play, and is considered the master of rotation around the world. This is also true for his serves and returns. That is why we focus on analyses of these stroke techniques and their application in different game situations.

In chapters 7 and 8, Timo offers additional information on his playing philosophy, his racket, and his training. In chapter 9, people who have been around Timo for a long time and are very close to him reveal what they think about Timo as a person and as a table tennis player. Finally, Timo gets a chance to speak during a brief interview.

Enjoy the book!

*Bernd-Ulrich Groß*

## Orientation

Chapters 1-6 follow a specific outline:

<b>Introduction</b>	Topic introduction
<b>Info+</b>	Additional information on topic
<b>Analysis</b>	Description and analysis of photo series
<b>Timo's Check</b>	Timo's commentary and practice-oriented tips
<b>Photo Check</b>	Photo series with analysis by Timo
<b>Direct quotes in quotation marks:</b>	Particularly noteworthy quotes from Timo

You can find an overview of the most important basic terminology of a technical-tactical table tennis analysis in the appendix starting on page 272.





# CHAPTER 1

**HOW TO GRIP  
THE RACKET DURING  
PLAY AND SERVE**





# CHAPTER 1

## HOW TO GRIP THE RACKET DURING PLAY AND SERVE

### ➡ Introduction

**T**he alpha and omega of table tennis is the grip on the racket.

The difference between a so-called wrong grip and a correct grip is that the wrong grip inherently has disadvantages when performing certain stroke techniques. The player should grip the racket in a way that allows him to optimally execute the different stroke techniques on the forehand as well as on the backhand. Although we



*Timo adopts his grip of the racket to the respective stroke technique.*

differentiate between the European shake-hand grip and the Asian penholder grip, the shake-grip has come into wider use in Asia's leading table tennis countries (e.g., China, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan) over the past three decades. Among the current top-ten players on the world ranking list (as of April 2016), there is only one penholder player, the Chinese player Xu Xin, who is ranked third.

The shake-hand grip differs by individual and variations include the low and high grip, backhand and forehand grip, different thumb and index finger positions, and many more subtle variations. Nowadays, changing grips during play (e.g., from forehand grip to backhand grip) is a given—and not just for elite players. And even the youngest players know that certain serves, particularly forehand serves, require a very particular serve grip.

**Info +****The right grip: it's not easy**

Every player has his own way of gripping the racket, which will continue to evolve as his game develops. This is due to the size of the hand, the length of the fingers, more or less well-developed dexterity, and a natural tendency to grip the racket a certain way. Beginners who have not been taught the proper grip always exhibit very different grips that nevertheless follow basic patterns (e.g., skillett grip, four-finger grip, two-finger grip, loose two-finger grip).

It is rare for beginners to find their way to the correct shake-hand grip without instruction. Every coach working with children knows how difficult—and sometimes downright impossible—it is to break their habit of a wrong grip if they have been playing recreational table tennis regularly prior to specific table tennis instruction. It is also just as difficult to work with players on improving their grip after they have been used to a certain grip for years, even if it involves only the most subtle changes. This requires enormous willpower and endurance from both player and coach.

Now let's take a look at Timo's grip.

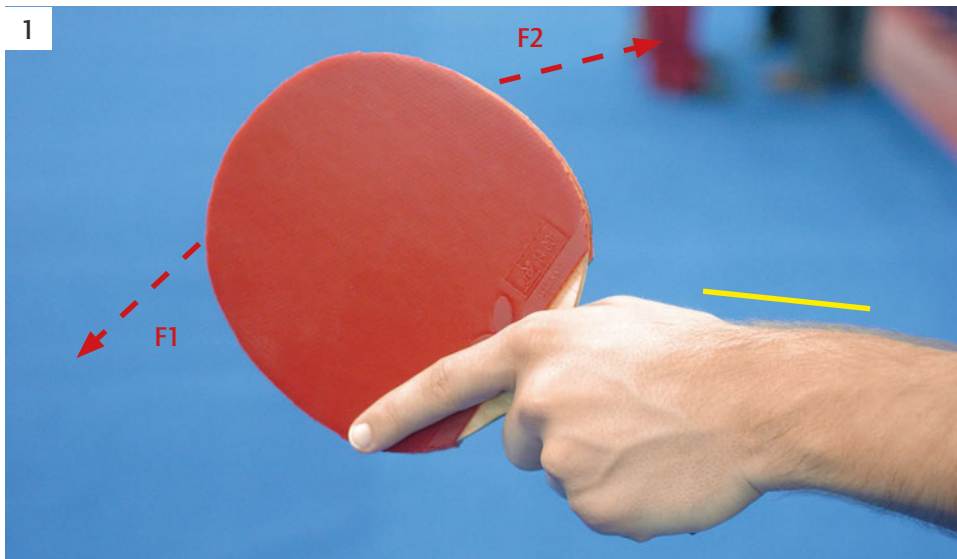


## 1.1 During play— basic grip and variations

### ➡ Analysis

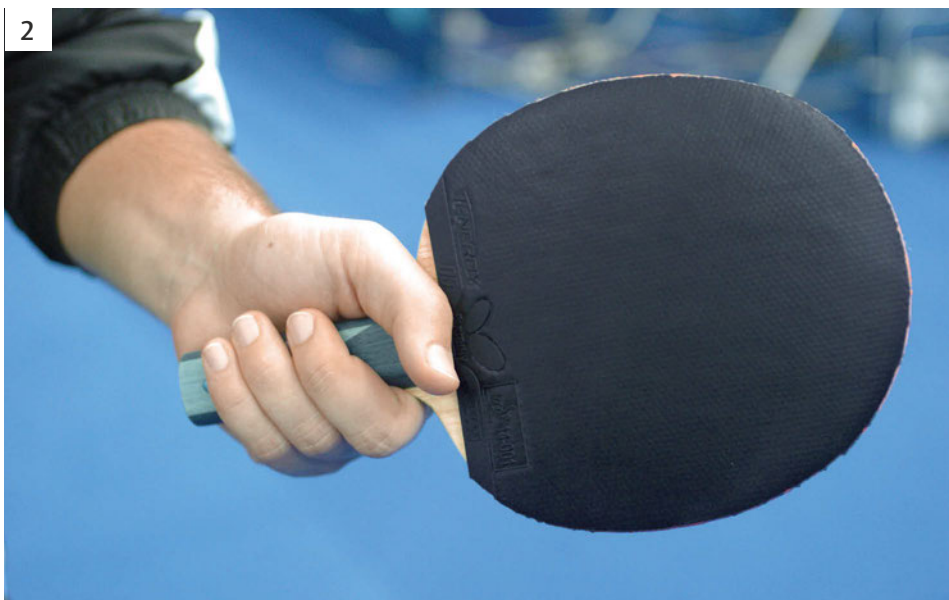
#### Basic grip

Timo plays with the classic shake-hand grip. It is the ideal grip and meets all criteria that an optimal grip should. It is also changeable, meaning it can be adjusted to execute certain stroke techniques.



*Backhand grip: wrist is in neutral position*

**Photo 1:** On the backhand side, Timo's index finger lies flat against the blade at the lower edge of the racket. This allows him full contact with the blade and, for Timo, it is the main sensor for his feel for the ball. Together with the thumb located on the forehand side, the index finger ensures a stable and precise stroke. The position of the wrist in the basic position is extremely important for an optimal grip. Looking at Timo, we can clearly see that the hand neither angles down (red arrow as illustration F1) nor up (red arrow as illustration F2) at the wrist, but rather remains relaxed in its basic position (yellow line). This prevents tightening of the playing hand and playing arm due to a grip that is too firm and tense.



*Forehand grip: wrist is in neutral position*

**Photo 2:** A glance at the forehand side shows the natural, relaxed, basic position of the wrist. Middle finger, ring finger, and pinkie loosely encircle the handle, otherwise the tendons in the wrist area would be taut. The thumb is slightly bent against the flattened upper end of the grip plate and provides counter-pressure to the index finger. In **photo 2a**, you can see how the tip of Timo's thumb sticks out slightly during the forehand topspin.

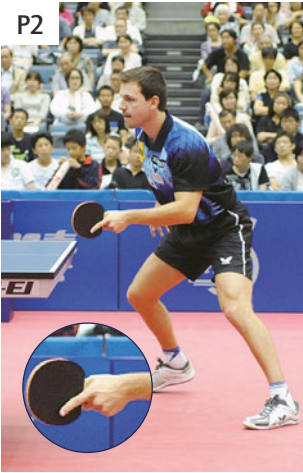
From here on, Timo's basic racket grip will be referred to as just the basic grip. However, Timo changes this basic grip during certain game situations described below.

### Changes to the basic grip

Changes to the basic grip relate to

- the position of the index finger,
- the position of the thumb,
- releasing the handle, and
- switching hands.





### The index finger in motion

**Photo series 1 (PS01)** shows Timo's typical ready position. **(P1)** Here we can see the nice and natural, relaxed basic position of the wrist (yellow line). Then we can see how he abandons the basic stance **(P1)** during a short push return and his index finger moves to the middle of the racket **(P2-4)**. This allows him to maximally open his racket and set an angle that is ideal for a short push return with the forehand. Let's look at Timo's grip position as he flips his opponent's subsequent short return with the forehand **(P7-9)**.





Timo moves his index finger back to the starting position of the basic grip (during a forehand flip the index finger in the middle of the racket would be more of an impediment). The super-zoom photos show this change in the grip that is only noticeable when looking closely. But there are also other reasons why he lets his index finger wander. He will tell you those during his CHECK (starting at page 29).



*“It is definitely very important to try out grip changes, no matter how minor they are, to be able to feel and recognize the advantages and disadvantages.”*



### The thumb in motion

Depending on his stroke technique, Timo's thumb is also moving. Photos 3a and 3b clearly show this. By letting his thumb wander toward the center of the blade, he can set a stroke angle with his backhand for a passive backhand lift that he can only achieve with this change in grip. He would not be able to do so with the basic grip.

3a



3b



### Extreme grips for emergencies

Photos 4a and 4b show how Timo lets the racket slip out of his hand, allowing him to lengthen his playing arm a little to try to reach the ball with the forehand. Take a close look and notice how deep Timo's index finger is in photo 4b.

4a



4b



### Changing the playing hand



*Right-handed Timo tries everything to reach the ball.*

On some rare occasions (i.e. nearly hopeless emergency situations in extremely contested matches), Timo will try anything, even switching the racket from the left hand to the right. **Photo 5** offers proof: From right-hander to left-hander! During the world championships in Suzhou, China in 2015, he demonstrated this skill during the outstanding quarterfinals match against Chinese player Fan Zhendong, which he lost 2-4. With the score at 7-9 during the sixth set, the Chinese player caught Timo with a deep forehand and drove him far away from the table. Timo managed to reach the ball and pulled it back with the forehand, but Fan played it into Timo's now wide-open backhand side at top speed. Given the game-determining importance of the rally, Timo quickly switched the racket to the right hand and tried to reach the ball with a dive. Although it showcased his amazing fighting spirit and effort, Timo lost the set and the game with a 7-11 score, but this attempt provided rousing television images that really convey the fascination with the sport of table tennis.

## 1.2 During the serve— basic grip and variations

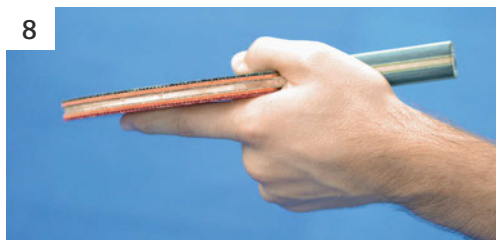
### ➡ Analysis

#### Basic grip

Timo is considered one of the best and most dangerous servers on the international professional circuit. He has perfected the so-called reverse sidespin serve with lots of sidespin variations. Consequently he has developed a very individual and variable grip, particularly for the forehand serve, which he uses for certain serve variations. He never uses backhand serves in a competition (or at least I have never seen him do so in the 19 years I have watched him play), but he will do it just for fun during training. We will therefore focus strictly on his basic forehand grip (**photos 6-8**).



*Timo's grip during the forehand serve*



*“My index finger  
is my sensing finger.”*



The index finger wanders to the edge of the racket and can be anywhere from slightly bent to nearly straight, depending on the serve variation (**photo 6**). The remaining fingers are stacked in a fan-shape—much like the Chinese penholder variation—so only the middle finger makes contact with the blade. **Photo 7** shows how his thumb is slightly bent and presses against the blade right above the handle. The three pressure points (i.e., thumb, index, and middle fingers) create an ideal grip on the racket and offer the wrist the best-possible range of motion, as is the case with the Chinese penholder grip. **Photo 8** offers a side view of the basic serve grip and shows how the racket is clamped between thumb and index finger. **Photos 9-12** show the basic grip from various angles in actual serve situations.

*“No one has to do it my way. Everyone has to find and refine their own ideal grip ...”*

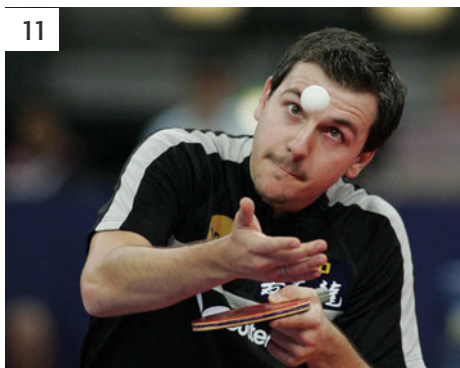
9



10



11



12

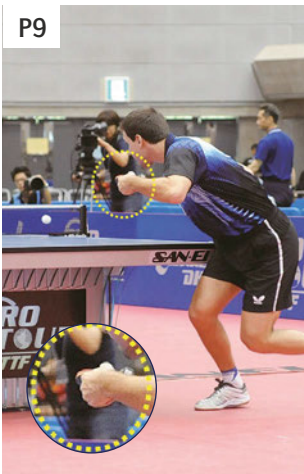




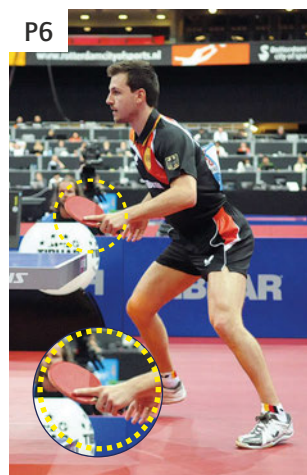
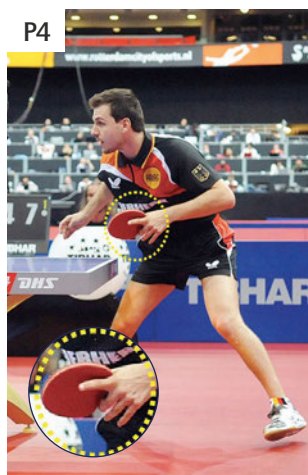
### Changing the grip or turning the racket at lightning speed

To shift from this serve grip back to the usual basic grip during a game, the racket must be turned at lightning speed in a fraction of a second. Turning the racket in this way requires incredible dexterity and skill, and must be practiced extensively. Timo, of course, has mastered it perfectly, as you can see in [photo series 2 \(PS02\)](#) from two different angles.

Photos 1-6 show Timo performing a simple forehand sidespin-serve from right to left. Photos 7-12 show him performing a complex forehand sidespin-serve, creating the opposing spin from left to right.







*“I try to find my perfect grip for every serve and every stroke, and change it as needed.”*

