

“Underspin” the “Other spin”

Developing a Competitive Game with more Weapons on Mass Confusion

In today’s game “topspin” gets all the press. Club players focus on how big the shots are and how they make the ESPN highlights. As a result, most all players want to be like the pros, so they go for the big topspin shot.

However, when you listen to the talk about the great players who have played the game you will hear about how well they play defense to stay in the point or force their opponents to play uncomfortable shots.

Federer’s “chip” backhand return that lands around the service line of the opponent's ad court is deadly. The opponent must now move forward into the court to retrieve this shot from below net level. They must decide if they will attempt to come to the net behind their shot or should they retreat to the baseline following their shot.

When a player is pulled wide on their forehand, you will often see that player use “underspin” to neutralize the situation until they can recover position on their side of the court.

So, what is this “other spin”? How and when do you use it in practice and match play?

There are 3 basic types of “Underspin Shots”. The name attached to a underspin can easily refer to the depth of the shot. Some shots will entail using more underspin than others and the amount of underspin you use can cause different problems for your opponent.

A low bouncing underspin can make it difficult to lift the ball deep into your court. The 3 types of underspin are hit from the same basic racquet position and therefore provide a great element of disguise. The 3 types of underspin are:

1. “Drop Shot” refers to an underspin ball that bounces close to the net, does not bounce forward very far and draws the opponent up to the net to retrieve the shot.
2. “Chip Shot” refers to an underspin ball that bounces around the service line and stays low to the ground – once again forcing the opponent to move forward and hit the ball up over the net.
3. “Slice Shot” refers to an underspin ball that bounces near the baseline with good speed and a low bounce.

There are 7 basic reasons to use underspin:

1. Disguise – Out of the same preparation position you can hit any of the 3 types of underspin shots. However, the “up” position of the racquet in preparation for an incoming ball allows you to disguise your intent to hit an underspin or topspin shot.
2. Defense - Buy time, the underspin can slow down the speed of an incoming ball by the amount of spin you apply to your shot. You can also slow down the speed of the ball you send back to your opponent. This can buy you time to recover or throw off your opponent’s timing. The underspin ball, because of the lower angle of entry over the net than the topspin will cause timing problem for the opponent as well.
3. Change the rhythm – By using the dropshot you can force an opponent to have to rush to the net to get the shorter ball and leave the security of their baseline. This opens up an easy lob return over their head on the next shot. The chip shot will have a second bounce low and near the baseline and often forces the opponent to bend low to pick up the ball and hit it up and short to you. The deeper slice can make the ball bounce lower and faster as it leaves the court and change the opponents timing as they have to adjust their shot from the normal ball they hit against.
4. Approach shot – a lower and shorter underspin ball can make it difficult to pass you when you come to the net. Because of the unusual spin and low bounce of the approaching shot, passing can be more challenging than approaching with a topspin that sets up into an opponent’s strike zone.
5. Return serve off a very slow, spinny or fast serve – the underspin will help you to avoid over-hitting the slow ball yet add a spin that can make it difficult for your opponent. Spinning a spin ball is a great way to neutralize an opponent’s shot and the shorter underspin motion can make it easier to return a fast in-coming serve.
6. Defense off a high bouncing ball – it is difficult to do much with a high bouncing ball that is rising as it crosses your baseline because of height or spin, especially if you try to hit a topspin ball back. Slicing off the high ball requires little effort and little racquet work to return the ball deep and soft to your opponent or to chip it short and slightly angled so they cannot hit a high deep ball on the next shot.

7. Offense - take time away by hitting a faster under spin ball that has a lower and skipping approach to your opponent making it difficult to get under the ball to return it to you. The ball will seem to accelerate as it comes off the court and rush your opponent.

Solving Problems/ Selling Solutions:

1. Some players say they do not want to hit underspin because they can't do it.
 - a. This is not to replace the shot you have but to add a new shot to your game so you will have more weapons to defeat your opponent.
 - b. All new skills are challenging but an understanding or how to hit the underspin, who to use it against, what it does to your opponent, where to hit it when to use it, when to use it and why it is important to use will give them confidence to practice it and slowly add it to their game.
 - c. Use underspin as a mid-court short court warm up shot instead of topspin or flat shots to be able to keep the ball in play more effectively against players who hit too hard in the warmup.
 - d. This shot is the same motion as your underspin volley and dropshot which you would use when close to the net anyhow.
2. The pros don't use it:
 - a. The pros do use it for the same reasons we want you to use it: disguise, buy time, change the rhythm, defense, approach shot, drop shot and offensive approach when the opponent is already in position.
 - b. Notice that more of the pros not only use it on their backhand but several are using it on the wide and low forehands as well to get the ball back into play so they can look for another chance to go on offense later in the point.
 - c. Because a lot of the juniors do not use it, they hate to hit against it. This is evidenced when adults who do use underspin play topspin juniors and they hate it when the "older" players hit drop shots, chip shots and slice against them – it messes up their timing.
3. I can't hit underspin because I use a topspin grip:

- a. Don't give up your topspin grip, add a new grip to your game so you have more options. When you see a replay of a drop shot by the pros, the announcer will say, "see how he changed his grip at the last minute to hit the drop shot?"
 - b. All the pros use a variety of grips for different kinds of bouncing balls, different heights of in-coming balls and different kinds of spins they want to hit. This is true on ground strokes and volleys – just ask the great volley players what grip they use on volley and they will ask you, "what height is the incoming ball?"
4. I like to play an attacking type of game:
 - a. By using some underspin in certain situations, you can force weak returns that will allow you to move forward and play a more aggressive and attacking game.
 - b. Sometimes your opponent is as strong or stronger with the attacking game than you. You will need to keep them off balance to prevent them from continually attacking you. Play some shots that force them to defend or else create weaker returns by under spinning low and short or deep and slow so you can go on the offense occasionally.
5. I can't play against soft hitters:
 - a. Soft balls have a downward trajectory off your racquet and using underspin helps to pick the ball back up over the net. Underspin can also help avoid over-hitting on slow balls while allowing you to place the ball back to your opponent to stay in the point or gain an advantage through an unusual spin or placement.
 - b. Resist the urge to "kill" the short and softer ball. You will usually try to swing harder than normal to put the ball away. If you must try to put the ball away, walk through the ball as you contact it so the power will come from the legs and not the arms.
6. I don't like to practice and using new shots mess up my game:
 - a. Practice during the warmup by using underspin to warm up from the service line. This is the area you would normally use it in a match anyhow. The shorter motion allows you to keep your hands in front of you, see the ball and the racquet at the same time and even slow down balls that are too hard by your opponent in the warmup.

- b. When you return a ball to your opponent during the match so they can serve, use underspin to give the ball back to them so they can serve. This allows you to practice while the match is in play and develop confidence in a new shot at the same time. If you just made an error, returning a ball to your opponent in a positive way helps to “erase” the error and replace it with the feel of making the shot.

A truly great player will develop as many weapons as possible for different kinds of opponents and situations. Do not limit the growth of your game by forgetting the “other spin-underspin”

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