

Underspin shots can pull the net man out of position.

Under attack

Use underspin on backhand passing shots and take a slice out of your opponent's game. By Peter Burwash

WHEN PLAYERS HAVE THE TIME TO TRY A BACKHAND passing shot, they'll usually hit with topspin in order to generate pace. But many recreational players are either uncomfortable hitting topspin backhands in pressure situations or just naturally prefer to hit with underspin. If you're one of these players, you don't have to change your stroke to hit a passing shot. Underspin can work for you, once you understand how to use it properly.

An underspin backhand is often referred to as a *slice*. I don't like this term, because players can get it confused with the spin on a slice serve. A slice serve entails putting mostly sidespin on the ball, but slice on ground strokes will send the ball spinning backward.

There are three reasons to use underspin on a backhand pass:

1 | Greater accuracy

Most players are more accurate when hitting with underspin than with topspin, and they get a greater sense of feel and touch. Since there are very few winning passing shots hit during the course of a match at the club level, you'll probably win most of your points when the opponent

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at the net misses a volley. This means that accuracy on attempted passing shots is much more valuable than power.

2 | Easier to keep low

Give an opponent a high ball at the net and you're asking for trouble. Yet topspin lifts the ball and is tougher to keep low. Underspin, on the other hand, gives the shot a flat, level trajectory and is relatively easy to keep low.

3 | Elicits awkward volleys

When you've been forced deep into your backhand corner, the net player will usually play the percentages and shift to cover the down-the-line pass. If you hit crosscourt with underspin, you might catch him off guard and get him to play a volley from an awkward position. And since balls hit with underspin travel more slowly than those struck with topspin, you'll have a little extra time to get back into the court and make a play on the next ball.

In the mid-1980s, Ivan Lendl frustrated John McEnroe by using a low, crosscourt, underspin pass that forced McEnroe to hit up and give Lendl a shot that he could drive. I believe this helped Lendl overtake McEnroe for No. 1.

So keep the ball low and try going crosscourt every once in a while. With practice, your underspin backhand can become a formidable weapon against net rushers. ●