

Istvan KORPA's great experience to enrich the European TT

As player Istvan Korpa (born 1945) was Yugoslav national team player, one of the best in Europe in his time. He was attacker with big forehand and excellent backhand block, known as absolutely fair sportsman - it was a real pleasure to watch his elegant but aggressive style of play. As player he won gold and silver medals with his team at European Championships and in singles he became European vice-champion in 1970 in Moscow. After he stopped his international playing career he went in 1974 to Germany where he has played several years in German Bundesliga and started to work as coach. He became German national team coach and coached in his career the German men, women and boys team. As coach his greatest success was 2nd place of German men team at World Championships in Doha 2003. In Terni at European Youth Championships 2008 he coached German boys team, but it was last time Istvan Korpa coached a German team on European Championships - with the end of the year he will retire, after 55 years in table tennis as top player and top coach! Web mag team used the opportunity to speak with Korpa about his experience in table tennis, about present table tennis and its future.



Photo: Istvan KORPA (Photo Henk HOMMES)

I have spent all my life in table tennis, started to play at the age of 8 and after finishing my active player's career in 1975 I started to work as coach. During this long period table tennis has changed a lot - service, spin, speed, gluing, rubbers and blades changed completely the game comparing with my time as a player. I do not think that it had only the positive influence on the game, there are negative aspects as well. It is almost not possible to control the game anymore, the rallies are extremely short, specially when young players are playing.

Many young players do not have technical abilities to control the ball, the playing materials are often too fast for them. It all started in men table tennis by copying the game of Chinese stars - serve and 3rd ball attack, but for this you should have perfect technique and ball control which most of our young players do not have. Coaches of course stimulated the efficient game with third ball attack, but the result is often lack of control. In the present situation I think we should work much more on control in the game. The ban of gluing is for me a good thing, but it will not solve the problem - new rubbers and new blades will for sure replace the gluing and the game will stay as fast as it is. In my opinion it would be good to make the game a little bit slower and the only way I think would be to reduce the thickness of the sponge to 1,7-1,8 mm. At the same time it would be necessary to make the ball a little bit heavier - the present 40 mm ball is bouncing unevenly into height depending on technique of the opponent and the quality of the ball, I think mainly because the ball is too light. For better control of the ball on the racket and evenly rebound the ball should be heavier.

As former player when I became coach I never started from myself, from my style of play, my technique or tactics, which is the mistake some of former top players do when starting to be a coach. My job as coach was always to try to help the player I am coaching so that I analyse his individual abilities and find ways how to optimize his individual game. I was never interested in the past, I always see only the present time and the future. It is good for young players to learn something about the history of table tennis, to know something about the great players of the past, but it is only history and can not help the player to improve his

game. Some coaches are talking a lot about past and young players are not interested in it - there is no use to speak about what was 30 years ago, for training of today it is not important at all. For me it was always most important to try to see in which way our sport will develop and how my player will with his individual abilities and shortcomings find his way in future table tennis. There is no ideal player without any defects. Such attitude I am sure helped me a lot in my coaching work - the most important thing is to find the best individual solutions for each player, find the way how to help him to develop them.

What is the difference of being a top player in my time and today? Concerning the hard work there is not a difference - in my time it was necessary to work very hard to become a top player, just like today. Of course the methods of training developed, but in my time we worked hard on physical preparation, technique, tactics just like top players nowadays do. It is of course possible with hard will to cover some deficits in the game, it was possible in my time and it is possible today. In my time I played a fast attacking game just like Chinese did, but they top stars were used to such a game and they did it a little bit better than me, so I was not able to beat their top stars with my game. Today Chinese top stars are physically perfectly prepared, they have very good technique, China has big selection of talented players. In spite of the fact that footwork of European players is not as good as of Asian players I think that European shakehands players with equally good backhand and forehand topspin, with lot of speed and rotation variations, covering the table with backhand and forehand almost 50/50 have good chances against the Asian players.

The difference between the past and today is that in my time we practiced much more and played less, today even young players are playing much more and practicing less. In my opinion this is becoming a serious obstacle in the development of young players - they have too many matches and not enough practice. Besides the practice is mostly not carried out as a part of long term developing program but as practice with short term goals - preparation for next tournament, next big event. This is for sure not a good way to prepare a young player to become a complete player. Besides in modern training it is absolutely necessary not only to practice spin attack on block, we must spend a lot of time practising for both players change between active and passive play.

When somebody asks me what was more difficult - to be a player or to be coach to answer is easy. It was much easier to be player - I had to take care only of myself and besides there were other people to help me - coaches, doctors, physiotherapists, officials. My only concern was to fight, to play as good as possible. When there was a crisis, some unexpected defeats there were always people around to give me support, to help me. As coach in Europe I have to work with a group of 8-10 top players, I have to treat them all in same way, everybody has to be equally important to me. They know who is number one, number two and so on in the team, but still they have to be treated in the same way, I must give to everybody my full attention, they all need help to develop their abilities, to be in form when needed, to support when a crisis occurs. In my time as a player the psychological firmness was important, nowadays it is even more important. In sets up to 11 points there is no time anymore to test the game of the opponent, to find right answers, you have to play more than 100% from the first to the last point. You have to be absolutely determined, psychically stable, you have to recover immediately after lost points, you have not any longer time to allow negative series of points. But it was a challenge to become a top player, it was a challenge to become a top coach - and both roles make me happy.

Edited text by Radivoj HUDETZ