

Table Tennis Philosophy – What matters most in training?

The many years of his own practice and training experience, his watching and observing other coaches, his pedagogical knowledge and his critical attitude all encouraged Claus MAYR to start a new and daring project. Together with his son, Mortiz FORSTER, he has developed a book which focuses exclusively on beginners. Its formal approach differs greatly from that of a “normal” text book.

First experience as a table tennis coach, 1975-80

My (C.M.) career as a table tennis coach began in a small club in Hamm-Rhynern where my sons Wolfgang and Thomas trained. When the coach for the junior players suddenly quit, I took over in what was supposed to be a temporary solution even though I had only started playing table tennis myself about a year earlier when I was 36 years old. Not to mention the fact that at that point I had never even played in an official competition myself. In the five years I ended up working there as a coach, the number of team members grew from three to seven. And the first team in which four of my charges played managed to be promoted from the lower district league to the district league.

Martin Adomet, who would later be the coach of the women’s national team, was still a student at the time and played for the club TSV Soest. Twenty years later, while I was attending a seminar which Adomet was giving, he said to me, “Claus, whenever your boys came into the hall and warmed up, all the rest of us thought they would shoot us through the hall. But they never did.”

At that time I still adhered to the popular and widespread ideas of the time about effective learning and applied these to my coaching. We would practice our returns endlessly. We almost exclusively did regular exercises and would play each and every ball correctly and safely. Fortunately we had a number of defensive players and players with long pimples in our club. This allowed us to practice the topspin, which was still a quite recent invention at the time, against the push and the chop defence. So when we played against the local YMCA /CVJM (today TTF Bönen), it was actually not surprising that the comment was made about us that “They only know how to play nicely”.

Quote:

This book is intended to be thought-provoking. It does not create dogmas, but questions them – if there should even exist any anymore. Achim KRAMER

New Basic Training Principles

In the meantime, playing techniques as well as practice and training methods have changed. New insights have been won in the field of kinetics.

Inner and Outer Focus

Ismael (see box) is a typical case. The first two tips were internal (changing body movement by explaining and demonstrating). The third tip was external. By introducing a tactile change in the style of play, the desired goal of improving the FH-technique was achieved. Strapping the elbow to the body while practicing the FH stroke is a tactile super weapon. It has a positive influence on:

- the position of the elbow
- the angle between the upper arm and the body
- the slight rotation of the free shoulder while the stroke is being executed
- the length of the stroke
- the use of the wrist
- the ball-racket point of impact

Tennis coach Timothy Gallwey (1975) was one of the first coaches to revolutionise the standard training methods of the time in terms of coordinative learning. Just as Axelsson had been, Gallwey is also a psychologist, was a very successful player (professional) and was sensationally successful as a coach. His book, “The Inner Game of Tennis”, appeared in 1975 and became a bestseller. Gallwey is our model. Unfortunately, his books are no longer available in bookstores. (Translator’s note: Both the English and German versions of this book were reprinted in 2008. They are available on the author’s website (www.theinnergame.com) or on amazon (www.amazon.com)). The following is an excerpt from this book (pages 14-16) which has been translated and summarised by C.M.:

“Try to imagine what goes on in the mind of an ambitious beginner who is taking lessons from an equally ambitious professional coach. The Pro (the coach) comments every single stroke in order to justify his high coaching fees: “That was good, but you closed your racket in the follow-through phase of your stroke, the ball was already long gone.”... “This time you left your racket raised up too long after your stroke.” ... “Your racket should be in a more closed position.”... “Yes, exactly, that’s much better”. After a while, the poor player’s head will be spinning trying to remember the six things that he should be doing and the 16 other things he should not be doing. He has the feeling that the path before him will be long and difficult – and is very impressed by the thorough and efficient work of his coach.

When I began working as a coach, I (T.G.) also tended to correct too often and too much. But one day, I was in a very good mood and decided not to make so many comments and to watch and observe my players more closely instead. I noticed that mistakes they made disappeared on their own, even though the players had not even noticed that they had made them. How was that possible? Needless to say, my ego was bruised. I was even more embarrassed when I noticed that when I gave verbal instructions, the players actually seemed less likely to be able to carry out what I had told them.

The next day, I (T.G.) decided to try something new. At the beginning of the training session, the only thing I said to my player, Paul, was that I would play ten forehand balls and that he should watch carefully and try to memorise the visual image. He should then repeat this image in his mind. When I then carefully placed the racket in his hand with the correct racket grip, Paul said: *“I noticed that in the beginning you always moved your legs.”* I did not comment this, but asked Paul to allow his body to imitate my forehand strokes. For a beginner, his strokes were perfect... except for his legs, which seemed to be nailed to the floor.

I began to understand what all good coaches and beginners must learn:

Images are better than words. Demonstrating is better than explaining. Too many instructions are worse than none at all. Even just consciously trying things out often produces negative results. (You can find explanations of Gallwey’s remarks based on teaching psychology in chapter 15 (Declarative and Procedural Memory) and chapter 19 (Mirror Neurons)).

Quote: “During competitions I never play the same ball twice in a row.” Werner Schlager

This external focus, which was just described, is the most effective and thus also the most important training method. Tips and corrections with an inner focus include the explanations of a demonstration of body movement when a specific stroke is executed. Studies have shown that after these kinds of tips and corrections, children hardly show any improvement. Sometimes they even play worse than before. When tips with an external focus are given, the children are given targets. The ultimate goal of a stroke is to win the point. This is achieved by placing (P) the ball well, as well as determining the right speed (S), the rotation (R), and the trajectory (T) of the ball.

When the corresponding target is given, it results in the player making positive changes in one or more of these factors. (Almost all of the exercises and training tips which are presented in the book are based on this principle. Chapter 13 includes a systematic overview). Of course there are also situations in which it is better to describe an important body movement, and to demonstrate it or to allow the learner to imitate it by shadowing it. In this case it can also be helpful to guide the learner's arm. This can be especially helpful at the beginning of private sessions. However, these kinds of corrections should concentrate only on basic aspects and should not lead to long interruptions. The better the player's technique is developed, the more specific the internal corrections will be. (See also chapter 15.3., Procedural vs. Declarative Memory).

The Interference Complex / Double-Tasks

An empirical study was carried out to see if movements which are made up of two or more elements are more readily learned if each of these elements are first introduced and practiced, or if several elements can be learned at the same time. The results clearly show that learning several elements of movement at the same time is much more effective. These include, for example, switching from a forehand to a backhand, or combining footwork and stroke movement, or moving from playing close to the net to playing long balls. In the following chapter, "Should I Begin with the Forehand or the Backhand?", this insight is applied to the various forms of training.

Practical Exercises / Automation

In the course of learning to play TT, everything which the player does and plays becomes automatic. One of the most important principles of training is that all which is practiced must be practical and relevant. It is not primarily a matter of executing a stroke correctly (that can be practiced and learned quite easily), but of making the right decisions, of choosing the best stroke and getting into the right position at the table in time to be able to execute the stroke properly. Players should start competing under normal circumstances early on. In this way, it is possible to focus on tactics and emotional behaviour from the start.

Easy to Apply and Put into Practice

For most of these exercises children do not need someone to feed them balls or need to be given long explanations. Only a few breaks are necessary to set things up since the equipment which you will find in any training hall (tables, cushions, benches, and boxes) can be used in many ways.

Individualisation

Every child learns and improves at his or her own pace. For this reason there can be very big differences in playing abilities within a single training group. It is therefore absolutely essential to individualise the practice and training sessions. The training forms which this book presents cover a time frame of about two years.

The Big Question:

When do I begin with...???

Individual training sessions with beginners

If you as the feeder want to ruin a beginner's game for the rest of his life, then place yourself as far away behind the table as possible, play the balls at medium height and as slowly as possible. And if possible, always return the balls to the same spot on the table. If you want your player to become good and to improve rapidly, then play the balls in such a way that it is easy for the beginner to return the balls and so that he has to keep moving after every played ball in order to get to the next one.

What does this imply for the ball's trajectory, speed and placement when feeding balls?

A commonly held misconception is that high balls are easier to play. Keep the balls at a normal height.

The easiest balls to play are those which are slow and which reach their highest point towards the end of the table. This is the case when the ball bounces in the middle area of the table. In order to keep the time spaces between strokes as short as possible, the feeder should hit the ball as early as possible while the ball is rising. If the player's backswing is too big, then play the balls a little shorter. Constantly vary where you place the balls (FH, BH, the middle of the table, shorter balls, and longer balls). And after a few good balls, you can throw in a ball which is a little bit higher and has more spin.

Of course a beginner should play with a grippy rubber and a thick sponge. If necessary, tell him to "stroke" (the ball) and to stay relaxed at all times. In the beginning, all strokes should be executed towards the front and sometimes with a slight upward swing. If your player tends to go under the ball when he executes his BH, then this should definitely be considered an alarm signal. It is difficult to learn a spin-backhand if a backhand-push was learned first. Individual sessions should be used to practice what the players cannot play or practice when they are playing with each other.

Should I begin with the FH or the BH? (A coach's question)

With neither of them. Play different balls right from the beginning. The question should not be asked until you have your first individual training session. In the beginning, you should play to the beginner's better side so that he is given a sense of success. When this happens, tips with an outer focus can be given. As a general rule, the first ball should be played to the player's better side. If the player has difficulties learning to play the backhand or the forehand stroke, it is often helpful to play one or two balls to the more confident side first before changing to the weaker side. Take the case, for example when the player does not execute his forehand backswing correctly.

If you play the BH side first and then switch to the FH, the player will not have time to think about what he is doing and will not even have time to execute his backswing incorrectly. He will automatically play the ball correctly.

Once he has executed the first FH correctly, he will most likely execute a number of FHs correctly in a row.

The same principle applies to learning to move back for long balls. First play a very short ball and then a long ball. After having to move closer to the net in order to play the short ball, the player will have to move back automatically. And it is quite likely that he will automatically move back far enough in order to play the long ball. The feeder should be to play across the whole table irregularly - right from the first session.

Players who prefer playing their BHs may move into their FH side with their BH. If this should happen during a ball exchange, the feeder should play a wide BH followed by a wide FH. In the beginning, you should try not to play more than three of the same balls in a row.



Werner SCHLAGER: “In competition I never play the same ball twice in a row.”

Common sense tells us that in the beginning regular exercises are necessary in order to learn the strokes more easily, and that irregular exercises can only be done by more advanced players. It is, however, exactly the other way around. When beginners are expected to do regular exercises, they generally lack the necessary movement and concentration.

Their strokes are too slow, too high and not precise enough. Advanced players, on the other hand, can do these exercises with great precision, speed and spin. They have the ability to remain concentrated, they know how to maintain the proper level of body tension, and how to use and move their whole bodies.

Extract of TTLlehre No. 1 2009