



USATT Coaching Newsletter

From the USATT Coaching Advisory Committee

FIRST EDITION

NOVEMBER 2009

Welcome to the first edition of the USATT Coaching Newsletter. This newsletter is brought to you by the USATT Coaching Advisory Committee. Our goal is to provide our coaches a unique publication that will promote communication between coaches as well as offer educational articles.

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SECTION 1 - ABOUT THE NEWSLETTER

This publication is being produced by the USATT Coaching Advisory Committee. Our plan is to publish the newsletter on a quarterly basis. We sincerely hope that this publication will grow in size and content and become a true “voice” for all the coaches within USATT.

The USATT Coaching Committee consists of the following members:

- Chairman: Richard McAfee - Richard.McAfee@ipaper.com or rmcafee@comcast.net
- Wei Wang - wei@alphatt.com
- Sean O’Neill - sean@ping-pong.com
- Brian Pace - brianpacett@hotmail.com
- Nan Li – Athlete Representative - nanli14@hotmail.com
- (Teodor Gheorghe – Staff Liaison) - doru@usatt.org

Please feel free to contact any of the committee members with your comments and suggestions.

SECTION 2 – USATT COACHING NEWS!

Stefan Feth Selected as the New Men’s National Team Coach

USA Table Tennis is very pleased to announce that Stefan Feth has been selected as the Men’s National Team Coach. Dan Seemiller tendered his resignation as MNTC earlier this year following a ten year service record in that capacity.

USATT CEO Mike Cavanaugh appointed a search committee shortly after the position became vacant. The search committee conducted an exhaustive process to fill this position. Each candidate was interviewed and submitted written answers to a list of questions provided them by the search committee. This was followed by teleconference consultations within the search committee and finally Mr. Feth was selected. After careful consideration, Mr. Cavanaugh accepted the committee’s recommendation and announced the decision to the Board of Directors during their teleconference of October 28. The search committee consisted of Doru Gheorghe, Bob Fox, Richard McAfee, Ashu Jain, Han Xiao, Whitney Ping, and Ross Brown.

Please join us in thanking Danny for his many years of service and congratulating Stefan on his acceptance of his new challenge.

Special Note: Stefan has gone through the USATT Certification Process and is now Certified as a National Level Coach.

2009 Coach of the Year Selections

USA Table Tennis is proud to announce the selections for 2009 Coach of the Year

USATT annually takes part in the U.S. Olympic Committee’s (USOC) Coach of the Year recognition program. Each Olympic Program sport is allowed to submit to the USOC one selection in each defined coaching category. Those categories include: National Team Coach of the Year, Development Coach of the Year, Volunteer Coach of the Year, Paralympic Coach of the Year and the Doc Councilman Coach of the Year (Best Use of Technology in Coaching).

We posted the respective nomination forms and the call for nominations on the website in late October with a posted close for nomination submissions of November 13, 2009. By November 13 we had received a total of 12 nominations for four of the coaching recognition categories.

It is important to note that in 2007 USATT’s nomination to the USOC in the Doc Councilman Coach of the Year category was Sean O’Neill and he was selected by the USOC as their Coach of the Year in that category. Equally impressive is the fact that in 2008, USATT’s nomination to the USOC of Rajul Sheth as Development Coach of the Year, was also selected as their Coach of the Year in that category.

The USATT’s 2009 Coach of the Year Selection Committee consisted of Richard McAfee, Chairman of the Coaching Advisory Committee, Whitney Ping , USATT’s Representative to

the USOC's Athlete Advisory Council, Ashu Jain , Vice Chairman of the USOC's Athlete Advisory Council and USATT CEO, Mike Cavanaugh. The Selection Committee met via teleconference on Nov 17 after receiving all of the nominations received. The following individuals were unanimously selected for respective Coach of the Year honors and they will be submitted to the USOC for consideration of their Coach of the Year recognition program.

2009 National Team Coach of the Year - EMILIA GHEORGHE

2009 Volunteer Coach of the Year – JERRY MINTZ

2009 Development Coach of the Year – RAJUL SHETH

2009 Paralympic Coach of the Year - DANIEL RUTENBERG

Please join us in extending our congratulations to these individuals for their well deserved recognition and for their dedication to their athletes and the sport of Table Tennis!

2009 Coaching Seminar in Las Vegas

USATT will host a Coaches Education Seminar on Friday December 18, 2009 at 8:30 PM at the Hilton Hotel, conference rooms 4-5.

Interested in a Junior Program at Your Club?

Larry Hodges will conduct a two-hour clinic on “How to Start and Run A Successful Junior Program.” There is no more fulfilling task for a coach than to watch a group of junior players develop from beginner to the point where they challenge the coach! If you would like to help develop the future of USA Table Tennis, this seminar is for you. Attendees will also receive a free copy of the 22-page “Professional Table Tennis Coaching Primer.”

Hodges is a certified National Coach, a member of the USATT Hall of Fame, and a long-time coach at the highly successful Maryland Table Tennis Center.

SECTION 3 JUNIORS AND RATINGS

By Larry Hodges, USATT Certified National Coach and Member of USA Table Tennis Hall of Fame

Ratings can be a cancer on junior table tennis. They change the focus from improvement to immediate results and leave juniors nervous and defensive in their matches. They also take much of the fun out of the game for juniors who become obsessed with fear of blowing their rating.

Like a disease, the obsession with ratings by parents and juniors--and some coaches--causes tremendous damage to junior development. It's not enough that a kid faces the pressure of regular win-lose situations when they play tournaments; now, with one loss, they can blow their rating and have to live with the aftermath for--what seems at the time--forever!

It's understandable that a junior might be upset about losing a key match in a tournament. However, once it's done, it's done, and they should move on. With ratings, the

effects of that loss live on. Worse, juniors often lose because they are so nervous about their rating that they end up blowing their rating because they are afraid of blowing their rating.

The frustration of watching otherwise successful junior programs--including ones I work with--that are handicapped by rating hysteria is disheartening. The most amazing thing is the often strained defenses given month after month by players, coaches, and parents, all in defense of protecting a rating--while in reality, teaching the junior a loser's mentality. Some of the best coaches in the U.S. came from countries without a rating system, and either do not recognize or do not understand how to address these problems. Yet, when you talk to top U.S. coaches like Stellan Bengtsson and Dan Seemiller, they roll their eyes in irritation at the very mention of ratings.

Most U.S. coaches know of up-and-coming players who flopped because they were more worried about their rating than in long-term improvement. Usually, it was the result of pressure (intentional or not) from parents or coaches, whose worried about short-term ratings cost their player long-term improvement--and ultimately led to a lower level of play and a lower rating.

Coaches, let's put a stop to it.

Rating events are a perfect place for juniors to learn to compete, and to think and play like a champion. Yet juniors--often under pressure from parents or coaches--often enter only higher events where they are less likely to play a weaker player and lose rating points. There are fewer things more sickening to me than seeing a junior rated 1600 only enter events from Under 2000 and up--but I see this type of thing all the time. (A similar thing happens in junior events, where juniors often avoid events they might win--but must defeat lower-rated players to do so--and instead enter older junior events where they aren't competitive but have a better chance of pulling off a "ratings upset.") Entering higher events and competing against stronger players gives experience that can lead to improvement, but it's only half the equation.

How can they learn to compete by avoiding the very players they need to learn to compete against? They need to learn to dominate against weaker players, and you don't learn to do this by playing only stronger players. A player who is rated 1999 and avoids the Under 2000 event because he's afraid of losing rating points isn't thinking like a champion. A champion rated 1999 wants to win that Under 2000 event. He may not do it, and he may even suffer a bad loss--thereby "blowing" his rating--but he'll keep trying, he'll learn from his losses, and eventually he will win it, and move on to higher events. Along the way, he'll learn how to compete and win. The one who avoids the event does not.

I remember a junior I was coaching at the Junior Nationals who was in the final of the Under 12 Boys' Singles. His hands were trembling before the match. I asked him why he was so nervous and his answer floored me: "I've never been in a final before." It was true; the kid had played for three years and probably 50 tournaments, but his parents had studiously kept him out of any rating or junior event that he could compete in, only entering him in higher events. He was rated much higher than his opponent, but he was too nervous to play, and lost badly.

I spoke to the kid's parents, and convinced them of the value of playing events where he was competitive. I'll give them credit; they learned, and soon their son was in the final of a rating event against a lower-rated player. However, it was too late; before the match, the kid was again nervous. I asked why, and his answer again floored me: "I'll blow my rating if I lose this." He lost again; the fear of losing rating points had been instilled in him.

The kid never came close to becoming a champion.

Rating anxiety by juniors is amplified because juniors are less experienced, and so more upset prone. But that's exactly why they need to compete, to gain that experience so they can learn to dominate matches against all styles. Juniors are the most rapidly improving segment of tournament players, and so are most likely to pull off an upset. Yet it is those painful losses that stick out to those who are obsessed with ratings.

There are some legitimate problems with the rating system that apply here. For a top junior, one bad loss can blow their seeding at a later national tournament. For this reason, I've never liked the idea of using current ratings for seeding at major events, as opposed to average rating over a period of time. But we have to live with the reality that current ratings are used. The problem is that the excuse of protecting one's rating for seeding purposes is way, way overdone. It's far more important, long-term, that the junior get the tournament experience to prepare for the big tournament and future ones than avoiding competition for fear of blowing their rating and seeding.

Imagine for a moment the best players in the world back when they were up-and-coming juniors. Can you imagine them avoiding an event because they were afraid of losing rating points? It's hard to imagine because the best players in the world (and the U.S.) are all very strong mentally. They are not worried about losing. If they were rated 1999, they wouldn't avoid the Under 2000 event; they'd want to win it because they have a champion's mind. They are competitors.

Now imagine the player with a 1999 rating who avoids that Under 2000 event. Is he avoiding it because he has the mind of a champion? Or is he avoiding it because he is afraid of defeat? Does he have a hitch in his mental game--fear, or lack of confidence in himself? How was this fear instilled in him?

Is he gaining the necessary experience to develop into a champion? Or is he avoiding that experience, while his peers compete, learn, and become champions?

Is he unable to perform at his best because he is afraid of failure?

Is he so afraid of losing that he can't make changes in his game to improve? Does he fall back into the same bad habits that worked at the lower levels?

Is he trying to succeed, or trying to avoid failure?

While there is no sure-fire cure for cancer or rating anxiety, doctors and coaches can help. In the latter case, coaches need to instill in juniors and parents *from the beginning* that ratings are not the focus of their play; improvement is. Coaches should stress the following from day one.

- Do not take ratings seriously. When ratings go up, they are fun; when they go down, who cares?
- Focus on improvement, with the goal to win events and titles.
- Ratings are only a snapshot approximation of your current winning ability in a tournament. Where you will be later on is more important than where you are now.
- Ratings can be a tool if used as intermediate- or long-term goals. There's nothing wrong with a 1600 player making it a goal to go over 2000 within a year, though that should be combined with event-oriented goals, such as winning the state junior championships, or winning the Under 2000 event at a major tournament.

Often a higher-rated player is like a house with a weak foundation, preventing further improvement, while a lower-rated player is like a skyscraper under construction with a strong foundation. The house might be taller now, but which one will someday soar into the sky? Those who focus on ratings may temporarily gain a higher rating but with a weaker foundation, while those who focus on improvement develop the foundation to become a skyscraper. Ask your juniors which they would prefer. If they want to be skyscrapers, urge them to compete in rating and junior events that they can win, and when it's over, don't ask them their rating. Ask them what they learned.

SECTION 4 – TWO PROCESSES IN WHICH WE ENGAGE

The following is adapted from a chapter in the book: *PATT – A Principles Approach to Table Tennis.*)

Two Processes in Which We Engage

unlearn: to put out of one's knowledge or memory: to undo the effect of: discard the habit of

learn: to gain knowledge or understanding of or skill in by study, instruction, or experience
(*learn a trade*)

Merriam-Webster Dictionary

Introduction

The major commitment coaches have to players is to assist them in improving. The activity PATT uses for this process is termed **player development**. A perspective on the two key mental processes in which the experienced player engages is discussed in this chapter.

Two Mental Processes

When a player attempts to improve, she engages in two mental processes: unlearning and learning. *Unlearning¹ is far more difficult than learning.* When a coach is providing technique improvement instruction to a player concerning a specific **feature**, one of two cases exists:

1. The player has experience in the **feature**, thereby requiring both unlearning and learning.
2. The player does not have experience in the **feature**, thereby requiring only learning.

The following is a set of guidelines to assist the coach in using these notions effectively.

¹ For those of scientific inclination, the physical structure in the brain that makes unlearning so difficult is a neuron-connecting sheathing called "myelin." The cells that compose these structures are termed "oligodendrocytes."

Coaching Guidelines

By Donn Olsen

1. The coach must identify when unlearning is needed and treat the developmental process as one which contains both unlearning and learning.
2. When unlearning is required, the coach must describe to the player what behavior must be unlearned, juxtaposed with what behavior must be learned. In so doing, the contrast will assist the player in understanding her dual role.
3. As a general guideline, no more than 50% of a training session should be devoted to one or more **features** that require unlearning. Unlearning is commonly found to be more emotionally stressful than learning, so learning will provide a pleasant counterbalance to unlearning. This 50% guideline is to be regarded as just a rule of thumb that may be altered appropriately to the psychological disposition of the player.
4. The coach must determine the value of a given unlearning requirement to determine the appropriateness of engaging in the unlearning process. If it is deemed inappropriate to proceed with the unlearning, a strategy is needed as to how the flawed **feature** is to be managed and integrated within the framework of the player's **feature set**.
5. When approaching an unlearning requirement, the coach must construct a strategy to effect the unlearning. One good method is to highlight one or more correct attributes to be learned in the **feature** that promote the realization of the unlearning.
6. Some unlearning **feature** requirements are multi-faceted. Typically, only one or two may be dealt with at any one time. The coach needs to determine the relative value and priority among the facets and proceed accordingly.
7. Visualization has been found to be a powerful means of altering the brain structure in valuable ways for improvement in sports performance. The coach must provide a sufficiently vivid description of the **feature** to be learned to then advocate to the player use of visualization of the **feature**.

Conclusion

Many times unlearning is a frustrating and emotionally taxing endeavor for both the player and the coach. It is always challenging. Due to the inevitable discomfort that accompanies this effort, some coaches are inclined to avoid facilitating the unlearning process that would potentially lead to attaining objectives the player needs to improve in substantive ways. This avoidance is unfortunate and inappropriate in those cases where it does not serve the interests of the player.

SECTION – KEEPING YOUNG PLAYERS ON TARGET

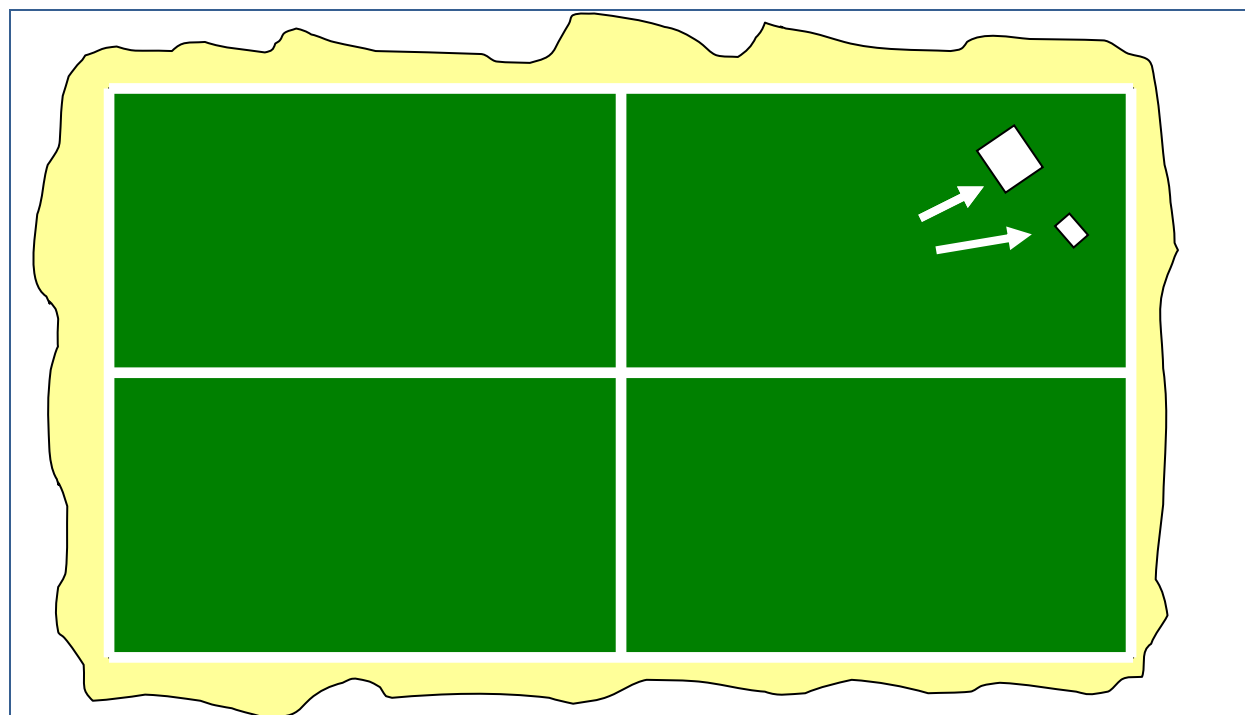
By Steve Hochman, USATT Certified Coach

Coaching very young players that are starting out in table tennis can be both rewarding and frustrating at the same time. While these young players can be very enthusiastic and capable of absorbing information like sponges, they can easily be distracted from the task at hand, which is learning technique and consistency. The proper response to that is, “so what?” Coaches have to remember that these are very young kids and their primary goal starting any new sport should be simple: Have fun. As table tennis coaches, we are really in direct competition with every other sport that parents make available for their children. The angle we need to push is the lifetime participation aspects of our sport and the enjoyment it can provide for many years. Clearly as they advance, there is an increase in disciplined training, so the physical and mental benefits of the sport become readily apparent.

Okay, back to the multi-ball drill with the 6 year-old, who has decent technique (when focused), can barely see over the table and is trying to rip every shot at full force. Of course their technique falters as they try to hit every shot as hard as he/she can. As balls are spraying all over the club and one out of every 5 actually lands on the table you take a break to pick up balls with your trusty net. When you look up, junior is running to the control desk where they left their hand-held video game. These days, it seems that every other kid is diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). When I was a kid that was called normal behavior.

Teaching correct technique is done by repeating correct strokes thousand of times and creating muscle memory. How can you get a young player to focus on proper technique and consistent placement of shots on your side of the table? The way to slow them down is to create a little game. Fold a sheet of paper into a square or rectangle approximately 8 inches by 8 inches. Place the square on your side of the table in a location that you want them to place the ball. Challenge them to hit the paper. I’ve done this many times and it’s amazing how all distractions completely disappear and total focus on technique and placement is the result. Each time they hit the paper there is a momentary celebration followed by an extreme effort to repeat the feat. Sometimes they appear dejected if they can’t hit the paper or only do it a few times – that is generally irrelevant however, as their strokes are perfect and they’re consistently landing shots on the table. That said, you can enlarge the target to give them a fighting chance of successfully hitting it. Conversely, if the game lacks a challenge, you can go the other direction and minimize the target.

The bottom line is to maintain the attention of young players and the way to do that is easy: Keep it fun!



Create a Target!

SECTION 6 THREE TRAINING PATTERNS

By Lee McCool – PATT Certified Coach

As both a player and a coach, I find it valuable in training to combine more than one skill in a routine. The ones I like best are those that are most similar to what my players find when they play their matches. The combinations I use I call “patterns.”

Here are three that are some of my favorites.

- 1. Control, then defend:** In this pattern, the player receives a short or medium length underspin serve. The player returns the serve to the training partner in a way that allows the training partner to attack strongly. The player, playing at the table, then tries to use the speed energy in the on-coming shot to create most of the speed for his shot. In addition, the player learns to place his defensive shot in different places on the table.

Usually, I start with the training partner attacking to one location—backhand, middle, or forehand—then switch to a set of points played to each of the other locations. Finally, when the player starts doing well, I give the training partner the option of attacking to either of two of the three locations.

One variation I like to use is to have the player return the serve to different locations so that the player can play against offensive shots coming from different angles.

2. **Soft topspin, medium return, strong attack:** In this pattern, the training partner serves a long serve that the player returns with a moderate quality topspin shot. The training partner returns this shot with a medium level topspin shot. The player then attacks strongly. I encourage the player to attack to different places on the table to develop those placement skills with his offensive shots. I make it a requirement that the player attack strongly every time, so that he does not miss taking advantage of this opportunity.

I ask the training partner to place his 3rd ball shot at various locations on the table to make it more like a game situation.

3. **Three lengths serve return:** I ask the training partner to pick one type of spin—topspin, underspin, one of the sidespins, or nospin—and serve to one of the player's positions—backhand, middle, or forehand—varying the length among short, medium, and long. I work with the player to develop a range of responses to the three lengths for a specific type of spin. In addition to improving the technical skill to play well in these situations, the player improves his judgment as to what the length of the serve is.

I hope this is helpful to you!

SECTION 7 – USING SELF-MULTI-BALL TO TEACH HAND SKILLS

By: Richard McAfee,

USATT National Coach, Author of “Table Tennis, Steps to Success



The standard training method when working with young beginning children is to first teach them the proper grip and then move on to having the students practice racket control drills. These normally include a number of ball bouncing and dribbling drills done off the table.. Once the children start showing some ability to control the ball the next step is typically to begin teaching them one stroke at a time using shadow practice and then with the coach feeding them balls, using the multi-ball method.

I have found a very useful step between the off-the-table drills and the coach feed multi-ball. I call it self-multi-ball and it consists of the student learning each stroke first by using the multi-ball feeding technique and sending balls to an empty table (no return). I typically start the student learning forehand strokes from a position close to the net on the side of the table. I put the student in the proper position, then have them practice the stroke (just the forehand and wrist movements), without the ball. I then give the student a small basket of balls (about 50) and have them first bounce a ball on the table and then strike the ball using the desired stroke. The student repeats this process until he/she empties the basket. For backhand strokes, I position the student in the normal backhand position at the end of the table. This type of drilling has a number of advantages for both the student and the coach. These include:

1. It allows the student to focus just on controlling his forearm and wrist movements. Unlike coach-feed multi-ball, there is no pressure of having to follow a moving ball or need to use the lower body.
2. It allows the student to quickly learn the correct relationship between the bounce of the ball and the racket contacting the ball (timing).
3. As the ball is not moving forward, it is easier for the student to learn to make topspin or backspin strokes by contacting above or below the center of the ball.
4. This type of practice allows the student to better learn the coordination of the left and right hand together. This makes it much easier to learn the serve in the future.
5. The use of “targets” on the table can concentrate the practice and add a “fun” element. You can also have students compete to see how quickly they can empty their basket of balls.
6. This type of practice frees up the coach to work with other students.
7. By learning to feed multi-ball, students can then serve as ball feeders in future player feed multi-ball drills.

I have found that students, who first learn each stroke using self-multi-ball, are much more successful when the drills move to coach-feed multi-ball. Since they have already developed the needed hand skills, they are more relaxed and confident, and can better focus on the moving ball. I also recommend that students should continue to work on their multi-ball feeding skills at all levels of their development as it greatly enhances their hand skills.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

The Editor for the Coaching Newsletter is Richard McAfee, Chairman of the USATT Coaching Advisory Committee. To submit an article or question for publication, please send it to: rmcafee@comcast.net. The deadline to submit articles for the next newsletter is

March 1st, 2010.