

Develop the Basics: Strokes & Footwork

By Larry Hodges, USATT *Certified National Coach*



At the 2004 USA Nationals, Cheng Yinghua, 46, became the oldest Men's Singles Champion in history, and the four semifinalists averaged over 40 years old. This was unique in a sport that is usually dominated by younger, faster players.

When asked what the younger players needed to do to compete with these veterans, four-time U.S. Men's champ and full-time coach Cheng said, "The younger players had not put enough training time and effort into the fundamentals.

Fundamentals, fundamentals, fundamentals.

Some find them boring, but they are probably the three most important things in being a Champion. No one becomes a champion in this sport without a solid foundation in the fundamentals.

Many find it the "boring" part of training, since fundamentals are mostly developed through repetition, but they are absolutely necessary.

Fundamentals, fundamentals, fundamentals.

They don't need to be boring. At the beginning level, where repetition isn't easy, it should be a challenge just to do the repeating strokes. As players advance, they should work in more and more advanced drills, which leads both to more advanced play and more interesting practice.

What are the Fundamentals?

The fundamentals include both proper stroking and footwork technique. Tactics, mental and physical conditioning, even great serve and receive don't help a lot if you don't have the fundamentals down.

At its most basic level, table tennis involves moving into position, and then stroking the ball. Along the way, you have to choose which stroke to use, read the incoming ball and adjust the stroke and racket angle to it. But if you can't move and stroke properly, nothing will help you.

The actual specifics of how to move and stroke are outside the scope of this article. For these, you really need a coach, although videos and books can also help. (Yes, it would take an entire book to cover the fundamentals.) You can find coaches at www.usatt.org/coaching. You can find books and videos from most major table tennis dealers.

The purpose of fundamentals is to develop consistency in your shots. To be consistent, you need to both be in position for each shot, and use the same repeating strokes over and over. That's what fundamentals are all about.

Footwork Fundamentals

To be a Champion, you have to develop proper footwork to that you are able to catch every ball in your forehand or backhand hitting zones.

Some players just stand at the table, and reach for the ball. If the ball just happens to be in the perhaps one-foot area that's convenient for their strokes, they hit a good shot. If it's outside that area, they have to adjust their shot – and so lose consistency. A good player will rarely hit a ball that you don't have to move to.

Stroking Fundamentals

To be a Champion, you have to develop repeating strokes, strokes that you can do over and over and over and (my god!) over and over and over. At the advanced level, this means many strokes, including forehand and backhand drives, loops, blocks, pushes, flips, and perhaps even lobbing and chopping. It's hard enough learning all these shots against all the different incoming balls (different spins, speeds, depth, direction, height, etc.). Now imagine having to do so while changing your stroke each time! Instead, develop a simple repeating stroke, and then all you have to do is essentially adjust the racket angle and perhaps the trajectory of the stroke.

Beginning Fundamentals

Many coaches swear by the "100" theory – you don't work on much of anything else until you can do 100 forehand and 100 backhand drives with a proper stroke. To a beginner, this is a real challenge, and should be an exciting challenge. The same is true of each of the other strokes – they are a challenge at the beginning level, and striving to do a certain number in a row is a challenge. As the stroke is learned, the fundamental footwork should be learned with footwork drills, so moving to each ball and stroking it properly becomes ... fundamental.

For each new drill involving a new stroke or some combination of stroking and footwork, beginners can see how many they can do in a row. It's an exciting challenge, and sometimes they forget along the way that they are getting better and better!

Intermediate & Advanced Fundamentals

At the intermediate level, the player can do all the strokes consistently with proper repeating strokes. At this point, it's time to get the fundamentals into game-like situations. This means doing drills that include more and more variation, and more and more random drills. Random drills are where the player doesn't always know where the ball is going. If the fundamentals are mastered, a player can do this, at least at a slower pace. As the player advances, the speed of the drill can speed up. All players have a maximum speed at which they can still maintain the fundamentals; if you go beyond that speed, their fundamentals break down. By drilling, drilling, and more drilling, a player can increase the speed at which they can execute the fundamentals.

Putting it Together

Table tennis has been called chess at hyper speed. Imagine playing chess where you were missing a rook or queen. That's what playing with poor fundamentals is. Proper fundamentals mean knowing you can execute the shots you call for in any given situation.

The Chinese tend to dominate table tennis worldwide. Most coaches would say that ultimately, the biggest advantage they have over their opponents is stronger fundamentals. It may be fun to play games, and they are important to improving, but the best players spend the majority of their training on ... you guessed it, fundamentals. They may do it at a pace that doesn't seem very fundamental, but that's because of years and years of developing these fundamentals until they can do them at that pace. Why are they still working on them? So they can do them consistently at an even faster pace against anything an opponent can throw at them.

If you want to be a Champion, you'll do the same.