

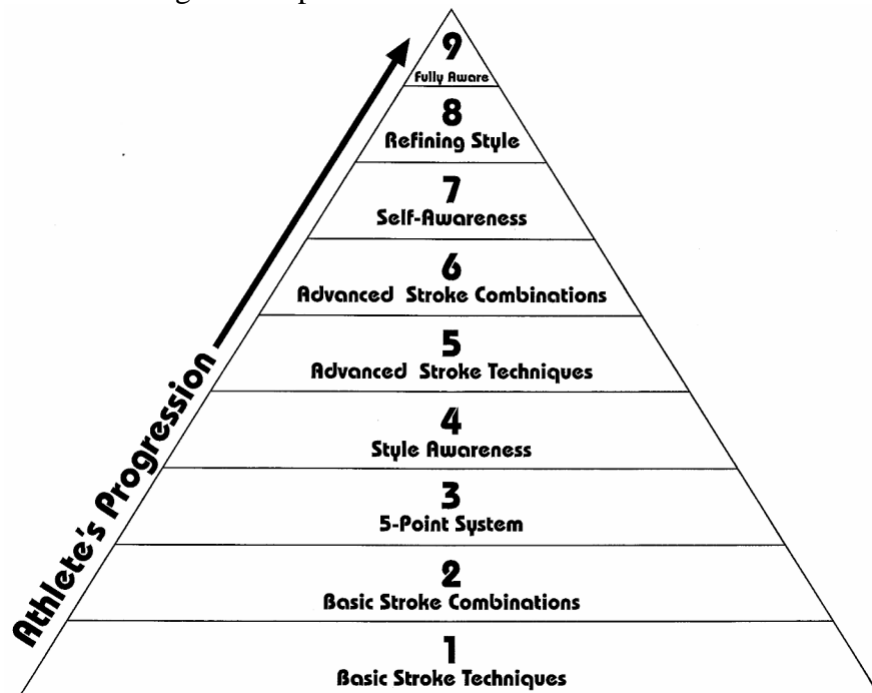
The Improvement Pyramid

By Richard McAfee, *USATT Certified National Coach, Butterfly sponsored coach*



For any athlete looking to become a champion, it is indeed a long path towards glory. Studies of Olympic Athletes have shown that it takes about ten years of organized training to achieve elite status. Within the Sport of Table Tennis, there is a definite progression of skill development. To help my students understand where they are on this developmental path, I have created a tool called, “The Pyramid of Success.”

The Pyramid shows the nine developmental stages that athletes go through in their journey to becoming a complete player. See if you can locate where you are on your own personal journey towards becoming a Champion.



The Stages of Athlete Development

Stage 1 – Basic Stroke Technique

At this stage, athletes are simply learning the fundamental techniques of the game such as basic strokes, elementary spin theory, simple serve and return, and the rules of the game.

Stage 2 – Basic Stroke Combinations

Once the athlete can control the basic strokes, the coach then begins to combine these strokes together to form combinations, bringing together both forehand and backhand techniques. This combining of strokes also requires that the athlete begin to move more, and lessons in footwork start during this stage.

Stage 3 – The 5-Point System

When the athlete can control the basic stroke combinations, the focus is turned to learning how to play points. As most points in a game are finished by the fifth stroke, the emphasis is placed on the first five possible strokes of a game. As all points must begin with either a serve or a return, these techniques are stressed during this stage. Third and fifth ball attacks are introduced, as well as fourth ball counter attacks or defense. The goal of this stage is to move the athlete from thinking of executing one stroke at a time, into planning out whole points.

Stage 4 – Style Awareness

During stage three, the athlete's natural style begins to express itself. It can be seen in how the athlete chooses to begin putting their points together. Does the athlete naturally prefer to hit rather than loop? Does the athlete have natural early or late timing? Does the athlete prefer to play close to the table or at mid-distance? These and other telltale signs start to show as the athlete learns to play whole points. During this stage, athletes should be introduced to the basic styles of the game, through written materials and the use of videotapes. They should watch the better players at the club and place these players into style categories. Finally, the athlete should write a complete description of his or her own style. An athlete's style is normally a blend of two of the major styles.

Stage 5 – Advanced Stroke Techniques

Now that the athlete understands what their style will be, they must begin to learn the advanced techniques necessary to complete that style. What these techniques are will vary greatly from style to style. Pips-out hitters, all-round topspin attackers, and choppers all need to learn very different techniques.

Stage 6 – Advanced Stroke Combinations

Once these advanced techniques are learned, they must be combined with the athlete's existing strokes and blended into the desired style of play. During this stage, the Five-Point System is revisited and practiced using the new combination of advanced strokes.

Stage 7 – Self-Awareness

At this stage, the athlete has all the technical tools necessary to execute their desired style of play. The focus at this level of development is on gaining match experience and learning how to use their style to defeat opponents at the International Level. As the athlete is still somewhat inexperienced, they are still focused more on what they are attempting to do than on what their opponent is doing. The athlete has become self-aware but often cannot focus outward towards their opponent.

Stage 8 – Refining Style

As the athlete begins to gather more and more match experience, they will continually be making small corrections and additions to their style of play. Ideally, athletes will return to this stage over and over again throughout their competitive life. When an athlete stops learning and improving their game, their development is over.

Stage 9 – Full Awareness

This is the stage of development that all athletes strive for. It is often called “the peak experience.” During this stage, the athlete is almost totally focused outside himself. Fully aware athletes often report feelings of time moving slower, the ball appearing larger, and feeling that they can do anything they want to with the ball. While most athletes experience this “peak experience” at some point in their lives, the fully aware athlete can reproduce this experience much more often.

Important Points

Please remember that an athlete’s development does not follow rigid, set stages. Rather, it flows as a process with each athlete spending more or less time in any one stage, as needed. Movement is not always in an upward direction. Sometimes, an athlete will need to return to a lower stage to correct some problem or learn material that was missed.

Most coaches feel that it takes about ten years of training to take an athlete to the top of their game. Hopefully, the Table Tennis Pyramid of Success will give athletes, coaches, and parents, a guide to understanding the athlete’s journey towards reaching their goals. While many try to become champions, only a few actually make it all the way to Stage 9. In fact, some athletes will stall out at each level. These athletes will make up the majority of players who participate in our sport. For that reason, it is important for everyone involved to understand that, “***The quality of the journey is more important than the destination.***”

The Pyramid of Success not only represents the path of the athlete but also the overall development of our sport. There will always be a smaller number of athletes at each increasing Pyramid Stage. The greater the numbers of athletes entering Stage 1 of the Pyramid, the greater the number of elite athletes produced, and the higher their level will be.