

What It Takes To Be a Champion

By Sean O'Neill, *Five-time U.S. Men's Singles Champion & USATT Certified National Coach*



Does it take determination, discipline, desire, or maybe God-given talent, superior genes, the perfect playing environment, and just a little luck? No single component by itself will make you a champion, but clearly the more key ingredients you possess, the brighter you will shine in table tennis and in life.

You have no control over who your parents are, so there is little benefit to spending time worrying about your genetics. For most American players, having an Olympic-level coach or full-time club in your backyard is unlikely, so there is not much point in being upset if you don't have these. Good-luck charms or being Irish won't suffice either, so what can you do?

The good news is that you do have control over many of the ingredients that help create a champion. A burning desire to succeed, the love of competition, an eagerness to improve, and an understanding that each match possesses golden nuggets of knowledge that you can learn from are all important pieces of the puzzle. Remember, becoming a champion isn't a part-time job, but a full-time commitment to excellence.

The pursuit of excellence is the fuel that champions rely on to push themselves to higher levels of play. It is said that it takes a something extra to make a champion, and this is true. For those that would like to take the journey to the top of the mountain, here are ten winning traits to keep in mind. No one is born a champion. It requires many years of hard work and dedication. The journey begins with one small step and a belief that "I can and I will."

1. Champions enjoy hard work

Serve practice, multi-ball, footwork drills, running, weightlifting and video analysis aren't always the most fun activities, especially after a tough loss. However, approaching these tasks with vigor will provide a springboard that will let you leapfrog the competition. Champions use tournament results as feedback to adjust their workouts and goals. The day after a rough tournament, don't be surprised to see a champion be the first to arrive at practice and the last to leave. During practice, each point should be treated with value, and nothing should be taken for granted.

2. Champions plan for success

Remember that failing to prepare is preparing to fail. But, what is your plan for success? Do you intend to cram on Friday night before a tournament or hope to "get hot" in the final in order to achieve success? Champions don't hope for victory; they plan for it. Becoming a champion takes time and requires thoughtful planning. Create measurable goals with timelines that are realistic based on your performance and rate of improvement. Write down your daily, monthly, and yearly goals, and place them in your racket case to review before and after each time you play.

3. Champions are confident and optimistic

We play the ultimate individual sport: there is no one to hit a homer while you are on base or sink a free throw while you are on the bench; the ball is in your hands, and hopefully, on your racket during each rally. You must believe in yourself, if you expect to succeed. Champions

know that with proper preparation they will play their best, and thus they can rightfully believe they can come out on top. When the score looks bleak, they know it only takes one point to start a great comeback. If someone just pulled off an upset, interact with them. Ask them how they did it. Their positive energy will be contagious. At practice, look to associate with players that have self-confidence and high expectations. Negative thinkers and pessimists are powerful energy zappers that should be avoided at all costs at tournaments.

4. Champions visualize success

If you can imagine it, you can achieve it! Champions understand the importance of mental imagery and visualization. This is a common skill most youngsters have until adults begin to tell them that they can't do something. Prior to practice and competition, it is prudent to daydream about the perfect performance. Find a quiet place to relax and close your eyes. Imagine hitting that winning shot against Waldner or beating an upcoming opponent. The more vivid the imagery, the more powerful the impact. Your subconscious mind doesn't know the difference between real and imagined events.

5. Champions are consistent

Champions know that success is the direct result of commitment and discipline. After a successful tournament, when it would be easy to take it easy, champions don't break their stride, and often take it up a notch. During events, champions know how to run their own mental program during matches, and don't wait until it is too late to make adjustments. Champions don't get too excited when they perform their best nor get too nervous when they aren't playing well. The key to being consistent is playing within oneself and not attempting risky moves that aren't dependable at crunch time.

6. Champions are focused

Champions know that you can train hard and prepare well, but if you don't have 100% concentration during competition, the chance for success will be haphazard. Before important matches, leave the building, take a break, clear your mind, and start to get focused for a point-by-point war. If you can win the battle of minds, you can play relaxed and at ease, but your attention must be on the task at hand. When your mind starts to wander, use a dependable technique like breathing control to re-focus your attention. Revisiting your written goals on a regular basis will make sure that you are always focused on your long-run success.

7. Champions are creative

Champions understand the need to think outside the box and to create their own unique style and strategy. Always following the lead of others, or becoming a carbon copy, is a recipe for mediocrity. Be original. Have your own set of serves. Learn from the best players. But, modify their skill set to fit your needs. Don't be afraid to add parts of other games into your own unique style.

8. Champions never quit

Far too many comebacks have been lost when players gave up a point too early. In our new eleven-point scoring system, amazing comebacks are at hand, if one is willing to believe the game is never over. Momentum is huge in table tennis, and failure to give an inch on the final

point of a game will often lead to a shift in momentum for the remainder of the match. Regardless of the score, a champion knows anything can happen, in either direction.

9. Champions help others

Champions know that by helping others you are helping the game. Coaching or encouraging others before or during a tournament will only help you in the long run. Don't be afraid after a match to speak with your opponent or their coach to share thoughts on what happened. While all of us enjoy easy victories, it is the hard-fought matches that stay with us the longest. When practicing, much can be gained by working with lesser players in the areas of consistency and control.

10. Champions love the game

The final trait that champions possess is a love and respect for the game. They recognize the past champions for their greatness and look to them for inspiration and guidance. Even when doing something else, champions figure out a way to tie it to the sport and use it to help their skills improve. With a love of the game comes the enjoyment of a difficult challenge. This desire and need to be tested will allow you to be at your best when your best is needed.