



In the Zone - Part 1

Training Emotional Skill in Table Tennis

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Introduction: Why Us?

Why would two average table tennis players from Hawaii write about emotional skill in the game? Isn't this a subject for experts? Shouldn't we be learning about emotional skill from top players who don't suffer from emotional failure? Why not coaches or psychologists?

Great players tend to have excellent emotional states which support their great performances. Those emotional states tend to be intuitive and built upon a natural predisposition to function well under the very specific

demands of table tennis. Top players rarely have any idea how they attained those skills; they came with the package and refined the skills in process. Few have overcome the hurdles those of us less well-endowed in that area must face.

As a high level competitive tennis player in my youth, I was naturally endowed with an excellent emotional state for that game. My arousal levels were almost always very high, my concentration was excellent, and my motivation was relentless. This is a perfect setup for tennis. The sport has brief periods of explosive physical demand followed by enough time to blow off steam and reset.

Nearly every shot, from serve to groundstroke to volley, demanded great exertion. Where control was required I never needed to bring down my excitement. I could just add more spin, and even the hardest struck shot would still land in the court. The exertion itself supported a certain relaxation which allowed occasional “touch” shots when necessary.

Learning table tennis in my later years, I found that my familiar very high arousal levels created high tension in my muscles. In table tennis, the management skills I’d developed for tennis did not work. Using high racket speed on every shot was not supportive of a thoughtful game, especially in the early development of points. There was a need to be composed.

Even that intense focus and tunnel-vision motivation which had characterized my great concentration in tennis became my undoing in table tennis! Tennis is a simple game compared to table tennis. My narrow focus on my own intentions did not take into account my opponent’s capacity to shroud intentions with deception. When I strained to focus harder, I tended to become overwhelmed with too much information and, unable to discern the relevant information, I failed to block out irrelevant distractions on the sidelines or on the next tables. Everything distracted me. I was overwhelmed!

In competitive matches I would melt down. Frustration was commonplace. My capacity to adapt and to learn was severely limited. Any external stressor in my life threatened to disintegrate my match play on any given day.

The emotional skills which had made me a great tennis player condemned me to being a mediocre table tennis player. It was frustrating. I consulted with peers and encountered the attitude that managing emotion was a type

of good fortune which those who succeeded just happened to have. Relax! Breathe deeply! Pretend it doesn't matter. . . .

Various books were recommended by coaches. Those books described how great players functioned but offered little for a player like me to figure out how to get from where I was to that desirable emotional state. All I encountered was "Meditation. Creative visualization. Therapy."

I began a conversation with our club coach, Clyde Young. We had both struggled with emotional balance in match play and the inability to perform under pressure. Over the following year we discussed and experimented with ways to understand and improve our own emotional skills, with the hope of being able to support and train those characteristics in others.

For our model we used prolific table tennis author, Donn Olsen's method of decomposing a domain into constituent elements to create frameworks for training skills. The following essays are the product of our shared experiences and conversations.

Part 1: The Nature of Emotional Skill

Letting Go

Learning a new skill is like going on a roller coaster ride. For a moment we choose to let go of all that feels safe and familiar. As the roller coaster pulls away from the platform, there is a moment of trepidation as we anticipate the loss of control. In an environment designed to be safe yet feel unsafe, we release ourselves into the wild feeling of uncontrollable free fall.

As table tennis players we try to control the environments of the game. In order to learn new skills, for a moment we choose to relinquish the control we've acquired and experiment with a new approach. In that moment of release we are offered new experience. For a beginning player, instinct decrees that the racket must face forward to launch the ball across the net, but when heavy underspin comes toward us, we are told that the racket must face upwards to send the ball forwards.

In a moment of faith we abandon our instinct and face the racket skyward. Seemingly miraculously, the ball

grips frictional rubber and launches forward over the net. Following a few iterations of this experience, we begin to feel secure with the new approach to the circumstance. The roller coaster has arrived back at the platform and we feel safe again. Courage has offered new knowledge.

Developing new emotional skill in table tennis is among the most daunting tasks a coach or player faces. Deeply entrenched habits hold us back. Young or old, long before we ever played table tennis we had already developed the ways we feel safely anchored in our reality. And when we were unable to master circumstances, we developed behaviors and belief systems to control the anxiety our loss of control left us. Sometimes those belief systems and practices were contrary to our long-term goals. But we often became deeply attached to those counter-productive belief systems because they made us feel less powerless.

Finding the fearlessness to release control and launch ourselves on the roller coaster of learning new emotional skills where we will have to experience those moments of emotional free fall requires courage. The reward of releasing fear is the full experience of the present. Eyes wide we fly forward, open to all our bodies and minds have to offer, prepared to learn new ways to relate to our inner and outer worlds.

Poise

Poised decision making is not exclusively a table tennis skill; it's a life skill. Each person who is poised embodies a common set of characteristics, such admirable attributes as composure, confidence, and fearlessness. When offering counsel to those of us struggling with emotional poise, we often hear storied examples such as “the composure of Gandhi” or “the patience of Buddha.”

We witnessed emotional poise in table tennis at its best in 2004, as aging legend Jan-Ove Waldner calmly dissected an overpowering number two seeded Ma Lin in his prime. Despite the decline of physical skills as he approached his 40th birthday, he was still shrouded in a cloak of emotional invincibility.

These wonderful anecdotes of extraordinarily emotional performance usually succeed in making us conscious of our inadequacy but do little to inform us exactly how to transform our own tendencies to compulsive, ineffective behavior into emotional strength.

Most information relating to emotional strength in sport offers up examples of highly successful individuals,

identifying their unique abilities to remain calm under stress, make great decisions in split seconds, and perform at the highest levels in the most challenging circumstances. We are advised to imitate the great ones, perhaps meditate or visualize, relax and take deep breaths.

Anyone who has suffered from anxiety understands that mimicking relaxation is rarely sufficient to resolve deep seated overwhelming feelings and all of the entrenched ideas and physical behaviors which result from counterproductive emotional predispositions.

How are those of us who are not naturally endowed with the most appropriate temperament for our sport to achieve the lofty heights of poise? Is it only available to those with a natural predisposition endowed by nature? And what is “emotional poise” really? Is it just one attribute, a few or a combination of many?

To be Continued...