

Psycho-regulation in Practice

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE MENTAL ASPECT IN TABLE TENNIS

Haven't we all been there before? The match gets off to an excellent start, everything comes off perfectly. After easily winning two sets, however, your game suddenly collapses for no apparent reason; shots which you played easily and placed perfectly just a short time earlier suddenly do not work anymore. Disaster sets in. You try to come back, but fail and clearly lose in the fifth set.

Or the other way around: Your form is utterly horrendous at the start of the tournament day. Absolutely everything goes wrong and you quickly lose the first few games. After fighting with yourself, you finally give up, and accepting the fact that you will lose, begin to play as if the game did not matter. Suddenly your shots begin to work again. You are back in the game - but unfortunately too late to place among the top players.

The development of optimum performance (Arturo Hotz) is based on certain guidelines. These involve a specific performance development program which includes training specific table tennis techniques, tactics, and perception, as well as developing general physical requirements (speed, strength, stamina, flexibility). However, other factors such as health, increased stress, or even just the inevitable fluctuations in a person's athletic form will also influence an athlete's performance development.

Nevertheless, these factors will hardly change during a set. They even remain more or less constant during the course of a tournament weekend. What does change in the course of a set or match is the opponent's game - their tactics or the quality of their shots. The situations described above, however, where you either find your way back into the game or lose it, rarely have anything to do with your opponent's game. And it is the same ball with which you make points, and then just 10 minutes later start to make mistakes.

So, the root of the problem is obviously to be found in one's own self.

THE STATE OF OPTIMUM PERFORMANCE

There are many descriptions of the state of optimum performance. Table tennis players often refer to it as "course/spring (German: Lauf)" or "stream/ray (German: Strahl)". Top players are in the "zone" or have "tunnel vision". At the same time, there are still many who dismiss this term, which sports scientists have coined as "flow", as being esoteric nonsense. However, whichever term one may use, they all more or less describe the same state of being. And I doubt anyone today would still claim

that this "state of being" does not exist. We have all experienced it and know what it is like: you are at the table and everything works perfectly and almost effortlessly. As mentioned above, this state of being is very delicate, and it always involves walking a fine line.

With reference to Doris Simon's article (VDTT Trainerbrief 03-2005), and for the sake of clarity, the mental state of a player can be divided into three parts: the emotional, the cognitive and the physical.

At the emotional level, which is the level of our feelings, players can make one of two common mistakes. They can either go into a match full of pessimism and fear ("I've never beaten this guy before"). Or they take the game too lightly ("This will be a piece of cake!"). In either case, it is unlikely they will reach their optimum performance level.

On the cognitive level, most players report that they were not thinking much or anything at all while playing their best table tennis. On the other hand, the further their thoughts were from the game and the action at hand ("...every time I've been this far behind I've lost the game!"), the less concentrated they were, and in terms of performance, the further away they were from what they are actually capable of. To have a free head means that your thoughts are entirely focused on the moment at hand and the activities being performed.

Most of us are familiar with the physical level. An "iron arm" - when there is too much muscle tension - is something every table tennis player has had at one time or another. It is, however, equally difficult to get into the game if, for example, during the first game on Sunday morning your body tension is too low.



PHOTO: Roscher

On all three levels, the ideal state of being is very individual, and most often lies somewhere in the middle. When talking about the physical level, sports scientists refer to a medium /middle level of body tension (mittlerer Spannungsniveau). Emotionally, players should be carefully optimistic in order to play their best possible game. On the intellectual level, the optimum state is generally described as shutting out any disruptive or distractive thoughts while being fully focused on the activities being performed, consciously using tactics and playing intelligently. This is how many athletes themselves have described the perfect athletic experience of being in a so-called "state of flow".

In practice, it is important to be aware of the fact that these three levels are in a constant state of interaction with each other. On the emotional level, when someone suddenly gets scared (at this point we will not take into consideration

and after three or four careless mistakes they suddenly get scared, lose their focus and the whole game turns around.

Conversely, players are often too ambitious ("I HAVE to win!") and are thus much too tense when they go into the game. If a player has resigned to the fact that they are lagging far behind and will most likely lose, they relax, tension is released and they begin to play well again.

I am sure that every table tennis player is familiar with these scenarios.

LEARNING TO CONTROL YOUR OWN STATE OF BEING

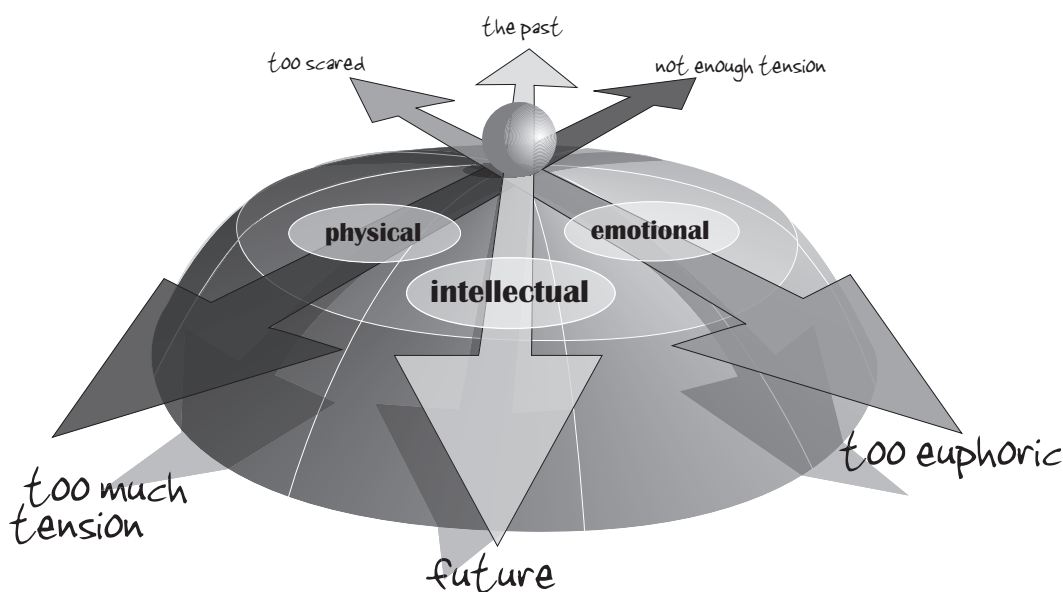
Most players assume that one's state of being, as well as the mechanisms just described, are a question of luck or coincidence. "I'm having an off day", they say if they are having a hard time getting into a match. And how many play-

so, they have learned to control their own state of being.

The desired state of being must be reached by the beginning of a game. A good warm-up, for example, helps to reach the ideal level of tension. This is no big secret. Many good players have developed certain rituals and habits which they perform before the start of each tournament. In doing so, they stabilise not only their surroundings, but their own state of being as well.

These top players are also more or less capable of controlling themselves on all three levels during the course of the entire tournament. So-called "Champions" have established certain habits and mechanisms in order to stay as close and consistently as possible to their ideal performance level. "Losers" rarely know how to help themselves. They easily fall off the thin line and are hardly capable of steering against what is

A Model of the Three Mental Areas



what the cause of this fear may be), they begin to dwell on this fear and cramp up. Their muscles become too tense and harden. When players are winning and leading by a comfortable margin, they often think they have already won the game. They lose their body tension

ers in the lower leagues completely fall apart when another player loses control of himself and starts ranting and raving?

Top players, on the other hand, have learned to control these three levels. And in doing

happening in order to find their way back to an optimum performance level. This is referred to as a "downward spiral". A careless mistake leads to being upset, which in turn only leads to more mistakes. After just a few more exchanges, the game has been turned around completely.

However, just as speed and technique can be trained, so can mental skills. In traditional table tennis technique training, the goal is to replace old and undesirable movements and techniques – i.e. habits – with new and better ones. In the same way, bad mental habits need to be replaced with better ones. This requires practice and training. The same applies to mental strength, however, as applies to physical speed: You cannot turn a work horse into a race horse. What everyone can do, however, is figure out for themselves what would have happened if they had gotten back into the game just two balls earlier; or if they had not completely fallen apart in a certain situation.

It is important to understand that the psychological aspect of the game is not won or lost during the ball exchange. Matches are actually decided mentally between ball exchanges. This is especially true of shorter sets going to eleven. In fact, the ball rests more than it is played and every single point is of utmost importance. It is crucial to regain control over one's own state of being between ball exchanges. This requires that a player even be aware of this fact. So, the first question that must be asked is: "How do I feel?" If the answer is "Good!", then you can move on to the next question regarding the tournament: "What is happening here?" If the player's own state of being is good then they can start to deal with the questions of tactics related to the match. However, if the answer is "Not so good!", then the first step must be to improve their state of being. It is time for psychoregulation.

If you want to work in this area as a coach, it is important that the player is willing to do so as well.

Many players are irritated or clamp up when their coach asks them how they feel. After all, the mental state involves very personal things, mindsets and feelings. If players are not prepared to recognize that mental strength is an important element of their game – as long as they do not do so with their coach – then no one has the right to insist on it. Doing so could permanently destroy the trust between a player and their coach.

IN PRACTICE

At the beginning of a tournament or match, and between every ball exchange, players need to check how they are doing. At first, this will require a lot of attention and concentration, and will at times get lost in the heat of the action. But it can be practiced and trained just as any stroke can. It can become as much a "habit" and "routine" as any technical skill – and thus becomes a useful tool in competition.

BODY TENSION

The easiest question refers to the physical state. How is my body tension? Am I too cramped or too relaxed? It takes some time and experience to be able to identify one's own optimum state and to learn to listen inside oneself. If your body tension is right, then you can get started. If it is not right, then you must regulate it. The popular "dancing" at the table or shaking out your hand are methods which can often be observed among top players. Consciously going into a very low basic position, sprinting to get the ball, and pumping your fist after a good play are all ways of creating more muscle tension. Too much tension can be reduced by taking a deep breath and exhaling slowly.

CONCENTRATION

Concentration is essential in our sport. When you lose it, it is usually because disruptive thoughts, which appear as actual words, begin to make their way into your head. Since these thoughts are not usually wilfully chosen they are often said to originate from the

"back of the head". "Chattering monkeys", "one's weaker self, and "alter ego" are all common terms for the "other" in these discussions. The important thing is to not allow oneself to get drawn into them. These comments, which are hardly constructive, should not be allowed to dwell in the back of your mind either. You can, for example, allow these thoughts to just "pass on by", as is the technique used in autogenic training. This, however, is difficult and must be practiced.

Another option is to put one's foot down ("Come on!") and to calm back down repeating – if necessary out loud – a previously chosen thought or phrase which has a calming effect. It is important to immediately return your thoughts and your focus to the game at hand. On a tactical level, this can mean focusing on the next serve or return. The ability to visualize the next ball exchange in your head is something which must be trained and practiced. It is a useful and effective way to get completely focused again on the next activity at hand. Getting your mind to focus on your body, on your breathing or on your muscle tension in your forehand hand, is another way to shut out disruptive thoughts.

EMOTIONS

Emotions are very hard to control. To overcome fears, for example, you must become aware of them first. The emotions themselves are not necessarily the problem. What is a problem is the fact that they influence the other two areas. It is probably due to primary instinct that when a person feels threatened they experience a rush of adrenaline. This, in turn, leads to an increase in pulse rate and muscle tone. Neither of which are especially desirable during a table tennis game. Fear also disrupts the cognitive area since it causes our thoughts and concentration to focus on the fear itself.

Control in this area can be regained by way of the other two areas. Taking a slow, deep breath has a calming effect. Everyone should try out for themselves and

see what happens when they force themselves to smile. On the cognitive level, fear can be countered with a person's own "magic formula" ("Ok now, let's go!"). Saying this phrase out loud helps focus your mind on the next steps. Consciously remembering a positive experience in the past can also help create a good feeling, as can glancing at a familiar face – at the coach or a team mate. Children often instinctively take some kind of talisman to the table with them. It can be a stuffed animal or a "lucky towel", for example.

This is often referred to as naïve psychoregulation. And, in fact, it may appear to be very naïve. However, many successful athletes do have some small rituals. Richard Prause, the national men's trainer, for example, is famous for the fact that he folds his towel in a very precise way. These kinds of rituals help free the mind to concentrate and focus on the next step. At the same time, this is something which players actually CAN control. Fear is often the result of the feeling of not having or having lost control of a situation. No matter what is happening around you, your personal ritual is something you can always control completely.

MENTAL TRAINING

During games which only go to eleven, the time between ball exchanges is longer than the actual playing time. Despite this fact, most training programs focus almost exclusively on ball exchanges. New, young players are hardly ever taught what to do between ball exchanges. Whereas strokes are practiced down to the last detail and many balls training are perfected, it is usually simply accepted as a question of character if a player is generally positive with positive thoughts and mental strength – or not.

For this reason, this article will be continued in the next issue of TTL where we will present concrete psychoregulatory steps and techniques to be used in training as well as during actual competition settings.



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PHOTO: Roscher