

# Psycho-regulation in Practice

## Part 2: Regulating Tension

### THE IDEAL STATE OF BEING

In the first part of this article (which appeared in TTL 01-2007) we discussed how every athlete has their own individual ideal state in which they reach top-level performance. This state of being which sport scientists refer to as "flow" not only differs from player to player, but can also vary in the same player from competition to competition. Being in a state of flow, however, always implies that there is a delicate and complete balance at various levels. For the sake of clarity, three levels were defined. On the physical level, the ideal state is described as the optimum level of tension. On the cog-

nitive level, thoughts should focus neither on the future, nor the past, but be completely focused on the activities being performed. On the emotional level, both negative attitudes as well as being overconfident impede top performance.

Being able to control these three levels, as well as being able to control one's own state of being are essential for achieving peak performance. "Champions" do this very successfully. Others always fall into the same pitfalls, making the same mistakes, and seeming to never even come close to achieving their full potential.

### WILLINGNESS AND SELF-AWARENESS AS PREREQUISITES

In order for a coach to be able to work with an athlete in the area of psychoregulation, it is essential that the athlete be willing to work in this area and to change things. As long as players continue to blame the circumstances for their breakdowns and failures, it does not make any sense to try to work in the area of mental training. Players must develop awareness and be willing to work and change.

Athletes often describe how after a certain point they lost complete control of the game. Specific measures to control their own status can not be introduced if the athlete is not even aware of such moments. The first step is therefore for the athlete to develop the ability to "listen" inside of himself and to begin to recognize such moments. The question the athlete (and coach) needs to ask is: "How do I feel?" This question should not only be asked between sets but after every ball exchange. At first, this will require an immense amount of concentration and effort. But just as stroke techniques become more stable in the course of an athlete's career, so do mental techniques.

### TRAINING SELF-AWARENESS

During training, you will never achieve the same level of stress as during a competition. For this reason, competition situations are ideal for learning to check your own state of being. Competitions in which the athlete is under less stress because their chances of winning are very poor and because, for example, they are playing against much better players are actually the ideal setting in order to begin to experiment with self-awareness. Since tactical components are less relevant, they are freer to focus on other things during the game. If there are no adequate competitions in the near future, training competitions can also be used to learn to get a feeling for one's own state of being. Many of the following exercises can be used outside of a competition setting and can also be included in training sessions.

### GETTING A FEEL FOR BODY TENSION

The easiest level to control is the physical – i.e. body tension. Before the start of a match, players are asked how they would describe their own body tension. During the following set,



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they should then try to do one of the following psychoregulatory exercises in between ball exchanges – to build up or reduce body tension respectively.

#### IF BODY TENSION IS TOO HIGH

##### "Dancing / Tänzeln"

The player dances around before each ball exchange. They should jump three times from one leg to the other and shake out their arms while doing so.

##### Changing Hands

The player takes the paddle in their free hand and blows into their playing hand.

##### Taking a Deep Breath

The player turns from the table, closes their eyes for a moment and takes a deep breath and exhales out slowly.

##### Making a Fist

The player makes as firm a fist as possible with their playing hand. After one or two seconds, they let go and relax their hand again.

#### LOW BODY TENSION

##### Ready Position

The player bends down further than usual – so far that the net and the back base line are on top of each other. ("To develop a feel for the net").

##### Playing the Forehand

The player tries to hit as many balls as possible with their forehand – this includes running around their backhand if necessary.

##### Making a Fist

The player makes a fist after every point.

##### Getting the Ball

The player gets the ball quickly – especially if they have just made the last point.

If you watch top players, you will see them use these measures more or less frequently. You will often observe that inexperienced players do not use any of them.

It is important to reflect how effective these measures are for the individual player. Those which prove useful should continue to be used in the subsequent sets.

#### EXPERIENCING EXTREMES

Once players have found one or more body tension regulating measures which work for them, the next step is to try take them to the limit. During a set, they should try to achieve maximum body tension. After the first attempt, the



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coach should ask if the player has really reached their limit. Several sets may be necessary to do so. Players will probably notice themselves that maximum tension is not good for their game. The second step is to try reduce body tension as much as possible. Players can use the any of the above described techniques, or others. And again, when completely relaxed, players will usually not play their best table tennis either. They will, however, begin to develop a feeling for their own body and its tension and can slowly begin to discover their own personal optimum tension level, as well as the techniques which work for them.



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## COACHING AND TENSION

From the perspective of a coach, on the other hand, it is necessary to be able to recognize the degree of a player's tension. A good coach will notice if the first set was lost for tactical reasons, or because the player could not find their way into the game. In the same way, a coach needs to recognize when a player is too tense, when their muscles turn to "iron".

What a coach says and does will be based on this. If the coach and player have agreed to work on the subject, then the coach can suggest appropriate and specific measures. At the same time, a coach needs to know how to help a player

even if they do not explicitly work on mental training. Gesticulations, facial expressions, volume, the choice of words, etc. need to be adjusted to the player's state of being. If players are too tense, then they need to be calmed down, and the coach needs to coach in a calming manner. Conversely, if the player lacks tension, then what the coach does on the sidelines needs to be dynamic and energetic.

## THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THESE MEASURES

The measures presented here are examples of the most common physical exercises and measures to regulate body tension. Ultimately, however, players need to find out for themselves and learn to use the right measure at the right time. This not only requires that players be willing to discuss the topic, but also that they develop a high capacity of self-awareness. This takes place on an intellectual level – and very often gets torpedoed by the third, the emotional level. Panic and fear cause a person to lose the capacity to self-reflect and to take control of their own situation.

For this reason, this article will be continued in the next TTL and will give examples of how to better deal with competition stress on an intellectual and emotional level, as well as how to control and direct your own state of being. ■

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