

Is Table Tennis just an individual sport?

“The difference between the old ballplayer and the new ballplayer is the jersey. The old ballplayer cared about the name on the front. The new ballplayer cares about the name on the back.” Steve Garvey (Former MLB first baseman, Business Leader)

What? A quote from a baseball player, talking about team spirit... in a table tennis newsletter?! No one could deny that sports like rugby, baseball and soccer are team sports – sports in which according to Wikipedia, “Teams normally have members with complementary skills and generate synergy through a coordinated effort which allows each member to maximize his or her strengths and minimize his or her weaknesses”.

I recently watched the NRL Grand Final “Broncos vs Cowboys” the other day. I was intrigued as I saw each team, as a whole, proudly wearing their jerseys and staying, playing and fighting physically and mentally together, all aiming for the one common goal.

The role of the player

Obviously, we are not playing rugby, table tennis is very different. We grow up learning that table tennis is an individual sport: “Just you against the guy on the other side on the table”. We improve our skills and fine tune our technique with private coaching to help us eliminate ‘OUR’ weaknesses. We grow up in an environment where we try to hide our best serves and best returns in group training sessions to ensure that they remain an effective and surprising

weapon against our opponents in the future.

But who hasn’t experienced that extra kick of energy that’s released when there are people on the bench behind you, supporting you? Who hasn’t experienced the benefits of a good training session with a friend, exchanging tips and giving advice that ultimately helps both players to improve? Who hasn’t experienced that the one ‘weapon’ you were trying to hide in your group training sessions, suddenly doesn’t work anymore in an important match?

By neglecting the advantages of training with a partner and competing in a team, we miss out on so much that table tennis and sport in general can offer. A culture in which we play a defined role, contributes to our team and social aspects with our club mates.

The coach’s role

Being a coach, I have the responsibility to teach my students not just the correct table tennis technique and how to beat their opponent but also, each student needs to understand that they can greatly benefit from the social skills they can gain beyond the sport. Plenty of studies show that committed junior players in a sport are more likely to move on to success in other areas of life.

This may be academic, business or other personal success. One of the reasons is that the lessons you learn through junior sport can teach you crucial skills for other areas of life. Most of these areas of life will require you to

work as part of a team. Hence, it is my responsibility as a coach to create a positive and supportive culture during training sessions in the hope to develop these skills in junior players.

Table Tennis as a team sport - opportunities for clubs

This year Table Tennis Australia is holding the first Australian National Club Championships in early November. Western Australia offered “Countries Team Event” for non-club players during the West Australian Open. Both are great opportunities for players to experience table tennis in a team.

On a club level there are plenty of opportunities to attract new players with social team tournaments or team events (e.g. 2 vs 2) included in the clubs open. To increase the identification with the club we may also want to re-think our fixture structures. It may be an option to offer once a year fixtures for juniors only, women only or veterans members only. It could also be an option to let teams move up and down in divisions rather than only the best single players moving up that ladder. It may even be an option to honour the winners of the team fixtures with medals and/or small prizes.

Table tennis can be a team sport if we allow it to be one. There are plenty of reasons why we should be proud to have our name on the front of our shirt, rather than on the back.

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