

Slump Busters

Nothing is more frustrating than the feeling of being in a rut. Opponents that were once easy to beat, seem unbeatable. Serves that were a breeze to loop, become unloopable. And shots that were a cinch to perform, become unexecutable. If you've experienced playing "in the zone" then you've probably also dealt with being "stuck in the mud" at some point in time. This week, we will focus on some simple tips and techniques to get your game jump-started and back on track.

First, let's make sure the reason you are having trouble is not due to some injury. If you are physically injured, *get sound medical advice and follow the treatment recommended*. As a frequent user of the USOC's Sports Medicine clinic, I have seen that most table tennis athletes do not take injuries or rehab seriously. Maybe it's because very few are dependant upon our sport for their livelihood. Stretching and icing after a tournament (or a hard practice) is critical to reducing the risk of reinjury or over-training.

When searching for answers many players have difficulty deciding where to look. I remember the story of a golfer who was having trouble with his long putts. He asked the local Pro if his problem was his grip or the length of his backswing. The Pro handed him a pitching wedge and promptly told him to go work on his chipping. Simply stated, better chip shots reduce the number of long putts!

Our sport is no different. Often I've been asked to give advice to players who were having trouble returning their opponent's attacks. The first area I always look at is the quality of their serve and serve return. If these are poorly performed then it is easy to see why they would have trouble returning attacks. In my opinion, the easiest way to improve your defense is to stop your opponent from getting such easy attacks in the first place. Here are a set of tips for keeping your opponent's attack at bay :

- Serve shorter - make sure the first bounce of your serve is closer to net. Remember, the first bounce determines the length of the serve, not the second.
- When serving, make contact with the ball close to net height - six to eight inches above the table. If the ball is going to clear the net by the smallest margin, then the height of the first bounce should be the same. Try this trick, place your racket's edge perpendicular to the table surface. The top of your paddle is usually about six inches. Scary how low 6 inches is, huh?
- Spin instead of striking the ball - more spin, not less makes the ball go short when serving or pushing. For super, short spinny serves, try to arc the bounce on your side of the table, instead of serving directly into the table.

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- Randomly serve or push very deep to keep your opponent off balance. If you force them to back off the table they will feel less comfortable attacking.
- Play very wide angles especially to the backhand side. The goal should be to make the ball go off the side versus the end of the table.

If your confidence is in the pits, you need to channel that negative self-talk into positive feedback. Do not focus on the points, games, or matches you just lost or choked away. Remind yourself of all your great comebacks, shutouts and well-played matches of the past. If you are surrounded by people who are negative or have defeating self-talk, get away from them, it can be very contagious!

Another pitfall is created when you start doubting your equipment. Comments like, "My rubber is dead", "I had a terrible glue", "Their loop was dead" (now, complaining about your opponent's lack of muscle!), "The floor is too slippery", and "They got tons of nets and edges" will only get you into trouble. Let's look at each of these common complaints one at a time.

"My rubber is dead" - There are a couple of things to do to rectify this:

- Obviously, you can replace your rubber before each major tournament. This can become very expensive, but most top players do this very practice.
- Save some bucks, clean your racket with water or rubber cleaner prior to each match.
- In between points, clean the surface by lightly breathing on your racket face and wipe off the condensation with your hand.
- Keep your racket covered in a plastic sleeve inside your racket case.

"I had a terrible glue" - This is more common among the newest generation of players.

- Give yourself adequate time in between matches to glue.
- Apply each coat evenly and allow to dry between coats.

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- Use a thinner glue (or solvent) to reduce unnecessary glue build-up.
- Use a racket-press or place a stack of heavy objects on your re-glued racket for 5 to 10 minutes to ensure a smooth attachment.

"Their loop was dead" - How dare they!

- Push with more spin to force a heavier loop, if this is what you really want.
- Block with a more open racket and let it bounce - don't take it too early.
- Smash through the ball by turning your shoulders on your follow-thru.
- Don't let them loop in the first place! (see above).

"The floor is too slippery" - Usually this is true with tiled flooring, but sometimes also with wooden surfaces.

- Ask for a broom or damp mop and sweep the floor before the match begins. Don't wait until 15-all in the third, it will throw off your concentration.
- Use a pile of wet paper towels to stomp on every few points. Or use an anti-stat mat to remove dust from the bottoms of your sneakers.
- Wear high gripping shoes like Double Coins or volleyball shoes.

"They got tons of nets and edges" - Contrary to personal belief, they do even out in the long-run ; -)

- 50% of all net balls pop-up and are easy to smash. The key is to take your time and not to rush them.
- If you can return an edge ball (no matter how weak) it will usually surprise your opponent into rushing their next shot.

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- Balls that hit the net after being loop, usually still have spin, so cover the ball.
- Edge balls are a sign that your opponent's shot are aimed deep, do the same and force your opponent to back off the table.

I hope these tips help you get back to your A-game. Remember, complaining about what did or didn't happen will never solve any problem or make you a better player. Look at each problem as a challenge and go about solving it in a systematic way that can be used on demand. Happy swinging.