

## Playing Smart – by Robert “Bj” Jacobucci

Table Tennis accommodates many different styles of play. It is difficult to make rules that apply to all styles... and player personalities. There are some essential fundamentals, however, that can be generally applied. These fundamentals are firmly based on common sense and, as we will see, will form the basis of “playing smart”.

### Applying the Mind

Table tennis is a mental game. Most bystanders fail to understand or appreciate the mental processes involved in a typical volley.

They see an orange (or white) ball being hit back and forth over the net. What the casual observer will miss... and what the skilled player knows fully... is precisely how to compensate for the spin and speed of the incoming ball and how to exactly alter the stroke so as to place the ball accurately on the table. And... this mental process must all be calculated in split second timing! It is this mental skill, often more than physical prowess, that allows the top players to excel over the rest.

Skill belongs to the mind. A piano player, no matter how great an athlete, could not play music without having awareness of the scales and chords. Once the mind grasps and understands these fundamentals, then the body will follow.

There is a martial arts saying, “**The body is the faithful servant of the mind.**” Balance is their example. Being able to stand on one foot is a mental skill... not a physical one. The mind is the key ingredient in all that we do. It is the mind that controls our play. It is the mind that we must train!

There are many mental skills. The one that we chose to cover in this discussion can be called “playing smart”. In table tennis, what does it entail?

“Playing Smart” is a mental discipline and is often the primary difference between a won and lost game. What then is involved in adding this most important element to one's game? Let's examine some very key principles that often get overlooked during the excitement of a game.

### Every Point Counts

Most of us pay extra attention during the last few points of a game. All sports have their own version of “crunch time” and table tennis is no different. What is often overlooked, however, is that the 1<sup>st</sup> point counts as much to the final score as the last. While we all get caught up in the glamor of the game winning shot,

## **every point counts... even the early ones!**

The player that plays carefully throughout the game will be rewarded. If we eliminate our careless and unwise decisions early and throughout the game, we will... quietly and without fanfare... more likely carry a solid lead into the games ending.

### **Lost Points**

If we were to examine a typical game, we would see that more points are lost than won. And typically the ratio, at our level of play, would be a surprising 2 to 1! Yes, our missed serve has just canceled our great slam!!

A "won point" would be any slam or shot that could not be returned... thus winning the point *from* our opponent. A "lost point", on the other hand, is any shot that misses the table... **giving the point *to* our opponent!** Each team's score will consist of its own won points and then adding to this the opponent's lost points. We are noting that it is the lost points, often the result of poor judgment, that will most often swing the results of any match!

Winning the point with a slam is the shot we all love to make. We get excited when we hit it... and our fellow players congratulate us on such a great hit! However, it is the many quiet shots that we should/could have made... and missed... that add up to extra points for our opponent (instead of us) and, more often than not, make the critical difference in the game.

Every missed shot is a point *for* our opponent... and perhaps one that our team could have won instead. Who will get this next point? Missed serves... missed service returns... missed easy shots... all add up as points for our opponent. Thus the rule for smart play is: **Don't give any points away!**

Remember there is a potential 2 point swing for every point played. **There is a 2 point difference between whether this particular point gets added to our score column... or theirs!**

If we miss a shot, a 7 – 7 game becomes 7 – 8 where it could have been 8 – 7 had we won the point instead... **the difference between a lost point and a won point is a 2 point difference.** In our example, it is the difference between a 1 point deficit or a 1 point advantage. When we lose a point, we must now win 2 points to be where we could have been had we won the original point!

We are usually fortunate that our opponent most likely suffers from the same bad judgment in shot selection as we do... so that the errors tend to even out... and we can walk away thinking that our great slam at the end was the key difference in the victory!

## Playing the Percentages

Every decision... every shot we hit... has a success rate... a percentage that can be placed as to whether it will hit the table or not. If a particular slam would only have a 40% chance of hitting the table, **it should not be attempted!** It would be poor judgment to take that shot as we are just handing our opponent a 60% chance of winning that point! And, if one were to continue this unwise practice over the course of a game, such a player would only be beating himself. In fact, **giving away points is the primary factor in lost games!**

Aggressive players would love to slam every shot. But if a slam would have less than a 50% chance of hitting the table, taking it would be ill-advised... and we would only be... **beating ourselves with our own bad judgment!** What else then could we do with that shot?

## Developing a "Safe Game"

What do we do with a ball that is too imprudent to slam? Our judgment and shot selection in this regard is probably the most critical skill (even if **not** the most glamorous) that we could develop. Pushes, varying the speed and spin of shots, placing a soft shot where the opponent least expects... are all part of a good safe game... and... skill here can win more (unglamorous) points than a slam! Having a confident safe game can be a tremendous asset to any player.

We often forget that **"hitting the table"** is the Golden Rule of table tennis. No matter how pretty the form or hard the hit... it is all meaningless if the ball misses the table! It is smart to begin here... by hitting the table... and then add... spin, speed, location. If these can be added within the key constraint of **"hitting the table"**, they will be welcome additions to one's game.

A good safe game consists of shots that have at least an 80% chance or better of hitting the table. If we can develop shots that have better than 90%... or even 95%... chance of hitting the table, then we will find ourselves very comfortable in our safe game.

There is now just one more element to be added to our safe game. Our "safe" shots should also be "good" shots.

## The "Good" Shot

During a volley, any shot that presents our opponent with a less than 50% chance for a successful slam is a good return. It is an even better shot if it makes it

difficult for the opponent to hit a good safe shot in return. A player skilled at the safe game will keep his opponent off balance and unable to unleash his aggressive game.

Mixing a short push with a deep one and , particularly in doubles, placing a ball out of reach or at least where our opponent must strike the ball while on the run... all serve to keep our opponent off balance.

If we can also become adept at flick shots... along with our safe game... we can begin to get the feeling that we "own" the top of the table.

The spin, speed, and location of a shot will determine how well our opponent can return the ball. If we can continuously offer balls with a 45% chance or less of a slam, we can easily frustrate a player unprepared to play a safe game, and coax him into whacking a ball with little chance of success.

### **A Whacked Shot**

We will refer to any attempt to slam a ball that has a less than 50% chance of hitting the table as a "whacked shot". A player who continually exercises this misjudgment can be called a "whacker" and will usually find himself on the losing end of the scoreboard... and in doubles... taking his partner with him.

In a singles match, a player could choose to whack at a ball all he wants because it is his game to win or lose as he chooses. In doubles, however, it is a different story. Doubles is a team game. We have a partner. Our choices must be made for the good of the team. To be a whacker in a doubles match is like being a "gunner" in basketball. Sending back a good "safe" shot is akin to passing the ball on to our teammate allowing him the opportunity of perhaps making the point-winning shot.

### **A Slam Is a Point-ENDER**

A slam is meant to conclude a volley. A successful slam wins the point... a missed slam losses the point. **In either case, the attempted slam will stop the volley... and end the point... one way or the other!**

### **Playing for Fun**

There is even more to consider. In a "for fun" doubles match, there are 3 other players that are there to have a good time. Each of them also knows how to slam and would also like the opportunity to make the shot that wins the point. With a whacker in the game, the point never goes past him... and, as a fellow player, I

know that anytime I touch the ball... I will never see it again! The whacker will intervene and end the point before any of the rest of us will ever get another opportunity. And, by game's end, the majority of points will have been decided, one way or the other, by the whacker.

Whacking the ball detracts from the fun and strategy of the game for the other 3 players. For example, if we set up our opponent by pinning him to the one side of the table on our 1<sup>st</sup> shot and know that we will have a winning advantage to the other side on our next shot... this never gets to happen if our partner is a whacker. We will never get the 2<sup>nd</sup> shot! And... most of the time... the whacker doesn't even realize the team's advantage he just threw away by missing an ill-advised shot. I say "he" because more than likely a whacker will be a male. It is a woman's biggest advantage in table tennis that she does not have testosterone ruling her shot selection! Whacking the ball is a male disorder that all males must learn to control and overcome!

The best advice for a whacker is to develop a confident safe game and reserve the slam for a high percentage shot. Besides being part of "smart play", this will allow all the players the rightful opportunity to win the point.

Keep in mind that long volleys are fun for everyone. Short volleys such as a slammed serve, on the other hand, offers little excitement to the group. Tension and excitement build in a long volley. Any point where each player gets to touch the ball multiple times becomes a real prize to the team that can win it!

## **When to Slam**

Certainly any time there is a 60% or better chance of landing a slam, the odds are with us and it would be "smart" to take it. On the other hand, low percentage shots should be played "safe".

Return of service can be a controversial topic. Many aggressive players will try to shine here. However, a good service could and should be a poor shot to be slammed! Yet, many aggressive players will regularly attempt to slam these difficult shots. One wonders how they would feel if they ever got to see their actual "success ratio" on these shots. However, the danger here... as it is with all slams... is that the glory of the successful shot will often override the 2 that are missed! Some serves can be slammed, of course, and the smart player will pick the right one to attack.

With all of that said then, when, in general, is the correct time for a player to attempt a slam? During regular play, any ball that offers us a greater than 50% chance of a successful slam can be considered "slamable". In fact, any ball that is a 60% or better chance... **must be taken!**

Why? Simply because a high ball (when not slammed) will probably only be returned high. Therefore, if we do not take advantage of this opportunity, we will just be passing this "gift" on to our opponent!

Also, if our partner has delivered our opponent a good shot that has caused him to cough up the high ball to us... not slamming it is like a basketball player passing up an open 3-point shot! The team worked hard to get us that shot... **now we must take it!!**

Remember the key strategy in table tennis is to force our opponent into a mistake. Patience here is a prime virtue! A mis-hit high ball is what we are waiting for and must then be capitalized on. When that opportunity presents itself... **we must take it!**

### **A Rule of Thumb**

For most players, the decision process of when to slam is instinctive. However, if it is not working for us and there is confusion over when to slam, these tips can help:

- **Consider yourself to normally be in "safe mode" because worthy opponents will not be routinely sending us slamable balls.**
- **If, however, the approaching ball is clearing the net by a foot or more... we can immediately and safely switch to "slam mode" without hesitation.**

Using this general rule, we can know as soon as the ball passes over the net whether we will be slamming it or not... thus simplifying the decision making process.

For better players, there is even a 3<sup>rd</sup> rule:

- **"Topspin is a gift!" - This wise advice, given to me by a cagey veteran, has certainly stood the test of time! If your opponent topspins the ball to you, it should automatically trigger you into "aggressive mode"!!**

If we allow ourselves to slam all topspins, we can know this as soon as our opponent strikes the ball. This gives us ample warning to switch into aggressive mode.

The above rules can be modified according to one's strategy, style, and skill level. However, the underlying principles are quite sound and worthy of consideration.

## **The Final Piece - Knowing Your Opponent**

A key ingredient to playing smart is to study your fellow players and observe their strengths and weaknesses. Obviously, smart play will attempt to put pressure on an opponent's weaknesses... thus undermining their confidence. Once doubt is introduced, a player's game will quickly deteriorate. In this way, the mental game can often overcome a superior player's prowess.

It could be as simple as keeping the ball to the opponents weaker backhand. A more cagey play, however, might include a "set up" shot. Let's look at an example.

When playing a penholder, it is generally known that their strength is in their forehand and their weakness (if you are lucky!) is in their backhand. So typically players will try to keep balls to the penholder's backhand side. If we observe this strategy, however, we see that we then leave the penholder in excellent position for his next shot as he is positioned where he would like to be to defend the open table with his forehand on the next shot.

An alternative strategy would be to play a safe close shot such as a push to the penholder's far forehand. In doubles, this will then "pin" him to that side of the table as his partner moves in to the center playing area. With the "pin" keeping him where he doesn't want to be, the penholder must now cover the open table on his next shot with his backhand!

**So hitting a good safe shot to a player's far strong side, will set up the next follow-up shot to attack his weakness!**

Finding a player's weakest link... and forcing him to play it... will create doubt and lack of confidence in our opponent. If we can defeat him mentally, the results will quickly show up in the score.

## **Conclusion**

Playing Smart involves using good judgment and making the right choices. This especially requires being completely in the "Now" and giving every point... indeed every hit... our complete attention. Since the mind is what controls our game, being mentally prepared... and mentally present... can be our biggest challenge and greatest advantage. Or, it could be our greatest obstacle if our mind is elsewhere!

Each point can and should be seen as an entire game in and of itself. Just ask yourself... How would I play differently if we were betting \$500 on this next point?! Better yet, how would I play if my very life depended on its outcome?!

With a good safe game we can wait for... and perhaps even instigate... an opponents mistake. That then is the proper time to attack and win the point. Having patience and playing the percentages are the key ingredients to an effective smart game.