

The (Fine) Art of Practice – by Robert “Bj” Jacobucci

We would all like to improve our games. Most feel that this happens as a result of more playing time. While this is true, it is only a slow track to success.

What is the secret then to rapidly bettering our game? Most high level players spend the majority of their time in practice. In fact, most great players claim to practice at least 2 to 4 hours for every 1 hour of game playing!

To those unaccustomed to practice, let's examine its whys and wherefores.

Why Practice

I don't know about you, but when I hit the ball, I always have a spot on the table where I would like the ball to land... my target area. The problems occur when I not only miss my small target... but when I miss it so badly that the ball also misses the entire table! Result: **lost point!!**

So the problem isn't picking the spot... but rather hitting it! The consistency of placing the ball exactly where you are aiming it is usually what separates the average player from the top level players.

How does one then develop this consistency? Practice is best!

And how best to practice? Can't we practice during a game? During a game, if we mishit a ball and would like another shot at it to get it right, it may take minutes before we see that shot again... and by then... it could take us by surprise... and we could very well mishit it the same way we did in the 1st place!

During a good practice session, however, you could have your practice buddy present you with the type of shots you need to work on. Then with successful repetitions, we can instill in mind and muscle the understanding and feel of the properly hit ball.

Finding/having a good practice buddy is essential to having productive practices. It is so important that every serious player should make it a primary objective to find a compatible practice buddy.

Like finding a good relationship, the best way to find a good practice buddy... is to first **be** a good practice buddy! Then you will have no shortage of people who would want to practice with you.

Let's examine then what goes into being...

The Good Practice Buddy -

1. is there to help his partner... not compete with him.
2. Is there to keep the volley going. The longer the volley... the more practice both partners get.
3. Hits the ball to his partner... where both can return and practice their shots... and is not intent on "winning the imaginary point" by slamming to out of reach parts of the table. This only serves to end the volley... and frustrate the "loser" who then has to chase the ball down to get it back into play. It is no big deal to slam a ball past a person who is trying to hit a ball to you!
4. Will ask his or her partner what they would like to work on. A good relationship is one where practice time is split between the desires of both partners. If one partner needs to practice a "one way" exercise such as killing high lobs, then good practice buddies switch roles after 10 minutes and allow the original setup person to have his turn slamming the ball.
5. is one who is close to us in skill levels. This way both partners could benefit from the shots practiced during the practice session.
6. is one with a similar style. 2 loopers will be better suited as practice buddies than a looper and a close to the table player. Any 2 styles can learn to practice together if their hearts and minds are in the right place... but some styles fit together better than others.
7. Is one where **both** players go away enriched.
8. Is one who would like to practice the same strokes that you would like to practice.
9. Is one who can share and enjoy your progress and not be resentful of your successes.
10. Is one who likes to practice! Many potentially good practice buddies would rather play in a game than practice. Unless you are able to put aside some scheduled practice time with such an individual, you will find it impossible to "hook up".

What can I practice? Some suggestions:

- 1) Pushing is one of my favorites. Both partners can push to any part of the table they like... with the green light to slam any ball that wanders too high. Push deep to both corners and also short. Feel as though you could land your push anywhere on the table and in the most difficult places to be returned. And be ready to slam any push that is less than perfect!
- 2) Forehand and backhand flicks
- 3) Forehand loops and drives
- 4) Backhand loops and drives
- 5) Chops & drives – one chops while the other drives

6) Service and return of service – one practices serves while the other practices returning them.

These are just some suggestions that can keep you busy for quite a while, but be as creative as you like in developing your own exercises.

All in all, we should leave a good practice session with a strong feeling of accomplishment.

One caution. Unless our practice partner is competent enough to correct our mistakes, it is best to intersperse practice with an occasional lesson to remain certain that we are practicing proper strokes... and have not fallen into a bad habit of mishitting balls. Then we are only reinforcing the bad habit... and practicing a mistake!

The secret of successful practice is to first learn the proper strokes... and then practice them until we can deliver the ball to our chosen spot... on demand!

Hitting what we are aiming at is the primary objective of practice and the cornerstone of a sound game.