

## Helping Young Kids Learn to Play with Correct Technique, Balance, and Power

By Sean O'Neill

"I always knew you would be a strong player. I could tell from the way you played against Scott as a kid," USATT Hall of Famer and TV commentator Jack Howard shared with me recently. Many veteran Topics readers might remember the numerous junior battles I had with my arch-rival Scott Butler, but most don't realize that, at one point in our early careers, Scott led the series, 12–3.

However, if you watched how our contrasting games develop, it really made sense. Scott had an outstanding table game and really controlled the angles; while I tended to be forehand-topspin oriented and went for big shots. Scott's rating was substantially higher than mine when we were 12, as he had a much more balanced game. Scott's backhand, which he learned from his father Richard, was rock solid, whereas my first coaches focused on my forehand loop and footwork.

As we both left the cadets, major changes took place in our games: my loops began to have some force behind them, and Scott's angles didn't seem so extreme. The series then changed to my favor as my game was now a bit more mature, and Scott needed to adjust his game to play a more offensive style of play. Ten years after our first match against one another, our games fully matured, and together we won a silver medal in the team event at the 1987 Pan American Games.

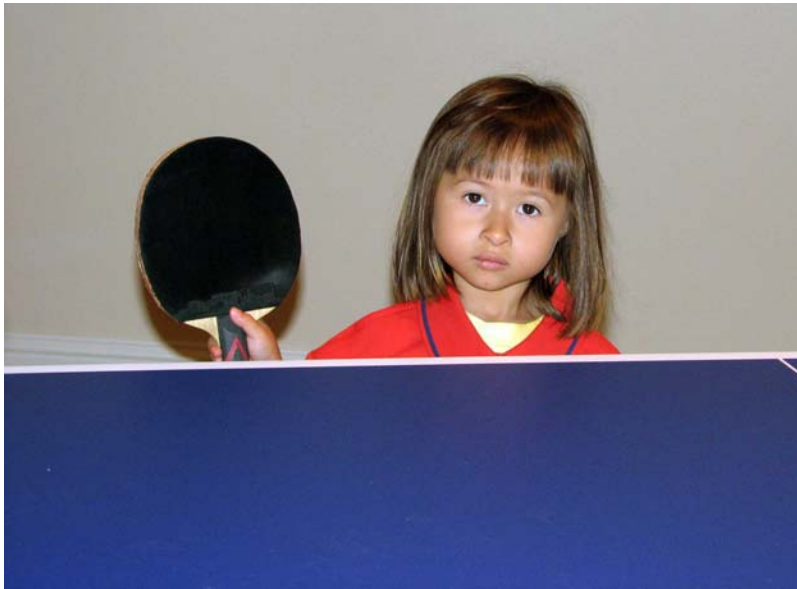
For most adroit coaches, this is really nothing new. All cadet players go through an adjustment period where they must alter their strokes as they grow and get taller. The challenge has always been when to teach strokes that don't really work today, but will in the future. I believe this question has a new answer, but first let me change sports for a minute to illustrate why our sport has been behind the times.

In elementary school, you probably played on an eight-foot basketball hoop that allowed you to shoot the ball, instead of the standard ten-footer, which would require you to throw the ball. If you played PeeWee football, the label on the ball said "Wilson K2", which size made it easier to throw a spiral since you could wrap your small hands around the ball. From baseball with small fields to volleyball with lower nets, it seems like the rest of the sports world figured out what it has taken us forever to learn: make the equipment and field fit the age of the athlete.

This past week, the Portland Table Tennis Club delivered a new Double Happiness Rising Star (Model T2125) to my home, courtesy of Li-Ning USA. This table can be lowered from the standard 76 cm height to 66 cm. You might think that 10 cm (or 4 inches) really isn't that much, but tell that to a mini-cadet that wants to hit like the Pros, but can't since the table is up at chest level. Double Happiness isn't the only manufacturer that understands our future stars often start out in elementary school. A quick Google search showed me that Cornilleau, DONIC, Double Fish, JOOLA, and Stag all make adjustable tables. Some have two settings and others have three to take it down to 60 cm. Hooray!

I firmly believe that if you are a coach or club that is serious about junior development, then you must encourage the smaller kids to play on a table that fits their needs, so that they can learn proper strokes,

balance, and power. While Scott and I had high ratings for our age, they would have been much higher if we could have learned on tables that fit our height. I am sure Scott's forehand loop would have developed faster, and I know I could have stayed closer to the table knowing that my loop drives would have used more body and less arm. So here is the challenge to USA Table Tennis: let's add a permanent event to our Junior Nationals for kids under the age of nine to be played on a table that will allow them to play with adult technique. And a challenge to all families and coaches with students under nine years: invest in tables that will grow with your kids so that they can truly enjoy the sport.



Picture 1. Four-year old Kaitlyn O'Neill sporting an adult-size racket on an adult-size table (76 cm high). No strokes are possible, only blocking the ball.



Picture 2. Kaitlyn with junior paddle on adjusted table (66 cm high). Ready for action!



Picture 3. Eight-year old Jeffrey Zhang of Willamette Table Tennis Club in Salem, Oregon, striking a forehand on an adult-size table (76 cm high). Notice the straight legs and high elbow position. This will cause the shot to use the triceps muscle more and very little weight transfer.



Picture 4. Jeffrey on an adjusted table (66 cm high). Notice the bent knees, natural elbow position, and waist rotation. This will allow for more of a backswing, lower contact point, and better follow through. This table height will utilize the correct use of the biceps muscles and weight transfer.

Adjustable tables and their heights:

Cornilleau Pro Evolutive: 76, 68, 60 cm

DHS Rising Star (T2125): 76, 66 cm

DONIC Triflex: 76, 70, 64 cm

Double Fish 01-401 & 402: 76, 68 cm

JOOLA Variant: 76, 70, 64 cm

Stag CTTA Adjustable Height: 76, 71, 66 cm