

Playing in Tournaments

You've been practicing hard and have mastered much of what's in this book. You've beaten everyone on the block and knocked off some of the best players at your recreation center/club/basement. It's time to show the world. It's time to enter a tournament.

FINDING AND ENTERING TOURNAMENTS

First you have to find one to enter. If you've read the first section, you know about the USATT. If you've joined, you should be getting a copy of its official magazine, *USA Table Tennis Magazine*. In it you'll find a tournament schedule for the entire country. If you don't have one, call or write USATT headquarters. The address is in the "USA Table Tennis Magazine" section.

Some of the tournaments listed are small; some are large. You can tell by the prize money. Big ones have their prize money listed in the schedule, with the largest tournaments having the most. Smaller ones usually have prize money but the amount won't be listed. Some of the largest will have their entry blanks published in *USA Table Tennis Magazine*.

Find a tournament to your liking. If it's a good distance away you might have to fly or take a bus or train. If you need a hotel, one is usually listed on the entry blank. For your first tournament you might want to find a smaller one that isn't too far away. Or you might want to be dazzled by the best at one of the bigger ones. It's your choice.

There should be a tournament director listed for each tournament, with an address and phone number. Contact the director and he or she will send you an entry blank. If you go to that tournament, you'll be put on the mailing list; in the future you'll receive an entry blank automatically in the mail.

Look over the entry blank. Note the many events. It may look confusing but it's really quite simple. There should be a men's singles or open singles and a women's singles. There will probably be a few doubles events, such as open, men's, women's, or mixed. These should be quite clear. You'll find the best players playing in these events. There will probably also be some junior events.

The events you may not be familiar with will be the rating events that make up the majority of events. If there were only events such as open singles, all but the top players would be eliminated in the early rounds and beginners would be out in one match. That wouldn't be much fun.

Instead, all players who play in sanctioned USATT tournaments are rated based on their results. This rating can range all the way from about 200 on up to the best in the U.S., which is usually somewhere around 2700. All players receive ratings after their first tournament, based on their results. The records of the games and matches (won or lost) as well as the point scores count for your initial rating, so fight for every point! After your initial rating, all that counts is whether you won or lost the match. The ratings are calculated by computer. The best players in the world often come to the U.S. and get ratings as well, some of which go over 2800. For comparison, a typical beginner takes a few months to reach 1000, if he or she practices.

If you're unrated and not sure which event to enter, contact the tournament director. You can enter as many events as you're eligible for unless the entry blank specifically says you can't. If you're in good shape and can afford it, enter a lot of events. Why not?

Another event that needs explaining is handicap singles. In it, you play one game to 51 points, spotting points according to your rating. In this event, anybody can beat anybody. If you're unrated, some tournament directors won't let you play. Others will watch you play in other events and estimate a rating.

Fill out the entry blank, write a check for the amount asked for and send it off. (Note that there will be a rating fee; it is mandatory. It is used to pay the rating chairman who works out your rating on a computer.) You're now as good as entered. It's time to get ready for the tournament.

PROPER REST AND NUTRITION FOR A TOURNAMENT

Everyone prepares for a tournament differently. Some rest the day before; others practice for hours. Do what's best for you. If you're in good shape, you should get at least some practice the day before. If not, you might want to rest. A tournament can be pretty tiring and you'll want to be well rested.

You should plan out your meals in advance. Most tournaments have food available but the menu isn't very good for an athletic event. Hot dogs are still standard, unfortunately. It's best to bring your own food or plan to eat out somewhere if you have transportation.

The night before a tournament it's best to eat foods high in carbohydrates. This will give you more energy the next day (it fills the muscles with muscle glycogen, which is what muscles use for energy) and is healthier as well. Of course, if you're playing strictly for fun, you shouldn't worry so much about your diet the day before.

On the morning of the tournament, eat early and well. You don't want to feel weak from hunger during the tournament. But again, eat mostly carbohydrates. Fat and protein stay in the stomach longer and will slow you down. (During digestion, blood is being used by the stomach. This reduces your energy level.)

Plan out your other meals. You don't want to eat a big (or medium) meal just before a match or you won't be at your best. If there are no long breaks, eat small snacks throughout the day. Fruit is good for this.

You'll need to drink lots of fluids during the tournament so as not to get dehydrated. Plain water is perfect but lightly sweetened drinks are also good. Sports drinks such as Gatorade are okay. Heavily sugared drinks will make you feel tired and should be avoided. (When your body finds extra sugar in the bloodstream, it pumps insulin into it. This removes both the extra sugar and the sugar that was there before. This leads to low sugar levels in the bloodstream and makes you tired.) Most tournaments have water fountains and soft drink machines. If you want something else, bring it with you.

WHAT TO DO AT THE TOURNAMENT SITE

Get to the tournament site early so you can practice. The later you get there, the more likely all the tables will be in use, and you'll have to wait for one to open up.

As soon as you arrive, register at the control desk. If it's your first tournament and you have questions, this is the time to ask.

Before warming up, do some easy jogging to get your muscles loose. (Many players jog before they eat breakfast, giving their muscles a head start.) Then stretch. (See "Warming Up For Success.") You won't be at your best unless your muscles are loose. Finish with some shadow-stroking.

Now warm up at the table. If all the tables are being used, you might have to double up. This means that four people warm up on one table. Two players hit crosscourt from the forehand side, the other two hit crosscourt from the backhand side. You can practice forehands or backhands from either side.

Practice all the shots you'll be using, including your footwork and serves. After the shots are feeling strong, play practice points or even a practice match. Don't do just rote drills until it's match time, or you won't be ready—play out some points.

If it's your first tournament, be ready for first-round jitters. If it's your 500th tournament, be ready for first-round jitters. In other words, they never go away. Get used to them. However, some handle them better than others. Just stay calm and remember that a million years from now the drawsheets will probably have been destroyed and nobody will remember what happened to you in the upcoming battle. Relax! Have fun!

Be ready when your name is called. You'll be given a match card, pencil, and ball and sent out to the table. You might even have an umpire for the match. Bring whatever you'll need for the match with you—towel, drink (for between games), maybe an extra racket, just in case. Shake hands with your opponent (both before and after the match, win or lose). Then go to the table and beat the living daylight out of his or her game.