

Step 15 The Physical and Mental Game

Many people think of table tennis as a very passive recreational sport requiring little more than the ability to keep the ball in play. To a certain degree, they're right. That's all a beginner does. But once you get into real table tennis, you discover it is something else. The better you get, the more physically demanding it becomes. At the highest levels, it's on a par with tennis in its physical demands, and the best players may spend several hours a day on physical training. If you are interested in developing your skills even further, this step will help you with physical and mental conditioning.

WHY IS PHYSICAL CONDITIONING FOR TABLE TENNIS IMPORTANT?

If your opponent is in better physical condition, he or she has an advantage. A faster opponent gets to more balls and returns them more quickly. An opponent with more power is able to hit the ball past you easier than you can against your opponent. An opponent with more stamina plays better toward the end of a long match and is able to practice longer and harder. An opponent with more flexibility is able to adjust to different shots better than you will and will be less likely to sustain injuries. Is physical condition important to table tennis? YES!

Speed

To develop speed, jump rope (fast) and do multiple short sprints. Shadow practice your strokes and footwork. You can do this with or without a racket. Do it as fast as or faster than you would in a match. All top players shadow practice some. It not only builds up speed but allows you to practice movements without having to worry about the ball. (Perfect the move first and then learn to do it with the ball.)

Power

To develop power, lift weights or do calisthenics. But do high repetitions and low weight in whatever you do. You don't want to build big bulky muscles—you want fast and quick ones. Push-ups and sit-ups and similar exercises are ideal, as are nearly anything that builds up the legs and

stomach. Few people realize how important the leg and stomach muscles are for table tennis. They're the support and pivot points for your body while you play. The forearm muscles of your playing arm are also of great importance. Keep in mind, however, that at the higher levels, you'll use just about every major muscle group, so you should develop them all.

Many top players use a weighted racket for training. It should weigh about three times what a normal racket weighs. Use it for shadow-stroking, but don't use it in a drill with a ball. You might hurt yourself, and it will throw off your timing when you go back to your normal racket.

Stamina

Stamina is important, both for those long 3 out of 5 matches after you've already played 10 matches in one day, and for practice. Who will improve faster, the player who can do a footwork drill at full speed for 10 minutes or the one who has to stop after 5? The importance of stamina is obvious. Long-distance running is the most common way to build this up, but an even better alternative is cycling, either on the road or on a stationary bike. This builds up stamina and leg strength. There are, of course, many other options. A game of full-court basketball played regularly (as the table tennis players at the Olympic Training Center do) is perfect, as are half a dozen other sports. Whoever said training had to be boring?

Flexibility

Flexibility is another aspect of fitness that's important to table tennis. The more flexible you are the easier it will be to make shots when you're slightly out of position and have to improvise. It also keeps you looser when you play, and perhaps most important, keeps you from getting injured. Before play, you should always stretch. (See "Warming Up For Success.") It's best to do some easy jogging first to get the muscles warmed up. Do this before you stretch. Make sure to cover each muscle group you'll use. After play, you might also want to stretch. You'll be looser then, and your muscles will stretch more. This will increase your general flexibility more than if you stretch when

you are less loose. (Of course, if you run or play full-court basketball, afterward would also be a good time to stretch.)

WHY IS THE MENTAL GAME IMPORTANT?

Up until now, you've mostly learned the physical aspect of table tennis. You've learned a lot of strategy as well, which is one aspect of the mental game, but it goes far beyond that.

The mental game can be broken up into four parts:

- Tactical
- Mental rehearsal
- Arousal level
- Drive and desire

The tactical aspect has already been covered in Step 14, but not much has been said about the rest. Yet many consider these the most important parts. At the lower levels, the difference between two players is mostly physical, but at the higher levels, it's mostly mental.

There are many reasons why the mental game is significant. Mental rehearsal has been shown to help players improve. Players who cannot reach the proper arousal level (or get down to it if they're overaroused!) cannot be at their best. And those with the most drive and desire—well, they're the ones who end up with gold medals draped around their necks.

Let's look at the various aspects of the mental game.

Mental Rehearsal

Mental rehearsal is the act of imagining an event before doing it. For example, a bowler imagines throwing a strike, then tries to do it. A table tennis player can imagine that perfect smash on the sidelines over and over, and then when the shot comes up in the match, boom! The player is ready for it.

The mind often cannot tell the difference between what is actually happening and what is being imagined. So imagining a perfect shot is almost as good practice as doing that perfect shot! And no matter how uncoordinated you are, you can at least imagine yourself doing the shot.

Of course, mental rehearsal is not perfect. If you imagine yourself doing a 10-foot high jump, you still wouldn't be able to perform it. But if you mentally rehearse things that you can physically do, you may find yourself doing them better and

better. Imagining yourself making world champion-level shots may not make you the world champion, but it definitely will improve your game significantly.

There are two types of mental rehearsal. One is to simply imagine yourself doing something that is new for you, but that you've seen someone else do. The other is to imagine yourself doing something that you've already done well in the past, with the idea of doing it again.

When learning something new, or perfecting something you can already do, just close your eyes and imagine yourself doing it. You can do this anywhere, and you'll find yourself learning the new technique much more quickly.

When you're practicing or in a match, do the same. This time the object is to do something you can already do. For example, when serving, imagine the serve, or your follow-up shot. Picture it in your mind, then do it.

When doing mental rehearsal, you can either imagine yourself doing the perfect shot or actually remember a shot that you did in the past and use it as a model. Whenever you do something that you want to be able to do more often, remember what it felt like (using all the senses, if possible—especially sight, sound, and feel) and keep thinking about it. The next time that shot comes up, you'll probably do it just like you remembered.

Arousal Level

Different players have different ideal arousal levels. To play your best, you need to find the most appropriate arousal level for you and learn to reach that level during a match. In general, it is important to maintain a positive level of enthusiasm and energy to help direct your thoughts on the game. Once you have established what works for you, you will be able to concentrate better and ultimately play better.

Some players get nervous in a match. They're overly aroused and cannot play their best. This type of person needs to learn to calm down. Try breathing deeply; picture something relaxing (a field of grass or a blue sky are often used as examples). Try not to take the game so seriously!

Other players stay calm and collected throughout the match. In fact, they're so calm that they don't react well to shots, seeming almost lackadaisical. They want to play harder but can't. This type of player needs to get aroused, to get "psyched." The best way to do this is to talk to yourself. Tell yourself to fight, to play hard—whatever works! Be positive—say, "I can do this!" or "I'm going to

attack!" As a last resort, you can increase your arousal level by telling yourself that the match is for the world championships.

Drive and Desire

Here I can't help you. The more drive and desire you have, the further you'll go. However, if you have too much of it, the game ceases to be fun.

Eventually you burn out and quit. It would be better to relax and enjoy the game.

However much you want to put into the game is up to you. Regardless of physical talent (or lack of it), enough drive and desire will at least make you a pretty good player. With determination, practice, and patience you not only can enjoy the game, but learn to play at a high level.

Physical Drills

If you are really serious about improving your table tennis, or if you just want to see how the top players train, go through the following exercises. They are general exercises that will not only help you in table tennis, but in most other sports as well. They will also help you get into great physical shape!

1. 50-Yard Sprints (Speed and Stamina)

Sprint 50 yards as fast as you can, then jog or walk back briskly, and repeat. Always warm up the muscles and stretch before sprinting.

Success Goal = 5 to 8 sprints, three times a week

Your Score = (#) _____ sprints a week

2. Jumping Rope, Fast (Speed)

Make sure to use a ball-bearing rope or equivalent, if possible. If you aren't familiar with jumping rope, then begin slowly until you can do the entire 20 to 60 seconds without missing.

Success Goal = 20 to 60 seconds fast, three repetitions with a 30 to 60 second break between each repetition, 3 times a week (total of 180 to 540 seconds a week)

Your Score = (#) _____ seconds jumping rope fast a week

3. *Weighted Racket (Strength)*

With a weighted racket, practice all your shots away from the table. Shadow practice your shots; don't use a ball.

Success Goal = Shadow-stroke 100 forehands, 100 backhands, and 50 of each other stroke, three times a week

Your Score = (#) _____ strokes a week with weighted racket

4. *Calisthenics (Strength and Stamina)*

Push-ups, sit-ups, and step-ups are standard calisthenics, but feel free to add your own. When doing sit-ups, do them with slightly bent knees to take pressure off your back. These calisthenics are also good for stamina, especially muscle stamina (as opposed to cardiovascular stamina). To do a step-up, you step up onto a chair or other platform, then step down. Don't do this if you have bad knees.

Success Goal = 20 push-ups, 30 sit-ups, and 30 step-ups (or more), three times a week

Your Score =

(#) _____ sit-ups a week

(#) _____ push-ups a week

(#) _____ step-ups a week

5. *Weight Training (Strength)*

See a weight instructor to set up a good workout, or get a good manual, such as *Weight Training: Steps to Success*. Concentrate on the legs, waist, and arms, but strengthen the rest of the muscles as well. Nearly all muscles are used at some point in table tennis. It is strongly recommended that you have a weight instructor help set up your program and show you proper lifting techniques to avoid injuries.

Success Goal = Follow weight instructor's weekly program

Your Score = (#) _____ weeks following instructor's program

6. *Running or Cycling (Stamina)*

All top players run or cycle to build stamina in their legs. Without good stamina, you won't be able to move properly throughout an entire table tennis match. If you lack in agility, your opponent will have an advantage. Runners should use running shoes and avoid running on hard surfaces (which can lead to shin splints).

Success Goal = 1 to 3 miles running or 3 to 10 miles cycling, three times a week

Your Score = (#) _____ stamina training drills a week

7. *Jumping Rope, Slowly (Stamina)*

This is probably the best stamina exercise for table tennis. It builds up the legs and arms, as well as cardiovascular fitness. Use a ball-bearing rope or equivalent and begin slowly. Your first few sessions of 1 to 5 minutes should be performed very slowly. Remember, the idea is to increase your aerobic stamina, not wear yourself out. As you become more accustomed to the exercise, gradually increase the duration that you jump. You can increase the speed if you want.

Success Goal = 1 to 5 minutes, three repetitions, three times a week, 9 to 45 minutes a week

Your Score = (#) _____ minutes jumping rope a week

8. *Flexibility*

See "Warming Up For Success" section, pages 7 to 9.

Success Goal = Follow warm-up routine before each time you play, at least three times a week

Your Score = (#) _____ stretching routines a week

Mental Drills

9. *Mental Rehearsal*

Think about each shot you want to learn or improve. Visualize doing each one successfully. Then go back to the step that explains the shot you wanted to improve. Choose a drill and do it. You are successful if you are able to do the shot that you have visualized.

Success Goal = Visualize yourself doing at least 10 different strokes, serves, or footwork movements and see how many you do correctly

Your Score =

(#) _____ visualizations

(#) _____ shots performed correctly

10. *Relaxation, Psyching*

Decide whether you're the type who needs to calm down when you play or needs to get psyched up. Before you play, concentrate on reaching the correct frame of mind. For example, if you are so excited that you begin to play sloppy shots, your arousal level is probably too high. Concentrate on your game and pay attention to technique. Also, try to relax when you play and enjoy yourself!

Success Goal = Be in the proper frame of mind during your next 10 practice sessions

Your Score = (#) _____ times in proper frame of mind during next 10 practice sessions