Table Tennis Today

It’s the most popular racket sport in the world and the second most popular participation sport. A sport with over 20 million active participants in the U.S. alone and, as of 1988, an Olympic sport. Ask most people to identify this sport and they’d immediately name that other well-known racket game. They’d be wrong.

You know what sport we are talking about or you wouldn’t be looking at this book. Table tennis—never call it Ping-Pong except to other players!—has probably gotten the worst press of any comparable sport in the world. Many people think of it as, yes, Ping-Pong, a game where a small white ball is patted back and forth until someone misses. You and I know better. So do the many millions throughout the world who play the game competitively. Even in the U.S., more people play table tennis each year than soccer or baseball.

At the beginning level about all anybody does is just pat the ball back and forth. This is where its image as an easy sport probably came from, as it takes practice to learn to keep the ball going at a fast pace. But once learned it’s a skill for life.

Table tennis is biggest in Asia and Europe. In the U.S. it is getting bigger very quickly. USA Table Tennis (USATT) has over 7,000 ranked tournament players and over 300 sanctioned clubs nationwide. Its Colorado Springs headquarters is staffed by seven full-time workers involved in everything from the running and sanctioning of tournaments and coaching camps to fund-raisning and public relations. There are even two full-time coaches for the U.S. National and Olympic teams, as well as a number of other resident table tennis athletes.

Among other benefits, membership in the USATT entitles you to play in any of the over 250 sanctioned tournaments in the U.S. each year. The largest and most prestigious is the U.S. Open held every June, with about 800 participants, including representatives from over 40 countries. There are also many other big tournaments, such as the U.S. Team Championships each November (with as many as 800 players) and the U.S. National Championships held each December. Membership also qualifies you to represent the U.S. in international play sponsored by the International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF), including the U.S. Open—if you’re good enough. If you’re not—well, that’s why I wrote this book!

You’ll also get the USATT’s magazine, USA Table Tennis Magazine, which I edit. In it you’ll find articles on everything from coaching to profiles, tournament writeups, results, and schedules. You’ll also find the USATT’s rating list, a computerized ranking of all active tournament players. After you have played in a tournament, you too will be listed.

How do you join the USATT? Contact the USATT office for a general information packet and membership information. It will include full information on clubs, tournaments, and how to get involved in the fastest growing and most played racket sport (more so than tennis) in America! Here’s the address:

USATT
One Olympic Plaza
Colorado Springs, CO 80909
(719) 866-4583
usatt@usatt.org and www.usatt.org

Before you leap into the world of table tennis you should know a few things about practicing. Although there are drills at the end of each section, they are directed toward beginning and intermediate players. You might find yourself practicing in a different environment.

METHODS OF PRACTICE

There are five methods of practicing table tennis, all of which have their advantages and disadvantages. You can choose the methods that best suit you.

• Practicing with another player. This will probably be your most common practice method, and it is usually the simplest. You and your partner can take turns choosing drills. It is assumed throughout this book that you have a practice partner.

• Practicing with a coach. This is probably the best way to practice, as you’ll be able to concentrate on your weak points instead of taking turns with an opponent, and because you’ll be getting coached at the same time. The disadvantage is that you have to find and possibly pay for a coach.

• Practicing alone. You can shadow-stroke the various shots and techniques without a ball. You can also get a bucket of balls and practice serves.

• Multiball. This is a method of practice for two players where one player practices while the other feeds. You’ll need a bucket of balls. The feeder stands to the side of the table and picks up and hits the balls to you one at a time in whatever speed, spin, and direction needed for you. This is an excellent way to learn shots,
but it has the disadvantage that only one player can practice at a time. This method is often used by coaches, who do the feeding.

- **Robots.** Owning a table robot is almost as good as having a person feed you multiball full time. Robots can be set for any speed, spin, or direction that you may wish. They can be expensive, but owning one gives you a tireless practice partner who never misses. Contact the USATT for information on getting one.

To fully enjoy the sport of table tennis, you should know something about the sport itself, its history and rules.

### A SHORT HISTORY OF TABLE TENNIS

Table tennis is believed to have started out in the 1880s in England. It began as a parlor game and around the turn of the century swept England and the U.S. in a craze that soon died down.

It became popular again in the 1920s, and clubs were formed all over the world. The original name, Ping-Pong, was a copyrighted trademark of Parker Brothers, so the name was changed to table tennis. The International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF) was formed in 1926. The United States Table Tennis Association was formed in 1933.

As a parlor game the sport was often played with cork balls and vellum rackets. (A vellum racket had a type of rubber stretched on a twisted stick.) In the 1920s, wooden rackets covered with rubber “pips” were first used. These were the first hard rubber rackets, and they were the most popular type used until the 1950s.

During that time two playing styles dominated: hitters and choppers. Hitters basically hit everything while choppers would back up 10 or even 20 feet, returning everything with backspin. A player’s attack with hard rubber was severely limited and so, more and more, choppers dominated. This became a problem whenever two choppers played each other. Both would often just push the ball back and forth for hours, waiting for the other to attack and make an error. This was stopped by the advent of the expedite rule. The rule helps players finish a game lasting longer than 15 minutes. From the time expedite is called, players alternate serves, and whoever serves must win the point within 13 shots, including the serve. Under expedite, and umpire counts the shots aloud and awards the point to the receiver if he or she returns 13 consecutive shots. This forces the server to play aggressively, while also ending long, boring rallies.

In 1952 a relatively unknown Japanese player named Hiroje Satoh showed up at the World Championships with a strange new type of racket. It was a wooden blade covered by a thick sheet of sponge. He easily won the tournament, and table tennis hasn’t been the same since.

Over the next 10 years nearly all the top players switched to sponge coverings. Two types were developed: inverted and pips-out. The inverted type enabled players to put far more spin than was possible before, and both types made attacking and counterattacking far easier. The U.S., which was a table tennis power up until this time (the top seed at the 1952 World Championships was Marty Reisman of the U.S.) was slow to make the change, and by the 1960s was near the bottom of the world rankings.

In the early 1960s, players began to perfect sponge play. First they developed the loop shot (a heavy topspin shot), and soon looping became the most popular style. Spin serves were developed, as was the lob (a high, defensive return of a smash), the main weapon of 1967 World Champion Nobuhiko Hasegawa of Japan.

Japan dominated the game during the 1950s, mostly because its players were all using sponge. They also introduced the penhold grip, which gave them dominating forehands. China, at first using only the penhold grip but later the shakehands grip as well, began to dominate at the start of the 1960s. They dominated the game almost continuously until the 1989 World Championships where Sweden pulled off the upset of the decade, beating China 5-0 for the team championship. Both Men’s Singles Finalists were Swedish, with Jan-Ove Waldner defeating Jorgen Persson three games to two. Sweden repeated at the next World Championships in 1991, this time beating Yugoslavia in the final. Waldner and Persson repeated as finalists, but this time Persson won, three games to zero. China dropped to seventh, but most tournament results show that they are back to being at least the second best in the world.

China staged a comeback in the mid-1990s, with most (but not all) of their players playing shakehands with inverted, like the Europeans. From 1995 on, they mostly dominated the sport. On the women’s side they almost never lost, with stars such as Deng Yaping, Wang Nan, and Zhang Yining. On the men’s side, they also dominated, with stars such as Kong Linghui, Liu Guoliang, Wang Liqin, and Ma Lin. However, Sweden won the 2000 Men’s Team Championships; Austria’s Werner Schlager won Men’s Singles at the 2003 World Championships; and South Korea’s Ryu Seung Min won the gold medal for Men’s Singles at the 2004 Olympics.

In the early 2000s, the game was changed by three major rule changes: the ball was increased in size...
from 38mm to 40mm to slow down the sport (rallies were getting too short); games were changed from 21 points to 11 points, usually best three of five or best four of seven; and hidden serves (where the server hides contact on the serve with the arm of body so the receiver can't read the spin) were made illegal.

THE RULES
There are a number of misunderstandings and misconceptions about the rules of table tennis. The following are important points that should be noted. You might even want to make a copy of these rules and post them on the wall!

Scoring
- A player scores a point when an opponent fails to make a legal return. This includes hitting the ball off the end or side of the table, hitting into the net, or failing to make a good serve.
- A game is to 11 points.
- A game must be won by 2 points.
- A match is usually best three out of five games, or best four out of seven games.
- Serves are alternated every 2 points, except at deuce (10-10) when they are alternated every point.
- The game does not end at 7-0 or at any other score except 11 or deuce.

Serving
- The ball must be held in an uncupped hand, with the thumb free, fingers together.
- The ball must be tossed up at least 6 inches. The net is 6 inches high and can be used for comparison.
- The ball must be struck while it is dropping.
- Contact must be above the table level and behind the endline or its imaginary extension.
- Let serves (serves that nick the net but hit the other side of the table) are done over. You serve any number of let serves without losing a point.
- The ball must hit both sides of the table on a serve.

Rallying
- If you volley the ball (hit it before it bounces on your side of the table) you lose the point.
- The rally continues until someone fails to return the ball.
- If you move the table or touch it with your nonplaying hand, you lose the point.
- To start a game, one player hides the ball in one hand under the table and the other tries to guess what hand it is in. Winner gets the choice of serving or receiving first, or of which side to start on. You can also flip a coin.