

## Keeping an Eye on your Opponents

I'm going to discuss a topic that is important to any serious table tennis player - how to keep an eye on your opponent. I'll be examining in detail just what areas of his game you should be trying to find out about to get you ready for the big match.

### What Are You Looking for?

When studying your opponent, what are you trying to do? The main aim should be to gather as much useful information as possible about him, so that you can come up with a tactical plan (or plans) to use against him in your upcoming match, and which will give you the best possible chance of winning so here is a comprehensive list of things that you should be taking note of to help you make your plans as good as possible:

### Patterns

What are his favourite patterns? This includes:

- What are his **best serve and follow up** routines?
- A short no-spin serve to the forehand followed up with a third ball kill of his opponents flick?
- A double-bounce sidespin-backspin serve to the playing elbow followed up by a heavy spin loop to the side-lines, and a fifth ball kill?
- How does he **return service**?
- Short and tight? Push long then counterattack?
- Loop anything in sight? Forehand or backhand?
- How does he shut down his opponent's attacks and take the initiative?
- What ratio of flicks to pushes does he use on short serves?

### •Rallying - what is he comfortable doing?

- Does he like loop to loop rallies from a distance?
- Does he stay close and block?
- Does he run around the backhand to hit his forehand?
- Is he equally strong from both wings?
- Is there anything that he obviously doesn't like?

### •Favourite shots - does he has any?

- Does he have a point-winner that he uses often (and is it really as good as he thinks it is)?
- Does he try to use it too often - if he does you may be able to tempt him to use it at the wrong time.
- And conversely, any shots that he is really bad at?
- Could you force him to play them during a match?
- How?

### •Best shot - what is his best shot in your opinion?

- Does he use it as much as he should? Try not to give him the opportunity to use it too much.

### •Tactics - is he willing to change tactics and play a different game if that is what is necessary to win?

•Or does he stay with his own style and tactics regardless of the situation? This is handy to know, because if he never changes, once you can find a winning set of tactics they should work well for a long time.

•**Pace** - does he favour a fast or slow pace between points?

•Or does he play fast when on top and slow the match down when losing? Be aware of the speed he likes to play, and try to play at your speed instead.

•Watch he plays, and see whether you can guess which serves he will make.

•Which return of serves he will use and what follow-ups.

•**Visualize** that you are facing him at the time - is he doing what you would expect from what you know of his game? If not, why not?

## **Pressure**

•What serves or service returns does he use when the match is close (ie at 9-9 in the seventh)?

•What patterns does he favour under pressure?

•Does he get more aggressive, play safer, or seem unaffected by the score?

•Does he make more mistakes or play better under pressure?

If he plays worse, make sure that you keep him aware of your desire to win and let him know you are fighting hard during the whole match - it might just make him tighten up. Also, if you can keep in touch with him during the match, you should have an advantage due to the pressure he will be feeling.

If he plays better, don't show too much outward intensity - you could end up lifting his game - play hard but keep it under the surface. Don't give him an excuse to fire up.

## **Mistakes**

•Can you see any pattern to his mistakes? If so, can you identify the cause? If you are able to work out what is causing his mistake you can attempt to repeat the cause yourself.

For example, if you notice that your future opponent consistently misses his forehand flick because he tries to hit it with too much power, you could serve often to the forehand with heavy backspin/sidespin and occasional pure sidespin, and leave an opening in your forehand side, to tempt him to try to flick the ball for a winner. He should be likely to hit the backspin serve into the net, and the sidespin only serve off the end of the table.

•Where is his crossover point (in terms of where does he switch from a forehand to a backhand and vice versa). Is it different for backspin and topspin balls? When in doubt, does he use the backhand or forehand more?

•Does he recover to a neutral ready position, or does he prefer to recover to one side most of the time? Or does he recover to the same side that the last ball was hit from (i.e. if his last shot was a backhand, he gets ready for another backhand)?

•**Footwork** - is he better going from side to side or in and out?

•Is he fast or slow? Can he be caught out wide to the forehand?

•Does he move better in one direction (i.e. running around the backhand) than another (going wide to the forehand)?

•**Timing** - does he prefer to play his main strokes as the ball is rising

- , at the top of the bounce,
- or on the way down? You may be able to make him play more strokes from where he is not comfortable.
- Is his **technique** suspect in any way? For example, does his grip give him a better forehand at the expense of his backhand?
- Or make him stronger against topspin but weaker against backspin?

## **Temperament**

- Does his expression and/or body language show what he is feeling?
- If not, are there any other signs of his situation, such as dropping the ball on the table before serving, wiping his hands on the table, or more deep breaths before serving?
  
- Does he pretend to be feeling something else? An opponent who does this may be trying to play mind games with his opponent, such as **John McEnroe's** temper tantrums in tennis, which were often designed to upset the opponent's rhythm and concentration.
- Does he tend to give up when he falls behind in a match? If you can get a lead you may be able to get him to stop trying.
  
- Does he ease up when ahead? Don't give up against this opponent and you may be able to make a good comeback due to his lack of effort.
  
- Have you ever seen him lose his temper or saw anyone else get under this skin? If so, why did it happen?  
This can tell you a lot about what he does or doesn't like, and may be useful if you want to distract him from the game. (Note - I'm not saying be rude to your opponent - but if you know he hates delays, taking a bit of extra time now and then when towelling, or making him wait that bit longer before serving can be legitimate tactics. There is sometimes a fine line between gamesmanship and bad sportsmanship. Try to stay on the right side if you can.
  
- Does he like to play to the crowd?
- Does he like to hit big winners so the crowd can applaud? If so, make sure that you acknowledge the great shots that he hits, but try to make it difficult for him so that he misses two for every one that he gets on.  
You might be able to keep him trying to hit wonderful winners and not noticing all the mistakes he is making.

## **Equipment**

- If possible, get a look at your opponent's bat well before your match, or ask reliable sources for any information on what he uses. At the very least try to watch him play so you can tell if he is using some type of pimples or antispin. You want to get as much advance warning on what type of rubbers you are going to face.
  
- Make sure you check out his bat before you start playing the match. You want to see for yourself exactly what he is using - don't take anyone else's word for it (or his!).

## **The Overall Package**

•Don't get so caught up in your opponent's individual strengths and weaknesses that you forget his overall game.  
His footwork may appear jerky and awkward, but that won't help you if that jerky footwork moves him around the court fast enough to hit the ball.

•His backhand may look terrible, but if it goes on consistently forget about the technique and look at the result.

•Speaking of results, it's what he can do during the matches that counts, not how good he looks in the warm up.

•Ask other players who have faced your opponent for their ideas and impressions about how he plays, and what worked well for them and what didn't. They may not be 100% accurate or totally applicable to your style of play, but they will give you a good starting point for your own plans.

### **Video Analysis**

•Try to get your opponent on tape if you can, against as many opponents as possible. Study the tape as often as you need to in order to identify the points mentioned above. Video analysis is great since you get to check and see what really happened during a match, rather than what you thought just happened.

•Tape your own match against your opponent - again, it's very helpful to be able to concentrate on your match at the time, and then be able to go back later to analyse all the points you missed.

### **Conclusion**

I hope you find these thoughts helpful when you are getting ready to check out your next important opponent.

Until the next session

Play right

Javad