

A Mental Training System for Japanese Table Tennis Players

Masashi Suzuki¹, Yoshinori Okazawa², Naoki Yonekawa³, Yoji Yoshizawa⁴, Kiyoshi Tsuruhara³ and Yuji Yamamoto⁵

¹ *Gifu University, Department of Pedagogy, 1-1 Yanagido, Gifu-shi 501-11, Japan;*

² *Nara University of Education, Takabata-cho, Nara-shi 630, Japan;*

³ *Mie University, Department of Liberal Arts, 1515 Kamihana-cho, Tsu-shi, Mie 514, Japan;*

⁴ *Nagoya Economics University, 61-1 Uchikubo, Inuyama-shi, Aichi 484, Japan;*

⁵ *Nagoya University, Furo-cho, Chikusa-ku, Nagoya-shi, Aichi 464, Japan*

Abstract

This paper reports on a mental training system for the members of the Japanese national table tennis team. We six members of the psychological staff of Japanese Table Tennis Association carried out the mental training of the players for a year and half. The activities constituting the mental training program were as follows:

1. Psychological testing
2. Individual players interviews
3. Audio tapes of mental training
4. Meeting with the coaching staff
5. Observation of player behavior during games
 - Video taping
6. Meeting with the coaching staff

The players reacted positively to the interviews and video taping. And the meeting with the coaching staff were also effective. Through the activities we built rapport with the players and coaches, and the players increased self-awareness. Rapport and increased self-awareness-motivated the players further mental training, and they seemed to develop psychologically and improve athletically.

Key words: mental training, counseling, psychological intervention

Introduction

Mental training is said to be necessary for athletes to improve athletic performance. The purpose of mental training is to make the athletes aware of physical and psychological conditions during stressful situations in games, and to enable them to exercise self-control and play up to their potential.

Thus many programs of mental training have been developed (3). While most players and coaches understand the importance of psychological factors and are very interested in psychological training, in fact few players and coaches manage to carry out that training completely, due to the problems within the players themselves such as low self-understanding, low motivation, etc., and/or problems in the external circumstances around the players such as low mutual understanding between players and the coaching staff, etc.

Table 1 Timetable of mental training for the members of Japanese National Table Tennis Team

Session	Date	Place	Event	Activities					
				Psychological test	Individual interviewing	Meeting with the coaching staff	Behavior observation	Staff meeting	Others
1	1987,6	Nagoya	Staff meeting					○	
2	6	Osaka	Training camp (women's team)	○					
3	6	Nagoya	Staff meeting					○	
4	7	Tokyo	Training camp (Men's team)	○					
5	7	Gifu	Training camp (Women's team)		○	○	○	○	○
6	8	Iida	Training camp (Men's team)		○	○	○	○	○
7	9	Kyoto	Staff meeting					○	
8	10	Aomori	Japanese selection game for Olympic game				○		
9	12	Osaka	Asian selection game for Olympic game				○		
10	1988,1	Nagoya	Staff meeting					○	
11	3	Nagoya	Physical fitness test, Staff meeting	○	○	○		○	
12	4	Nara	Staff meeting					○	
13	5	Niigata	Asian Championship				○		
14	6	Nagoya	Staff meeting					○	
15	6	Tsu	Staff meeting					○	
16	7	Nagato	Training camp	○	○	○	○	○	○
17	8	Matsuyama	Training camp				○		○
18	9	Shibetsu	Training camp	○	○		○		○
19	9-10	Seoul	Seoul Olympic	○			○		○
20	11	Tsu	Staff meeting					○	
21	11	Ohbu	Staff meeting					○	
22	12	Tokyo	Individual interviewing		○				
23	12	Tokyo	Training camp	○	○	○	○	○	

Table 2 Examples of rating criteria of behavior (Okazawa, Y. et al., 1988A)⁶⁾

Positive	Negative
"I've got guts" pose Saying "Good!" Saying "One more point!" Jumping up joyfully	Hanging one's head Going for ball trudgingly Sighing

Table 3 Examples of suggestions to the players (Okazawa, Y. et al., 1988A)⁶⁾

Player	C o n t e n t
A	Eye-to-eye contact control When you get a point or play better, look at your opponent closely.
B	Body action Move your legs with short, quick steps after taking points.
C	Self-presentation Take the "I've got guts" pose, staring at your opponent.

Japan Table Tennis Association asked six sports psychologists, to form a group to overcome these difficulties and improve the athletic performance of the members of the Japanese national table tennis team. We have been carrying out the mental training for them since June 1987. So in this paper we report on the process of the mental training we carried out.

Project Procedures

This project evolved in two phases as follows (see Table 1).

1. *First phase* : session 1-9 (1987/6-1987/12)

In this phase, we sought to get to know the players, the coaching staff and their circumstances and to begin designing a program of mental training in a four-pronged approach.

First, we administered three types of psychological testing, which three of us had administered previously to the Japanese national table tennis team. Second, the team members were divided equally among the six of us for person-to-person contact. Having created an interview file for each player containing life history, athletic history, etc., we interviewed each player in order to understand personality traits, psychological problems, etc. Third, we provided each player with several audio tapes on mental training which had been produced by TAIKYO (Japanese Amateur Sports Association so that they could learn the techniques of mental training such as relaxation, visualization, etc. (1) and we communicated with the players about these tapes by letters and telephone calls several times. Fourth, we held meetings with the coaching staff for three to six hours in order to understand each others' view of the players.

In this phase, we could not confirm that athletic performance was improved effectively. Then this period was, as it were, one of establishing a working relationship with the players and coaches.

2. *Second phase* : session 10-23 (1988/1-1988/12)

Based on the results of the first phase and the demand of the coaching staff, we decided to attempt to improve athletic performance directly.

First, we had each player continue with the TAIKYO audio tapes, and called and sent letters several times in order to make sure the players were using them.

Second, we observed and analyzed body actions and facial expressions of the players during games in order to heighten their awareness of their behavior pattern, promote behavior change, and motivate the mental training.

At the 9th ASIAN Table Tennis Championships in Niigata, two of us filled out a check list concerning our players' negative or positive behavior in the game (see Table 2) (6) and at the same time took a video recording from both the front and back of the players. We found that they expressed positive body action and facial expression comparatively few times.

We then edited the master tape to make one tape of positive behaviors and another of negative ones. At individual interviews the players were shown these tapes and urged to express positive body action and facial expression many times in a game (see Table 3) (6).

In addition, we carried over from the first stage the individual interviews with players, psychological testing, and meeting with the coaching staff in order to better understand the players and build up rapport with them.

Activities Constituting the Mental Training Program

The mental training program which we developed was comprised, then, of six aspects:

1. Psychological testing

Three types of psychological testing, the TEG (Toudai-shiki egogram) (1), the TSMI (Taikyo Sport Motivation Inventory) (2), and the MPI (Maudsley Personality Inventory) (4), were administered periodically in order to grasp players' psychological traits and to identify any change.

2. Individual player interviews

Individual interviewing was conducted five or six times, each lasting about an hour and most of it done at training camps. As their various psychological problems came to light, we encouraged them to understand themselves and try to change their behavior patterns. We interviewed them with the three basic attitudes of Rogerian psychological counseling, unconditional positive regard, empathic understanding, and genuineness (Rogers, C. R., 1957) (8).

3. Audio tapes of mental training

By providing each player with the audio tapes, we wanted them to learn several techniques of mental training. But it was difficult because we could seldom meet to guide them. Once, every one or two weeks, would have been necessary.

4. Meetings with the coaching staff

Meetings with the coaching staff were held five times, each lasting three to six hours and most of them taking place at training camps. In these meetings we reported to the coaching staff on the results of psychological tests and interviews (if allowed within their privacy, while they reported to us concerning the players' physical and psychological conditions in practices and games, followed by discussion about each player and deeper understanding.

5. Observation of players' behavior during games

We observed, video taped and analyzed the players' behavior in view of good or bad body action and facial expression, as noted above. The goal of this component was to induce the players to control their emotion by controlling their body actions and facial expressions.

6. Meeting of the psychological staff

We held staff meetings fourteen times in order to discuss the issues as they arose and to plan our next actions.

Discussion

The mental training we carried out had two aspects, one for the player himself and the other for the circumstances around the players. The former involved the psychological tests, the individual player interviews, and observation of the players' behavior in games. The latter involved the meetings with the coaching staff.

The players reacted positively to the interviews (7). "It was good for me to talk frankly." "It was good for me because I could say things which I cannot say to the coaching staff, officials, etc." These comments meant we were in rapport with the players, which meant that we had the relationship with the players necessary for counseling and training. The players also highly appreciated the video-taping (7). Having seen the edited ASIAN Championships tape, one said, "Because I was shown good or bad body action and facial expression directly, I could understand the importance of having a good mental image of performance." "These tapes were instructive for me. In the Seoul Olympics I played with a little excessive action." We felt such remarks indicated the players had become highly motivated to pursue mental training. Moreover, we judged the videos had increased the players' self-awareness.

The meetings with the coaching staff were also effective. Discussion about players' personalities and behavior patterns built rapport with the coaches. Evidence of this rapport was that the coaching staff praised our work (5), and they changed their way of treating the player. As a result of rapport, meetings with the coaching staff became like group counseling sessions for understanding the players and each other.

Rapport and increased self-awareness motivated the players increased mental train-

ing. From this result we judged that the players were in fact, to some degree, influenced positively by the mental training, that is, they seemed to develop psychologically and improve athletically. We expected these results to be reflected in actual performance in table tennis championships. The coach reported definite improvement in table tennis ability, judged by standard evaluative criteria. It's not clear at this time which of the activities may be most crucial. However, we are convinced, first of all, that the psychological staff must build up rapport with the players, and they in turn have to carry out various methods which increase self-awareness. We think, therefore, rapport and self-awareness are the essential points in mental training.

For the above purpose there needs to be a sufficient number of psychological staff to operate such a program effectively.

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