

The History of Table Tennis

Table Tennis is one of the most popular games in the world, but its origins have never been exactly pin-pointed. Historians can agree, however, that it arose out of England in the late 19th century having descended, along with lawn tennis and badminton, from the ancient medieval game of tennis.

The earliest known form of the sport, called Indoor Tennis, was played in the early 1880's by British army officers in India and South Africa, using cigar box lids as bats and rounded corks from wine bottles as balls. A row of books set up across the centre of a table formed the net.

The game was also played back in England as a parlour game by the upper class, but even the wealthy players were improvising, using balls made of rubber, string and cork. Racquets would be made from thick cardboard and all sorts of other materials.

Other versions developed in England during the 1890's with names like Gossima, Flim Flam and Whiff Waff. The American game manufacturer, Parker Brothers, began selling "Indoor Tennis" kits that included a portable net that could be set up on a table, a small ball covered with netting and miniature racquets.

James Gibb, an English enthusiast who visited the U.S. in 1900, brought a lightweight, hollow celluloid ball back home and began playing Indoor Tennis with friends and found the new ball perfect for the game. Gibb apparently came up with the name "Ping Pong," representing the sound of the ball hitting the racquet and then the table. However, an English manufacturer of sporting goods, John Jacques, registered "Ping Pong" as a trade name in 1901 and sold American rights to Parker Brothers, who came out with a new kit under that name.

In 1902, another Englishman, E. C. Goode, invented the modern version of the racquet by fixing a sheet of pimpled rubber to his wooden blade which allowed him to put spin on the ball. The game became something of a craze not just with the leisured classes, but right across English society, although it was still seen by many as an after-dinner amusement rather than a sport. A Ping Pong Association was founded in England that year, but it lasted less than three years, mainly due to the Parker Brothers' control of the name and as they made equipment rather expensive.

In 1905-10, the game was also popular in Central Europe and had been introduced to Japan, where it later spread to China and Korea.

Meanwhile, as the Parker Brothers held the patent in the U.S. and U.K., it prompted the fans and players of the game to re-name it "Table Tennis" so the new organisations would not have to shell out money to them for the right to use the name.

After a period when the game had dropped out of favour in Europe, it was revived in England and Wales in the early 1920's. A new Table Tennis Association was established in England in 1921. As the game's popularity spread rapidly through Europe, it was followed by the International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF), founded at a 1926 meeting in Berlin by England, Wales, Germany, Sweden, Hungary, Denmark, Czechoslovakia, India and Austria. Standardisation of the rules began, both in Europe and the Far East.

The first World Championship tournament was held in London in 1927. Hungary dominated and would remain virtually unbeatable in men's and women's international competition for three decades. The top two players of that early period were Hungarians: Maria Mednyanszky, who won seven women's championships, and Viktor Barna, a five-times men's champion. Czechoslovakia and Romania also produced several champions.

The American Ping Pong Association was organised in 1930, but its membership was limited because only Parker Brothers equipment could be used. Two rival organisations, the U.S. Amateur Table Tennis Association and the National Table Tennis Association, were founded in 1933. The three groups merged in 1935 into the U.S. Table Tennis Association, which was renamed U.S.A. Table Tennis in 1994.

The game was becoming a highly competitive international sport through the 1930's, as the U.S. joined European countries as a Table Tennis power.

The game was banned in the Soviet Union from about 1930 to 1950 because of the danger it was thought to pose to the eyes.

Central European dominance continued for a time after World War II, but Asian players took over the sport beginning in 1953. One factor in the sudden emergence of Asian stars was the introduction of the foam rubber bat by Japan's Horoi Satoh in 1952. The new surface made the game faster and also allowed players to put even more spin on the ball. Asian players also developed the "pen-holder" grip, in which the bat handle is held between forefinger and thumb, which allows the player to strike the ball with the same face on any stroke.

Sweden also started producing champions by taking elements from their opponents' style of play, and learning how to keep the opposition off balance by mixing shots shrewdly and unpredictably.

By the 1980's, the International Olympic Committee recognised the world-wide popularity of Table Tennis and included the sport in the schedule for the Seoul Games of 1988, at the height of Chinese dominance. But it did not go according to the script in the men's singles. None of the top five seeds made it to the semi-finals, leaving South Koreans Yoo Nam-kyu and Kim Ki-taik to win the gold and silver in front of an ecstatic crowd in Seoul. The women's singles event was marred by controversy when China opted not to send their World No.1 player, He Zhili, who was being punished for not throwing a match against another Chinese player at the 1987 World Championships. China still took all three medals in the competition.

The 1992 men's singles event featured Jan-Ove Waldner of Sweden rolling all over the opposition, dropping only 1 game in 6 matches to win the gold medal. In women's play, Deng Yaping began her reign as the greatest female player of the 90's winning golds in both singles and doubles in 1992 and 1996.

Going into the men's singles event of 1996, China's Kong Lingui was ranked number one, but was eliminated before the medal round which was won by China's Liu Guoliang. Kong teamed up with Liu to win the men's doubles.

In the Sydney Olympics of 2000, China were victorious again as the men's singles title went to the top seed Kong Linghui after defeating Swedish living legend Jan-Ove Waldner.

World No.1 singles player Wang Liqin, who was only ranked No.4 among the Chinese players and therefore was not picked to play in the singles event, won the men's doubles with Yan Sen, beating compatriots Kong Linghui and Liu Guoliang in the final. The women's top seed Wang Nan, also from China, won the doubles title and defeated her doubles partner Li Ju to take the singles gold medal.

Table Tennis has developed into a major world-wide sport, played by perhaps 30 million competitive players and countless millions who play less seriously. However, the game itself has not changed in essence since its earliest days, though it is much faster, more subtle and more demanding than it was even only twenty years ago. A constant concern of the ITTF has always been to insure that Table Tennis remains a contest of human skills and that technological developments do not give too great an advantage to the players who have the first opportunity of making use of them. Therefore, equipment specifications are carefully laid down, and rigorously enforced.

Other changes: a lowering of the net; a rule to avoid protracted games between defensive players; and rules preventing excessive advantage being gained by the server, were introduced in the thirties and further minor changes are made from time to time, including the most dramatic of recent times: the 11-up points system. Changes to the sport can be made only at the ITTF's Biennial General Meeting, and are never made without the agreement of a substantial majority of the hundred or so member Associations represented at the BGM, all of whom have an equal vote.

Modern Table Tennis at national and international level is as rigorous as any sport in its demands for the highest degree of physical fitness and mental concentration. Fred Perry, world men's singles champion in 1928-29, later achieved even greater fame at Wimbledon; perhaps it would not quite be true to say he moved to the larger court when his play became too slow for the table, but it is certainly true that no sport requires faster reactions and more delicate muscular co-ordination than Table Tennis.

