

Table Tennis strokes: power, rhythm and speed combinations

LI Xiaodong

STROKE COMBINATION VS STROKE LINK

Combination: Stroke combination as I understand it is relation between one ball and the following ball. This relation can be between same kind of balls as well as between different kind of balls. The scope of combinations is very big. There are many combinations of rhythm, many combinations of power etc. Combinations can be more or less effective. I can play one ball with lot of power, the ball is coming back very fast, and if I try to play again with lot of power, it wouldn't be reasonable; usually it will not be as successful as for instance playing the next ball with medium power. An example of successful combination can be first powerful loop and then the spin loop with less power.

Stroke link: The idea of stroke linking in fact is principally the same as stroke combination, however the idea of combination offers more variations. Linking is, as I understand it, continuous using of two various techniques, so this category is more limited. For example many people talk about linking attack with defence - 'first attack, then defence', or 'first defence, then attack'. It is rather complicated. 'First attack, then defence' link seems to be more difficult and is bigger challenge. Both links have differences - in attack you merely use your own power, in defence you 'borrow the power' a lot; in attack your centre of gravity is in front, in defence your centre of gravity is behind, in attack your swing is rather large, in defence your swing is short etc.

SPEED IS THE CORE

In top table tennis there is tendency of development of speed and power. Speed is essential. Increased power is also the reflection of this tendency. Therefore, if we talk about combination and linking, we have to emphasize speed. My feeling is that combination (linking) reflects relations of the following strokes in the rally - 3rd, 5th, 7th or 2nd, 4th, 6th etc.. Very often, when watching close-to-the-table or medium distance counterattacks, the rallies are very fast, but at the same time speed and power doesn't differ very clear, there are only different style differences. When I used to work with the women team, I applied in my coaching practice 'start first', to emphasize the speed in playing. 'Start first', means use own power first, or change the placement first, or be first to take control.

WANG LIQIN. THE KEY IN LINKING

If combination is performed well, its value is priceless. This can have, for the playing style of an athlete, catalytic role. Let's take Wang Liqin as the example. I found that there is a gap between his playing awareness and awareness of Liu Guozheng or Ma Lin. Wang Liqin's skills of dealing with crucial balls are very strong, he can play with strong will and confidence. His mental qualities are not so bad. But his main problem however is in various linking strokes. His whole playing style is built around his power, speed and strength.

He is 186cm tall, his movement width is comparatively large, swing is bigger than average player, so his returning to basic position after stroke is more difficult than of average player, so linking is for him the main problem. He is tall and fast so it is easy for him to play all long balls. He is especially good at dealing with topspin balls, but over the table skills are not as good as those of Liu

Guozheng or Ma Lin. That's why he built his playing style mainly around power, speed and strength. Therefore the training emphasis is put on in-and-out footwork, short-and-long balls to make them fluent. When those links stability became rather good, Wang Liqin was able to bring into play his strengths. But in his training most of the time was spent on net play and linking with other strokes.

Wang Liqin when dealing with short ball flicks when possible, if not he makes side-spin push or drop-shot, but the target is the next ball. In case of flicking it is easier for Wang Liqin to play the next ball, because it is active situation. Drop-shot, just the contrary, creates difficult situation for Wang Liqin, he must deal with various options that force him to change the position. Wang Liqin is an example of the tall player, who must have and develop high quality technical skills and physical qualities to be able to change the position fluently. Only thanks to his training focused on achieving these conditions he was able to achieve the highest level.

MACHINE GUN VS ARTILLERY

Kim Taeksoo, Persson: If the player has not enough power, and builds his/her style around mainly changing the speed, combinations can be even more important. Like Kim Taeksoo, Persson power is absolutely huge, I describe them as 'artillery' – they usually after one or two strokes wins the point. But we (Chinese) are like 'machine guns' -using own exploding power not giving the opponent chance to breath, continuing 3-4 attacks to win a point.

Kong Linghui: In 1995 World Championships somebody raise the issue: Chinese Team demand is "Actively take initiative, give prominence to own strengths, be without obvious weaknesses", without strong points you can't develop the highest level; but Kong Linghui's power was average, spin as well, only his speed was OK. If we look back today, all the success of Kong Linghui, from technical perspective was due to the speed of his combinations. He was winning with speed combined with spin.

Tan Ruiwu: Another example is Tan Ruiwu, with his height 160 cm and body weight 45 kg. Despite of that he is very agile, his arm extension was very limited, and in the second team he wasn't considered strong, but because he was very clever, he reached the first team. When I was coaching him for 9 months, the most important was strengthening his combinations.

Considering his characteristics, we planned playing style around his speed variety like 'machine gun', increasing speed of combinations, increasing explosive power in combinations, in returning service or in service and attack, always we emphasized speed, unexpectedness and hitting the ball very early. In his training main strategy was to develop agility and variety. The result was jumping to the 20th position in the World Ranking. It is a pity he did not continue with such a training later on.

LINKING STROKES, RACKET TYPE, SWAPING THE CENTER OF GRAVITY

Shake-hand: some players focus on backhand, and neglect forehand, some of them put even the right foot a bit in front in basic ready position, this enables good using own power (fali) with backhand, but when meeting the forehand ball the position is not adjusted, the ball is hit behind the body or only with the wrist. Some other players do just the opposite, play with wide range forehand swing with big follow-through, so it is hard to play the following stroke with forehand or backhand.

Penholder: when playing forehand attack you need to use the thumb, when playing backhand block you need to use the forefinger. If you use your forefinger when playing forehand attack, it is easy to lift the elbow. If you also still use your thumb when playing backhand block, in controlling the direction of power with the wrist you can go only up or to the side, not down.

Training suggestions: My personal feeling, no matter penholder or shake-hand, fingers and wrist should be used accordingly, when executing forehand-backhand link. As an example, transforming from forehand to backhand with shake-hand grip is easier a bit, forefinger presses down a bit to return. This skill of using fingers and wrist to assist linking forehand with backhand should be practiced very often. It's width is very small, the power used is very small, it helps to increase the speed. It is not necessarily to practice it only when playing at the table, you can practice at anytime and anywhere. You can practice with iron bat, this is also good method but remember to stay relaxed. If you practice skilfully, increase the load, during the competition transformation will be much better.

Shifting centre of gravity: Emphasizing assistance of fingers and wrist in stroke transformation, you need also to pay special attention to shift centre of gravity. When the coming ball is very fast, you still have to shift the centre of gravity. Even if there is not enough time to return the ball with high quality, it is possible to get good effect if the centre of gravity was shifted, if not the forehand stroke could be too weak. In my view, this belongs to fundamental table tennis skills, but some young players do not pay enough attention to it. Shifting centre of gravity is certainly more difficult than not shifting, hitting the ball in the ascending phase is more difficult than in the highest point or descending phase, but you shouldn't stop doing it because of difficulty, better things are certainly more difficult to do. Developing your playing style you need to do your best to get the required standard. But ask first, if it is advanced, if it is feasible, if you have resources and skills to do it, if yes -do it! If you do it, you will be in front of others. Note: In Chinese table tennis language 'fali' means 'using own power'. This is one of the most important ideas in Chinese table tennis understanding. Attacking (and looping) strokes are 'using the power' which is bigger than the power of the oncoming ball. 'Jieli' means 'borrowing the power of the oncoming ball' as it happens in blocking strokes.

OFFENSIVE POSITION

Many players when dealing with aggressive opponent, with fast ball or with powerful attack turn to very passive position, hit the ball behind the body etc. Therefore, I recommend in practice: keep the hand over the table, in front of your body, in front of your elbow, in this way your position to hit the ball is more offensive and comfortable. The player and the ball make up a triangle, the player's body is the centre of the triangle. From the right position you need small movement for the stroke, can hit the ball in front of the body easily, and it is easy to use own power (fali) or borrow the power (jieli).

REASONABLE POWER OF STROKE

Before I came to the National Team, I worked over 10 years with Beijing Team. Master is Cen Huaiguang Coach. He did some researches about counterattack. Some people say that Beijing Team is very strong. Do they practice more than others? No. In fact, we even didn't deliberately pursue certain number of strokes practicing 'baisu'(whole table random exercise), but we studied opponents a lot, and classified their power of stroke into few categories.

For example: level 10 - 'killing' power, we do not approve it; level 8-9 -when possible to win the point directly; level 6-7 -active attack; level 4-5 -for counterattack; level 2-4 for defence. We promoted middle power and 'fali' among 'jieli' (first 'borrow the power', then 'use own power'). We also promoted hitting the ball in ascending phase, at this point the spin hasn't emerged fully yet, opportunity to use own power is as good as at the highest point, speed is very fast, and possibility to cover own intention is very high.

If you wait until the highest point, speed is already much slower, stroke movement must be much wider, stroke intention is much clearer for the opponent. Only if your power is rational, the rally can be more consistent. Furthermore, the stroke must be organized whip-like. Only then you can produce full explosive power. If I can defend not-so-far-from-the-table, even in difficult situation, it is difficult to beat me. Try to find good position, try to find good distance, create the most comfortable conditions to hit the ball, this is very useful for linking the strokes.

DEVELOP ALL-ROUND SKILLS AND STRESS STRONG POINTS

Combinations should be well-trained. For example loop-to-loop or defense-and-counterattack, when you stand close to the table, if the ball trajectory is rather high, spin rather strong, rhythm rather slow, you may as well play one backhand punch, as Waldner, Ma Wenge or Kong Linghui did.

If ball trajectory is rather low, spin average, you can use kuaidai, or kuaisi with good results. Regarding backhand players with smooth rubber, which combinations do they play especially good? In modern table tennis you need to expose your strong points, but at the same time having good all-round skills. In backhand counterattack, in switching from defense to attack, playing backhand punch and fansi, kuaidai, is not enough.

Against strong topspin ball with low trajectory still flat block can be useful. Having 3-4 options is not enough, it is also important to have own specialty, own strong point. If your kuaisi is really good, use it more often. If you have especially good loop-to-loop use it more often. The tendency in modern table tennis is to increase the speed and the spin. In my opinion increased spin is even more threatening, is even bigger, than just speed. In example, Liu Guoliang started development of penholder loop against backspin ball. Wang Hao and Ma Lin continued with improvements in using backhand spin and speed with good result.

LEARN FROM OTHERS' STRONG POINTS TO REMOVE YOUR WEAKNESSES

Waldner: From my point of view we all learn from each other. What was the biggest contribution of Waldner to our table tennis? His specific service-and-attack? or maybe his backhand punch against topspin ball? or side-spin push return?

Samsonov: For example Samsonov, he is also very tall, rather strong, and from my observations his main problem to solve were combinations. He is initially using a lot of long balls to open, avoiding short-and-long situations. That's why he returns service mainly with flick or long push to create counterattack situation, similar to Wang Liqin.

Samsonov pays special attention to the quality of every stroke, for example his long push is usually very deep, his stroke movement is very fast, spin is very strong, and also we heard that his rubber is more thick than other players', and the resilience of his blade is higher than other players. Of course linking backhand and forehand is relatively easy to solve, but the middle remains usually weak point. The middle has special high requirements to shifting center of gravity, and is especially for tall players difficult to solve.

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Translated by Jerzy GRYCIN