

Dissecting the Commonwealth Games

Author: Paul Stimpson

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England International Hannah Hicks

There were more signs of progress, particularly amongst the England male players, at the 2010 Commonwealth Games in Delhi. The two standout results were Paul Drinkhall's defeat of Sharath Achanta in the semi-final of the team event (England defeated India 3-1) and Liam Pitchford's victory over Gao Ning of Singapore in the final (England lost 3-1).

Drinkhall has always had tremendous power, but his performances in the Indian capital indicated that he has successfully developed a few more weapons. His speed and determination were palpable throughout. He will be disappointed, however, that having got into a winning position against Yang Zi of Singapore in the quarter-finals of the men's singles (Drinkhall led 4-1 at two games all) he made three unforced errors to squander the advantage and hand the initiative to Yang.

Pitchford has a lovely, flowing technique. His vision and timing are immaculate. His victory over Gao in one of the most memorable matches of the tournament provided new testimony as to his burgeoning potential. He also won bronze in the men's doubles alongside Andrew Baggaley. The key to his development will be ensuring that he is practicing against high quality opponents in the training hall. If he is pushed to his upper limits day in, day out, the improvements will flow.

Without wanting to overload Pitchford with pressure, he has every chance of making the top 10 in the world, providing he makes the sacrifices and trains with sufficient intensity over the coming five years. No England player has got close to such an elevated position in the days since Desmond Douglas, with the one exception of Chen Xinhua.

On the women's side, Joanna Parker played very well alongside Paul Drinkhall to claim bronze in the mixed doubles. Parker has an elegant technique and a pleasing capacity to step forward with instant hits on both sides when the ball is high. But it is noticeable that she has not yet developed a forehand topspin, a stroke that could win her dozens of points, given that many of her opponents push the ball so often. The forehand topspin is one of the easiest strokes to learn, and Parker should have no problem building it up with focus and discipline.

Hannah Hicks, like Parker, is also a defensive player. She clearly has potential, but I would urge her to work on her consistency in defence away from the table. When Chen Xinhua first came to England in the late 80s, he gave me a very specific drill. He would stand close to the table and topspin the ball slowly, surely and consistently with his forehand to all parts of the table. He counted how many I returned with my defence.

On the first point I chopped 7 balls before making a mistake. On the second I chopped 10. I thought that was pretty good. Chen didn't. He said that we would practice nothing else until I was able to chop 100 balls without a mistake. He said that it was pointless being a defender if one was unable to defeat an opponent for pure consistency. We practiced for an entire week, then another, then another. Eventually, I had such rock solid consistency in my defence that no attacker could beat me with safety alone.

Having utter certainty in one's strokes, for a defender, is a monumental blessing. It is the core around which everything else is built. I would urge Hicks and Parker (alongside her forehand topspin practice of course) to work on this. It will give them huge confidence and assurance, but it will take weeks of slow, steady practice to build it up. As Richard Bergmann, perhaps the greatest defender of all time, put it (or words to this effect): "You should be so sure of your forehand and backhand chops that you can play them in the midst of a burning building or on the bow of a sinking ship".

To return to the male players, Baggaley played well in the team event. He made few unforced errors and played with tactical intelligence against India in the team semi. But one noticeable technical flaw is a tendency to lean back when making topspins, particularly on the forehand. The follow through is almost behind his head and the

momentum is taking him backwards, not forwards.

Table tennis has got a lot faster and more aggressive in recent years. The block is now almost entirely absent – instead top players use the counter topspin on both the forehand and backhand side, often with a very low margin of error. Baggeley's safeness is, of course, admirable. But his inability to stand toe-to-toe with players such as Gao (to whom he lost 4-0) is a defect that he must eradicate if he is to make the top 100, let alone the top 50 of the world rankings.

For the competition as a whole the highlight was, without question, the victory for Achanta and Saha of India in the men's doubles. The Yamuna stadium, the best table tennis venue I have seen, rocked to the euphoria of the home crowd as the Indian pairing came through in a tight contest. The emotion was also touching when Achanta shed a tear on the podium as the national anthem played.

Much credit must go to the organisers for the immaculate execution of the event. Alan Ransome, as the technical delegate, in particular showed shrewd judgement to deliver an excellent schedule that reflected the concerns of international television (broadcasting clients from all over the world) as well as the live audience and the teams. His contribution to Commonwealth table tennis is truly immense.

In four years' time, Glasgow will be the host city. There is every chance that, by then, the England men's team will be the dominant force in Commonwealth table tennis. A target of two gold medals is not beyond reach.

By Matthew Syed

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