

From knockabout to top 250 in a year – can Sam make the grade?

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Ben Larcombe (left) and Sam Priestley

It's one of the enduring debates of any sport – are top players born with natural talent, or created through hard work?

Table tennis coach Ben Larcombe and player Sam Priestley are on a mission to find out.

The pair have teamed up to put Sam through a year of intensive coaching, practice and tournament play with the target of transforming him from social player to one of the top 250 in the country in just one year.

They believe their daily regime of drills can help Sam to graduate from a knockabout with his housemates to the upper reaches of the national rankings.

Sam, 24, has been painstakingly practising the basic strokes over and over again since the start of the year and will begin to enter tournaments and get on to the rankings list in the coming months.

The project was the brainchild of coach and sports scientist Ben, who has known Sam for 10 years and is himself an accomplished player, representing Crusaders TTC from Wallington in Surrey in the British League and coaching at nearby Wilson's School.

It was inspired in part by the book *Bounce*, by former England No 1 turned journalist Matthew Syed, which examines whether top sport players are the product of hard work rather than natural talent.

Ben, also 24, said: "When I started coaching, I started to think about the perfect way to develop a player. I was looking for someone I could do it with and it worked out perfectly that I had a friend who had some time and had a table."

Sam said: "Me and my housemates are very competitive. Once upon a time it was Super Mario, then we wanted to do something social and move around a bit more, so we got a table tennis table.

"We played quite a bit and because I'd known Ben for a long time I started asking him for tips to help me beat my housemates.

"He was getting interested in accelerated learning and I think it was his wife Katie who had the idea to put us together.

"I didn't really know what I was getting myself into. I didn't know how much work was involved and how much work has been put in by people who are at the top level. Each time I do something, I realise how much more there is to learn."

As well as the drills, the pair have done a lot of work without the ball, focusing on shadow-play and movement.

"I picked up my forehand quite quickly and enjoy battering the ball, but the most useful stuff has been down in the gym, just focusing on movement and how to keep yourself balanced," said Sam, who is self-employed and runs a coffee shop near St Paul's Cathedral in London.

"I'm struggling to move, twist the body and play the shot all in one movement.

"It looks pretty silly in the gym when people are on the running machines while I'm there pretending to play table tennis in front of the mirror. I cringe when I see how bad I am at some movements.

"I didn't really think about being really quick and agile at first but I soon saw how important it is if you want to play at a good level.

"During each session I don't think I'm getting anywhere but when I look back at the videos from a couple of weeks ago I can see how I've improved."

Ben added: "The long-term plan was to spend the first four months really focusing on systematically going through basic strokes – forehand and backhand drive and push and then developing topspin – over and over again and making little tweaks.

"Starting in May, we'll try to get him playing in local leagues and then we'll see if we can get him into a British League team. From August, we'll look at grand prix tournaments and one or two-star tournaments and hopefully we can start building up the ranking from there."

While Sam has improved hugely since the start, he admits he is finding it difficult to master the art of serving, and says he does not know how he will fare at tournaments or whether he will meet his ultimate aim of a top-250 place.

"I'm not sure how hard it will be to reach the target," he said. "People ranked 400 seem so far out of my league at the moment and there's all these things I need to improve.

"Failure to me would be if we don't get a ranking or couldn't compete, or if we end up dropping out or cutting down the work intensity."

There is little danger of that happening at present, with the pair's friendship – and the fact that the table tennis community is following progress in a project blog – helping to keep Sam focused.

"If I was trying to do it myself, there would be a few days when I wouldn't do it, but knowing Ben's coming round and people are following the blog it's means there's quite a lot of accountability," he said. "I know I can't stay out too late if I'm practising the next morning!

Ben says he is also getting a lot of benefit from the sessions. He said: "It's a challenge for me as well, and something I find very exciting. The fact I'm doing it with a friend is also great. I've learned loads. It seems like every other week I have a massive brainwave and change what I'm doing.

"We've done a lot of things away from tables, like shadow-play in front of the mirror, which I've never done

before, and getting Sam to bounce a ball for himself and hit the shot over and over again. I've been amazed at how effective that has been.

"The emphasis on different ways to move before you even get to the drills, most people pick it up over years of experience, but we've had to think about everything and there are questions all the time.

"It's been great for me. My coaching has improved because it has forced me to think about everything we do."

You can follow Sam and Ben's progress at www.experttabletennis.com

by Paul Stimpson (14th April, 2014)

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