



Drilling down on the sand-paper bats....

Author: Jamie Gordon

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This weekend (Jan 24/25) sees the televised finals of the World Championships of Ping Pong (WCPP), where 64 of the world's best sand-paper bat players take part in a two-day tournament at Alexandra Palace, with a substantial prize fund on offer.

England will be flying the flag with several of our players picking up their sand-paper blades, including Andrew Rushton, Andrew Baggaley, Chris Doran and Kent veteran Joe Kennedy. There are also some big international names playing, none more so than Russia's Maxim 'Magic Max' Shmyrev, who returns to defend his title.

*In the commentary box for Sky Sports will be **Colin Wilson**, who was ranked as England's No 1 at Under-13, Cadet and Junior levels; won two silver medals at the Commonwealth Championships in Edinburgh in 1979 and is currently on the Board of Table Tennis England. He has also been seen recently playing with a sand-paper bat at a few events.*

So is this a return to table tennis in its purist form.....or is sand-paper best left in the hands of the DIY enthusiasts? Love it or loathe it, the weekend at Alexandra Palace has captured the imagination of the sport and its players.

Here Colin looks at some of the issues facing the players in the World Championships of Ping Pong.

Colin Wilson (right) writes:

Lots of things are the same between Ping Pong as played in the WCPP and Table Tennis as we know it under the ITTF rules. But there are three crucial differences that make all the difference! The things that are the same include the table, the net, the ball, the flooring, the lighting and the court size (in terms of international table tennis competition standards). So non-players often ask why it is so different? Here are my top three reasons:

1. The bats: The bats for the World Championships of Ping Pong have no modern rubber or sponge on them. They are made of wood, like modern bats, but are then covered only with very fine blue sandpaper, as the leading bats were, when made in the days before modern rubber technology. So the crucial difference is a simple but

amazing thing about friction between bat and ball on contact during the stroke. In modern table tennis, the rubber on many of the bats has incredibly high friction, enabling a ball to enter the bat at up to an 80-degree angle, and yet bounce back in the direction it came from! These rubbers offer even more mechanical grip than a Formula 1 slick car tyre, with prices (per square centimetre) to match. This makes table tennis a fantastic, fast, dynamic sport as the players learn to control and express amazing amounts of spin. Against a lesser player, a good modern-day high-friction bat specialist will create more spin than the opponent can handle, forcing errors of technique in the opponent; also they will create a lot of deception in each stroke, so that the opponent is led to believe there is one spin, when in fact there is another spin actually on the ball's rotation, forcing an error of perception, rather than an error of technique (rather like a magician's illusion forces an error of judgement in the eye of the audience). This is amazing to study when watching modern day table tennis, and makes the players into incredible physical and mental athletes.

The high friction rubber also has another effect, to enable the generation of huge amounts of topspin (video analysis shows ball rotation of over 60 times per second as it leaves the bat – and maybe more these days). This enables a player to hit the ball extremely hard (90+ mph on contact), aiming it slightly upwards to get the ball over the net, and yet the topspin will generate an aerodynamic effect like an upside-down aeroplane wing (again, like a rear wing on a F1 car) that in effect increases the gravity on the ball and pulls it downwards so it doesn't travel off the end of the table before landing and shooting onwards towards (or past) the opponent.

So why Ping Pong as played in the WCPP? Well the games are very different both for the players and for the spectators, and I believe in both formats of the game for very different reasons. The impact of the modern rubbers has been a) to speed up the rallies, b) to shorten the rallies in many (but not all) cases, and c) to make it harder for the spectator to see what the players are actually doing in all their skill. It becomes partly a covert operation – as WCPP promoter Barry Hearn says, “A battle between scientist and scientist”, as well as a battle of skill.

With sand-paper bats, however, the friction between bat and ball is very low. I think Fred (our star hard-bat competition organiser and one of our 'low-friction founding fathers', Fred Dove), quotes the video analysis from sand-paper spin being about only two per cent of high-friction Table Tennis spin. This virtually zero-spin environment of WCPP means the players have a very different challenge. They cannot easily deceive the opponent with their spin (though they will certainly try to do so with direction and change of pace!), and they will have to work much more carefully to prevent their hard shots going off the end of the table. So self-control, ball control, table control and opponent control all have to be deployed in very different ways in order to plan and execute a winning strategy in the sand-paper game.

So for the spectators, WCPP is an amazing and different treat. The rallies will on average be much longer than in table tennis, with more cat-and-mouse strategy to notice and enjoy. Perceptually, it is easier for spectators to see the skill applied by the players, and there are more defensive players, rallies and shots from away from the table, which is great to watch as the ball is controlled from afar and floated carefully and low to a tricky corner of the table. The reduction in spin (and hence speed) also means that mentally, the spectators can 'get inside the heads' of the players more easily, understand what they are doing, what they are planning, and can judge the players' judgement and execution more readily during rallies. It all makes for a great event and so much fun to play and to watch!

2. The scoring system is slightly different to table tennis. WCPP games are played to 15 points instead of 11, and importantly, a unique aspect of this Championship is the use of the now-famous 'double-point ball'. Once against each opponent, a player, when due to serve, can ask the umpire to switch to the white ball (from the normal orange one) for one rally. If she wins the next rally she gets two points instead of the usual one point. This may not sound much, but in a close match this can be seen to be the difference between winning and losing, such are the slim margins that create champions with sand-paper. And the psychological effect of winning or losing the double-point ball rally can be really significant and fascinating for the spectators to see in the players' subsequent shots. The crowd, and often the players, make a big deal of the double-point opportunity. You can't use the double-point ball to win the game directly though, so you can't use it if you have more than 12 points on the board.

3. FUN! Sand-paper bat 'Ping Pong' was born out of player creativity – out of a desire of some to remove the complication and increasing complexity that has been produced by technology, to lengthen the rallies, to

enable an excellent spectator experience and above all, to enable players to have a 'ball' of a time playing in a new and refreshing format. Most of the players are not hard-bat specialists (some are) but play both formats of the sport they love. But the real winners are the spectators who like to see the grace and power of tremendous athletes, tactical minds and great personalities. Most of all it is an expression of love for the game and epitomises the friendship that sport can bring across nations and generations.

How easy is it for a top Table Tennis player to succeed at sand-paper Ping Pong?

I've been asked this question a lot, and experience has taught me not to be too sure of myself here in this new sport, as the world level of this discipline evolves! I think there is a balance between sheer athletic and sporting class on the one hand – which shows that a great table tennis player is not just a function of their bat but their eye and skill is likely to make them fantastic at sand-paper Ping Pong too. It certainly surprised some traditional aficionados how good some of the younger kids were able to adapt to this format of the game so quickly. So I think it's true to say that 'the cream rises to the top' whether it's Table Tennis or sand-paper Ping Pong – but these days that's only true if you familiarise yourself with the bats and the change in style properly. Gone are the days when good TT players could simply pick up a sandpaper bat from scratch and think they could win a big hard-bat or sand-paper bat tournament!

But I think it's also true to say, as in any sport, that particular conditions suit different players differently. Just like some golfers are links specialists, or footballers are strikers or defenders or good in a particular formation, a particular change in the rules or style will suit some more than others. I think sand-paper bat Ping Pong is well suited to world-class defenders, like many of the Philippino sand-paper specialists (Richard Gonzales is a joy to watch around the back of the court, for example), and at the very highest level I think physical conditioning, especially speed endurance (as opposed to the explosive power of table tennis), plays a significant role in shifting the odds between table tennis and Ping Pong. That's one reason I think Max has been so strong. I also think it's hard for the players who excel in table tennis by using more subtle variations of spin to dominate in WCPP – this 'spin-subtlety' has less effect with sandpaper bats, while the risks of this complicated type of shot execution (making a tiny error that takes the ball just off the edge of the table) are just as great. So sand-paper shifts the risk-reward ratios of the game in a number of subtle ways.

What have been your impressions of the first two years of the WCPP?

I've absolutely loved it. I still uncover and coach some talented juniors in 'modern' table tennis mode, and it's a great sport. But then Fred (Dove) got me into a 'hard bat' competition (similar to sand-paper) where I met up with lots of my old TT tournament circuit friends and adversaries, and we had a great time – competitive but not debilitatingly serious! And it is not so hard on the body in terms of explosive twisting, so I can protect my old injuries from too much exposure!

I've played in several English competitions since that are similar to this WCPP event, but I'm struggling to keep up with the keen, fit and (increasingly) younger up-and-coming sand-paper or hard-bat enthusiasts, so I'd struggle to qualify for this event. I'm more a local quarter-final kind of guy these days! I'm just very, very impressed by the sheer class of the qualifiers who are vying for the medals and the prize money, by the way they approach it professionally, and the way they still, by and large, keep a little tongue-in-cheek about the entertainment aspect of the whole event, despite the intensity of competition and the prize-fighting.

But what is clear is that the standard is rising quickly at the moment, more players are training specifically for this event, the game is evolving quickly, and so I think we're due for some surprises and a lot of fireworks this year!

Can anybody stop Magic Max?

I mentioned the two-time and unbeaten Champion earlier. Max is an amazing athlete, so intense, quick and consistent, and if you look back over 2013 and 2014, he was so good at maintaining his form in the latter stages when some players were beginning to fade or the inspiration occasionally eluded them. Max is tall but he's not large or carrying weight (not according to his latest Facebook picture anyway!), and his physique is fantastic for a guy his age, relative to many of his peers and in fact, even relative to lots of the younger players. My prediction is that he will not dominate in the same way this year, as he's a year older, and some younger players have

been gunning for him in training. And no-one wins forever.

But while the standard will be higher, and the matches closer, I still reckon he'll come out on top again, as his experience, approach and attitude are just supreme. But from hard experience from my own playing days, I have learned that my predictions in these types of international events always need to be qualified by the thought that there is always one country that can bring out a new, sometimes internationally unknown player who is just amazing. And this year, Magic Max has to face the qualifiers from, yes...the mighty People's Republic of China.

How do the conditions differ between the big arena of Ally Pally, with its TV lighting, and the sports halls these players practice in?

The conditions at Ally Pally are brilliant – perfect for the sport. Spectators can mill around the back courts and rub shoulders with the players, the coaches and the physios, seeing what goes on and what's involved in preparing for a match in this World Championships. We also have a large and beautiful show court, fantastically lit, with lots of colour and entertainment for the spectators. When I was training full time in my early 20's trying to work my way up into the England team, we had to train in a filled-in indoor swimming pool and had to run behind the pillars that held the roof up in between shots! These days many international table tennis players are used to training in large, well built sports halls, but you cannot easily replicate the intensity of this arena – the noise, the colour, the sheer scale of the welcome the players receive from appreciative crowds and the expectation felt on their shoulders, the intensity of the TV lighting that really puts them under the spotlight, plus we screen it live on TV – so it's all seen and felt right there in the moment by the players.

It's like taking a penalty in the last minute of a World Cup final – you can train and prepare all you want, but when that moment arrives it's very different to training and it's just a raw engagement in an exciting, knife-edge, thrilling activity. And you want to control your emotions, express your best game at the right moments, and win....!

Colin Wilson (January 2015)

The event will be televised on Sky Sports on January 24-25, 2015.

More details are available on the website:

<http://www.worldchampionshipofpingpong.net/>

The event is promoted by Barry Hearn's Matchroom Sports

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