



## Zak Abel: From table tennis star to music sensation

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It's one of the most eye-catching music videos for years – the young singer showing off his table tennis skills, including multiball, while performing his latest hit *Everybody Needs Love*.

The man combining two extraordinary talents is Zak Abel, a 21-year-old Londoner. But table tennis insiders might know him better as Zak Zilesnik, former Cadet Boys' Singles national champion.

That was before he was signed by Atlantic Records and launched a career which is beginning to turn heads in the music industry – with *Everybody Needs Love* reaching a further audience as the theme of a recent Tesco TV advert.

How high his star is destined to rise in the music firmament is yet unknown, but he certainly topped the hit parade in table tennis terms, winning that national title in 2009. He was in good company too, succeeding Liam Pitchford and preceding Sam Walker as holder of the trophy.

So how and why did Zak make the transition from table tennis to music, and how did that video come about? I caught up with Zak recently to find out.



Zak Abel

The story starts a few years ago when he first met the man who is his sparring partner in the video – Harefield Academy coach Eli Baraty.

“I was living in a house next to a park and was in-line skating with my mum one day at about 6pm,” remembers Zak. “She wanted to go home and I didn’t, so I ran away from her.

“I saw a guy racing from one tree to another and back and I said ‘that looks like fun, can I race you?’ and I joined in.

“I asked him why he was doing it and said he was a professional table tennis player. I thought I was really good at table tennis because I’d just been playing it on holiday, so I’d said I’d beat him.

“By that point my mum had caught up with me and he invited us to an exhibition he was giving. I went along and that was when I realised how bad I was compared to him!”

That chance meeting set Zak on a path to the Cadet Boys’ Singles title in 2009, having learned his game at a combination of London Progress, Barnet TTC and Harefield.



Zak with Eli Baraty at an event in 2010

A year later, at the age of 15, he reached the crossroads that led him away from sport and into music.

"I moved to France to be semi-pro for Hennebont and I was there for four months, training for five hours a day, six days a week," said Zak.

"I realised what my life would be like if I carried on that way and what it would take to be the best I could be. It felt like quite a lonely and repetitive experience.

"At the same time, I was playing piano and writing songs and had put up a couple of videos on YouTube and I felt I would rather do something else with my life than table tennis.

"I'd given it a good go and gave it my all, so I could never say I hadn't done it properly."

Two years later, he signed with Atlantic Records and has so far released two EPs, with a debut album out later this year, and is due to make several appearances on the festivals scene this summer.

He said: "I'm playing at the V Festival and Lovebox and a few others and I'm really excited about it. I'm also in the studio a lot, so it's a busy time."

How does he describe his musical style?

"I would say it's soul underlying it and especially for the album, it's soul and funk with a bit of pop," he said.

"I grew up listening to Marvin Gaye, Al Green, Aretha Franklin, that's the kind of music I admire a lot and I'm inspired by.

"I really enjoy song-writing because it gives me a chance to express how I'm feeling specifically from my point of view. A lot of people don't get that opportunity because they get given songs to sing, so I'm lucky to get an opportunity to do that, and Atlantic Records have supported me to do that 100%."

Talking to Zak, his passion for both music and table tennis is clear, so it was perhaps obvious to combine both in

his latest video.

"There hasn't been a music video with real table tennis, it's all been with CGI," he said.

"I wanted to use multiball in the video. A lot of people think you just train by playing matches, and that annoys me so much. I wanted to do the sport justice.

"We spent a couple of days choreographing the video and how we could express some of the music elements with table tennis.

"There are some really quick sidesteps at one point which correspond with the beat and for the chorus I wanted it to feel really open and big, and that's the lobbing and smashing scenes."

The video lasts around 3min 15sec and was filmed in one take, so it was quite an intense experience for both players. Zak added: "We did it about 15 times. The first bit of the video was probably the hardest because of having to look at the camera while playing."

Needing a sparring partner with the necessary skills made Eli Baraty an obvious choice, but Zak says that was not the only reason to get him involved.

"It was important that Eli was in the video," he explained. "The song is about how I was feeling lost and dislocated and I remembered that whenever I've been in that space, it was the patience and support and love of someone close to me that pulled me out of it.

"I was having a couple of difficulties (when I was younger) and he was there for me providing guidance. We're very close. He's like the father I never had and now he's a bit of an older brother, which is cool."

Although he has taken a different path in life, Zak still follows the fortunes of the England players – he was not only aware of their World Team Championships bronze medal earlier this year, he even watched some of the matches on YouTube, including the Japan semi-final which England lost 3-1, with Jun Mizutani winning the decisive match against Liam Pitchford having saved four match points.

"I saw Sam Walker against the Japanese guy (world No 20 Yuya Oshima) and it was amazing," said Zak. "It's amazing to see England up there with the best in the world – I'm super proud of them.

"I was smiling the whole time watching the match but I was nervous, even though it was on YouTube and not live. It was very difficult to watch Liam play Mizutani, but Mizutani has got a strong head.

"I played against Sam Walker and we had our battles – I won a few, he won a few. I played Paul Drinkhall once and lost 3-0 and I played Liam a few times but never took a set off him."

Seeing the Leopards win that bronze, does Zak have any regrets that he gave up the chance to hit that level?

"No, not really, I chose the path which I thought was best for me and as I said, I'm really proud of them," he said.



Zak on the table in 2010

Not that he never plays – tables are often to be found backstage at festivals and venues – though the equipment is not what he was once used to. He also has a famous opponent and well-known devotee of table tennis in his sights.

“When you don’t have your own bat, you can’t really play properly – people don’t understand that,” he said. “I like to play a bit at festivals and when someone takes points off me I tell them it would be different if I had my bat and could spin it more.

“I’ve never met Justin Bieber but he and I have the same birthday, so maybe we’ll have to play a challenge one year on our birthday!”

Before that possible clash, what is in the pipeline?

“Short term, I need to finish off my album. It’s going well – it’s about finding a couple more songs and finessing some more which I think will be on the album.

“I want to get my life set much better and connect with as many people as possible, making my songs as honest and relevant as possible and performing live in a way that makes people feel included – that’s important to me.”

As his career develops, Zak is still drawing on old table tennis lessons, as well as new ones provided by music.

He said: “Table tennis gave me discipline both in my attitude to things – trying to achieve something – and what I would allow myself to eat and drink. I’ve never touched a cigarette and I hardly ever drink. I look after my body and table tennis ingrained habits from an early age.

“Music has taught me to feel the fear and do it anyway. I get very nervous before I go on stage but I feel unbelievable when I’m up there. And it’s taught me to trust myself more and be open to ideas I don’t really understand.”

Chatty and open, Zak comes across as a grounded and pleasant young man with an interest in others. He also has that confident streak you would expect from a performer and competitor, as evidenced by one of his closing remarks: "I've still got it – I beat Eli last time I played him!"

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