



MTQ48 CASE STUDY 2013 – SUB-ELITE JUNIOR TABLE TENNIS PLAYER – AND FAMILY

27 November 2013, Business Athlete Ltd

The Player: Born 1998, the player was ranked in the top 12 in England for their age (11 years) in 2010.

The Coach: Colin Wilson is a Level 4 and international table tennis coach and an executive coach/supervisor aged 50. He trained with AQR Ltd to gain his MTQ48 accreditation in 2012.

Background: The player was first coached by Colin in 2010, who was working in partnership with the local coach to add some specialist technical, tactical and mental elements, over a few sessions and an intensive half-term camp. Not being local to each other, there was no further coaching work undertaken and little further interaction between November 2010 and February 2013. At this point though, the player's father approached Colin for some help with the player – primarily around mental state and skills.

The Problem: It was clear to the father that the player (now nearly 14), despite still having a top 12 ranking in England for their age, was suffering and confused about their involvement in table tennis; had considerable anxiety around competition and wasn't enjoying competitive play.

Initial Analysis: After a long (2.5 hour), friendly, informal and semi-structured open conversation between player and coach at the player's house, the coach proposed, and father agreed:

- The problems were caused mainly by sub-optimal mental perceptions, exacerbated by recent events, and had led to a lack of an organised, positive mental approach
- There was scope for the player to become happier, more purposeful, better mentally skilled and regain their love for the game and for competition
- It would require a process over some months, and a deliberate process by the coach, while making the process feel 'light' and 'natural' for the player
- The father's employer would sponsor the intervention.

Objectives:

- Clarify and rediscover a sense of purpose around 'why I play competitive table tennis'
- Enjoy playing in competition again and to look forward to it
- Improve results and underpin performances with a 'basic guaranteed minimum standard'
- Win more matches from behind
- Win a higher percentage of close games
- Beat more players ranked above you
- Improve mental skills to reduce anxiety, increase confidence, stabilise mood and performance (especially the use of the in-between point time)
- Improve preparation (the critical last 48 hours before performing)
- Player to learn how to take responsibility for their own table tennis career going forwards.

Role of MTQ48:

As an accredited MTQ48 feedback and development planning provider, Colin thought it would be an ideal opportunity to use this objective measure as a basis for a common language, ongoing conversations about mental approaches, and to measure progress. The player completed the questionnaire before a further analysis session (this time 'on the table' for two hours). With scores very low (min 2, max 4), Colin decided not to share the report with the player to avoid reducing confidence even further, but did share it with the father, to aid understanding and teamwork in the support team. The report suggested low mental toughness in ALL areas. Based on knowledge of the player, the family, the sport, and from experience, the coach mapped out a flow of intervention over eight months, based

on mixing technical and tactical (on the table) development with the 4C's/six areas of Mental Toughness, choosing deliberately to work through, in order, but iteratively, the following:

1. Life Control (returning a sense of control of situations, control of career, and general self-determination to the player)
2. Confidence in Abilities (recalibrating in the player's mind a more objective sense of what strengths they had and how to use them)
3. Emotional Control (specifically, the use of the in-between-point time to get emotionally and physiologically out of the last rally, then physiologically and emotionally 'into' the next one before it starts; keeping anxieties under control by focusing on playing one point at a time irrespective of situation/score; and lots of work on decision-making around 'valuing each ball' before committing to each stroke in a rally)
4. Commitment (a return to process goals and an outlawing, initially at least, of outcome goals!; linking commitment to Life Control so that commitment arises from intrinsic motivation and not external factors (like perceived unhelpful 'pushing' from National Governing Body, Club team coaches' ambitions or perceptions of 'unfulfilled talent' etc); showing by happy acceptance to the player that choosing 'middling' commitment is fine with the coach as it supports the principle of self-determination [Inner Game coaching used here], and so allowing the player to rediscover their own preferred level of commitment commensurate with the likely results – and grow their own commitment back over time, with improved self-planning and competition preparation)
5. Challenge (lots of work led by on-the-table activities to condition responses to dozens of scenarios related to challenge in all time perspectives – perceived challenge during a point, between points, during games, between games, matches, before competition, between and during competitions over a season, from the media, unhelpful advisors etc)
6. Interpersonal Confidence (several on-the-table exercises to cover the range of performance demands for assertiveness 'standing up to an opponent or a situation' in a range of scenarios).

To begin with, this flow was not made explicit to the player but delivered informally; as the player started to respond, each step was introduced explicitly until in July, when they were re-tested on the MTQ48, they were familiar with the whole framework and its meaning.

The Process: This was delivered between March and October 2013, with around 11 hours per month of contact time split between:

- On-the-table technical and tactical development together
- Face to face meetings/sessions
- Telephone sessions focussed on mental skills, competition preparation, self-planning and reflective practice
- Text conversations before, during and after competition events.

It was suggested by the coach that he would not attend any competitive events; rather they would work together to enable the player to attend without the coach and enjoy taking responsibility for their own performance and success. This proved to work well, helped the player to regain a sense of self-determination, independence, and pride in seeing one's own self-dependence grow in an environment where many players rely on much support at, and during, competitive matches.

The Support Team (family and local coach):

Once the player and father were familiar with the MTQ framework (by April/May 2013), the MTQ results and framework was also introduced to mother and sister, who are non-sports players and non-fans of sport. It was therefore introduced informally and gently by a supportive and discerning father in order to align the family around the purpose and benefits (sporting and, more importantly, broader future life skills) for the player, and to encourage a common sense of support. This worked reasonably well.

Outcomes:

By May 2013, the player was beginning to be able to articulate again why they liked table tennis, why they wanted to play in competitions, and was showing signs of regenerated commitment and enjoyment. In May and June, they played well (process, performance and results) in four consecutive competitive events, culminating in reaching the last eight of the England National Under 14's – a great result and more importantly in the coach's view, a very enjoyable event for them.

School exams dominated the next few weeks, but the commitment and understanding of preparation was such that this period was used as 'active rest' and the long haul to training for the next Nationals in late November 2013 began in July, with a two-week intensive training camp in Scandinavia followed by 8+ hours per week of table time at home, plus physical training.

At the beginning of this new effort in July, we retested MTQ48 and found that sten scores now averaged five – a considerable improvement in Mental Toughness (or at least, coping strategies!). All scores were five except for Commitment which was up too, but from two to four. This time the report (and finally the earlier report!) were shared with the player and this enabled a conversation that elicited the benefits of the technical/tactical/mental coaching programme from the player's perspective and confirmed the achievement of all the objectives set at the outset.

The Commitment score also enabled the player to acknowledge and articulate to themselves, their father and me the coach, that the Commitment sten score of four was related to the limit of their overall ambition – they wanted to play, play quite a lot (around eight hours per week), compete and win, and reach England Under 18's 'Top 20' status in future. But they were also able to say that they had other priorities in life (scholarly, music), and wished to stay balanced with those rather than make significant life sacrifices for one sport they happened to be good at. As coach, I was very happy to hear this, as I had suspected that there was ambition, but not an Olympic-level ambition. Some peers are currently dedicating double the table hours in their quest to represent England seniors in future. Importantly for me I am satisfied that the player has learned much about themselves, has recovered mentally and moved on significantly, knows how to self-motivate and self-regulate at a high level of pressure, and they also report that this improved 'mental toughness' agenda has proved useful in other areas of their life too. As coach, I am very happy with this outcome and accept that 'my' sport and the pursuit of Olympic dreams is not the 'only' life for everyone!

Post-Script:

The coach/player interaction was managed down through September to move the player to a more self-dependent place, and to release the sponsor from open-ended costs over the new competitive season. Face to face work 'on the table' ended late in August and phone and text conversations continued until early October while the player worked with their local coaches. From then the family and player continued with minimal support from the MTQ coach – the test being the next Nationals – the England Under 15's Nationals, in late November 2013, when the player hadn't seen the coach face-to-face for over 10 weeks. Would the mental skills hold up?

Despite several peers training a lot more hours from August to November, the player again reached the last eight, to the satisfaction and pleasure of all. The player had 'made themselves proud', 'did their best in every point' and 'maintained a high standard whatever the pressure'.

Now let's see what 2014 brings...and we remember that life has no guarantees.

Conclusion:

We found the MTQ48 to be a useful framework and guide as part of a sport-specific programme over several months for a sub-elite junior player. Several key mental and performance objectives met, and a happier player and person now.

Colin Wilson
Director of Programmes
Business Athlete Ltd