In the Zone - Training Emotional Skill

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Introduction: Why Us?

Why would two average TT players from Hawaii write about emotional skill in the game? Isn't this a subject for experts? Shouldn't we be learning about emotional skill from top players who don't suffer from emotional failure? Why not coaches or psychologists?

Great players tend to have excellent emotional states which support their great performances. Those emotional states tend to be intuitive and built upon a natural predisposition to function well under the very specific demands of TT. Top players rarely have any idea how they attained those skills; they came with the package and refined the skills in process. Few have overcome the hurdles those of us less well-endowed in that area must face.

As a high level competitive tennis player in my youth, I was naturally endowed with an excellent emotional state for that game. My arousal levels were almost always very high, my concentration was excellent, and my motivation was relentless. This is a perfect setup for tennis. The sport has brief periods of explosive physical demand followed by enough time to blow off steam and reset.

Nearly every shot, from serve to groundstroke to volley, demanded great exertion. Where control was required I never needed to bring down my excitement. I could just add more spin, and even the hardest struck shot would still land in the court. The exertion itself supported a certain relaxation which allowed occasional "touch" shots when necessary.

Learning TT in my later years, I found that my familiar very high arousal levels created high tension in my muscles. In TT, the management skills I'd developed for tennis did not work. Using high racket speed on every shot was not supportive of a thoughtful game, especially in the early development of points. There was a need to be composed.

Even that intense focus and tunnel-vision motivation which had characterized my great concentration in tennis became my undoing in TT! Tennis is a simple game compared to TT. My narrow focus on my own intentions did not take into account my opponent's capacity to shroud intentions with deception. When I strained to focus harder, I tended to become overwhelmed with too much information and, unable to discern the relevant information, I failed to block out irrelevant distractions on the sidelines or on the next tables. Everything distracted me. I was overwhelmed!

In competitive matches I would melt down. Frustration was commonplace. My capacity to adapt and to learn was severely limited. Any external stressor in my life threatened to disintegrate my match play on any given day.

The emotional skills which had made me a great tennis player condemned me to being a mediocre TT player. It was frustrating. I consulted with peers and encountered the attitude that managing emotion was a type of good fortune which those who succeeded just happened to have. Relax! Breathe deeply! Pretend it doesn't matter. . . .

Various books were recommended by coaches. Those books described how great players functioned but offered little for a player like me to figure out how to get from where I was to that desirable emotional state. All I encountered was "Meditation. Creative visualization. Therapy."

I began a conversation with our club coach, Clyde Young. We had both struggled with emotional balance in match play and the inability to perform under pressure. Over the following year we discussed and experimented with ways to understand and improve our own emotional skills, with the hope of being able to support and train those characteristics in others.

For our model we used prolific TT author, Donn Olsen's method of decomposing a domain into constituent elements to create frameworks for training skills. The following essays are the product of our shared experiences and conversations.

Part 1: The Nature of Emotional Skill

Letting Go

Learning a new skill is like going on a roller coaster ride. For a moment we choose to let go of all that feels safe and familiar. As the roller coaster pulls away from the platform, there is a moment of trepidation as we anticipate the loss of control. In an environment designed to be safe yet feel unsafe, we release ourselves into the wild feeling of uncontrollable free fall.

As TT players we try to control the environments of the game. In order to learn new skills, for a moment we choose to relinquish the control we've acquired and experiment with a new approach. In that moment of release we are offered new experience. For a beginning player, instinct decrees that the racket must face forward to launch the ball across the net, but when heavy underspin comes toward us, we are told that the racket must face upwards to send the ball forwards.

In a moment of faith we abandon our instinct and face the racket skyward. Seemingly miraculously, the ball grips frictional rubber and launches forward over the net. Following a few iterations of this experience, we begin to feel secure with the new approach to the circumstance. The roller coaster has arrived back at the platform and we feel safe again. Courage has offered new knowledge.

Developing new emotional skill in TT is among the most daunting tasks a coach or player faces. Deeply entrenched habits hold us back. Young or old, long before we ever played TT we had already developed the ways we feel safely anchored in our reality. And when we were unable to master circumstances, we developed behaviors and belief systems to control the anxiety our loss of control left us. Sometimes those belief systems and practices were contrary to our long-term goals. But we often became deeply attached to those counter-productive belief systems because they made us feel less powerless.

Finding the fearlessness to release control and launch ourselves on the roller coaster of learning new emotional skills where we will have to experience those moments of emotional free fall requires courage. The reward of releasing fear is the full experience of the present. Eyes wide we fly forward, open to all our bodies and minds have to offer, prepared to learn new ways to relate to our inner and outer worlds.

Poise

Poised decision making is not exclusively a TT skill; it's a life skill. Each person who is poised embodies a common set of characteristics, such admirable attributes as composure, confidence, and fearlessness. When

offering counsel to those of us struggling with emotional poise, we often hear storied examples such as "the composure of Gandhi" or "the patience of Buddha."

We witnessed emotional poise in TT at its best in 2004, as aging legend Jan-Ove Waldner calmly dissected an overpowering number two seeded Ma Lin in his prime. Despite the decline of physical skills as he approached his 40th birthday, he was still shrouded in a cloak of emotional invincibility.

These wonderful anecdotes of extraordinarily emotional performance usually succeed in making us conscious of our inadequacy but do little to inform us exactly how to transform our own tendencies to compulsive, ineffective behavior into emotional strength.

Most information relating to emotional strength in sport offers up examples of highly successful individuals, identifying their unique abilities to remain calm under stress, make great decisions in split seconds, and perform at the highest levels in the most challenging circumstances. We are advised to imitate the great ones, perhaps meditate or visualize, relax and take deep breaths.

Anyone who has suffered from anxiety understands that mimicking relaxation is rarely sufficient to resolve deep seated overwhelming feelings and all of the entrenched ideas and physical behaviors which result from counterproductive emotional predispositions.

How are those of us who are not naturally endowed with the most appropriate temperament for our sport to achieve the lofty heights of poise? Is it only available to those with a natural predisposition endowed by nature? And what is "emotional poise" really? Is it just one attribute, a few or a combination of many?

Ten Attributes of Poised Players

Browsing literature on the mindsets of great athletes makes clear that all emotionally strong TT players share similar characteristics. Most often noted we find words like **composure, confidence, fearlessness, focus, a relaxed approach, an appropriate arousal level, adaptability, creativity, resilience,** and **consistency.**

Let's briefly describe these attributes common to emotionally stable athletes:

1. **Composure:** You rarely see top TT players "lose it." If emotion occurs during a match, it is usually in positive celebration after points.
2. **Confidence:** Effective competitors believe in themselves. Win or lose, they are rarely self-defeating.
3. **Fearlessness:** How many times have you seen a great player attempt and execute a shot you thought impossible even for them? That's how they became great by trying it.
4. **Focus:** When attentiveness wanders from the concerns of the game, quality of performance drops.
5. **A Relaxed approach:** All great players seem to do what they do with such ease. Their bodies appear to hold little tension.
6. **Appropriate arousal:** Too excited a player loses poise. Too enervated a player fails to meet the challenge. The ability to maintain appropriate levels of arousal supports optimal performance.
7. **Adaptability:** When opponents change tactics or plans go awry, top TT players adjust quickly and appropriately.
8. **Creativity:** Seeing circumstances as they are and resourcefully imagining how they might be are the hallmarks of a creative player.
9. **Resilience:** This is the ability to emotionally recover from poor outcomes. A player mired in past events is not alert and present.
10. **Consistency:** This is the ability to apply all of the trained attributes of skill (physical, mental, and emotional) readily throughout competition.

What about us?

Thus, all emotionally strong players share a common set of characteristics. However, if any one of those characteristics is missing, a player can fail to perform up to the standard of their mental and physical abilities.

So each highly functional athlete is highly functional in the same ways; yet each dysfunctional athlete is dysfunctional in a uniquely personal way.

One player might become fearful of closing points in matches and develop heavy feet or fail to read spin. Another could become overly aggressive when behind, or tentative and passive when ahead. Some players become angry after missing easy shots and fail to recover. Others become distracted by minor changes in playing environments. There are players who lose focus when a lucky shot goes against them. Others cannot adapt when an opponent changes tactics. Some players freeze up against better opponents, others against less able opponents.

The journey from being a player who struggles emotionally to becoming one with poise requires a detailed training process involving individual, personal diagnoses, methodical correction, and substantial training. Given the uniqueness of dysfunction, the process of improvement should be equally specifically tailored for each individual, and developed as systematically and seriously as any stroke technique or footwork training.

Improvement in emotional strength isn't something which descends upon a player through grace, nor is the skill an on/off switch that either works or doesn't. It is a set of very specific skills to be integrated by each player through training, attention to detail and conscious, mindful practice, in what can be a unique and rewarding collaboration between coach and player.

Diagnosis

When a player fails to perform in match play to the standards achieved in practice, we often suspect a weakness in mental skill or emotional skill. The player is either "thinking wrong" or "feeling wrong" or often both, with one as the primary cause. Sometimes it's obvious such as when the player feels nervous or frozen. Other times it's less obvious and the player might be oblivious to what is happening or why.

A single symptom might have various causes: One player can be gripping the racket too tightly – a physical issue. The coach might suggest relaxing which might resolve the problem. Another player could be gripping too tightly because he feels it will enable a stronger shot – a mental error. The coach might explain that he can stroke faster with a looser grip. A third player might grip the racket too tightly because of match-time fear. That is an emotional state. This circumstance won't easily resolve with physical or mental training.

So a universal diagnosis can't be made based exclusively upon behavior. The total player has to be considered. In medicine, the term "diagnostic treatment" is used when a practitioner, unsure of the cause of a symptom, prescribes a medicine for one of several possible causes. If the medicine works, then the disease is identified by the treatment.

Unsure of the cause of tension in match play, a coach might suggest, "Relax your muscles." If the player tries yet the habit persists, then it is not simply physical. If the coach explains the dynamics of the arm and how relaxed muscles move faster and the player persists in the behavior, then it is probably not exclusively a mental issue either. It probably has an emotional component.

Physical skill is about what we do. Mental skill is about what we think. Emotional skill is about how we feel.

Intervention

When a player is losing poise, adept coaches notice immediately. "Oh, he's hitting flat now! Where's the spin gone?" or "She's spinning everything! Where's the ball speed?" or "He's become passive! Where are the loop drives we trained so long?"

A cascade of physical, mental, and emotional effects can begin with a single emotion, such as fear or frustration and then spread. An emotional reaction such as fear might give rise to an idea (affecting mental skill) that more care must be taken on each shot. As a result, the player might choose more defensive shot types and slow the speed of the racket (affecting physical skill).

So we witness a shower of effects, from the emotional to the mental to the physical. When the coach admonishes the player to "increase racket speed," if there is fear at the source of the problem, failure to perform might result from a mental belief that caution is imperative. It might also be due to tension developed in muscles, a physical problem, but ultimately the underlying fear response will have to be addressed.

Increased heart rate, shallow breathing, heavy hands and feet, and tight wrists are some of the physical consequences of fear or anxiety. Limited **energy action options**, failure to note opponents' changes in tactics, failure to read spin, or loss of thoughtful responses to match circumstances might be mental consequences. When all of those effects diminish the player's performance, then a loss of confidence and resilience might complete the disintegration of composure.

When a player simply cannot improve despite coaching and diligent training, a compromised emotional state can be the lynchpin holding progress back. The ability to perform, the ability to enjoy playing, and the ability to learn effectively from training are all couched in a player's state of being. For the player and coach, addressing the fundamentals of emotional skill and all of its mental, physical, and emotional consequences is of high value.

Changing Goals

We're always ready to improve our physical skills. We'll work on a FH, develop a new serve, or practice footwork in order to improve. A coach will train us while we flail inconsistently at a new shot and remind us that "landing the shot" is secondary. We need to practice a technique with appropriate racket speed and a correct approach to ball contact movement. We'll land the shot on the table later! After we've landed the shot consistently, then placement will become the new goal.

Evolving changing goals is critical to skill improvement.

But we rarely set evolving goals for improving an emotional skill. We tend to think of emotional composure as an on/off switch. Either we're composed or we're not. Losing poise is failure. We'll try to be more composed next time. We might meditate or visualize, breathe deeply or pause to think, but we rarely set specific detailed goals to learn from a coach, apply in practice matches, and finally after weeks of training, apply effectively to competitive match play.

To begin with, we must recognize that there are behaviors in TT which make us feel safe but jeopardize our outcomes. A physical example would be the instinct to slow racket speed when unsure of an oncoming spin. While slowing the car when approaching an unknown intersection supports a good outcome, slowing racket speed when approaching an unknown spin does not. A fast racket adding spin might more often promise a good outcome.

Similar conflicts arise in many circumstances of stress. We engage actions which make us feel safe but make us play worse. Tentativeness and caution, or bravado and aggression – either can make us feel safer but might or rarely improve outcomes. Adaptive, composed players have a full range of response options available and can access appropriate approaches at appropriate moments.

Creating detailed goals as steps along the path of emotional skill is a most important aspect of approaching the process of transformation. Emotional skill is not an on/off proposition. It is a set of skills with physical, mental, and emotional components; the modification of which need to become step-by-step goals in a detailed ongoing process. Winning will be a byproduct. It cannot be the goal, or the player will not learn to "let go" in the ways required to learn.

The Components

Let's look for a moment at how the candidates on our list of ten attributes of emotionally skilled players affects competition:

1. **Composure** is the capacity to manage the ebb and flow of emotion in the process of match play. Anger, frustration, or disappointment can undo a player. While emotional arousal is necessary, spikes and valleys in composure are especially problematic in table tennis. The short time frames and instability of the environment require presence. Composure can be trained. Dwelling on past emotions undoes the balance required for poised play. Identifying for the player the loss of judgment and perceptiveness for a player is a mental component of the skill. Attending to the physical signs of composure loss, acting out, gestures, and body language supports balance.
2. **Confidence** is critical to high level performance. Racket speed diminishes, timing goes off, and judgment is slowed when confidence dwindles. Confidence can be practiced with the support of a coach. In applying drills, the coach can support the player in a high percentage success rate, then push the player until a high level of failure threatens confidence, then work on attitude in that moment. In practice matches players can do the same by limiting their range of shots so that victory is unlikely, yet maintain a positive attitude in the ability to execute under threatening circumstances.
3. Fear is at the root cause of most emotional failure. Some fear failure, others loss of power or humiliation. While it is not the job of the coach to offer therapy to a player, identifying that which a player fears supports demystifying it. "You fear loss?" You've lost before and recovered. You have the skill. Now you just need to accelerate the process. **Fearlessness** is an emotional state which can be built like a muscle and sustained through practice and training.
4. The ability to narrow the range of attention through **focus** is critical to achievement. There is a huge amount of relevant detail between two players in a match. Failure can occur in two ways. First, too high a level of arousal can make events outside the playing area distracting. Second, an insufficiency of attention to what is going on within the match can cause a player to miss important factors.
5. **A relaxed approach** to the game supports the loose musculature and absence of reactivity (fear-based responses). A relaxed approach is natural to some, but it can be trained by those for whom it is not innate. Slowing down the pace of play, relaxing muscles that tend to be tense, breathing long and deeply, all can support developing this skill.
6. "Arousal level" is the expression used to describe a player's level of emotional engagement in a match. If the player is not sufficiently aroused, play will be flat and the competitor unresponsive. If the player is too aroused, the player can become overly emotional. An **appropriate arousal level** is critical to alert responsive table tennis.
7. TT is characterized by unstable environments. The opponent can change the spin environment, the speed environment, the placement and depth of shots, and the sequence of shots. A willingness to recognize opponent's changes and willingness to change one's own unsuccessful tactics and approaches are hallmarks of the **adaptability**.
8. The capacity to select and permutate from amongst the many choices available to a well-trained player identifies creativity. Under stress creative players note their environments more observantly and imagine what might be. In any activity involving changing environments, **creativity** is significant.
9. **Resilience** is underappreciated. When negative outcomes occur, whether points games or matches are lost, the ability to rebound and perform with optimism and enthusiasm defines how the player contends with the ups and downs of match play.

10. A discrete emotional skill is the capacity to apply all the components above consistently. Lapses in performance diminish outcomes. **Consistency** involves remaining poised, even when one or more of the components of emotional skill are challenged, maintaining balance and attention to the tasks of the game despite suboptimal outcomes.

3 Stages of Learning

The difference between those naturally endowed with poise and those of us developing it is that we are learning a new set of skills, some of which are counter-intuitive for us. Learning new skills requires a systematic process and should be given the appropriate time to develop. Each will require the three stages of learning to be implemented:

1. **Unlearning:** When someone already knows a way to do something, then a space for learning must be created prior to new information being introduced. Novice TT players are often easier to teach than those who have learned incorrectly. However, we all have emotional responses to stressors, so anyone who is struggling with unhelpful emotional states needs to unlearn prior to learning. Unlearning involves challenging the physical practices (tight muscles, negative talk, etc.), mental practices (misguided beliefs and comforting wrong ideas), and emotional states (fear, frustration, etc.)
2. **Learning:** Once a person has begun the process of emptying themselves of negative physical, mental, and emotional practices, learning can begin. Systematic learning requires a plan. New goals should be established for the player. These goals should be small, incremental, and detailed, not simply, "Calm down!" Over a period of time, positive physical, mental, and emotional habits should replace the corrosive ones. These should be practiced and trained in controlled environments of practice matches, every match having a limited goal, e.g., no self-talk, active feet, or contained focus.
3. **Integration:** Once learning has occurred and the player has entrenched healthy conscious behaviors and states of mind to replace the previously deleterious ones, then the process of applying **beyond technique** in competitive circumstances begins. Like a musician who painstakingly strings together sequences of notes and self-consciously practices difficult transitions, the player now must to abandon control and let the new practices find their place in the unstable environments of match play. New physical, mental, and emotional practices support new emotional resources in becoming intuitive.

We'll use this model for learning as we introduce the ten attributes of emotional skill and discuss how the three stages might apply to each one.

Part 2: The Skills

1. Composure

Composure: calmness especially of mind, manner or appearance

Merriam-Webster

Composure is the capacity to manage the ebb and flow of emotion in the process of match play. Anger, frustration, or disappointment can undo a player. While emotional excitement is necessary to high performance, spikes and valleys in composure can undo the capacity to process and perform during the flow of play.

The short time frames between shots and between points, and instability of the environment requires rapid mental processing. When composure is lost, a player displays frustration, anger, and displeasure. While there is a need to express and release emotion between points and during matches, a "meltdown" is almost always a prelude to a decrease in the ability to perform.

In the few seconds that elapse between points in a table tennis match, a player has several tasks to accomplish. Releasing the emotional intensity of the last exchange, whether it is the exuberance of success or the dismay of failure, is important. Next, the previous point needs to be understood and assimilated by the player: "Was the point won or lost by luck, good strategy, or a flaw in the opponent's game? If the point was lost, was it a result of doing the wrong thing, or was it the right thing being done poorly?"

A player involved in extended emotional outbursts is using up valuable time that might otherwise be used for important analysis and for preparing emotionally for the next point.

The steps for recovery are:

1) Emotional release – a reaction that completes the emotional arc of the point

2) Diagnosis – an accurate analysis of **the principal cause of the result** of the previous point

3) Prescription – a ready corrective response to analysis

4) Mental/emotional balancing – recreating open readiness for the next point

Many people think of composure as a "grace" – either you have it or you don't. But poise can become the everyday fare of the astute player and coach, a set of skills and habits to be trained, practiced, and improved. Between shots, between points, between games, and between matches are the spaces where the greatest learning can occur; these are the moments when the experiences of the past are integrated and evaluated in preparation for improved future performance.

Composure keeps those spaces available for important player activities. It's important to remember that loss of composure is most often a person's frustration with the feeling of powerlessness. To change that behavior the player must not be shamed into improved performance through negative imperatives. They must be empowered by being offered a set of more effective behaviors!

There are three phases to learning composure: 1) **unlearning** existing habits, 2) **learning** new habits, and 3) moving beyond training, **integrating** new skills intuitively.

Unlearning:

While a coach might not be able to convince a player to be unemotional, the coach can inform the player that many responsibilities are neglected during extended outbursts. Once the player recognizes that they are neglecting important activities, the spaces become available for new information to be instilled.

Learning

Listing the activities that need to happen between points, release, diagnosis, prescription, and recovery offers the player a set of tasks to replace the outbursts and become truly powerful in the flow of play. This is attractive to anyone struggling with a sense of powerlessness. These tasks should be clear and measurable.

Note that the player displays loss of composure *between* points, so filling that time with meaningful activities is an important aspect of training. Each activity should be explained in detail:

1. Release the emotion of the previous point as quickly as possible. Exhaling might be enough. If not, a grunt of disapproval or a whoop of exuberance won't take too long.
2. Analyze what happened. Was the point won or lost through the player hitting a good shot, by an opponent error, through a successful tactic, or by luck?
3. What does this imply for the next point? Should focus be increased? Is there a technical flaw? Should a new tactic be employed?
4. Once a prescription has been made, right or wrong, it's time to forget the previous point and prepare an appropriate physical, mental, and emotional balance for the next.

Initially these will be difficult for a player entrenched in negative emotional outbursts, but with a coach's support and intervention the steps can be followed and entrenched as thoughtful replacements for emotional outbursts. The player should be rewarded for small improvements in accomplishing the tasks and maintaining composure.

It is not so important that the diagnoses and prescriptions are correct but that they are done at all and come to replace destabilizing outbursts.

This builds new habits and leaves little time for meltdown. Improvements in diagnosis and prescription can be gradually introduced, but these are **mental skills** and should be improved distinctly, and synergistically with the development of the **emotional skill** of composure which involves replacing excessive emotional outbursts with measured productive processes.

The process of learning new emotional and mental habits can take weeks or months and should be a clear focus of player training as detailed as learning a new stroke.

Integration

Once the steps are being accomplished regularly and that the player has developed thoughts and belief systems consistent with composure (mental skill) and demeanor consistent with composure (physical skill), then the player should be turned loose from the conscious repetition of the steps. With healthy composure, emotional expression will become a natural part of the flow of play, the player understanding the costs and benefits of outbursts.

2. Confidence

Confidence: a feeling or belief that you can do something well or succeed at something

Merriam-Webster

Confidence is critical to high level performance. When confidence dwindles, racket speed diminishes, timing goes off, and judgment is slowed. As an emotional skill, confidence is that special sense that "things will turn out fine." With confidence, muscles relax, inner conflicts dissolve, indecisiveness is gone, and the player moves forward without hesitation.

Through the process of training any specific physical or mental skill, confidence builds as positive results accumulate. The acceptance that what was once an unlikely outcome has become a familiar and expected result supports the player's attention moving on to other matters. With confidence in one's skill set, other variables in the environment become the subject of the player's attention.

Confidence is a product of good systematic training but it is also a necessarily variable emotional state during play. When trained practices do not result in predicted outcomes, either due to an opponent's skill or to the failure of training to effectively mimic playing environments, confidence must ebb and flow to support effective adaptation.

However, confidence cannot be exclusively attached to winning, or it will fluctuate causally along with results. So we will divide the attribute into two components. We will think of "proximate confidence" as confidence in a particular skill and "ultimate confidence" as a more generalized belief in self. A confident player might remain in good spirits despite the failure of a particular skill during an event.

The capacity to maintain that buoyancy through the ups and downs of match play supports the many interoperative physical, mental, and emotional skills developed in training. Thus, it is a discrete attribute that should be trained and practiced along with other play behaviors.

Unlearning

Those who lack confidence tend to believe that it is the exclusive property of those who win. But confidence is not a consequence of success! It is an inner state of optimism. As an inner state it is the purview of the individual and can be built by the individual. Confidence is the belief that we can meet our goals. The intelligent player has small, manageable, and changing goals both during matches and in a career as an athlete.

Learning

If victory is the exclusive measure of the player's inner state, then confidence will ebb and flow with every ripple in performance. A consistent state is desirable; thus, a player must control confidence by developing a creative flexibility with regard to goals. Flexibility with goals is the key to building healthy confidence.

1. In each practice session the player and coach should have manageable goals. When learning a loop drive, landing a high speed/spin shot in the corner is the ultimate goal. But the proximate goal might be to create high racket speed. Next, it might be to create spin. When that is achieved, then landing the shot on the table is in order. Movement might be added. Placement of the developed shot might be next once all of the previous goals have been achieved. Finally the totality of the shot type is introduced as the new goal. Now, a new shot type might be "confidently" introduced into match play.

2. In match play it will be the goal of the opponent to break down the confidence of the player by introducing variables. The speed, spin, and placement of the ball plus deception destabilize the environment. When the trained skill fails, confidence can ebb. The player then must consciously deconstruct the training process, analyzing the circumstance, and once again create manageable goals. For example, if inability to read spin is causing the result, then the proximate goal might be to successfully read spin. Once that has been achieved, then a new goal of executing the desired shot might be reinstated.

3. The player has been introduced to the idea of confidence construction. Practicing the skill of goal changing should be taken as seriously as any other skill. If confidence fails, it is a failure in an emotional skill of the player and needs more training.

Integrating

An inner state of optimism associated with judicious choice making and executing processes effectively within a player's skill level can be practiced with the support of a coach. In applying drills, the coach can create an environment where the player has a high percentage success rate; then by increasing challenge, the coach can push the player until a high level of failure threatens confidence. This is when the player can practice shifting perspectives to the more manageable variables available in that moment.

In easy practice matches players can do the same by limiting their range of shots so that victory is unlikely, yet they can maintain a positive attitude about the ability to execute shot types, movement, and a tactical plan. It should *not* be the ongoing responsibility of the coach to sustain a positive attitude in a player. The player must internalize the process of *flexibly creating manageable goals* and sustaining a fluid sense of confidence throughout the processes of training and competition.

Maintaining optimism with regard to goals is a foundation of good performance. We cannot change the opponent's skill level but we can change our goals.

3. Fearlessness

Fearless: not afraid: very brave

Merriam-Webster

Fear is at the root cause of most emotional failure. Some people fear failure, others loss of power or humiliation. While it is not the job of the coach to offer therapy to a player, identifying that which a player fears supports demystifying it. "You fear loss? You've lost before and you've recovered. You have the skill! Now you just need to accelerate the process." **Fearlessness** is an emotional state which can be built like a muscle and sustained through practice and training.

The biggest misconception in building this skill is to confuse fearlessness with courage. A person might have the courage to face a lion but will do so with great fear! Just because you can do something doesn't make you fearless.

Fearlessness is not a state in which we overwhelm fear. *Fearlessness is a state in which the mind and body are free of fear.*

Unlearning: *Courage is not fearlessness.*

We tend to relate to fear as something that should either be hidden or overwhelmed. Fearing fear renders it very hard to manage. Fear is a natural and highly adaptive aspect of our humanity. When someone strikes a projectile with great force towards us from ten feet away, we very naturally flinch at the "cracking" sound and violence of the delivery. Unfortunately, if the projectile is a hollow plastic ball, the flinch tenses muscles, making it much less likely that we will be able to respond quickly and appropriately.

Fear is not something to be ashamed of and hide. Exposing fear is safe (especially in a game like table tennis). To train the mind and body to shed fears and the instinctive fight or flight responses which limit our options is a manageable task. The expression "fight or flight" itself illustrates the notion of limited options. Under perceptions of imminent threat, people will tend to abandon a multitude of potential responses to circumstances and prepare to either strike out or flee with accompanying increased heart rate, rapid breathing and muscle tension.

Table tennis is a form of symbolic combat where rapidly changing variables require quick decisions selected from a plethora of responses:

The ball is half long just off the end of the table. Should I push it back short with no spin, add heavy underspin, sidespin to a corner, attack the ball with high racket speed and topspin, or perhaps flat hit adding high speed at the top of the bounce to end the point?

In the split second a ball is traveling from an opponent's racket across the net, a decision has to be made based upon a player's physical position, the height, speed, spin and location of the ball, the player's repertoire of shot types and skill level, an opponent's capacity to respond, and the opponent's weaknesses. The more time a player processes, the more information is gathered and added to informing the decision-making process.

However, if a player enters fight or flight mode, a very quick early decision is made with little information, largely based upon the player's instinctive tendencies to respond to stress. In table tennis this usually manifests in favoring one or another of the modes by which we manage energy. We might "fight" by striking out with great racket speed with little thought to control. We might "curl up" and become tentative nudging the ball back, trying to be safe.

Any of these *might* be an effective response. However, a fear-based response will tend to be made without regard to the many factors at play. An adept opponent will recognize the triggered player's limitation in choice options and exploit it, often rendering the player still more fearful and even less likely to make an informed decision.

This is the meltdown.

Fear steals time. Fearlessness extends the time in which a player might make decisions.

Learning: *Visualize, accept, and recover.*

Becoming fearless requires acknowledging the outcomes we fear most, accepting them as possible, recognizing we'll survive them and recover if they happen, and moving on. Most players fear failure, humiliation, and loss. Those fears manifest in a variety of symptoms: accelerated heartbeat, tight muscles, limited options, and extreme fight or flight type reactions.

A common sports psychology suggestion is positive visualization. In this scenario the player envisions a positive outcome to stressful events again and again until the player believes in the outcome sufficiently strongly to perform despite inner fears of failure. This is a formula for overwhelming fear. Our goal, however, is to *eliminate* fear.

1. Prior to competition (opposite to positive visualization exercises) the player can visualize failure in the worst context possible.
2. The player is coached to mindfully observe the mental and physical manifestations of the fear.
3. Once that visualization is complete, the player can then visualize their recovery from that failure and the return of calmness. Since this has occurred many times before (since we've all lost), it is a known and manageable process.
4. Now the player prepares for competition. If fear remains, repeat the process.

We've all spent lifetimes learning the skill of recovery from loss. There are steps which we can practice and accelerate until they can be used in match time to manage fear.

Repeating this process as often as necessary, mindfully observing the physical and mental manifestations of incoming fear as well as those which accompany its departure, is an education in fearlessness. With patience and gentle nudging, the player can become less fearful of loss and gradually acquire the ability to notice the rise of fear and manage its symptoms.

Integrating: *Play like a child.*

Fear is a natural and healthy protective response to threat. However, when fear inhibits performance, it becomes maladaptive. Hidden fear is a powerful force to contend with. Exposed fear is a manageable, natural response to stressful circumstances.

Table tennis is not dangerous and so it is an ideal venue to confront, experience, evaluate and embrace that which we spend so much of our lives hiding from. Once the fearful charge behind a circumstance is embraced, the charge will dissipate.

The most important symptom of fear is the loss of options. Great table tennis players do not have the maximum number of possible shot types, but they have lucid, fearless responses to the maximum number of environments they encounter. Integrating fearlessness means coming to enjoy that feeling of free fall, open to success or failure – in the truest sense, like a child playing.

4. Focus

Focus: a state or condition permitting clear perception or understanding

Merriam-Webster

The famous film-maker, Akira Kurosawa, once said, "Being an artist means never averting your eyes." One of his most notable movies, *Rashoman*, describes an incident witnessed from seven different points of view, each retelling biased by the self-interested perspective of the viewer.

The ability to expand and narrow the range and subject of attention through focus is critical to achievement in table tennis. There is a huge amount of relevant detail between two players in a match. Discerning the deceptive from the real, the relevant from the irrelevant is the task of focus.

Too broad a field of focus can make events outside the playing area distracting. Too narrow a field of focus and important information will slip away unnoticed. Biased attention to the wrong aspects of the game can also occur. Maintaining a fluid, mobile focus which readily adjusts to the unstable realities of a match is a developing skill.

While we often think of focus as a mental skill, we will consider the attribute as having three aspects: *how we focus* is a set of **physical skills** involving eye movement and field of perception; *that which we focus on* will be the subject of **mental skill**; and *the state which supports focus* will be discussed as the emotional component of the skill.

Training mental skill, the coach might point out appropriate targets for focus, e.g., "When the server tosses the ball up, *do not* watch the ball but watch the racket for contact!" and "When the ball is traveling toward you, watch the ball. When the ball is traveling away from you, watch *your opponent's behavior*."

For physical skill a coach might encourage the player to open eyes wide. Gaze at the racket. Narrow your focus. Or broaden your field of focus.

As an emotional skill, focus has to do with the capacity to modulate the range of focus around and within the field of play. A person making noise in the bleachers is not of equal interest as the sound of an opponent striking the ball. Within the field of play, healthy curiosity supports a learning environment balancing between the two **player shot responsibilities**:

The first responsibility is managing the characteristics of the oncoming ball; the second is creating the appropriate characteristics for the outgoing ball. Focus must be manageable and agile in moving between these responsibilities.

Unlearning: *Effective focus is agile***.**

Players lose focus for many reasons, such as over-arousal, fear, external stimuli, wrong locus of attention, and exhaustion. Emotions which lead to loss of focus are discussed under their own headings. However, the skill of focus itself should be addressed independently. Like other emotional skills, focus is not an on/off capacity.

If focus is at a high level but entirely committed to executing a player's intentions, then important information about the environment can be missed. Training focus to be intent but agile is critical to supporting adaptive play.

Learning

Focus can be thought of as a range of attention with two distinct "controls." The two controls are *amplitude* and *breadth*. Amplitude of focus is the sheer intensity of focus during a match. This is the familiar attribute coaches refer to when they say "Focus!" to a player whose attention is wandering. Observing the quantity of focus (amplitude), the player might aspire to 100%.

The breadth and target of focus is quite distinct. Information sources move from the opponent's body relationships to ball and table (first player shot responsibility) to the ball itself to the player's own intentions (second player shot responsibility). The agility to move between the two is vital. For the coach, supporting a player in developing agile focus requires a very distinct process of training.

Training should mimic the dynamics of match play:

1. Introducing a new shot type, at first the player focuses on technique and then movement (physical skill).
2. Very soon the coach varies the amount of the given spin to engage **judgment** (mental skill).
3. Finally, the shot type is introduced in dynamic sequences that would be found in match play (emotional skill).

Following a model of this sort in training everything from technique to tactics trains a healthy emotional state of focus in the player. A high level of attention is present, but it comes from a place of curiosity and agility.

Any other mental or emotional failure such as fear or loss of composure might limit ability to have fluid focus. These should be addressed in concert with focus training. Mental failures such as preconceived ideas about the game or the player's own capacities can inhibit improvement.

If we can enter the field of play with acceptance and composure, then training focus agility and the constant adjustments between the player shot responsibilities becomes manageable.

Integrating

If training is always completed in a creative unstable match-like environment, then consistent focus in match play will follow. Those who are trained in a repetitive abstract environment without sufficient variables to stimulate **judgment** will struggle to maintain their training focus on the match floor.

When integrating this skill, or struggling with focus in match play, always remember the two player shot responsibilities. The capacity to respond results from agile focus shifting between the two.

5.A Relaxed Approach

Relaxed: calm and free from stress, worry, or anxiety: not worried or tense

Merriam-Webster

Quoted in an interview late in his career, the great Waldner listed as one of the keys to his success, "I adopted a relaxed playing style."

He *adopted* a relaxed playing style! Apparently, Waldner studied contemporary high functioning athletes in other sports and chose this approach as the best way to develop his table tennis game. That amazing relaxed approach to the game we witness is not inborn and unchangeable. While nature might play a part, nurture is a working component of this skill.

A relaxed approach to the game supports the loose musculature and absence of reactivity (fear-based responses) required for creative, effective play. A relaxed approach is natural to some, but it can be trained in those for whom it is not innate.

Unlearning: *Tension is rarely a useful response.*

For those of us who are not naturally relaxed there is an innate sense that tension is self-protective. When we are tense, we feel primed for action. Vigilance and flexed muscles brace us for impact. Tension is part of a fight or flight package.

Tension is one kind of response to threat, but in table tennis, rarely an effective one.

Given that the table tennis environment (like so much in life) is unstable, being prepared for any single or limited variety of responses excludes many other optional responses. One of the key distinctions our humanity endows upon us is our capacity to respond in various ways to the changeable environments around us. A relaxed approach is the best preparation for that.

Learning: *Play like you train!*

There is an old saying amongst table tennis players: "Train like you play!" The implication is to bring all the focus and seriousness of match play to the training floor. Otherwise, training tends to be an exercise session which fails to translate to effective match play. Thus, all great coaching and training ultimately mimics the competitive environment.

For the purposes of learning a relaxed approach to table tennis, we suggest a different aphorism: *"Play like you train!"*

In practice we can learn to relax, avoid concerns with outcomes, and enter that transcendental state where we attempt shots without fear of consequences. Without those feared consequences – loss, embarrassment – the player is free to commit to a process for the sake of learning.

Relaxation during competition has distinct emotional, mental to the physical aspects. The emotions associated with competition – anxiety, anticipation, fear, etc. – are all focused on the importance of outcomes, resulting in elevated heartbeat, shallow breathing and tense muscles.

In training and in practice matches, a new goal can be created to replace the competitive goal of victory. Much like training a backhand topspin, the discreet goals can become *reduced emotional anxiety, calm thought processes, and relaxed muscles*. So success might become *achieving a sequence of shots with very little tension*, rather than winning a point, game or match.

With these new goals, mindfulness, and consistent practice, appropriate levels of relaxation will reduce anxiety, limit fearful thoughts, and produce relaxed quick muscles ready to respond upon command. Introducing relaxed point play into training will begin the practice of relaxed match play. As the skill improves, it can be introduced into practice matches.

It is important to focus on the goal, which remains to be relaxed rather than to win.

The level of achievement possible for a relaxed player will build confidence in the process until it is ready for competitive match play. Positive associations will ultimately create the idea that tension will make the player unsafe, reducing creativity and quickness. This is a new idea to replace the old (subconscious) idea that tension was self-protective.

Integrating

When a relaxed approach is introduced to match play, the player has already developed extensive experience self-monitoring emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. When tension rises, players become sensitized to the manifestations of anxiety and can choose to slow the pace of play.

Then a series of mnemonics can come into play: Relax those key muscles you've become aware of in your training (the shoulders, the hands, etc.) and bounce on the feet. Slow deep breaths release tension. The illusion of control that tension once brought you is just a distant voice. Now the new relaxed approach has become an ally to releasing those amazing shot making abilities that once were only available in practice.

6. Appropriate Arousal Level

Arouse: to stimulate to action or to physiological readiness for activity

Merriam-Webster

A relaxed approach to the game or any stressful circumstance does not mean a low energy, enervated approach. "Arousal level" is the expression used to describe a player's level of emotional engagement in a match. If the player is not sufficiently aroused, play will be flat and the competitor unresponsive. If the player is too aroused, the player can become reactive and over emotional. An **appropriate arousal level** is critical to alert responsive table tennis.

Unlearning

Competitors are often judged on "intensity." The more intense they are, the more competitive they are deemed to be. As we've illustrated, emotional skill is comprised of many interoperative attributes. Intensity as some sort of grand volume control for all emotions offers an oversimplified view of arousal level.

We might need to increase the intensity of focus yet decrease muscular tension. We might want to relax our intensity about what we're trying to achieve yet increase our interest in what an opponent is attempting. So arousal level can be thought of as a sense of engagement in a set of particular tasks.

Learning

We've all felt "flat" in competition. We've all also felt over-excited by match play and realized we need to bring it down. "Relax!" Suddenly your feet don't move. "Amp it up!" Now you're jumping the gun and guessing what your opponent might do. Your opponent picks up on that and does something different. Over-arousal is not responsive.

So arousal is not just one attribute. Managing appropriate arousal levels could be thought of as a sound engineer's "mixing board" where controls for a large set of functions is available.

1. Visual focus: With too low an arousal we don't notice what the opponent is doing. With too high arousal we narrow our focus too much to support our own intentions of shot.
2. Footwork: With low arousal we are flat footed. With over-arousal we are unstable.
3. Muscle tension: Too low and we are unresponsive. Too high and we are tense.
4. Resilience: Too low and we remain attached to the past. Too high and we forget the past.
5. Creativity: Low and we fail to create. High and we abandon fundamentals.
6. Confidence: Low and we can't commit to our skills. Too high and we don't take the opponent seriously.

One application of arousal unique to match play is the player's response to opponents and circumstances. In competition, players will detect arousal rising and lowering in response both to specific opponents and also to circumstances within matches, and to the stage itself. Hyper-arousal generated from fear can be retrained utilizing the creative visualization process recommended in the earlier section, "Fearlessness."

1. Envision the loss complete with the feelings associated.
2. Recall that you have recovered from such loss before and will again.
3. Note that hyper-arousal will only diminish your results.
4. You have neither won nor lost yet. Return to play fearlessly.

The ability to adjust arousal levels in tense moments can be trained in close practice matches. While finding opponents who are evenly matched enough to create close matches consistently is difficult, limiting your own deception or range of shots in competition against less skilled opponents can create challenging circumstances as often as a player needs them.

Mindfully managing your arousal levels for each of your key attributes even when you can't win a match is great training for maintaining poise under high stress.

Integrating

In an ongoing dialogue between player and coach, the appropriate arousal levels can be fine-tuned for each attribute deemed critical to a player's performance. During coaching, training, and practice matches, interventions can be made by player and coach, noting tendencies, building skills, and increasing or decreasing the "volume control" associated with arousal levels for each attribute.

The key to integrating the notion of appropriate arousal levels for the player is self-knowledge. Once the player is attuned to the detailed application of arousal level, observation and application in match play occurs naturally and intuitively.

7. Adaptability

Adaptable: able to change in order to fit or work better in some situation or for some purpose

Merriam-Webster

Biologists have coined and expression “the Red Queen Effect” to describe the arms battle which takes place between predator and prey in the evolution of species. The expression is based upon Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*. In the story a naive Alice discovers herself in a new magical world, running as fast as she can beside the Red Queen. Arriving at their destination, Alice notes they are just where they started. The Red Queen responds, “In this place, Alice, it takes all the running you can do just to stay in the same place.”

In the adaptive arms race of evolution, when a predator changes ability or tactics, prey is naturally selected by survivability for adaptive appropriate responses.

Part of what we love about table tennis is that it is characterized by similarly unstable environments. The opponent is often changing the spin environment, the speed environment, the placement, depth and sequence of shots, pace of the match, and tactical approach. A willingness to recognize opponent’s changes and the ability to change one’s own selections, tactics, and approaches are hallmarks of **adaptability**.

Unlearning: *Remember the Red Queen.*

We praise behaviors in players such as “sticking with the plan” or attributes such as “knowing yourself,” but in unstable environments, being observant and a willingness to change the plan are equally valuable attributes. We identified two player shot responsibilities, the first relating to managing the characteristics of the oncoming ball, the second to do with creating the shot of your choice. A player who intransigently plays with attention only to the second responsibility can rarely compete with a creative adaptive opponent.

Learning

As with most emotional skills, there is a mental component of adaptability and an emotional part. *What you do* when you adapt is idea-based. Your willingness and propensity for making adaptive changes during match play is an emotional state.

Players who lack adaptability rarely note what the opponent is doing. This skill can be developed by the coach, not so much by telling the player what is happening and what to do about it (mental skill) but by asking the player to analyze what is happening when circumstances change. Making an analysis and developing the openness and habit of doing so is the first step. Making a *correct* analysis is the second (mental) step. Adjusting behavior (physical skill) is the third step.

Whether the player is simply entrenched in an unsuccessful approach to a match or failing to respond to opponent’s tactical changes, a process of training should begin. In practice matches the coach might change the environment and note whether the player responds appropriately. If not, the process of coaching adaptability can occur in steps:

1. Ask what the player has noted. The player must be paying attention. This is the basic skill. *Players with a lack of emotional adaptability will often have noted nothing*. It is important for the player to begin the process of noting. Even if their analyses are wrong, they are performing well if they have any observation at all. This is an activity which should be rewarded and developed *even without correct analyses*.
2. Once the player is noticing opponent changes during matches or their own failure, then the quality of those observations becomes relevant. Is the opponent simply better? Has a tactic changed? Is some obvious weakness being missed? Could a distinct alternate approach be effective? This is the mental component and is much more readily trained when the emotional component is present.
3. Making the adjustments is the physical application of adaptability. It should be practiced and its success or failure observed and noted for future possible adaptations.

While adaptability clearly has a large mental component, the willingness to adapt is an emotional state requiring courage. We hold onto the familiar because we know the outcomes. When we change what we are most comfortable with, we are challenged emotionally. Some are comfortable with the process and readily adapt. Others find it unfamiliar and stressful. For them, each of the three aspects should be trained in sequence.

It is nearly impossible to get someone to adapt who fears change. The emotion comes first.

Integration

Build and maintain individualized mnemonics for players to refer to when things are not going well, such as a) Take inventory, b) Make an adaptive plan, c) Put it in play, d) Evaluate, and e) Repeat. This will build the "adaptive muscle" until it becomes second nature. Players should have adaptive abilities during points, between points, between games, and between matches. Each process should be constructed with respect to the appropriate timeframes.

8. Creativity

Creativity: the ability to make new things or think of new ideas

Merriam-Webster

The capacity to responsively select and permutate from amongst the many choices available to a well-trained player identifies creativity. Under stress creative players note their environments more observantly and imagine what might be. In any activity involving changing environments, **creativity** is a significant asset.

Great creativity does not happen in a void. An alert, open, curious mind observes and takes in the variable factors in an environment and intuitively constructs possible responses. Arriving at the table with "ideas" does not constitute great creativity. Simply permutating the things you can already do throughout the match misses the dynamic essence of the process.

Unlearning: *You can't create if you're not curious.*

Curiosity is the first half of the creative process. In table tennis, there are few intrinsically "great shots" independent of the opponent's position and skill level. With a small table, a light ball, and some skill, almost any shot can be returned if an opponent is prepared for that shot. The effectiveness of a shot as measured by its speed, spin, placement, and deception is multiplied by its relevance to circumstance.

Arriving at the table "with an idea" is good. Arriving at the table with curiosity backed by ideas is better.

Learning: *Observation is about what is; creativity is about what might be.*

Creativity has two central components of curiosity and creation. The first phase of curiosity is gathering information which is the ground in which creative ideas grow:

1. Curiosity informs a player: Arriving at the table to serve or receive without reference to the opponent's unique set of skills, skill level, body relation to table, and circumstances of the match reduces the potential for effective, creative outcomes. In training curiosity in a player who tends to play unilaterally, the coach can stop a practice match and ask for observations.
2. Detailed curiosity about the ball is the single most important factor in the playing environment. Physical training of the eyes, where to focus, what to watch, and when to watch can support developing this disposition. The focus of curiosity should be mobile: As the ball approaches us, we remain curious about the ball. As the ball returns to the opponent, we become curious about the opponent's behavior as it predicts their intentions.

Great players often spend the early portion of matches less intent upon their own shot intentions while observing opponents, learning the quantity and quality of their spins, placement patterns, and tactics. They are informing themselves. Then they create.

The second phase of creativity requires fearlessness. We let go of the familiar and allow our minds to explore reality in a new way. Creativity is a unique emotional state evolving in stages:

1. An orientation in principles: While factual knowledge (in table tennis, techniques, tactics, etc.) are building blocks, underlying principles inform us in those ways that support intuitive processes.
2. Preparation of options: For each circumstance the player prepares an array of possible responses. This is a coaching and training activity. Recombining and experimenting are part of this process.
3. Suspending decision-making: The creative process is over the moment a decision is made. The longer the final decision on implementation remains unmade, the greater the potential for alternate views to cycle through the creative mind.

Creative processes are both technical and intuitive. The most important part of a coach's job is asking the important questions which stimulate the process and support the player in evaluating results.

Integration: *Staying open to possibilities*. . . .

Creativity is not simply permutation. It is a state in which a player is open – not to just anything but to experimenting with a set of useful tools to solve a multi-variable equation. Einstein once commented that he was not smarter than other mathematicians. He just stayed with problems longer. The acknowledgement of the limits of your knowledge, combined with the willingness and openness to consistently explore and learn, are the fertile grounds in which creativity grows.

9. Resilience

Resilient: able to become strong, healthy, or successful again after something bad happens

Merriam-Webster

George Santayana said, "Those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it." We need to understand and assimilate both successful and unsuccessful results in order to improve our outcomes. Learning and integrating that knowledge is power.

But the dropped head, heavy feet, and wallowing of an emotionally defeated player combine to perpetuate failure. They undo thoughtful approaches to a match, and, over the long term, to improving at the sport. While a shot might be ineffective, or a point, game or even a match lost; important goals remain available to the resilient player.

Resilience is an underappreciated and under trained skill. When negative outcomes occur, whether points games or matches are lost, the ability to rebound and perform with optimism and enthusiasm defines how the player contends with the ups and downs of match play.

Undone by an unmanageable quantity of spin, a player might dedicate the process of a losing match to the positive process of understanding the spin by a series of committed responses. Overwhelmed by an opponent's powerful loop drive, a resilient player might adopt the goal of returning serve in different locations to test the opponent's footwork.

While it is critical to learn from the past, it is equally critical to avoid dwelling in the past. A player confused by a point will do better to emotionally set aside the result go, rather than ponder when they should be playing.

Unlearning

Winning cannot be the sole goal of the player. Points, games, and matches can be lost; tactical ideas and experimental strokes can fail. Learning occurs through the differential process of success and failure. Each shot is an opportunity to learn. A player who has ceased learning is the only truly defeated player.

Learning

It is far too common to see players involved in self-recrimination between points: A player yelling at himself "What an idiot!" is not making a diagnosis but rather is creating a self-fulfilling prediction of future performance. In the time it takes to render self-deprecating condemnation, the opportunity for analysis has passed and the next point is about to begin without the thoughtful self-correction needed to adapt to the unstable environments of table tennis.

With a clear understanding of the value of each moment in a match, resilience can be trained, not simply as a "positive attitude" but as a table tennis skill which will facilitate the ongoing process of development. It is natural to suffer from defeat. It is the body's way of saying, "Take note! Something went wrong." In response, the healthy individual learns what is to be learned, then releases the result.

Timing and dedicating the appropriate energy to the goals of recovery are important. We will expand on the four recovery steps introduced in our section on **composure**:

1. Following the completion of a point, the player must first **release** the emotional intensity of the last exchange, whether it is the exuberance of success or the dismay of failure. Remaining too emotionally excited can result in thoughtless aggressive play. Remaining in the diminished intensity resulting from failure of a previous effort can lead to tentativeness. Quickly releasing the emotion of the previous point is the first task.
2. Now comes **diagnosis**. Failure in this task will surely result in an inability to adjust to evolving match circumstances. It is as much the coach's responsibility to train players in accurate self-analysis between points as it is to train them in correct stroke mechanisms.
3. Once a diagnosis has been made, a **prescription** for corrective actions needs to be created. For example, if the player missed an opportunity for offense, then the correct prescription should be, "I must maximize my opportunities." Diagnoses must be linked with prescriptions.
4. When a simple prescription for continuing success or correcting failure has been integrated, **clearing the emotions** and mind is necessary for an instantaneous return to preparedness for the next point. A player dwelling on the results of a previous point, whether emotionally or mentally – locked in a reaction to a past event – is unlikely to be ready to thoughtfully respond the next point beginning.

Astute players know when opponents are locked into the result of a previous point. A player who repeatedly practices a topspin stroke after missing an **underspin** serve is likely to fall victim to a deceptive **topspin** serve. A player who is too "pumped up" after a successful counterattack might respond overly aggressively to a very short, low **nospin** ball.

While it is important to learn from the past, it is critical not to dwell in the past. Good adjustments and just a dash of emotional amnesia come together to prepare a table tennis player to become responsive rather than reactive.

Integration

The steps for resilience are: 1) emotional release – a reaction that completes the emotional arc of the point; 2) diagnosis – an accurate analysis of **the principal cause of the result** of the previous point; 3) prescription – a ready corrective response to analysis; and 4) mental/emotional balancing – recreating open readiness for the next point.

Many people think of resilience as a skill that magically emerges from repeated hardships, but it is a *set* of skills and habits to be trained, practiced and improved.

Between shots, between points, between games, and between matches are the spaces where the greatest learning can occur; these are the moments when the experiences of the past are integrated and evaluated in preparation for improved future performance. That learning is the lifeblood of resilience.

10. Consistency

Consistency: harmony of conduct or practice

Merriam-Webster

A distinct emotional skill is the capacity to apply all the components of emotional skill described above consistently. Lapses in performance diminish outcomes. Consistency involves remaining poised, attending to the tasks of the point, thoughtfully focused, fearless, maintaining an appropriate arousal level, adapting when environments change, confident yet resilient in defeat.

Unlearning

While we think of actions and ideas as *things we do*, we relate to emotions as *things we are*. Our capacity to distance from something supports an "objective approach." Emotions are subjective. They are our experience. They are how we feel. But our emotional states can be known, supported, and transformed. They do not have to be pushed down, overcome or subdued. To overwhelm our emotions is to lose connection with that which moves us as humans.

Learning

Acknowledging our human nature as comprised of sets of physical, mental, and emotional skills creates a baseline for consistency. When we try to train players just physically, they often fail to perform well. When we train them mentally to have "the right ideas," they still often fail to perform to expectations. Emotions are the ground in which mental and physical skills grow.

There are relationships between emotional skills. Composure supports resilience. Creativity supports adaptability. Appropriate arousal levels sometimes upset a relaxed approach. A narrow focus can diminish creativity. Confidence can interact negatively with curiosity.

Training consistency is a fluid process of unlearning predispositions, learning new ones, and integrating them intuitively into optimal performance. Consistency involves monitoring the "emotional mixing board" and keeping the controls regulated appropriately.

Integration

We can think of that mixing board as having ten channels: **composure, confidence, fearlessness, focus, a relaxed approach, an appropriate arousal level, adaptability, creativity, resilience,** and **consistency.**

When performance fails to match training potential, we can look to our "dials." With trained ability to correct suboptimal states, consistency will be created by balancing emotions appropriately to circumstances.

Learning

Part 3: Applications

Fear Itself

Physical, mental, and emotional skills are interoperative, having complex relationships. The physical manifestations are always easiest to see. They are there for the discerning eye. Technical problems are diagnosed by direct observation. Video will often reveal flaws in technique, and an adept coach will readily pick out details.

Mental problems are accessible through observing and interfacing with the player. What are you thinking? What is your plan? Why did you choose that shot type? What is the intention of your shot? Such questions readily elicit a player's mental processes.

We comfortably separate ourselves from our bodies and even our thoughts and thus can readily objectively analyze and create corrective measures for issues which are primarily physical or mental in nature.

Emotion is unique. Our feelings *are* us! Without the ability to separate from our emotional state, we lack objectivity, and often deny what we feel both to coaches and to ourselves. This makes diagnosis and analysis more challenging. There is often shame associated with emotion which causes us to hide our states of being still more.

"Get it together!" or "Calm down!" are imperatives we might hear a coach deliver to a player who is falling apart emotionally. If a player could do this, they already would have. These kinds of directives do little but drive home the lack of control and shame a player already feels at being undone by rampaging feelings.

At the core of many emotional difficulties is a common central theme: fear. When we experience fear, we become reactive. Our muscles tense, we try to anticipate a fearful negative outcome and prepare for it or even respond to it before it is upon us. Fear of loss or powerlessness triggers a very natural fight or flight type response.

Fear-based reactivity does not favor the unstable environments of table tennis.

So there is one way to be poised but many ways to lose poise. Emotionally strong players have full access to their achieved levels of physical and mental skill. Each emotionally suboptimal player symptomatically loses some aspects of their abilities to perform. Whether that is footwork or the ability to read spin, tactics or racket speed; aspects of what that player can do in practice will not manifest in stressful situations in match play.

When a factor of emotional skill is missing a cascade of physical, mental, and emotional consequences occurs. Those skills work and fail in synergistic interaction. Building emotional strength requires addressing these relationships.

The Cause of the Result

A player is in the midst of a match. She misses a shot. Her head droops – lack of **resilience**! Raise your head (physical). Forget the lost point (mental). Regroup (emotional).

She tries again and fails again. She says, "I suck!" – A lack of **confidence**! No self-talk (physical). Remember when you succeeded (mental). Believe (emotional).

A player becomes tentative in match play. He tightens up and his racket speed slows and he loses his topspin – loss of **relaxed approach**! Shake your hands out, loosen shoulders, and bounce on your feet (physical). Remember that racket speed creates safer shots (mental). Let go of fear (emotional).

Each player collapses in match play in a unique way. If there are ten attributes to emotional skill, then any combination of one or more of those ten attributes can result in sub-optimal performance. The manifestations of any of those combinations are unique to each player.

The coach or player needs to identify the very specific attribute which is lacking. Next, they need to identify the unique manifestations of those emotional failures, physical, mental, and emotional. A long term plan should be created for the systematic improvement of these synergistic, interoperative behaviors, and experiential states.

Few take the time to understand the delicate relationship of emotion to our sense of self, or to decompose emotional skill into component elements and address those elements as "techniques," each to be practiced, improved, mastered, and finally integrated.

Emotional Predispositions

Players often become attached to a way of thinking and build skills based upon emotional predispositions.

A player who becomes intimidated by the variety of service spins in the game might focus on shots featuring much topspin in order to compensate for that weakness in mental skill. The shot type makes him feel safe. The ball travels over the net high and lands short, giving a wide margin for error. It defeats lesser players.

If the player becomes emotionally attached to those shot types featuring topspin over speed to respond to everything off the table, it might elevate him to become a quite good player. However, he might never improve beyond that level because he has given up the option of shots featuring speed over spin. His **offensive control** game will fall short when facing players competent at using the spin energy he generates to create their counter attacks.

When the player is challenged by a coach to develop a more speed-oriented variation, he struggles for three types of reasons:

1. Physically, he is trained to respond to off-the-table balls by dropping his racket.
2. Mentally, he believes that he is playing offensively by "attacking" at each opportunity.
3. Emotionally, when he experiences match anxiety, he feels safe with this one shot type.

To change this predisposition the player will have to adjust physically, mentally, and emotionally. New shot types will have to be trained. The player will have to come to believe that speed-oriented shot types are an important option if he wants to improve. Finally, the anxiety which arises during match play will have to be addressed, or his attachment to the shot type will return under pressure.

Deciding which aspect to begin with, we can use our introduced diagnostic method to understand which factor is the **principal cause of the result**. If we try to change the physical behavior and it does not respond in match play, then the principal cause is not physical. If we correct the thinking behind the behavior and it does not resolve, then it is not mental, either. It is emotional.

Even with a clear diagnosis of emotional skill deficit, without a thorough decomposition of "emotional skill" into component parts, it remains unclear where to begin. But we have our ten attributes of poised players: **composure, confidence, fearlessness, focus, a relaxed approach, an appropriate arousal level, adaptability, creativity, resilience,** and **consistency.**

We then need to find which aspect of those ten characteristics of emotional skill has failed. Is the player rushing? Then relaxed approach has failed. Is the player dwelling on lost points? Resilience has failed. Is the player distracted by events in the gym? Focus is lacking. The player who is "losing it" needs to do one thing before all others – regain composure. In an unstable emotional environment little good will happen in table tennis.

Lost Options

When we witness those unique ways a player malfunctions under stress, we can see the behavioral options that player loses first. Training those options and gradually introducing those skills into stressful circumstances can build the metaphoric "muscles" of emotional skill.

Balls coming toward a player have both speed and spin energy – the forward motion of the ball and the rotation of the ball. The player must respond to both energy types and also create the characteristic speed and spin of the outgoing shot. The oncoming ball also has placement to which players must respond with movement. Finally, the opponent might engage deception in executing a shot, so the player must "read" the shot.

A manifestation common to all emotional failure is a characteristic diminishment in options. Feet slow down, focus on spin of the oncoming ball lessens, tactical thinking is compromised, and one or more of the player's options on how to deal with the oncoming speed energy and spin energy is lost.

A loss of options in match play is a clear sign that emotions have been compromised. A player might fail to move, fail to read spin, lose one or more of the **energy action options** available or any combination of those capacities.

The **energy action options** available to a player in regard to speed and spin are **use energy, add energy, reduce energy, or use and add energy**:

1. **Use energy** means using either or both the speed and spin in the approaching ball.
2. **Add energy** means adding to either or both the speed and spin to the approaching ball.
3. **Reducing** energy means reducing either or both speed and spin in the approaching ball.
    1. **Use and add energy** means using and adding to either or both energies in the approaching ball.

When stressed, some players will **add energy** to everything, swinging harder, adding speed and/or spin to all shots. They will favor **offensive** and **offensive control** categories and tend to lose **control** and **defense**. Others will become tentative and lose the **offensive** option and only **use or reduce energy** and find a sense of safety in **control** and **defense**.

Loss of options is symptomatic. It can manifest proximately in match play where a player trained in all aspects of the game loses a portion of their options. This can be coached and modified in practice match play.

More damaging is the loss of options in the long term training the development of a player. In this situation, a player might never develop important skills in the game because those skills are not supported by the player's emotional foundation. This warrants diligent emotional training. Accepting emotional limits as a player's nature limits potential.

Challenge your predispositions!

Conclusion: Playing in the Zone

In my early years of high level tennis competition, I occasionally experienced that epiphanic state people mysteriously call "The Zone." At these moments, time appeared to slow down. Everything on the court would become very clear. My opponent appeared to be moving in slow motion. The ball moved through the air as through honey. My body was balanced and relaxed. I moved into position, looked at my various options, and they seemed to extend to the limitless.

At the time I never understood the nature of these moments. They came and went of their own volition. The Zone was a promiscuous "state of grace" which descended upon me unsummoned and left without permission. It endowed momentary super powers but left me bereft of magic upon its departure. I accepted its blessings and hoped that when the Holy Spirit took over, it'd be the world championships and the camera would be rolling!

Now, forty-five years after my retirement from competitive tennis, through training **emotional skill** it is finally clear to me what The Zone is and how to summon it into being.

Time does not slow down! There is no mystical intervention.

In the absence of fear or any vestige of anxiety, the time available for processing perceptions and making decisions is expanded.

We can make our decisions when the opponent strikes the ball. . . *or if we're fearless, we can watch the ball launch off the racket, move our feet to respond. . . . as the ball crosses the net, we can attend to its trajectory. . . when it*

bounces, we might prepare the racket placement for response. . . as it approaches our own racket, we make further adjustment.

As the ball contacts the rubber, eyes open, gazing at contact, experiencing the dwell time as the ball attaches to the frictional rubber, changes trajectory, then leaves on its course back to the opponent. Our gaze rises, returning to the player on the opposite side of the net, as they prepare for what we have sent their way.

Emotional poise promises magic.