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Neither Bigger Balls Nor Slower Glues

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"Speed glue" is an adhesive which, when used on a table tennis racket, increases the tension of its rubber surface, resulting in better ball spin and greater speed (though less control). Discovered by accident in the 1970s, the substance gained popularity throughout the 80's and even

tually became indispensable to high-level competitors.

A decade later, however, it became clear that the VOCs (volatile organic compounds) present in speed glue were a health hazard. Tournaments provided well-ventilated "gluing rooms" where players could prepare their rackets, but reports of severe reactions continued to surface. In 2008, just after the Olympics in Beijing, the International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF) took decisive action and banned speed glue from tournament play.

Interestingly, this regulatory move occurred during a moment of general concern regarding the sport's obsession with speed. Over more than a half-century, technical advances had driven table tennis to dazzling extremes of velocity and spin, but as the game evolved, its appreciation demanded a similarly evolving specialized knowledge. While thrilling to the initiated, doubts began to surface regarding the marketability of table tennis as a spectator sport.

Ironically, competitive table tennis initially suffered from a lack of speed. At the beginning of the 20th century, the most popular style of play was defensive in nature. Competitors bided their time, waiting for their opponent to make an error, or hoping to surprise them with a particularly unpredictable or clever shot. As a result games could last for hours, and demanded considerable patience on the part of both participants and spectators. At the 1936 world championships in Prague, two players reportedly took over an hour to contest a single point. The following year, the ITTF lowered the height of the net in order to increase the speed and difficulty of play, so matches would be shorter and more exciting.

It was another two decades, however, before a new development truly redefined the sport's relationship to speed. The original table tennis racket was a wooden paddle covered with a thin sheet of rubber, but in 1952, a Japanese player invented a new racket with a layer of sponge-y foam glued between the wooden blade and the

rubber surface. This additional layer not only dampened the sound of the ball hitting the racket, it also drastically increased the speed and spin with which it rebounded. The innovation's effect was swift and definitive:

> The first time I played against sponge it was like being ambushed by an invisible opponent. You couldn't hear his bat on the ball, and because its surface had a mind of its own you couldn't read what kind of stroke he'd played. Fear entered the game. A new unfriendliness. It was as though you didn't exist. You were simply someone the ball had to be driven past at uncanny speed.[1]

This newfound power unleashed a wave of technical innovation as players mastered the complex physics of topspin, backspin, sidespin and corkspin. These possibilities in turn encouraged the evolution of a more offensive game strategy and a preference for extremely short volleys (the "three-ball kill").

By the end of the century, the combination of high-tech rackets and speed glue produced a lighting quick and volatile game demanding an almost inhuman degree of reflex and technique. A service could set the ball spinning at a rate of up to 9000 rpm, and players exchanged hits at a rate of 2-3 per second, with an average of only 3-5 hits per point. Game play was effectively condensed into a series of barely perceptible microbursts. This extreme speed meant only practiced participants could see and appreciate the exchanges. To the casual observer the sport had simply receded into a cloud of invisible virtuosity.

Even before the 2008 speed glue ban, the ITTF was looking for ways to render the sport more accessible through regulation. In 2000, for example, they increased

1 Howard Jacobsen, "Whiff! Whaff! The beautiful game may be coming home," *Independent,* July 16, 2010, http://www.independent.co.uk/sport/general/others/whiff-whaff-the-beautiful-game-may-be-coming-home-2028687.html

the circumference of tournament balls by 2mm, and changed their material from celluloid to plastic. Their goal was to decelerate play, decrease spin, and extend the duration of the average volley in order to produce more viewer-friendly matches.

Still, neither bigger balls nor slower glues have made the game more comprehensible to the general public. Even with decreased speeds, volleys remain extremely short, which makes the game feel un-dramatic and difficult to follow. The ITTF's interventions have been ineffective because they fail to address the strategies that truly shape the nature of the game. Offensive tactics, though honed in the age of speed glue, actually have less to do with speed, and more to do with efficiency and risk management. The "three-ball kill" dominates because the fewer times the ball is exchanged, the fewer chances you have to miss it. This strategy is an effective way to win points, and, in the end, competitive players are not concerned with putting on an entertaining show, they are there to win the game.

It is clear that within the context of competitive table tennis, abandoning offensive strategies is illogical. But, what if that competitive structure were displaced by a more open-ended one? What other strategies might emerge if we removed the imperative to win the game as quickly as possible? And how could this shift in intention transform the experience of play for both participants and spectators?

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In the fall of 2016, as a response to these questions, we proposed a set of experimental rules for playing table tennis:

- Try to keep the ball going as long as possible.

- Modulate speed in order to make the exchange sustainable.
- Stay interested.
- It's okay to miss the ball, just keep going.
- The exchange will end when you decide to stop playing.

We recruited three professional players: Pierre-Luc Thériault, Antoine Bernadet, and Edward Ly. Together we agreed that it would be interesting to see where these new parameters might lead us[2].

2 A video documentation of *Speed Glue* by Simon Grenier-Poirier & Dorian Nuskind-Oder can be accessed at: vimeo.com/224649194