



## **Playing Table Tennis to get fit vs Getting fit to play Table Tennis**

**by Eugene Fusco**

You've all probably heard people say **“I don't need or have time to train, I get all I need from playing the game!”** These same players are also usually the ones you hear exclaiming that they are stuck in a rut, not improving fast enough, if at all, or are suffering from some ailment or are injured all the time!

You've probably heard this saying but never really paid any attention to it as the underlying principle has never been properly explained, so why would you believe or pay any attention to it, right?

In this article I will try to shed some light on which is the best approach and why it should always be the preferred option!

So to start with, I'd like to state the two main things that happen to your body when you play table tennis or any sport for that matter?

1. You train the neural pathways to reduce the energy involved in re-producing the action (playing the stroke), this also strengthens these pathways and
2. You build strength and endurance in the body to enable the stroke to be produced using less energy (becomes less energy intensive).

### **You'll notice that the focus here is energy conservation, so why is this so important?**

Every action the body takes is aimed at becoming more energy efficient which is why you become better at reproducing your strokes over time with practice (I'm sure you've heard the old saying **“practice makes perfect!” well it should say practice makes more energy efficient!**).

This applies whether you are memorising a route (Less chance of you getting lost and having to expend more energy to get to your destination) or learning a new skill, the body and mind evolve to remember the skill and to become more energy efficient at reproducing it in the future.

Everything in nature is in a state of entropy, that is working from a state of high energy to low energy, understanding this principle helps us understand why things happen the way they do and gives us some control over them. e.g. This is why you crave food to restore your energy levels to continue to play your game, as the body is in a constant fight to reserve and restore these energy levels which is why it responds positively to any action that enhances its ability to reserve energy, such as learning a new skill.

So now let's explore the pros and cons of each approach and finish off with a conclusion as to which is best.

### **Let's start with playing Table Tennis to get fit:**

On the face of it, this approach sounds great, it allows you to maximise your training time around your game by focusing all your training effort around the exercise you love and are trying to improve and if done regularly you should reap the benefits from doing regular exercise which includes cardiovascular, lung, musculoskeletal and stress reduction to name but a few.

Ok, that all sounds great, but are there any downsides to this approach and if so what are they?

Firstly, people who use this training method solely tend to neglect stretching (warming up and cooling down) before and after playing and with the modern game incorporating such rapid movements and changes in direction, this can result in a myriad of muscular tears, strains, niggles, aches and pains leading to chronic or sudden injury. Amateur and part-time professional players who hold down day jobs can spend copious amounts of time in bad posture slumped over their computers throughout the day which frequently results in stressed, tight, shortened muscle fibres. Asking their bodies to suddenly cope with the explosive movements of the game, being pulled apart and stressed to their maximum capacity without first being warmed up can lead to injury.

Secondly, playing a sport will strengthen the musculoskeletal system used in the movements of that sport only, all other areas used to support and stabilise the body will be neglected, this can lead to an imbalance over time resulting in chronic injuries and the niggles, aches and pains felt by these players. One such example is Rafa Nadal who is over developed on his playing arm side and has been notably plagued with injuries throughout his career!

Thirdly, playing the game as a means to getting fit or maintaining fitness levels, limits you to your current fitness and playing level, it will not provide you with the physical attributes necessary to progress to or play at a higher level.



## **OK what about getting fit to play Table Tennis:**

Firstly, as you know table tennis is a dynamic sport with lots of quick explosive movements, so you would think that you wouldn't have much need for a high degree of aerobic fitness, but you'd be wrong! The number one rule of any sport is to only train while you can maintain good form, this goes a long way towards injury avoidance and prevention and honing in sharp accurate play. Fatigue is the one thing that limits training most. The more aerobically fit you are, the longer you can practice at the optimal level for improvement. That's where running and other aerobically intensive exercises can significantly enhance your capacity to train.

Secondly, by adding a regular gym routine to your training plan you can target the muscle groups not significantly activated during your sport. By doing so you can bring balance back to your musculoskeletal set-up. You can also focus on the smaller muscle groups necessary to ensure support and stability is maintained in your frame. Another advantage is the ability to provide a controlled loading to muscle groups, enabling you to build extra strength and power into your body which will transfer to your game providing both extra speed and power to your shots.

Thirdly, by incorporating a regular stretching routine into your training plan you can ensure you maintain the required elasticity in your joints and connective tissue (Muscles, Ligaments, Tendons, and Fascia) to avoid injury and have a long and fruitful playing career. It may also help you reach that elusive wide ball!



## **Conclusion**

By training to play you will expose your body to stresses and forces not experienced whilst merely playing the game, this can provide you with a sound playing platform from which to develop your game. It will enable you to build in exercises to increase your aerobic capacity, enabling you to get more out of your playing sessions and it will also allow you to strengthen your body to avoid injury which is the biggest barrier to most players' progress. There are two words of caution I'd like to finish with. Firstly make sure you have a properly guided training programme. It's very easy to get caught up in the whole gym ethos and get over developed and thereby restrict your range of movement hampering your ability to play fluently, this is where a coach is invaluable and lastly, there is no substitute for actual playing time, having the right physical and mental attributes will go a long way towards your goal but you need to supplement this with quality table tennis training time to get the gains you strive for.