

Officials' View

The Age of Experimentation

By Dr. Azmy

[Note: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of USATT or its officers.]

In the last few months two experiments took place on the International arena. The first experiment was an expected one, an attempt to try the new service rule. In that experiment the umpires were briefed in advance. They were given a document comparing the new and the old law, and explaining the differences. The document included a diagram illustrating the 'Triangle,' which had to be kept clear of the server's body. According to the report by Colin Clemett, the Chairman of the ITTF Rules Committee, the experiment was moderately successful.

The second experiment was surprisingly different. It was with longer tables. They used tables that were 0.5 meters longer, with an area of 0.25 meters on each side of the net that was not part of the playing surface. The immediate impression was that the game became more powerful, more physically demanding, and the rallies longer.

Other changes dealt with the size, weight and color of the ball; the height of the net; the design and material of the rackets; the two-color rule of the racket covering; the specifications of the rubber covering; the dress code; multi-color shirts; etc.

Most of those who promoted these changes were hoping that they will attract TV coverage, recruit more players, attract more audiences, and generate more revenues. Historically most of these changes were sought when the game lost its popularity, that is the ratio of the number of players to the world's population. And more important when the game lost its attractiveness to the audience as well as its own players. It is not uncommon these days to see many players pack and leave the arena once they lose their matches. Final games are not watched by many players participating in the tournament. Gone are the days when college matches attracted 3000 spectators, and national tournaments were watched by 15,000 people.

Speculation about the cause of this decline were attributed to various reasons; the shorter rallies, the high speed of the ball, and the difficulty of returning the serve. All of them are related to each others. The high speed of the ball eliminated the chopping defensive game, and with it the longer rallies. The difficulty of the serve aborted rallies before they got started. It is hard to explain to a non-player audience how a world champion cannot return the serve of another player, or return it so awkwardly that it is easily smashed by his opponent.

One cannot understand why page after page in the TT magazines are advertising nothing but more speedy blades, speedy rubber, and speedy glue. Who said that the sport needed more speed?

Scientific analysis published previously in TT Magazines illustrated that the speed of the ball now is traveling faster than the normal reflexes of a normal human being (to react to it). A sport cannot be limited to those who possess extraordinary reflexes. Research also demonstrated that longer rallies attract the attention of the audience and their interest.

Please do not get offended, the game will never go back to the boring 50 returns a rally as it used to be, although more people were happy to play it and watch it then. All we need is just a little bit slower game, enough to give the defenders as well as the hitters a chance to return the ball, which would lead to longer rallies.

It is very clear that the ITTF is genuinely trying to find ways and means to help the sport. One has to commend the ITTF for its effort, flexibility and willingness to give every possible change a chance.

There are some simple solutions, which have been tried by some Associations. Two of those are a higher net, and no more that 1.0mm sponge.

The U.S. was the Association which lowered the net. Maybe it is time to lead the world again, and try to raise the net 3/4 or 1.0 inch. Let us start some experimental tournaments and put them on videotape for analysis. Let us involve our best players in the country to participate in such experiments. **IT MAY MAKE THE DIFFERENCE WHICH EVERYBODY IS LOOKING FOR.**

Before I close, I would like to keep you informed about the status of the new service rule. Several years ago the U.S. Association introduced a proposal to change the serve to be played in front of the body. The ITTF Rules Committee proposed a similar proposal. When it was debated at the AGM, it came back with the different concepts of the "Triangle" between the ball and the net, and the "Hologram" above it. Several reservations have been raised by players, umpires and associations. The Rules Committee has advised us, especially the U.S., to propose a simpler rule and send it directly to the AGM.

In another indication of the sincerity of the ITTF, President Adham Sharara has written two articles, one in Table Tennis Illustrated and the other in the ITTF Bulletin. He extended an invitation to all Associations and those concerned to send their proposals for possible modifications to the coming AGM.

I am proposing the following rule, **"During the serve no part of the body of the server or his partner can be between or above the ball, resting on his flat palm, and his end line."** This proposal will guarantee that the opponent and the umpires can see the ball all the time, it is easier for the players to understand and for the umpires to apply without the need to figure out the triangle and its hologram.

I will be forwarding the above suggestion for the President and the Board for their approval. Those who have different suggestions, please forward them to the USATT office or to me.