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Table Tennis England

Paper on Performance for National Council Meeting on 16th January 2021

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Towards the end of the last National Council Meeting, after I had expressed disappointment that 'Performance' had not been discussed, the Chair, Estyn Williams suggested that I produce a Paper on the subject, for the January 2021 meeting.

Introduction.

This Paper is intended to review where TTE Performance is now, its strengths, and areas where it seems to me that improvements are needed. These opinions are based on my experiences as a volunteer in leadership positions within national selection and performance over periods from the 1970's onwards, including being Chairman of the ETTA Selection Committee from 1979.

Whilst successes should always be celebrated, problems if any, should be acknowledged. Without that acceptance that there is a problem, a cure will not be found. One problem for English table tennis, at this time, is in the area of Youth Development. All English international successful players that we enjoy today were in the youth development pipeline before the present Performance Team became established. Table Tennis England's apparent lack of ability so far, to develop the next generation of successful England teams, is a worry although there is apparently one cadet boy who is highly rated. My concern is that we are heading for a situation where England could become a third-rate international table tennis nation. This is an early warning; now is the time to do something about it as once the small number of quality international players that we now have retire from our sport, it will take many years to recover. We should not want Liam Pitchford, Paul Drinkhall and Sam Walker to be our last success story.

Summary of key points

1. Review the self-funding for all Under 18 players policy, instigated by the TTE Performance Team. Re-assess the financial situation to discard this policy which is something no current or past senior international had to deal with.
2. A review of the Selection Criteria documents for junior and cadets. A change is needed to allow for judgements by the coaches on players performances in training as well as competition results.
3. England Squads should be selected for juniors and cadets. The squads should be made up from the strongest players in England. Training camps should be compulsory and free for squad players. Selections for competitions should be made from players in the appropriate squad.
4. If self-funding is maintained and it is to an overseas tournament, it should be in small groups (squads) and accompanied by a TTE Performance Coach.
5. Efforts need to be made by the TTE Performance Team to increase the number of quality hours on the table each week for members of the England junior and cadet squads.
6. Improvements need to be made to the TTE Competition structure to be of benefit to the to developing juniors and cadets including their entry into senior events; all to re-invigorate the sport of table tennis as a highly competitive activity.
7. That the TTE Performance Team support these improvements to the Competition Programme by recognising home performances and results as relevant and by having a presence at the main events.

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8. Put more emphasis on the creation of an England **Team** ethos amongst the Under 18 players.

9. The TTE Performance Team need to make allowances for the education of the junior and cadet squad players involved.

10. Remove the ITTF Override for Juniors and Cadets on the TTE Ranking programme, as the players can still compete in weaker ITTF events around the world, do well and attain enough ITTF ranking points to be high on the ITTF, ETTU and therefore the TTE Ranking lists. Consequently, a higher seeding position in the home events.

11. The TTE Performance Team to encourage young English players to wait until the end of their junior career before seeking a position at a European club.

12. The TTE Performance Team, should be given Youth Development targets or set and publish their own.

How, through Youth Development, did we get to where we are now?

Paul Drinkhall was a beneficiary of learning his table tennis, first at Ormesby, then attending the residential ETTA Academy at Nottingham, before going on to the new National Training Centre at EIS Sheffield. These two establishments, managed by Steen Kyst Hansen, the Danish Coach who was the English Performance Director, provided these young players with the coaching and training needed for the number of hours each week, to match the table tennis total experiences that their rivals abroad were getting.

As Under 15 cadets, Liam Pitchford and Sam Walker, every four to five weeks along with the best under fifteen English players, came together to train as the ETTA Youth Development Squad at Ford Hall, Lilleshall, with a coaching and sparring team led by Carole Moore, from 10am on a Saturday to 4pm on Sunday. Everything, all food, accommodation, training facilities, staff costs were all provided for a cost of only fifty pounds per player. That was the only charge made to players towards any training or competitive activity made by the ETTA Selection team.

Liam was still at Primary School at that time. This activity enhanced the table tennis training at their local clubs. At the YDS, quality sparring partners, including Des Douglas took part. Present day successful players such as Tin Tin Ho, Maria Tsaptsinos, David McBeath, Chris Doran, Ross Wilson and Kim Daybell were also part of the YDS squad.

When they became juniors, Liam and Sam lived close enough to EIS Sheffield to gain huge benefit from the quality training facilities on offer and the coaching of Jia Yi Liu. The worrying thought is that a look at the list of players mentioned in the above paragraphs, tell us that none of them are new to success, having attained some notoriety before 2014, which was before the present Performance Team personnel, apart from Alan Cooke, were put in place.

Many years before this, in the 1980's without any National Centre, another way towards England international success was found. Under Don Parker's leadership, there were frequent five day, Monday to Friday training camps at Ford Hall, Lilleshall, for our top seniors together with our best juniors at the time (including Alan Cooke) and even cadets during school holiday periods. This provided continuity and succession planning for the future of England teams. Over the same period there were regional Centres of Excellence across the country that offered the best junior and cadet players within the region the chance to train together twice a week whilst avoiding long journeys to the venue. Overall, the target was always to create environments of table tennis excellence.

The need for strong England Teams.

For myself, the success of the England Table Tennis teams is a marker for the progress, well-being,

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and health of our sport in this country. Even members whose main table tennis concern is their weekly local league match or their County or British League match and who do not follow every England result, are happier that our sport has a high profile at international level. It is a source of pride that they are part of something bigger, and that the sport of table tennis is respected at home and abroad.

Performance targets should be about the England Teams. The most important result for an aspiring young English player should be to win in an England shirt. Of course, teams are made up of individual players, but being part of a team ethos with its internal support and yet individual player rivalry, helps young players with their development to a higher level.

England have a successful men's team, a fact that should be celebrated. Paul Drinkhall and Sam Walker now led by the outstanding Liam Pitchford, make up a world class team. The top three players are backed-up by a youngster, Tom Jarvis, who left the junior ranks in 2017 and is working hard to inherit one of the top places. The appointment of Gavin Evans as Men's team coach may prove to be a long-term benefit to England. Here is a young coach who but for injury, was destined to be a player in this team. He has the capability of becoming a valuable contributor to future national teams.

For the English women's team, the gap between Tin Tin Ho and Maria Tsapsinos, England's one and two at present, has been allowed to widen to the point where there is little challenge for their places. It is the responsibility of the Performance Team, through Youth Development, to promote these challenges.

Table Tennis Competition Programme in England

Throughout all the previous training provisions mentioned, there was an active, competitive, cadet, junior and senior English tournament circuit so that young players could come through a balanced regime of regular tough competition and hard training. Juniors tested themselves in senior events as well as their own junior ones. This was England's alternative method of producing a succession of quality international players as we could not match, even then, the club provision in most foreign countries.

Whilst results in international competition should become the eventual target, young, developing players should first learn to deal with strong competition at home. But the home competition circuit needs to return to the fit for purpose that it once was. High quality competitive experience is essential in developing players, building the good technique, table tennis intelligence and mental toughness necessary to reach a higher level. The round-robin events called the Masters (now called the National Cups) were the best value for the Selection Panel, coaches, players and parents. The introduction of an ITTF Override to the TTE Ranking System for senior players is obviously justified to give credibility to the list as some of the best English players don't play enough in this country to earn the points to place them in high positions. The recent change for this to apply to juniors and cadets however is not justified because it means that these young players can enter themselves self-funded, into weaker ITTF tournaments around the world, earn the points that will be reflected in the Ranking Lists produced by the ITTF, ETTU and TTE. This has not helped with the promotion of the English Competition programme for juniors and cadets.

Selection Criteria and Policies.

In my view, it is a mistake to exclude the training performances from the results in competition within the Junior and Cadet Selection Criteria. A re-look at this document is needed in order to get as close as possible to teams made up of the best players rather than just those who just qualify by meeting the written criteria. The Selection Criteria, at this moment, inhibits change for the better. The attitude of the players, their technique, their physical commitment, their intensity in the training

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hall are strong indicators of future international success whilst having the ability to win under the pressure of tournament match play as well. Competition should inform the areas of training. Selection Criteria, particularly with juniors and cadets, should reflect this. This requires the England coaches to see the English players perform in serious competitive situations. This is best achieved in a quality domestic competition. Young, developing players need repetition in the training hall and stiff competition outside it.

Note. English table tennis before 2013, did not require a Selection Criteria as there were no appeals procedures, but the world has changed. You can now appeal against almost anything. But some judgements can still be made; particularly by the coaches based on their experiences with the players. If there are quality training camps and quality home competition, both witnessed by the England coaches and selectors, judgements should still be permitted.

TTE Performance Team Responsibilities

The Performance team must be held responsible for the quality of the England Junior Table Tennis teams for now and into the future. It would be of value for the TTE Performance/Selection Team to be set targets, or to publish their own targets in the areas of talent identification and talent development.

One of the biggest challenges is the lack of quality table time available every week to our young players in order to compete with the Europeans. Unlike most European countries where the structure was built around big, multi-table, well-funded clubs, our system in England evolved in a way less conducive to the provision of local, table tennis specific experiences for all but, especially the requirements for young, ambitious players. Therefore, we have had to find our own way. It is not good enough to neglect this developmental responsibility by handing it over to foreign clubs to bring our younger juniors and cadets up to a higher standard. We also have to find a way of developing our older juniors (as well as in some cases the Under 21's) to a standard, when they are physically strong enough and hopefully emotionally mature enough, to a level where clubs in Europe want them. Top European Clubs, quite understandably, only want players who can give them quality in the training hall and represent them well in club competitions. Clearly, foreign clubs are not in the business of doing England favours but are seeking benefits from the inclusion of top, ready-made players, or at least players who will give them quick returns. The TTE Performance Team have little to do for the players in our senior men's team as any issues are either attended to by their club or more often, by their own independence and maturity (CPD; Continuous Professional Development) deals with any issues. This supports my comments about young English players going too early to European Clubs. Des Douglas and Jill Parker went to Germany in their twenty's, Jill after she had won the European Championship.

The TTE Performance Team's present policy of concentration on the young, primary school age players, is high risk strategy unlikely to help with the continuity of successful English teams. This policy may be adopted on the grounds that there will not be the time for these older players develop into a good international standard. This position is not new. In the 1980's there was a survey done of the world's top hundred male players to discover at what age they started playing their table tennis; the significant age was found to be seven and a half years. Despite this data, England still managed to field strong international men's and women's teams for the next three decades with players who started their table tennis at a variety of ages; some at primary school age, some considerably older. However, there have been situations over many years where England have produced extremely successful players at the mini-cadet (Under 12) and younger age groups; at the time highly ranked in Europe but who did not carry that through to their senior or even junior times. There were a variety of reasons for this, including injury as with the case of Gavin Evans. Other

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players did not blossom until late in their junior years but went on, through hard work, talent and determination, to have a long and illustrious international table tennis career for themselves and England. Alan Cooke for example.

Whilst adding Primary School age players into the Talent Development activity is important in order to have a large base to the process. In England at this time, our ranking list shows very few Under 10's are competing in table tennis. There are only seven on the list of boys and worse still, only three girls; one of these has seven points, one with only one ranking point and the other with no recorded points at all. Not the large performance base that is needed. **The fact that as the players move up the ladder of success, every step up gets harder than the last**, puts into question concentrating on the younger age groups to the exclusion of the older cadets and juniors. Initiatives such as TTKidz should be showing up on the statistics, for players wishing to compete in the sport of table tennis.

If the time gap between English players of good international standard becomes too wide, it becomes increasingly difficult to fill. If the next Liam Pitchford is more than ten years away, he (whoever he may be) will lose the tow, slip stream effect, meaning the country having to start again from scratch. In that way in England, Liam needed to quickly follow Paul. Success tends to build on success. Players at all levels use the players above them as the target, the inspiration to achieve more.

At the present time, our individual young players are being encouraged by the TTE Performance Team to go early to European Clubs in order to learn their trade rather than learn it in England. That seems to be the main strategy; to send them as early as possible. Also, they encourage the parents of the young players to enter their child into foreign tournaments, self-funded and in most cases without the support from TTE Performance staff. Self- discovery is an important aspect of learning but in the past young English players would travel to foreign tournaments in groups or squads with an England coach who would develop that learning experience. Rarely do players learn good international table tennis technique by accident. Now, they travel with an accompanying adult to compete as individuals.

Within the area of English Talent Development, there appears little likelihood soon of any young players of either gender, challenging for places in our top teams with only one cadet boy seemingly highly rated. However, England have no boys in the top one hundred of the European Junior Ranking List for example. The highest ranked English boy at 109, Naphong Boonyaprapa, chooses not to attend TTE Junior Training Camps.

The current TTE Youth Coach, Marcus Gustafson, is experienced in European Youth table tennis but he has insufficient time with our best juniors and cadets. The training camps, not necessarily with the best players, do not give the coaches enough contact time to make the difference needed. He and the 'contract coaches' could help by spending more time with the England Junior and Cadet Squad players in their clubs, working with their club coaches to ensure some consistency in the development of our top young players. We may not have enough, big multi-table clubs in England but there are smaller, ambitious clubs dotted out around the country whose membership does include England squad members. The England Coaches need to spend more time in the training hall with the best, strongest junior and cadet players in England. Quality **and** quantity of hours on the table each week is a basic requirement.

Self-Funding for all Under 18s

Once the English players leave the juniors and turn professional, I understand the need to live, train and compete abroad, as unfortunately England does not have the earning power, the high-class training partners, facilities or the professional competition structure to provide for them.

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My concern however, is in the area of Youth Development where all age groups below under 18, self-fund to all TTE table tennis activity, training camps and international competition apart from the European Youth Championships and the Euro Mini Championships. The TTE Performance Team have taken the line that for juniors and cadets, results in competitions in England are relatively unimportant compared with results abroad. This may become true at senior level but first the player needs to be successful at home to earn the right to challenge for international success. The cost to parents for their child to compete on the home circuit was never that cheap but was always regarded as a necessary investment in their child's table tennis future. However, it was considerably cheaper than self-funding the entry costs, travel costs, several days of accommodation and food for at least two people (under 18's cannot travel alone) to any of the ITTF or ETTU events in Europe. The home domestic junior competition programme has been allowed to decline, partly because the message, intentional or otherwise, from the Performance/Selection Team is that it is not important to them. **England should have their quality junior and cadet players competing in quality home competitions.**

There is no doubt that for the ambitious parent of a young ambitious English table tennis player, this is the most expensive time in the history of English table tennis. The cost starts with the rise in the number of local paid coaches. With the change from the ETTA Coach qualification to the cost of qualification under UKCC, more coaches are looking to earn a living from table tennis coaching. There were more volunteer coaches in the clubs in England under the previous coach qualification system. Whether that is a good change I am not sure, but it has certainly added to the cost for many parents. Then add to that to participate in TTE Training Camps, where parents have to meet the cost of staging the camp, staffing, their child's (maybe their own as well) accommodation and food. If our top junior players, do not wish to or cannot afford it, they do not have to attend in order to be selected for the England team, as per the Selection Criteria document. If the best players do not attend these camps, the standard of table practice deteriorates. With no selection element included in the training camps, the quality of training, the attitudes, the commitment in the training hall cannot be judged by the coaches and it is in the training hall where the greatest improvements are made.

One statement that has been credited the Performance Team, regarding self-funding to national training and overseas competitions, is that the parents and their child will appreciate it more and work harder. Sorry, but that is nonsense in my experience. If a young player displays that belief, they should not be there at all. I have only ever heard that theory in connection with sport at a recreational level; never with ambitious, potentially high performing athletes looking to improve to international level. Are the two former English internationals on the Performance Team happy with saying that they would have tried harder if their parents had been required to pay for ETTA training and England international competitions abroad? I would be surprised if today's parents are feeling grateful for being allowed to pay for something that these two former internationals got for free.

The system of applying to attend TTE training camps and applying to be considered for England selection, rather than simply being selected, is very odd and is probably responsible for some apparent lack of pride in being a member of an England Squad. Being selected for England should mean something. Apparently, Sport England refuse to fund TTE for performance. It is a prohibitive financial burden on the parents for performance activity. **England should not lose the next generation of table tennis international talent due to lack of finances.**

Peter Charters