

“Olympic Project the right approach on behalf of Europe”

The Chinese expert, LI Xiaodong, a key-note speaker at the European Coaching Conference in Zagreb, compared the professional career, physical preparation, technique and more between Asian and European players.



23/11/2009 – After having delivered a very resourceful and instructive lecture at the European Coaching Conference in Zagreb, the qualified Chinese coach LI Xiaodong, one of the conference star-guests, answered some questions of the participants.

- How is Talent Identification run in China?

”Motivation, physical characteristics, feeling for the ball are the key elements that are analysed.”

- What is the main difference between the development of European and Asian players?

” Firstly and maybe mostly important it’s the age: in China players start with professional training earlier. Also quality of competition could be considered a key issue as Chinese players start to train and compete against better players earlier and more. Our players go through 4-5 stages that follow age categories. Each player stays in a level for some time and if it’s longer than 2 years his out of the selection. The stages are the following: aged 6-10 years old (whereby the practice tend to be interesting and the focus is on the development of physical skills), 10-13 basic (which includes the basic table tennis skills training), 13-17 (at that age the playing style and concept are decided), from the age of 17 and on (players become professional). The stage system is same for boys and girls.”

- Do your teams of coaches cooperate with scientist and does science represent an important component of your programs?

”Coaches and scientists cooperate a lot and all our actions are based upon science, i.e. scientific researches.”

- China lost only 2 big titles in the last few years - in 2003 the World and in 2004 the Olympic title. What did you change afterwards in order to avoid it?

”WANG Liqin and MA Lin where simply not ready at that time, they were not completely mature. Actually, we learn many new things from European players – from different players we choose their very best elements, for example the service of KORBEL, topspin on mid-long balls from SAIVE, the parallel backhand push from SCHLAGER & WALDNER. All the matches are taped, studied and analysed thoroughly.”

- Which strokes are learnt first by beginners?

”At the beginning a lot of emphasis is on games off the table, like balancing, bouncing etc. in order the players acquire the appropriate feeling for the ball. Besides, we do a lot of shadow training, whereby the players are requested to imagine when and how the ball should be hit. Moreover, the forehand and backhand drive are taught at the same time but much more focus

is on forehand. We also use a combination of teaching methods: many balls feeding to fix the movement but also single balls training aiming to reach a bigger diversity of balls and thus enabling them to learn the skills of improvisation. Another different in my opinion is also the approach toward footwork – we do a lot of it from the very beginning.”

- How would you define the role of the parents in the players’ development? Are they involved in it?

”Normally they are not involved and sometimes we face problems with them especially if they were players themselves. Our system is based on the authority of coaches and they are the ones, who take over and decide about everything.”

- Do you use any special methods to test and evaluate your players or their performances?

”Due to many changes in game a lot of attention was paid on physical preparation. We hired top professional experts in the field of physical preparation, who have to have also a perfect knowledge of table tennis. We believe that this was a very good and a necessary action to take, which also resulted in the final success of our players. As an example I can give you the improvement in power performance of WANG Liqin, who was initially doing bench-press with 60 kg but now his load is 120 kg, which is indeed a big difference. Medical test are not used.”

- How much physical preparation do you do in the 14-17 age category?

”I would say around 20% but most of the physical conditioning is implemented through exercises in the training itself.”

- Do you systematically observe and follow players from other /developing countries, let’s say the ones you consider as possible threats?

”Of course we do. We know and respect the great job Germany is doing, the improvement of English players is impressive, too. Besides, some young players from Belgium and India also caught our attention. In the 1990’s there were really many excellent players in Europe but nowadays the situation, especially by young players, is somehow weaker. In my opinion you should work together, organize more common activities with young players in order to raise the competition. The ideal would be to have 10 SAMARAs or DODEANs in Europe; I’m familiar with your Olympic Project and I believe that is the right approach.”

- What do you think about championships for mini-cadets? Are such events needed and do you have them?

”In China players start to play earlier, usually at the age of 4 to 6, which means that at the age of 10 they have been playing on average for 5 years. At that age they also start to compete on official events, while before they only participate on unofficial tournaments. Official, i.e. title championships begin in the cadets category.”

- What do you think how will the game look in 5 years time?

”Most probably technique will change. Backhand will have the same potential as forehand.”

- What is your vision of development of the game?

”Table tennis is already on a very high level. The future development of the games depends on the kind of skills that will be effective, that will make the players to win.”

- We know that the Chinese players significantly increased the quantity of training lately. What else can you do to increase the effectiveness of your practice?

"The effectiveness is a combination of quantity and quality. Besides, periodisation is very important and should be done strictly on individual basis. Actually, we believe that you can always find something to improve, to work on details till their perfection therefore we have reserves in all areas".

- Which innovations in terms of training methods will in your opinion be important in the next 10 years?

"As I said before, development will follow what makes the players win matches – we have to adjust to the situation and normally the innovation is “just” a consequence. However, we try to assist and support the global development of table tennis as this will raise the competition and make the game develop onto a higher level. Therefore one more time, common training actions should be organized more often, whenever possible."

- How often and for how long do you take days off or breaks from table tennis?

"When speaking about time we have adopted some timeframes, which proved to be successful: for us 5 hours is the duration limit. Training camps usually last for 15 day and the most common system is to have 2 training sessions per day. Well, sometimes, depending on the purpose and of the time in the year we practise 3 times per day. Before events, when we are working on the fine-tuning we also reduce the quantity of practise. In our system Sundays are always free while longer periods of holidays, 2-3 weeks like the ones you have in Europe, are not possible due to our dense competition system."

- What is the future of pen-hold grip? How and when do you decide a player should use it?

"There is no strict rule. It's actually upon the coach and the player's feeling and capacity to decide which grip will be in use."

(by Polona CEHOVIN SUSIN, YDD)