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# Table Tennis in Singapore: A Case Study of Success

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In

## Secrets of Asian Sport Psychology

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Tony Morris, and Stephanie Hanrahan



## Introduction

It was an epic moment in the history of table tennis, the day when underdogs Singapore toppled mighty China to win the women's team crown at the 2010 World Championships. It was almost unfathomable. How could Singapore, a tiny nation of five million people, upset China, the giants of world table tennis with its population of 1.35 billion?

On the final match-winning point, Singapore's Feng Tianwei looked up to the heavens and screamed with pure joy and exhilaration. Even now, that image of her celebrating the team's victory can still make my hair stand on end. That very day, I was sitting in the spectator stands in Moscow with the rest of the support team, cheering and screaming the team on from the very first to the very last point. I was extremely privileged to play a support role, as the team's sport psychologist, in an event that helped Singapore to create sporting history.



view video:  
*WTTC 2010 -  
Liu Shiwen vs  
Feng Tianwei  
(Womens Team  
Final)*

I remember standing near the warm-up venue after the women's team final and hearing an official from the International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF) tell every single person he met, "*Singapore beat China!*" The reaction was always a gasp of disbelief. I stood there with a knowing smirk on my face. Indeed, Singapore had defeated China at its own game, but it was not good fortune that brought them the title. Singapore's World Championship campaign was planned with detailed precision and executed with confidence, aided only by the sprinkle of luck that every team needs.

The secrets of Singapore's success in table tennis are largely linked to its East meets West approach. To understand the success of the Singapore table tennis team, it is important to first understand the Singapore sports system and the support structures that have been put in place to engender excellence in the sport of table tennis.



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*Singapore Skyline*





Sport Singapore is the governing body for sports in Singapore, overseeing the operations of more than 60 National Sports Associations (NSAs). The Singapore Table Tennis Association (STTA) is one such NSA, which focuses its efforts on developing table tennis players for high performance, on youth development, and on promoting mass participation in the sport. The Singapore Sports Council supports its NSAs with funding as well as providing technical support, such as sports management, sports science, and sports medicine.



view video:  
Singapore  
Secure Bronze -  
Women's Table  
Tennis Team  
Finals | London  
2012 Olympics

Established in 1931, the STTA has, in recent years, overseen much progress by Singapore in international competition. In 2000, Singapore had a taste of Olympic success when table tennis player Jin Junhong made it to the women's singles semi-final for the first time, finishing a respectable fourth at the Sydney Olympic Games. Since then, table tennis has become one of the more important sports in Singapore. In 2004, team mate Li Jiawei repeated this feat by finishing fourth in the women's singles event at the Athens Olympic Games. One Olympic cycle later, a breakthrough was achieved at the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, when the women's table tennis team won Singapore's first silver medal. Li Jiawei again finished fourth in the singles event.

taste of  
Olympic  
success



view video:  
Feng Tianwei  
(SIN) Wins  
Women's Table  
Tennis Bronze  
- London 2012  
Olympics

Success continued in 2010 when the Singapore team won the World Table Tennis Championship for the first time, creating one of the biggest upsets in the history of the sport by defeating China, which had won 16 of the previous 17 world titles. In the 2012 London Olympic Games, the Singapore team continued its wave of success by winning two Olympic medals for the first time ever, the women's team bronze medal and an individual bronze medal in the singles event from team captain, Feng Tianwei. To date, three of the four Olympic medals won by Singapore have come from table tennis. The record of achievement continued at the 2013 Commonwealth Table Tennis Championship, with Team Singapore bringing home a haul of six gold, two silver, and two bronze medals, stamping its authority in the sport by winning a medal in every single event.



Credit: whyohgee (Singapore 2010) / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY-2.0

Singapore wins Team Silver in Beijing 2008





This build-up of success did not occur by chance. Significant financial backing totalling several million dollars per year from the Singaporean government and a range of corporate sponsors has enabled the STTA, under the influential leadership of its President, Dr. Lee Bee Wah, to establish Singapore as a genuine international contender in the sport of table tennis. The STTA has worked hard over the years to develop a strong squad of players, to establish a vibrant junior program to provide a pipeline of talent, and to put in place a comprehensive support structure to promote sporting excellence. One aspect of this support and development is a dedicated training facility in the Toa Payoh district of the country, where the national team players train and live, making table tennis the only sport in Singapore to have a fully-fledged residential training facility.

The national team train at Toa Payoh twice a day, usually six days a week. The facility also has a hostel to house the national athletes, offices for STTA staff, and a classroom for off-court sessions. The facility is located within a larger sporting hub, at the Toa Payoh Sports and Recreation Centre, allowing the table tennis players to utilise neighbouring facilities for their strength and conditioning and cross-training work, including a stadium with soccer field and running track, a well-equipped gym, and an Olympic-sized swimming pool.

## huge monetary incentive

The support and planning by the STTA has been integral to the wave of success achieved by the national team. On top of that, Singapore offers the world's largest financial bonus for an Olympic gold medal, of one million Singapore dollars (Soh, 2012). This huge monetary incentive serves as a powerful motivational tool to entice local athletes to work extra hard to win at the world's greatest sporting event.



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Toa Payoh Sports and Recreation Centre



## Case Study of Singapore's Success

With a good support structure in place, the success of the Singapore women's table tennis team has been built upon a solid foundation and hence did not come as a surprise. There were four key elements to the success of the team: a comprehensive training program delivered by the best coaches, a strong social support network, a comprehensive sports science program, and meticulous preparation.

### Secret to Success #1: Comprehensive Training and Coaching

The Singapore women's table tennis team that created history in 2010 included Feng Tianwei, Wang Yuegu, Sun Beibei, Li Jiawei, and Yu Mengyu. All five are China-born Singaporean citizens who have been training and playing in Singapore, on average, for over six years. Many sceptics in Singapore may argue that they are not locally-raised talents, but there is no denying that all five players have honed their skills and sharpened their competitive edge in Singapore. They are all products of the STTA's comprehensive training and development program.

The women's table tennis team has been coached by the dynamic duo of Zhou Shusen and Jin Junhong. Coach Zhou was the head coach of the women's national team for four years from 2009, before stepping down in 2012 after the London Olympic Games, handing over the reins to his younger deputy, Coach Jin, who currently serves as the head coach for the women's national team. Both were formerly successful international players with vast playing and coaching experience to share with their charges.

Coach Zhou, who was in his late 60s when he took over coaching the Singapore team, had previously coached the China national women's team as well as the Zhejiang and Beijing women's teams. It was clear that everyone involved in Singaporean table tennis revered Coach Zhou. Lee Bee Wah, President of the STTA, summed up this sentiment with the words, "*Zhou acts like our players' father. He is so experienced that we should follow all he says. He has shared a lot of experiences with the players*" ("*Meritorious Table Tennis Veteran*", 2013). Undoubtedly, Coach Zhou's wealth of technical and tactical knowledge helped all the team members to significantly improve their skills and tactical play, and his amiable personality made it easy for players and support staff to engage in lively discussions with him.



Credit: Gerhard Palnstorfer/Wikimedia Commons/CC BY-SA 2.0

Coach Jin was Singapore's first Olympian in table tennis. She competed at the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games and finished fourth at the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games. She has won numerous international accolades in table tennis. A trailblazer of women's table tennis in Singapore, Coach Jin paved the way for her current squad of players, and they in turn respect and admire her as a big sister. This coaching duo complemented each other well, forming a formidable coaching partnership that addressed all the aspects required of an elite table tennis team.

From the perspective of sport psychology, effective interpersonal relationships are a key issue in elite sport, especially relationships between players and coaches, but also relationships with teammates and support staff (Jowett & Poczwardowski, 2007). I was in a position to observe at close quarters the interpersonal relationships between all those involved with the Singapore women's table tennis team, both in the training environment and at competitions. Because the players, coaches, and support staff appeared to interact well with each other and nobody raised concerns to me about team harmony, this was not an aspect that I felt needed to be addressed further by explicit sport psychology techniques. Nonetheless, I would identify effective interpersonal relationships as an important psychological consideration in establishing a positive team environment, which was certainly central to the team's success.

The team's training regimen is extremely rigorous. For six days a week, the team devotes almost the entire day to improving skills, honing technical abilities, and building mental strength. The coaches take the time to understand each player's strengths and weaknesses and design every training session to develop the individual needs of players. Sparring partners are brought in from around the world to help players improve the game. In table tennis, learning how to play against different opponents with varying playing styles is pivotal. The game is played at lightning speed

and hence players need to be quick to read the pattern of the game and the tactics of the opponent, and then decide on the best way to overcome the player at the other end of the table. To ensure they can deal with this, the training program is geared towards making the players physically fit and mentally challenged to cope with a variety of situations that may occur in competition. In this way, training is designed to enhance players' confidence by allowing them to gain experience in the techniques and tactics needed to compete against their most challenging international opponents in a non-threatening, home-based environment.



Credit: Yong Chee Men/Flickr/CC BY-2.0

Along with the rigorous training program, the team has an even more demanding competition schedule. At least twice a month, the players travel overseas to participate

in ITTF-sanctioned competitions, so that they can gain valuable points to improve their world rankings. With better rankings, the players tend to get better draws in competitions, and this in turn provides them with more opportunities for success. In addition, experience of playing against the best players in the world in the cauldron of high-level competition gives players increased confidence that they can compete and win against the world's best anywhere and at any time. Probably the first step to beating the previously unbeatable Chinese women was giving Singapore's players the belief that they could win.

With such a demanding training and competition schedule, rest and recovery is extremely important. The players are allocated an almost sacred period of time to take a nap during the day and, wherever possible, adequate rest time is provided during training and competition to allow the players to recover both physically and mentally. During international travel, all players in the team are monitored closely by the support staff to help them to adjust quickly to time zone changes. Massage is a very popular recovery modality with the Singapore team because it relaxes both mind and body, preparing the players for another day of training and competition.

Research has shown that anxiety is often an obstacle to peak performance (Hanton, Neil, & Mellalieu, 2011). To perform optimally in a sport like table tennis, which involves delicate and precise skills combined with explosive speed and power, the players need to be relaxed and calm yet alert and energetic. Anxiety and confidence are often considered to be two sides of the same coin (Hanton et al., 2011). Thus, the combination of opportunities to build confidence in training and competition against the world's best table tennis players in the most stressful competition environments, along with physical therapy to help relax body and mind, has great potential to prepare players for peak performance at the biggest competitions, including the World Championships and the Olympic Games.



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## Secret to Success #2: Strong Social Support Networks

For many years, the STTA has functioned like a traditional Asian extended family. The STTA staff and players look after and care for each other just like a family would, providing strong social support for everyone, especially the players. This is particularly important because many of the players leave their friends and families in China at a young age to train in Singapore. Hence, this family-run approach helps to fill the void created by moving away from existing social networks, enabling the players to fully concentrate on training and competing.

Being an elite athlete requires tremendous discipline, hard work, and sacrifice, and all this cannot be done without support from loved ones. Table tennis players travel frequently to participate in ITTF Pro-Tour events, the World Cup and World Championships, as well as other major international competitions. This hectic schedule can be exceptionally challenging for the players as they make table tennis their number one priority in life. The STTA supports the players through these challenging times just as a family would and this helps the players achieve more balanced day-to-day living in what would otherwise be deemed to be unforgiving lifestyles.



Credit: Meng Yongmin/Flickr/CC BY-NC-2.0

Again, from the perspective of sport psychology, social support has been shown to be an important factor that influences sport-specific coping (Petrie, 1993), general well-being (Smith, Smoll, & Ptacek, 1990), and even sports performance (Freeman & Rees, 2009). I paid close attention to the organisational structure within which the Singapore women's table tennis team operated. The family-style approach that was evident seemed to work well. The sense of well-being associated with players' lifestyles and the activities that supported them during training and competition appeared to help the players to cope with the demands of elite sport in general and, more particularly, to cope with the pressure of competition at the highest level. I monitored stress and anxiety among the players as part of my role, judged that social support from the family-style environment in Singaporean table tennis had a very positive influence on the players, and concluded that the existing approach should

be encouraged. Hence, I played my part in nurturing and promoting the strong social support that was given to the players without introducing explicit psychological techniques to enhance a process that was already working well.



## Secret to Success #3: Comprehensive Sports Science Program

A comprehensive sports science program was developed specific to the needs of the athletes, encompassing sport psychology, nutrition, physiology, biomechanics, sport medicine, and strength and conditioning. The sports science program was integrated with the team's periodisation plan, to ensure that the needs of the group as a whole were not compromised in catering to the needs of each individual athlete.

Over the years, a support team of sports scientists and sports medicine personnel has been built around the national team to promote rapport and trust among the support team and the athletes and coaches. The national team has a core group of sports trainers who take turns in providing support for the players to help prevent or manage injuries locally and on overseas trips. In Singapore, the national players have access to a sports medicine physician and physiotherapist. They also have the assistance of biomechanists to analyse their own performances and the performance of their opponents. Sport psychology has been another mainstay in the training programs for national table tennis players, together with sport nutrition and strength and conditioning. The sports scientists and sports medicine personnel also function as part of the team's social support network, much like their extended families.

The sport psychology program has focused primarily on individual interventions and performance troubleshooting to try to maximise the potential of each individual player. Given that the team members were taught basic mental skills for peak performance in their earlier playing years, the psychological interventions during my involvement with the national team were able to be highly individualised, encompassing personal counselling, training support, competition support, and biofeedback training. To help gain the trust of the players, I travelled with the team often for competitions and training camps. I also regularly attended the national training centre in Toa Payoh to interact with the players and coaches. This approach, whereby the sport psychologist becomes an integral part of the team, continued when the table tennis squad had a different sport psychology practitioner attached to them in 2012.



Credit: Courtesy of Emily Ortega

During individual consultations, I worked with each player to fine-tune their mental game, identifying personal strengths and weaknesses, and clarifying gaps that each player could strive to fill, in order to become a more resilient competitor and to stay in control of their emotions. Biofeedback training was conducted using Heartmath emWave software. I taught players basic breathing techniques to achieve a state of coherence, where they were able to breathe at resonance frequency. This process involves taking slow deep breaths from the diaphragm such that the breathing rate is synchronised with the heart rate. Each player went through four sessions of biofeedback training, focused on improving their breathing techniques for recovery in-between points as well as before and after games.

The players' support team of managers, sports scientists, and other specialists adopt a policy of making doubly sure to take care of all the needs of the team, allowing the players to focus purely on playing their very best. This *team behind the team* consistently works hard and in unison with the clear objective of doing everything possible to assist the team to perform at their very best.

It was within the scope of this comprehensive sports science program that the majority of the sport psychology work occurred. Because the support was individualised, the work conducted with each player was different. This required me to be widely versed in a range of psychological techniques to address the diverse issues that players raised. I also had to be willing to search the literature when players brought up issues with which I had no previous experience, or to talk to colleagues with expert knowledge of a specific topic. A key feature of the work I undertook was the extensive periods of observation of group interactions, during which time I recognised the positive nature of the interpersonal relations between players, coaches, and the support team, and the social support provided for the players by others in the Singapore table tennis family.



Credit: Courtesy of Emily Ortega

Strength and Conditioning at Toa Payoh



## Secret to Success #4: Detailed Preparations

In preparation for the 2010 World Table Tennis Championships, the coaches left no stone unturned in the lead-up to the competition. The players were involved in a high-intensity training camp for a period of one month, with the specific purpose of preparing the team to peak at the competition. In addition to the traditional skills of table tennis and physical training, strength and conditioning sessions and weekly competition simulations were built into the training program.

The coaches ensured that each player had adequate training and sparring opportunities to prepare to compete against their opponents at the World Championships. This involved meticulous research on their potential opponents and on their own players through observation, tracking player progress, and video analysis. Every match played was recorded and tagged by the biomechanists, and then saved to a cloud computing database so that the players could review the videos no matter where they were in the world. Access to videos of their next opponent was also readily available on this database.

Once the team had arrived at the World Championships in Moscow, before each day of competition, all the players would gather in the coaches' room for a meeting. The coaches provided every player with comprehensive information about their respective opponents, giving them detailed tactical tips for game play. Players were also given video-recorded matches played by their opponents, and would prepare for each game by thoroughly analysing their opponents, developing their own game plans and strategies, and mentally rehearsing their forthcoming matches.



Pre-WTTC Training Camp 2010

Psychologically, the focus of the players was strictly *one match at a time*. At no stage during the World Championships, until the final of course, were they thinking about playing and beating China. The focus was always on the next game only and everyone encouraged one another to play well, generating a very positive environment. There was a strong element of teamwork as the players willingly shared information about opponents their teammates were going to face, giving each other tips on how to better compete against them. The prevailing ethos was that it was not each woman for herself, but the whole of the Singapore women's team versus the next opponent.

Even as the team progressed through the rounds, there were no celebrations in the Singapore camp. Everyone stayed focused on the objective of winning every match as a team. After each round, it was always straight back to the drawing board to prepare for the next round of matches. This encompassed being disciplined in their sleeping, eating, and recovery habits; taking full responsibility for their own physical and psychological well-being. Wherever feasible, the support team took the players out for simple Chinese dinners where they could eat familiar comfort food even though they were in Moscow. The mental approach to the competition was exactly the same as it had been at the training camp, to keep everyone focused on one match at a time. I monitored each player informally and worked closely with the sports trainer to get feedback about each player on a daily basis, trying to ensure that every individual was in an optimal mental state. When discrepancies emerged, I quickly addressed them with the player(s) involved via individual sessions.

According to Singapore Team Manager, Eddy Tay, a different mentality pervaded the team compared to previous championships, resulting in the players having a strong belief that they could beat China this time.

*In his words, “A lot of times, when we met them in the finals we lost 3-0, 3-1, but we kept telling the Singapore players that one day we would beat them .... So, during the training, we kept drilling this into them - to have this mindset that we’re able to beat them ... Tianwei was trailing in the first match but she was fighting for every point ... when she won the match, it really gave a lot of confidence to Yuegu going into the second match. She had never beaten that China girl before ... but suddenly they felt that the past doesn’t count, that although we have lost so many, many matches, it’s like a fresh start”*  
(Yin, 2010).

After the historic win in the final of the 2010 World Championships, the team had to rush off to the airport to fly home that very same night. The trophy was happily passed around the bus and the atmosphere on the bus was truly euphoric, everyone wearing silly grins on their faces, filled with laughter, and the air lingered with smells of the favourite snacks being devoured as reward for all their hard work and effort.





## Summary

Prior to the 2010 World Championships, Singapore had lost to China on numerous occasions. By learning from past failures, the players, coaches, support team, and management never gave up hope on the dream of one day beating China. The combination of factors discussed in this chapter, of which the four “secrets” were paramount, helped every player to feel confident that the team could beat the Chinese even in the cauldron of a World Championship team final. Every player and everyone working with the team believed it was possible and this shared belief became a reality with hard work and perseverance to defy the odds and create a moment of sporting history. Since 2010, everyone associated with the Singapore women’s table tennis team has continued to apply the same approach, which has helped to keep Singapore at the forefront of the women’s game internationally.



view video:  
*Team  
Singapore at  
the Singapore  
Sports School  
and Ai Tong  
School*

The victorious Singapore women’s team returned home from the 2010 World Table Tennis Championships as national heroes. Their triumph in Moscow and their successful 2008 and 2012 Olympic campaigns produced an upsurge in the popularity of, and support for, table tennis in Singapore. Hosting the 2010 Youth Olympics Games gave Singaporean sport another welcome boost, with Isabelle Li Siyun securing a table tennis silver medal for Singapore in the women’s singles event. This string of successes for the Singaporean women’s table tennis team has not only written a memorable chapter in the country’s sporting history but also augurs particularly well for the future of the sport in Singapore. Even the normally modest Zhou Shusen reflected back on his 2009-2012 period of tenure as head coach of the Singapore women’s table tennis team as “the most glorious four years throughout my whole sport’s career both as a player and a coach” (“Meritorious Table Tennis Veteran”, 2013).



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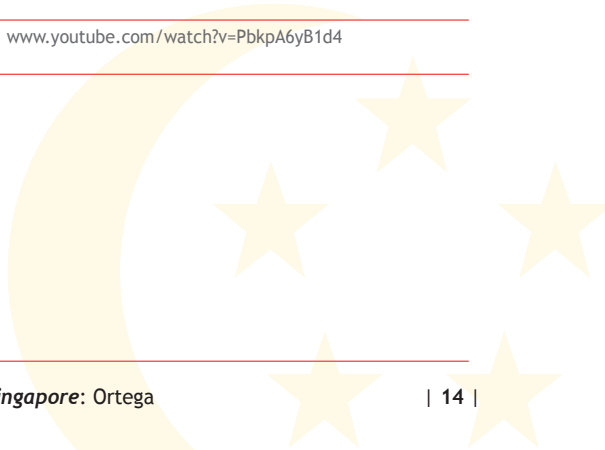
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3	Tianwei Feng (SIN) Wins Women's Table Tennis Bronze - London 2012 Olympics	<a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CwjK7Mlo-2M">www.youtube.com/watch?v=CwjK7Mlo-2M</a>
13	Team Singapore Paddlers @ Singapore Sports School and Ai Tong School	<a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PbkpA6yB1d4">www.youtube.com/watch?v=PbkpA6yB1d4</a>

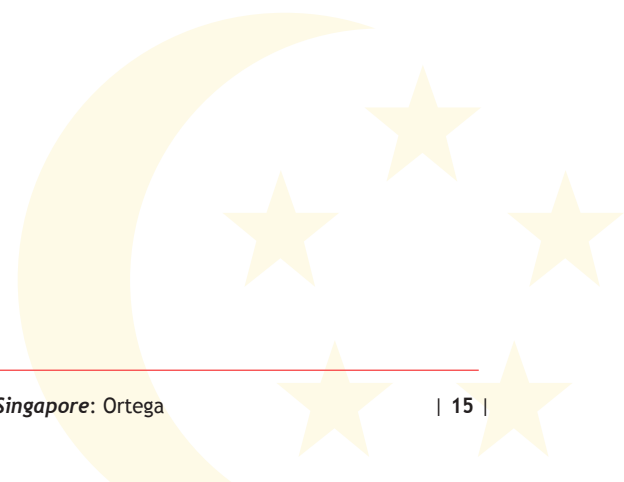




## PHOTO CREDITS

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