

The Chiseller

Table tennis has had many different styles of play over the years ranging from the first tentative steps using plywood tops and relatively high nets to the modern ultra fast rubbers and tables that those forebears would view with a certain amount of incredulity.

In 1885 England's James Devonshire applied for a patent for a game called "Table Tennis" but this was abandoned in 1887 when JH Singer jumped in and produced a dice and board game of the same name. The patent for "Gossima" was applied for by Jacques in 1891.

It was not until 1926 that the International Table Tennis Federation was formed and, at the same time came the English TT Association. Table tennis had arrived with the first World Championships that year. Slow tables and, significant at the time, nets six and three quarter inches high, three quarters higher than they are now.

Everything changed after the 1936 World Championships in Prague when, in the first round, Alex Ehrlich of Poland, so called king of the chisellers, faced Romania's Paneth Farcas, neither willing to give anything away.

So, love-all, and off we go. After 70 minutes of play and still playing the first point of their match, Ehrlich switched to playing with his left hand to give his right arm a rest. On it went and after 85 minutes the umpire's neck seized and he had to be replaced, all the while that first point was still on the go.

Soon after that, getting a little bored Ehrlich begins a game of chess with a spectator, calling out the moves when needed. The score was still love-all. It all changed dramatically at two hours and 12 minutes into the game when Farcas's arm completely locked and he lost the point. One-love to Ehrlich.

History does not record how long the match took but Ehrlich went on to win the silver medal in the singles having won the gold the year before in London. During WW II he spent time in both Auschwitz and Dachau but survived and went on playing the sport, even devising the first robot server.

That first point prompted big changes to the sport with faster tables paramount, the net reduced to six inches high to encourage more attacking and the expedite rule was introduced to limit each game (up to 21) to a maximum of 20 minutes. With games now up to 11 the expedite rule allows up to ten minutes per game but is seldom needed with the current fast conditions.

But there will always be defenders and the interesting aspect these days is the reverse sponge attacking players complaining about the "funny" bats used by some defenders. Bats that closely resemble those used by everyone up until roughly the 1960s onwards. Long may it continue.

John Bowness.