

LEICESTERSHIRE TABLE TENNIS <https://www.topspin-ldttl.co.uk/>

Earlier this year the passing of International high jumper, Dick Fosbury, was announced with the distinction of being the most revolutionary of all sportmen with his new technique called the “Fosbury Flop” whereby he would clear the high jump bar and land on his back.

Certainly from then the high jump went to different heights if you will excuse the pun with the World record beaten in great strides, although I don't think Fosbury ever actually broke it. The current record set in 1993 is 2.45 m (8 ft ¼ in) by Javier Sotomayor while Fosbury's best was 2.24 (7 ft 4 ¼ in).

Table tennis circles would challenge that revolutionary statement, however, as in 1952 at the World Table Tennis Championships held in Bombay a bespectacled Japanese gentleman by the name of Hiroji Satoh changed the sport in a massive way forever.

A year earlier Satoh was an complete unknown but he came to the championships with a secret weapon in the form of a lethal bat covered in a thick reverse pimped sponge. Hitherto it had been a level playing field for everyone throughout the world playing with plywood bats covered with pimped rubber and a characteristic clack-clack of the ball.

Satoh looked anything but an athlete, more like a bank clerk with long trousers and gave the impression that he normally played with a fag in his mouth and a hand in a pocket with very little movement around the table. He didn't need to move much at the time.

No-one could return his spin as no-one had seen anything like it, or played against anything like it, before. His round of 16 matches onward, up to 21 of course, were won 3-0, 3-1, 3-0 and, in the final, he defeated Jozsef Koczian of Hungary 21-19, 21-17 21-14, an epic performance by the loser.

From then on Far Eastern countries such as Japan and then China began to dominate with bat coverings in chaos with very few or no regulations. Anything went including glue – and this was not used to stick down but on the outside to make it even stickier.

After a decade or two regulations gradually came and now everyone has to have a bat covered with black one side and another colour the other as many play with different coverings backhand and forehand.

Just to give an example – George Tso played for Barwell Constitutional for a couple of years back then and, being a penholder, had sponge on one side using only the forehand, and polished wood the other. Occasionally he would turn the bat round to return a nasty spin with some surprising results.

Local leagues took much longer to come around to sponge with diehards carrying on with the “Barna” bats and it was around 1970 it came home to me when Charlie Jacques, the best defender I ever knew, changed to a sandwich bat. The revolution was complete in Leicester.

John Bowness.