

# The Turbulent Fifties – Part 2

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The 1950s was a time of strife and deep-rooted controversy within the ITTF global community. In Part I (TTI #60, March-April 2006) we saw how the Table Tennis world was divided into two camps: the traditionalists vs. the technologists, over the issue of the sponge bat. The traditionalists demanded a ban of the sponge bat, as it radically changed the game; the technologists favored the sponge bat, and more broadly wanted to allow the influence of technology.

ITTF President Ivor Montagu had a difficult problem to solve, and some member nations were not prepared to compromise. At first Montagu was an outspoken proponent of the technology position. According to the first World Championship programme in 1926 he used "a racket surfaced with springy aerated rubber." However, when he perceived the depth of the rift caused by the sponge bat he realized that some delicacy was required to maintain a posture of complete objectivity and fairness.

Questionnaires were distributed, and experiments with draft resolutions were conducted via trial periods to assess the impact of the sponge bat in member nations. Many discussions ensued at the AGMs, along with a torrent of international exchanges by correspondence.

## Stockholm vote

An indication of the severity of the controversy can be drawn from the vote at the 1957 AGM in Stockholm: 19 member nations favoured racket standardization, 15 opposed and 8 were undecided. A further vote showed that if standardization were enacted, 20 nations preferred a pimpled rubber with no sponge standard, 12 for a thickness system allowing the sponge, and 10 undecided.

## The President reaches out

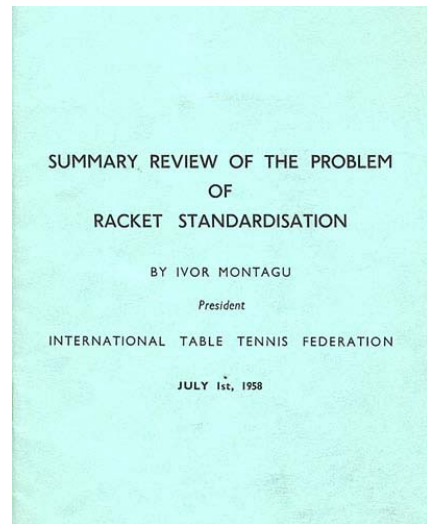
When a compromise still seemed out of reach, Montagu published a 24-page booklet, "Summary Review of the Problem of Racket Standardization" (July 1<sup>st</sup>, 1958). In this highly erudite dissertation Montagu laid out a convincing argument in favor of racket standardization.

He prefaced his arguments with a sense of urgency:

I have been anxious not to take advantage of my position to interfere with this process. But it seems to me that the time has come when I must accept the responsibility of my position, and make the recommendations which seem to me called for in the interest of the ITTF and the sport as a whole.

Montagu gave a comprehensive summary of the historical background, citing current ITTF laws and activity on this issue in the previous years, while also pointing out an ironic twist regarding the  $\frac{3}{4}$  majority requirement:

It should not be possible to change the whole character of a sport against the will of a substantial minority, and this is the reason for a  $\frac{3}{4}$  majority for any change of Law. Unfortunately a change in its whole character against the will of a substantial section of the membership is precisely what has taken place.



Food for thought for a divided membership

He dismissed the Men's Singles finals at the 1954 (Ogimura-Flisberg) and 1955 (Tanaka-Dolinar) World Championships as "fiascos" due to inexperience, and were not likely to be repeated. He also acknowledged that ball reactions caused by the sponge bat were more difficult, but could be learned by hard work; however "90% or more of the players of Table Tennis do not want their game to become hard work, they play it for fun, for enjoyment."

## Three proposals

The President made an impassioned plea for the sake of maintaining the unity of Table Tennis as an international sport. He considered three feasible types of standards:

1. pimpled rubber only
2. thickness of covering
3. only types of rackets approved by the ITTF

Proposal 1 was the system favoured by the majority of associations who wanted standards enacted. Proposal 2 was favoured by Japan (up to 15mm thickness!), though they were generally opposed to any standardization. Proposal 3 would require a Committee for recommending racket types for vote at the General Meetings.

Reversing his earlier stance, Montagu preferred proposal 1 as the simplest, based on experience and not "mere hypothesis," and he recommended a clear procedure to follow before the 1959 World Championships in Dortmund. This procedure was successfully implemented.

## Roadmap for peace

First, a special meeting of the Advisory Committee was held in Dusseldorf in August 1958. The Committee determined by correspondence with the ITTF member associations that most were in favor of some form of racket standardization. To end the disputes and for unity within the ITTF the Committee concluded that racket standardization is necessary. A pimpled rubber only standard was recommended for discussion at the AGM in Dortmund in 1959. The plan was that if the measure failed, then they should have an alternate proposal ready, with less narrow limits.

In Dortmund, the Standing Orders Committee recommended a full debate in the First Session of the Congress, with separate votes on: a) the question of standardization; b) pimpled rubber only standard. The votes were for information and guidance purposes, after which the Advisory Committee would prepare a proposal capable of gaining the required  $\frac{3}{4}$  majority for submission to the Second Session of Congress.



Man on a mission – could he unify the ITTF?

had been resolved. A decade of dissent had come to a peaceful end, thanks largely to his passionate appeals for unity as well as his ability to communicate and formulate a workable plan, based on teamwork, confidence in the committee process and respect for inputs from all member associations.

The technology issue is by no means unique to Table Tennis. A recent example is professional golf, which is now dealing with the possible need for equipment restraints. Most all sports will face this issue at some point, given the relentless pace of technology 'advancements.' Will it resurface at some point in the future for Table Tennis – quite likely, as the sport strives for optimal television viewing and entertainment value.

**First Session votes:**

- a. Standards? For: 64 Against 25 (incl. Japan, Sweden, Yugoslavia, Korea ...)  
b. Pimpled Rubber only standard: For: 50 Against: 35

Therefore the Advisory Committee prepared a compromise proposal, one submitted by China: Pimpled rubber only, or sandwich, 4mm maximum thickness, pips in or out, sponge as underlying material; another by Deputy President Ake Eldh (SWE): pimpled rubber, + sandwich, pips out only, no maximum thickness, no definition of underlying material.

Japan continued their opposition to standardization, but if necessary, would support proposal 1 but with 6 or 8mm maximum thickness, to allow room for experiment.

A sub-committee was then formed to consult the delegates, concluding that the Eldh proposal had no chance of  $\frac{3}{4}$  majority, so the Chinese proposal was submitted to the Second Session of the Congress. Doubtless there was a strong lobbying effort to finally put an end to one of the most difficult problems ever to face the ITTF.

**Second Session vote:**

With a vote of 72 –19 (against: Japan, Korea, Sweden Egypt Iran Yugoslavia ...) the compromise was finally achieved.

Law 4 was revised to state:

The racket may be of any size, shape or weight. Its surface shall be dark coloured, and non reflecting. The blade shall be of wood, continuous, of even thickness, flat and rigid. If the blade is covered on either side, this covering may be either (a) of plain, ordinary pimpled rubber, with pimples outward, of a total thickness of not more than 2mm; or (b) of 'sandwich', consisting of a layer of cellular rubber surfaced by plain ordinary pimpled rubber – turned outwards or inwards – in which case the total thickness of covering of either side shall not be more than 4mm.

Many refinements to this Law would occur in the future, but for now the ITTF President could rest assured that the crisis