



Hiroji Satoh's controversial thick sponge bat that caused a revolution in Table Tennis



Dunlop Barna thick sponge bat with huge pips



Thick waffle sponge bat by Amouretti

## The Turbulent Fifties Decade of Dissent - Part 1

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Fifty years ago the Table Tennis world and the ITTF were struggling with great difficulty over the controversy of the sponge bat. After Hiroji Satoh won the Men's Singles title at the 1952 World Championships in Bombay using his silent, thick soft sponge bat, there ensued for the next 7 years and beyond a chain reaction of loud dissent, splitting the Table Tennis world into two main camps: the traditionalists versus the technologists.

### The President reacts

Soon after the Championships in Bombay, ITTF President Ivor Montagu penned an impassioned argument in favour of technology. In the March 1952 issue of the English "Table Tennis" magazine he observed that "most of this agitation derives from panic or sensationalism on the part of the ill-informed", and urged everyone **not** to be "like those politicians of whom it is said that, when they lose, they change the rules."

Montagu reminded that back in 1926 players who used plain wood bats were demanding a ban of pimped hard rubber on the grounds that it 'spoiled the game'. He also made the surprising claim that he had himself used sponge rubber padding for over 20 years!

### European dissent

The 1954 Men's Singles Final between Ichiro Ogimura and Tage Flisberg was the first all-sponge final, a dull and lifeless match that reinforced the doubts about the sponge bat. The strong views of the European member nations soon tempered Montagu's enthusiasm; as President he must be fair and objective, open to all considerations. He adopted a more cautious approach, tasking the Advisory Committee to study the situation for future review. Questionnaires were distributed to gather viewpoints on the pros and cons of racket standardization, and an assessment of the impact of the sponge bat on the sport in each member nation.

Research in the ITTF Archives reveals just how serious the problem was back then. Member nation dialogue found that some countries had banned the sponge bat; Austria, England, France, Germany, Netherlands and Wales tried an experimental ban in the 1957-58 season. European TT Union members insisted on the traditional pimped rubber bat, while our Asian colleagues, led by Japan, preferred no restrictions, to allow technology to influence technique and equipment.

Some were open to compromise, while others were adamant in their views. The German Federation favoured standardization of only wooden rackets with normal pimped rubber, adding that they were not prepared to support a compromise.

### Standardization, but how?

Montagu must have had many sleepless nights agonizing over just how to solve this difficult problem to the satisfaction of at least  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the ITTF membership, as required to enact a new rule. It became apparent that most members were in favour of some kind of bat standardization. The traditionalists preferred adding this qualification to the existing bat rule:

"If any covering be applied to the surface, this must be of ordinary pimped-studded rubber not more than 2 mm in total thickness. Only the necessary quantity of adhesive may be used."

Ordinary pimped rubber was defined as:

"A single covering with pimples outwards, evenly distributed, not fewer than 60 nor more than 330 to the square inch, of rubber which, whether natural or synthetic, is non cellular ... " (English TTA)

The technologists advocated instead:

"If there be no covering, the total thickness of the racket must not exceed 7mm. If cove-

ring be applied to one side surface, this must be rubber, natural or synthetic, of which the maximum thickness, including the thin textile backing if any, is not more than 8mm; if covering be applied to the other side, this must be of cork not more than 1mm." (Japan TTA).

During the 1957 World Championships at Stockholm and for the following 15 months Montagu considered it proper to abstain from expressing his opinion publicly. But when it became clear that no solution was yet to be produced to solve the dilemma, he felt compelled to use the full force of his intellect and his office as President to address a membership in crisis.

Part II describes how Montagu unified the ITTF to solve one of the most difficult problems in the history of Table Tennis.

### Missing Programme Found!



The Paris 1933-34 World Championship programme was found in a recent auction, though for me yet another case of heart happy, wallet sad. Now the Archives needs only 4 programmes: Stockholm 1928, Budapest 1929, Berlin 1930 and Prague 1936. Contact the Curator if you can help: museum@ittf.com fax:+41-21-340-7099