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Dear Councillor,

Introduction

In advance of our next meeting I have taken the opportunity to have a close look at the Ranking Consultation Document which has been issued recently by the Competitions Department of Table Tennis England.

Quite clearly a great deal of time and effort has been invested in producing this document. It is very well written and explains many important aspects of the current ranking system and details some of the opportunities for improvement.

I have a serious concern that, whilst it clearly could succeed in achieving an improvement in the ranking system, there are a number of important points which are not explained as fully as they need to be, particularly about the Absolute System.

The Absolute Scheme could also have a seriously detrimental effect on the sport in this country if introduced for the season 2021/22.

Objectives

The paper has listed the objectives. However, the main objective of the ranking system is not included. This is to produce a list of players that reflects, as accurately as possible, in the correct ranking order or their current playing standard. This has been the objective of the ranking list for at least 50 years, whether it was produced by a small committee meeting on a regular basis to prepare it manually as it was originally or later through a computer system.

The other items listed in the document as objectives are as much benefits as objectives, and there are more benefits than those listed in the document, as follows

The Benefits

1) To motivate and encourage the players to compete in team matches. Team matches are the most important aspect of competitive play in England as they provide the majority of results and they are a great opportunity for the players to compete at their own level. In particular the British League, County Championships and National Cadet and Junior Leagues represent more than half the matches played for ranking purposes in England.

More than that, they provide the motivation to the main Clubs and Coaches to produce players to be part of their club membership and represent their Club in team matches.

Without the motivation associated in gaining ranking points, there would be much less incentive for many of the players to represent their Counties and Clubs so the motivation would also be lost for the organisers and coaches to invest their time and energy in this important part of the Association's activities.

2) The ranking list provides information for the British League and other competitions to be able to list the players in the correct and meaningful order of playing standard order within the teams. This is vital for team matches to ensure balance, so that the best players in each team are playing each other and the weaker players the same.

3) It provides an accurate seeding list for tournaments and other competitions of similar nature, which is a very important part of having successful tournaments.

Disadvantage of the Absolute Scheme

The Absolute Scheme, whilst having some advantages, has some clear disadvantages as follows.

Accuracy

i. The ITTF have been using the Absolute Scheme for more than a year and it is clear that the accuracy of this scheme is poor compared with the Relative Scheme.

It is acknowledged in the Consultation Document that many people prefer the Relative Scheme due to it being more accurate. The reason for this is that whilst the Relative Scheme goes very much on the wins and losses that players achieve, the Absolute Scheme works on wins only.

In principle, with the Absolute Scheme, the more a player competes and the more competitions they play in, the more points they will gain and the higher ranking they will achieve. Which means the Absolute Scheme ranking is based on a mix of performance and participation, where the Relative Scheme although there is a small element of participation, this is much more in balance so produces a more accurate list. Even this small element in the Relative Scheme is controversial, but it is relatively minor, therefore, on balance it can be accepted.

A good example of this was in the last World Championships, with the lack of accuracy with the Absolute Scheme, when the best player in the world, Ma Long, had been out for a period of time and had come back in time to play in the World Championships but because of the lack of participation he had dropped to Number 11 in the world list when clearly he was the best player and retained the World Singles title. On the Relative Scheme he may have dropped a place or two but would still have been a top seed.

The Absolute Scheme favours players with money and time

ii. Other points relating to this which make the Absolute System unfair, is that it strongly favours players who have the time and resources to be able to participate more and, therefore, encourages participation and players to chase ranking points. This has worked well for the ITTF and as a result the entries for many events have increased because the players who have been able to obtain significant finance and have the time, have been able to play in more events, whereas the players who do not have the money are not able to reach this level.

A prime example of where the player has been able to benefit in world ranking terms as a result of participating rather than performance is Scotland's Gavin Rungay, who currently has a world ranking of 158. On the other hand our own up and coming international player, Tom Jarvis, has had much better results than Gavin Rungay. Tom Jarvis is ranked 25 places lower at 183. Rungay has gained many of his ranking points by simply turning up at relatively weak open championships in the far corners of the world, which have included Pyongyang Open in North Korea, the Nigeria Open in Lagos, the Australia Open in Geelong, the Indonesia Open in Batam and the Thailand Open in Bangkok. His results in these events have not produced big victories but he has gained the points for effectively turning up.

On the other hand Tom Jarvis has had a very good year. He reached the quarter-finals of the Belarus and Polish Opens. The semi-finals of the Commonwealth Championships and the last 64 of the Portuguese and Korea Opens. Despite this, he is behind Gavin Rungay in the world list, including a number of wins against players ranked higher than him.

I am confident that most table tennis experts would regard Tom Jarvis as the higher standard player than Gavin Rungay. Having reached the semi-finals of our National

Championships and played a very good match with Paul Drinkhall. On the other hand Gavin Rungay has only played one Grand Prix where he lost in the groups at Preston and was recently defeated in the final of the Scottish Closed Championships by Colin Dalgleish

To look at this from an English perspective, there will be a significant advantage for players who have large personal or family resources to be able to travel and play more regularly, against those who are unable to do this if they do not have the time due to other commitments; work, exams etc or the resources.

Table Tennis has always been a sport which has tried to be fair to players of all levels regardless of their personal resources whereas this would only be an advantage to those with significant funds to use for this purpose.

Post Code Advantage

iii. It would also be an advantage to players who geographically live in an area where there are more tournaments, and this is an issue with the Relative System but even more so under the Absolute system.

Effect on Team Events

iv. Another negative with the ITTF system is that the international governing body has given strong priority and preference in the points allocated to the various individual tournaments to the detriment of points for team competitions. The team competitions have lost their importance.

If the Absolute system was to be adopted in England and this ITTF priority was followed, then the team competitions would be diluted and this would have very serious effect on the counties, the clubs and the motivation for the largely volunteer officials and coaches to invest their time and resources to produce quality players for their teams.

I was aware of some discussions between some of the senior personnel in Milton Keynes and some members of the British League Committee about the change to the Absolute Scheme a year or two ago, and the possibility of there being no ranking points for team events i.e. British League and County Championships and presumably National Junior and Cadet League. I would hope this is no longer the case. However, there is no information in the Consultation Document about the important point as to if the Absolute Scheme is adopted how the ranking points would be allocated for British League, County Championships and other competitions and what weighting within the system they would have and how it would work.

Lucky Draw

Another feature of the Absolute Scheme is there is a much bigger element of luck when achieving points. The points are awarded for reaching a certain round or stage in a competition. A player who has a tough draw and has two or three very good wins against players of a higher standard, against that another player in the same competition could have a draw against weaker players or ones that withdraw by scratching or have an injury and gain more points without having had any particularly good wins against the player listed above doing very well and not gaining the same number of points.

European Table Tennis Union Disquiet

My understanding is that there has been a significant amount of concern expressed by the members of the National Associations of the European Table Tennis Union about the ITTF Absolute Scheme.

In fact there was a General Meeting of the ETTU members called in Budapest last month when a presentation was made pointing out the concerns relating to the Absolute Scheme. Amongst the concerns expressed in writing was

a) Most European players are forced to play many events to keep up their ranking and are missing practice time and recovery. Therefore, are having problems with their Clubs. The report goes on that the calendar of a European player shows that this is very exhausting and leaves no time for practise or improvement.

b) The seeded players in the World Tour events, are given points for not even winning a single match and even more points if they beat a lower ranked player in one of their matches.

c) There is also concern about the lack of points given for team matches.

Cost Advantage

A plus factor with the arguments for the Absolute System is that it is easier to administer, and I have no doubt this is the case. For many years we have had computer ranking systems and we have had good people, both as volunteers and professional staff, who have had the expertise to be able to manage this very well. Do we have the right quality of volunteers and staff dealing with the work, as it appears that there are more issues now than there were some years ago?

The cost advantage may be an important factor so far as the organisation in our Milton Keynes office is concerned in that they would need to allocate less staff time to the ranking scheme and save some of the cost and so generating a budget surplus with the Absolute Scheme. This should not be the case to the detriment of the scheme and the sport.

Relative Scheme

I am aware that there have been lots of issues with the Relative Scheme due to various errors and mistakes which have taken place. I am also aware that there has been a lot of comment and criticism about how the Relative Scheme is implemented with regard to how matches are included. For example, if two cadets play each other in a senior tournament the points count for senior ranking but not for cadet ranking.

I believe that there are significant improvements that can be made as to how the Relative Scheme works and, therefore, will be keen to see proposals on how this could happen and, hopefully, produce a better scheme with less mistakes and problems going forward.

Alan Ransome OBE

National Councillor for Cleveland