



**Usha Mukunda  
nee Iyengar**

*“Do you know what my favourite part of the game is? The opportunity to play.”*

- Mike Singletary,  
American football star and now coach

The crowd roared with glee and within seconds, a tall, bespectacled man dejectedly elbowed his way out of the steamy hall. “The king is dead, long live the king,” I heard him mutter as he pushed past our curious stares. I was 12 years old and had turned up at the YMCA, in Calcutta, for my very first Table Tennis match. The man was Kalyan Jayant, reigning champion of Bengal for many years who had just been dethroned by the teenager, E. Solomon. I did not take in the implications of his statement then, but as I progressed in the game and in my ranking, that moment came back to me over and over again. Why? I think it epitomised so many things. The ephemeral nature of success and of failure too, though we do not always see failure that way. The fact that success and fame in sports is so heady and ego-building, that it is very hard to accept that it will not last. And finally, *what is the relationship we have to the game which will endure when the steady supply of laurels is over?*

#### **Enjoyment in Physical Activities and Games:**

I cannot think of any young child who does not run like the wind when given the chance. It is a spontaneous, joyful outburst and celebration of the body. But as the child grows older and goes to school, structure and filtering comes in. There are teams and matches and winning and losing which becomes all-important. Medals, prizes, positions and fame start rearing their heads and too soon, there are those who can and those who can't. The annual races and contests in school are almost always fraught with tension. Parents vie with one another to see whose child gets the medals.

So I feel that enjoyment both for the victor and for the vanquished begins to be tinted with other shades! Too often, schools relegate and restrict this activity to after school hours and only for those who are especially good at it. The right thing to do, I feel, is to ensure that games and sports are woven into the curriculum and are totally participative and celebratory. So games are played by all, teachers and students, irrespective of their prowess at it. The attempt is to convey the sheer joy of physical movement, energy, exuberance and special skills inherent in each game. So there are keenly fought games, played with great intensity, but no ill-will or deliberate rough play.

*“The atmosphere is one of fun, camaraderie and sweat! Is this an improbable dream? It is a happy talent to know how to play”.*

R.W. Emerson (Journals. 1834)

It is possible that for some children, acquiring skills in particular games does not come easily. At times, allowing them the flexibility to try out different games, helps them discover an arena of enjoyment. An excellent physical fitness programme would give them another angle to be in harmony with their bodies. Different kinds of sports and games can emanate from the physical well-being of the body. So a balanced mix of all these ideas would have the best impact on the child. This is the approach that Centre for Learning, Bangalore, has been happily wedded to right from the start of a young child's life in the school, which has resulted in every child and young person being physically active and looking forward to the games hour with joy.

#### **Competition and How it Plays Itself Out in The Sports Arena:**

There is a notion among many, even those who abhor competition generally, that it has its place in sports and games. Many strongly feel that a child will push towards excellence when faced with strong opposition. There is a different way to look at that. When we play with a person who is that much better, there is an instinctive urge to push oneself to play to that level

and in table tennis and probably other racket sports, it would be right to say that a lesser player benefits from playing with a better player. But it is more about reaching out for that impossible shot, taking care to shape a stroke which will score, or pausing to think what best strategy to use. So playing for points may well achieve this desired state BUT it is important for the coach or teacher to be wary of this becoming the only reason to play the game. Many times, I am asked by a student tongue-in-cheek, “You say you don’t support competition, but how come you are fighting for every point and trying so hard to win?” Any takers for that question? To me, it would be unthinkable to go out to that table and play casually or in a lackadaisical manner. *When I am at the table, I play my best, give all my attention to the ball, the rallies and my strokes. Each point is vital. I owe that to my relationship to the game.* But if every victory or defeat hangs on me and shadows all that I do, then something is rotten in the state of that relationship!!

“As a sportsman, I accept being beaten. Everybody likes to be a winner, but only one will win. It’s fun to win! But I don’t find unhappiness if I lose.” Kipchoge Keino. Two-time Olympic athletics gold medallist from Kenya

### Role of Parents, Teachers, and Coaches in The Playing of Sports and Games:

We have seen any number of parents who push themselves and their children to harsh schedules and privations. Coaches too become obsessive about achieving success for their trainees. Is this inevitable, and do we feel it is all worthwhile when an euphoric Djokovic chews the grass at Wimbledon? Somewhere there is a disconnect, I feel. *Talent in a particular game or sport begins with a genuine passion for the game. As the young person goes deeper and deeper into the caves of competition, does this love survive?* I recollect Andre Agassi revealing his state of mind when tennis began to seem like a monster. Is there a point where love turns to hate?!

Speaking for myself, I began with a strong love for the game. There was something natural to my body to

hold that racket and juggle the ball. There was joy and there was never weariness or boredom though there was physical exhaustion. Now that the hurly-burly’s done, I feel that my relationship with the game has deepened. When I play there is a wonderful feeling of well-being. So can we look for that when a child begins to play a game? How? Since I have informally interacted with children and Table Tennis for many years, I can recognise a player who is out to score and looks at his or her prowess as a tool of superiority. Such a child is bored to help a weaker player and wants to ‘get on’ with his/her game. Almost as soon as a few rallies are done, he/she wants to keep score. Then there are those who constantly wish to challenge others to a match! I am not decrying these children. A sensitive teacher can guide them to the right way to play both in skills and in attitudes. Many do respond but for some who can only look at laurels in the present, I feel that years later they may not really be too interested in the game. There is no enduring relationship.

*In our play we reveal what kind of people we are. Ovid. (The art of love)*

The sports arena offers tremendous opportunities to discover in what frame of mind young people play a game. The child who is consistently angry, violent or dejected when faced with defeat can be helped by an adult who can bring a perspective to the situation. It is important here to differentiate between a ‘lecture’ on sportsmanship and a dialogue to uncover what is going on in the child’s mind. The latter has more scope for true learning. Similarly, if in other aspects of school life, a student is dysfunctional, but shines in the games field, this is a window to reach the child and talk together in a very different atmosphere. When I had trouble communicating with a child, suddenly in the Table Tennis room, I found myself in perfect harmony with him/her!

### My Reflections on Coaching:

As someone who has coached children at more than one school, my focus is on their learning about the intricacies of the game and getting a glimpse of the



beauty in it. At the same time, I try to help them learn the basics and perhaps show how they might grow in their skills by being aware of the role their whole body plays in this growth, being attentive to the ball and the opponent's movements. I have the hope that very soon they will feel a body-mind connect with the game and feel a sense of joy in playing. For me that is

what it is. Pure joy! As the years rush by, I may not be able to make all the daring and breathtaking strokes I used to, but I can still do them in my imagination and that is what I aim at. The actual strokes and accuracy may have diminished but the exhilaration I still feel has not! So my intent is to convey a flavour of that to every child who plays the game with me. I clearly recollect that my introduction to Table Tennis was exploratory, unbroken and immensely leisurely. I discovered a table tucked away in a corner of the family club and played for hours contentedly with Niruwa, a tennis ballboy of my age. In a school setting, that is not always an option, but is it still possible to convey a whiff of that to the children who play? *Whatever the 'talent' quotient, can every child relate to games in this way? Can sports and games in schools be excellent, enjoyable and inclusive?* For those schools or group of educators who are clear that they wish to bring in these elements, there is good news. It can be done!

#### Reading suggestions:

1. "Playfair : Everybody's guide to noncompetitive play " by Matt Weinstein and Joel Goodman. Impact Publishers. California. 1980.
2. "Co-Op Games Manual" by Jim Deacove. Family Pastimes. Canada. 1974.
3. "Co-Op Sports Manual" Ibid.
4. "Let's play" by Sharad Jain. Journal of the Krishnamurti Schools. No. 14. January 2010. Page 32.

*Usha Mukunda is a founder-member of Centre for Learning, Bangalore where she initiated the Open Library. She has been playing table tennis since the age of 12, representing Bengal for 7 years, and later Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu at the National Championships. She has also played for India at the Asian Championships. Over the years, she has explored different ways to awaken a passion for the game among her trainees. She can be reached at [usha.mukunda@gmail.com](mailto:usha.mukunda@gmail.com).*

