

## A Response to Mr. Gilbert Simons's

# "The Future of Table Tennis in the U.S."

USATT Ratings Committee

Mr. Bob Partridge, Chairman

Mr. Larry Rose

Dr. David Marcus

### **Introduction**

Mr. Gilbert Simons has presented a lengthy proposal, titled "The Future of Table Tennis in the U.S.," to the table tennis public. This proposal is presented on the World Wide Web at:

[http://www.correlationsystems.com/gilbertsimons/table\\_tennis](http://www.correlationsystems.com/gilbertsimons/table_tennis)

One of the key points of his proposal is the implementation of an *Event Rating System (ERS)*, which he proposes as a replacement for USATT's existing rating system, which he terms a *Match Rating System (MRS)*. A similar proposal, written by Mr. Thomas Fox of Arkansas, for a rating system was recently brought to the ratings committee's attention by Diana Gee at the last USATT Board of Director's meeting.

Recently, the USATT Ratings Committee has recommended that the USATT Board of Directors adopt the new rating system developed by Dr. David Marcus (USATT Ratings Committee member) under a grant from the U.S. Olympic Committee's Sport Science and Technology Committee. Mr. Simons, a USATT Member, Club Director, and USATT Club Coach has publicly stated his disapproval of the new system. While we do not agree with Mr. Simons, his proposal does represent a significant amount of work and merits a response. This report discusses Mr. Simons's ERS proposal, our reasons for recommending against it, and some other points that Mr. Simons's proposal raises.

### **The Event Rating System (ERS)**

In Section XXXIII, Mr. Simons introduces his version of an ERS classification system. He states that "Tradition, statistics and records play important roles in sports, such as baseball with its records of home runs, triples, stolen bases, etc. Table Tennis has none... Non-labeled numbers such as 1276, 1695, 2107, etc. are fine for an elite organization wanting to keep its activities secret; Inept for an organization wanting to grow and become a major sport."

Mr. Simons's ERS gives rating points to players depending on how far they advance in their event. If there are more players in an event, the rewards are higher. All players start as Novices. If you win a Novice event, you advance to the next classification level. You never lose rating points. You may play in your classification event and the one above it. If you gain points in the upper event, they are doubled. Mr. Simons presents no method for placing players into the system - everyone starts as a Novice. There is also no way to drop into the next lower classification. Mr. Simons's system would require that all sanctioned tournaments us a fixed structure of events. Rather than the rating system being an aid to tournament directors to assist with seeding and determining event eligibility, the rating system would determine how tournaments are structured and would only work with tournaments that followed that specific structure.

Mr. Simons's version is only reasonable if all participants have the same opportunities to earn points. This means that there should be the same number of tournaments in each area, with the same number of participants in the area, which does not occur in USATT. Consider and contrast Maryland and Hawaii. While Maryland has a tournament within driving distance every weekend, Hawaii might have one per year. How long would it take Allen Kaichi to become a Master Class player as opposed to Cheng Yinghua?

What happens when both players travel to the U.S. Nationals? Increased participation in tournaments means increased points. Simons's system is, without a doubt, an inflationary system. This sort of system rewards participation, not performance.

### ***Simons's Arguments Against a Match Rating System (MRS)***

Mr. Simons states: "Publicity-wise, the M.R.S. is most useful in sports which require years or decades to develop champions." We submit that Table Tennis is just such a sport. In Section XXXVII, Mr. Simons explains his belief that the MRS makes it impossible to grow and prosper:

- A. **Simons:** Mr. Simons states that an MRS is inhospitable to growth because it is a finite point system.  
**Committee:** The USATT Rating System is not a finite point system.
- B. **Simons:** Mr. Simons believes the MRS "causes thousands of established players to stop playing tournaments, as a means to avoid going down in rating which the M.R.S. guarantees over time."  
**Committee:** This is untrue.
- C. **Simons:** Mr. Simons writes, "the MRS affects the choice of events recreational players enter. Many avoid entering their own class events and enter events several classes above their rating."  
**Committee:** Players are free to enter whichever events they are eligible for. Most players enter the lowest events they are eligible for. Without a rating system, there wouldn't be this choice.
- D. **Simons:** Mr. Simons uses the example of Don Tillotson to demonstrate a problem with the current system. Tillotson stopped playing tournaments for several years, trained the whole time, entered the 1995 U.S. Nationals with a 647 rating, and successfully advanced out of his U-1500 Round Robin and one round into the Single Elimination event. His opponents lost significant rating points because Mr. Tillotson's old rating was no longer accurate.  
**Committee:** We agree that this is a valid example of a flaw in the current USATT Rating System; however, there are ways to fix this flaw. In the newly developed rating system developed by Dr. Marcus, Mr. Tillotson would have been treated as basically an unrated player (because his rating was out of date), and his opponents would have lost very few points.
- E. **Simons:** Mr. Simons says, "The MRS is not intended to function under a Multiple Classification System." He defines a class of players he calls "Gatekeepers" as those players who are at the junction between two categories, constantly winning all the trophies - rated 1485, they win, go up to 1515, lose back down to 1490, win again, etc."  
**Committee:** The fact that the U.S. Open and U.S. Closed use different rating levels for their events should be enough to show that this phenomenon does not exist. More likely, the players Mr. Simons is seeing are those who are tournament-tough and tend to win competitions. Since USATT does not standardize the categories, Mr. Simons is free (and even encouraged) to run events like U-1983 Singles. Perhaps it would be an interesting marketing ploy that would encourage participation.
- F. **Simons:** "The win-lose format of Match Rating System tournaments imposes severe stress on competitors."  
**Committee:** Mr. Simons seems to equate the rating system with the single elimination format. He references a quote by Don Harrington that speaks of the stress of chess competition as compared to poker. Mr. Harrington makes no reference to the chess rating system, but Mr. Simons assumes that's where the stress came from. We find his remarks to be taken completely out of context. Any tournament match is a win-lose contest--those are the rules of our sport.
- G. **Simons:** Mr. Simons states that the MRS places players in a permanent holding pattern, forcing them to meet the same players for the rest of their lives.  
**Committee:** We see no evidence that his Event Rating System would be any different, and point out that Mr. Simons's desired restriction to only allow players to play in their class and the one above would make it even more difficult to play new players. Anyway, there are more than enough players so that players get plenty of variety in their opponents. In fact, this is a major reason why tournaments are run. Mr. Simons's complaint seems better aimed at clubs.
- H. **Simons:** Mr. Simons states that the MRS is complex, time-consuming, and expensive to administer.  
**Committee:** With computer aids being developed for tournament directors, this is untrue. In fact, the rating system costs are more than covered by the rating fees.
- I. **Simons:** Mr. Simons states that the M.R.S. is too unwieldy to service a membership of millions.

**Committee:** This is completely untrue.

### ***Simons's Opinion of Dr. Marcus's System***

Mr. Simons thinks that administering a system such as Dr. Marcus's is too difficult. As his evidence, in Section XXXVI Mr. Simons points out that the English Table Tennis Association (ETTA) must activate its computer for 20 hours straight to compute the results of several weeks of tournament play.

Mr. Malcolm Macfarlane, Chairman, ETTA Ratings Committee notes that the ETTA's software has been rewritten, and that the "time to run a periods (sic) results (now about 4 weeks and 6-7000 results) with this new rating system is about 15-20 minutes!!!"

Furthermore, while testing the new ratings system, Dr. Marcus used a personal computer to repeatedly reprocess the complete results of the last five years of tournament data. Clearly, no unreasonable amount of processing power is required. In fact, each USATT tournament requires approximately 60 seconds to process, which would allow Dr. Marcus to compute five years of tournament data in about 24 hours.

### ***Categorizing the Table Tennis Population***

Mr. Simons lists four types of table tennis players. His descriptions and our comments follow:

1. Casual players

**Simons:** "the 19.8 million players the USATT identifies as participants in our sport."

**Committee:** The 19.8 million number referenced by Simons is from an old survey that claims that this type of player occasionally enjoys playing ping pong. More recent and presumably more accurate surveys exist. Mr. Simons is correct in stating that there is a large untapped market here.

2. Recreational players

**Simons:** "Virtually non-existent in the US [approximately 7,200 of the USATT members fit this category]... These players have no illusions about becoming champions."

**Committee:** Mr. Simons assumes that all of the current members of USATT fit this category, but then he describes them as follows: "They go regularly to their table tennis clubs as family affairs, and participate in weekly low-intensity competition for fun, exercise and camaraderie." This implies that they're just out having fun, having no competitive interest. A more reasonable representation of this category would be the numerous players who participate in USATT clubs but who are not USATT members. Again, this is a largely untapped market.

3. Elite players

**Simons:** "These are players who thrive on and esteem the technical aspects of the game... Ratings: from about 1,600 to 2,400... I place their numbers in the USATT at about 300."

**Committee:** Mr. Simons's description of these players is difficult to understand. Just a glance at the magazine shows that there are more than 300 players at this rating range. Plus, these elite players are the current backbone of the USATT membership--they play in our tournaments, run our clubs, and volunteer in the national organization. However, Mr. Simons believes that this group of players "may resist opening the sport to millions of recreational players."

4. Professional players

**Simons:** "players who earn their livelihood from prize money and endorsements alone...Currently, the United States has no bona fide professional cadre."

**Committee:** We agree with Mr. Simons that increased participation in the sport will result in more income for these players.

### ***Players Should Never Lose Points***

Mr. Simons believes that recreational players will respond to a "Rating System which offers the potential of modest reward and recognition without punishment." He makes the following statement: "How many would play Blackjack in Las Vegas if they made money when they won, but had their knuckles rapped

when they lost?" He continues, "Now imagine that 50% had their knuckles rapped each time they played. Las Vegas would go back to cactus and tumbleweed."

Our experiences at the U.S. Nationals show that most people who play Blackjack in Las Vegas lose money. In reality, the casinos take the player's money about 51.5% of the time. Despite this, we'd be very happy to see USA Table Tennis achieving the growth evident in the city of Las Vegas. Beyond this, we believe that there is an inherent flaw in a system that rewards players for both good and bad performances. Truly competitive players would not respect the results, and winning would lose its value.

Further, with Mr. Simons's system, players never go down in level. Suppose that, after a long career of representing the U.S., our former top players (Marty Reisman, Danny Seemiller, John Tannehill, Dell Sweeris) would be required to compete against only our elite athletes? The reality is that some players do get worse over time. To allow players an opportunity to compete with their peers, ratings/classifications that go up, must also go down. Mr. Simons does allow for separate Junior and Senior classifications, which might allow these players to continue on the "Senior Tour," but that eliminates the possibility for our young players to compete against our former stars.

### ***Recreational and Professional Rating Systems***

In Section XXXIV, Mr. Simons describes the purpose of ratings systems: "For the recreational player, tournaments and league play may be characterized as...a gauge by which to test improvement in proficiency and skill; obtaining some tangible rewards and recognition for efforts in gaining additional proficiency." He quotes the National Physical Achievement Standards book: "Point systems are tests of achievement... as a stimulus to participation and as a record of proficiency...and serve as an incentive for an individual to progress..."

We believe that for a point system to act as a record of proficiency, that point system must be accurate across the entire playing population. USATT members have always shown interest in their ratings, and pride in the progression they see when their ratings improve.

Mr. Simons states that an appropriate ratings system for **recreational** players must accomplish four tasks:

- a) it accurately identifies players' current levels of skill,
- b) in concurrence with a compatible classification component, the system matches players of near-equal skill in competition, providing the greatest degree of enjoyment,
- c) it rewards their progress if and when they advance in skill, and
- d) it confers corresponding prestige.

We agree that these are excellent goals. Unfortunately, they are not attained by Mr. Simons's proposed event rating system. Mr. Simons's system will mostly reward players who attend many tournaments.

Mr. Simons then describes four points that an appropriate rating system for **professional** players must accomplish:

- a) it evaluates players' performance vis-à-vis others in the select group whereas the recreational players' level of skill is measured vis-à-vis his own potential. The professional has already attained his skill limit, the recreational player has this limit perpetually ahead of him.
- b) it indicates the difference between the ratings of such players.
- c) it is a guide to predicting the performance of those players,
- d) it provides "A" type competition suitable to their personality, with winners seizing points from losers.

Mr. Simons's first point states that the recreational player should be ranked with respect to his potential. Yet, in his description of the rating system for a recreational player, there is no mention of this. We're unsure how this would be accomplished.

Mr. Simons's second and third points are reasonable. The fourth point is not - Mr. Simons has the false impression that ratings in a Match Rating System are necessarily finite, and winners seize points from losers.

### ***Miscellaneous Ideas***

- A. **Simons:** Mr. Simons suggests that a "supportive Classification System which will offer players competition with others of like skill" is a key toward tournament participation.  
**Committee:** We agree completely with this principle. Both our current system and Dr. Marcus's new system contain this element.
- B. **Simons:** Mr. Simons states, "From an organizations viewpoint, the number of players must be fixed and small. The transfer of a finite number of points among competitors requires that these competitors also be finite."  
**Committee:** We're not sure where Mr. Simons gets this idea. The USATT rating system is not restricted to a finite number of points. Initial ratings are assigned to unrated players upon the receipt of the results of their first tournament, and these points are not "taken" from their competitors. The adjustment system of the current USATT rating system also creates points to reward certain excellent performances by players, and, again, these points are not removed from the existing players. Likewise, Dr. Marcus's new system is not constrained to transferring a finite number of points between players.
- C. **Simons:** In Section XXXII, Mr. Simons states that round robin formats are very important and should be used more than single elimination formats. He goes on to state that larger round robins would be appreciated at the U.S. Nationals and U.S. Open.  
**Committee:** Most tournaments in the U.S. include a large number of round robin events, despite the fact that they take more time to run. Mr. Simons does not account for the extra amount of time needed to run 6-8 person round robins at major events.
- D. **Simons:** In Section XXXVII, Mr. Simons contrasts two organizations: the U.S. Chess Federation (USCF) and the American Contract Bridge League (ACBL). He claims that the ACBL is more successful than the USCF solely because of its choice of rating systems.  
**Committee:** This is pure surmise. One might just as easily claim that bridge would be more successful with a different rating system or chess even less successful if it had a bridge-like system.

### ***Conclusion***

Mr. Simons makes some good points in his proposal; most of which are related to proper operation of clubs and leagues. The rest of his points contain a dearth of proper supporting evidence and reveal his lack of a basic understanding of ratings systems in general and the USATT rating system in particular.