

Historical, Traditional and Cultural Significance: The Untold Story of “Liha”/ Sandpaper Rackets of Table Tennis in the Philippines

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Abstract: With the advent of technology, the use of table tennis rackets has become significant in the development and propagation of the sport where it has greatly affected the speed and spin of the ball, style and the level of play. Little has been known about the sandpaper or “Liha” (in Filipino term) rackets by most modern player now, unlike the “Hardbat” which the Americans have popularized. However, both “liha” and hardbat have been popularly played in the Philippines during the American colonization. It has its own humble beginnings and has great influence in the contemporary games of Philippine table tennis. The study aims to explore “Liha” table tennis rackets and its influence in the Philippine table tennis setting. Using a cultural-historical activity theory approach, the researchers have drawn from a widespread database that included published materials, pictures and video transcripts of events, interviews, field notes and texts produced by prominent table tennis personalities and the Table Tennis Association of the Philippines (TATAP). The following data were gathered:

- I. Popularity – Hardbat and Liha became so popular during the American colony of the Philippines through the efforts of TATAP’s first president, the late Senator Sergio Osmeña when several world-class players in the likes of Martin Reisman, Richard Bergman and Johnny Leach were invited to play in the 1st Philippine Invitational of Champions in 1952
- II. Events conducted – Included in some regional and national table tennis events
- III. Underground “Liha”- The unrevealed story where it is being kept privately in most areas especially in Cebu City where the late Mr. Sergio Osmeña resided
- IV. Champions produced which started off as Liha players – The late Teofilo Ybanez and current Southeast Asian Champion Richard Gonzales
- V. Physical fitness for elders at Marikina and Malabon Table Tennis Club in Metro Manila
- VI. Fiestas-“Liha” events in fiestas; e.g. Sinulog Fiesta of Cebu City –Central Philippines
- VII. Rules – Modified Rules compared from the ITTF Rules

In conclusion, the game of table tennis using “Liha” rackets has its benefits in the Philippine table tennis scene. The researchers do not wish to propose and inform the table tennis community to include “liha” to its present “rubber” tournaments but rather suggest having it as an added “variant” to be legalized and recognized in table tennis events. It can be played by young and old individuals who do not only want to enjoy the game because of its longer rallies but also to maintain an optimum level of fitness , fun and a “fallback” grounds from the present fast-paced game of table tennis.

Keywords: “liha”, cultural historical activity theory, variant, table tennis, Philippines

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Equipment in table tennis play an important role in enhancing the performance of a player. Rackets are much more interesting of table tennis miscellanea since they are more personal than other items of equipment. It can be of any size, shape or weight as long as it is flat and rigid (ITTF Handbook). From the earlier vellum battledores of the late 19th century (Crayden, R., 1995), the pimped rubber faced racket of the 1920’s, the introduction of the “sponge” in the 1950’s to the present times of the “Glueomania” of the 1990’s, table tennis rackets have greatly affected the speed and spin of the

ball, the style of play as well as the level of performance of players. With the advent of technology, the use of table tennis rackets has become significant. At present, table tennis has become a fast-paced sport that different proposals are being addressed by many for it to be slowed down in terms of the speed and spin of the ball. Many argued that it is becoming more “boring” since rallies end shorter than those of the earlier times in general sense. Unfortunately, these proposals has remained futile to no avail because of the continuous innovations of table tennis equipment particularly rubbers, which is designed to “kill” or confuse opponents in an instant. As a matter of fact, it is only in this era that we encounter the word “equipment junkies” half joke / half "name calling " to other players to other players.

Similarly, other sports have also their own means of innovations. Take the case of lawn tennis for example. It has a clay, shell, and grass court, where we consider as “variants”, which has been popularly played in tournaments like the French, Wimbledon and Australian Open. A Champion in all these said events in a calendar year is called a grand slam winner. Martial arts have karate, taekwondo, kung fu, judo and muay thai and even the slow Chinese “ Tai chi” as a form of exercise. Nobody ever predicted that mixed martial arts of fighting, called “UFC” would be that popular nowadays and even televised. Though this kind of UFC had its reputation of “hiding” underground for decades too. In other words, the researchers perceived that sports need to have a “variant” of their own to keep themselves abreast with sporting the world while suiting to one’s technical, physical and psychological capabilities.

While we admit that Philippine table tennis is still outmoded when compared to the fast paced modern table tennis world. Little has been known about the sandpaper or “Liha” (in Filipino term) rackets by most modern player now, unlike the “Hardbat” which the Englishmen and Americans have popularized. However, both “liha” and hardbat have been popularly played in the Philippines most especially during our American colonization. It has its own humble beginnings and has great influence in the contemporary games of Philippine table tennis.

Table 1 shows the difference between a “Liha”/sandpaper and the sandwich rubber.

Table 1 – Difference between a “Liha” and a Sandwich rubber

“Liha” / Sandpaper	Sandwich Rubber (Pips out and inverted)
Longer rallies	Shorter rallies
Less Spin	More spin
Less speed	More Speed
smaller ball (38 mm)	bigger ball (40mm)
Easier rules	More complicated rules
less advantage in service	can gain advantage in service

The main characteristics of a “Liha” game are:

1. Longer Rallies (low intensity and longer duration form of activity)
2. One player normally attacks and the other player defends. (formerly)
3. Exciting to watch than the conventional “rubber” game where points takes a lot of time to gain
4. Elders here only use the ‘ Liha’ as means for exercise to promote better health, “fun” and fitness

1.2 Statement of the Problem

This study aims to explore “Liha” table tennis rackets and its influence in the Philippine table tennis setting. Using a cultural-historical activity theory approach, the researchers have drawn from a widespread database that included published materials, pictures and video transcripts of events, interviews, field notes and texts produced by prominent table tennis personalities and the Table Tennis Association of the Philippines (TATAP).

1.3 Significance of the Study

Most of the international table tennis enthusiasts are not aware that the “ liha”/ sandpaper game is prevalent in the Philippines although played in the “underground” world. Some perceive that this kind of play is a “poor man’s” sport mostly played by low to middle income based individuals. Others recognize it as a means to make money through “underground betting”. But there is more than just these things.

This study serves to guide and inform table tennis aficionados that the “liha”/ sandpaper game is something that they should be proud of as Filipinos because of its humble beginnings. Once taught by our colonizers and slowly, the Filipinos after all these years were able to “refine” the skill in playing at its highest standard despite being kept for years and not shown to the outside world. Such high standard of play are even shown in the “You Tube” of internet proudly proving this fact to the world.

While together, it can also be an integral part in the promotion of fitness and health especially among middle to old ages since it is a “low intensity, longer duration” type of activity where the researchers would like to emphasize what “liha” is all about aside from being perceived as “money game” in the Philippines.

Finally, it also serves to guide and motivate especially our national sports association, clubs, and school athletic leagues to come up with comprehensive programs in the promotion of recreation and fitness with some degree of high level of competition for both local and hopefully in the international scene.

2. POPULARITY

The Philippines was once colonized by the Spaniards, Japanese and the Americans. It also has a rich cultural heritage. Among them, the Americans had great influence in the promotion of table tennis in the country. Hardbat and Liha became so popular during the American colony of the Philippines through the efforts of TATAP’s first president, the late Senator Sergio Osmeña of Cebu City when several world-class players in the likes of Martin

Reisman, Richard Bergman and Johnny Leach were invited to play in the 1st Philippine Invitational of Champions in 1952 witnessed by at least 10,000 spectators in an arena as personally accounted for by Mr. Reisman during his Philippine visit. This was the first official international table tennis event organized in the Philippines. The figures below are some of the highlights of the said event.



Figure 1 – Published Article during the 1st Philippine Invitational of Champions in 1952



Figure 2 – Souvenir Program



Figure 3 - Pictures and Dedications/Signatures of Former World Champions Richard Bergmann, Martin Reisman and Johnny Leach



Figure 4 - Philippine’s “1001 Electric Chop” Teofilo Ybañez and Martin Reisman in an Exhibition Match (top photo); Martin Reisman and Richard Bergmann (right photo)

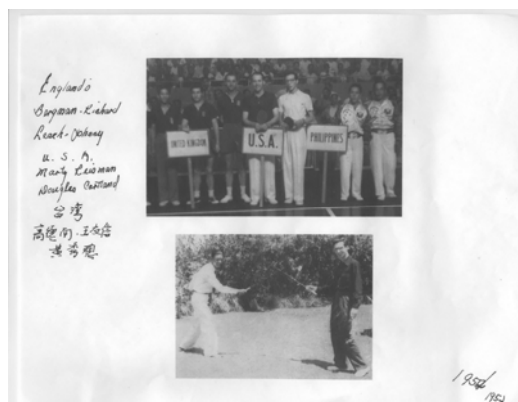


Figure 5 - During the Opening Ceremonies with Philippines’ Teofilo Ybañez and Ernesto Pingol, USA;s Martin Reisman and Douglas Cartland, United Kingdom’s Richard Bergmann and Johnny Leach (top photo); Martin Reisman (bottom photo)

The staging of this event opened the door for Philippine Table Tennis producing top players during those times in the likes of Teofilo Ybañez, once called the “1000 chop”, Ernesto Pingol, Bienvenido Alcantara among others. It became very popular especially in the City of Cebu and later on expanded to the other provinces and cities including Metro Manila. It also became a diversion for betting. Even with the introduction of the sponge in 1952, the use of the “liha” table tennis rackets were still popular in the Philippine Table Tennis scene even though it was banned to

participate in rubber tournaments. So slowly, it started to become an “underground world” because of the rubber rackets being recognized by the International Table Tennis Federation. Aside from that reason, there is no “international springboard” that’s why it became “underground playing” in a sense. But still, other clubs maintained its tradition. Most recently, in one of the researcher’s email communication with Mr. Reisman, the former made a remarkable comment quoted as saying: *In 1952, I had the pleasure of spending time in the Philippines during the early and middle fifties. At that time, I played a series of matches against your two best players, Ebanyez (referring to Mr. teofilo Ybanez) and Pingol as well as against Richard Bergmann and Johny Leach, both world champions in Rizal Stadium before a crowd of ten thousand. This international match also included two Hongkong and two players from Taiwan. I had many friends, among whom was Sergio Osmeña. We often played at his estate in Cebu and Manila. Doug Cartland and I played several times in the Philippines, once going down to Cebu under the sponsorship of Sergio Osmeña. Another time, we were paid \$5,000 by Amanda Araneta, the sugar baron to play a match on his sugar plantation. He built a special arena for the match and even made money on the promotion. With 80,000 workers cutting sugar cane on his field, thousands came to watch us play.*”

3. SOME POPULAR EVENTS CONDUCTED

In some events where the ITTF rule is implemented, “liha”/sandpaper events also take center stage by including them in these regular “rubber” game events. This is where a lot of “unknown” liha players from the different parts of the country gather and vie for top honors. It is interesting to note that in most “rubber” regional tournaments are done, the aged coaches bring out their liha bat and start playing liha with betting money at stake especially among old rivals bringing with them the pride and glory of their hometown city or province. The following are some of the events conducted in recently:

1. 1st LOPUE’S Liha-Kahoy Table Tennis Tournament; June 28-29, 2008, Bacolod City



Figure 5- Event Logo

This is the first event where both “liha” and plain wooden rackets called “ kahoy” were played. It was held at the southern part of the Philippines, Bacolod City where it is both a haven for “rubber” and “ liha” players. Previously there used to have an event of this sort but mostly played at a lower level and usually unknown to the table tennis

community because of its tradition on hardcore betting. This event produced top players mostly from the middle ages to compete and vie for top honors both in team, doubles and individual events. Doubles using ”liha” rackets are very exciting to watch because of its longer rallies that’s why in team events, the deciding match is normally in doubles. Winners are given trophies, medals and especially cash prizes where a lot of competing players vie for.

2. 1st Philippine National Table Tennis Championship slated on October 27-31, 2008 at Philsports Arena (ULTRA) in Pasig City, Metro Manila, Philippines



Figure 6 – Our National Governing Body Logo (Table Tennis Association of the Philippines)

This event was held last year where it also coincided with the national selection of rubber players for the Southeast Asian Games in 2009 in Laos. “Liha” was featured as a special national event. The rules are the same but it is more systematic because of the involvement of the Department of Local and Interior Government which is the umbrella organization of all the different local government units in the country both cities and provinces. Team and individual events were played. The researcher, Mr. Peter Cua voluntarily solicited funds from various private sectors where aside from the medals and trophies awarded to “liha” players, cash prizes incentives were also given. Otherwise, no good players will come out from the “underground” with no money at stake. Mr. Cua understood this psychology very well and it did work well. Here are some pictures and highlights of the event:



Figure 7 - Current Southeast Asian Champion Richard Gonzales (green and yellow shirt) also winning the “Liha” Men Singles Event during the 1st Philippine National Table Tennis Championships (October 27-31, 2008)



Figure 8 - Cebu City Team winning the Men's Team "Liha" Event

4. UNDERGROUND "LIHA"

For the first time, this unrevealed story of "liha" will come out in the open for in decades since its inception, it has always been kept private and exclusive in most areas in Cebu City, Cavite City, Marikina City, Malabon, Navotas, Cagayan De Oro, Iligan City and Manila. Top players would engage in private "underground" betting, which also serves as their means to supplement their livelihood. A number of top players even in the national team failed to continue their studies because of too much poverty and it is where playing "liha" that provides them money for food even for the day just to get by.

Fortunately, some players have their own managers who take care of their training, transportation and meal allowances and most especially the money that they put during betting where they get a certain percentage if that player wins. Sometimes, featured matches are organized similar to that of a cockfight arena where there is even a middleman or locally termed as "Kristo" who facilitates betting among the players with their own manager and also from the spectators. It is still prevalent today and this tradition will continue. The researcher, Prof. Oscar Yoshihiro S. Santelices, who was the head coach of the national team in the early 1990's personally witnessed a classic match that was supposed to take place in the national table tennis team venue where then rising "liha" star Mr. Richard Gonzales engaged then national champion Mr. Richard Ching in a classic duel between "Liha" and "Rubber" with ITTF rules. The said researcher had to call off the match because he was not informed that the said "secret" duel would take place in that venue where the national team was training. Aside from that reason, gambling is generally prohibited. With that, one sees why it's been kept "underground" for that reason. And besides, hundreds of "liha" and rubber enthusiasts flocked the venue to the hysteria of the security guards who were manning the venue. Nevertheless, that classic encounter still ensued in a different venue with hundreds who watched and put in their bet and also witnessed as to who and what racket is better, a

"liha" or a "rubber" player. Mr. Ching won that match. Later then, Mr. Gonzales made it to the national team using this time a long pimped and ordinary pimped rubber that represent the timing of a "liha" bat. These are just some documented events that took place which will be long remembered.

The researchers, remembered, of whom were personally coached and handled by some Filipino "lihador (one who plays liha)" friends who served as trainers during their younger days of rubber playing. The researchers feel that they have a moral obligation to reciprocate the patience and kindness of these "lihadors" by informing now to the table tennis community of their unique skills and traits that they possess.

5. CHAMPIONS PRODUCED WHO STARTED OFF AS LIHA PLAYERS

Among many players who made it to the national team and started off as "liha" players, two popular names have come out whom the researchers think have brought honor and pride for the country; **Teofilo Ybañez** and **Richard Gonzales**. Both researchers feel lucky enough to have played with them. Even the late champion Mr. Teofilo Ybañez whom the researchers described as "the great chopper of the Philippines". Incidentally, both this great table tennis players hail from the city of Cebu. Here are their brief sports achievements:

1. Teofilo Ybañez – One of the most feared table tennis player in the early 1950's because of his well known "1000 chop". He sparked his teammates during the 1952 Invitational held in Manila where former champions Martin Reisman, Johnny Leach, Richard Bergmann and Douglas Cartland. This fabulous player can use "liha", hardbat and rubber. At some point, Mr. Cua remembered an informal staged money game of Mr. Teofilo Ybañez where he intentionally switched from hardbat to plain rubber or liha then vice versa. This is one sneak tactic which confused his opponents by being able to accustom to the sudden style of the racket. This proved how versatile he handled rackets of different qualities.
2. Richard Gonzales – perhaps the youngest and for many the greatest table tennis player in both "liha" and "rubber" since Mr. Ybañez. His life and times in table tennis was dated back when he was eleven and encouraged by his father in his hometown in Cebu City. Under the tutelage of his father also a "lihador" himself, he would engage in betting against seasoned "lihadors" from the different

place in his province. He was once named “King of Liha” in the Philippines in the early 1990’s and would challenge any player whether be “liha” hardbat or rubber even in the national team by just using his “liha”. His dream match with former national champion Richard Ching will still be long remembered in years. He won the bronze medal in the 1999 SEA Games in Brunei with the researcher, Prof. Santelices as his coach. In 2005, he won the silver medal in men singles and a bronze medal in the men’s team event. And just recently in the Southeast Asian Table Tennis Championships in Jakarta, Indonesia last October, 2008 he finally won the Gold medal in the Men Singles, a bronze in team and doubles event paired with his playing coach Henberd Ortalla, younger brother of Mr. Jose Ortalla, Vice-president of the Table Tennis Association of the Philippines. All these achievements are already part of history for Philippine Table Tennis. And to think that his training started off as a “liha” player and carrying this rare skill over modern pimple rackets and winning the gold in international event. Both researchers believe that there is some “technical connection” about him being a lihador and mastering over his modern rubber pimples racket including his footwork.

6. PHYSICAL FITNESS FOR ELDERLY AT MARIKINA AND MALABON TABLE TENNIS CLUB.

Aside from the City of Cebu where “liha” was popularly played, there are also two prominent places in Metro Manila where “liha” is also popularly played especially among elders; in Malabon and Marikina Table Tennis Clubs. The researchers both visited these clubs and interviewed its officers and some of the popular and old players.

The Malabon Table Tennis Club, where it has a modest number of more than 30 members at present was founded in 1969. Most of its members are great “lihadors” in the likes of Arsenio Francisco and Erning Baldonado where their main objective was purely “underground” betting. Arsenio Francisco had great influence in “liha” where his family from his children down to his grandchildren were great “lihadors”. Aside from having great “liha” matches that were staged in this suburb in Metro Manila, their top players would invade other provinces to challenge their top players in money betting. Even the great Mr. Teofilo Ybañez would visit this club and also challenge their players. Later on, their club slowly drew more interest in elders who realized that playing “liha” contributed to good health. This is evident when a number of their members are “senior citizens” (aged 65 and over). The oldest member at 79 years old is Mr. Ver Navarro. According

to Mr. Ramir Francisco, the present no. 1 player and son of the great Arsenio Francisco, old players play regularly because of its health benefits. The sweat that they get alone from playing liha for a long duration of time relieves some of the common health risk factors most especially an increase in stamina or cardiovascular endurance. More players in Malabon Table Tennis Club play “liha” than rubber. And this is the only club in the whole of Philippines which has an “electronic” scoreboard. They only have 1 table but top of the line. Here are some of the pictures taken during the researchers visit.



Figure 9 – The Venue



Figure 10 – Some of the club members with the researchers

The Marikina Table Tennis Club has a larger membership dates back from the mid 1950’s. Its proud founder was Dr. Benjie Rivera who built a table tennis club with only 1 table beside their residence. The club produced both champions in “liha” and rubber. However, rubber became more popular. Later on, the club transferred to the Marikina Sports Complex which is just beside its original venue. It drew more members with more tables.

According to its incumbent president Mr. Sonny Ramos, the club institutionalized a morning fitness program for middle age to senior citizen from 6:00 a.m. – 8:00 a.m. as part of their physical fitness training. This drew more participants, some of which became a regular routine for them just before reporting for work. Mr. Ramos emphasized the importance of

physical fitness for every citizen in Marikina that is why he still manages this program. Some prominent differently able players are also regularly seen in this club. Mr. Rogelio Cezar, the President of the Philippine Table Tennis Association for the Differently Able (PHILTTADA), a National Champion Paragames player said that he together with his other teammates in the likes of former national player and paragames player, Mr. Pablo Catalan practice “liha” to keep their fitness at an optimum level and hone their skills in pimple rubber through using “liha”. Aside from this, the club also has at least two major “liha” tournaments every year and invites players from other areas not only in Metro Manila but also from nearby provinces. Presently, it has more than 50 “liha” members a lot of which are senior citizens. The following are picturea which the researchers took during their visit.



Figure 10 – Action shots



Figure 12 – Group picture of club members with the researchers

7. LIHA EVENTS IN FIESTAS

In Cebu City where “liha” originated, there is a special “liha” event held every year called the “Sinulog” Festival. This is an occasion even foreigners look forward to because of its rich tradition. They celebrate this event on January this year, but the event

was held last February so that the organizers can prepare better. The event was called “Cebu Table Tennis “Liha” Championships”. One of the highlight of this event is the traditional “Ping-pong Dance” using “liha” rackets. Four events were contested namely:

1. Team Event
2. Singles Open
3. Inter-Barangay (smaller district)
4. Senior Citizens (65 years and over)

The best players mostly from the southern part of the Philippines participated in this momentous event. The highlights of the event were two special awards given to distinguished persons who not only contributed in the development of “liha” in the Philippines but also brought honors internationally. They were the late Senator Sergio Osmeña, the first TATAP President for his invaluable support in the development of both “liha” and rubber and Mr. Richard Gonzales, the current Southeast Asian Table Tennis Champion. The award for Mr. Gonzales was jointly donated by one of the researcher, Mr. Peter Cua and Mr. Winston Jimenez. While the award for the late senator Sergio Osmeña was donated by Mr. Gee Batayola representing the “liha” players of Cebu. Both these awards were handed by TATAP Regional President Ms. Jessica Jawad.



Figure 13 – Ping-pong Dance



Figure 14 – Ping-pong Dance 2



Figure 15 – “Lihadors” in action



Figure 16 – Winners with Mr. Richard Gonzales

8. MODIFIED RULES OF “LIHA” AS COMPARED TO THE ITTF RULES

The game of “liha” has its own unique rules which somewhat differs from the ITTF Rules. The basic rules are:

1. 38 mm balls either white or orange are used compared to the current rule on Rubber which uses the 40mm ball
2. “ Easy Serve and Easy Return” from right to right half court – player can catch the ball if you do not like your opponents service unlimited times.
3. Game is up to 20 points
4. If score reaches 19-all, first player who reaches 5 points wins the game
5. Best of three games to win a match
6. Player can touch the table with his freehand

9. CONCLUSION

The study led the researchers to draw the following conclusion:

1. The game of table tennis using “Liha” rackets has gain benefits in the Philippine table tennis scene.
 - a. “Technical wise” – the late Teofilo

Ybañez and most recently Richard Gomzales has somehow shown and proven it from their astonishing international record in rubber tournaments.

- b. “Economical wise” --- for us 3rd world countries, it is economical to use because all you need is a simple wooden racket and a piece of “Liha”/sandpaper.and yet still embrace the 3 very essentials in a sport :COMPETITIVE , FITNESS AND FUN

2. The researchers do not wish to propose and inform the table tennis community to include “liha” rackets to its present “rubber” tournaments but rather suggest having it as an acceptable added “variant” to be legalized like another category and hopefully ITTF will recognize such table tennis event as a form of “revival “for more senior players to participate even internationally. In the most recent email communication with Mr. Peter Cua and Mr. Scott Gordon, the President of the U.S. Hardbat Association, the latter mentioned in their website: *“Most recently, Reisman has been hard at work developing an international organization for promoting sandpaper table tennis. Yes, you read that right- the old sandpaper paddles that have been illegal since the early 1960’s are making a comeback. Actually, they never totally went away – a large continent of players on the Philippines who call the game “ liha” play competitive sandpaper a a very high level and Marty is working to bring them together with the hardbat movement and introduce the world to a game-and—sound that is sure to excite. Think sandpaper is “old School”? Think again.”*

In another email correspondence, Mr Gordon also said that *“Another idea is to stress that “liha” is not something you are asking for- it already exists and is a lasting cultural fact in your country. Instead, you have observed many benefits of “liha”, and that you are proposing that the ITTF would be wise to consider duplicating those same benefits by providing avenues for international “liha” competition. And, that you are , in a sense, offering to help them do that.”*

3. It can be easily played by young and old individuals who do not only want to enjoy the game because of its longer rallies but also to maintain an optimum level of fitness , fun and a “fallback” grounds from the present fast-paced game of table tennis so as yet to continue to patronize and stay in the table tennis community.

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