

COACHING A CHAMP: MITCH SEIDENFELD

by Sean O'Neill

The United States has been honored to have many great champions in our disabled ranks over the years. Players like Jennifer Johnson, Mike Dempsey, and Marcelino "Marcy" Monasterial are a veritable who's who in international disabled table tennis and have set a high bar for our younger team to meet. One player who has a solid foot in the record book while still creating new pages, is Mitch Seidenfeld and I am fortunate to be his coach.

When I started as a coach for the disabled team we were in a bit of a transition with a number of new players joining the team. As a coach you always like to have a mix of freshmen and veterans to help each other with desire and experience. Through a bit of recruiting and permission from his wife Tina, Seidenfeld re-joined our team and gave us a huge boost both in results and on the team front.

As the first U.S. Paralympian to qualify for Beijing in 2008, things are looking pretty good for Seidenfeld, but there have been plenty of hurdles for me and him to climb along the way.

First off, Mitch got reclassified in 2005 in the least disabled class ten due to the fact he didn't play in 2002 when they redid the classification scheme and forgot to include dwarfs. (When Mitch competed prior to his break he was a class eight player.) However, this didn't stop him from becoming a silver medalist to Tahl Leibovitz in the 2005 Para Pan Am Championships in the Open Division or going five games with the number one ranked class ten player in the World.

Tournament after tournament, Seidenfeld waited patiently for the classification system to correct itself. At the 2007 World Championships the Board finally agreed that nanism (being short) was a minimal disability, and that they would adopt new language to include it. The next step was to get Mitch re-classified based on rules that were still being formulated.

In Rio, with the help of Dr. Aart Kruimer and his staff, Mitch was finally placed in the right class (seven) based upon the new rules and our successful appeals.

The administrative stuff was behind us, and it was now up to Mitch to take care of business on the table. This might sound easy for a player that has won medals with a broken hip, trained with a separated shoulder, and won coach of the year from USATT, but it isn't. The quality of the players has drastically improved, more countries are playing, and Seidenfeld isn't getting any younger.

That is where I come in. As a former competitor of Mitch and student of the disabled game I help him take off his coaching cap and place his player hat back on. He allows me to do the scouting for him and to help by creating a game plan. This doesn't mean he can go out and play without thought, or miss his serve a number of times a game, but having a strategic plan certainly allows him to play relaxed and confidently.

In one key match for the Gold in Rio, on game

point, I actually told Mitch to come back to the bench since the game was over. The umpire had awarded Mitch the point after his opponent illegally touched the table with his non-playing hand. Mitch didn't know what had happened and wanted further clarification as he didn't want to win a game based on an incorrect call. Three times I said, "Mitch the game is over, come back!" —It was only later that Mitch learned the other player had a habit of using the table for balance with his non-playing hand (I had reminded the umpires of it prior to the match). Here we were arguing over whether he had won the game, and I am thinking there goes another 30 seconds of coaching time!

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by looping not one, but two balls around the net for winners which drew support from the crowd. I loved it when he then had to explain to the umpires that those were legal shots after they mistakenly awarded his opponent the point. I just sat back and laughed and allowed him to do some officiating work on his own.

He received those two points, the match, and the Gold for Team USA. In the process, he was voted as most outstanding standing disabled player of the Americas for the past two years. I think many will look to his play on the table for the reason of this award, but I know better, it was really due to how he handled himself off the table and how he inspires others that made the real difference.

