

AN INTERVIEW WITH TAHL LEIBOVITZ

USATT: Tahl, what inspired you to get into table tennis?

Tahl: I started going to the South Queens Boys Club when I was 14 years old. They had two table tennis tables there. Everyone was playing with sandpaper rackets. I liked the sound of the ball and the long rallies, soon after I was playing table tennis five days week.

USATT: Tahl, when did you start playing disabled table tennis and what led you to it?

Tahl: My first disabled table tennis tournament was in 1995. I played quite well, winning two gold medals and one silver medal. I believe the tournament was a qualifier for the 1996 Paralympic Games but, I can't remember. The reason I got into disabled table tennis was because of Chris Lehman. He convinced me to play for the US Paralympic team. Sharon Brooks then classified me as a class seven. It was certainly a big change. I never really thought of myself as disabled and I was a bit reluctant at first. However, over the years my physical condition deteriorated quite a bit. I slowly began to realize that I do have physical challenges. Before I would try and tell myself that I didn't have these challenges, but I look at it differently now. Even though I am disabled, I have still had some great opportunities and have accomplished quite a bit in able-bodied tournaments.

USATT: What have been your favorite countries and tournaments to play in?

Tahl: I would say France or maybe Germany. The best tournament I have ever been to was the IPTTC World Cup in 2006 in Nantes, France. I really felt like an international star. We were treated so well and the tournament was just unbelievable. In Germany they have offered prize money for the class winners for the past three years. Other than the World Cup this is

I start by putting index cards all over the house with goals to set. I set the goals in present tense. For instance I might write "I am the German Open Champion".

the first event to award cash for the winner. I hope that other countries, especially USA, follow this practice and give the players that have trained so hard some rewards so that we can cover our expenses. Speaking of expenses, I am very fortunate to be a USOC Elite Level Athlete as they help me with my schooling, health insurance, coaching, and I get a quarterly stipend for my training. Laura Ryan and her team at the USOC are awesome.

USATT: Tahl, what's the deal with the socks?

Tahl: During a tournament I probably go through 40 pairs of socks. My feet and hands sweat constantly. My mother and grandfather had the same problem. The only cure really is surgery. My mom had surgery to get rid of the problem but, I don't think that's something I am going to do.

USATT: Describe your style of play— What parts of your game are you working on?

Tahl: Right now I am focusing on two areas. The first area is physical. I am trying to get in better shape so I can reach more balls against high level players. The second and most important aspect is the mental. I have been focusing almost exclusively on the mental game for the past three months. I think I have made some dramatic improvements in that area. My goal now is to have one of the best mental games in the country. Sean has been helping me quite a bit in this area.

One technique I have been using is setting 21-day daily affirmations. I start by putting index cards all over the house with goals to set. I set the goals in present tense. For instance I might write "I am the German Open Champion". In this way I will be more prepared to accept the results when



they present themselves. It is funny when my wife Dawn tells me she is also a German Open Champ since she also sees the same signs all over our house!

USATT: What are your goals in table tennis and how long do you see yourself competing internationally?

Tahl: My short-term goal is to qualify for the Paralympic Games in Beijing. My longer-term goal is to win a Gold Medal at the 2008 Paralympic Games. I might try and compete in the Olympic trials in Philadelphia. I am not sure how much longer I'll continue. I have been going to school full-time for the last year and a half studying Nutrition. I want to eventually get my Master's Degree and also become an RD. Beijing might be my last international tournament. It's really a tough decision. However, my body is breaking down and it's and tougher to compete at such a high level but, who knows, maybe I'll play in one more Paralympic games.

Tahl: I would like to thank my practice partners, Paul David, Michael Pappov, and De Tran. I would also like to thank Nison Aronov and the Brooklyn Table Tennis club for all their help and support. I would also like to thank the USOC, STIGA, and The Table Tennis Pioneers (ping-pong.com) for their generous help. Special thanks to our coach staff at the Para Pan Am Games and our trainer Craig Elder. My final thanks goes out to the one person who gets to deal with all my dreams and goals on a daily basis, my wife Dawn. Without her none of what I do would be possible. She is the main force behind Team Leibovitz and she doesn't get nearly the right amount of credit she deserves. When they say Leibovitz won nine Gold medals in the last three Para Pan Ams, I think she deserves at least four of them. No wait, make that five— as long as I can keep the medal from Athens!