

MEET JUSTEN YAO

Interview by Sean O'Neill

Sean: How did you get involved in table tennis? What was special about table tennis that made want to make it your sport?

Justen: When I was 9, I went to the St. Louis Club. I just wanted to play around so I put my racket on one of the tables. The guy I was supposed to play didn't want to play me. I put my racket down and he left. So I told my mom I wanted to beat that guy (even though I didn't know my mom was a professional table tennis player). And my mom has been coaching me since. I chose table tennis because I have a very good environment for this sport and I love playing it. Table tennis is a great sport to improve your mental and physical strength.

Sean: Most kids play for fun for a few years and then suddenly get serious. In your case from the first day your parents expected you to be very serious and train hard, did you find that difficult? What type of off the table training did you do?

Justen: I didn't think that training hard was difficult because I knew I chose this sport and not anybody else. My mom warned me how tough the training would be, but I still wanted to play. So I am always ready for the hard work. Usually I work out and do a lot of other footwork drills when I am not playing. My brother and I also go to a gym every Sunday, for weight training.

Sean: What is your typical day like during the school year? During the summer time?

Justen: During a typical school year, we practice six times a week and about three hours a day. Then afterwards, we have physical training. During the summer time, we usually go other countries to train, like China. I have also been to Taiwan and Sweden, where I trained and played tournaments for seven weeks.

Sean: What have been your secrets to success to improve at such a rapid rate? What have been the biggest lessons learned along the way?

Justen: I don't really believe that there is a secret to my success. All I had to do was train hard and have a good coach. My biggest lesson learned

was that to never give up, even when you are losing. That's how miracles happen. I also learned over the years not to be too excited over a win because you still have more games ahead. You should always have a calm mindset, and not [get in] over your head.

Sean: Recently you changed from pips-out on your backhand to inverted? Why the change and has it been hard to adjust?

Justen: I changed from pips-out to inverted just a couple days after I got back from the US Open. I felt that I needed to change because there is a certain limit on how far you go with pips. I decided that changing to inverted will help me go farther in the future. The change has been hard but I'm getting used to it now. I would like to thank Gao Jun and Emilia for helping me with my backhand in the beginning.

Sean: You had a chance to play for the famous Angby Sports Club in Sweden two years ago. Did that change your perspective on table tennis as a sport? What was your favorite part of playing in Sweden? How did you do?

Justen: Going to Angby had a great impact on me. Seeing all these great international players from Europe encouraged me to play better. I saw that there were many good players in the world, and I have to train hard in order to beat them. Going to all those club tournaments every week was probably the best part of going to Sweden. I was surprised when I did really well at those tournaments. Out of the 11 tournaments I won 7 gold medals for my age division. It was great.

Sean: Carl Akerlind has been able to visit your family twice. How is it to have an exchange player for the US Open? Carl and your brother Alex won the U4200 doubles at the US Open did that surprise you?

Justen: Having an exchange player come to our house before the US open was great. My mom trained all of us, and it was hard and fun. We got to play a lot of multi-ball so we were ready for the tournament. Carl's technique improved greatly. When my brother and Carl won the Under 4200, I wasn't surprised. They were very good partners. And since Carl improved so much the first year he came, the club was very impressed. They sent two more Swedish national players along with Carl to the training this year.

Sean: Speaking of your brother Alex, has he ever beaten you in practice or a tournament? What type of example must you set for him? How are your games different?

Justen: Yeah, he's actually beaten me a couple of times. But that's how we improve. If I always beat him, then I wouldn't be able to know what I'm doing wrong. Plus there would no point of practicing with him. I think that

I don't really have to set examples for my brother technique-wise. I just have to teach him to be mentally stable, something that I'm still working on— And also to train hard. My brother's game and my game are totally different. My brother likes to rip and rip, until he wins. While I usually have a more spin and controlled game. My brother has an excellent backhand, and I am learning from him right now.

Sean: This past year you qualified for the cadet team a second year in a row. Was making it the first time more difficult than the second? How have you and the team done this year internationally? What is your next tournament?

Justen: Making the U.S. cadet team was equally hard. As everyone got older they also got better. But I felt that playing the Junior Trials was much harder. Internationally we haven't done so well. During these two years, the U.S. cadet and junior team haven't had so many good results. Hopefully, we will get better results for the world junior championships this year. I am now training hard for the tournament.

Sean: Now for some tough questions. I was told that just a couple of days ago you took your first vacation day off from table tennis in six years, what did you do?

Justen: Ha ha. Well, I've always wanted to

take a vacation. Every time we were traveling I would always have pressure because I knew we had a tournament to play. But it felt so good this time, because we were relaxed the whole time. We went to Branson, Missouri. We went Go-carting and we went on a car/boat where it took us across one of the lakes. It was great!

Sean: If you had a choice to train in Sweden or China which would you choose and why?

Justen: If I had a choice of going somewhere to train, I would probably choose both. Because training in China improved my technique and game, while in Sweden I gain more experience from the matches we play. But I thinking training with my mom would be the best choice... because she is a great coach. I truly believe that she is the best coach I ever had. She knows all my weaknesses and my strengths.

Sean: When do you think you will be ready to make the U.S. Men's Team? How long do you think you can go without losing to your younger brother?

Justen: Hopefully making the U.S. team is in the near future. I can't say when but I'm training very hard now. I don't think I could beat my brother all the time. He is improving fast! He still beats me once in a while. But with him improving I would train hard and improve also.

Sean: Which player would you like to beat the most? Which tournament would you like to win? Which is your favorite tournament to play?

Justen: I would love to beat a lot of international players. There really isn't a specific person. I would love to win the Olympics. That's every athletes dream. My favorite tournament would probably be the world junior championships.

Sean: Thanks for those lively answers and best of luck in the upcoming Junior World Championships. Is there anyone you would like to mention or thank?

Justen: I would first of all, thank my mom and my dad for supporting me with this great environment; my brother for being a great practice partner; and all of my coaches that have been in China, like Zheng Ziyi, Shen Jianping, Cao Yanhua, Jiang Jia Liang-- and my coaches in Taiwan, Wu WenJia, Zhao Long. I would like to thank Sean O'Neill for arranging me to go to Angby and train, and also coaching during some of the tournaments. I would like to thank all of the great players and great coaches for helping me out in Sweden—I even got to play with Appelgren and Waldner. And last but not least, The Table Tennis Pioneers and Stiga for sponsoring me for all these years.

St. Louis Table Tennis Training Center

The St. Louis Table Tennis Training Center targets students from 6 years to 85 years old under the tutelage of head coach Sheri Xu. Sheri was a professional player in Shanghai twenty years ago and her coach was also the coach of current world champion Wang Liqin.

Xu and the club are currently sponsored by The Table Tennis Pioneers. Xu is focused on the competitive elements of the game through serious training with professional standards. Students (mainly juniors) are required to be eager to learn, highly disciplined, to be goal oriented, and to have a clear dream. The club's parents have been tremendously supportive and are fully committed. Juniors have participated in major USATT events over the past few years and four are currently sponsored by the Table Tennis Pioneers: Justen Yao (STIGA), Alex Yao (STIGA), Kerry Xiao (andro) and Jie Jie Liu (DONIC). Yao is currently a U.S. Junior and Cadet Team member. There are hopes that the two Yaos will win the first annual Nate Wasserman Memorial Scholarship Awards at age under 16 and under 14 group this year.

In addition to group and private lessons during the week, every summer Xu has a two to three week junior training camp; six hours of table tennis technique plus one hour of physical training every day, six days a week. The training camp has a Chinese provincial team member as a practice partner for students. There are no televisions, internet access, computers, video games, or cell phones allowed during the training days. Juniors have come to train from all 50 states and foreign counties. The Angby Sport Club has sent their best Junior and Cadet national team member to join the St. Louis Training Camp for the past two years. Angby has been very pleased with the level of improvement of their players— not only with their skills, but also mindset and mental attitude. In order to let students become familiar with world class players training, Coach Xu has also arranged for her students to go to China, Taiwan, and Singa-

pore national team camps.

Thanks in part to her dedication, Coach Xu has been appointed by St. Louis City Hall to run the St. Louis City K to 12 after school table tennis program. Confluence Academy, a charter school in St. Louis made up of 30 kids in grades 3 to 8, created the first public school team in the area.

In the U.S. when the kids get frustrated with something, they sometimes quit, and often parents tell them it's Okay. Parents may believe that the important things is "to have fun". But what does that teach the kids? Coach Xu has perspective on this; she says, "We want them to learn how to face challenges, we want them to learn discipline and commitment. We don't expect the kids to be world champions but they must take it seriously. Table Tennis will teach them great lessons and help for their future life development."



Justen Yao, Alex Yao, Kerry Xiao, and Jie Jie Liu. Photo by Jonathan Yao.