

US OLYMPIC QUALIFIER AND TEAMS TRIALS

January 10th to 13th, 2008
Daskalakis Center, Drexel University
Philadelphia, PA

by Alan Williams

From every possible aspect, the 2008 US Olympic and Teams Trials for table tennis were important. They were important in their purpose, because when the process was complete, the rosters of the U.S. Men's and Women's Team destined for the 2008 World Championships were decided and the players headed for the North American Olympic Qualifier were set. They were important in the history of our sport, as their staging and presentation and the media attention they drew far surpassed any other competitive event in recent USATT memory. They were important in their outcomes, as players who had trained for this opportunity for most of their lifetimes were either rewarded or denied.

In the recent past, USATT's Team and Olympic Trials have been held in various locations, but for the most part, our players labored in front of small audiences; groups composed of officials, trainers, coaches and family. At Drexel, they found themselves swarmed by reporters from radio, print, television and the internet, and cheered by capacity crowds of up to 2500 at a time. In fact, when the trials had concluded, an estimated 5500 people had purchased tickets to see the U.S. men and women play. This wonderful fact speaks volumes for the local organizing committee.

Philadelphia regarded the Trials as important, as the city is bidding to host an Olympic Games and their performance in staging this event would reflect on the success of that bid. With Drexel University, the Philadelphia Sports Congress and its President Bob Levy, Philadelphia Convention and Visitors Bureau, and the Philadelphia International Sports Project weighing in, the event support was simply incredible. Dan Simmons of Drexel was a fantastic organizer, marshalling more than 100 enthusiastic student volunteers who provided remarkably able support. Bob Fox, the U.S. Men's Team Leader, along with Mike Cavanaugh, USATT's Interim Executive Director, interfaced beautifully with the local officials to create the single best competitive environment our players and coaches had ever seen.

Larry Kesler served as the competition's Referee, assisted by Chris Williams and a dozen USATT certified umpires from across the nation. Richard Lee of North American Table Tennis was the Tournament Director. Nittaku provided the competition balls, JOOLA provided the tables and barriers. Gerflor sports court carpeted the six competition tables and the practice area.

The Setting

Draped across the main streets of Downtown Philadelphia were conspicuous banners announcing the Trials. On campus, signs hung from every lamppost as the electronic message board outside the Daskalakis Center flashed the dates and times of the competition. The generous hospitality was immediately obvious in the choice of hotel, the four-

star University Sheraton. No attendee could fail to be impressed!

While local television heavily featured the upcoming tournament in their telecasts, NATT's John Miller, Richard Lee, and I worked with those remarkable Drexel Dragons to set the hall. The entire playing area (both the competition and the practice zone) was covered with Gerflor sports court and the hall was divided by a curtain. Hospitality areas were designated, one for the dignitaries, celebrities, and guests, and one restricted for use by the players and their coaches. A sixty-foot long zone for media representatives and photographers was set courtside. To keep the spectators and fans informed of the event's progress, a 25-foot tall projection screen continuously displayed results and standings. JOOLA USA set up a vendor booth that was heavily trafficked by the large crowds. One of the most popular items there was the oversized table tennis blade, designed for collecting player's autographs, an activity the enthused spectators embraced.

You could tell by the gleam in the eyes of USATT's elite athlete representative Ashu Jain, along with Hall of Famers Sean O'Neill and Danny Seemiller, that this was on the order of a dream come true. Repeatedly overheard were variations on "this is the best event I've ever seen" and "our players are finally being treated like the special athletes they are". This was easily stated because this was easily true. The players responded to the attention, the setting, the cheers of the full crowds, and the importance of the competition, by providing outstanding play.

The Competition

At stake were the spots on the U.S. Men's and Women's teams that will represent us at the World Team Table Tennis Championships in China. For the women, this meant that of the nine players entered, two would join Olympic pre-qualifiers Gao Jun and Wang Chen in Guangzhou, with a third player becoming first alternate, but only if willing to pay her own way. The top four finishers in the women's competition would move on to the North American Olympic Qualifier (held in Vancouver) to play against Canada's women for the continental spots left available after Gao and Wang's anointment, an honor they earned based on their 2007 ITTF World Rankings. All nine women in Philadelphia would play a round robin format over three days.

For the men, there were no pre-qualifiers, and all five spots for the World's team and the four slots for the North American Olympic Qualifier were wide open. With 12 players slated for the three day Round Robin, the top 10 were seeded directly to the group. The remaining 24 hopefuls were placed in a win-or-get-out single elimination bracket to find the last two members of that group.

Men's Qualifier

The top two seeds, and thus favored to emerge, were Samson Dubina and Joseph Cochran. Yet this field was so closely matched and determined that neither of those two players emerged from the bracket to join the Men's Round Robin Group. Here's what happened, starting with the Round of 8.



ADAM HUGH

Photo by Steve Hopkins ©2008

Samson Dubina vs. John Leach

Leach had just returned from a training session in Germany and Dubina has been training with the Canadians, this trials having been his goal for several years. Dubina had defeated a pesky David Fang, 6, -12,6,-8,9,8 to reach this round, while the unorthodox Leach overcame junior star Justen Yao 2,8,12,-12,6. Leach's creative shots and continual change of pace upset Dubina's timing and his desire to play to his strength; the crosscourt topspin volley. Leach nailed the upset, 8,9,-6,6,-7,8.

Shashin Shodhan vs. Tahl Leibovitz

Shodhan had to move through two emerging juniors, Charlie Sun and A.J. Brewer, while Leibovitz dispatched never-say-die John Wetzler. This match was extremely close but in the end Leibovitz celebrated with coach O'Neill a victory -9,11,9,11,8.

De Tran vs. Trevor Runyan

De Tran, a former member of the US Team, cut down Amaresh Sahu, while Runyan held off the energetic Alexander Yao. When they met each other, De Tran's left-handed play and steady nerves ended Runyan's hopes, 8,9,2,10.

Razvan Cretu vs. Joseph Cochran

Hometown favorite Razvan eliminated Wally Green and Cochran ousted Joseph Goldstein. Cretu had to shake off the rust as he's not been tournament active for some time. His aggressive play bested Dan Seemiller's protégé 11,-5,8,7,-8,5 and thus, at the end of this round, both the top seeds were gone.

That left only two matches to decide who'd join the main body. John Leach had to take on Paralympian Tahl Leibovitz and De Tran faced Cretu at the end of Thursday's competition. Both matches were outstanding, with both De Tran and Cretu in a test of stamina, while Leach and Leibovitz had to battle each other's eccentricities to continue. Cretu prevailed over De Tran, repeatedly using his powerful forehand shots to send De Tran into untenable positions, -3,5, 7,-7, 6 and 4. De Tran had left nothing behind and Cretu's victory was well earned. Leibovitz had an even harder time, dispatching Leach in a series of nail biting games: 6, -9,-8,10,10,-9,11!



with a record of 4 and 4, the real sinker being a two games to four loss to Whitney Ping. Whitney's defeat of Jasna, 7,-8,13,-7,8,7, placed her fourth and Jasna fifth, assuring Whitney a chance at the North American Qualifier in Vancouver. Jasna was clearly disappointed at being unable to savor the Olympic experience again, but buoyantly rebounded to her coaching duties at Texas Wesleyan University.

At six wins, two losses, third place Jackie Lee handed in her strongest performance to date, justifying her decision to set aside her university studies and concentrate on her game during this Olympic cycle. She's going to China with the Women's team as the fifth member. Nan Li finished second at 7-1, surviving a tough seven game match with Judy Hugh to solidify her position. Crystal Huang was an impressive 8-0, losing only eight games in the eight matches, and proving her mental toughness in surviving seven game outings with both Jackie Lee and Whitney Ping. An impressive group and a great medal stand for the appreciative crowd capped the achievement for the top four, Ping, Lee, Li and Huang!

Men's Round Robin

With Lupesku's injury and Leach's lucky coin toss, the field now became as follows, top seed to low: Cheng Yinghua, David Zhuang, Mark Hazinski, Eric Owens, Khoa Nguyen, Adam Hugh, Han Xiao, Shao Yu, Sean Lonergan, and the three qualifiers, Tahl Leibovitz, Razvan Cretu, and John Leach.

Razvan had to be gratified by the boisterous cheers that greeted him as a Philly resident, but it wasn't enough to roll back the years and the toll the competition took on his back and legs as the rounds went by. With a record of 3-8, but three of his losses being defaults that awarded no points, Razvan came twelfth. His wins over Lonergan, Leach, and Leibovitz proved he'd deserved his inclusion. Tahl Leibovitz finished eleventh, his default win over Khoa Nguyen giving him a total of 12 points. Leibovitz competed throughout belying the physical pain he endures and was loudly supported by an appreciative crowd. John Leach obviously learned something in his loss to Leibovitz in the qualifier, defeating him four games to two in the round robin. Also 1-10, Leach was tenth by virtue of his tie-breaking victory over Leibovitz. John played hard start to finish, repeatedly nicking



There was one unexpected wrinkle; the competition's very top seed, Lupesku, was a no-show. Frantic attempts to contact him resulted in the news that an injury was forcing his withdrawal, so the tournament committee had to decide how to proceed. Should the field stand as it was with Ilja defaulting each round as it occurred? Should one more player be advanced, and if so, how was he to be chosen? A "lucky loser" approach was taken, and De Tran and John Leach came to the desk to be informed of their second chance. Larry Kesler handled the coin flip, and it came up John Leach. Always classy, De Tran said, "It's just as well. I am exhausted and not as young as I once was. Back to work for me!" and with a handshake to Lucky John, he departed with a smile.

Women's Round Robin

Nine players had three days to put their feet on a path to Beijing to join Gao Jun and Wang Chen on the US Women's Team. In order of seeding they were Jasna Reed, Crystal Huang, Nan Li, Jackie Lee, Judy Hugh, Whitney Ping, Ariel Hsing, Olena Sowers and Barbara Wei. Hsing, the youngest member of the field, garnered a great deal of media interest and favored the crowd with a Saturday lunchbreak exhibition match against Gao Jun, who attended all three days of the event. For several players it was the largest crowd they'd ever played before; for our international veterans, it was certainly the largest American audience they'd ever had.

Barbara Wei, attending the University of Pennsylvania only blocks away, competed valiantly, but went winless over the competition to finish ninth. Olena Sowers gained her sole win against Barbara to be eighth. Ariel Hsing defeated both of the players she outranked but didn't upset any of the group above her (she did force top seed Jasna Reed to stage a comeback from trailing one game to three) thus Ariel finished seventh.

Judy Hugh, famed for her poise, was disappointed in her 3-5 finish, which included an upset loss to Ping. The real shocker, and one that required a stiff upper lip, was Jasna Reed's result. She concluded the event

Photos by Steve Hopkins:
left to right: Crystal Huang, Nan Li,
Cheng Yinghua, Han Xiao



the competition for games and throwing real seven game scare into Adam Hugh.

Khoa Nguyen was in the competition with strong wins over Cheng Yinghua and Eric Owens, but his losses to Razvan and Adam Hugh severely hindered him and his Sunday return to California for family matters left him five and six overall and ninth in the field. Adam Hugh finished eighth in the competition, three wins and eight losses, less than he'd hoped for. He became a crowd favorite by clawing to a seven game victory over Leach and with his stylish and impressive play. Sean Lonergan was seventh in the final analysis, four and seven, his victory over Hugh being pivotal and later proving to be important in the team selection.

Shao Yu played well to finished sixth, with seven wins and four losses. Over the three day trials a mere four points delivered in a timely place would have made Shao Yu undefeated and placed on the podiums top step. With records of eight wins and three losses, a three way tie had to be broken to determine fifth, fourth, and third. When the math was finished, Mark Hazinski was fifth, Eric Owens fourth, and Cheng Yinghua the third place finisher. Hazinski having defeated Cheng, but a one game to four loss to Eric Owens being decisive. Han Xiao stood alone in second place at 9-2 when his head-to-head loss to David Zhuang was taken into account, leaving Zhuang in first place with his 9-2 record. Cheng and Owens were the only two players to stop Zhuang in the competition, which found him happy, healthy, and on his way to the World's as U.S. Men's Team member No. 1.

Although the order of finish was Zhuang, Xiao, Cheng, Owens, and Hazinski; the actual squad at the World's will be somewhat different. Owens has decided not to take the trip and sixth place Shao Yu declined the opportunity (though he richly deserved it), Sean Lonergan becomes the squad's fifth member.

A remarkable trials, wonderfully presented, and surely a new standard of excellence for our sport to strive to repeat. Congratulations to the victors, which, in this instance and in my humble opinion, extends to everyone involved in the event.