

Through The Eyes Of A Champion

Ilya Lupulesku

An Interview with current US National Singles and Doubles Champion and 1988 Olympic Silver Medalist
by Ed Hogshead

In December, you won the US National Singles title for the fourth time and the US National Doubles title also for the fourth time. Congratulations! How were these championships different from the other three? Who was your strongest competitor this year?

Thank you. I felt I had a very good chance if I competed because I had prepared. It was unknown if I would be there because I was admitted to the hospital on December 7 with kidney stones. After several days, the stones passed. People close to me thought I was not strong enough, but I started practicing for the 2007 National Championships in October and was very confident that I could do well. I played in the Nationals six times and won four times – those were the years in which I practiced. I ended up feeling very good and had an easy time getting to the finals. In the first game of the finals against Mark Hazinski, I was up around 8 to 4 and let up a bit. To Mark's credit he came back and won that game. But I felt that I could control the rest of the games to win the match. I did and won four games to one game. Winning depends on practice. This Nationals was the toughest to win of the four because I was a little under the weather and Mark was playing great. Mark has a great future.

You reached another milestone in your life with your fortieth birthday in October of 2007. How do your 30 years of competition benefit you before a tournament? What advantage does it give you during the match?

I will continue to compete. I feel young. The illness in December was the first time I was ever sick. I started when I was nine years old so I have over 31 years of experience. Experience helps me to properly prepare for a tournament and to make adjustments during a match if the game is not going my way. Yes, my experience is a tremendous advantage because I cannot practice here in the US as I had previously done in Europe.

The US Olympic Trials were held in January in Philadelphia, PA. You were forced to withdraw due to a back injury. What happened? How do you feel you would have impacted the trials? What do you think about the players that will be competing in Canada in order to qualify for the 2008 Olympics in China?

Immediately after the Nationals in Las Vegas, I competed in the Killerspin Holiday Open in Chicago beginning on December 28, 2007. It was too soon to compete at the highest level and I pulled a muscle in my back on Saturday during the SPINvitational event against Aleksandar Karakasevic. At this

tournament I won the 41-point Handicap event on Friday by defeating Thomas Keinath in the Finals, played four matches against some of the best in the world on Saturday and then played in the Open event on Sunday before defaulting in the quarterfinals with the injury. The Olympic Trials were only two weeks after that and there was not enough time to heal. I believe I could have won the trials if I had been able to compete. I am now helping Eric Owens prepare for the trials in Canada. Eric lives in Chicago and is a fellow Killerspin Krew Member.

Larry Hodges did a good interview of you in 2002 for the magazine wherein you said the strongest part of your game is your ball control and your ability to use your wrist. It seems that many left-handed players employ great angles and a lot of wrist. Did this come naturally to you? Do you consider being left-handed an advantage?

Left-handed players tend to be trickier and use more angles. Tricky shots are something I practice because they can give me an advantage, especially when combined with differing angles.

Many top 100 players in the world have commented that they do not like to see you in their part of the draw. They dislike the effort it takes to play you and know that few rallies will be short as you keep returning the ball. Have you heard this? Do you take this as a compliment?

I know my rallies are longer. It is a psychological advantage I have over opponents. It takes a lot of experience, energy, and concentration to beat me.

You are world-famous for your doubles' championships and for your Silver Medal in Doubles at the 1988 Olympics with Zoran Primorac. Do you prefer doubles play to singles play?

I love doubles but I like singles equally as well. I know 80-90 percent of the time where the ball is going, especially when I receive the service. It is not as much work. Angled shots are more effective. We have more successes in doubles. I also think communication with your partner is essential and for some reason I am able to do that in doubles even without speaking – it seems to come natural.

You competed in the Olympics five times representing three different countries, Yugoslavia, Serbia, and the United States. Few world-class players have the opportunity to compete in the Olympics and you have done it five times. What were your Olympic experiences like?

The first Olympics in 1988 was very good. It was the first time table tennis was in the Olympics and, of course, the first time Olympic Table Tennis was on television. I never thought about winning a medal or anything like that. I just practiced very hard. When Zoran and I won, it was like a dream. It was incredible.

I also loved to watch other sports at the Olympics. We were watching the best players on the planet in each of their sports like basketball and water polo. I watched Tony Kukoc and the Yugoslavian team lose in the basketball finals at the 1988 Olympics. Tony was a top table tennis player in Yugoslavia who later played in the NBA for the Chicago Bulls and Milwaukee Bucks.

You have been competing as a U.S. citizen for more than five years. How does US table tennis compare to table tennis in European countries? Have you seen improvement here? What else should we be doing here?

There has been some modest improvement. The major challenge here is a lack of the necessary infrastructure to compete against Asian and European players. I am not sure I see a clear vision and

determination by the U.S. to be a Table Tennis power. There needs to be more focus on improving the popularity of table tennis in the U.S.

What inspired you to start playing table tennis? How old were you?

I was nine years old and saw table tennis in my school. I saw many people cheering and it looked like an interesting one-on-one sport. After just a few months playing, I won the first tournament I entered. The coach moved me up one level and I was regularly defeating players with three years of experience.

You joined the military during the Yugoslavia Civil War. Many people escaped the strife, but you stayed. Was it a good decision to stay and how are you different because of this?

I was in the military as an athlete. Athletes received special treatment and did not perform normal military functions. For most of the time, I was outside of the country, training and competing so it was not so bad for me. I competed in the 1995 World Cup and the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta during this time. The war was not a hardship for me.

Do you follow tennis? The Serbian tennis program is achieving incredible international results without a large number of athletes. Do you think there may be lessons of success that could assist the U.S. table tennis program?

Yes, I follow all Serbian sports. Serbia is a very small country with good athletes that like challenges. Serbians know they cannot excel within their country and must travel to train and improve. One must have sparring partners that are better than them self. The top Serbian tennis players go to Switzerland, Monaco, and Florida to train. These same athletes are now winning internationally.

Yes, U.S. table tennis can learn from the successful Serbian tennis program. We must make great changes to the U.S. table tennis system by making the juniors that excel our priority and by enabling their overseas training.

Overall, what has your experience been like working with U.S. table tennis and Killerspin? Is it what you expected when you moved to Chicago in 2000?

The experience has been good. The U.S. is a great place to raise a family. Robert Blackwell and Killerspin have worked hard to promote table tennis in the U.S. I wish more sponsors would assist his efforts because we need that. I enjoy living in the U.S. and hope that table tennis will grow and prosper here.

I expected more changes to occur. I thought more international players would come to the U.S. to live and compete. The process of creating world champions in table tennis for the United States needs changes. The organization must be based on clubs that compete in leagues. We must hold high-quality camps. The top players, both junior and adult, must train and compete overseas.

What are your future goals?

To compete and coach. I would love to be a coach in a world class program here in the U.S. Unfortunately, I may have to return to Europe unless new opportunities present themselves here. I love it here and to be a part of the U.S. coaching staff that creates world champions would be wonderful. This is a great country.

Thank you for your time and good luck.

Thank you! And good luck to our U.S. players competing for a spot in the 2008 Olympics.



Photos by Diego Schaaf