

Western Open

on the 2009 JOOLA North American Tour

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The National Media has been laying down a steady drumbeat of bad news, filled with bailouts, downturns and shortfalls, but there was no shortage of new faces, fine play, or good times at this year's Western Open. Open Singles saw a number of first-time contestants on the tour and when the dust had settled, a worthy and historic Champion.

With a field of 200 entrants, the playing population was nearly ideal to the room, allowing larger court sizes than in previous years. On the topic of officiating, the tournament had a wealth of riches, Yelena Karstedt presiding as Referee for the trouble-free event, assisted by umpires Walter Witkowski, Tom Miller, Kenny Tien and Saul Weinstein. The room was well-stocked with smiling faces, many of them belonging to the UC Berkeley "Golden Bears" Table Tennis Club, who were invaluable, bright, energetic and hard-working in their volunteer support of the tournament. Ryan Hsu must be singled out for the unflagging aid he has furnished to NATT in staging the Western Open in this and previous incarnations.

The players of the Bay Area were likewise a pleasure, displaying good sportsmanship and a love of the game that is unequalled in America. We were quite pleased to see healthy numbers of players entered in the lowest rating events, proof that the Norcal clubs continue to recruit new members and provide them with an excellent table tennis experience. Our field also included players like Arthur Breton, who learned the game in Limoges, France and Jitendra Gilad, Hyderabad, India, now coaching in Milpitas, CA!

Players who have invested hard work and careful study are often rewarded with multiple titles. At the Western Open that statement would include Masaru Hashimoto, victor in both the Under-2125 and the Over 50 categories. Johnny Baldanado was also a 'double dipper', winning both the Over 40 and the U-2375 and displaying both athleticism and poise in the process. The remarkable Shen Hailong played a brilliant U-22 Men's Final with Zhe Hao Wang, won the U-2500 in four spirited games with Trevor Runyan and played deep into Open Singles. Aarsh Shah continued to prove his game is growing, winning the U-1700 title, and Prachi Jha remains on course, winning the Girls Under 13 and placing second to Ariel Hsing in Girls Under 16. David Sakai had a pair of second-place finishes to his credit, in the Over 50 to Hashimoto and to the photogenic Elmira Zainabudinova in the U-2250. Notable also was the Father-Daughter tandem of Neel and Mekala Neelakantan. Dad took home the 'big trophy' in the U-1100 while Mekala was tops in the U-1250.

Tournament Director John Miller made a change to NATT's procedures for the 2009 season. Now when three round robin groups find the Single Elimination bracket, rather than giving one player a bye and having

the other two play off for a spot in the final, all three players will meet in a round robin and the order of finish will determine the Champ and runner-up. You will see this reflected in the event list at the end of this article. It was a factor in Women's Singles at the Western Open. Yin Zhong, Gejie Mai and Jiaqi Zheng all won their groups, but with Open Singles looming, Jiaqi chose to conserve her energy and step aside, leaving Zhong and Mai to play for the Women's title which went to Gejie.

Two players graduated from each of the four Open Singles Round Robin groups Saturday evening and met in Quarterfinals beginning Sunday at 1PM. Weijian Zheng managed to get past the Women's Champion, Gejie Mai in 4 straight games, 12, and 9,6,7. Aaron Hu gave a good account of himself, but fell to Shen Hailong 4 games to 2. Cheng Yi Du had more trouble with Trevor Runyan than expected, and they were tied at 2 games apiece before (10 and 5) Cheng notched the fifth and sixth games for the win. Spectators were already three and four people deep around the two feature courts for this high-level play, and got a real treat when top seed Jiaqi Zheng met Jitendra Gilad of India Community Center. All the games were exciting and intense and Zheng made especially good use of her penhold backhand over the table with a number of pickhit winners. Gilad's fans tell me he is still 'shaking off the rust' off a layoff from competitive play, but Jiaqi's win of 9, -10,5, -9,5,6 shows her to be competition-ready.

The semi-finals produced outstanding play; great points and drew cheers from the crowd. Shen Hailong was lightning quick in his backcourt play, but Jiaqi Zheng controlled the table and could not be budged from the endline. Over and over she dragged Shen wide to his forehand, working him to death. Her pickhit backhand discouraged Shen from that court. Four straight games for the young lady, 6,2,16,9. Cheng Yi Du and Weijian Zhang were thus left to find Jiaqi's opponent for the Championship. Cheng took control right out of the gate, 11-3 in the first game. A change of ends brought no change of result, and Cheng led two games to none. Weijian appeared visibly upset with himself, and with his fans exhorting him to work harder, made the third game his, 11-6, driving Cheng into lobbing positions from the backcourt. Cheng tried to shift the momentum back to his favor in the fourth, but an early lead evaporated and 11-9 for Zhang, the match was tied two all. A fifth game win made it 3-2 for Zhang, a 12-10 result that had the crowd cheering on every point. Despite having lost three straight games, there was no quit in Cheng and he made the match even with a sixth game victory, 11-9. With only one game to decide everything, the crowd was into every point, but when all was said and done Weijian Zhang prevailed 11-6 in the seventh game. This match was the most exciting and competitive match of the tournament.

In the final, both players were representatives of 'Ping Pong Dojo' and obviously familiar with each other's game. They worked quickly and efficiently, trading ends

with minimal delay. Points were played quickly and there were few long rallies. Almost all the points were three ball kills off serve. Jiaqi and Weijian traded the first four games, and then Jiaqi won a pivotal fifth game 14=12. With victory in her sights, Jiaqi brought home the sixth game 11-9 to become only the second woman to win an Open Singles title on the JOOLA North American Tour! A popular champion, Ms. Zheng exited to the cheers of the faithful as staff and UC Berkeley volunteers folded the tables and loaded the truck.

The 2009 season is underway with a great tournament! Next, NATT will be holding events in New York City and San Diego in April, but we hold a special place in our heart for Berkeley, a site we will return to this year at Labor Day.

Results

Open Singles: Jiaqi Zheng d. Weijian Zhang; 6, -5, 7, -8, 12, 9

Women's Singles: Gejie Mai, 1st, Yin Zhong, 2nd

U-2500: Shen Hailong d. Trevor Runyan; -9,8,8,8

U-2375: Johnard Baldanado d. Arthur Breton; -7,6,7,5

U-2250: Elmira Zainabudinova d. Dave Sakai; 3,8,6

U-2125: Masaru Hashimoto d. Terence Chan; 3,6,8

U-2000: Pranav Gopal d. Barry Or; 5,7,3

U-1850: Jhomaper Yan d. Naruto Haguro; 9,-5,10,9

U-1700: Aarsh Shah d. Kent Leung; 10,-9,9,6

U-1550: Julien Coupe d. Nathaniel Chu; 7,6,-11,6

U-1400: Casey Kong d. Kenny Wong; -17,8,8,8

U-1250: Mekala Neelakantan d. Kevin Wong; -10,-9, 7,7, 16

U-1100: Neel Neelakantan d. Joe Li; 4,6,4

U-950: Joe Li d. Michael Wong; -9,5,8,8

U-800/Unrated: Chu Tsz Lun d. Kaiman Chan; 8,3,8

Sol Feingold Memorial Senior Events

Over 40: Johnard Baldanado d. Ray Wong; 6,8,9

Over 50: Masaru Hashimoto 1st, Dave Sakai 2nd

Over 60: Mao Lin Zhao 1st, Chi Hsuing Wang 2nd

Ying-Lo Junior Competitions

U-22 Men: Shen Hailong 1st, Zhe Hao Wang 2nd

U-18 Boys: Brian Chen d. Justin So; 9,9,-10,7

U-16 Boys: Aashay Patel d. Pranav Gopal; 9,-11, 7,-6, 14

U-16 Girls: Ariel Hsing, 1st, Prachi Jha, 2nd

U-13 Boys: Ethan Chua d. Aarsh Vyas; 7,-5,4,9

U-13 Girls: Prachi Jha d. Aditi Chodri; 6,-8,-5, 10, 9

U-10 Boys: Kanak Jha, 1st, Kunal Chodri 2nd