

# Learning from the Hardbat Classic

by Steve Hopkins

A lot of attention has been focused on the Hardbat Classic for the size of the purse (\$100,000 for the overall winner and \$2,000 for three other division winners), for the tournament format, for the staging and hype, and for the recent ESPN broadcast of the event. Certainly discussions will continue long into the future both by those who wish to improve the event in the future and those who wish to imitate its commercial success. Here is a brief overview of some of the positives.

## THERE ARE PLAYERS OUT THERE

Bud Light (Anheiser Busch) managed to organize 4,700 regional qualifying tournaments that averaged 14 players each. Even with repeat entries, they have clearly shown that there are 40,000 Americans willing to pick up a paddle and play our game competitively. These numbers were generated with limited advertisements outside of bars and pubs.

## SPONSORS CAN MAKE MONEY WHILE SUPPORTING TABLE TENNIS

What was the exposure? -- 40,000 participants, hats/shirts/paddles, commercials, a major event in Las Vegas, media coverage, and an hour long TV spot on ESPN on a weekend. Between Bud Light and the others, over two million dollars was likely spent on the event and the promotion. A company like Bud Light is going to spend that amount of money on advertising -- What they are looking for is a new way to reach their target audience and for the best way to get that audience to remember their message. Table tennis was able to deliver as an appropriate backdrop for that message. It has been reported that Bud Light is very happy with the result. Other companies should be more receptive to ventures of this magnitude involving our sport. w.

HBC sponsors included: Bud Light, KSwiss, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Emeril Lagasse's restaurant, the Stadium, and The Venetian Resort and Casino with Killerspin as the equipment supplier.



## TABLE TENNIS CAN MAKE IT ON TELEVISION

The Hardbat Classic aired on a Sunday afternoon (4pm EDT). The event partners (Radical Media, Mark Gordon Productions, and Fremantle Media) are experts at bringing events to television screen. Certainly the quality of the product has much to do with the success.

The ratings for the HBC on ESPN were very good. In fact, those ratings were higher than the lead-in show and higher than the show that followed the event.

Though this was a harbat event and not a standard table tennis event, much of the broadcast featured scenes of the more modern game and the telecast carefully separated the All-Star division final match in order to showcase the skills of those two players.

## HANDICAP AND HARDBAT

The HBC arguably leveled the playing field both with the equipment that was mandated and with a handicapping system. Some interesting angles were created both

in regard to spectator support at the event and to the story lines available to those that edited the footage to suit a television audience.

Consider Wayne Oberton as an example: his story made for really good TV. His suspenders and smile, the part showing his garage table and his buddies, the loud cheering from the players-turned-spectators; all this made for an interesting story. However, had there not been a handicap in place, there is little chance that Wayne, or many of the others who advanced from the round robins, would have been around long enough to become a story at all.

Obviously, we wouldn't want to make every tournament like this one, but there is certainly room for more handicap tournaments where the results are much more uncertain.

I hope the Hardbat Classic becomes an annual fixture in the American table tennis scene, and I hope promoters and sponsors can learn from the event and help take table tennis to the next level.