

A MEMORABLE TRIP

by Charles Deng

Now that I have time and that I'm not panicking over my next match, I look back to my trip in France, which was part of the ITTF World Hopes Team program. I had a really good time there. It was a great end to my summer, which was already the best one I ever had (I went to China twice, once for the program, and once for the US team, and once to Canada, also for the US team). First of all, Strasbourg, France was a lot different from America. A lot of the buildings in Strasbourg are over 200 years old, and there was also this huge cathedral that was over 700 years old which made me feel like an ant. The houses were old, small, and neat, like they were straight out of a fairy tale. I even got on a ferry to see palaces, canals, bridges, and prisons.

Table-tennis-wise, the kids on the team and the French are all very good. We trained around five hours a day for one week, and we always stretched and ran in the morning. Even though it was very tiring, I had a really good time with the members of the team and the French, both during and out of training. The French and WHT coaches were all really cool; for example, once, for physical training, we played slap jack. Our coaches, Dejan and Olga NEMES, were all very good coaches and taught me a lot. Thanks! At the end of the week, Mr. Andersson made a speech about this program, and Coach Olga NEMES, who was once a world class player, told us her life experiences. She had made the Romanian National Womens team when she was only 11, practiced eight hours a day, was a European Champion many times, yet she was really nice! I thought that it was a great idea for us kids to hear the experience of someone who we see as a role model.

Two days later, the tournament began. Almost 400 people from 40 countries participated in the Euro Mini Champs. The event I played in, the 1997 boys, had 96 people, so I was really surprised that I was the most favored player. The first day, I was really nervous. I still managed to win all three of my matches, however, and come in first both my groups.

The next day, I won my first two matches. The third one against a Russian was tough. I still managed to beat him 3-1 in two deuces. I won my fourth match and finally, after advancing as first in all four of my groups, I got into the single elimination rounds. Thirty-two people were still in because only one person was eliminated in each group. This was when it started to get tough, but by



the end of the day, I had advanced into the top eight. I was really proud when all the 1997 boys on the WHT team made it to the top 16. The only reason that one person didn't make it to the top eight was because he had to play against someone else who was also on the team. After I was done being nervous, I realized it was my birthday, but only when my roommate reminded me. Then, he tricked me and led everyone on the team to my room so they could sing *Happy Birthday*, which was really embarrassing. My mom then gave me some chocolate to share with my friends. I began to prepare for the next day.

The last day, I played a French boy (one of my friends) in the quarterfinals. I got very lucky and managed to win a crucial game at 1-1, 17-15. The last game, I also won in deuce. In the semi-

finals, I played another French boy (that I didn't know) and won 3-0. During the finals, the volunteers took all the tables except two away. It reminded me of the Mens and Womens top four at the U.S Nationals and Open, except this time, the spacing was even larger, and I was the one who would be playing. I was also the one who would play the last match of the tournament along with my teammate from Poland in the finals, which made even more nervous than I already was. When my match finally started, I lost 3-1. I was pretty happy as a whole, however, because I finished with a 11-1 record and came in second out of all of Europe. The highlight on the day came when all three boys on the podium were part of the World Hope Team.