



2009 US Open THROUGH THE LENS



by Richard McAfee

USA Table Tennis had a pleasant surprise this year as USOC Broadcasting selected our 2009 US Open as one of the events they would produce as a web-based broadcast. I was even more surprised and delighted to receive an invitation to join the announcing team. When I arrived in Las Vegas, I quickly met up with my co-announcer, Michael Boot. Michael is very knowledgeable in both table tennis and announcing. We quickly decided to split our duties with Michael handling the play-by-play and with me as the color commentator. The production team arrived from Hollywood on Friday and gave us our instructions— react to the play and have fun with our experience. It was decided that we would shoot a total of eight matches, that three cameras would be used, and that no slow motion or replay would be available— there would be limited opportunity to add much in the way of technical explanation to the show. Below is a short description of the matches that were filmed.

their experience and a noticeable advantage in the serve and serve return game to control the important end points of each game. Match to Samara and Dodean 10,9,7,10.

Men's Double Final

Once again, we had an unknown team in the finals as Kim, Sang Soo and Lee, Dong Hee (KOR) had upset the third-seeded team of Stefan Feth (USA) and Peter Franz (GER) in a tough seven game quarterfinal match, 10,8,-4,9,-6,-9,9. In the semifinals, they continued their upset run by taking out the second-seeded Romanian Team of Adrian Crisan and Andrei Filimon in straight games 8,7,7,10. Turns out these strong players both play professionally for the Seoul City Team. Lee, who plays the traditional Korean pen-hold game is only 19 years old and Kim at 32 years of age plays a strong shakehands looping game and is actually Lee's coach.

Their opponents in the final were two players who have repeatedly proven themselves to be among the best doubles players in the World, Chen Weixing (WR 23) and Joerg Rosskopf (WR63). In years past, Rosskopf has twice won the World Doubles title and Weixing has won several European doubles titles.

At the beginning of the match, many in the audience wondered how Rosskopf and Weixing would blend their very different styles of play together. Any questions were quickly answered as Chen and Joerg quickly raced to an easy 11-7 first game win. Throughout the match Chen would use his very strong forehand loop at every opportunity with would allow Rosskopf to stay close to the table and score with his own power game. When the Korean pair did force Chen back into chopping mode,

Through the Lens continued on next page

KEINATH'S EIGHTH

IN SEVEN PREVIOUS US OPENS, SLOVAKIA'S THOMAS KEINATH HAD ONLY PLAYED IN ONE FINAL — LOSING TO WEIXING IN 2008. THIS YEAR, HE WOULD NOT BE DENIED — SPREADING FIVE LOST GAMES OVER SIX MATCHES ON HIS WAY TO THE TITLE

LAS VEGAS, Nevada. Thomas Keinath has been competing in the US Open each year since 2002. Over that stretch, he had lost early in six years (including upset losses in 2003 and 2006), and made only one run to the top eight (in 2008 where he eventually lost to Weixing in the final).

This year, however, was his year. He was

pushed early by Xavier Therien in the Over 30 event (with Therien up 2-1 and later tied 9-9 in the fifth game), but after gaining some momentum, Keinath never looked back. He swept through the Open spreading five losses over six matches and also won the Over 30 event with an equally dominating performance.

The 2009 US Open Men's field featured 14 players with US ratings of over 2600, five players in the top 100 in the World, and four Olympians.

Some of the top competitors included Thomas Keinath of Slovakia (World No. 62), Weixing Chen of Austria (World No. 23), Adrian Crisan of Romania (World No. 32), Jörg Rosskopf of Germany (World No. 63), and Andrei Filimon of Romania (World No. 98).

On the women's side, Gao Jun continued a dominating two year run— spreading six lost games over five matches on her way to defending her 2008 Women's title. Gao Jun also won the Over 30 Women's event and the Over 40 Women's event (without losing a game in either event).

This was one of the strongest women's fields in recent years with many top players joining Gao Jun (World No. 19) including: Daniela Dodean of Romania (World No. 33), Elisabeth Samara of Romania (World No. 36), Tanja Hain-Hofmann of Germany (World No. 111), and 2006 US Open Women's winner Mo Zhang of Canada (World No.130). ■



(top) Thomas Keinath, (left) Adrian Crisan, (right) Gao Jun, on opposite page (top) Richard McAfee, (bottom) Chen Weixing.

Top photo provided by NATI, Gao Jun photo by Diego Schaff, other photos by Steve Hopkins.



Top Seed Weixing lost to Canada's Wang

Top seed and defending Open Champion Chen Weixing won his first three matches without losing a game but lost momentum early in his match against Eugene Wang and never recovered. The first two games were very close with 9-9 ties turning into 11-9 Wang wins. The match featured a series of called service faults (three faults: all called against Weixing) that quickly became the story of the match.

The calls clearly frustrated Weixing, who took long breaks between points and played to the crowd with animated gestures towards the umpire. At one point he flipped his racket into the air and as it landed loudly on the table, a yellow card was issued. A vocal crowd tried to urge on the defending champion, and the noise quickly attracted more and more people to the arena. The umpire never lost his temper and showed great restraint in not reacting to the player's gestures. And, to his credit, Weixing's frustrations never degraded into real confrontation — no swearing, or aggressive argument, or direct challenge of the umpire, and certainly no actions that showed a lack of respect to the other player or the event. Weixing continued to smile throughout the match, joked with friends after the match, and reappeared the next day to compete, and ultimately win, the Open Doubles.

Though somewhat eclipsed, the real story was Eugene Wang's overpowering performance. He led the match 2-0 before the controversy began and was able to maintain his concentration throughout, thwarting any attempted comeback, dominating the remaining games, and closing out the match 4-0.

Roskopf showed that he was quite comfortable in joining him back from the table and playing topspin defense. Roskopf and Weixing had just too many weapons and too much experience for the Korean pair and won the match, 7,2,3,-11,4.

Women's Semifinals

First Semifinal -Gao Jun (USA) vs Elisabeth Samara (ROM)

On paper, Gao with her World Ranking of 19 and several decades of international experience looked to be a favorite over the young Romanian Samara.

The crowd was stunned as Elisabeth ran to a quick 6-2 lead in the first game. She seemed to have little trouble making consecutive loops against Gao's tricky spin changing blocks. Samara's left-handed serves and forehand loops out wide to Gao's forehand also cause a lot of problems for Gao and the Romanian took the first game 11-7.

Gao tighten-up her blocking game in the second, and made only one unforced error. Now Samara couldn't get a ball through Gao and even though she scored with three service winners, the score was tied at 6-all. Another missed forehand loop and a brave third ball forehand attack by Gao took Gao to an 8-6 lead. She would tie-up the match with an 11-7 game win.

The third game saw both players continuing to have difficulties figuring out each others style of play, which resulted in a number of errors from both. Once again the game would be tied again at 6-all but this time it was Samara elevating her game as she scored with yet another service winner and a strong forehand third ball loop to take an 8-6 lead. A lucky net increased her lead to 9-6 and she held on to take the third game at 11-9.

Gao came out more aggressively in the fourth game, using her block to push Samara around the table and forcing errors to take a 9-4 lead. At this point, Samara again raised her power level to score with several strong forehand loops and backhand counters and goes on her own run to catch Gao at 9-9. A strong forehand third ball attack and a clever backhand flip give Samara the game at 11-9.

With Samara now up 3-1 in games, she Samara took a quick 4-2 lead in game five, so Gao tightened her strategy and began to force some errors from Samara and again a game is tied at 6-all. This time Gao took control of her own fate and came out attacking to take a 9-7 lead, she finished the game with two beautiful forehand kills of her own.

Gao quickly established a 5-2 lead in the game six and ran out the game at 11-7 to level the match at 3-games all.

The seventh game was marked with some early nervous play from both players. When Gao misses a forehand kill and then miss-serves to go down 5-7, things did not look good for her. Both players traded winners and Gao would serve at 6-8. A service winner and yet another brave forehand kill would finally bring Gao back even at 8-all. The players traded points to 9-all and Gao then smashed in a forehand to get her first match point at 10-9. Samara quickly brought the score to deuce with a lucky net cord. Now it was Gao's turn to get lucky as she smashed an edge ball to get to 11-10. When Samara missed Gao's serve, Gao won the game and completed her amazing comeback from 1-3 games down.

Second Semifinal - Daniela Dodean (ROM) vs Tanja Hain-Hofmann (GER)

This match featured two right-handed European topspin-style players. Nineteen-year-old phenomenon Dodean facing off against a tour veteran in Hain-Hofmann. Tanja had been in this position before as she was the Women's Runner-Up in the 2007 U.S. Open.

Throughout the first game, whoever opened with the first topspin most likely won the point. Both players had problems with their serve returns but it was clear early on that Tanja's reverse forehand sidespin serve (right-side spin) was going to be a very effective weapon. Play was very spotty with some good counter-looping points mixed in with a number of easy errors. When play reached deuce, both players had their chances to win this important first game but it was Hain-Hofmann who pulled out the game at 15-13.

The second game closely mirrored the first as both players traded topspin exchanges mixed with some easy errors. At deuce, neither player could take two points in a row until Tanja missed her own serve to go down 15-16. Dodean then played a strong mid-distance topspin point and with a series of three forehand counter-loops won the game at 17-15.

Hain-Hoffman seemed to do better when she could open with her back-

hand and finish with a strong forehand loop. Dodean won most of the points when she executed several forehand topspins in a row. Again, the players match points until a lucky net gives Dodean a 10-8 lead and when Tanja misses a forehand, Dodean takes a 2-1 lead in games.

Game four is another close struggle with Dodean taking a 10-8 lead. Hain-Hoffman scored with two strong forehands to deuce the game. This time it is Hoffman who better controlled her nerves and was more aggressive at the end as she won the fourth game at 14-12.

Game five started off in the same mode with neither player really finding a rhythm to their play. However at 6-all, Hoffman finally took charge of the game and took five points in a row to win the game 11-6.

In game six, Hoffman took an early lead and held it to lead 10-8 and had two match points. At this point, Dodean served an edge and Hoffman made a backhand error and once again we had a deuce game. Hoffman served a winner for a third match point. Dodean responded with a strong backhand counter to tie the score 11-all. Hoffman went to the forehand serve that has bothered Dodean the whole match but this time the serve went long and Dodean stepped around and ripped a brave forehand winner to go up 12-11. When Hoffman missed a backhand block, Dodean won the game at 13-11 and the match went to a deciding seventh game.

At the beginning of the final game, Daniela took an early 4-3 lead. At this point, Hoffman stepped up her game to run six points in a row to lead 9-4. Tanja won the game and the match at 11-6 and once again was in the finals of the US Open Women's Championship.

Men's Semifinals

With both of the Women's Semifinals going the full seven games, the Men's Semifinal Matches would start about one hour late; it was going to be a late evening for everyone.

First Semifinal - Thomas Keinath (SLK) vs Wang Zhen (CAN)

The stands were full as everyone was looking forward to this match-up. Wang Zhen is Canada's No. 1 player and had already knocked off the tournament's defending champion and number No.1 seeded, Chen Weixing in straight games in the quarterfinals. Thomas Keinath was the runner-up in last years US Open Men's Singles and is a frequent participant in tournaments in this country.

While both players are shake-handed attackers, they play very different styles. Wang is a classic Chinese style power attacker whose game is based on a strong serve and serve returns and powerful forehand opening attacks. Thomas plays a unique game largely based on his ability to play quicker than his opponents. He takes the ball early off the bounce and can loop and counter at such a quick rhythm that few players can stay up to the table and exchange with him.

It was obvious throughout the match that Wang was not comfortable when Thomas forced a quick pace. Thomas was aggressive from the start but could not find his timing in the first game a lost a quick first game to Wang at 11-4.

In the second, all of Thomas strokes began to click. His flip returns and reflex blocked off Wang's strong loops began to find their mark. Thomas could do no wrong this game and won the game 11-4.

Game three was a serve and serve return battle until 8-8. At this point Wang missed a high ball to give Thomas the lead 9-8. A quick backhand winner down-the-line and a flip winner off of Wang's short serve, gave Keinath the game at 11-8.

The fourth game was another quick win for Keinath. Throughout the game, as well as the match, Wang Zhen seemed confused about how to play Thomas. Not only did Keinath's time pressure play not give Wang a chance to bring his powerful forehand into play but Thomas has the ability to change the direction of his returns at the last moment. Wang was often left this game watching Keinath's return go by untouched. Game to Keinath at 11-5.

In the fifth game, Wang made a tactical adjustment and began to open more balls to Keinath's forehand side. This proved to be a good move as Wang took a 9-6 lead with one more serve on his racket. Wang gave a medium depth serve to Thomas's backhand and could only watch as Thomas hit yet another amazing backhand flip winner down the line. Thomas quickly took the next two points to tie the game. A backhand error from Wang gave Thomas his first match point at 10-9. He only needed one, as he finished the game and the match with a beautiful step-a-round forehand

counter-loop to win 11-9, Keinath moved into the US Open Men's Final for the second year in a row.

Second Semifinal - Adrian Crisan (ROM) vs Andrei Filimon (ROM)

Adrian Crisan (WR 32) came into this event as the second seed and except for losing two games to Stefan Feth (USA) in an early round, had proceeded through the draw without much difficulty. His opponent was now Andrei Filimon (WR 98), his teammate and regular training partner.

While both players are right handed topspin attackers there are considerable style differences. Crisan is a balance two-winged looper who can produce a wide variety of spin and speed with both his backhand and forehand topspins. Filimon is more of a forehand power looper.

In game one it quickly became apparent that both players know each other's games well...they traded points until Crisan was finally able to take the lead at 9-7. However a few strong forehand exchanges from Filimon brought the game to deuce. Filimon went up 11-10 with a very heavy topspin forehand loop than Crisan couldn't handle. Then when Crisan pushed a serve off the table, Filimon won the first at 12-10.

Game two was even until Filimon ran five straight points to get to 10-5. This seemed to wake-up Crisan who began to add more power to his own opening loops and also to direct most of his returns to Filimon's backhand side. The change in tactics worked as Crisan went on his own run to deuce the game. A couple of strong backhand loops later; Crisan won the game 13-11.

In game three, Crisan continued to press the backhand attack with great success. It became clear Filimon can't win many of the backhand exchanges and with the speed of Crisan's returns, Filimon cannot find a way to pivot into the backhand corner to use his big forehand loop. Crisan won the game quickly 11-6.

While Filimon continued to land a number of big shots, Crisan's more balanced play was just too much. Crisan took games four and five by the identical scores of 11-5, 11-5. Match to Adrian Crisan who would meet Thomas Keinath in the finals. Both players received a round of applause from the audience.

Women's Final - Gao Jun (USA) vs Tanja Hain-Hoffman (GER)

The large disparity in the world ranking between the two (Gao at No.19, Hoffman at No. 111) normally would indicate that Gao was the clear favorite. However, up to this point Gao had not looked nearly as sharp in her matches as she had last year and Hoffman is a very capable opponent.

In game one, Gao raced to a 6-2 lead as Hoffman seemed confused by Gao's returns and played too many soft returns which Gao put away with strong forehand kills. Tanja scored two points in a row, by first opening with slow higher arching spin loops and then finishing with strong fast loops to a corner. Finally finding a pattern that worked, Hoffman continued to alternate slow and fast returns, even mixing some mid-distance chops into play, as she evened the score at 10-10. At this point, Hoffman made a strong forehand third ball attack and Gao missed a backhand block. Hoffman won the first 12-10.

Tanja continued her strong play to open the second game. She repeatedly was able to out-steady Gao, mixing offensive and defensive returns to build a 6-2 lead. At this point, though, Tanja began to make errors on her usually very strong opening backhand loop and Gao worked her way back to 8-all. Hoffman went up 9-8 and then Gao scored with a clean serve winner fast down the forehand line of Hoffman that left her watching the ball go by. Gao then won an exciting forehand to forehand exchange and Hoffman went for a tricky serve and missed to give Gao the game at 11-9.

So far this had been a streaky match with both players winning or losing points in bunches. That pattern continued in the third game as Gao took an early 3-1 lead. At this point the umpire faulted Hoffman on her serve (second time) and clearly Hoffman is not happy with the call. While she did win the next two points 3-4, Gao ran six points in a row and won the game 11-4.

In game four play continued to be very uneven as Gao quickly went up 2-0 only to see Hoffman run eight points in a row. Tanja's run was helped by Gao twice being faulted on serve by the umpire. Both Gao and US Team Coach Doru Gheorghe were not happy and called for the tournament referee, Bill Walk. Finally play continued and Hoffman quickly won 11-6 to even the match at two games-all.

Game five featured more consistent play from both players. Hoffman

had early success pushing Gao's serves, inviting her to attack and then scoring with successful counter-attacks out wide to Gao's forehand side. With Hoffman up at 5-3, Gao changed tactics and became more aggressive scoring with three strong forehand kills and using backhand serves instead of her normal forehand ones. Gao ran four points to take a lead at 7-5. At this point, Hoffman seemed rattled and faults not one but both of her own serves to extend Gao's lead to 9-5. Gao took the important fifth game 11-7.

In game six, Hoffman continued her pattern of playing soft and inviting Gao to open the attack and then initiating her own counter attack. Gao surprised Hoffman with some clever drop shot winners when Hoffman retreated too far from the table. The game was well played and very close as the score reached 8-all. Gao then made a brave forehand third ball attack and blocked back three of Hoffman's bullet loops in a row to take a 10-8 lead. When Tanja looped a backhand long, Gao won the game and match 11-8.

Both players received a big ovation from the crowd for the exciting match they had just witnessed. Gao Jun takes home \$3,500 for First Place and Tanja Hain-Hoffman received \$1,700 as runner-up. This was Gao's third US Open Women's Singles Title, winning last year and fifteen years ago in 1994. Truly this is a remarkable achievement and also a testimony to the longevity of her career.

Men's Singles Final - Adrian Crisan (ROM) vs Thomas Keinath (SLK)

Due to the length of the earlier matches the Men's Final starts a little after 9 pm, about an hour late. No one had left the arena as this is the match the crowd had been waiting for. One of these great champions would win his first US Open Singles Crown this evening.

From the very beginning of the first game, Keinath came out swinging. By aggressively flipping almost every serve and playing every return off the bounce he repeatedly pushed Crisan off the table. Crisan was caught in the dilemma that many players face when they play Keinath, they can't match his speed at the table and when they back off the table; Keinath quickly angles them out of position with clever side-spin loops. Thomas raced to an early lead 9-3 and won the first game 11-8.

The second game started off with fireworks. I mean real Fourth-of-July fireworks were being set-off nearby. The sound of the booms could be heard rumbling through the hall but it did not seem to distract the players. The game is even until 4-all and once again Keinath went on a tear, hitting forehand winners, blocking back Crisan's strongest loops, and flipping a number of out-right serve return winners he ran out the game 11-5.

Keinath came out full of energy at the start of the third game and continued to dominate his opponent to take a 7-3 lead. Crisan fought hard but it seemed he had no shot from which Thomas could not find a way to hit a winner. The crowd was treated to many excellent counter topspin exchanges and even louder fireworks booms from outside as Thomas won the game 11-7 and took a 3-0 game lead in this best of seven match.

In the fourth game, Keinath, once again, started off strong to take a 6-2 lead. At this point, Crisan began to apply more spin and less speed to his opening loops and this forced some errors from Keinath. Crisan fought hard to reach 9-all and with a great backhand block down the line off Keinath's best loop he reached game point 10-9. Then quickly Crisan made two forehand errors and Keinath ripped a forehand winner to win the game and the match 12-10.

Somehow the fireworks outside now seemed appropriate for the occasion, as a very happy Thomas Keinath captured his first US Open Men's Singles Title and the \$6,000 first place prize that goes with it. Adrian Crisan had to settle for the runner-up prize of \$3,000 and the applause of the audience that enjoyed his fine play and good sportsmanship throughout the tournament.

I would like to thank the USOC Broadcasting Team for their fine job in covering the US Open and also the USATT for giving me an opportunity to be a small part of the team. Finally I want to express my appreciation to my announcing partner, Michael Boot, for the great job he did with both the play-by-43 play announcing and the athlete interviews.

If you have not seen the USOC production of the 2009 U.S. Open, you can find the videos online at: <http://tabletennis.teamusa.org/video>