

# HARDBAT CLASSIC

by Sean O'Neill

This summer I participated in two terrific table tennis events that really made me feel optimistic about our sport. The first was coaching at the Indian Community Center (ICC) in Milpitas, California, for two weeks leading up to the US Open; I coached local Bay area junior players and members of the Indian National Junior Team. The second was participating in the Bud Light Hardbat Classic, both locally and at the finals in Las Vegas. While some might think that these two events could not be more different, the fun and enjoyment I had at both were non-stop.

So how did I get to participate in the baddest \$100,000 throwdown in the history of the sport? I followed the same path as 275 other regional champs by winning an event at a bar and then winning a regional. In my case, I first won a friendly Friday night event at Bar 84 in downtown Portland, and then I won my regional finals at The Agency Ultra Sports Lounge. Our local Bud Light events were coordinated and run flawlessly by Kate Riesen of Maletis Beverage and even included the Bud Light Girls.

The Hardbat Classic rules were straightforward: Everyone used the same inexpensive Bud Light branded equipment (paddles, balls, and table). Matches were best-of-five games to 11. The format was single elimination. 7-0 skunks were in effect and would end the match immediately regardless of the game score. There was a good mix of USATT, basement, and bar players, and the smaller court, bar-room lighting, and free Bud Light beer surely added to the Cheers-like atmosphere. I am told that with over 4,100 local events, the total participation exceeded 40,000.

I wonder if USATT would entertain this type of regional qualifier for our Nationals. The National Collegiate Table Tennis Association and ACUIs do it for their members, thus ensuring much greater participation than one mega event. Imagine a similar size event with one to two dollars of each local entry going to the finals purse. We could

easily have USATT players playing for \$50,000 or more in awards in Vegas in December if we ever went down this avenue.

Prior to the event, I spoke at length with tournament director Ed Hogshead and Kathryn O'Kane of Radical Media to offer my support in any way possible. I really believe that this type of event can only benefit all parties involved with our sport. There had been quite a bit of discussion both online and off wondering if this event would harm USATT or take away from the US Open. My thought was: When else are we going to have Anheuser-Busch provide over \$500,000 to just fly in regional winners and for people like Robert Friedman (of Radical Media), Mark Gordon Co. (which produces Grey's Anatomy), and Freemantle Media Enterprises (producer of American Idol), plus K-Swiss and Killerspin leveraging their assets to promote and televise our sport?

Originally, I was going to bring my primary practice partner Jim Hermann to Vegas as he helped me prepare for my two local events. To Jim's credit, he accepted a rain check when I asked him if he would mind me asking Dave Edwards, the second-place finisher from The Agency, instead. Dave is a regular hardbat player and had won previous hardbat rating events at the Nationals. Once we learned there would be handicapping (based on current USATT ratings) within the "PRO" and "All-Stars" Divisions, I knew Dave's chances to win the grand prize of \$100,000 were more than triple mine. Dave would still need to pay the standard \$100 entry fee like all the other non-regional winners. To support our local efforts, USATT national clothing sponsor Li Ning, which recently opened headquarters in Portland, outfitted both Dave and me in full gear and shoes.

I was not to be disappointed when arriving at McCarran International Airport as Hardbat Classic representatives greeted me and lead me, and a number of other winners, to the free shuttle to take us to the Venetian Hotel. Registration at the hotel provided VIP cre-

dentials (and some extra food money) that granted us access to an exclusive Saturday night party catered by Lagasse's Stadium at The Sportsbook Bar & Grill of the Palazzo Hotel and Casino, plus a Sunday brunch and VIP seats for the Finals.

I already had my official Killerspin hardbat racket, which I purchased online a few weeks earlier, so I opted for some lunch with Hardbat Classic All-star Tahl Leibovitz and comedian Judah Friedlander. Tahl and Judah have been hitting partners in New York City for quite some time. In addition to a full stand-up schedule as "The World Champion," Judah also appears on NBC's hit 30 Rock.

In total, there would be four separate divisions with the winners advancing to the final four. The Pros (anyone with a USATT rating), the Bud Light Regional Winners, the Basement Players (players without USATT ratings), and the All-Stars that included Eric Owens, Ilja Lupulesku, Lily Yip, Wally Green, Tahl Leibovitz, Adam Preiss, Trevor Runyon, and Elmira Zainabudinova. Each all-star represented a different demographic and story line that the producers wanted to capture, and each did a number of media appearances in New York City and Las Vegas. Games at the finals were to 21.

My results on Friday night were pretty close to what I had expected, especially once I saw that perennial US Hardbat Champ Ty Hoff was in my round robin. We had warmed up a little earlier in the day and Ty's offensive attacks were just too much for me—spot or no spot. Chris Lehman of New Jersey also got a chance, along with everyone else in our group, to really stomp me into the ground. I swear, I really am not that bad at hardbat, but I just cannot play close to 2400 with it! Ty finished second in our group and advanced to Saturday's play, and we could both tell that the winner would probably be someone unexpected who was severely underrated.

Some other top players that went out early as I did included Danny Seemiller, Houshang Bozorgzedah, and Li Yu Xiang, while the loudest exit was surely David Zhuang, who had to give the maximum spot of 17 points to most of his opponents. It was exciting to see my Olympic Coach and former World Champion Li Zhenshi and his outdated 2124 rating out there smashing through the field.

Once I was out, I proceeded to be a corner man for Dave Edwards

and Tahl. Dave had little trouble getting through his first round robin, and with some solid deuce play made it through his second round robin coming in second to Adam Brown of Alabama. That placed Dave into the final 24 for single elimination play. At the same time, Tahl won his initial four-player round robin over Wally Green (Tahl gave a 7 point spot), Eric Owens (Tahl got a 6 point spot) and Lily Yip (Tahl got a 3 point spot), while nursing a bit of a sore back.

I mostly followed the Pro Division single elimination, which started with Ashu Jain and Freddie Gabriel being the top two seeds and receiving byes. Unfortunately, that is as far the top two seeds went as Eugene Colucci (Eugene got a 17 point spot) took out Ashu two straight and Li Zhenshi (Li got an 8 point spot) beat Freddie in a lopsided -19, 16, 3 match.

One of the most exciting players was a star from the hit TV show 24, Adoni Maropis. A type I diabetic athlete/actor, Adoni plays exclusively with hardbat in the Los Angeles area and was a real fan favorite. Adoni started the event strongly when he beat Li Zhenshi (Adoni got a 9 point spot) in the first round robin and later Lim Ming Chui 19 in the third (Adoni got a 10 point spot) to reach the quarters to face Dave Edwards. Dave had taken out Adam Preiss (Adam got a 4 point spot) and Ed Ball (Ed got a 6 point spot) in straight games. The two-game match (score: 17, 20) was very exciting with each side taking turns on the attack. Adoni playing with a taped up, broken index finger on his playing hand(!) was able to make up the 6 point spot with a laser forehand that just didn't miss and a defense that was almost impenetrable.

The other featured quarterfinal was 59-year-old Li Zhenshi versus 57-year-old Daniel Chu (Daniel got a 10 point spot) of the Bay area who only recently returned to the sport after a long absence. Coach Li took the first game at 14, but could not keep up the pressure and dropped the next two at 10 and 13. It turns out that the former Hong Kong Junior champion Daniel Chu had been getting great workouts with Freddie and Trevor leading up to the tournament.

In the semifinal that I watched, Daniel's left-handed penhold hitting machine was too strong for Adoni (Daniel got a 3 point spot) and kept the actor pinned to his backhand with his forehand at bay. The



Photo courtesy of HardbatClassic

final point had Adoni pulling out all the stops and crashing the barriers to a loud ovation. Later, I got a chance to watch the final four seated next to Adoni, and I think I have met someone more passionate about the sport than I am!

The final match of the Pro Division was between Daniel and Jeffrey Shaw, a 48-year-old chiropractor from Michigan and a player that Daniel had beaten earlier in a star-studded second-round round robin that also featured Larry Hodges and Mitch Seidenfeld (two of my early picks for the event). This time Jeffrey (Jeffrey got a 12 point spot) turned the tables by blocking more and cautiously controlling the angles. It appeared to me that Daniel had both run out of steam and was a little impatient under the strong lights of center court.

In the two Pro Division crossovers, Elie (Elie got a 6 point spot) took out Tahl in a close three-game match, while Trevor (Trevor got a 6 point spot) eliminated former US Men's Singles champion Eric Owens. Almost a mirror image of their first meeting, Trevor once again pulled out an incredible victory from a very persistent Elie (Elie got a 7 point spot), running out the match from down 19-15 in the third!

The Basement Division featured a 73-year-old Wayne Oberton chopping the heck out of his opponents to earn a spot in the final four. University of South Alabama student and former Wimbledon Junior tennis player Jack Baker won the Regional Winners Division thanks to the support of his girlfriend and some classic tennis strokes.

Jeffrey, Trevor, Wayne, and Jack made it to Sunday's feature court and a chance leave the state with a cool \$100,000. Coin flips set the semifinal matchup of Jeffery vs. Wayne and Trevor vs. Jack. Wayne would start with 8 points and Jack with 17. The semifinals were over before you knew it with Wayne and his trademark suspenders and defensive style proving to be too consistent for Jeffrey. Jack gave Trevor a clinic in how to play when you have the maximum handicap spot with a 3, 12 thrashing. Jeffrey received a bit of a consolation taking the Bronze Match over Trevor with the same maximum spot.

This set up the final with a \$95,000 difference in prize money between the winner and loser. However, the loser would still be taking home \$5,000, which is quite a bit more than David Zhuang won last December when he won his sixth US Nationals singles title.

The final was a tossup with youth vs. experience. Wayne was the clear crowd favorite, but Jack was still a mystery, as no one really knew his true level. Jack had not really been tested in the early rounds. He had outscored Trevor in their first game, but had had the maximum spot. Early on in the first game, Jack established that he could push forever if need be, thus forcing Wayne to abandon his defensive style of play and to go for winners which did not land. I would estimate that Jack was playing around 1850 to Wayne's 1500, which was really just too much game for the event's sentimental favorite. Jack won 11, 13.

Upon winning the final point, confetti burst out of towering Bud Light Ping-Pong balls, and Jack was presented with 100 Gs alongside a full bevy of Las Vegas showgirls. Photo shoots followed with plenty of smiles and a number of players getting ready to head over to the Convention Center for the US Open. Unfortunately, I needed to get back home after being on the road for over two weeks to help look after my daughter who was about to turn three.

In summary, the event was not perfect, but nobody thought it would be the first time out and it gave everyone a chance to win some serious loot. Additional sponsors are already in talks to increase the prize money to the next level and to expand the number of local events. The first commercial for the finals has hit the Internet and the finals will be on ESPN on Sept. 27 at 12 p.m. Pacific time (3 p.m. Eastern time). If the YouTube teaser is any evidence of what the two-hour production will show, we all should be in for a great treat.

As I got into the free shuttle back to the airport, I listened to my regional winners speaking about the sense of awe they had for the all-stars and how they could not wait to sign up for next year's event. A big thank you to Ed Hogshead, Greg Thompson and his staff from the Northern Kentucky TTC, NCTTA, Executive Producer Andrew Fried, and the entire crew that took hardbat out of the basement and into the Big Time!



PHOTOS: (top to bottom) Dave Edwards, Adoni Maropis, Li Zhenshi, Daniel Chu, and (large) Trevor Runyan  
Edwards and Li photos by Gerry Chua,  
other photos by Marielle Chua

**Yasaka**



MA LIN: XINHUA PHOTO COURTESY OF ITTF

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CLASS: OFF/SPEED: 89/CONTROL: 67

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CLASS: OFF/SPEED: 95/CONTROL: 60

Handle says "Olympic Gold Medalist"

COMBO SPECIAL  
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CLASS: OFF/SPEED: 88/CONTROL: 68

COMBO SPECIAL  
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