

Paralympic Hopeful: Daryl Sterling, Jr.

by Sean O'Neill

How did you get involved in Table Tennis?

A player named Tom Plaisted saw me playing in the game room at UC San Diego and told me about the table tennis club they had on campus. He was the first person to teach me what a loop was. I couldn't do such a crazy looking shot with my racket from Sport Chalet, so he taught me how to block it instead. After seeing that I was comfortable with learning technique, he suggested the San Diego Table Tennis Association. I was much too scared to go to such a place, so I didn't go for the next year and simply stayed on campus- in the game room. One day, a player in a wheelchair came and asked me if I wanted to play. I was used to losing, but I couldn't understand how this bald headed, black guy was so impossible to score a point on. It was like playing against a wall! After the hard lesson, he introduced himself as Andre Scott and told me about the SDTTA at Balboa Park. I finally mustered up the courage to go, and I've never stopped going since.

Please describe your disability.

HD - Hip Dis-articulation. I was born with two legs. But while I was walking in a crosswalk, my skinny, 8-year old body was hit by a car directly and it pretty much removed my leg all the way up to the hip, hence the name of the disability.

What is best part of the sport?

The best part of the sport for me is the thrill of the rally. I have never had so much fun while exhausting myself. Fast or slow, smash-fests or drop shots, I love the exchange itself. Never have I had to think about so many things at once in such a short amount of time. Whether I'm participating myself or watching it from the stands, I never seem to get tired of it.

What is the toughest part of the sport?

Footwork drills. I have never felt more tortured over something that I do voluntarily. After eight sets of zig-zagging around barriers at maximum speed, I feel like my leg muscles are on fire!

What is your weekly training like?

Let's see: Monday, Tuesday, Friday, and Saturday I am in a Stellangie Coaching group training. We do drills for two hours. For two of those days, we have physical training after the drills which include: plyometric jumps, planks, stamina and speed footwork exercises. Before every training, we always warm-up. After every training, we always stretch.

What part of the game are you working the most on?

My mental game. I figure that since I started serious table tennis training relatively late in life (May 2008), that any top player is going

to have a lot more total training time than me. Moreover, any top player is probably going to have better technique than me. So, in order to become the best I must be able to assess situations quickly, coach myself in between points, recognize spin accurately, adjust in the blink of an eye, and outsmart them during every exchange. All while staying cool, calm, and collected- shouldn't be hard, right?

What are your goals in the sport?

My main goal in this sport is to realize my full potential and see what am I really capable of. Can I really use this sport to express all my creative energy? Or will those amazing games remain in my daydreams? Could I make the US Paralympic team? I'd like to think so. An awesome side effect of trying my best every time I play is that it seems to inspire the people who watch me. And if I can inspire people to do their best just because I'm trying to mine, then that would be perfect!

What tournaments are you training for?

The two major ones are the fifth German Open this September and the US Nationals this December. To keep keep myself motivated, I always tell myself that I'm that training for the London 2012 games.

What is your favorite tournament?

That would have to be the San Diego Open. Not only do I get to see other players that I only see at tournaments, but my friends come out too. The clapping and support of my friends makes me feel like I can do anything. This last San Diego Open was especially great because a fellow Stellangie training group member, DJ Alto, won the Open. I have never felt more at home in San Diego and a sense of community than when we were cheering for him in the finals and congratulating him after his victory.

Any additional thoughts or experiences you would like to share?

Most definitely! This summer, our club was treated to a rare event. We normally have the pleasure of having a world champion (Stellan Bengtsson) at our club. But, this July, we had two. Jörgen Persson gave us a glimpse into what world-class training is all about from a player's perspective via multi-ball with Stellan. After the training was over, Persson played a friendly game with DJ Alto (our local Open



Daryl Sterling, Jr.

Home Club: San Diego Table Tennis Association

Coach: Angelita Rosal Bengtsson & Stellan Bengtsson

Class (Paralympic): 7

champion), Aidan Kahng (the youngest in the training group), and yours truly!

I have never played a game against someone who could successfully return my winning shots just inches before they hit the ground -- repeatedly! The most memorable point was one where I served a topspin serve (disguised as underspin), Persson popped it up slightly, and I ripped a vicious backhand only to get it blocked back. I powered back the block with another backhand and he returned it yet again. To switch it up, I tapped it over the net. Persson dashed to the table from the back court and hit the ball high from below the table with left sidespin -- or so I thought. His clever misdirection below the table made the ball jump so hard to the right that I was left standing there with my racket no where near the ball. It was definitely an experience for the books. I must say -- he's quite good!

Best Title/Result: U1400 champion and U1550 finalist at the same tournament
Personal Motto: Knowledge is Power.
Favorite Player: Jan-Ove Waldner
Personal Website: TheMightyAfro.com
Personal Sponsors: Angelita and Stellan Bengtsson and the SDTTA
Twitter: TheMightyAfro

photos: Sterling by William R. Greenblatt, RI Camp by Rajeev Sharma, Chicago Camp by Biba Golic

USOC Paralympic Military Camp, RI - The camp which made us realize...

By Rajeev Sharma

When I got a call from Sean O'Neill, I was very happy and wondered why he was calling. Is he coming to Boston? Or maybe he needed a new doubles partner and right before the US Open? As it turned out, he was looking for some assistance for an upcoming Paralympics event in my neck of the woods. He asked me if I would be available to run a table tennis camp for wounded soldiers through US Paralympics. At that very moment I knew this was going to be one of the finest moments of my life.

Without thinking twice I was in, and guess what, I was absolutely right that this was going to be one of my finest experiences with table tennis. Sean introduced me to the crew of USOC Paralympics— an amazing group of people to work with (and on top of that they are full of heart).

I had been informed that there would be approximately 50 soldiers from all areas of defense. It was not possible for me to run the camp on my own, so I turned to one of the best player and coaches in the Massachusetts area, Kurt Douty, and just like me, when he heard this was about table tennis and for the US soldiers, he was right in with a lot of pride.

In the next few weeks, we coordinated with Sean and USOC for the event. Since I run a club called TableTennisRocks.com out of the YMCA in Westborough, MA, it was easy to just roll the tables and barriers from the club into a U-Haul to bring them to the Naval base in Newport, RI. But we didn't need just tables to run the show; we wanted to do more. We wanted to give a racquet to each soldier, we needed balls, and we also needed prizes. There was not a second thought in our minds about whom to turn for this: the all-American table tennis brand Killerspin. When we contacted them, they accepted our request and provided us with racquets, balls, and around twenty smart-looking Killerspin t-shirts. Killerspin is one company which is way ahead of anyone when it comes to things like this. Robert Blackwell, CEO of Killerspin, personally kept in touch with us and his staff to make sure we got everything in time. We are so grateful to Killerspin.

We arrived at the US Naval base in our fancy U-Haul ride, went through security and straight to the gym to set up the tables. We received a warm welcome from USOC crew and volunteers. Since it was a two-day camp, we were provided with our room keys for an overnight stay, and trust me, those rooms were no boot camp rooms, I can relate those rooms to any decent hotel.

We were provided with plenty of volunteers to work with, almost two for each table. We had a little chat with the volunteers, explained to them the sport and rules, and most importantly, explained them the procedure to count the scores.

Right on time, the soldiers started to come in. Even though they were not marching, I could sense the discipline in them. Within few minutes, all had arrived. Kurt and I had overwhelming first impressions looking at a smart and sharp group of people who looked both passionate and focused. It was really touching to see these young guys and gals right in front of us who had lost some part of their lives, either mentally or physically, through one of the multiple wars our country is fighting. But on the surface one could never make out that they had any complaints— they were there to play table tennis and they were all in with heart and soul. During introductions we realized that this exceptional group of people came from all over the country. We took the opportunity to thank them for their services, and we could see the pride in their eyes too.

We started with the basics of the sport, some of them knew how to play and they certainly made the fact known! Though some of the soldiers were more physically capable than others, everyone had a passion to learn as much as they could in a three-hour session. We had them do little drills off the table and right away everybody was having some fun... but the real fun began when we moved them onto the tables... everyone got involved and all were keen to learn what we were telling them.

First we played with everyone (for at least a few minutes each) and then we divided the players into groups to begin the competition. These guys are very competitive. After an hour of training, we started a mini-tournament where we created round robin groups to play matches. Even though most had never played table tennis, all seemed to start hitting the balls from the word go. On every table, there were rallies occurring and sometimes we could hear a scream or two on missing the ball and even a Cho for celebration. (They learned Cho from us when Douty and I did a small exhibition.)

After the round robin, we picked up the top two players and started the single

elimination round. It started with the quarterfinals, since we had four groups. Once we had our four semifinalists, we gathered everyone for the prize distribution. (We did this at the point of semifinals because, thanks to Killerspin, we were able to recognize the top four) Once we gave them the smart looking t-shirts, they put them on immediately and boy! this group of men and women made those shirts look even better.



Even after all the matches were over and though their buses were waiting outside, these guys and gals didn't want to leave the tables. In the end everyone thanked us for our time, and we thanked them for the exceptional service and sacrifice they have given to our country.

On the second day, we had two new groups and did about the same routine. Each and every one of them enjoyed table tennis to the fullest. (A few of them even came back again with the next group!) Some soldiers asked where they could buy tables, as they wanted to pursue the sport and train more.

While conducting this event Douty and I had the opportunity to spend additional time with these soldiers, to interact with them at lunch and dinner. We also got to hear their brave and heartbreaking stories. Everyone had something to share, and some of these true story tellers were 19 to 20-year-old troopers who have seen life more than any one of us. Yes, we had winners from the tournament we conducted, but we are not naming anyone because they are all winners in their own remarkable way.

What an amazing experience this was! The soldiers made me realize that life is much more than we think. They made me realize how lucky we are to have them as our front warriors. They made me realize what competition is all about. Last but not the least, they made me realize that nothing is out of reach— You just need to reach out and get it, just like one of the soldiers who reached for a table tennis ball out from his wheelchair and another one with a prosthetic arm: The arm which replaces his God given arm, the arm which he lost while fighting for your and my freedom— freedom which we sometimes take for granted.

Military Paralympic Training Camp, Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago (RIC),

by Jennifer Johnson, August 3, 2009

Paralympians Jennifer Johnson and Andre Scott were invited by Jenny Di-Laura, CCLS, CTRS, of RIC to conduct a table tennis clinic for the veterans at their Military Paralympic Training camp sponsored by RIC. This was one of many camps that have been funded by US Paralympics and the Wounded Warrior Organization. They were assisted by Biba Golic and Sasa Drinic of Killerspin. Robert Blackwell, CEO of EKI Consulting and Killerspin donated shirts, rackets and balls to give to each participant. Chicago Slam Table Tennis Club, downtown Chicago, sponsored by Killerspin hosted the clinic.

After introductions were taken care of each of the four of us took one or two veterans and taught them the basics of table tennis, rules, equipment, serve and volley. Ardy of the club also made his robot available for training, which was quite a hit with the participants. At the end we played abbreviated matches of five points with winners moving up and losers moving down. Ginny was the overall winner. As far as we are concerned, everyone was a winner.

It was delightful to see these young men and women and some of their family members enjoying themselves and playing table tennis. We would like to thank little Cody Robert's son for his outstanding ball shagging for us.

Thanks to RIC, US Paralympics, Wounded Warrior, EKI-Consulting, Killerspin, Chicago Slam Table Tennis Club and all of the volunteers who made this event very special.

