

THE PRICKLE FROM SYDNEY

Why Jörgen Persson managed to play his best table tennis ever at the age of 42

by Jens Felke, Swedish Sports Journalist

At 42 years old Jörgen Persson played his best table tennis ever, reaching the semi-finals at the Olympics in Beijing, and at that moment on Swedish television the commentator Staffan Lindeborg suggested that J.O. Waldner too, ought to have made a serious run for the Olympics. Why is that? And how is it possible?

Jörgen Persson of Sweden had just won the match point against Primorac of Croatia and reached the semi-finals of the Singles event at the Olympics in Beijing; and at that moment on Swedish television the commentator Staffan Lindeborg suggested that J.O. Waldner too, ought to have made a serious run for the Olympics.

Look how it can turn out when old former world champions get new fresh legs: Waldner, in Athens 2004, at 38 years old, also reached the semi-finals— in a magnificent last performance. And, at that moment after winning the match point against Primorac, Persson, too, was right in the middle of a last and magnificent performance.

Previously, Waldner and Persson seemed to be about the same level when playing together in the German Bundesliga, but Waldner has stopped competing internationally and for the first time since 1982, he is not on the world ranking list. Meanwhile, Persson travelled around the world playing the Pro Tour, collecting rating points, to end up directly qualified for the Olympics.

“I want to give it a last chance,” Jörgen said when we talked on the telephone in the beginning of June, “Then I will quit on the international scene”.

So, why did Persson give the Olympics a last try and not Waldner?

Motivation: Jörgen Persson was yet not finished with the Olympics, but Waldner was, having won gold in 1992, silver in 2000 and ending among the four best 2004.

If Waldner had persevered and neglected his injury problems (back and neck) for a chance to once again stand there as the evergreen tree; the downside risk was that raptured Chinese table tennis lovers might have witnessed a tired and unfocused tree, with limbs moving in slow motion, game for game—a yellowed tree which might have fallen down to the wine red floor of the table tennis hall. So, no, in the Olympics there was nothing more for Waldner, and no more to prove—but for Jörgen Persson the situation was contrary.

I think Persson has been preparing for his run to the Beijing Olympics since Sydney 2000. Back then he was in the semi-finals and in his best condition ever. On the way to the semi-finals he was the one who made the greatest impression on enthusiasts and fans. In Sydney, he stood tall and strong at the edge of the table tennis table. In Sydney, he looked impenetrable in his blocking game, which neutralizes the opponent's normal advantage of serving and attacking afterwards. In Sydney, calmly and methodically, he picked-up a lot of points from his opponents' serving games, via his strong heavy forehand loop and rarely missing on his backhand.

Among team captains and other top players, Persson was the favorite to become gold medal winner that year, even though the two best Chinese (Liu Gouliang and Kong Linghui) and Waldner were still alive in the tournament.

But someplace in between the matches some mean

bacillus bounced in to the body of Jörgen Persson, and then everything went cold. Persson played the semi-final against Kong as well as the bronze match against Liu with a strong cold virus in his body—it affected his physical status so much that he was unable to do justice to himself at the table. He lost the two matches, did not win any medal at all—and went home with a prickle in his mind. That prickle has been there for eight years time.

When Jörgen Persson said that he wanted to give the Olympics a last try it was that prickle he wanted to get rid of— when he travelled the world around and made long distance calls to his wife Madeleine and the kids back home in Oslo, Norway, where they live— even though he knew so well that he ought to have been retired with his big bank account long time ago— Yes, then he was driven by the dream that a flood of winning endorphins would flow through his brain to dissolve that unfortunate prickle from Sydney.

Personally I thought it sounded almost touching in the telephone call when I understood that Persson seriously seemed to believe that he could win a medal in Beijing.

The cool, reliable and very fair guy from the Swedish west coast had just come home from a tour in Asia, where he had played the bigger preparation tournaments for the Olympics. It was the first whole weekend he had been at home in Oslo for over four or five months, so we had to shorten our conversation (since the family had guests coming over and the Perssons were about to prepare dinner).

“One is not so keen on making dinners and such stuff”, he excused himself.

Anyway, we talked some and I said I was impressed with what I had seen at the Swedish Open some half year before, in November 2007. I said that I thought he moved his 42-year-old body surprisingly smoothly and that he was in there in the game at a level that was astonishingly high. We discussed how he had shortened his stroke movements without losing power and that he had adjusted his game to the present fast table tennis playing of quick topspin (from both backhand and forehand close to the table where the old passive but safe block that he built so much of his game on back in Chiba 1991 nowadays only exists exceptionally, at reflex savings).

I ventured that Persson had no chance against Ma Lin of China. To the best Chinese there was still some obvious distance.

Persson did not really agree:

“Now in Asia I felt I had come closer to them,” Persson replied, “I felt I could match Wang Hao when I met him and if you only can put some pressure on them one can win. I must be active all the time. I must flip when receiving the services so that they can not attack on chop. And I must try to be active with my own aggressive shots all the time”.

He continued, “You know, at the Olympics they are only allowed to participate with three players. If one loses there are only two left. That could put a tremendous pressure on them, especially when playing at home in Beijing and everybody demands that they shall win gold”.

“At the World Championships they are seven or something. Then they feel safe. But if one looks back



in the history of table tennis Olympics they have only won two out of five. That is a poor percentage of winning for being China”.

When we were finished and had hung up the telephones, I thought to myself: They are funny these world star players, unbelievably optimistic with an unusual picture of how things are. I guess it is a sort of instinct of surviving which one must have to be able to stand all the efforts and work. Only masochists mortify themselves through training session after training session if they think they are about to lose. But realistically—how far can he reach at the Olympics, a friend asked me before the games. Among the 32 best is likely, among the 16 is possible, but not among the eight. Among the eight would be a feat.

Jörgen Persson did not think that realistically. Inspired about getting rid of his prickle from Sydney 2000 he started the Singles event shaky and tense against Karakasevic, but versus Yuk Cheung in the next round it was obvious that both timing and movement were there.

The next match (against Samsonov) is on the list of Persson's all time high matches: Playing at 42 years old and 22 years at World top class level, from being down 1-3 in games and 1-4 in points against the World's No. 5 Samsonov, and saving two match points for the win— that is a performance which only the very best Chinese are able to manage.

Samsonov may look tall and stiff in his serving movements— but he is the very

best table tennis player in the world outside China. He has an incredible safety in his game and never, never, plays a really poor match. To beat Samsonov, an opponent is forced to play on absolute top world class level. Thus did Jörgen Persson play against Samsonov— and he continued the same against Primorac in the quarter finals.

Against Samsonov, Persson impressed all the way. Technically the two men are equal, but mentally, and even physically, it seems like Persson was maybe the stronger of the two. The services, the service receives, and the first attacks were all decisive at the table.

In his own serve Persson came in trouble immediately when Samsonov managed to receive short and low over the net. The Persson came in too late to the ball, was forced to reach at it and chop it back too slow over the net—An easy pick for Samsonov to create an initiative in the rally which would result in winning the point.

But Persson is clever and smart, so he started to vary the service with sidespin and over-spun short and low services, which Samsonov had problems receiving throughout the match. Either he received long so Persson could attack and get the initiative— or short but a little too high. On the high ones Persson flipped firmly and with good variation in placement of the ball on the table, that means he did a short movement with his wrist close at the net, a mini top spin, that Samsonov had repeated problems with and which gave Persson enough time to hit hard with his own offensive weapons on the coming

strokes. That, and a constant aggression on the weak services of Samsonov, laid the ground for the victory in the round of eight.

The victory against Primorac was not so much of a feat as the Samsonov match, but this quarter final match was an exhibition of steel hard focus and mental strength on the decisive points and fantastic quality of playing. The most obvious proof of how high a playing level Persson actually reached, was in the second part of the fifth and last game, a game that the Croatian needed to win in order to force a sixth game and extend the match.

Primorac tried to put more pressure on Persson's backhand corner— but Persson answered by increasing the pace even more by doing a short, lash-like topspin backhand stroke that reduced the amount of time in which Primorac had to react (therefore he could not get the ball back on the table). This happened at several occasions in the closing rallies.

And that is exactly the sort of thing that proves a table tennis player is in peak physical condition; to possess the ability and creativity, during fast and intense rallies, to suddenly surprise an opponent with a weapon previously not revealed: A weapon that maybe Jörgen Persson himself did not know existed in his stroke arsenal— but that exactly there, in those seconds against Primorac in the quarter finals in Beijing— was demanded from him to win and in the same moment reach the semi-final and ultimately to get that needed flood of endorphins... which now have washed away and cleaned his mind from the prickle from the last rounds of Sydney 2000.