

2008 National Championships



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THE 2008 NATIONALS

Between the cold weather and the hot table tennis, December set some Vegas records! During the National Championships, Las Vegas got three inches of snow, the most they have had in almost 30 years. While the snow didn't affect the venue or the ground transportation, it did affect flights and travel plans and caused delays for many participants.

Speaking of cold, top seed and defending champion, Ilija Lupulesku arrived with a cold of his own— a cold virus that is. He practiced on opening day and played in the first round of the Open Doubles event, but later withdrew from all events.

Top seed and defending champion, Ilija Lupulesku arrived with a cold virus. He practiced on the opening day and played in the first round of the Open Doubles event, but later withdrew from all events.

Lupulesku said he gave it a try, but even with medicine he just didn't feel that he could play. He seemed very disappointed to be at the tournament and not able to participate.

The late exit of Lupulesku from the Open draw left some interesting problems for the tournament administration. The official decision was to pull a lower rated player and insert him into the Open draw in the vacant slot rather than reshuffle the seeds and redraw the entire event. This left a lopsided draw: Ultimately, David Zhuang, Mark Hazinski, and Eric Owens (and others) all ended up on the same side of the draw, and Cheng Yinghua became the top seed on his side. Some players were upset that the entire draw was not redone after Lupulesku's withdrawal, but because the event had already begun, the officials elected not to make additional changes. Further skewing the two halves, Adam Hugh, another high seed, was forced to withdraw due to injury.

MEN'S FINAL

In both of the Men's round robins, the top two seeds advanced to the Semifinal. On David Zhuang's half of the

draw he and Eric Owens advanced (Zhuang with no losses and Owens with one loss to Zhuang). On Cheng Yinghua's half of the draw, Cheng Yinghua, Shou Yu, and Niraj Oak each tied with a 4-1 record (Yinghua lost to Yu, Yu lost to Oak, and Oak lost to Yinghua). However, after tallying game scores, Yinghua and Yu advanced in order.

In the first cross over, Cheng Yinghua battled Eric Owens — beginning with four close games. Owens won the first game 12-10, but then Yinghua won the next three at 9,8, and 7. With contrasting styles, Cheng Yinghua varied the pace and the spin with a strong presence close at the table while Eric Owens maneuvered to line up his forehand and then used his whole body to win points with big strokes. Down 3-1, Owens dominated the fifth game, hitting shots from all angles, to win 11-2. But Cheng Yinghua was steady in the final game, hit a few unbelievable returns, and closed out the match with an 11-9 win.

Photos: (top) Men's Champion David Zhuang and (right) Women's Champion Crystal Huang - both photos by Diego Schaaf

MOST MEN'S SINGLES TITLES

SIX TITLES

David Zhuang: 2008, 2006, 2000, 1998, 1995, 1994

FIVE TITLES

Sean O'Neill: 1991, 1989, 1988, 1987, 1985

Dan Seemiller: 1983, 1982, 1980, 1977, 1976

FOUR TITLES

Ilija Lupulesku: 2007, 2005, 2003, 2002

Cheng Yinghua: 2004, 1999, 1997, 1996

MOST MEN'S DOUBLES TITLES

ELEVEN TITLES

Dan Seemiller: 1994, 1991, 1990, 1976 - 1983

NINE TITLES

David Zhuang: 2008, 2006, 2003, 1999-2001, 1992-1994

EIGHT TITLES

Rick Seemiller: 1976-1983

MOST WOMEN'S SINGLES TITLES

ELEVEN TITLES

Insook Bhushan: 1991, 1985-1989, 1981-1983, 1977-1978

EIGHT TITLES

Gao Jun: 2004, 1996-2002

FOUR TITLES

Amy Feng: 1992-1995

MOST WOMEN'S DOUBLES TITLES

ELEVEN TITLES

Insook Bhushan: 1985-1991, 1983, 1981, 1976-1977

NINE TITLES

Diana Gee: 1983-1991

EIGHT TITLES

Gao Jun: 2004, 1996-2002

The second cross over matched training partners and good friends David Zhuang and Shou Yu. Yu won the first and the fourth games, and Zhuang seemed to struggle a little-- winning three of his four games by just two points. The result never seemed in doubt, however, with Zhuang setting the pace both on serve and return. Zhuang seemed to win all of the easy points while Yu often struggled early in points... Yu had to work hard at longer rallies, sometimes with tremendous shot-making, in order to win his points.

The Men's Final was between 45-year-old David Zhuang and 50-year-old Cheng Yinghua, two players who have been rivals for almost 15 years. At this point in the tournament, Zhuang was truly at the top of his game. He jumped out to a quick lead, winning the first game decisively at 4. Yinghua played a strong second game, winning at 6. Now tied, the third game may have been the key to the whole match — down 8-10, Zhuang managed to hit four successive winners to take it. Zhuang continued the momentum to dominate the fourth game, winning at 2. Encouraged by the crowd, Yinghua fought back in the fifth to win close, but Zhuang was able to close out the match in the sixth game. A record setting six game victory for Zhuang's Sixth Men's Singles Title.

Overall, Zhuang's performance in Vegas was not perfect, but it certainly was dominant. He trailed only three times during the tournament and at no point did he trail after the fourth game (in this best of seven championship matches). Further, at no point was he within one game of losing a match. He finished very strong — winning the final three games in four of his five matches (and winning three of the final four games in the Finals).

Zhuang had an especially amazing year, being the first to win six Men's Open events. Previously in 2008, he represented the United States at both the Olympics and the World Championships. He finished first at the US Olympic Trials, had a great performance at the North American Olympic Trials, and was named USA Table Tennis Man of the Year.

WOMEN'S FINAL

Unlike the Men's Final, the Women's Final featured some new faces. The run of 13-year-old Ariel Hsing through the women's draw was the big story here. Ariel failed to win the Cadet event (though her third place



finish did qualify her for the Cadet Team), and she also failed to win the Junior event (though her second place finish did qualify her for the Junior team). She did, however, win the U-21 event and she shined in the Women's Open, where she lost seven games in six matches (for a 5-1 record) on her way to the Finals. Her one loss in the round robin was to top seed, Crystal Huang. She managed to win her Semifinal match over Jackie Lee 4-1. Her Finals appearance was a repeat performance against Crystal Huang — with the same result.

Crystal Huang has often been overshadowed by her strong teammates on the US Team (Gao Jun and Wang Chen). However, this year, she showed that she should be overlooked. In 2008 she represented the U.S. at both the World Championships and the Olympics and she was absolutely dominant in the Women's event— winning 28 games and losing only 6, including sweeping the Finals 4-0. She was steady and consistent, varied the pace of the ball, served well, and seemed content to allow her younger and less-experienced opponent press the pace and miss. As with her Semifinal win (4-1) over Jasna Reed, Huang seemed to win the easy points, allowing the opponent to dictate the pace of the match; but she is clearly in control and always capable of summoning something extra to win the big points.

Singles Finals: Play by Play by Larry Hodges

MEN'S FINALS: David Zhuang vs. Cheng Yinghua

How many times have these two played each other? Zhuang has won Men's Singles five times ('94, '95, '98, '00, and '06). Cheng Yinghua, who wasn't eligible until he was 38, has won the title four times ('96, '97, '99, '04).

The two are about as steady as players can be, and yet, if either gives an inch, the other promptly ends the point. There's a reason why they dominate table tennis in this country.

Cheng Yinghua took a quick 2-0 lead in game one, then quickly lost, 11-4. When Zhuang went up 4-1, it looked like a Zhuang victory. Cheng Yinghua tied it at 4-all, then at 5-6 ran off six in a row to win game two, 11-6.

Game three was one of several major turning points. How might things have turned out if Cheng Yinghua had won from up 10-7? But Zhuang played five straight brilliant points to win, 12-10.

And a suddenly dominant Zhuang wasn't done. He went up 5-0 in game four, won 11-2, and lead game five 4-0 and 7-1.

Cheng Yinghua's had been played a counter-driving game, not confident



that he could loop through David at age 50 - after all, no one else has. But then he's back spinning, over and over, mostly with his backhand, side to side until Zhuang missed or Cheng Yinghua sees an easy one to rip. From down 2-8, it's suddenly 8-all. Zhuang smashed a winner to go up 9-8, but Cheng Yinghua ripped a forehand-- his first in a while. Zhuang, knowing that he had to do something different to stop C. Y.'s relentless topspins, served and looped, then served and smashed - but missed both. With this incredible comeback, Cheng Yinghua wins game five, 11-9.

In the sixth, C. Y. went up 4-1, but in this never-ending series of twists and turns, Zhuang, then attacking, kept Cheng Yinghua more on the defensive, scored six in a row, to lead 7-4. Then he's up 9-7. Cheng looped a forehand winner, then a backhand winner, and it's 9-all. And then, anticlimactically, Cheng Yinghua blocked one into the net, and then pushes David's serve off. David won his sixth Men's Singles — more than any other U.S. player.



WOMEN'S FINALS: Crystal Huang vs. Ariel Hsing

This was the ultimate in age and experience versus youth and skill. Or perhaps that should be steadiness and variation versus a blistering backhand.

Perhaps Hsing was nervous, but Huang quickly led 6-0, 9-4 and 10-7. But three shouts of "Suh!" later, and it's 10-10.

Things might have been different if Hsing's fast and deep serves didn't go off the end at both 13-all and 14-all. But finally, after seven ads for Huang, and four ads for Hsing, Huang served long to Hsing, and she backhand looped off. Huang won the marathon, 19-17 - and it's only game one.

Because of Hsing's dominant backhand, Huang had to stay out of normal backhand rallies. One very good strategy she used over and over was to backhand loop (with her inverted reverse penhold backhand) to Hsing's wide forehand. Ariel usually tried smashing it, but the timing appeared difficult: she often missed. In general, Huang was mixing up her shots, forcing Hsing to miss.

Game two was a seemingly quick affair as Huang, from 7-all, won 11-8.



In the third, Huang lead 6-3, then 6-6, then 9-6 for Huang again. She likes to bounce the ball on the table a number of times before serving, then is stationary for a moment as she prepares to serve-- too long for the umpires. She is yellow-carded for stalling as the umpire says, "Huang, do not delay again," and she loses the next three points, 9-9. Huang goes up 10-9. She backhand looped to Hsing's forehand, and Hsing made the smash, 10-all. Hsing served a backhand kill shot, now 11-10. She tried again, but this time Huang counter-hit a winner, 11-all. Hsing served and backhand kills again-- into the net. They have another nice exchange, until Hsing missed finally, and Huang won game three, 13-11.

Game four was back and forth right up to 9-8 Huang, then 9-all after yet another Hsing backhand kill. Hsing caught Huang off guard with a serve and forehand loop kill, but Huang deuced it with net ball, 10-all. Two more deuces followed. Finally, Hsing backhand looped a serve off, and then missed an awkward forehand smash, and Huang won four straight (17,8,11,12) in a match that, somehow seemed even. Huang's win took skill and craftiness.

Photos top to bottom: Zhuang, Yinghua, Huang, Hsing (Zhuang and Yinghua photos by Steve Hopkins, Huang photo by Diego Schaaf, Hsing photo by Rob Trudell)



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JUNIOR EVENTS

By Larry Hodges

CADET TRIALS

The top four seeds in the Cadet Boys' and Cadet Girls' Team Trials were seeded out of the preliminaries: Justin Nguyen, Grant Li, Michael Landers and Alexander Yao for the boys, Anne Deng, Ariel Hsing, Lily Zhang and Erica Wang for the girls. Eight other cadet boys and cadet girls qualified through the preliminaries to make the final twelve in each event. They were placed in two groups of six, with the top two from each group playing crossovers for placement on the USA National Cadet Team.

In the Cadet Boys' event, second-seeded Charles Deng and third-seeded Brian Chen both made it to the Cadet Boys' final twelve. Deng had a tough start, losing the first game 11-6 to Jonathan Ou after leading 4-0, but won the match at -6,4,7,8. However, Andrew Chen (2130), top seed in the qualifier, was upset in the first round by Daniel Tang (1732), 5,-8,9,9. Tang, in turn, was upset by Luke Yamasaki (1859), 3,-8,6,-6,6, who made the final twelve. Fourth-seeded Austin Preiss (2026) was upset by ten-year-old all-out looper Ethan Chua (1945), 6,9,-6,-6,7.

In the Cadet Girls' event, the top four seeds in the preliminaries all advanced to the final twelve - each had a bye, since there were only twelve in the preliminaries. The other eight players battled it out for the other four positions. In the final crossovers, Anne Deng defeated Ariel Hsing (5,-5,-3,3,7), and Lily Zhang defeated Natalie Sun (6,-10,5,6). Lily Zhang then defeated Anne Deng (8,-9,6,10) in the Final.

Final Cadet Results (The Top Four are on the USA National Cadet Teams)

1. Alexander Yao (MO)
2. Michael Landers (NY)
3. Grant Li (MA)
4. Charles Deng (TX)
5. Anand Engineer (CA)
6. Tong Tong Gong (MD)
7. Luke Yamasaki (OR)
8. Ethan Chua (CA)
9. Chenda Lu (TX)
10. Kerry Xiao (CA)
11. Justin Nguyen (CA)
12. Brian Chen (CA)

1. Lily Zhang (CA)
2. Anne Deng (TX)
3. Ariel Hsing (CA)
4. Natalie Sun (CAN)
5. Charleen Hsieh (CA)
6. Annie Guo (CA)
7. Ellen Hwang (CA)
8. Erica Wu (CA)
9. Shirly Ho (TX)
10. Prachi Jha (CA)
11. Judy Yang (TX)
12. Jasmine Nguyen (CA)

JUNIOR TRIALS

The junior boys finished almost as expected. In group one, Preston Chin upset Chance Friend to finish second. The other top seeds advanced as expected. In the crossovers, the final four then finished nearly in order of rating with Timothy Wang leading the way— followed by Yahao Zhang, Peter Li, and Preston Chin.

After the Junior Girls' Final, where Lily Zhang (2229) upset Ariel Hsing (2316) at -9,7,8,-8,8, I spoke with Han Xiao, who had coached Lily in the match. He said, "At 8-8 in the fourth, Lily made a nice backhand loop, but Ariel smashed it to lead 9-8. This got in Lily's head, rattled her a bit, and got her off her game plan, and she lost the next two points. Between games, I told her not to let it bother her if Ariel makes a great shot, to stick to her game plan."

In the fifth game, Zhang led 10-6 match point, but lost the next two points, and Xiao called a timeout. "I told her she was playing too safe, to stay with her game plan." The next point, Zhang backhand looped and followed with a backhand smash to win the match.

Final Junior Results (The Top Four are on the USA National Junior Teams)

1. Timothy Wang (TX)
2. Yahao Zhang (CO)
3. Peter Li (MD)
4. Preston Chin (GA)
5. Alexander Yao (MO)
6. Chance Friend (TX)
7. Emile Goldstein (NY)
8. Amaresh Sahu (MD)
9. Stephen Clyde (IN)
10. Mark Croitoroo (NY)
11. Kevin Kuznetzow (NJ)
12. Michael Landers (NY)

1. Lily Zhang (CA)
2. Ariel Hsing (CA)
3. Erica Wu (CA)
4. Sylvan Guo (CA)
5. Olena Sowers (OH)
6. Natalie Sun (CA)
7. Annie Guo (NY)
8. Alison Wu (MA)
9. Ellen Hwang (CA)
10. Charleen Hsieh (CA)
11. Nina Zhen (MD)
12. Anne Deng (TX)

Photos: Top (this page) Lily Zhang by Diego Schaaf. Photos opposite page: Eric Owens prepares in isolation and David Zhuang (foreground) and Shou Yu (background) share a practice session. Photos opposite page by Steve Hopkins.

Eric Owens: The Doctor of Pong?

By Larry Hodges

A look at the top four seeds in Men's Singles is a nostalgic look to our past. Ilija Lupulesku, David Zhuang, Cheng Yinghua... and Eric Owens. Eric, the last U.S.-born player to win Men's Singles at the Nationals (2001) and the only one to do it since Jim Butler in 1993, is now 33 years old. Among the senior stars that take up the top players in the Men's, he's been the youth movement for about fifteen years.

Table tennis, however, is not his focus these days. Eric's halfway through his second year as a medical student. He's actually double-majoring in a six-year program for his medical degree and a master's in biochemical science at the Chicago College of Osteopathic Medicine.

"The last 18 months has been mostly coursework," Eric said. "The good news is that from now until May it's mostly labwork and my master's thesis, where I can set my schedule. So I'll be able to practice table tennis a lot more."

Want to know about Eric's thesis? Brace yourself: "Leukotactin Induces Migration and Proliferation of Fibroblast-like Synovial Cells Through Mitogen Activities Protein Kinases." Say that at your local participating McDonalds, and you get a free Big Mac. (This would be over Eric's protest; he's a vegetarian.)

It's been a long ride for Eric, from his junior days in Texas and at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, years of training in Houston and elsewhere, and many years on the U.S. Team, where he won gold and bronze at the Pan Am Games in 1999 and 2007, respectively. Now, as a full-time medical student, can he win another big one? Dr. De Tran, a medical doctor from New York, made the USA National Team a few years ago. Can Eric up this someday and win the big one again, Men's Singles?



Preparing for the Finals

By Steve Hopkins

During the hour before the Men's Singles Semifinals, I found it interesting to watch how the final four competitors prepared. As people began to enter the arena to watch the women's semifinal matches, Eric Owens isolated himself on the top row of the stands overlooking empty tables. Occasionally a friend would wander by and wish him well, but for the most part, his preparation was to remove himself from his surroundings to find his focus.

Owens' opponent in their semifinal match was Cheng Yinghua. Yinghua warmed up with one of his young students, Nathan Hsu (rating of 1962 at the time). They played soft rallies, and exchanged smiles and jokes between those rallies.

The other semifinal match-up was between Shou Yu and David Zhuang. These two are regular practice partners and on this day, they began their warm-up together. After a short time of working together, they

shared one side of the table— with each alternating playing one rally against a third player.

From my observation point, each player was reacting differently to the pressure. David Zhuang was clearly excited. He was bouncing with energy and looked as if he could barely wait for his match to begin. Unlike previous times that I had seen Zhuang during the tournament, there was no limp, there was no hint of soreness— just excited anticipation. Cheng Yinghua looked exactly like he had appeared all week— relaxed and unworried and proceeding as if it were any other day, and any other match. Eric Owens was quiet and focused and blocking out everything; and when I asked if he was ready, he responded "I have this." Shou Yu seemed a little nervous, offering a big smile both between points and even during his warm-up swings.

