

SKETCHES FROM FRANCE FOR PORTRAIT OF YOUNG CHARLES DENG; SUMMER 2009



CURRENT/HIGHEST RATING: 2470 / 2470
UNDER 14 RATING: No. 1
UNDER 16 RATING: No. 1

By Dejan Papic, Head coach of World Hopes Team 2009

French girl

That morning Charles had advanced from his round robin and passed his first knock-out match relatively easily. Now hundreds of young players were filtered to 32 and we expected some real fire. It turned out to be quite a remarkable crowd gathering to watch the table tennis matches of 12-year-old lads. These are not senior or junior tournaments where players are well known and fairly ranked through numerous previously played tournaments. When you play in this category, you never know who you are going to get to play against. So Charles was excited, his activation level was really high and every ball was played with full focus and intensity. After each set more and more people were watching Charles' table. Was it because he is playing with a French player? Maybe, but there were many other French players still on the floor and yet more and more eyes and crowd reactions were responding to his table. He won in style. It would be hard to tell whether people cheered for him, but with game progression I heard more and more different reactions from the crowd. The noise was a mix of clapping and occasional yelling "Aller". There was definitely applause. At the end of the game, while talking to him in our corner, a beautiful young French girl of similar age approached him. She gave him a handshake and said "Congratulations" while rolling the "r".

Gatien

On the last day of the tournament in France, hundreds and hundreds of young boys and girls born 1997 and 1998 from all over Europe plus 11 members of World Hopes Team showed up. We had a good and successful tournament and I walked the nice streets of the French city of Strasbourg without any table tennis worries. "Our" players (WHT) reached

the finals. Just a few hundred meters before hitting the gym I met Jean Philippe Gatien. After a few words of courtesy (after all last time we talked was more than 10 years ago, it is good that I could be recognized), he started telling me about Charles. His feedback was "Charles is a good player, he is quick, left-handed, and like me," he said. In a coach manner I said something unnecessary. I started talking about what else needs to be done; backhand still needs to be developed etc. But, I cannot believe that he said "like me" without hesitation. I've never before heard a world champion comparing himself to a 12 year old boy.

Birthday

As I was visiting players' rooms the evening before the tournament, I realized that all my boys were gathered in Charles' room. It was almost daily routine – in France the social gathering point was Charles' room, but this time it was just a few minutes before bedtime. Should I have been happy that we were building team spirit or should I have given them a lecture about proper preparation for a tournament? Just before storming in, his mom showed up and explained to me - it was Charles' birthday. He was about to turn 12 in middle of our training camp/competition in France. Five or six boys were there eating chocolate bars, and getting the last opportunity for an extra video game. Charles was already in his bed still chatting, but ready to go to sleep in a minute because of curfew.

Coaching Charles

When you coach it is difficult to know if you say too much or too little to a player; especially to a young "mini" cadet that you have only known for a month or two. There are several ways to find out if he is really listening, agreeing on a proposed way of playing, called time-outs... The easiest way would be by simple feedback, but it doesn't work that way with Charles. He would only look at me; never respond to any of my comments, no gestures, no

words, no eyes motion. Hard to pick up any signals of his opinions of what has just been spoken. Then once in a tournament in China when things looked beyond salvation, I realized that he was trying to do something that we had talked about a few days ago. Was this a coincidence or was he simply trying to find a way out in his moment of difficulty? Then, while in France, I gave him a speech about the coach-player relation during games. Some of my advice to him was – if you get advice that you don't like, don't do it. If you think you have a better solution... Well, it sounds nice and logical, but when players are involved in important, knock-out games and when things get tough they prefer to get advice and follow it.

Later, at one of the games, Charles was doing exactly as he was told-- then, suddenly, he choose a different method. It worked. But soon he was back again to following my advice. This has happened only once before. Finally, I figured out what was going on – not only was he listening to every single word, but he was able to apply it- while being critical to it- and come out smart enough to understand when being "too smart" is enough.

Charles the has ability to focus, to commit, and to be so passionate during training and games that it is both very demanding and charismatic. He is so intense that he catches the attention of everybody present in a gym.

These are some early sketches-- I can only guess when the table tennis portrait of Charles Deng will be ready. It may be ready in Rio, 2016 or even in London, three years from now. Meanwhile, he will grow up; will learn who JP Gatien truly is, understand what it means when a World Champion has to say something about himself, he will furthermore appreciate the attention of beautiful girls and celebrate his future birthdays with more noise.