

World Champs – A Familiar Ending!

Author: Russell Moore

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The world table tennis championships ended in Rotterdam last month with a familiar question. Just how does the rest of the world catch up with China?

Their domination was again complete, with the final of the men's singles and doubles, the women's singles and doubles and the mixed doubles all contested by Chinese players.

Remarkably, you now have to go back 20 years – to Peter Karlsson and Thomas von Scheele in 1991 – for the last time that any pair from outside of China were the winners of any world doubles title.

The singles record is almost as daunting. Werner Schlager in 2003 and Jan Ove Waldner in 1997 are the only non-Chinese men's champions since 1993, while only the Korean players, Pak Yung Sun and Hyun Jung-Hwa, have broken the Chinese dominance in the women's singles events over the last 40 years. Indeed, you have to go back to 1955 for the last European women's world champion.



If you accept the powerful thesis in Matthew Syed's book, *Bounce*, the success of China can be explained quite simply by the fact that they train harder, better and for longer than anyone else. The sheer size of the country and the access to table tennis clearly improves the odds of finding a champion but, above all, the gold medals are a result of relentless hard work.

Syed describes the National Centre in Beijing as "a beehive of activity, a living, breathing testament to the power of practice". He describes the scene of a different team, whether juniors or seniors, training on every floor with incredible effort.

"It is impossible to spend time in this building," concludes the triple Commonwealth champion, "without realising that the Chinese national team trains with more intensity, more devotion, and a more vivid belief in how hard work translates into medals than in any other table tennis training hall in the world".

Further anecdotal evidence backs all this up.

Jill Parker, the former European women's champion, tells of how her daughter, Katy, spent time training in Asia when she was playing professionally. "The culture is very different – very repetitive – and I'm not sure how easily the British players would stand it," she says. "My daughter Katy trained in Japan and I remember her telling me that they spent one entire day simply hitting forehand chops."

Others have described a typical training day in China. They spend at least seven hours practicing – and play six days a week.

In the mornings, there is understood to be a focus on physical training and serve and return. There is a second morning session and then an afternoon training session. Some players then play matches in the evenings. The key to the practice is its high quality and intensity. Multi-ball practice is used extensively, with players drafted in with the sole purpose of being full-time practice partners. This means that there is no taking turns while working on drills. Every minute of time, therefore, is maximised. Even more intriguing is the fact that these practice partners are often instructed to mimic the style of a top European opponent.



Duan Xiang, a member of the Chinese Technical Committee of the Chinese Table Tennis Association, said: "We have a lot of Chinese Samsonovs and Waldners. Our players play against them every day and that makes the

real match day easier." Much of the Chinese training approach is kept secret, but there are also intriguing stories about how they try to make the training as difficult as possible for even the best players in the world. One technique is apparently to use two practice partners against one player, with each patrolling one half of the table with their forehand. The effect is that suddenly even the world's greatest players are gaining valuable practice against a "better" opponent.



The Chinese system of training certainly paid off again in Rotterdam, with the European challenge generally swatted aside. Vladimir Samsanov did reach the last 16, as did three German players; Timo Boll, Dimitrij Ovtcharov and Bastian Steger. Only Boll survived this round, beating his countryman Ovtcharov.

Six of the eight quarter-finalists were Chinese, with Boll striking the one major blow for European table tennis in the quarter-finals by beating Chen Qi by four games to one.

Wang Hao, Ma Long and Zhang Jike did all progress, with Boll duly beaten 4-1 in the semi-final by Zhang. Wang was a 4-2 semi-final winner against Ma, but Zhang prevailed in the final to win his first world singles title.

In the women's singles, every remaining European player was wiped out in the round of 16, with seven Chinese and one Singaporean making up the quarter-final line-up.

Singapore's Feng Tianwei was duly dismantled 4-0 in the quarter-final, setting up an all Chinese semi-final. Ding Ning and Li Xiaoxia eventually contested the final, with Ding prevailing 4-2.

Asia were similarly dominant in the doubles, with three Chinese pairs and one from Korea contesting the men's semi-finals. Another all Chinese final was won by Ma Long and Xu Xin. There was yet another all Chinese final in the women's competition, with Guo Yue and Li Xiaoxia prevailing. Zhang Chao and Cao Zhen completed the clean sweep in the mixed doubles.

Against such a mass of Asian brilliance, the British players achieved limited success.

Paul Drinkhall, Andrew Baggaley and Gavin Rumball all did well to qualify for the first round proper of the tournament but were beaten by higher-ranked European opponents.



Indeed, arguably the most promising performance was that of Liam Pitchford, who was narrowly beaten 4-2 in first round by Japan's world number 76 Koki Niwa. In the women's singles, Kelly Sibley and Joanna Parker both also reached the first round. Parker then produced an outstanding performance against another defender, Yuka Ishigaki, the world's number 29 from Japan. The match went into expedite in the third game and, after a tussle that eventually lasted 80 minutes, Parker was narrowly beaten 15-12 in the deciding seventh game. Parker had saved four match points but also held three match points of her own. Parker and Sibley did also reach the last 64 both in the women's and mixed doubles with their respective partners of Drinkhall and Darius Knight.

By Jeremy Wilson

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