

Preview: Pro Tour Grand Finals

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Jan-Ove Waldner

The Pro Tour Grand finals will be a scintillating event. The greatest players on the planet will be there, but a particular frisson will be added by the fact that the venue is the same that will stage the Olympic Games in 2012.

There is always something special about an Olympic venue, not so much in terms of the playing conditions or the wider auditorium (although these are generally nothing less than outstanding), but because of the sense of history. No event is more central to the mythology of table tennis, despite the fact that the sport only joined the Games in 1988.

My first Olympic was in Barcelona and I well remember the unique atmosphere when I first walked into the stadium to begin my preparation for my opening match against Nicholas Chatelain from France. You instantly knew that this was a place that would not just define one's own career, but provide a new chapter in the history of the world game.

Jan-Ove Waldner, of course, won the men's singles gold in Barcelona, defeating Jean Philippe Gatien 3-0 in a superb final. The King of Sweden stood to applaud and later congratulated Waldner in his dressing room, cementing a moment of significance not merely to Swedish table tennis, but to Sweden. The Olympics is an event that transcends sport.

And that is why the top players will be determined to gain as much information as possible at the Pro Tour Grand Finals. They will be hoping to get used to the lighting, the flooring, and the idiosyncrasies of the backdrop. They will be getting a feel for the catering, the quickest walk from the transport drop-off to the player's entrance, and other small but key issues. And they will also be looking to find an area away from prying eyes where they can prepare for their matches.

At every venue I have ever played, I have found a place like this; a small, quiet space, in which to conduct my mental preparation in those last, crucial moments before competition. At the Olympic Games in Barcelona it was a small dressing room rarely used by other competitors; at the European Championships in Birmingham it was a roped-off area above the arena, away from the hubbub; at the Super Circuit in Tokyo it was tiny space just behind the cafe on the top floor.

Sometimes I would discover the perfect spot only to find it had been commandeered already. I once stumbled upon Zoran Primorac, the Croatian table tennis legend, in a tiny dressing room at the Swedish Open, dancing from foot to foot, his eyes closed, mouthing words to himself. On another occasion I snuck into a rarely used VIP area and bumped into Trinko Keen, the Dutch champion, sitting on the floor, his head in his hands, his mind so deep in concentration he didn't even hear my approach. A quick whispered apology and I left in search of a quiet place of my own.

These are the little things that so often make the difference between victory and defeat. And these are the minutiae that the players will be gain from the Pro Tour finals. The player who wins in November will not be a nailed on certainty for next summer, but they will get a massive boost in confidence. The Pro Tour finals have always been a major event, but this year it has added and very special significance.

By Matthew Syed

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