A brief history of the Grand Finals

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Record Grand Finals winners Wang Liqin and Zhang Yining (Photos courtesy of ITTF)

Former Champions Once Again Striving to be Centre Stage at the Grand Finals

Open international tournaments were ailing; an injection was needed, the serum was the ITTF Pro Tour, with the English market town of Kettering the start of a whole new era in early 1996.

Immediately China made an impact; Kong Linghui, the reigning World champion at the time, won the Men's Singles event with compatriot Yang Ying securing the counterpart female title. At the end of the year the leading names gathered in the Tianjin, just north of Beijing, for the first ever ITTF Pro Tour Grand Finals.

One name above all was welcomed in the city, the player for whom the Chinese had the utmost respect, in many eyes the greatest of them all; everyone travelled from the hotel to the venue by bus but for Jan-Ove Waldner there was a special car. Such was the reverence in which the legendary Swede was held.

Alas, the faithful only had a brief glimpse of the star man, he was beaten in the first round by the somewhat unpredictable Xiong Ke; ironically, victory by a host nation player was only partially welcomed, everyone wanted to see Jan-Ove Waldner exercise his mercurial skills.

However, at that tournament in Tiajin; one legend asserted herself and new stars emerged.

Deng Yaping won the Women's Singles title on her one and only appearance in the ITTF Pro Tour Grand Finals and in the Men's Singles final, Kong Linghui beat Vladimir Samsonov.

A legend was ready to bid farewell and two young men were asserting themselves on the global scene but there was on other player to announce his arrival, a player who will be on duty in the Excel Arena in the 16th edition of the prestigious annual event; the world had set eyes on Wang Liqin.

In Tianjin he was present in the Men's Doubles event; he partnered Yan Sen, the player with whom he was to win Olympic and World titles; in the final, the duo tore Jörg Rosskopf and Vladimir Samsonov to shreds. Zlatko Cordas, the German men's national team coach sat in awe, disbelief at the incredible level of doubles play that had unfolded before his eyes.

It was the start for the player, who 15 years later, has the record of being the most successful player of all at the ITTF Pro Tour Grand Finals.

He is the only player to have won the Men's Singles title at the prestigious annual event three times; after losing to Vladimir Samsonov in the final in Hong Kong in 1997, he won the following year in Paris, in 2000 in the Japanese city of Kobe and in 2004 in Beijing.

Furthermore, the man born in Shanghai, who had partnered Yan Sen to victory in the inaugural Grand Finals, won again with Yan Sen in 1998 and in 2000; whilst more recently he succeeded in 2007 with Chen Qi.

It is an amazing record and it leaves his colleagues in silver medal position.

Next in line to Wang Liqin in terms of Men's Singles success at the Grand Finals are his compatriots Ma Lin, Ma Long and Wang Hao; each has won twice.

All are present for the 2011 event, as are two other previous winners, the defending champion Japan's Jun Mizutani and Chinese Taipei's Chuang Chih-Yuan; the latter a player with his own special place in the annals of the ITTF Pro Tour Grand Finals. He won at the Grand Finals in Stockholm in 2002 before he ever won a Men's Singles title at an ITTF Pro Tour tournament!

Meanwhile for the ladies, four previous Women's Singles winners will be on duty in 2011 with, as in the men, China very much to the fore.

Guo Yan, who succeeded on both occasions that the event was held in Macao, in 2008 and in early 2010, is on duty as is Li Xiaoxia, the winner in 2007 in Beijing and Guo Yue who succeeded in the same city in 2004.

Also present will be Singapore's Feng Tianwei, the reigning champion, who will be forever remembered for beating Ding Ning and Liu Shiwen in the final of the 2010 Liebherr World Team Championships in Moscow, when Singapore sensationally defeated China in the final.

Previous successes for four players present in the ExCel Arena but all trail the most successful of all, Zhang Yining and Wang Nan.

During an illustrious career, Zhang Yining won the Women's Singles title at the ITTF Pro Tour Grand Finals on no less than four occasions; she won in 2000 in Kobe, two years later in Stockholm and then in consecutive years, when she succeeded in Fuzhou in 2005 and in Hong Kong in 2006.

Meanwhile, Wang Nan won only twice, for most mortals twice is outstanding but for Wang Nan perhaps more might have been anticipated; she won in 1998 in Paris and in 2001 in Hainan.

However, match her two wins with her doubles record and it puts her amongst the elite. She won the Women's Doubles title on no less than five occasions; in consecutive years – 1997, 1998, 1999 – with Li Ju and in 2004 and 2006 in harness with Zhang Yining.

Both Wang Nan and Zhang Yining have now retired from the international scene but in the ExCel Arena, the most successful Women's Doubles partnership of the modern era is present.

Winners of the Women's Doubles title at the H.I.S. World Championships in Yokohama in 2009 and earlier this year successfully defending that title at the GAC GROUP 2011 World Championships, Guo Yue and Li Xiaoxia head the seeding.

In 2011, Guo Yue has won with a variety of partners on all nine occasions she has appeared on the ITTF Pro Tour; furthermore, she has won on her last 15 appearances in Women's Doubles events on the ITTF Pro Tour.

The last time she lost and the last time the partnership of Guo Yue and Li Xiaoxia lost a Women's Doubles match was on Sunday 14th September 2008! They were beaten in the final of the Panasonic China Open in Shanghai by Hong Kong's Jiang Huajun and Tie Yana; like Guo Yue and Li Xiaoxia, Jiang Huajun and Tie Yana are on duty at the 2011 ITTF Pro Tour Grand Finals.

Four years ago in 2007, Guo Yue and Li Xiaoxia won the Women's Doubles title but one year ago in Seoul, it was the Korean defenders Kim Kyung Ah and Park Mi Young who struck gold; alas, in 2011 they have not qualified for the Grand Finals.

However, in the Men's Doubles event, the champions of one year ago, Hong Kong's Jiang Tianyi and Tang Peng will be present.

Therefore all four events – Men's Singles, Women's Singles, Men's Doubles, Women's Doubles – see past Grand Finals winners in action but that is not the case in the Under 21 events.

No players present in either the Under 21 Men's or Under 21 Women's Singles events have ever previously won a Grand Finals title.

Nevertheless, there is a plethora of talent on view; notably there is Korea's Kim Min Seok and Japan's Kasumi Ishikawa at the top of the list.

Both have proved themselves on the ITTF Pro Tour in 2011, both beat former Grand Finals champions! Kim Min Seok accounted for Vladimir Samsonov at the Harmony China Open in August and Kasumi Ishikawa has a particular liking for England. At the English Open in January, she beat Guo Yue.

Welcome back to England for Kasumi Ishikawa, welcome to the best players in the world, welcome to past champion and welcome the ExCel Arena, the venue for ITTF Pro Tour Grand Finals and in 2012, the home for biggest stage of all, the Olympic Games.

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