

2012 Looms Nearer

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Reigning Olympic Champion Ma Lin

By Matthew Syed

The Olympic Games in London loom ever nearer. Since the bid was won, time has flown by and now athletes around the world, and table tennis players in particular, are preparing with greater intensity than ever for the greatest show on earth.

Table tennis joined the Olympics in 1988 in Seoul and, at the time, most players regarded it as inferior to the World Championships. That was understandable, perhaps, given the long and cherished history of the Worlds and the great players who had featured as winners down the years.

But by the time of Jan-Ove Waldner's victory in Barcelona in 1992, this had all changed. The Olympic event was now the premier in world table tennis, and the one most coveted by the players. Waldner was feted by the Swedish royal family after his victory and proclaimed as a transcendental hero back in his homeland. His elevation was not lost on his fellow players around the world and the status of the Olympics has only grown in recent years, particularly in Beijing in 2008 when table tennis took centre stage in China.



1992 Olympic Champion and all time great Jan-Ove Waldner

On the men's side, the Games have often provided surprise winners. Yoo Nam Kyu took the inaugural event in Seoul with an awesome display of power top-spinning, his footwork seeming to do defy geometry. Waldner's victory in 1992 was less surprising, although the manner of it was remarkable. His demolition of the field was, to most observers, the most stunning exhibition of table tennis yet seen, a performance only bettered by his triumph at the World Championships in Manchester in 1997.

In 1996, the wonderful Liu Gaoling captured the title and was succeeded by compatriot Kong Lingui in Sydney in 2000 to make it two in a row for China. 2004 produced, perhaps, the most memorable match of all at any Olympics, and certainly the most emotional one. Waldner, rolling back the years, defeated Ma Lin in the last 16 to send shivers down the spine of a capacity audience at the Galatsi Hall on the outskirts of the Greek capital. It was a feat that, in many ways, defined the Athens Olympics, even if Ryun Sung Min won the title (defeating Waldner in the semi-finals).

I must confess that, although the Olympics in Beijing were memorable for all sorts of reasons, the domination by China in all four events (men's and women's singles and team events) deprived the competition of the requisite level of tension that is vital to stir the emotions. Ma Lin was a worthy winner in the men's singles, particularly given his many near-misses in the World Championships, but by that stage the Chinese national anthem – although a wonderful and rousing piece of music – had become all too monotonous.

The sport, to that extent, misses Waldner. The table tennis world, and not just the Swedes, miss his virtuosity, perhaps in the same way that boxing mourned the culmination of the career of Muhammad Ali in the early 1980s. Waldner not only struck fear into the Chinese, creating narrative tension in all the events he played, but he also provided an artistry all too rare in sport, and not just in table tennis. Without wanting to sound pessimistic, I wonder whether we shall see his like again.



Timo Boll, Europe's number 1

There are other quality Europeans, of course, but it is difficult to credibly assert that they compare with the current crop of Chinese. And this does not bode well for 2012, unless something dramatic happens between now

and then. An acceleration in form from Timo Boll or a dramatic maturing of Michael Maze is just what table tennis needs in order to create the possibility of an upset or two in 2012.



Can England rise to the occasion?

We may also hope for some further improvement from the England players, principally Paul Drinkhall. No player from these shores has got close to winning an Olympic medal, but, in the case of Drinkhall, we may dare to hope for such an accolade providing he can discover rather more nuance and strategy to go with his prodigious power and fizz.

But, whatever happens, the Olympics are not to be missed. It is the biggest event in table tennis, and the biggest festival in sport. There will be drama and substance and superlative quality. The countdown continues.

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