

**EVERGRANDE REAL ESTATE WORLD TEAM TABLE TENNIS  
CHAMPIONSHIPS • Guangzhou, China – February 24 – March 3, 2008.**

**WORLD TEAM CHAMPIONSHIPS – WOMEN**

The Canadian Women's team went into the competition with the goal to qualify for the first division. It would take a solid team effort – but the goal was definitely achievable. Two years ago, at the last World Team Championships, Canada finished 32<sup>nd</sup>, albeit with a different team.

Two weeks prior to the Championships in Guangzhou, the news was not good. Zhang Mo, Canada's #1 suffered from a tendonitis in her playing arm and could not participate in the final preparation camp. Much had been expected from Mo, since she had some good results in the Germany's professional league and the reports from the center coaches in Düsseldorf were that she was working very hard in training. The rest of the women's team prepared for the Championships in Taipei. Taipei proved a gracious host and the team enjoyed wonderful hospitality and excellent training.

**Preliminary Group matches:**

Match 1 pitted Canada against **New Zealand**, a dangerous team with the experienced Karen Li and a new player, Sun Yang, of whom we did not know very much. The draw put our team in a precarious position from which the team would not recover. New Zealand gambled, putting their #3 in position B. This meant that Sara Yuen had to win against Sun Yang in the absence of a stellar performance from Mo, or Judy Long. Judy played well against Karen Li, but could not find a winning strategy – the match ended 11-9, 12-10 and 14-12 for Li. Mo had a clear win over Jenny Hung but could not play up to her usual level and lost to Karen Li. Sara put in a brave effort but lost against the more experienced Sun Yang:

**New Zealand 3 – Canada 1**

In Round 2, the team, now with Chris Xu replacing Sara, cruised to a **3-0** win over **Belgium**. Judy Long prepared the way for victory over **Israel** in Round 3, with a convincing 3-1 win over the always dangerous Marina Kravchenko, Mo and Chris followed suit:

**Canada 3 – Israel 0.**

Against **Slovakia**, the Canadian team started well with Mo winning against Barbora Balazova in a well-fought match. The key match would be Judy's match against Eva Odorova. Judy jumped ahead to a two-nil lead but was unable to finish in the same fashion any of the following three games: Canada 1 – Slovakia 1. Chris found no winning tactics against Lenka Kmotorkova and the match began to slip away. Odorova closed out the match against Mo with a 3-1 win:

**Slovakia 3 – Canada 1**

In the final match, with Sara in position 3, the Canadians swept **Chile** by a score of 3-0.

Because of the 3<sup>rd</sup> place finish at the group stage, the first round of the knock-out stage would be difficult – draw: **Malaysia**.

Mo opened the match with a convincing 3-1 win over Ng Sock Kim; Judy matched Mo defeating Beh Lee Wei by the same score. Coach Wang Enlong called again on Sara for the third position. Sara put in a good fight against Chiu Soo Jin, but her nerves would not allow her to win the match. The Malaysian prevailed by a score of 3-2.

Next up Mo who had problems finding her form throughout the tournament. Against Beh Lee Wei, she started well and was up 2-0 – it looked like a quick finish. But, the experienced Beh had a different agenda and took the next three games – the match was tied Canada 2 – Malaysia 2. Judy's good performance against Ng 'sealed the deal' for the Canadians:

**Canada 3 – Malaysia 2.**

**Lithuania**, group winner in the preliminary round, would be up next. Judy and Mo put in good performances leading the team to a **3-1** win with Chris losing the only point.

**England**, who had overcome Luxemburg by a score of 3-2, was the final hurdle to move up into the first division. Judy started the match against Joanna Parker, a defensive player, by winning game 1 11-9. The tenacious and spirited Parker turned things around and took a 2-1 lead 11-8, 11-9. However, Judy came up with her best and most spirited table tennis of the tournament and ended the contest in her favor – 11-7, 11-8. - an important win to start.

That trouble was on the horizon became evident when Mo could not find her form against Kelly Sibley, an aggressive topspin player against whom Mo should not have any problem. However, unfocused and error-prone Mo lost without much of a chance by a score of 3-1.

Sara did her duty in the third match, allowing only 14 points for Kelly Vickers, winning 3-0.

Now Canada needed only one match and the goal to move up into the first division would be achieved. Mo had played Parker a couple of times recently and won. Game 1 went according to form, Mo 11 – Parker 2; game 2 also went in the Canadians favor, 11-7. Inexplicably, in game 3, Mo started to play cautiously, with Parker finding her groove, 11-7 for the English woman. Surely, this was just a fluke, since Mo got off to a good start, taking a 9-4 lead – now only 2 points separated the team from the 1<sup>st</sup> division. Suddenly, Mo caved in to her own nerves and started pushing the ball rather than attacking; point for point Parker used her own attack and evened the score to 9-9. Mo went ahead 10-9 – match point for Canada. But it was not to be; a lucky ball and Parker evened the score, then 2 more and it was 2-2. Game 5 was not much of a contest and Parker took it at 11-7.

Now, Canada and England are tied at 2-2.

The final match was a 3-0 occasion for Kelly Sibley, albeit a close one. After losing game 1 without much of a chance, Judy regrouped and kept the game open, losing 11-9. In the last game, Judy was in fine form, giving everything, but with some unlucky breaks she lost 20-18.

In closing, the English team deserved the win; they appeared more spirited, fought better and showed better discipline. On the Canadian side, ironically it was Mo – our best player – who could not hold up her end of the bargain.

The final match against Serbia for position 27 or 28 went 3-0 to Serbia.

Some questions will need answers: how can Mo's injury problems be addressed; why did the Canadian team not show the same spirit as their opponents (Judy excluded); what are the needed improvements to perform better two years hence?

The team still has a chance to qualify for the first division for 2010, provided each player improves considerably on the World Ranking. The work on this goal starts now ...

## **WORLD TEAM CHAMPIONSHIPS – MEN**

The men's goal was also to move up, but the likelihood of success was certainly more difficult – North Korea would be the main hurdle - only a week later the North Koreans competed at par with the best Asian athletes claiming 3 out of 8 Asian Olympic qualifiers. But there were also the German Bundesliga pros representing Portugal and the young English team with two of the highest world ranked juniors – Paul Drinkhall and Darius Knight, and, Brazil, Ukraine, Nigeria, Turkey, Bulgaria – all strong teams that would prove a test to the Canadian team, a mixture of experience and youth.

Much would depend on Wilson Zhang – could he be the leader Johnny Huang was in the past? We had not seen Wilson, since he started his professional career in the Spanish Super League where he had some very good results.

### **GROUP PLAY**

Looking at the draw, Canada had a tough group, with no 'weak' team – but then there were not many 'weak' teams in Division 2. Bulgaria would be up first, a country with a strong table tennis tradition. Canada started nervously: Pradeeban Peter-Paul took a quick 2-0 lead against Teodor Yordanov only to lose the match 14-12 in the fifth.

Wilson Zhang found himself down 2-0 against the talented Konstantin Parapanov – the team was in trouble. However, Wilson fought his way back into the match. Closing out the fifth game comfortably at 11-2.

A solid performance from Pierre-Luc Hinse put Canada up 2-1, allowing Wilson to close out the match with a 3-0 over Yordanov.

### **Canada 3 – Bulgaria 1**

**Australia** was up next, a spirited team led by William Henzell who plays a style not unlike Werner Schlager – composed, risky, athletic, experienced and smart. Shen Qiang started for Canada against Henzell, but Shen was not yet at his best. Shen had a number of chances, but had to let them pass – Henzell won 3-1.

Wilson put away David Zalberg 3-0, and Pradeeban did the same to Trent Carter (ITTF World Junior Circuit champion in Venezuela).

Wilson then closed out the match winning against Henzell 3-0:

### **Canada 3 – Australia 1.**

Two solid wins would set the stage against **England**. The English juniors have had some impressive results on the ITTF Pro Tour and would be a formidable opponent. Shen opened the match against Paul Drinkhall; last summer Shen won against Drinkhall in Montreal; this time the Englishman was set on revenge. After dropping the opening game 8-11, Drinkhall was the more consistent player and put England ahead with a 3-1 win.

The next match – like every match in this encounter – would be crucial. Game 1: Darius Knight 11 – Wilson 3. But Wilson replied with three straight games in his favor and evened the score.

Daniel Reed jumped ahead to a 2-0 lead over Pradeeban, before the Canadian seemed to have found his way, evening the score with 11-3, 11-7 game wins. Game 5 would prove to be a nail-biter. Pradee, down 8-10, never gave up and rescued the match with a 12-10 win, putting Canada ahead 2-1.

The respite was short. Drinkhall made short work of Wilson who clearly could not find his high gear: Canada 2 – England 2.

The final match would pit Shen against Knight. Shen had never won against the English youngster after his change to smooth rubber on the backhand. But at 11-1 for Shen in game 1 no one remembered that little detail, or did someone? The game was certainly not over for Knight who took the next two games at 11-4, 11-9. Then, with both players in fine form, a lively crowd was treated to some outstanding table tennis. One could hear the ooohs and aaahs in the crowd, the spectators expressing their amazement at the talent of the two athletes. While the match was close to the end – both games ended at 11-8 – Shen seemed a step ahead. The head stayed together, some near unbelievable shot making and a good spirit brought home the two games. Shen closed out the game for Canada with a 3-2 win; **Canada** also prevailed **3-2** over **England**.

With the three wins, Canada would advance from the group – the question was in which position. Next up Nigeria, an experienced team, that could spell trouble for our squad. Nigeria had lost to England 3-1; but the different playing style of the Nigerians presented a challenge for the Canadians.

Shen lost the opener to Segun Toriola by the closest of margins, an early turn in favor of Nigeria in the match. Wilson evened the score against Kazeem Nosiru with a clean 3-0. Then, Pradee had to pick this match to not find his best form. The experienced, ‘soft handed’ Monday Merotohun, outblocked Pradeeban in a close contest. 2-1 Nigeria.

Toriola closed the door for the Canadians by defeating Wilson who could not find a way against the barrage of aggressive spins of the Nigerian.

**Nigeria 3 – Canada 1.**

Canada, England and Nigeria were all tied for first at this point – Canada faced Israel, Nigeria vs Australia and England vs Bulgaria.

The Canadians made short work of Israel and were now condemned to awaiting the match outcomes of Nigeria and England to learn their place in the group. A first place would guarantee a higher placing and theoretically a ‘weaker’ opponent.

Both matches went down to the wire, with Nigeria winning over Australia and England over Bulgaria, both by a score of 3-2. Due to the tie-breaking rules, Canada ended up 3<sup>rd</sup> in the group facing Slovenia to move up into the top 32.

### **KNOCK-OUT ROUND:**

Against **Slovenia**, Shen opened with 3-2 (11-9) win against Mitja Horvath. Wilson was next against the tall defender Sas Lasan. Lasan who plays long pips – mostly on the forehand – gave a lot of trouble to Wilson and surprisingly defeated him 3-2.

In a nervous match Pradee disposed of Bojan Roposa, despite the vocal support of the Slovenian fans. Wilson did his duty and left Horvat no chance and Canada was through to face Portugal.

**Portugal** had surprised North Korea in the group stage, defeating the Asian power 3-2.

The key to a chance at beating Portugal would be for Wilson to find his groove. Tiago Apolonia was his first opponent, and Wilson had a good start: 11-9 in game 1. Then some unfortunate exchanges put Apolonia 2-1 ahead. A brave fight led Wilson to 10-10 in the fourth game, 11-11, 11-13: **Portugal 1 – Canada 0**.

Pradeeban was up next against Joao Monteiro who had just soared to new heights in the ITTF Pro Tour winning against Werner Schlager, Lucjan Blaszyk and Chiu Yan Leung to reach the podium at the Slovenian Open.

Monteiro a lefty with touch and experience to give away dominated game 1 (11-5). But Pradeeban does not give up – 10-10 in the second, but still 12-10 for Monteiro. Then Pradee seems to find an answer against the wily Portuguese and wins the third 11-5. However, Monteiro has another ace up his sleeve running out game 4 and making it 2-0 Portugal.

Unfortunately, Shen does not find any answers against the Bundesliga experience of Marcos Freitas and Canada loses 3-0. The result betrays the competition in this tie, but the Canadians must admit defeat.

Now the difficult matches start: the team can no longer go up and must now play for position. Some players do not like to play these matches, since the tension, the adrenalin of pursuing a goal is gone. In the next match the team faced Brazil, without Wilson – a re-match of the PANAM Games semi-finals, with the same result **Brazil 3 – Canada 1** (Pradeeban wins against Tsuboi.)

The final match of the tournament pits **Canada** against **Turkey** – again Canada plays without Wilson and defeats Turkey by a score of 3-0. This seals the 31<sup>st</sup> position for Canada – 11 places higher than 2 years ago in Germany.

Generally this marks a positive development; in Germany we had Johnny Huang and Bence Csaba to lead the team.

Wilson has not proven to be the leader Johnny used to be. More matches on the international scene and in one of Europe's top leagues may change this; Shen has shown good progress, but there is still ample room of improvement; Pierre-Luc put in a reasonable performance, but more international competition and more self-confidence will make the difference for him; last but not least, Pradeeban put in a decent performance; as with the others more international competition will add to his level of play.

As with the women's team, an improvement on the ITTF World Ranking may yet secure a place in the first division for 2010.

But now the focus of the athletes is on the Olympics – first the qualification in Vancouver, then on to the Games in Beijing!

*Report prepared by Tony Kiesenhofer*