

The Perfect Year:

Yong Xiang “David” Zhuang — 2008 Olympian, National Champion, and Male Athlete of the Year

by Steve Hopkins

David Zhuang’s celebration began before the final ball stopped rolling. He first planted both feet to shift his momentum— then running almost full speed with mouth wide open and hands in clenched fists, he crossed the length of the court to where his wife was waiting. He grabbed her, lifted her up, and raised both of his arms as she held his waist— family and friends rushed to join the celebration.

Those who haven’t heard of David Zhuang probably haven’t been following American table tennis over the last two decades. Since moving to the United States from China in 1990, he has been a permanent fixture near the top of the national rankings. In the ’90s he won four Men’s National Championships. He became a citizen in ’96 and represented the U.S. in the Olympics that year and again in 2000. In 2003, Zhuang was inducted into the USA Table Tennis Hall of Fame and many wrongly assumed his best days were behind him. Then, in 2006, at age 43, Zhuang claimed his fifth National Championship; tying with Dan Seemiller and Sean O’Neill as the only players with five Men’s Singles titles.

In 2007, he was not able to defend his title (losing in the semifinal to Mark Hazinski). However, 2008 proved to be a very different year with dominant performances at the both the U.S. and North American Olympic Trials.

He followed that by representing the United States at the World Team Championships and then the Olympics and ultimately finished the

“I am now the only one with six. I don’t think seven or eight would be as big either.”

year by becoming the first and only person to win a sixth Men’s National Singles title. To Zhuang, winning this sixth title was different from winning his fifth— and, he says, different from winning his seventh or eighth if he is fortunate enough to do it again. This was the victory that broke the record. On the final Sunday of the tournament,

he was tied with two other players (Seemiller and O’Neil) each holding five titles. But, by the end of the day, he was all alone at the top of the record book.

Zhuang said that defeating Cheng Yinghua gave the match greater significance. He spoke highly of Yinghua noting, “he plays me very well.” Zhuang also mentioned how Cheng Yinghua made adjustments and changed strategies at different points during the match. These two have played so many times that they each know the other’s game and sometimes use mental tactics against one another. Cheng is known for the stare — focusing directly on his opponent before and after points. Zhuang says that when you make a great shot, Cheng looks at you as if to say, “you can’t make that shot.” Zhuang also said that when he is playing well, he sends messages too — relaying that he is confident and that things are going his way. In stark contrast to Cheng’s quiet tactics, Zhuang’s displays of confidence are generally loud and vocal. During the finals, those displays of confidence echoed through the playing hall.

A PERFECT YEAR

When David Zhuang begins to reflect back on 2008, some things come to mind. Like when he arrived at the Olympic venue for his match, he was surprised to find that he had been placed on table one, the center court table that was to be televised all over the world. He considers it to be a great honor. Zhuang has great respect for his opponent in that match, Segun Toriola. His initial goal was merely to avoid an embarrassing loss,



but he started strong and found himself in a match he soon believed he could win. (In 2003, Zhuang defeated Toriola at another tournament.) “When I first began, I was hoping not to lose too bad. Then I won the first game. And then it was 2-1 me. And then 3-2 me.”

“When I first began, I was hoping not to lose too bad. Then I won the first game. And then it was 2-1 me. And then 3-2 me.”

At that moment, the last of the other matches concluded and all of the attention in the stadium turned towards table one. Some of the audience began chanting and calling to Zhuang. Some yelled “welcome home” and others called his Chinese name. Zhuang was shocked by the warm reception. It affected him almost to the point of tears. He was especially surprised because he was from Southern China, not from the region near Beijing.

Zhuang felt that he chose the right strategy, played well, and executed well. It was a close match, but in the end, Toriola advanced. Zhuang cautions, “Sometimes a crowd that is involved in the match can make you too aggressive or make you too passive. It can affect you.”

“In sport there is no country. It is like an American basketball player that spends two years playing for New York and then goes to play for Los Angeles. If you like that player, you will follow him as a player even though he is on a different team.”

In interviews both before and after the Olympics, Zhuang has been asked what it was like to be a Chinese-American representing the U.S. at an Olympics in China. His answer is that he is both Chinese and American. He explains, “In sport there is no country. It is like an

American basketball player that spends two years playing for New York and then goes to play for Los Angeles. If you like that player, you will follow him as a player even though he is on a different team. I was very proud to play at an Olympics in China. And I was very proud to represent a great country— the United States.”

In Zhuang’s opinion, 2008 saw the greatest Olympic Games ever. Even if China were to host the Olympics again, it will never be as big or as important as the first time the Olympics were held in that country.

When asked to look back on earlier events of 2008, Zhuang is reminded of controversy at the National Championship, and how the late withdrawal of top seed Ilija Lupulesku highlighted the team selection process. Because only the top three players are selected for the National Team, the draw is very important. Zhuang noted that without Lupulesku, the draw was not balanced; and this wasn’t just the National Championship, it served the dual purpose of the US National Team Trials as well. Ultimately, the decision was made not to adjust the draw.

Zhuang believes that the Team Trial should be separated from the National Championship. The current combined format forces players to play in a round robin — sometimes playing too many matches in one day. “We have to play six people in one day. Internationally, no one plays that much. And we aren’t professional players who are playing that much or in that kind of shape. It is too much.” Zhuang prefers the idea of a format that would allow players to choose if they wanted to participate in the Team Trial, or the National Championship, or both.

There are two schools of thought in choosing a National Team: choosing those that play best in a trial or choosing younger players who could benefit from more international experience and who might make the team stronger in the future. Zhuang likes the current system. “Survival of the fittest — that is the American way. That is why I am in America. Anyone can compete and those who play the best make the team, regardless of age or anything else.”

Before this interview ended, Zhuang shared some thoughts on the future of



“Survival of the fittest — that is the American Way. That is why I am in America. Anyone can compete and those who play the best make the team, regardless of age or anything else.”

table tennis in America. He cited the NBA and the fact that it is successful because of marketing and money. He says that unless we build a system that can market and that has enough money to pay players, creating a fan base, the future will look very much like what we have now. Further, all-star events with large prizes aren’t the answer as it just brings international players here for a short time who take the available prize money and then go away.

“This year could be a huge year — a perfect year”

Right before the tournament began in December, Zhuang was speaking to his wife and said, “This year could be a huge year— a perfect year”. He’d been having a year like no other; finished first at the US Team Trials, qualified for the Olympics at the North American Trials, represented the United States at the World Championships, played in the Olympics in a U.S. televised match, was declared USATT Man of the Year, and had a chance to break the record for the most national titles for any man in American history. After a strong showing in Las Vegas, defeating Cheng Yinghua 4-2 in the Final, Zhuang’s perfect year came to a close.

As Zhuang moves into a new year, he continues to practice and coach. He indicated that he doesn’t practice like he used to — opting to focus on physical training in the gym instead of many hours at the table. He continues to coach at the Westfield Club in New Jersey and describes his focus as being 80% on his students and only 20% on his own game. How does Zhuang describe 2008? As “A year I’ll remember for the rest of my life”.