

Our Man Opposes the Experts Seeking a Winner on the Table-Top

by Herb Zurkowsky, *The Gazette*, Montreal, February 28, 1979

Herb Zurkowsky had the inspiration of covering the second Canadian Open championships by playing in the tournament himself. He encountered the Champ's kid brother, plus a few other surprises.



Lou Marinoff repeated as Canadian champion

The major knock against some sportswriters is that while they write a good game, they can't play a good game. Not me, though. I was determined to prove to the Montreal populace that I'm not only a great writer but also a fine athlete. (Editor's note: There is no unanimity on the first point).

Now how could I accomplish this? Bash heads with Gordie Judges? Deposit some lightning slapshots behind Ken Dryden? Strike out Warren Cromartie? Too simple.

Instead, I decided to go into serious training for perhaps the most exciting, physical, strenuous, nerve-wracking game around--table hockey. More specifically, I entered the second annual Canadian table hockey championships.

It was not enough to eat and sleep properly, or forego my occasional jaunts to the local tavern.

A Somebody

I wanted to find out what makes up the essence of a table hockey champion. After all, I can always remember my mother saying that she wanted me to be a somebody. I turned to Lou Marinoff, a 27-year-old musician and the defending Canadian champion.

Marinoff, like most other table-hockey connoisseurs, began playing in his basement, eventually graduating to the Cartierville Table Hockey League, the top league in Montreal and one of the leading circuits in North America.

"Hand-eye coordination is important," he explained. "You need a brain to tell your hands what to do." Last time I checked I had a brain. And I don't remember my hands ever coming in for a great deal of criticism. So far so good.

"You have to be very quick, and the only way is with practice," Marinoff added. Now I knew I was in trouble. I hadn't played in eight years. Oh well, once you learn how to ride a bicycle . . .

I approached Ron Marsik, the American title holder, for more advice. Marsik, from Chicago, spent \$200 to fly in for the tournament. "You need luck," the 24-year-old said. "You have to make your own breaks by controlling the puck. You have to be patient and concentrate," he continued. "The fingers and hand movement play an important part. And you have to control your temper. If someone scores a cheap goal, forget about it and keep playing."

No trouble again. Nobody was going to score any cheap goals on me. They would have to work for everything. Finally I turned to Mike Clarke, organizer of the championships and founder of the Cartierville league.

Good fingertips

"Familiarity with the set you're playing on is important," he said. And you need good fingertips." The trophy was as good as mine.

I headed out on a Saturday morning for the downtown YMCA at the ungodly hour of 9:30. My first game was at 10.

Four Stanley Cup Playoff games were waiting as players killed time to the opening faces.

Many of the 25 entrants wore Cartierville black-and-gold sweaters. Others wore Boston Bruin or Montreal Canadien sweaters, figuring it might improve their performances.

Wore neither

I wore neither. I needed no help.

For the first round, I was put in Division 3 with Paul Matthews, Steve Webster, Sid Marinoff (Lou's brother) and Zach Pierce, a Torontonion who never showed up. We played everybody in our division twice. That was eight games, two of which I'd already won by default thanks to Pierce. Games were five minutes long. Three players from each division would advance to the following round.

Candy from a baby.

Matthews was my first opponent. Well, maybe I was a little over-confident. My unfamiliarity with the set killed me. I ruined many excellent scoring chances when I couldn't find my centre, the player in front of the opponent's net. I did play a great defensive game though. I had little choice; I hardly touched the puck.

Put one in

Matthews put one past me halfway through the contest. It was the only goal scored. I drew Webster next. He scored in the first minute. I was still having trouble locating my men on the game and my hesitancy was my major downfall. These guys were a lot faster than I expected.

Lou Marinoff, referee in the first round, announced three minutes were left in the game. I had to score. "Two minutes," Lou yelled.

First point

The fact that his wife Gail, a stunning blonde, was stationed to my right wasn't helping my concentration.

"One minute." I let go a long shot from the blue line. It went in! Webster couldn't believe it! Hell, I couldn't believe it! I had my first point and had found my groove.

It seemed like a good time to get back in touch with Clarke.

A 29-year-old computer programmer, Clarke started the Cartierville league 13 years ago to get table hockey players "out of the closet." Each league member palys a 108-game schedule, facing every opponent 12 times.

"We formalized a schedule and for years went on thinking we were the only league," explained Clarke. "Then we started hearing about other leagues and tournaments in the U.S. We started making contacts and started our own Canadian championships. And it's serious business in these championships. Entrance fee was \$25, with only the best players entering (except for me). Competition is intense and losing is not taken lightly.

You may laugh at this and you wouldn't be alone.

For years Clarke and others like him have been ostracized by those who think table hockey is a game played only by kids in basements.

Don't understand

"People think we're wierd," Clarke said. "They don't understand it at all. Those of us who play are die-hards. This is no kids' stuff."

That's for sure.

The game consists of a series of two-on-one breaks when you have the puck. Much of the game is played on the outside with the object being to get the puck from the wingers to the centre. He has the best chance of scoring.

But because of the small dimensions (the game is approximately four feet by two feet) and the speed, there is a lot of guesswork. Often you can't see the puck and can only put a man in place, hoping for the best.

"It's an easy game to play, but it's difficult to play properly," explained Clarke. "Because of its size, you have to be so accurate. Miss a pass by a quarter of an inch and it's gone."

Too fast

"Things happen too fast to think about them."

Things happened very fast in my next game against Sid Marinoff. Too bad they couldn't have happened a little quicker. In defeating me 6-0, Marinoff exhibited all of the above qualities, and then some. I couldn't have had the puck for more than 30 seconds.

Marinoff, who gave me a hint of what to expect by wearing a Canadiens sweater, also threw a new wrinkle at me--checking. That's right. Every time one of my players had the puck, one of his players would slash mine and regain control.

Pierce was next on my list so at least I had my first win, but I could hardly bask in my 1-2-1 record. But I had learned that there are a variety of styles, each as different as its proponent.

Matthews, 19, of Burlington, explained he plays a slow, controlled game, keeping the puck and making deliberate shots. "You need a cool hand," he tells me advisingly. "Once you start shaking, you're in trouble. It's not the speed or how fast you play."

But Clarke told me . . . Oh well, it doesn't really matter.

Matthews shut me out 3-0 in my next game, a bit of a disappointment since he only beat me 1-0 the first time. My record is 1-3-1 and I have to defeat Webster, who is also having his share of troubles, to advance.

"You're in a tough division," Lou Marinoff tells me.

So it all comes down to this game with Webster. All of the training, preparation and \$25 entrance fee.

I choked. Final score: Webster 4, Zurkowsky 0.

"This game is so precise and timing always comes into it," says Sid Marinoff. You have to practice for a few hours each night and you can't really expect to do much otherwise."

Two left

I only had two games left and since one was against Pierce (thank God for the absent Pierce) I was determined to somehow leave my mark. Being out of the playoffs and with no pressure on me, I decided to beat Marinoff and avenge my earlier 6-0 loss. Well, I certainly left a mark. This time Sid only beat me 5-0.

But Lou was correct. I really was in the toughest division.

Lou repeated as Canadian champion, taking Matthews three games straight in their best-of-five final.

That made me feel good. After all, I held Matthews to one goal in one of our games.

But why?

The only thing left was to figure why these grown men play table hockey, sometimes hundreds of miles from home. "I've been playing since I was 12 and have a deep love for the game," said Marsik. Matthews said exactly the same thing.

My overall record was 2-5-1. (Did I mention my love for Pierce?) Goals scored: One. Goals allowed: Twenty.

It's not the end of the world though. Just wait until next year.