

Table hockey championship demands skill

By Scott Abbott

MONTREAL — If Lou Marinoff isn't the best table hockey player in Canada, the rightful No. 1 is nowhere in sight.

Marinoff, a 28-year-old Montreal computer technician, won his third singles title in as many years in a weekend competition billed as the Canadian table hockey championships, held not at the Forum but at a west-end motel.

Larry Watson, 24, a Toronto fire insurance inspector, took Marinoff to six five-minute, stop-time games in the best-of-seven singles final. Both then figured in the doubles final Sunday.

Marinoff and partner Ron Chesick, a 28-year-old Montreal computer engineer, beat Watson and Mark Mannerling, 21, a Toronto supply distributor, in the maximum seven games in the doubles wrap-up.

The singles event drew 49 entries, 37 from Quebec province and 12 from Ontario, and 10 teams took part in doubles play.

Few Canadian boys — there were no women entered in the championships — have made it through childhood without developing at least a passing acquaintance with table hockey machines, on which two-dimensional players are moved along cut-out tracks in a waxed surface.

Low scoring affairs

But those who remember high-scoring shootouts haven't played top-level competitive table hockey. To illustrate the point, the singles final saw Watson win the first two games 3-1 and 2-1 before Marinoff reeled off four victories in a row — 2-1, 3-2 in sudden-death overtime, 3-2 and 2-1.

"I concentrate on defence," said Watson, whose approach to his brand of hockey parallels that of Scotty Bowman on a larger rink. "You can't lose if they can't score. The worst that can happen is a tie."

To prove the point, Watson and Mannerling battled to a 0-0 deadlock minutes later against Bob Tierney and Robin Boyd of Montreal in an elimination-round game.

"He just took the play away from me," Watson said of Marinoff's rally in the singles final, sounding much like any National Hockey League coach analysing a loss.

'Kept off balance'

"I controlled the play in the first two games and I might have surprised him with a few things, but he adjusted. I kept him off balance for a while with some tricky passes. He made a couple of big saves. That's table hockey."

Apart from quick reflexes, the game demands a studied approach.

"I try to analyse an opponent," said Watson, playing in his first tournament. "I think I have a wide selection of plays and I can use whatever is needed against the person I'm playing."

"But these guys are good. We don't have guys like these in Toronto."

Twelve of the singles entries came from the 16-member Montreal Table Hockey League, a 13-year-old organization known as the Cartierville Table Hockey League until this season. They get plenty of practice for tournaments, with each member playing 120 games a year before playoffs. Marinoff had won the league's regular-season and playoff titles.

"What we're trying to do is build



Lou Marinoff, left, and Ron Cheswick of Montreal combined to win the doubles title at the Canadian table championships.

up a good organization so that we can look for sponsorship from a strong foundation," said Marinoff. "If we can guarantee prize money, then it would be worthwhile for guys in Vancouver, Edmonton and Halifax to come and play."

"We're at the stage where hockey and football were when guys got \$100 a game and held down other jobs too. They kept the game going because they loved it. They didn't get a million dollars out of college."

\$20 entry fee

Entry fees were \$20 for each of the singles and doubles competitions, with \$400 allotted to prize money.

Marinoff picked up \$100 for winning the singles title, and Watson earned \$50 as runner-up. The doubles crown was worth \$30 each to Marinoff and Chesick, while Watson and Mannerling got \$20 each.

Marinoff suggested he'd like to see the Canadian championships as only one step along a longer road in the future.

"We have some long-term goals," he noted. "We'd like to play against players from the United States. They play there, and they play in Sweden — in all the hockey-playing countries, probably."

"Then what you might see is each country with a team of 10 players in a world championship. You see what they have as sports on television. I think we're at least as legitimate as arm-wrestling and Frisbee throwing."

Sid Marinoff, 24, the champion's brother and a prison official, recalled that the U.S. used to be where big-money table hockey tournaments were found. But the U.S. game fell on hard times when the company that manufactured the units used in competition there went out of business.

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