

# ICC California Open

April 30-May 2, 2010

By: Richard McAfee

Suffering from a case of table tennis spring fever, I decided the only cure was to leave the high altitude of Denver and attend this year's ICC California State Open. Actually, for some time, I had been looking for an opportunity to visit the ICC Table Tennis Center in Milpitas, CA. I had heard so much about this premier full time training center that I was eager to see it myself. An easy flight to San Jose and a short drive later, I walked into what can only be described as table tennis heaven.

The ICC is a 10,500 sq ft facility with excellent playing conditions with all tables on ITTF Approved Stag Red Court Maps and good lighting. My first impression was one of kids, kids, kids everywhere. Saturday's play featured events for the U-1900 crowd. The tournament drew 238 entries and many of these were juniors from the ICC and the many other training programs in the local area.

Since I was not playing or coaching on Saturday I took the opportunity to spend a very enjoyable day watching these up-and-coming juniors, their parents, and the many hard working coaches. I also looked over the center's pro-shop and lounge areas and spent some time talking to the ICC's Head Coach and Director, Rajul Sheth. Rajul seemed to be everywhere, determined to personally greet each person and to make their experience at the ICC a good one. Need a hotel room? Need a drive in from the airport? Rajul was amazing. What was also amazing was how well the event was organized and run. Tournament Director, Bruce H. Liu and his staff, kept all the events running smoothly and the results posted quickly. Tournament Referee, Karshedt Yelena did a very professional job of overseeing the draws and quickly solving any problems that came up.

On Sunday, the higher level events were held and the ICC was jammed with not only players but hundreds of spectators. With 10 players rated over 2400 and 26 players over 2200, this was one of the highest level Open Singles Events to be held in the United States this year. Once the Open reached the quarterfinal stage, a show court was created. About two hundred spectators gathered around on three sides of the court making for an exciting atmosphere for the players. The ICC also set-up two professional video cameras to broadcast the matches from the show court live, via an internet broadcast complete with play by play announcers.

The fireworks started early in the quarterfinals as the top two seeds were defeated. Top seeded, Barney Reed Jr. (2606) lost a thrilling 6-game match to ICC Coach, Shen, Hailong (2496).

First up was the young, upset minded, Timothy Wang against Jitendra Gidla. Gidla was a long time member of the Indian National Team last competing for them at the 2007 World Championships. He has a most unique blocking style of play with the ability to absorb the strongest attacks and continually vary the speed and debt of his returns. On the forehand side he has a short whip-like attacking stroke and an explosive flip kill on a short ball.

Wang started out the match strong taking a 2-1 lead in games and many in the audience were thinking his runs of upsets might continue. However, as the match went on, the world-class experience of Gidla came into play as he began to become more and more comfortable with the pace on Wang's shots. By the start of game four, Gidla's backhand had become a "wall". Time and time again Wang would rip multiple power shots only to see them returned and returned to difficult positions. Gidla continued to raise the level of his game and ran out the match in four games at -4,3,-12,6,8,9. The spectators showed their approval with loud applause for both players.

The second semifinal match featured Shen, Hailong against Molla, Zaman. There was great anticipation in the hall as the spectators were wondering how their local favorite, Hailong would fare against the strong Iranian. Zaman's game is very European looking in style as he loves the mid-distance looping game. He plays a very physical game and seems to loop every ball harder and harder. Hailong's style is very Asian and features a strong forehand loop with great footwork. The style match-up made for a most entertaining match with long topspin rallies the norm. As the match progressed it became apparent that once both men were in mid-distance from the table, Molla was the stronger player and won the majority of the long points. It also was quickly apparent that Molla was a very entertaining player with his great smile and his humor even became

winning over the home-town crowd. In the end, Molla was two strong and he won the match at 5,-10,11,6,-4,4.

## Finals

The stage was now set for the final match of what had already been a great tournament. We had a member of the Iranian National Team versus a former member of the Indian National Team, truly an international level final.

Molla started out game one looping like a man on fire. Molla is a good size man but he moves very well often covering the whole table from mid-distance with his forehand. Gidla on the other hand looks relaxed and uses his great reflexes to redirect his opponent's power against them. At first, Gidla had trouble judging the power of Molla's topspins and Molla took the first game at 11-5. Jitendra quickly made the adjustment to the pace and suddenly the "wall" was back up. Time and time again, Molla power looped the ball in only to see the ball returned. To the spectators Jitendra seemed to have Molla on a string moving him not only side to side but in and out at the same time. Games two and three went to Gidla at 11-5 and 11-8. Molla pulled out game four 12-10 to level the match at 2 games all and from this point on the level of play went even higher. Molla was now pressing to stay closer to the table and put more time pressure on Jitendra. Jitendra countered by starting to use his own forehand more. For the first time in the tournament, Gidla started to fight to open the point first, even pivoting to use his own forehand from his backhand counter. The resulting play was a feast of high level exchanges for the spectators and it was obvious that both players were playing at top level. This was one of those rare finals where both players were playing well and you could tell they were enjoying the intensity of the match. The closeness of the spectators added to the excitement and energy and the applause came often and loud. In the end, Gidla won the last two games by the slimmest of margins at 11-9 and 11-9. Both players exhausted from the effort embraced and waved to a standing ovation from the large crowd. This was one of the best final matches that I have witnessed in the last few years and it was a fitting tribute to a great event.

If you have not yet made the trip to the ICC Table Tennis Center, I strongly encourage you to do so. It will lift your spirits to see such a program going on in the United States. I know it lifted mine. I believe that I have seen the future of USATT and it is alive and well at the ICC. A special thanks to Rajul Sheth for being such a great host and for all you are doing for table tennis and the kids at the ICC.

U250: 1st Darukhanawalla, Malcom; 2nd Mannem, Rohan  
Girls 15 and Under: 1st Chu, Isabel; 2nd Jiang, Diane  
Girls 11 and Under: 1st Neelakantan, Taruna; 2nd Deb, Ishana  
Boys 15 and Under: 1st Chodri, Kunal; 2nd Avvari, Krishnateja  
Boys 11 and Under: 1st Avvari, Krishnateja; 2nd Howard, Tong  
U500: 1st Shen, Kevin; 2nd Kannan, Sandhya  
U1900: 1st Mock, Kenny; 2nd Aebersold, Charles  
U1700: 1st Jiang, Diane; 2nd Alfred, Stephen  
U1500: 1st Barua, Arindam; 2nd Liang, Richard  
U1250: 1st Wong, Randy; 2nd Fu, Zheng  
U1000: 1st Shen, Kevin; 2nd Wong, Reynold C  
U850: 1st Zhang, Hong; 2nd Huang, Vincent  
U3200 Doubles: 1st Zhao, George / Wong, Randy;  
2nd Huang, Kerry / Or, Barry  
U2500: 1st Tu, Truong; 2nd Wang, Timothy  
U2100: 1st Hashimoto, Masaru; 2nd Zhou, Ningjian  
Open Singles: 1st Gidla, Jitendra; 2nd Molla, Zaman  
Over 40: 1st Nguyen, Khoa; 2nd Benedicto, Voltaire  
U4200 Doubles: 1st Avvari, Krishnateja, & Rudesill, David; 2nd Dhami, Tony, & Dhami, Parminder  
U2250: 1st Mahat, Sandeep S.; 2nd Gopal, Pranav

