

Chapter 24 - World Table Tennis

By 1975, Mort had ceased to be involved with the operation and promotion of the USTTA and its programs. However, there was one more idea that he wished to bring to fruition – the founding of a professional tour. Mort deeply believed that Table Tennis was a saleable product, and that our best players had the talent and the charisma to become marketable media stars. The sport of tennis had been transformed in the 1970s, trading in its elitist, clubby image in favor of that of a sport for the masses. The change was brought about by professional management, and with the appearance of colorful and talented tennis personalities – Ashe, Connors, Borg, McEnroe. Ping-pong, already a sport played by the masses, must also move in the same direction.

And so, “World Table Tennis” was born, its name as boundary-less as Mort’s dream. Mort set elusive goals for himself and his new organization, in short, the building of a 30-week tournament circuit within 5 years. A contract was signed with the USTTA, committing World Table Tennis to these goals, in return for exclusivity in conducting professional tours within the United States.

This would be an *immense challenge*. Running a successful event in one’s hometown, where the media, organizers, and potential sponsors were familiar, was one thing. But running a non-stop, city-to-city tour demanded vast resources, and the building of a corporate-type infrastructure, whose demands, may I say, seemed *too* great, even for a visionary like Mort Zakarin, who was really more of a do-it-yourselfer than an organization man.

At the same time, a revolt was taking place. The top U.S. players, fed up with years of playing for token (if not nonexistent) prize money, formed a players union, and began to demand change. Traditionally, the few players who made a full-time living from the sport had to supplement their winnings by selling equipment, managing clubs, giving lessons, and performing in exhibitions. The new union contacted the various U.S. tournament directors, and put forward its demands: Prize money, lots of money, and *now*.

The inaugural World Table Tennis showcase, held on Long Island in November 1975, was a genuine success. The finals attracted a full house, as hundreds witnessed an exciting 5-game struggle between Danny Seemiller and the winner, Charlie Wuvanich, who took home the \$750 first prize, a sum rarely heard of in those days.

FAMILY PONG

Despite the success, the general atmosphere worsened, as tensions between the players and the promoters continued to rise. There were even rumors of a player's boycott of the upcoming U.S. Open in Philadelphia, where the distribution of prize money was going to be minimal, as in the past.



Mort, flanked by Errol Resek, left, and George Brathwaite, right, at the opening World Table Tennis press conference in 1975.

2. 5:55 pm. Mort Zakarin presented a concept for a series of professional invitational tournaments. The EC was in general agreement with this presentation with the following possible hard spots: a possible conflict with a National Table Tennis League, the exclusivity clause to be 75 miles rather than 100 miles from the tournament site, the 10-year option after the first five years, the need for further definition of the tournaments and what constitutes a "tour". Zakarin is to present the EC with further explanation and information on his proposal by the end of June.
Meeting at Houston tournament site May 25 10:10 am

Mort presented his idea of a professional tour to the USTTA Executive Committee.
From Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, May 1975.
Topics, July/August 1975

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48. (Mort Zakarin arrived at 11 a.m.)
49. Zakarin's proposed contract -
Miles/ table the vote on Zakarin's contract until the E.C. can meet in closed session. Passed 8-1(TB).
50. (Errol Resek arrived)
51. Bochenski/ allow Neal Fox to stay at the closed session. Passed 6-2(JRH,DM).
52. Boggan/ allow Fuarnado Roberts to stay at the closed session. Passed 6-2(JRH,MRA).
53. Harrison/ allow Mort Zakarin to stay at the closed session. Failed 3(CD,JRH,JAC) - 5.
54. Closed session was called, Disney allowed Miles 2 minutes to speak. Miles - "We are talking about a contract to give a promoter exclusive rights, the term of which is not less than five years, and can extend as long as 15 years. Miles can't speak intelligently on this in two minutes, so he yields his two minutes back to the chair."
Boggan - "Considering what I've already said, and what others have said on the subject, I, having made up my mind on how I want to vote, have nothing further to say now."
Miles - "If the E.C. wishes to entertain the notion of granting exclusive rights to promoters in any areas the USTTA controls, the correct and most profitable and fairest procedure would be to solicit bids on such rights from interested parties and, at some announced date, choose the bid that is in the best interests of the sport and most profitable to the USTTA. Miles is opposed to exclusive rights for anyone, but believes that, if given out, they should be given out only by the above stated procedure."
55. Boggan/ The USTTA accept Zakarin's contract with the modifications discussed at considerable length that are agreeable to both parties.
56. Miles/ amend the above motion so that Zakarin's proposal is deferred until the November, 1975 E.C. meeting, and in the interim all interested parties investigate the possibility of soliciting bids for similar contracts and that if no better bid is received by then, to accept Zakarin's contract as modified. Failed 2(DM,GK) -5-2(LB,CD).
57. Miles/ Amend Boggan's motion so the modifications to the contract as agreed to by the E.C., as to the intent of the contract, shall be made in writing before the contract is signed. Passed 6-2(TB,JAC) - 1(CD).
Boggan's motion as modified passed 8-1(DM).
(Out of semi-closed session)
58. Bochenski/ we have a three man committee meet separately with Mort Zakarin to discuss these changes. Passed 5-3(JAC,DM,TB).
This committee, Anderson, Boggan and Kennedy, with Fox observing, then left the main meeting to confer with Zakarin.

The agreement between Mort and the USTTA was not without controversy, with Dick Miles and Fuarnado Roberts (Players' Union President) expressing reservations.
From Minutes of Executive Committee Meeting, August 1975.
Topics, September/October 1975

World Table Tennis, Inc.

by Mort Zakarin

The very first tournament that I participated in was an Eastern Championship on Long Island about eight years ago. I watched three marvelous matches that I still remember very clearly. Glenn Cowan played Marty Doss; Bobby Gusikoff played John Tannahill; and Errol Resek played Dell Sweeris.

To tell you how little I knew about table tennis at that time (like most ping pong players), I went into the tournament expecting to win. After watching these three great matches, I remember thinking to myself, "Somebody should try to promote this sport."

Well, I've gone and done it. I've just signed a contract with the United States Table Tennis Association. Our Company will be called World Table Tennis Inc., and our aim is to develop a tour of professional invitational table tennis tournaments.



Our first tournament will be held the weekend of November 15 and 16 at Adelphi University on Long Island. 68 players will compete for over \$1,700.00 worth of prize money, \$750.00 going for first prize. Money prizes will be awarded to the top 16 finishers.

Neal Fox's rating system will be strictly adhered to for invitation purposes. Even though we will have a cutoff of 68 players for this tournament, it is obvious that many of the top 68 will not be able to attend for one reason or another. We will therefore invite

many more players to this tournament. This means that if you are a man, woman, or junior and you fit into that rating category, you will be invited to play.

We will be trying to build a new professional image for table tennis, and, with your help, I know we will succeed. We are going to try for bigger and better sponsors, as well as a large paying audience to attend the matches. If we attain these goals we will be able to award bigger money prizes in the future.

Mort outlines his vision of a professional tour to the USTTA membership.
Topics, September/October 1975

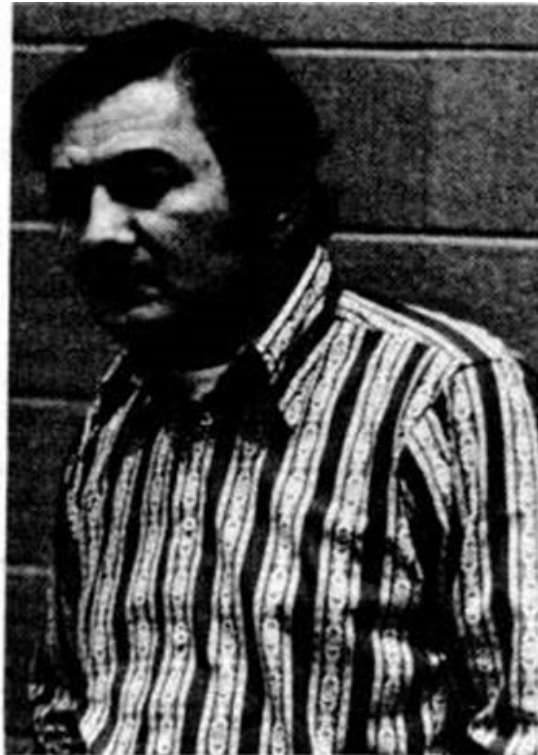
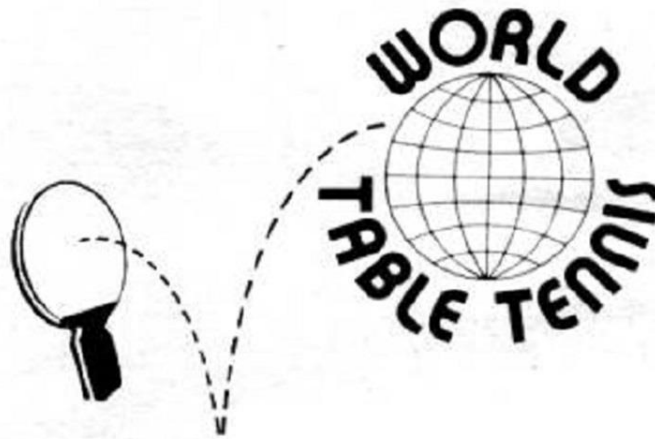


Photo by Mal Anderson

MORT ZAKARIN

Topics, November/December 1975



Wuvanich Champ In Other WTT

by Greg Aiello (from Nov. 17, Newsday)

Garden City - It was similar to a gimmick the Sets use at World Team Tennis matches and that was no coincidence. Before the last matches of the tournament, the four semifinalists each took a handful of table tennis balls and batted them into the stands. The near-capacity crowd of about 400 yesterday at Adelphi gymnasium howled its delight. World Table Tennis was making its debut.

"We want to present table tennis in the same atmosphere as tennis," said Mort Zakarin, founder of World Table Tennis. "No one has tried to promote it that way."

The two-day tournament at Adelphi was Zakarin's initial effort. The tournament drew about 400 people each day and Zakarin said he expected to break even. The next World Table Tennis tournament probably will be in late February in Detroit, Philadelphia or Boston, he said.

Zakarin is seeking national sponsorship and hoping to raise the prize money to \$100,000 for the six-to-eight tournaments he plans for next year. Zakarin distributed

\$1,750 in prize money for his first tournament, an invitational with 68 players.

"You saw what can be done," Zakarin said. "And what you saw was a saleable product."

Zakarin referred to the exciting match between Charlie Wuvanich of Minneapolis and Danny Seemiller of Pittsburgh, the two best players in the United States, for the singles championship.

With the crowd cheering the slams and spins of the match, Wuvanich rallied after dropping the first two games. He collected the \$750 first-place prize by defeating the 21-year-old Seemiller, 17-21, 19-21, 21-19, 21-11, 21-14.

"I fall apart at the end every time," Seemiller said of his fourth loss to Wuvanich in five matches. "He's very, very experienced." And he is rated first in the United States.

Wuvanich, a 26-year-old native of Thailand, said he slowed the rhythm of the game against the aggressive Seemiller. "He's very talented for this country," Wuvanich said...

Newsday's coverage of the 1st World Table Tennis competition.
Reprinted in Topics, November/December 1975

Chapter 25 - Swan Song, Part I

The 1976 U.S. Open, held in the city of Philadelphia, opened in June amidst a whirl of controversy. With no progress made between the promoters and the player's union on the subject of prize money, the U.S.'s top players made good on their threat to boycott the tournament. They set up a picket line in front of the entrance to the playing site, and began their protest.

When we arrived that day at the playing site, we were embarrassed and unsure of how to proceed. Evelyn and Mort, themselves clearly on the side of the promoters, greeted the players on the line and walked in. Chuck, a gregarious child, joined the line for a few turns before scooting into the hall. "O.K. Chuck!" the players applauded him. I took a less courageous approach, and simply attempted to sneak around the line unnoticed. It didn't work. "Hey, thanks for *supporting* us, Jeff!" yelled Danny Seemiller, as I cruised inside.

My spirit was broken. At that moment, I felt that a great divide had opened between myself and the top players, the group I had so badly wanted to become part of. I had ceased to be a member of the ping-pong community. I was finished.

The Zakarins had also ceased to be a "ping-pong family". We would all be going in separate directions. I would be entering the university and concentrating on my studies. Chuck was gradually giving up the game in favor of tennis. Mort and Ev would remain involved in the sport, but never again with the same intensity that had driven them before.

In the ugly atmosphere that prevailed following the U.S. Open player's strike, Mort seemed not to be in any mood to push his plans for World Table Tennis forward. He petitioned the Executive Committee for a 1-year delay in fulfillment of the terms of their agreement, which was promptly approved. World Table Tennis was officially dormant, and would never awaken.

FAMILY PONG

2512 WUVANICH, CHARLIE	2108 ROKOP, JOE
2498 SEEMILLER, DAN	2107 STERN, MIKE
2400 LEE, DAL-JOON	2106 ROBINSON, RALPH
2365 CHAN, CHACHAI P.	2106 PAAL, JULIUS
2354 GUILLEN, RAY	2105 BARRY, RUTLEDGE
2292 SEEMILLER, RICK	2103 BOGGAN, TIM
2291 BHUSHAN, IN-SOOK NA	2089 DESCHAMPS, HARRY
2289 RAPHEL, PAUL	2087 HOBSON, DOUG
2269 ROBERTS, FURNADO	2083 MARTINEZ, PATTY
2263 SEARS, APICHART T.	2083 OVEISSI, ALI
2267 CHUI, LIM-MING	2070 ROSAL, ANGELITA
2254 BRATHWAITE, GEORGE	2070 SHAPIRO, DAVE
2252 RESEK, ERROL	2068 LANGE, ROBERT
2234 SAKAI, DAVE	2066 HAN, VO QUI
2230 PASHUKU, PAUL	2066 WAMPLER, MARK
2230 GALARDI, DEAN	2065 KATZ, ELLIOT
2223 BARISH, DENNIS	2063 GUILLEN, RICKY
2216 HOWARD, JACK	2063 ZAKARIN, JEFF
2197 BUSH, MIKE	2062 KELLY, PETER SR
2178 HICKS, RICHARD	2061 DWELLY, FRANK
2174 SMOLANOWICZ, STANLEY	2061 DANNER, CARL
2171 GROSSMAN, HOWARD	2061 COUSINS, WINSTON
2169 LESNER, BILL	2058 SEXTON, FRANK
2164 PLOTNICK, BRUCE	2056 BANACH, DAN
2157 BALAMOUN, SAM	2046 SODERBERG, JOHN
2156 EVERETT, AL	2046 MUNROE, BENFIELD
2152 COWAN, GLENN	2045 KURTZ, JEFF
2148 LAZARUS, JIM	2044 LEE, JOE
2142 SVERDLIK, ROGER	2040 GAITHER, DON
2139 CARVER, RON	2039 MACK, RAY
2138 NISSEN, ALAN	2039 MONASTERIAL, MARCY
2137 UKAPATAYASAKUL, BILL	2039 MITCHELL, ALVIN
2136 SCHWARTZBERG, PERRY	2037 KUUSK, LEM
2136 DAVEY, JIM	2036 YOSHIMURA, MASANORI
2134 PAGAN, GARY	2034 VORHEER, HELMUTH
2133 SHARPE, BILL	2033 GREEN, DAN
2133 BABER, MIKE	2032 DAUNT, WAYNE
2131 SHARPE, BILL	2027 BERGER, STEVE
2124 VONSCHIMMELMAN, RON	2024 CHUNG, KEUN
2118 WITTNER, GARY	2022 WASIELEWSKI, WAYNE
2111 VEILLETTE, MIKE	2020 GOLDFARB, LARRY

Jeff's highest-ever U.S Men's Singles rating, #59 (see above at 2063 rating points).
Topics, March/April 1976

Chapter 26 - The Trophy, Part I

Evelyn and Mort, accompanied by Chuck, traveled in December 1976 to Las Vegas to participate in the 1st annual U.S. “Closed” Table Tennis Championships. Now that the U.S. Open had become an international affair, a competition closed to United States residents would be necessary if we wished to have our own national champions.

Evelyn: *The tournament was held in Caesar’s Palace Casino and Hotel, in their Sports Pavilion. The floors were carpeted! If you tried to bounce the ball on the floor before serving, the ball wouldn’t bounce – it would just lie there on the floor.*

Anyway, I lost in the first round of the Women’s Singles, and was entered in the Women’s Consolation. I finished in second place. When it came time to distribute the awards, I was in shock. I received a huge trophy that stood about 3 feet [1 meter] high. Apparently, the person who ordered the trophies didn’t understand what “Consolation” meant, and ordered a trophy that was about the size of the Women’s Singles trophy! Joe Louis, the famed ex-prizefighter, presented the trophy to me.

Back home in Woodmere, we realized that the trophy wouldn’t fit on any of our shelves, so we decided to place it on the water tank of the toilet in our guest bathroom. It was quite a conversation piece!

fun as anyone. I am sure that everyone will agree that the trophies were the biggest and best ever given at any tournament. Give Jerry LaLande credit for them. Even I couldn’t believe my eyes when I saw the trophy Evelyn Zakarin got for Consolation. It was bigger than last year’s Men’s Singles trophy. Wow! I apologize that the Team
Trophies weren’t what we had hoped

**Bill Hodge, 1976 U.S. Championships Tournament Director, on Evelyn's trophy
Topics, January/February 1977**

Chapter 27 - World's, Part II

Evelyn and Mort, still very much USTTA insiders, decided to travel with the U.S. Team to the World Championships in rainy Birmingham, England, in March 1977.

Mort: *I enjoyed the English very much. They were always helpful, and sometimes very funny. Upon our arrival at Heathrow Airport, we explained to the lady at the car rental counter that we had never driven in the country before. "How long will you be staying for?" she inquired. When I answered, she remarked, "Well, I'll just stay off the roads until then."*

Driving on the left-hand side of the street was a real adventure. At one point, I accidentally cut off this fellow, who leapt out of his car, and began to scream at me for what must have been ten minutes. When he finally stopped, I asked him for directions. He became instantly agreeable. "You're going there? No problem, just follow me!"

It was at this World's that the U.S. Men's and Women's teams finally broke through and earned the long sought-after promotion to the elite 1st division for the next World Championships to be held in Pyongyang in 1979. In the deciding Men's Team's series against the Italian squad, with the match count deadlocked at 4-4, Ricky Seemiller (Danny's younger brother), backed by the large and noisy American contingent, convincingly won the 9th and final match over his petrified Italian opponent. Pandemonium broke loose in the playing hall as the Americans celebrated their victory.

Mort: *Later on, in the men's room, I ran into the guy who had umpired the match. He said to me, "Ricky didn't beat that Italian player, the rest of you did. You Yanks scared the s... out of that poor guy."*

FAMILY PONG



U.S.A. VICTORY PICTURE

Photo by Mal Anderson

The U.S. Team celebrates. Evelyn and Mort are standing in front, 2nd and 3rd from the right.
Topics, May/June 1977

Chapter 28 - Swan Song, Part II

The Long Island Table Tennis Association sponsored its last competition, the Long Island Closed, in May 1977. Chuck, now concentrating solely on his tennis game, made one of his final appearances at a table tennis tournament. The LITTA leadership – Dave Cox, Danny Ganz, Mort Zakarin, and others, had grown tired, and with no new generation of leaders on the horizon, decided to disband the organization. They closed the association's bank account, and with the remaining funds, threw a farewell dinner party.

singles events, including the Boys Under 17, after a gutsy 19-in-the-5th squeaker in the 15's over Chuck Zakarin. Chuck, who's not so old himself, showed that though he still has the strokes to be a very good player, he doesn't seem to want to concentrate on the game, preferring often to play tournament tennis instead.

Chuck in Long Island Closed Boys Under 15 Final.
Tim Boggan, Topics, May/June 1977

Local and Other News:
Chuck Zakarin, who has limited his table tennis time in favor of tennis, lost in the quarter-finals of the first United States Tennis Association-sponsored tournament he entered. Not bad for the first time.

Gossip columnist Jairie Resek on Chuck's new tennis career.
Topics, July/August 1976

Chapter 29 - Family Reunion

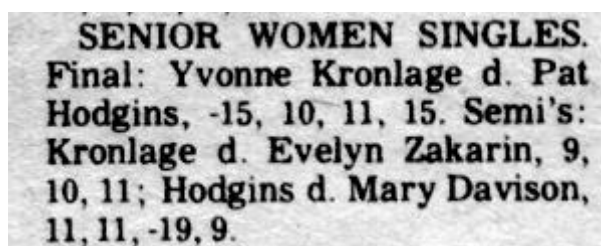
The Canadian Open, held in Montreal, Quebec, in the month of June, 1977, served as a family reunion for us. Evelyn, Mort, and Chuck arrived from Long Island, and I joined them shortly thereafter, having just completed my first year at the University of Buffalo in upstate New York.

Before the tournament, Mort had been appointed captain of the U.S. Team, which was quite an honor! The appointment was not without controversy. Tim Boggan had also campaigned for the position, which not only offered prestige, but also partial reimbursement of travel expenses.

On the first night of the competition, the opening ceremonies were held. Evelyn, Chuck, and I watched from up in the stands. The international teams marched into the playing arena, each led by their captain. Tim, who was also part of the official entourage, was standing next to Mort as a Canadian official presented each of the captains with a ceremonial banner. The official welcomed the U.S. Team, and proceeded to give the banner to Tim.

A few seconds passed, and Tim was looking straight ahead, still holding on to the banner. From my perch in the stands, I could see Mort lean over and whisper a few words to Tim, who after a moment of hesitation, handed the banner to Mort.

The event was as much a parting as it was a reunion. It would be the last time that we were all together at the same competition. Chuck and I, both out of practice, were out of the running quickly. Nevertheless, it was an enjoyable weekend for all of us. Evelyn and Mort had befriended the English team, and we spent much of the time hanging out together, enjoying late-night dinners in town.



SENIOR WOMEN SINGLES.
Final: Yvonne Kronlage d. Pat
Hodgins, -15, 10, 11, 15. Semi's:
Kronlage d. Evelyn Zakarin, 9,
10, 11; Hodgins d. Mary Davison,
11, 11, -19, 9.

Evelyn reaches the semi-finals of the U.S. Open Senior Women's Singles Championship, held in New York in 1979. Topics, July/August 1979

Chapter 30 - Comeback

In the spring of 1980, I came out of retirement, briefly. I was enjoying my last semester as a student at the University of Texas at Austin, when someone reminded me about the annual ACUI (Association of College Unions International) competition. The ACUI sponsored annual competitions in “recreational games”, such as bowling, chess, billiards, and ping-pong. If I could win the University and then the Regional tournaments, I would earn an all-expenses-paid trip to the ACUI National Championship, to be held at the University of Minnesota. I liked the idea. I was in good shape, but had to practice. So after winning the University of Texas championship (without any real competition), I started preparing for the Regional.

I played every day for 2 weeks, and arrived at the Regional Championship at the Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge in reasonable condition. I proceeded to surprise myself with my own ability, and won an exciting final in front of several hundred onlookers in the sports hall of the student union.

I had made it to Minnesota. The 14 finalists were divided into 2 round-robin groups, the 2 top finishers in each group advancing to a semi-final playoff. Having already qualified for the tournament, and not thinking much of my chances, I remained quite unmotivated and played lackadaisically, losing my first match. It was at that point that I learned that the loser of each match would have to umpire the following round at that table. I hated umpiring, but what could I do? I sat down and umpired the next match. That alone was sufficient to bring about a change in me. I was now fully motivated to win, and was victorious in 4 out of my next 5 matches. I was in the semi-final!

In the semis, with my hopes now high, I played against Todd Peterson, who had lost to Chuck and Eric in the final of that amazing Under 13 Doubles competition back in 1974. This time, however, reality made a comeback, as Todd was too serious a competitor for an opponent with only a few weeks of table time over the last four years. He won, 3 games to 1, and then won his next match to take the championship.

Back in Austin, I was nevertheless pleased with myself and with the attention that I received, giving an interview to the local daily newspaper, and afterward, on the radio. The radio guy asked me if I was excited to hear myself on the air, and I jokingly replied that I was, but that I *really* wanted to be on television.

'Has-been' paddles last hurrah

Former table tennis champion bounces back to interrupt early retirement

By BRAD BUCHHOLZ
American Statesman Staff

After a decade of steady training, professional table tennis player Jeff Zakarin had made it to the top. Two hundred trophies. A national doubles championship in 1971. A national rating in the Table Tennis Top 50.

Then, in 1976, Jeff Zakarin retired. At the age of 18.

"All of a sudden, I was getting ready for college. I discovered studying. I discovered women. I discovered having fun," says Zakarin, now a senior marketing student at the University of Texas. "And then, I just quit playing. I teach a table tennis class for the union now, but that's it. I'm a 'has-been.'"

"One of my complaints about table tennis — and all other competitive sports for that matter — is that there's just too much tension involved. I'm just not that kind of person. Tournament play is OK; it's just not a truly enjoyable experience."

LAST MONTH, however, Zakarin broke out of his four-year retirement for one last fling — in an attempt to qualify for the Collegiate National Tournament in Minneapolis, Minn.

Until that point, Zakarin had quenched his competitive urge by way of jogging, tennis and soccer. But now, inspired by a mild case of "senioritis" and the attraction of an all-expenses paid trip to Minnesota, Zakarin tried to pick up where he left off four years before.

Step One was the UT qualifying tournament, which he won with ease. Step Two, the Region XII Championship in Baton Rouge, La., was a bit tougher — but he won that tournament, too. Then, in Minneapolis for the nationals, he won four of six round-robin matches to advance to the tournament semifinals — where he finally lost to Todd Peterson, 3-1, in a best-of-five match.

Finally, after the tournament officials credited Zakarin with a third-place finish in the competition, the quick-talking senior from suburban New York City did the only thing that came naturally — and retired again. This time, for good.

"TRUTHFULLY, I wasn't in it as much for the competition as I was for the trip," Zakarin says with an honest smile. "But I did train very, very hard for two weeks to prepare myself; I practiced two hours a day, five days a week. Most importantly, I stopped drinking — went on the wagon for two full weeks, you might say. In addition, I ran two miles a



Ping-pong ace Jeff Zakarin says game got to be too competitive for him.

day, went into light weight training and did agility exercises."

Though onlookers point out that Jeff's training schedule looks like something out of the Pittsburgh Steeler training camp, Zakarin insists that world class players work even harder.

"It's something I've never been able to explain to those who aren't familiar with competitive table tennis," says Zakarin. "But it might interest you to know that the man in China who is considered the top player in the world practices 10 hours a day. In fact, he's so dedicated that he spends four of those hours on his serve alone."

"For me, well, the regimen I went through the last two weeks was much like the one I practiced for four years when I was younger."

ALTHOUGH ZAKARIN still remembers his achievements as a young player, not all of his memories are fond ones. After being introduced to the game by his parents — who also played competitively — Za-

karin began working hard at table tennis before he was nine years old.

Ironically, he "wasn't good enough" to play with his parents at first; but Zakarin improved rapidly after spending most of his free time at table tennis clinics in New York.

"The clinics were set up where you play people of your own ability, not of your own age," explains Zakarin. "So here I am, about four-foot-two, playing against old men..."

"They used to like to play me, though. I didn't know it was illegal at the time, but when people would serve against me, they'd lean way up toward the net...and just barely trickle the ball the net. My arms were so short I couldn't reach the ball."

It did not take long, however, before Zakarin — short arms and all — learned how to beat the older players with ease. Restless, he began searching for better players to compete against — and finally found them playing in a dingy motel basement in mid-town Manhattan.

"I LIVED OUT in the suburbs, so I used to take the Long Island Railroad into the city to play some of the finest players in the state of New York — who, at the time, happened to be the finest players in the United States," recalls Zakarin, who was still only 14 years old at the time. "The place they played in was a dump; that's the best way to describe it. You can imagine what it looked like, this young kid living a protected life in the suburbs playing ping-pong in this old basement..."

For Zakarin, who had already won a national doubles championship in the 13-and-under division in 1971, the next four years of his life centered around the clicking sound of wooden paddle hitting a tiny plastic ball. A special trip to a table tennis clinic in Sweden. Victories in the U.S. Open. More than 100 tournament wins and thousands of dollars in prize money.

Then came the retirement. Prize money was often scarce, Zakas admits, and seeing "greedy" players resort to cheating in order to pick up extra dollars tainted his view of the sport. So for the next four years — two at the University of New York at Buffalo and two at Texas — Zakarin wouldn't even play in an intramural match, much less a sanctioned United States tournament.

AND EVEN THOUGH his third-place finish in Minnesota brought back some pleasant memories, the new Jeff Zakarin says he can never play competitively again. Laughing easily while sipping a beer in the Texas Union, Zakarin looks ahead to his future career as a sales representative for a computer parts company in Houston.

Someone asks if he'll ever buy a ping-pong table to play on at home. Zakarin rolls his dark brown eyes and says maybe — but probably not.

"Playing table tennis did a lot for me: it took a shy, introverted kid and gave him confidence — something to be proud of," says Zakarin. "But when I was younger, I lived in a world which revolved around whether I won or lost...I was tried to compete against people instead of making friends with them."

"When I lost a tournament, yeah, I'd go home and cry. And hold grudges. I used to be like that. But not any more."

"It really is over now. I'm a has-been. All washed up at 22. Really." And with that, the new Jeff Zakarin smiled, let out a contented sigh and took another sip from his beer mug...

Brad Buchholz, Austin American-Statesman, 5 May 1980

Chapter 31 - The Trophy, Part II

Evelyn: *The 1980 U.S. Open was held in Fort Worth, Texas, in the final days of June. Mort and I had flown down to Dallas a few days before the tournament was to start. We were by ourselves. Jeff had just finished his studies at the University of Texas in Austin and we had arranged for him to fly in for a day to see us. Chuck was busy finishing his senior year at Hewlett High School.*

Mort had wanted to see Dallas again. He had lectured there at the University of Dallas twenty years earlier. That was the year Dallas reached a million in population. Since then the town's population had exploded.

Texas was in the midst of a terrible heat wave. As a matter of fact we changed rental cars twice because they overheated. It was the wrong time for sightseeing, but we enjoyed it anyway.

Two days later we checked into our hotel across the street from the Coliseum in Fort Worth, where the Open was being held. That afternoon we looked over the tournament site. It was a nice hall, with wood floors, good lights and plenty of room for a defender to move about. Mort and I registered for the tournament, then found an empty table and practiced for a couple of hours. People kept arriving from all over the world. We saw lots of old friends that we only see a few times a year, usually at the National's or at some other tournament around the country.

At about seven that evening we left to shower and change. We had made a date with another couple to go to dinner together. Mort and I had spotted a place that looked interesting around the corner from the venue. We picked a beauty. It had a great salad bar, the steaks were wonderful and Mort was in seventh heaven because they served Foster's Beer in those large containers that look like oil cans.

The trouble was, we kept telling everyone about the place and towards the end of the tournament it was hard to find a table that didn't have a ping-pong player at it. We should have been paid a commission.

When we left the bar that night at midnight we saw this big sign that indicated the temperature. It read 104 degrees [Fahrenheit, 40 degrees Celsius].

FAMILY PONG

The next morning we had breakfast and went over to warm up and there they were, the trophies. They were the most beautiful trophies we had ever seen. A lucite table tennis racket sat upright on its side, glued to a lucite base with a lucite table tennis ball. A plaque glued to the base indicated winner or 2nd place and listed the category.

Mort stopped, "My god Ev, look at them. Aren't they beautiful?"

"Yes, they're unreal and you know how much I love lucite," I replied.

"When the tournament is over let's find out who made them and buy one for our trophy shelf," said Mort.

I said, "Better still, let's win one."

Mort laughed. "Yes, dear, ha, ha, ha."

Mort ended up having the worst tournament of his life. On the other hand, I was playing out of my head. I had finally put that Phantom junk rubber on my forehand side, and suddenly I was beating people that had much higher ratings than mine. In the Women's Senior Singles, I beat the number-one seeded player in the semi-finals. But then it happened. They called my opponents name and mine and announced that the championship match was going to be played on center court. Well, I froze. Talk about being nervous, I choked all over the place and lost badly.

Before my match, Mort had gone back to our hotel room in disgust, showered and had a few drinks. I know, because I noticed that the Cutty Sark bottle was half empty when we got back in that night. After dressing he headed across the road to watch me play. He was only out a short time, but the sun was so hot that the silver necklace he wore burnt his neck. The sign indicated that the temperature was 114 degrees [Fahrenheit, 46 degrees Celsius]!

Mort was back in time to see me lose, but he was also there to see me receive that beautiful trophy with the inscription:

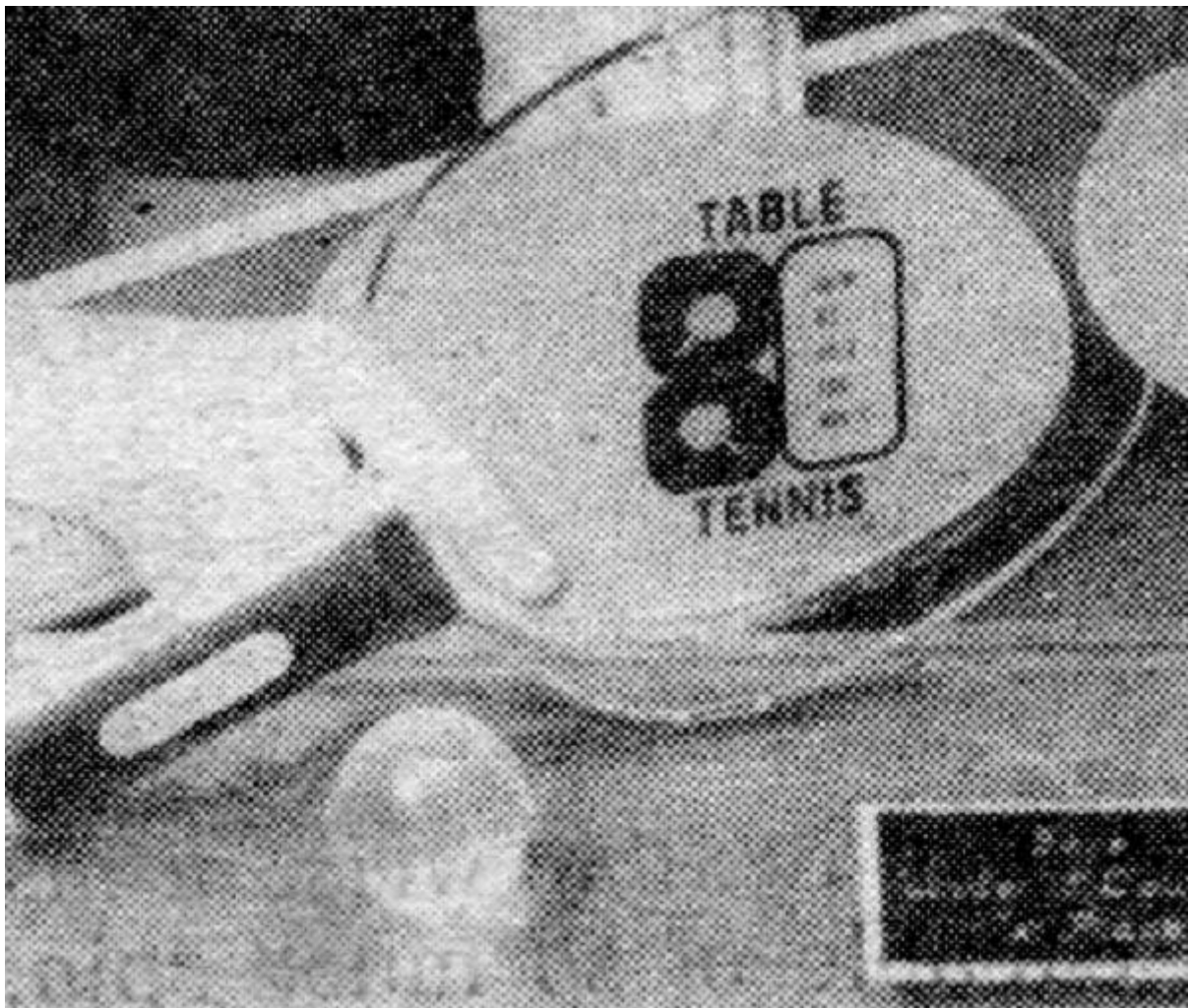
***Women's Over 40 Singles, 2nd Place
1980 United States Open Championship***

And today it sits on our coffee table for all to see.

FAMILY PONG

d. Richard Puls, -20, 14, 11, 19.
WOMEN'S OVER 40. Final:
Yvonne Kronlage d. Evelyn
Zakarin, 13, 15, 8. Semi's:
Kronlage d. Pat Hodgins, -15, 20,
13, 13; Zakarin d. Heather
Angelinetta, -20, 19, 15, 20.
MEN'S OVER 50 Final: Norm

Evelyn finishes second in U.S. Open Senior Women's Singles.
Topics, July/August 1980



Lucite trophy from the 1980 U.S. Open.
Topics, July/August 1980

Chapter 32 - The End

Mort, who played table tennis for the first time as a 40-year-old in 1965, never had particularly high expectations regarding his own playing ability. Yet in 1982, and now in his late fifties, Mort was finally coming into his own as a player. He and Evelyn were now beginning to spend their winters in sunny Florida, and during one of their stays, participated in the Florida Winter Open. Mort won the Senior Singles event over a large and talented field – his first major singles title.

The most exciting event on Saturday had to be the Senior Singles — with no less than nine players having a shot at the title. In the preliminary round robins, the former Orlando Club President, Randy Hess, shocked top seed “Laci” Bellak, devastated him two straight; second seed Jim Leggett avenged last tournament’s loss to Tampa’s Ray Look; and third seed Mort Zakarin, who’d traveled 1500 miles from Long Island, squeaked by Miami’s B Singles winner Gil Welsh in two deuce games.

In the round robin playoffs, Randy continued his upsetting ways by beating Mort deuce in the third; however, when Randy lost two straight to Leggett and Zakarin beat Jim two straight, all three players had 1-1 records, and Mort won the tie-break with a 3-2 game record, while Jim was second at 2-2.

Mort, Florida Winter Open Senior Singles Winner.
Bard Brenner, Topics, January/February 1982

FAMILY PONG

Mort: *Our last major tournament was the World Senior Championships in Sweden in 1982. Evelyn played poorly, but I had my best tournament ever. I won my preliminary round-robin in the Men's Over 40 and Over 50 Singles. In the elimination matches, I got to the second round of the Over 50 before losing. I also reached the second round of the Over 40 Doubles and the third round of the Over 50 Doubles. I was playing out of my head.*



Photo Courtesy of Bob Kaminsky

U.S. players in the World Senior Championships at Gothenburg, Sweden in May: (rear, l. to r.) Paul Vancura, Bob Kaminsky, and Leon Ruderman; (center) Laszlo Bellak, Yvonne Kronlage, Evelyn and Mort Zakarin, and Bill and Liz Hornyak; (front) Jerry Hock, Errol Resek, Bohdan Dawidowicz, and Tim Boggan.

Evelyn and Mort with the rest of the American players at the World Senior Championships.

Evelyn and Mort are seated in the second row, third and fourth from left.

Topics, July/August 1982

Mort: *Evelyn and I played in our last competition in 1983, and then quit table tennis. Why did we stop playing? We had certainly come as far as we could as players. We were also fairly frustrated with all the junk rubber. Besides, we were both having a lot of fun playing tennis, and decided to put all our efforts into improving our games. We progressed rapidly. A few years later, I even had a regional ranking in my age group.*

FAMILY PONG

Afterword

In 1988, I packed my belongings, adopted my Hebrew name, and moved to Tel-Aviv, Israel. Though I hadn't played in years, I almost immediately sought out a table tennis club in my new home town, not only in order to contribute some of my knowledge and experience to young players, but no less importantly, as a vehicle for making connections and meeting new people.

As it turned out, I could still play a bit, and was therefore drafted into service as a player for my "Hapoel" Tel-Aviv Club, which had a weak 2nd division team that year after year would narrowly escape relegation to the 3rd division. I played through the 1993-1994 season, at which point the fire once again burned out.

In 1992, Chuck married Lisa Arkowitz, a native of Westchester County, New York. Today, they live in the town of Rye Brook, New York with their 2 children, Morgan (born 1996), and Skylar (born 1998).



Lisa and Chuck Zakarin with daughters Skylar (left) and Morgan (right) in the year 2000.

FAMILY PONG

In 1993, Evelyn and Mort sold their home in Woodmere and moved permanently to South Florida. They live today in the town of Lake Worth. Nowadays, the U.S. Open is held annually in the nearby city of Fort Lauderdale, and the two of them regularly drop in to watch the action and renew old acquaintances. Evelyn, who got us all hooked on table tennis back in 1965, says she still gets the urge to play now and then.



Mort, Evelyn, Jeff, and Chuck with the remaining trophies prior to the sale of the house in Woodmere in 1993.



Mort and Evelyn Zakarin in 1997.

FAMILY PONG

In 1995, I married Racheli Kreisberg, a native of Utrecht, Holland. We live today in the town of Ra'anana, Israel, with our 2 children, Ella (born 1996), and Maya (born 1999). Racheli is currently expecting our third child.



Racheli and Jeff ("Yosi") Zakarin with daughters Maya (left) and Ella (right) in the year 2000.

FAMILY PONG

Final Word - 2007

Understanding that *Family Pong* is first and foremost a family album, I have been nagged for several years by the feeling that this work was somehow incomplete. Therefore, I submit here a final installment of *Family Pong* with a photo of our third daughter, Tali (born 2001).



Tali Zakarin with Grandpa Mort in 2006