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Paddling Solo – College Table Tennis’ Lone Warriors

Most college athletes will travel to Monroeville, PA this weekend with their teammates, coaches and maybe even a proud parent in tow. But three singles players will be taking on the best college table tennis has to offer - alone.

We speak to Great Lakes Region men’s singles runner-up Keith Pech, West Region women’s singles champion Ann Er Lim and Northeast Region wildcard qualifier Mike Reff about their experiences, hopes, and how it’s like to paddle solo at the 2014 TMS NCTTA national championships.

Hi! Congratulations on making it to the 2014 TMS NCTTA national championships! Could you introduce yourself?

PECH: My name is Keith Pech. I am 22 years old and I am a senior at Baldwin Wallace University. I have two majors: international business and sustainability.

LIM: I’m Ann Er Lim, 19, originally from Malaysia. I’m a sophomore studying journalism with an emphasis in public relations. I’m the vice-president of California State University, Northridge’s table tennis club.

REFF: My name’s Michael Reff from Hofstra University. I’m 27, a first-year grad student pursuing an MA in forensic linguistics.

Tell us about your table tennis experience! How long have you been playing in the NCTTA?

PECH: I first started playing table tennis at the age of 11. We had an old table stored away upstairs and my dad pulled it out to play with my brother Seth and I. We enjoyed it so much that we got some training videos from the library. It didn’t really start to get serious until we met Valeriy Elnatonov at a local club.

He later became our coach and as I found out later, he used to be one of the national coaches in Uzbekistan. This is my third year playing in the NCTTA.

LIM: I made the Selangor State team in Malaysia when I was 10, and represented Malaysia at the youth level when I was 13 until 17. This is the first time I'm playing in a ping-pong event in the States.

REFF: I first started playing the true sport when I was around 13 or 14. I started playing NCTTA table tennis in 2004 at Florida State University (shout out to the women's team and Olmo, the team and single's qualifiers for nationals respectively at my alma mater.) I played there till 2007, and then picked up NCTTA play again last year at Hofstra.

Could you describe your journey to the national championships? How did you do in the divisional/regional tournaments?

PECH: This year I played pretty well in my division; I took first place without dropping a single game. In Regionals I took second, I lost to University of Michigan's Lester Lee. As for the Baldwin Wallace team, well they put up a good fight, but most of the players are just starting.

LIM: Divisionals wasn't that hard. There were only 3 girls participating, and all of them were from my school! (laughs). The level at Regionals was decent. There were good players, and I would place myself in the "middle level." One of the girls I lost to in the round robin had to leave early actually, so I didn't get to play with her in the final. It was really close. I lost to her 3-2, and actually hoped to play her in the final.

REFF: Well, I won one single's match a piece in each of the previous two qualifiers. My journey to nationals has been a combination of luck but also a willingness to commit my time and energy to a sport that I might not be very highly rated in, but on the brighter, gives me all the more reason to improve. Our team at Hofstra did pretty well in the division tournaments, considering a lack of infrastructure and inconsistent practice times. I feel with more commitment, humility, and motivation to excel will be key factors for the team next year to compete better.

Were/are there any obstacles getting to the national championships? If so, how did you overcome them?

PECH: There weren't any obstacles getting to nationals this year, in the past, I think two years ago, I had to raise money to get a flight to Texas.

REFF: Not really.

LIM: It wasn't hard, but then it wasn't that easy either. I'm actually getting fully funded by my school this time. This is the first time our school has ever sent players to nationals in table tennis. Also, I'm the only one going. At first they only agreed to fund me partially, but we got to a bigger meeting and all the committee members and sports council members voted yes for us to increase the funding amount by 25

percent.

It was really cool, but it was also really intense, sitting there and waiting, and seeing them vote yes for you.

Do you feel ready for the national championships? What does your tournament preparation look like?

PECH: I feel that I am fairly prepared for the nationals. I practice often with my younger brother Seth, who is a senior in high school. We do a lot of different drills, but we mostly focus on the first 3 to 5 balls after the serve. I also do a lot of running and sprints before tournaments. I am not sure how helpful it is two weeks before a tournament, but maybe psychologically I feel like I have an edge.

LIM: For the past week I've been playing more. I usually practice with one of my team members at school, and this week I've been to clubs more often to practice competition tactics. I feel excited actually, really excited. I think I'm prepared but sometimes I feel my form fluctuates, and isn't really stable. But my current form is pretty good so I hope it will maintain until nationals. I'd also like to thank my teammates, every one of them. They contributed a lot to help me get into nationals. They're the ones that made it possible for me to go. They would give me mental support, and consistently ask me 'hey have you been going to training? You have to go to training' They're very good teammates.

REFF: My prep for nationals has been somewhat haphazard. I practice when I can. A good thing is that a previously "undiscovered" treasure of three table tennis tables in the fitness center here has given the team and the organization a chance to get out of the game room and attempt real playing conditions. Although we have only taken advantage of the facility there about twice due to conflicting schedules, we are going to have a practice the Sunday before nationals, so I will be able to have the opportunity to get some last minute drills in play before heading off to Monroeville later in the week.

Do you feel you're at a disadvantage without your teammates there to cheer you on? Why/Why not?

PECH: Yes and no. I am so used to playing singles from an early age that I am used to playing alone. However, it is nice to have someone cheering for you and that you can spend time with at the tournament

LIM: Not really! It's an adventure to me. I really like to travel alone, and it's not scary actually. I mean I used to travel back to Malaysia alone, so it's not that a big deal to me. It's exciting.

REFF: I don't really feel any disadvantage. One of the reasons is I consider Table tennis a life long pursuit, and I think the passion I have will make up for the team not being physically with me

What are your goals for the tournament? What would you like to achieve at the national championships?

PECH: I would be thrilled to make it to the quarterfinals of the tournament. However, my goal is to play well and challenge every opponent I play, while displaying good character and sportsmanship.

LIM: To be honest, this is my first time, so I would just say I wanna give all my best and see where my level stands at nationally. At the same time, I hope I can get into the semi-finals at least. But even if I don't get into the semi-finals it will be a great experience for me too.

REFF: My goals are very simple: enjoy the experience, make every effort to pull off upsets, and meet new fellow ardent supporters and participants of the sport. I feel at home with the table tennis crowd.

The 2014 TMS College Table Tennis Championships is hosted by the [National Collegiate Table Tennis Association](#) and the Visit Monroeville and is one of the most competitive table tennis tournaments in North America featuring 6 events: Men's and Women's Singles and Doubles, and Men's/Coed Teams, Women's Teams. The event is sponsored by TMS International, Newgy Industries, Butterfly.

Players and spectators alike will enjoy a jam-packed weekend of table tennis at the [2014 College Table Tennis Championships](#). The event starts Friday April 4th and continues to Sunday April 6th at the Club Sport and Health in Monroeville, Pennsylvania.

About NCTTA

The National Collegiate Table Tennis Association (NCTTA) is a non-profit organization established exclusively for promoting the sport of table tennis at the college level. As the national governing body for college table tennis in the United States and Canada, NCTTA organizes intercollegiate competition throughout North America. www.nctta.org

About USA Table Tennis

Headquartered in Colorado Springs, USATT is the national organizing body for table tennis in the United States, serving 9,000+ members and nearly 300 clubs. USATT sanctions 200+ events a year including the US Open and US Nationals. USATT is affiliated with the International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF), as well as the United States Olympic Committee (USOC). www.usatt.org & tabletennis.teamusa.org

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