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Ping Pong on the Vegas Strip

By DAN ACKMAN

Las Vegas

One school of ping pong purists holds that the game was ruined in 1952 by a man named Hiroji Satoh. Mr. Satoh was a then-unknown member of the Japanese national team who showed up at the World Championships in Bombay wielding a paddle fashioned with a layer of sponge on both sides. Using this mysterious and powerful instrument, Mr. Satoh cruised to the world title, beating U.S. hopeful Marty Reisman en route. The sponge paddle quickly became the standard, and the game was never the same again.

Mr. Reisman's life story was the inspiration for the Hardbat Classic, an all-comers tournament and made-for-television event at the Venetian hotel in Las Vegas held from June 26 to 28. The tournament matched hand-picked "Hardbat All Stars" against tournament-rated players of various levels, bar-tournament champs and unrated "basement" players. For a tournament buy-in of \$100, the victor would take home \$100,000 -- an unheard of sum in the ping pong world, where the U.S. Open winner earns \$6,000. (Overseas tournaments can be considerably richer.) The idea was to revive ping pong in its "classic" form and create a TV franchise in the process.

Though most folks know ping pong as a rec-room diversion, it once drew crowds to Madison Square Garden. But with the advent of the sponge racket -- and the decline of U.S. players in world rankings -- popular interest fell flat.

The sponge racket allowed a skilled player to strike the ball with tremendous spin and with vastly more power. "It ruined both the spectacle and the aesthetics, too fast, too furious, too technical," wrote Jerome Charyn in "Sizzling Chops and Devilish Spins," summarizing the traditionalist view. At elite levels, rallies went by in a blink, lasting less than two seconds. Even the distinctive sound of the game was lost.

Three years ago, film producers Andrew Fried and Jordan Wynn stumbled on Mr. Reisman's 1974 autobiography, "The Money Player," and pitched it to Mr. Wynn's boss Mark Gordon, producer of "Saving Private Ryan." Instead, Mr. Gordon, joined by @Radical Media (Mr. Fried's employer) and FremantleMedia Enterprises ("American Idol"), decided to film the Hardbat Classic for ESPN in the hopes of doing for ping pong what the "World Series of Poker" did for that game.

Using the old "hardbat" -- just a layer a pimped rubber on top of wood -- would be a

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great equalizer. A strong player would still be able to spin the ball, but not nearly as much. Lesser players would have a better chance, with the odds leveled further by a handicap system by which top players would spot opponents as many as 17 points in 21-point games, depending on the respective players' ranking on the U.S.A. Table Tennis ratings. Unrated players would compete in either in the "Bar Bracket," made up of winners of bar tournaments sponsored by Bud Light, or in the "Basement Bracket."

This being Las Vegas, the idea was that anyone could win. It wasn't quite true, but the important thing was that it seemed true.

In the early rounds, the buzz focused on two players. The first was Li Zhen Shi, 59, a former world champion as a member of the Chinese national team who later coached the U.S. Olympic team. Though once among the world's best players, Mr. Li had barely competed in decades. As a result, his rating by the USATT was just 2,124. Thus, by Hardbat Classic rules, he would be spotted as many as 10 points by the highest-rated players in the field. (Top 10 players are rated 2,500 or higher.) But Mr. Li would also be giving points -- as many as 17 -- to lesser opponents.

Meanwhile, Wayne Oberton was dominating the Basement Bracket. Mr. Oberton, 73, had been among the top players in the U.S. in the 1960s -- he had even played against Mr. Reisman. But because he also had not competed in any tournaments for more than two decades, he had no rating at all and would compete even-up against rank amateurs. That Mr. Oberton had always used a hardbat, never a sponge, would make him even more dangerous.

Mr. Oberton played his matches wearing both a belt and suspenders to hold up his khaki shorts. His game matched his wardrobe: Mr. Oberton employed a devastating chop shot and a fiendish consistency that allowed him to cruise through preliminary rounds without dropping a game.

Mr. Li, meanwhile, spotted 10 points and lost early on to Adoni Maropis, an actor best known for playing a villain on "24" -- and a very strong hardbat player. He soon regrouped and beat Keith Fraser, an aggressive and surprisingly agile 300-pounder, who afterward railed that the former world champ's rating was suspiciously low.

In the elimination rounds, Mr. Li, getting eight points, beat Freddie Gabriel, 26, the 2007 U.S. Open Hardbat division champion. But in the bracket semifinals, Mr. Li spotted Daniel Chu 10 points and lost. Mr. Chu, 57, had been a junior champion in his native Hong Kong at age 16. Then he gave up the game before picking it up again at 52. Mr. Chu, however, lost in the Professional Bracket final to Jeffrey Shaw, a 48-year-old chiropractor and midlevel player with a 1,120 rating, whom he spotted 12 points.

In the semifinal round, Mr. Shaw spotted Mr. Oberton eight points. Mr. Oberton, now the fan favorite, didn't need the help and won easily to earn a spot in the finals.

In the other semifinal, Trevor Runyan, one of the Hardbat All-Stars and the reigning U.S. National Hardbat Champion, faced off against Bar Bracket winner Jack Baker. Mr. Baker, 23, a nationally ranked collegiate tennis player from the University of South Alabama, had never competed seriously in ping pong until entering the Hardbat Classic. The unrated Mr. Baker was spotted 17 points against Mr. Runyan and won 21-3 and 21-12.

It should be noted that the Las Vegas sports books refused to make book on the Hardbat. In a minor effort to fill the void, and swept up in Mr. Oberton's story, I offered to take wagers on the 73-year-old with the antique style. After all, this was

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Vegas -- someone had to take a little action.

I lost my bets: Mr. Baker was just as steady as Mr. Oberton, but much stronger. Playing even-up, the tennis star won 21-11 and 21-13. The promoters and I might have been hoping for a Cinderella ending, but that wasn't to be.

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