

World Junior Championships 2013

Being selected for the World Junior Championships held in Morocco was a satisfying if not fulfilling achievement in itself. Going to the championships, I had nothing to lose and everything to learn. This is not to say I wasn't anxious or scared. The fact that Ma Long, Kenta Matsudaira and Fan Zhendong had all won this tournament was an indicator of the immense competition and level of the tournament. A 3 day preparation camp with the national team beforehand certainly gave me confidence to play aggressively and positively in Morocco. Awaiting the team after the camp was a draining 24 hour flight – the only positive note, for the first 15 hours we were in the comfort of an A380.

As we exited the gate on arrival, the Chinese Team arrived simultaneously in the adjacent gate. Following a very long custom check, there was another slight delay to the accommodation; we were notified that our bus was involved in a crash! When it eventually arrived, we undertook a 1 hour bus ride to Rabat, passing poor and rural areas, largely uncultivated, before arriving at Oumlil Hotel, via the competition centre. As we waited in the bus going to the hall, all a bit weary, two cars crashed violently only a few metres from us. To say the least, our first day in Morocco, despite being jetlagged and enervated, was filled with drama and exposure to a vastly different culture and environment.

The hospitality was 15 minutes away from the hall and we had all our meals there. In total, there were 3 hotels. We shared the accommodation with New Zealand, France and the Latin American countries to name a few.

Competition commenced on Sunday, 1st of December. The competition hall consisted of 8 tables, including two show court ITTV tables, one slightly bigger than the other. The training hall consisted of 12 tables. At times, there were at least 8 players on each table. One day, Ivan and I found ourselves hitting on the same table as Masataka Morizono and Asuka Sakai (two Japanese players who had given Japan a 2-1 lead in the team final against China). They displayed high intensity and quality from the very first ball. Seeing up close what it took to be a top player was definitely a beneficial and valuable experience.

Our first team match was against Italy, the current European Champions. Although we lost 3-0, my team-mates, Dominic, Jake and Ivan all gave the Italians some level of difficulty. In the afternoon, we faced Egypt. Despite being seeded 3rd in our group, we caused a 3-0 upset. At 2-0 up, I went in for my first of the tournament. I was very shaky in the first set; losing badly and missing a smash and probably 10 other backhands with it. I started feeling more comfortable in the court and struggled to a 3-1 victory. It wasn't the prettiest win but still a win. The first day was definitely a confidence booster for the team and myself.

On the second day we faced New Zealand and had the chance to confirm our best placing in several years. With the team and I both winning 3-1, we earned the chance to play for 13-16th. Despite losing to Chile 3-0, I think we were evenly matched in each contest – Ivan and I both losing close in the 5th. Lastly, we played Nigeria for 15-16th. We lost 3-1 and I was outplayed in my individual match. Although we were obviously disappointed, we had to concentrate on the individual events commencing immediately on the following day. Luckily

(or unluckily) for me, I ended up playing 4 times on Table 1 (note. these matches were all broadcast on ITTV). Although I wasn't able to pull any upsets, I was competitive in both my mixed and boy doubles whilst the Croatian and German in my singles were simply too good in many aspects of the game.

Throughout the week there were many exciting matches between the top players in the competition. I personally enjoyed watching these matches, taking it as a learning experience.

On our final day, and the competitions second last, we ventured into the city. Inside the ancient city walls was a brimming market place, resemblant of China. In contrast, the beach was placid, serene and clean! Funnily enough, the most modern thing we saw was a double storey, alfresco included, McDonald's restaurant, complete with a playground and soundtrack that was appealing to both the eyes and the ears. Despite some up and down's, the entire trip was not only greatly enjoyable but educational and inspiring. Seeing and playing some of the best juniors has certainly given me an idea of what it takes and what I will need to do to keep improving and hopefully, one day, be playing on the last days.