

**American / Chinese**



**Ping Pong Diplomacy**

**THE REMATCH**

## **Ping Pong Diplomacy: How it Began**

**by Robert Nedelkof**

What became known to the world as "ping-pong diplomacy" came into being on the afternoon of April 4, 1971. As the World Table Tennis Championship was concluding in Nagoya, Japan, a member of the team of the People's Republic of China noticed that one of the American players, Glenn Cowan, had missed his team's bus returning to their hotel after practice. The player gestured to Cowan to board the Chinese team's bus. Once aboard the vehicle, Cowan was presented with a silk brocade depicting the Fuchun Mountains by Zhuang Zedong, the leader of the Chinese team. Cowan reciprocated the next day with a red, white and blue shirt bearing a peace emblem and the words "let it be."

Although there had been low-key and mostly indirect contacts between American and Chinese diplomats since 1969, the expression of friendship between Zhuang and Cowan proved to be just what was needed to begin the opening of full-scale relations between two great nations. After reading newspaper articles about the exchange of gifts, Mao Zedong observed, "Zhuang Zedong not only plays good ping-pong but knows how to conduct diplomacy as well." He then instructed the PRC's Foreign Ministry to extend an invitation to the American team to visit China.

The Americans, with the teams of several other nations, arrived on April 10 and spent an exciting week in the PRC, playing matches with their Chinese counterparts in Beijing and Shanghai, and being honored with a lavish banquet at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, hosted by Premier Zhou Enlai.

The American team, in turn, invited their Chinese counterparts to visit the United States. A year later, on April 12, 1972, the PRC's team arrived in Detroit. During the next two weeks the Chinese and American players appeared in matches in seven cities across the nation. For fans of table tennis it was a chance to see players regarded, to this day, as among the best to play the sport. And, for Americans thrilled and moved by President Nixon's dramatic visit to China the previous February, it was an opportunity to show their appreciation to both teams for the way in which sportsmanship had enabled a new era of friendship and international harmony to begin.

Thirty-seven years after Premier Zhou raised his glass to the American team in the Great Hall and 36 years after President Nixon welcomed the Chinese team to the Rose Garden of the White House, as the world eagerly awaits the opening of the XXIX

Olympiad in Beijing, it is fitting that the men and women of table tennis, who helped bring about today's warm relations between China and the United States, be remembered.

This is the purpose of the American/Chinese Ping Pong Diplomacy: *The Rematch* exhibitions.