

NCTTA PROFILE: MICHAEL LANDERS

by Kenneth Lim

Playing professional table tennis is a daunting experience. You train for months on end, hitting multiball for hours every day, seven days a week. Countless footwork drills. Strength training. You watch your diet. All for that shot at glory and a podium finish during the Olympics. It's just you, your opponent, a 9 by 5 table, and millions of people watching worldwide.

But for 18-year-old former USA men's national singles champion Michael Landers, calculus is way scarier.

"The questions just sit there you know. They don't move, they don't do anything," Landers says, shaking his head. "At least when you hit the ball it might come back."

Michael Landers has played table tennis since he was 10 years old. He is the youngest ever player to win the national singles championship at 15 in 2009. He is also a freshman at New York University's Stern School of Business. And just as he's caught on to opponents' habits and tendencies on the table over the years, the Olympic hopeful is now adapting to life as a college student.

"It's definitely a lot different from the life that I've been used to," Landers admits. "Going from an online high school with minimal amount of work to like one of the top business schools in the country with tons of work has been really difficult."

But despite the increased workload, the Long Island resident is grateful for the new opportunities college brings. For years, table tennis was Landers' life. He would practice 6 to 7 hours a day and go for physical training 4 to 5 times a week.

"Before college, I was basically just focusing on table tennis. I stopped going to high school, I had to transfer to online school, and I lost a lot of my friends," Landers said. "But for the first time in a while I can actually be around people my own age and have the social life I kinda missed out on for a little bit."

Landers started his table tennis career literally by accident. When he was 10 years old, he fell out of a trashcan at home while playing hide and go seek, breaking his left arm just before the summer started. Not being able to do other sports for the entire summer, Landers and his family decided to visit a nearby table tennis club in Queens they had recently heard about.

"My dad and I would always play ping pong in the basement after dinner as a father son bonding activity," Landers said. "And since I only had my right arm available, we decided to check out the ping pong club. That was when I found out it was an actual sport, and I loved it, so I kept playing and playing."

Almost a decade later, Landers is in college. And for him, one of the main differences between NYU and high school is that his new schoolmates embrace his table tennis ability rather than dismissing it as a mere basement activity.

"People here are a lot more mature and they actually respect table tennis as a sport rather than just taking it as some silly little game that shouldn't be in the Olympics," he said. "You tell them you play Olympic level table tennis and they think it's the coolest thing."

But the 2623 rated player turns candid at the mention of college romance.

"That kinda happened by itself you know," Landers says, grinning,

referring to his current girlfriend Suzanne, whom he met at NYU. "I like to let things in life play out by themselves."

He recalls them being late for an NYU formal party this semester. Landers was playing in a tournament final that day. The ball started at 7 and Landers had to leave the gym to text his girlfriend that he would be late. At 8.

"She got so mad," Landers laughs. "And when we eventually went there I couldn't dance because I was still sore from playing. We had to leave after an hour. She was the one wearing heels but I couldn't move at all."

Nevertheless, table tennis remains Landers' first love and almost a year in college has not covered his Timo Boll ALC with dust just yet. Landers joined the NYU Table Tennis Team in September last year, and played a pivotal role in leading the team to its first ever NCTTA grand slam. NYU won both the coed and women's team tournaments at the Northeast Regional Championships in February this year. Landers was the men's singles champion.

"The NYU team's a great and really dedicated group of people and that's one nice thing about collegiate table tennis as opposed to just playing in regular United States tournaments," he said. "You're part of a team and I'm not only playing for myself, but for my school and my team mates and trying to represent us the best as I can."

Saajan Patel, a junior at NYU and fellow NYU table tennis team member recalls his first impressions of Landers when the latter joined the team last fall.

"I thought he might be self-centered because I've seen good players behave like that before," the 20 year old said. "But he turned out to be quite the opposite. He's a great team player, and he's always looking to give tips to other players and helping everyone else get better."

Landers hopes to do his best in both the team and singles tournaments at this year's NCTTA National Championships, held in Rockford, IL from April 12-14. He is currently the number one men's singles seed leading up to the competition.

"We're a relatively new group of team mates put together so I think around top eight would hopefully be the goal this year, and much higher in the future as we learn to work and get better together," he said. "For singles, I'm just gonna go all out and try to win the entire thing."

Still, Landers does not think it will be an easy path to victory, considering the number of good players playing collegiate table tennis this year.

"Everyone's a threat," Landers said. "Two of my closest friends Grant Li and Peter Li play for USC and UC Berkeley, so there should be some interesting matchups."

Ultimately, juggling college and table tennis is a delicate balancing act, and Landers says it's all about making time. Personally, he doesn't think he will ever stop playing.

"I still get to do what I love," Landers said. "And in addition to that I'm hanging out with people my own age, making friends and going to college. It's awesome."



MIDWEST REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOL TABLE TENNIS CHAMPIONSHIP

By: Linda A. Leaf

Over the years NCTTA has achieved many milestones. At the recent 2013 NCTTA National Championships another "first" was established. On April 13th, the first ever Midwest Regional High School Table Tennis Championship event was held at the NCTTA Championships in Rockford, Illinois.

A total of six high school table tennis teams competed, two from each state of Illinois, Minnesota and Wisconsin. A team consisted of four or more players. The format was four singles and two doubles in each team match-up. The competition between the schools was more even than anticipated with some team matches decided by the tie break procedure of games won-loss; a lot of fun drama!

NYTTA sponsored the high school event. NYTTA (National Youth Table Tennis Association) is a new, non profit organization with a mission of promoting table tennis in the schools as a sport. The states of Illinois, Minnesota and Wisconsin have had high school table tennis tournaments for several years. The obvious next step is a regional competition.

The full results are: Moundsview High School, MN – 1st; Madison West, WI – 2nd; Evanston, IL – 3rd; Oshkosh, WI – 4th; St. Paul Harding, MN – 5th; and, Adial E. Stevenson High School, IL – 6th.



Thank you NCTTA for its support of this high school table tennis event!

High school students, if you are interested in forming a table tennis team at your school and would like to compete against other school teams, please contact NYTTA. The NYTTA program also offers a trip to China in the summer for students for table tennis training. The first trip will occur this summer. For information on NYTTA visit its website: www.NYTTA.us or contact Linda Leaf at linda.leaf@gmail.com.