

L I F E L E S S O N S

Nobody Beats the Wiz

Playing table tennis against Judy Hugh, president of the Rutgers Table Tennis Club and member of the U.S. women's national team in 2007, is humbling, no matter how good you think you are.

When it comes to Ping-Pong on the backyard barbecue circuit, I seldom lose. To beat me, you have to slam me into submission. I'm steady as a rock, and experience has taught me that even decent Ping-Pong players make less than half their slams. If I avoid unforced errors, the percentages favor me, and I'll soon be christening my victory with a celebratory cannonball into the pool.

Playing the role of a human backboard was going to be my approach in challenging sophomore Judy Hugh, president of the 50-member Rutgers Table Tennis Club on the New Brunswick Campus and member of the U.S. women's national team in 2007. When we met in The Barn on the College Avenue Campus, I knew I needed a psychological edge. I thought I might rattle Hugh by asking her if I could use her paddle. "No way!" she said. She then dropped the news that she travels to China every summer to train and that she finished sixth in the U.S. Olympic team trials last winter at Drexel University. As a first-year student, Hugh won the women's singles state championship and helped last year's club team finish sixth in the nation.

Well, Hugh crushed me like ice in a blender. I tried serving deep and hard to her backhand. When that didn't work, I tried short slices to her forehand. Most points went no more than two or three volleys. She consistently angled her slam; when I managed to return one, she calmly pummeled me again. Her underspin and sidespin made my head spin, my returns net-bound or veering off blindly. In four games, in which the first to reach 11 won, I got two points. At least I was able to measure my game against someone who had competed in tournaments throughout the world to emerge as a nationally ranked player.

After methodically dispensing with me, Hugh was gracious—and offered guidance. We started with the grip. "Your index finger needs to move from the middle of the racquet to a 45-degree angle closer to the edge of the paddle, so your ball won't pop up as much," she said. "The proper grip gives you the flexibility to use both sides of the paddle." The only way to return spin is with counterspin. "And to put good spin on the ball, make contact from underneath, not by chopping down on the ball.



Judy Hugh finished sixth in the U.S. Olympic team trials last winter.

"I never slam at 100 percent; 60 to 70 percent will get the job done," she went on. "Placement is more important than a hard-hit ball, and jamming an opponent by aiming deep and for their belly limits their ability to extend their arms and hit an effective shot back."

Hugh had taught me the difference between recreational Ping-Pong and serious table tennis. Tutorial completed, she looked into my eyes knowingly, her expression steeped in sympathy. She knew, and I knew, that my game would never get me beyond the backyard barbecue circuit of Ping-Pong—unlike Hugh, who was aiming to earn her way back onto the U.S. women's national team and possibly win a spot on the U.S. Olympic team in 2012.

Next time I cannonball into the pool, the splash of victory won't feel quite the same.

— Bill Glovin