

DIANE AND ROSALIND ROWE – THE TEENAGE WORLD CHAMPIONS

On 14 April 2008 two of England's select band of world champions will be celebrating their 75th birthday. The twins Diane and Rosalind Rowe surprised the world of table tennis with their doubles success in Vienna in 1951, and then delighted their home crowd with a repeat victory in 1954 at the Royal Albert Hall. The all-English final, against Ann Haydon and Kathleen Best, took place on their 21st birthday.

Diane and Ros began playing the game as many children do even today, hitting the ball across the kitchen table, with the endless encouragement of their father. Soon they joined a local youth club in Greenford, Middlesex, where they had their first experience of proper conditions. It wasn't long before, in their mid-teens, they both joined the nearby West Ealing club, where they soon played for the local league team.

They were both very agile and interested in playing any form of sport. Their affinity to table tennis came naturally and they played during every free moment. Sisterly rivalry, especially as twins, was never far from the surface, and the girls helped each other to improve as a result of this. They also found that they made a natural doubles partnership, with an innate understanding of the other, as Diane calls it "like a machine, in automatic harmony."

Coached at West Ealing by England international Ken Craigie, Ros, who is right-handed and the elder, and Diane, who is left-handed, made great progress. In 1949, 16 year-old Ros was selected to play for England in a match in Czechoslovakia. Whilst she was away, Diane won a *Daily Mirror* competition for which the prize was coaching from the great Victor Barna, who became the twins' coach and mentor for several years.

After both girls had played in several internationals for England, in 1951 they were selected to represent England in the world championships in Vienna. Whilst considering it a tremendous achievement to be selected, the urge to win once they arrived also burned strongly. It may have surprised the rest of the table tennis world that they won the title, but the twins themselves were more determined than overawed.

The 18 year-olds fought through four knockout rounds to reach the final, where they played the highly-rated Romanians Angelica Rozeanu and Sari Szasz. Roared on by British servicemen stationed in the Austrian capital, their victory was by three games to one, their most memorable moment in the sport.

In the 1950s, the world championships were held each year. In both 1952 in Bombay, and 1953 in Bucharest, the twins were twice runners-up as they attempted to win the ladies' doubles for a second time. Meanwhile, both reached the semi-finals of the singles in Bucharest and Ros also reached the Bombay semi-finals. Ros' results individually were slightly better overall than those of her sister. She was the steadier player, whilst Diane was capable of brilliance and despair in the same game.

So the scene was set for the 1954 championships in London. Diane reflects on her disappointment that their opponents in the final were also

English, but throughout the event the twins had demonstrated that no-one was going to stop them this time and in the final they duly beat Haydon and Best deuce in the fourth game. The victory sparked a whirlwind of celebrations, first of all back at home for a 21st birthday cake, and then to the England team hotel in London to party on until the early hours, all the time surrounded by flowers, telegrams and assorted well-wishers.

Ros played the following year (the twins were again world runners-up), but then she married and played no more top-class tournaments. Instead, Ros reached a very high standard at golf. She now lives in Kent.

Diane, however, carried on, appearing regularly in all of the major international tournaments until she was into her forties. She was again world doubles runner-up in 1957 playing with Ann Haydon and, with Mary Shannon, twice European doubles champion. In 1966, Diane not only married her mixed doubles partner, Eberhard Schöler, but she also took up German nationality and they settled in Düsseldorf. Diane played in, and for, West Germany for the next six years, achieving success at all levels, including a mixed doubles bronze medal at the 1971 world championships in Japan.

Diane has never quite lost the table tennis bug. For many years she was a coach and national team trainer in Germany. She has served the Swaythling Club International (representing ex-international players), latterly as President of the Executive Committee since 2000. In 1993, she was awarded the ITTF Merit Award for services to the game.

Diane says that she has enjoyed her lifetime's involvement with table tennis. "Playing can be very exhilarating but also heart-breaking; coaching can be very inspiring, particularly of young players; organising, well, it's sometimes a thankless hobby."

Who were her best players of the past? Two she played against: Gizi Farkas, oozing with natural talent, and Angelica Rozeanu, who was a dedicated and tenacious player; two she played with: Victor Barna, with his elegance and ball control, and Richard Bergmann for his fighting ability and tenacity; and two whom she has watched more recently: Jan-Ove Waldner and Jean-Michel Saive.

Thinking of the future, Diane would like to see an end to the blanket domination of the Chinese players, especially in the women's game. "It is essential," she says, "to have a high standard of competition throughout the world and not to be dominated by one nation – this makes it more interesting for all."

As their 75th birthday approaches, Diane can certainly look back on her achievements with pride and is grateful for what she has achieved: "I would like to think that I have given sufficient back to my sport as a thank you for what I gained from table tennis over the years."

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