

Aurora Sports Hall of Fame inductee Grace Wong: Masters? Division ITTF World Champion, Co-Founder of Canada Panda Cup, and Table Tennis Advocate



Grace Wong is coming off the best year of her table tennis career.

Last November, the Aurora resident captured the gold medal for Team Canada at the ITTF Pan America Masters Tournament in Fort Lauderdale, FL.

?It was amazing. Winning a team world championship was very special. I was teamed with three other Canadian women?two from the GTA and one from Vancouver. We all swept through our singles and doubles stages. We beat the national teams from Columbia, Ecuador, and Brazil before winning the championship against Chile.?

Prior to the showdown in Fort Lauderdale, Wong finished in first place in Mixed Doubles at the ITTF World Veteran Championships in Muscat, Oman in January.

Her victory was even more remarkable because her doubles partner was not known to her until she checked into the registration table at the tournament.

?I didn't know who my playing partner was when I landed in Oman. As it turned out, I was partnered with Waleed El-Khouly who is considered to be a national hero in Egypt. He was a great partner. Communication is the key to success in doubles and, although we didn't have much time together prior to competing, we were both fluent in English. The mixed doubles event was also my last chance to win in Muscat-- after a series of disappointing singles and doubles performances. Waleed and I defeated national teams from Germany, the UK, and India to win the championship.?

This year, the international champ put forth a strong showing at the Rome Masters Table Tennis Championships in July where she earned a Top 5 finish in a tournament featuring 6100 players and 109 countries. A resident of Aurora since 2008, an ASHOF volunteer for two years, and slated for enshrinement in the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame next month, Wong's remarkable ride to international table tennis stardom began less than ten years ago.

To say that Wong is an inspirational late bloomer is an understatement.

Although she learned to play the sport she loves in an after-school program in her native China as a seven-year-old, Wong played table tennis as an extracurricular option only.

Wong remembers playing the sport with the most rudimentary types of equipment ?on a concrete table surface with tiered bricks serving as our net.? From these humble beginnings where so many great sports stories begin, Wong developed into a multi-sport athlete. Table tennis took a backseat to a range of sports including basketball, golf, and tennis. Notably, Wong starred as a shortstop on her university softball team where she was the foundation of her squad's defense.

The team finished fourth in China's national university championships. Wong found that the ?quickness, ferocity, and hand-eye skills used to hit a fast-moving, spinning object in softball translated well to hitting and returning the ball in table tennis.?

Wong, between sips of tea at our table at Tim Hortons, explained how she fell back in love with the sport and became an advocate for table tennis. The epiphanic moment took place when she co-founded and co-chaired the Canada Panda Cup in 2016?an internationally-recognized table tennis event.

?We had the Olympic champion and World Champion at the event to help grow the sport. The event was 100% reliant on a huge volunteer team. Hosting the 2017 Panda Cup at the Pan-Am Centre in Markham showed me up close how great table tennis is as a sport.?

Her memories of the watershed Markham tournament are vivid.

?I did look at the trophy, but I never dreamed I would be at that level, too. I watched the speed of the game and realized I would have to make some mechanical changes to my game.?

Wong explained the key change she made was to her paddle grip in order to generate more power and speed to her game.

?I had to undo decades of habits and the way the game was taught to me in China. I had been taught the traditional ?pen holder grip' which allowed me to push back returns, but it took away any kind of strong backhand. When I changed to a ?shake hands style', it took months to re-learn the game. I had to undo techniques I'd used for over thirty-five years.?

After making mechanical adjustments, Wong described how she became ?a volunteer coach at the Oak Ridges Community Centre on Bayview.?

?The Community Centre staff was really supportive and provided us with four tables. I got a chance to coach thirty kids, along with other coaches, and started getting back into the game. I became recommitted to table tennis and was determined to show people that it wasn't just a game to be played in basements.?

Wong emigrated to Canada in 2007. Her decision to take up residency in Aurora in 2008 was all about her son Jerry's schooling.

?My son was enrolled at SAC and was spending three hours on a bus every day up and down Yonge Street. He was a multisport athlete who played football, basketball, and rugby, and was part of the Cadets and Music programs at St. Andrew's. I was really happy when we made the move to Aurora when Jerry started Grade 9. It was easier on him and he graduated in 2011 from SAC. I have been lucky to live in Aurora and work from home so I can enjoy what the Town has to offer and I enjoy golfing in Aurora, too.?

As a 16-year resident, Wong expressed her satisfaction about being inducted into the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame in November.

?I'm the first table tennis athlete to be inducted. As an inductee, I feel a responsibility to promote table tennis as a sport. I think I'm

going to be super excited and have loads of emotion at the ceremony ? or I might be as calm as I am when I go into a tournament. My sister is coming in from New York, my son and his wife will be there, my parents will be there, too. My mom is still playing table tennis at the age of 87?soon to be 88. Her health and activity is something I wish for everyone. I am so happy to see her play. I'm happy since we'll explore the lifetime benefits of table tennis. There are so many benefits to the game for people of all ages. Sports, in general, have so many benefits, but I'll be advocating for the sport.?

Advocating for the sport of table tennis has become a mission for Wong and her enthusiasm for it is infectious. She expresses a similar love of golf as well and noted how ?golf was so important during COVID to get back into recreational sports and find a safe activity outside your house.?

Despite golf's ongoing benefits, it's clear her passion is for table tennis and its prominent place in Aurora's official Sports Plan.

?I'm really trying to improve table tennis's profile into the Town's official Sports Plan. Table tennis should be offered in our public recreational places like the SARC and the ACC. The Aurora Seniors' Centre has a wonderful table tennis schedule on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. However, you have to be 55 years old to qualify and enjoy it. Last week, I was invited to join an open discussion organized by the Aurora Sports Plan team.?

Wong's present and future impact on the sport of table tennis?locally, nationally, and internationally?is a given as she shares her love of the game with a widening circle of aficionados on her way to enshrinement in the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame.

Wong mentioned in her fun-loving manner that she wants to ?play table tennis when I'm 90? and it would not be prudent to bet against this bundle of positive energy.

By Jim Stewart