

Eight decades, ready for number nine

By Ian Marshall

(Editor – Swaythling Club Magazine, International Table Tennis Federation).

A total of eight decades completed, a career starting in the 1940s, now in 2020 New Zealand's Alan Tomlinson commences his ninth decade of play!

He progressed to international status in an era that witnessed television becoming the norm in the household, the plastic bottle appearing; rock and roll transforming the music scene, the first passenger jets entering service.

Recovering from the effects of World War Two, the 1950s was an era of immense change. Arguably, in the sport of table tennis, the greatest of changes; it was an age that witnessed the most significant impacts on the

history of the sport, a period that formulated the modern day game.

At the start of the decade, Europe dominated the international scene, by the end of the period Japan and then China had world titles in their lockers. Moreover, the racket had changed from a blade covered with layer of pimped rubber to the principle of the modern day racket that added a layer of sponge. The so-called sandwich bat was born.

Starting to play in those days meant adapting quickly; especially adjusting techniques, experimenting with new materials was rampant as the sport moved into the unknown.

Born on Tuesday 27th March 1934 in Auckland in the North Island, the city in which he has always lived, either in St Mary's Bay or Herne Bay; Alan Tomlinson is a family man. He is married to Maureen, has a married daughter Larissa Park and a son, James; his grandchildren are Emily and Isabella Park. During his working life he was a distribution agent for the New Zealand Herald, supervising boys and later girls to make home deliveries.

Table tennis for Alan Tomlinson began in 1948, the pimped rubber racket the only option for the serious player.

"I started playing in a room off All Saints Anglican Church where I had earlier attended Sunday school", reminisced Alan Tomlinson. "I was 14 years old and would have been at Auckland Grammar School, which had some top juniors. I did not start interclub competition until I was 16; my claim to fame is that I never won a junior title of any description!"

No junior title but in 1959 there was a major breakthrough; at the New Zealand Open, the tournament held annually, he won the men's singles title beating Bob Jackson in the final, the winner in 1950 as well as on the six previous occasions from 1953 to 1958.

Later Alan Tomlinson was to win again in 1964, 1969 and 1972; additionally he claimed the men's doubles ten times but the mixed only once.

"Probably I won the mixed on just one occasion because I was a steady attacker rather than a big hitter", explained Alan Tomlinson.

Internationally, he travelled widely; in 1971 he competed in the first ever Commonwealth Championships, the tournament staged in Singapore; later he has played in three World Veteran Championships including the 2014 event in Auckland.

The result at the time, he surpassed all others and gained a place in the New Zealand edition of the Guinness Book of Records, a total 54 international appearances, the most of any table tennis player.

He was named New Zealand Player of the Year in 1959, 1966 and 1967; additionally he fulfilled several administrative roles including writing newspaper articles and editing magazines. In 1999 he was inducted into the Table Tennis New Zealand Hall of Fame. He was a NZ National Selector from 1981 to 1984.

However, when considering the changes in his table tennis career; his debut in the 1961 World Championships in Beijing is arguably one the greatest significance.

"I think we were able to go to China because they paid half our fares," explained Alan Tomlinson. "To nobody's surprise we didn't do very well."

Three groups in the men's team event; they finished in eighth place in a group of nine; their only success being a 5-0 win against Cuba; however, they did cause England problems.

"We led England 2-1, before losing 5-2, Ian Harrison in fine form", explained Alan Tomlinson. "Murray Dunn beat Jeff Ingber and I beat Brian Merrett 18-14 in the third, on the time limit rule, a feat which remains unique in our table tennis annals."

The "time limit rule" reflects a major change in the era; in fact Alan Tomlinson was quite possibly the last player to win a match under the rule! In 1937 a time limit of 20 minutes for each game was imposed; at the 1961 Congress in Beijing, it was agreed to introduce the American innovation, the "expedite rule" as an experiment, the principle of the rule applies today.

For the records, in the contest against England, Ian Harrison remained unbeaten. The further English wins came from Jeff Ingber against Alan Tomlinson, Brian Merrett in opposition to Bryan Foster.

Also, at the 1961 World Championships New Zealand faced Japan.

"The Japanese had a player called Nobuya Hoshino; when I played him he lobbed a lot in the first game, which I won", said Alan Tomlinson. "After that he played more aggressively and beat me. It was suggested Ichiro Ogimura may initially have told him that I didn't like lobs. He was a tragicomic figure as he shuffled off after he and his team had lost to China but he did win the doubles later."

China progressed to win the men's team title. Zhuang Zedong was crowned men's singles champion. Japan emerged the women's team winners, Nobuya Hoshino and Koji Kimura clinched the men's doubles top prize; Ichiro Ogimura and Kimio Matsuzaki reserved the top step of the mixed doubles podium. The only title for Europe was claimed by Romania. Maria Alexandru and Georgeta Pita secured women's doubles gold.

Most significantly, Qiu Zhonghui became the first Chinese player to win a women's singles title at a World Championships.

Ten years earlier in Vienna all seven titles had finished in European hands, ten years on it was very different; the headline written following the 1961 World Championships by Peter Wilson, a Daily Mirror reporter, summed up the decade: "China takes over from Japan", his words proved prophetic.



Visitor to the British Isles

Alan Tomlinson was a most welcome visitor to the shores of the British Isles and attracted the attention; not only by the way he played but also by his attire. True to his country, he dressed in all black. However, contrary to his rugby union compatriots he did not perform the Haka before every match.

In 1962 he arrived in England, having enjoyed notable success on home soil. Additional to having won the men's singles title at the New Zealand Open in 1959, he had also emerged successful at tournaments in North Island, North Shore, Auckland, Franklin, Thames Valley, Waikato, Bay of Plenty and North Taranaki. He was no stranger to travel but England was a little further!



A long journey today, even longer in those days; it was by sea, not the modern day experience where, if you can afford the flight, the journey can be made by air in just over 24 hours.

Arriving in England, he practised in London at Harry Venner's Putney Club; the first tournament of note in which he played was the Sussex Open at the White Rock Pavilion in Brighton, held on the weekend of Saturday 27th and Sunday 28th October. It was not the best of fortunes; he was beaten in the qualification stage by Arun Khanna from Willesden in west London. The loss was no great surprise, earlier in the year in April Arun Khanna had won the Essex Open.

"I arrived in England on October 6th; I failed at Hastings, the weekend that the clocks went back but unlike Harold I lived to fight another day," smiled Alan Tomlinson, somewhat a historian. In 1066 at the Battle of Hastings, Harold, the King of England had been defeated by William the Conqueror.

Disappointment on the south coast of England, Alan Tomlinson headed north. On Saturday 3rd November he played in the Hull and East Riding Open, a tournament with a traditional home of Madeley Street Baths, a temporary wooden floor being laid over the swimming pool. It was also the home for roller skating and in the winter, cricket nets.

Again in the men's singles, he departed proceedings in the early rounds. He was beaten by 18 year old Denis Neale, as in Hastings it was no great loss; Denis Neale won the event and later, commencing in 1966, was English national champion on overall six occasions.



Next on the itinerary was a journey across the Pennines to the other side of the country, staying with relatives in Royton, near Manchester, on Saturday 10th November he played in the Merseyside Open staged at the Dunlop factory in Speke.

In Speke, it was somewhat different to Hastings and Hull. He attracted the attention of George Yates, the local reporter at the time, later to be the editor of Table Tennis News, the official journal of the English Table Tennis Association.

"Fresher than the wind that whipped over the Mersey Bar was the impact of New Zealand's no.2, Alan Tomlinson, making his third appearance in this country since arriving five weeks previously. Tall and rangy, this 28 year old Auckland newspaper agent commanded all eyes in bringing about the downfall of the no.1 seed, Jeff Ingber in the quarters. Having previously disposed of Mike Creamer, Roy Morley and Derek Baddeley, the traveller was finally halted by Symonds in a swashbuckling semi that had the crowd thundering their applause."

Matches best of three games, each game to 21 points, five serves before change; a closely contested straight games defeat was the outcome against Mick Symonds (21-17, 21-19), a player a sublime talent and raconteur par

excellence but on this occasion had to settle for runners up spot. He was beaten by Brian Wright of Middlesex in a quite epic final (13-21, 21-16, 21-19).

“Yes, I had a couple of good wins there before losing to Mick Symonds”, said Alan Tomlinson. “I was disappointed because I had been practising at the Manchester YMCA with him, Jeff Ingber, George Livesey, Jack Clayton and others and had usually beaten Mick. He later became a good squash player and moved to South Africa.”

The win against Jeff Ingber (21-18, 21-16), a player who stuck to tradition using the pimpled rubber racket with no sponge, was a major upset; they were to become close friends. Sadly last year on Sunday 7th July, Jeff Ingber passed away.

“I was saddened to read of the death of Jeff Ingber,” reminisced Alan Tomlinson. “I first met him in Beijing in 1961 and used to practise with him at the Manchester YMCA in 1962 and 1963. We were both spectators at the World Team Championships in Bremen in 2006, enjoyed catching up.”

A semi-final defeat in Speke but there was success; he partnered Yorkshire’s Mick Dainty to the men’s doubles title; the pair accounting for Lancashire’s Kevin Forshaw and Roy Crusham in the final (21-17, 14-21, 21-15). At the time they were a most prominent force in tournaments held in the north of England; Roy Hinchcliffe, one of the leading players in Hull aptly named them “forehand and crush ‘em”.

Impressive on Merseyside, the following week he was on duty in the midlands. On Saturday 17th November at the Friends Institute, he won the men’s singles title at the Birmingham Open. He beat renowned Englishmen Laurie Landry, David Bevan and Terry Densham to reach the final where he accounted for the host city’s Ralph Gunnion.

Closest contest was at the quarter-final stage where he overcame David Bevan by the very narrowest of margins in the decider (13-21, 21-12, 21-19). The final was less dramatic, he beat Ralph Gunnion in straight games (21-16, 21-9).

Success against Kevin Forshaw, one week later in the York Railway Institute it was success in partnership with the Lancastrian; at the Yorkshire Open, the duo won the men’s doubles event. In the final they overcame Scotland’s Ian Barclay and Bertie Kerr (21-14, 21-10).

Throughout the later months of 1962 and the early part of 1963, Alan Tomlinson travelled far and wide; he won the men’s singles title at the Bath Open and partnered Roy Morley to men’s doubles success. Meanwhile, he journeyed to Ireland where he secured three titles at the Munster Open. He beat England’s Johnny Leach followed by success against South Africa’s Derek Wall to win the men’s singles event; he partnered Derek Wall to men’s doubles success, Violet Lambert to mixed doubles gold.

“I won the mixed with Violet Lambert because her usual partner Tommy Caffrey was sick”, reflected Alan Tomlinson

Also in April 1963 there was success at Govan Town Hall at the Scottish Open; a tournament with a very Oceania feeling; both from Australia, he beat Mike Wilcox in the semi-final, Cliff McDonald in the final. In addition he partnered England’s Pam Mortimer to mixed doubles gold.

Four years later, in preparation for the 1967 World Championships, Alan Tomlinson returned to British shores. In the men’s team he lined up alongside Murray Dunn and Bryan Foster; two younger players completed the squad, Harrison Waterhouse and Terry O’Carroll. Neti Traill, Cath Johnson, Dawn Wade and a 15 year old Yvonne Fogarty formed the women’s team. Notably, at the Stag 2014 World Veteran Championships in Auckland, Yvonne Fogarty played a major administrative role.

An intense schedule, proceedings commencing on the weekend of Saturday and Sunday 18th March, when the New Zealanders competed in Edinburgh at the Scottish Open; notably Alan Tomlinson partnered Bryan Foster to men’s doubles success, prior to losing to the host nation’s Malcolm Sugden in the men’s singles final (21-14, 12-21, 19-21, 21-18, 21-13).

“In the final I led Malcolm Sugden two games to one; at 16-18 down in the fourth I got him back lobbing”, reminisced Alan Tomlinson. “I had won every point when he had lobbed but he got an edge ball and won that game. In the fifth he got a huge lead, something like 10-2; I was never going to catch him from there.”

Runners up spot for Alan Tomlinson but overall for New Zealand it was success. In addition to the men’s doubles, Neti Trill won the women’s singles and the mixed with Bryan Foster. Yvonne Fogarty partnered Cath Johnson to women’s doubles gold as well as claiming the junior girls’ singles title.

Immediately following, three international fixtures, commencing on Tuesday 21st March and completed on three consecutive days, were played. The first two were against Scotland in Wishaw and Glasgow respectively, honours even, the outcome being 5-5 on each occasion. The third was in the capital city when opposing Edinburgh Select, a 6-4 win for the hosts was the end result.

Significantly, the New Zealanders took the opportunity to field their younger players; Alan Tomlinson only played in the second fixture. He lost to Malcolm Sugden but beat Brian Kean; in addition he partnered Bryan Foster to doubles success when the two Scots united.

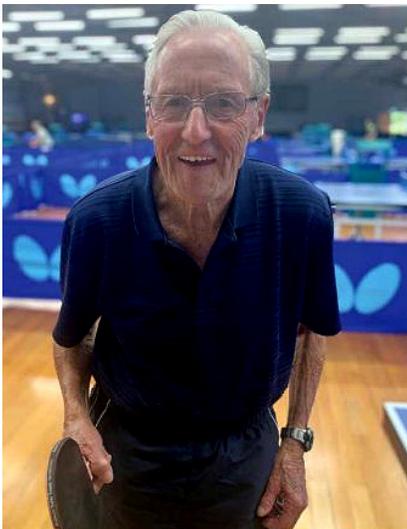
Scottish adventures over, it was a journey down the east coast to Scarborough for the North East of England Open, played over the Easter weekend, Friday 24th March to Monday 27th March. Alas, success for the visiting New Zealanders was limited. Cath Johnson and Neti Trill won the women’s doubles; Yvonne Fogarty secured the junior girls’ singles title.

Immediately following, commencing on Tuesday 28th March; just as in Scotland, a series of three fixtures followed, the first two against Yorkshire, the third in opposition to Lancashire.

“We had too many players for the county match system, we used three men and one woman”, explained Alan Tomlinson

Against Yorkshire, Alan Tomlinson beat Peter Duncombe in both fixtures, sharing the honours when facing Denis Neale. New Zealand secured a 7-3 win followed by a 6-4 success; in the latter Alan Tomlinson appeared in the doubles in harness with Murray Dunn, the duo lost to Alan Hydes and John Kedge.

“I played Denis Neale at least seven times and beat him twice, in his home town Middlesbrough and mine, Auckland,” reflected Alan Tomlinson. “I first met him at the Hull and East Riding Open in 1962, shortly after I had arrived in England. He was just out of juniors and beat me with his close up pimples out style, reminding me of the Chinese pen-holders. When I beat him in 1967 he said: “how could I lose to you? I beat you all those years ago and I have improved 15 points since?”



Two wins for New Zealand; against Lancashire, it was a 5-5 draw. Alan Tomlinson lost to Kevin Forshaw but beat John Clarke; partnering Bryan Foster the pair secured the doubles in opposition to Kevin Forshaw and George Livesey.

A busy schedule to say the least, the following week they travelled south to compete in the Stevenage Open on Saturday 8th and Sunday 9th April.

“The top four Englishmen had left for the World Championships in Stockholm but there were several ranked players present, including Brian Wright, the fifth ranked,” explained Alan Tomlinson.

After overcoming Murray Dunn in the semis, it was Brian Wright whom he beat in the final. Next stop was Stockholm; in the men’s team event it was 25th place, for the women the 16th spot.

Adapting to sponge by Alan Tomlinson

After the Japanese success at the 1952 World Championships in Bombay (Mumbai) some brief experiments were made with sponge in New Zealand but it was the reports coming from the London 1954 World Championships that had some of us heading for various stores to buy anything that could be called sponge.

Notably in 1953, Japan had not played at the World Championships in Bucharest; I think the reason was owing to the American occupation treaty following the end of World War Two, they were not allowed to go behind the Iron Curtain.

National champion Bob Jackson came back from London with a Flisberg bat and managed to find some rubber locally that was thick, fast and grey in colour. It looked like the Flisberg because similarly it was partly cut in squares.

He used it alongside my discovery, a black, hard industrial sponge on the backhand. I found I couldn't play defenders with that stuff on my forehand so I took a slice of sandwich rubber off a bat I had purchased in 1956; notably, it was slower than the Flisberg. On the backhand we used the black stuff to block or counter and found that it applied considerable backspin for over the table pushes.

I tried a bat like Bob's and nearly beat him once but I wasn't comfortable against chop. I reverted to traditional pimped rubber for a while before discovering a Tomita bat and used a slice taken from that. It was pimples out sandwich, unquestionably thicker than allowed now. Yoshio Tomita was about number four in Japan.

The Japanese champions, Ichiro Ogimura and Toshiaki Tanaka arrived in 1957 to show us how to play. Before their exhibition, they were scheduled to play Jackson and myself in a Corbillon Cup style match, in the doubles each of them with a junior player. They said that they were tired after playing the night before in Whangarei, about 100 miles, some two hours north of Auckland. They would play only one singles each. I was our second string I played Ogimura, who had narrowly lost his world title to Tanaka.

We played in the "Peter Pan", a popular venue for ballroom dancers, the night was truly amazing. The ticket price was raised considerably to 10 shillings (taking into account inflation in modern day terms £25.00 or US\$32.00); some people were almost literally hanging from the rafters. Those at the very back clung precariously to anything that would keep them from disaster. I have no idea of the exact numbers but visiting champions could sometimes attract 1,000 spectators.

Ogimura used a rubber called felt, which was fast, hard with a roughened surface providing very little spin, despite what you may read, Ogi had great of trouble trying to hit my backhand pushes and when I blocked to his backhand he usually went back and lobbed. I had never seen lob defence before but it was love at first sight, especially as I was then seven centimeters taller than I am now! I won 21-15, 21-16.

Jackson then narrowly beat Tanaka, prompting a friend to tell me that I had been world champion for half an hour. The next night Jackson played by invitation in Hamilton and beat Ogimura but lost to Tanaka; that was the extent of our wins.

Afterwards they gave us a Butterfly brochure and I loved the description of felt, though incorrect "elasticity of sponge bestows speeds, featuring moreover intensified spinning of the beaten ball". Tanaka used the first reverse sandwich we had seen, much thicker than is allowed now. When I used it for a while I was said to be using Tanaka and black.

Later they saw my strip of sandwich and Ogi was offended that it carried the name of a leading Japanese player. Ogi seemed to want him deprived of his amateur status.

We had read that Ogi was a great softball player but that was a popular fallacy. The players explained that Japan had two forms of table tennis, hardball which we know and softball. Ogi was champion in both.

Sponge may have been my saviour because through 1952 and 1953 I made the suicidal decision to play forehand only, like Richard Bergmann and Bohumil Vana. They were small and fast, I was tall and not very fast. I should have been trying to emulate Ferenc Sido and Ivan Andreadis.

I may have been unlucky. The English coach Ken Stanley came to New Zealand in 1952, I had exactly one class lesson, the only coaching I ever had. If I had been selected for personal coaching he might have sorted me out in no time because in the previous year, my second, I had developed quite a reasonable backhand.

Perhaps I might have made the team for the London 1954 World Championships, I didn't but I was part of a 12 man training squad.

Six years later I made my debut, the 1961 World Championships in Beijing. At the time I was using pimples out sandwich but on our first stop in Manila we saw the loop drive; on our return I used reversed rubber and developed a loop. On arrival in England I bought a Stiga bat with reverse and used it for the whole of that season.



Many changes in less than ten years, finally a solution: the basis of the modern day racket. Ever since, it has been that type of racket I have used, now it is Butterfly Super Anti on the backhand, I play about twice a week at the wonderful purpose built Auckland Stadium where I am a lifetime member.

Times have changed.

Notes:

Some very minor changes in the interests of absolute accuracy have been made to the original article.

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