

Victor Barna

The name of Victor Barna resounds in the world of table tennis with a reverence scarcely dimmed by the passing of time. Barna has just been recognised by the sports authorities in his native Hungary as “the most successful Hungarian sportsman of the twentieth century”. Barna died in 1972, aged just 61, but the award was presented to his wife Susie, who still lives in the same flat in Pinner which she shared with Victor from the early 1940s.

Contemporary reports credit Barna with being the individual more than any other to whom the popularity of table tennis was due – he did so much to raise the game from the status of a winter indoor recreation for tennis players into a major worldwide sport in its own right. Barna himself won 22 world titles at singles, doubles and team, but more than anything it was his dedication to the game and his enthusiasm on and off the table which characterised Barna’s career.

The son of a Budapest printer, Barna learnt table tennis playing at the local sports club. In his teens, he reached the fringes of the world-beating national squad, and soon he was starring in his own right as Hungary won the 1929 Swaythling Cup (for national teams). Barna won his first world singles title in 1930 in Berlin, using the hard bats which were then popular. This was before the far-eastern nations had joined the world scene and the game was dominated by Europeans.

But Barna was an enthusiastic traveller and he became, even before the War, an ambassador for the game. He played exhibitions with his fellow Hungarians wherever they went, and he showed a dedication to the game and to his audiences that few could match. He was an excellent stoke-maker with a trademark backhand flick and an almost impenetrable defence. He was extremely agile on his feet, with terrific powers of anticipation and concentration.

More world titles followed, at singles and doubles, and winner’s trophies from several open tournament in North America, Europe and Australia. One wonders what might have been had Barna not been involved in a car crash, whilst travelling to a match in France. He wasn’t seriously hurt, but he had a platinum plate inserted in his forearm, and everyone who knew him said that he was never quite the same player again.

Barna had a job in the pharmaceutical industry, but he had an argument with his boss about the amount of time he had off to play table tennis and he walked out. He moved to France in 1936 and played professionally there, but it was to England that he came on the

outbreak of War. He and his wife Susie were travelling and playing in the United States in September 1939 and were the only people applying to come back to Europe – Victor felt that he had a duty to fight the Nazi threat. He joined a British army commando unit and was all set to be parachuted into Yugoslavia until Marshal Tito cabled London that he didn't require any help. So he remained in Britain playing exhibition table tennis to improve morale – the Savoy Hotel was a regular haunt.

After the War, Victor and Susie settled in Pinner. No longer the force in the world game that he had been in the 1930s, Victor became more involved in the development of the game, at international, national and local level. His last World Championships were in 1954 at the Wembley Empire Pool and he was runner-up in the Men's Doubles. He represented England and would also play for Middlesex. The Victor Barna Trophy is still competed for every year by representative teams from each of the Middlesex local leagues.

Not being able to live off table tennis alone, Barna became a representative for the Dunlop Sports Company based in London, initially for table tennis products, but later – he was very good at his job – for tennis, athletics and golf as well. Many of today's table tennis players will remember the hard 'Barna bat' with which they first played the game and Barna tables and nets were also in vogue.

On behalf of the international federation, Barna continued as an ambassador for the sport, which was growing in popularity around the world and now boasted a sizeable contingent of successful far-eastern adherents. And he would always have his bat with him, and would entertain locals even in the most rudimentary of facilities with a selection of flicks and trick shots. It was whilst on official table tennis business in Peru in 1971 Victor suffered a heart attack and died in Lima.

Barna's playing success speaks for itself – five world singles titles (four of them consecutive in the 1930s) plus 17 others in men's and mixed doubles and for Hungary. The honour recently awarded by that nation was justly deserved for this alone. But he will be remembered just as much as the personality who popularised the sport and gave it a worldwide platform – and all this with a significant presence, grace and humility not often seen amongst today's world champions.

Steve Leven
October 2003