

# SPEEDING BIRDIE NO MATCH FOR BADMINTON ACE

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*By LELAND JOACHIM, Mercury News Staff Writer November 7, 1990 Publication: San Jose Mercury News (CA) Page: 9 Word Count: 1070*

WHEN THE tryouts for the National Badminton Team were held about a month ago in Manhattan Beach, Meiling Okuno wasn't expecting to set the court afire. Babying an injured knee, the Sunnyvale woman qualified for the six-woman singles team, won the semifinal, then cruised through the final match, giving her opponent a gift victory to avoid worsening the knee.

"I did better than I expected," she said. "I was just hoping to make the team."

Okuno, 28, looks like she might be more at home in an aerobics class at the recreation center than blasting opponents into badminton oblivion in top tournaments. Bum knee or not, how can this wisp be one of the top female badminton players in the country?

"I think it's my agility and athletic ability," said Okuno matter-of-factly. Don't get the idea Okuno and the other athletes of amateur badminton play some namby-pamby ladies game.

100 mph birdie

"I think it's even more grueling than tennis," Okuno said. "The bird is traveling much faster than a tennis ball. It can go up to 100 mph. You're shooting spurts of energy here and there on the court, up and down and sideways."

Okuno knows tough. She was an MVP in volleyball and soccer -- as well as badminton -- at Palo Alto High School. Badminton isn't as bruising, but "I think badminton demands more of your body, especially in singles," she said.

On U.S. badminton team

The U.S. team has 20 members, six singles and four doubles players for women's play, the same for men's. Okuno has made the team the past three years.

The big push for the team and the United States Badminton Association next year is to qualify U.S. players for the 1992 Olympic Games in Barcelona, Spain, the first year badminton will be a medal sport at the games.

The Americans will try to earn their way by amassing points by competing in and sometimes winning international tournaments. If none of the women make it this time, some will compete in 1996 in Atlanta because the host nation's athletes automatically qualify.

Andy Gouw, Okuno's coach, said two Bay Area men, Benny Lee of Daly City and Chris Jogis, formerly from Palo Alto but now in Los Angeles, have a good chance for 1992. Both are world ranked, but none of the U.S. women are. Okuno may have the best chance to qualify. Gouw thinks she's the best in the country, mainly because of superior natural ability.

Got a late start

Her start in badminton was late compared with many women on the national tour who grew up playing the game, but aren't as athletic, Gouw said.

"She has been consistently getting to the semi-finals or finals of the tournaments," he said.

Okuno lost in the finals of the Nationals in Colorado Springs last year, then won a gold medal, her first major tournament win, in the Olympic Festival this July in Minneapolis.

Okuno has played in a few foreign tournaments, and she was recently assured a share of a U.S. Olympic Committee grant. "It's the first money I've had," she said.

The U.S. has suffered from a lack of training facilities and travel money. Okuno, who used to practice twice a week in San Francisco, now uses a court at Sunnyvale Recreation Center. The

only commercial court is in Los Angeles.

The sport is expensive. When she is training heavily, she will spend \$200 a month for shuttlecocks. They cost \$1.80 apiece, "and you can break one in one rally," she said. Top-of-the-line rackets cost \$80 to \$100 each.

It has been a drain," she said. "Right now we're on a very tight budget."

Support from sponsor

Okuno has a sponsor, a Los Angeles manufacturer, which furnishes her clothing and rackets and "some birds, not many."

Husband Russell Okuno, who was the coach of rival teams when Meiling Okuno was in high school, is an inventory control planner at Amdahl. "I think my husband really kept me in it. He's been so supportive of my sports," Okuno said.

Okuno's husband is one of her two coaches.

Meiling Okuno has worked as a pharmacy technician but doesn't have a job now because she is concentrating on rehabilitating the knee and getting ready for tournaments, starting with the U.S. Open this week in Los Angeles.

She thinks making it into the Olympics will be difficult because of the superior ability of foreign players. Asian and European players are almost entirely supported by their governments, she said.

Okuno is the daughter of Chinese immigrants who started out in San Francisco but moved to the Peninsula when Okuno was in junior high school. Her father, Nite Yee, ran a restaurant in East Palo Alto, Day and Nite Barbecue.

Chinese barbecue?

"No, it was soul food. It was really popular, too," she said, laughing.

Okuno played badminton in high school and college, winning a college championship one year, and she's been playing ever since she was graduated.

## Facing up to injury

Although it wasn't until about three months ago that doctors operated on Okuno's knee for slightly torn cartilage, the problem may have begun a year ago in practice when "I came into the net . . . and my foot stuck and my knee turned the other way. I didn't realize I had injured it until I played last year's national trials. I played six matches and used it really hard."

Forced to recognize the injury, she went to an orthopedist, who first tried to build muscle to support the knee. "But there was pain when I tried to work out. I couldn't run at all in training."

She said the knee is 80 to 90 percent rehabilitated. "Overall, my movement is getting back," Okuno said. "I've been on the court about a month or so." But she isn't up to the two-hour sessions, three or four days a week, which marked her previous regimen.

"I don't go 100 percent, and the knee feels a little sore before I'm through."

She also has been riding a bicycle, jumping rope, running a little and lifting weights. Okuno, who is 5-foot-3 and weighs 115, can bench press 95 pounds, squat about 265.

Gouw describes Okuno as "very dedicated and . . . very, very competitive."

Being in the Olympics would mean a lot to her, Okuno said. "It would be a payoff from all the hard work I've been doing, putting into the sport. The Olympics is the ultimate goal for any athlete and any sport."

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