'THE MIRACLE ON COTTON'

SA's title evokes memories of 19

By Jake Curtis CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Half of Sunday's "Miracle on Cotton" had its origins in Indonesia, a logical beginning for such badminton success stories. But the other half started at a YMCA in San Francisco's Tenderloin District, and it's difficult to imagine a more unlikely venue to spawn badminton stardom.

It was there — at the Golden Gate YMCA — that Howard Bach began playing badminton at age 5, two years after his family moved to San Francisco from Vietnam.

Twenty-one years later, Bach, 26, teamed with Tony Gunawan, who had moved to Southern California from Indonesia three years ago, to complete what was probably the biggest upset in badminton history, and one of the biggest upsets in all sports: The American team of Bach and Gunawan won the International Badminton Federation World Championship doubles title Sunday night before about 7,500 screaming fans at the Arrowhead Pond in Anaheim.

"It was surreal," Bach said Monday. "I still think I'm dreaming."

Most could not have dreamed of such an upset. The United States is nothing in badminton. Never had an American entry gotten past the round of 16 in the world championships or the Olympics, badminton's two premier events. The United States is pleased whenever its entrants qualify for an event

Though Gunawan had won an Olympic gold medal for badminton powerhouse Indonesia in 2000, he and Bach were ranked just 13th for the world championships, with their lofty goal simply to win a medal. Then, on successive nights, they beat teams ranked No. 8, No. 1, No. 4 and No. 2

"It's unbelievable," Gunawan said

Badminton folks are trying to relate just how unbelievable it is for an American team to win a world title.

"It's like Indonesia winning the world basketball championships," Bach said.

More often it is compared with the United States' upset of the Soviet Union en route to the 1980 Olympic ice-hockey gold medal in the so-called "Miracle on Ice" game. Because badminton is played on an indoor court covered by a cotton mat, America's badminton win might gain fame as the "Miracle on Cotton."

Like the American hockey win, the run by Bach and Gunawan was assisted greatly by the home crowd.



Howard Bach proudly displayed the flag to the fans chants of "U-S-A" after he and Tony Gunawan won the world doubles title in Anaheim.

"It was just wild that night," USA Badminton Executive Director Dan Cloppas said. "If it had been played in Jakarta (Indonesia) or Beijing, I don't think it could have happened."

The Americans seemed spent when they got behind their final-round opponents, Candra Wijay and Sigit Budiarto, in the third and deciding game. However, Bach and Gunawan gained energy from the bois-

terous crowd, which, like it did in the 1980 Olympics, chanted "U-S-A, U-S-A," willing Bach and Gunawan to a 15-11, final-game

Bach held his own playing the backcourt position behind Gunawan and played a role in getting the crowd involved by shouting, jumping around and pumping his arms. During the quarterfinals and semifinals, officials had to tell Bach to cool it a bit,

and by Monday, Bach had little voice left. "It was breathtaking," Bach said.

Seated among the riveted crowd Sunday night were about a dozen members of Bach's immediate family, including his father, Cam Sen, the instigator of Bach's badminton career.

Cam Sen Bach had dreamed of repre senting Vietnam in badminton at the Olympics before bringing his family to Sar Francisco in 1982. Two years later, he brought 5-year-old Howard to the Golder Gate YMCA to take up badminton.

The young Bach spent the next 11 years improving his badminton skills against formidable opposition at the Y, which is within a block of adult theaters, as well as the Hastings College of Law.

"I remember when I was 6 or 7, I was beaten by an 80-year-old guy," he said.

At the age of 16, following his sophomore year at Galileo High School, Bach moved to Colorado Springs to train at the U.S. Olympic site, finishing high school

He and partner Kevin Han won a round in the 2004 Olympics, reaching the round of 16. He moved to Orange (Orange County) and was partnered with Gunawan, who came to the U.S. to continue his education in computer sciences.

Though Gunawan has superstar fame in Indonesia - "It was like walking around with Shaq when I was there with him last year," Cloppas said - not all Bach's fellow employees at the Home Depot know he plays badminton (Bach works 20 hours a week as a cashier and gets paid for 40 as part of Home Depot's support of Olympic athletes).

Now, suddenly, Bach and his sport have a name in this country.

"We've gotten out of the backyard-barbecue syndrome," Bach said.

He says he's waiting for the call from Jay MARK J. TERRILL/Associated Press Leno, and he and Cloppas are using the publicity from Sunday's win to promote badminton in the United States.

> "Will anybody be calling us back in 24 hours?" Cloppas said. "I don't know. But we're going to run with this while we can."

They hope the buzz will last until the 2008 Olympics, even though Gunawan is unlikely to have his U.S. citizenship in time. Bach might need another partner for the next Olympics, but at least he should have his voice back by then.

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