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2009 College Table Tennis National Championships

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WEBSITE: <http://www.nctta.com/champs/2009/index.html>

****NEWS RELEASE****

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ROCHESTER, Minnesota-

ROCHESTER, Minn—Bone tumors since birth are no barrier for table tennis champion Tahl Leibovitz.

Crowds at the 2009 College Table Tennis National Championships in Rochester watched the 33-year-old New Yorker make amazing shots and show why he's won gold and bronze medals at the Paralympics against some of the world's best.

On his way to earning a bachelor's degree with a double major in sociology and philosophy at Queens College in June, Leibovitz on Friday added more honors to his resume: he won the singles competition over two other disabled opponents from Texas Wesleyan University. Later, he and a partner defeated a strong doubles team from Lindenwood University in St. Charles, Mo.

Leibovitz has played the game for 17 years. He expects to keep playing the Olympic sport of wicked spins and slams when he attends graduate school in a few months – most likely Columbia University in New York. Getting a Ph.D is something he's thinking about.

Asked to explain his passion for ping pong, Leibovitz summed it up quickly before watching a doubles match a few feet away in the spacious sports facility on the Rochester campus.

"It's good way to keep me in shape," he said during a break in his day at the NCTTA tourney wrapping up Sunday. "It's like playing chess and running at the same time."

With a solid table tennis rating that some say approaches 2,300, he's hard to beat - he won the gold at the Paralympics in Atlanta and is making plans for strong performances in other tournaments on the world stage. "To go out and compete is what it's all about."

Leibovitz is a repeat winner at Minnesota. He won the 2008 NCTTA Paralympic singles for disabled players.

The two others entered in the Paralympic competition at the Nationals also play with the heart of a champion.

Second-place finisher Pam Fontaine, 44, a graduate student in education and kinesiology instructor at Texas Wesleyan, moves quite a bit in her wheelchair as she plays table tennis. She got hurt in an auto accident in 1981. Her best sports are basketball and table tennis. She retired from the Paralympics after performing on teams as a basketball player from 1986 to 1996. Ping pong is now her top sport- she joined the Texas Wesleyan team about two years ago. In the fall she plans to compete in the Pan

American Games then qualify for the Worlds in table tennis in 2010. Competing in the Paralympics in London in 2012 would be a dream come true for the Texan.

“I’m very competitive and I like learning new things. This (table tennis) is a different challenge for me outside basketball,” Fontaine said during an interview at the Nationals. “I like being part of a successful program,” she said of Texas Wesleyan, the NCTTA champs for five consecutive years. She’s trying to balance a career as an educator with family life. The single mother is raising two children. Sometimes table tennis must take a back seat. Her quest to succeed in the sport is getting noticed by others, especially others with disabilities. “It’s great if it motivates somebody else.”

Her 40-year-old Texas Wesleyan teammate James Segrest of Fort Worth also has a compelling story to tell. Injuries sustained in a car accident nine years ago left him in a wheelchair. A Texas A&M alumnus, he began working on a master’s in education and soon one of the Texas Wesleyan coaches approached him about joining the team. He’s been sticking with it for 18 months and improving his game. Segrest plans to try out for the Pan American Games in Venezuela.

Segrest’s game is nothing fancy. He plants the wheelchair in one spot near the middle of the table, sits still and defends.

“I like the comradery and the physical rehabilitation that this game provides,” Segrest says. “It gets me out of the house.”

That’s for sure. He’s traveled to national tournaments in places like Las Vegas and now Minnesota. He first played the game as a kid and his love for the game never subsided.

Today, Segrest says the game is more popular than ever.

Like Leibovitz, she’s not let a handicap or disability get in her way.