

US Women Run the Table at Vegas Grand Prix

Contributed by Bill Ward
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The US Women's Sabre team came into the Las Vegas Grand Prix as the #1 ranked team, but with little room between them and #2 ranked France in this important Olympic seeding event. The US fared well beating out China in the round of 4 and then France in the finals to cement the #1 seed going into Beijing.

Bill Ward was on hand in Las Vegas to provide some commentary.

"The last Grand Prix team competition of the season sets up some last minute jockeying for the table of 8 in Beijing. The US comes in ranked #1, with 3 straight Grand Prix wins in Orleans, Lamezia-Terre and Algeria, and a disappointing 3rd in Tianjin earlier this month at the hands of the Russian squad.

The day starts very well for the USA, with convincing wins over Spain in the 16 and a scrappy Polish squad in the 8. The Chinese outpoint the always dangerous Ukrainian team in the 8 to set up a semifinal bout with the Americans.

Becca Ward leads off against Ying Ying Bao. The two met in the 8 in Tianjin, with Bao taking the bout 15-14 on an ugly point that had the replay refs arguing at length. She falls to Ward 3-5 and the US has an early lead. Mariel Zagunis steps up against Chinese anchor Tan Xue, who immediately begins chipping away at the deficit. She snaps a solid parry-riposte to tie it at 6, then bolts to a 9-7 lead. Mariel fights back to 9-all before letting the last point go to Tan. Sada Jacobson matches up next against the #3 Chinese fencer Haiyang Huang. Sada picks up the pace with a series of unrelenting attacks that has Huang befuddled. Sada tosses in a parry and a exquisitely timed stop cut to put the US back on top 14-11. Huang gathers herself and launches two deep attacks while Sada looks for the defensive score. It's 14-13 USA. After two looks at the attack tempo, Sada has seen enough. She shows attack, pulls distance and takes the solid parry and riposte for a 15-13 lead.

Mariel meets Bao in round 4. Mariel makes it 17-13 with a pair of aggressive offense actions before Bao begins to pick up Mariel's approach tempo. Bao closes to 16-18, then 18-all as Mariel turns defensive and begins to use an upward flick of the blade to fish for parries that aren't there. At 19-18 for Bao, the Chinese fencer finds an attack in prep on the advancing American, and the US trails for the second time, 18-20.

Becca confronts Huang with the task of staunching the points hemorrhage. She ties it 20-all and then 21-all. At 22-21 USA, Becca pulls off a fast attack into Huang's hesitation, and then on the next touch, deftly swivels her hip and executes a classic saber "butt parry" against the closing Huang. It's 24-21. Huang rallies for two. It's 24-23 US and Becca retreats to the end of the strip, dances out of range, and then methodically hunts Huang down the full length of the strip before closing with a looping full lunge attack. The US regains the lead 25-23.

Sada and Tan tangle next. Sada uses her blade instead of her feet to set up two close-outs and a solid parry-riposte for a 28-23 lead on the Chinese anchor. They trade points until the round is over 30-25 USA. At this point Huang is -5 in two bouts, and Chinese Coach Christian Bauer gives her the hook, substituting Hong Ni for the next round against Mariel. Ni has one of the oddest point celebrations in women's saber. She puts both fists together in front of her visor, elbows locked together, and emits a full bodied scream that has virtually no volume. It sounds eerily like a tea kettle with a wet sponge over the whistle hole. She's a fan favorite for the Chinese men's saber team though, who all shout encouragement and imitate her signature move every time she scores.

And score she does. It's a good call by Bauer. Ni closes the gap to 31-33 as Mariel looks unsuccessfully for more defensive parries. Mariel takes a cut on the off-hand and trainer John Carollo comes in to staunch a real hemorrhage. It takes Mariel a moment to recover and by then Ni has knotted the score 33-all. But when Mariel regathers her focus, it's a thing of beauty. She flicks an impeccably timed stop cut, then out dances Ni in a back and forth bouncing contest to steal the time and the point. 35-33 USA.

Bao and Sada enter for round 8. They trade points, then, at 36-34, Bao thinks she's has caught the attacking American with a minute graze of the blades for a parry. The ref says no. Bao challenges. The replay official says no. They trade points again, 39-35. Next comes a rarity in these days of tight timing and close tolerances for preparation: 3 successive simultaneous attacks. Once again, the veteran American has seen all she needs of Bao's timing. Sada feints the attack off the line, steps back, and puts the US on top 40-35.

Anchors Ward and Tan hook up for round 9. Tan brought the Chinese team back from way behind against Russia in Tianjin for a thrilling home crowd win three weeks ago. Could she repeat the feat on the American turf?

Tan scores first with a hard attack. Becca closes her out for a one lighter in defense. 41-36. Tan attacks again, but Becca has the distance, and leaps backwards to plant a mid-air skyhook on the outstretched wrist of Tan. 42-36. Tan fights back for a quick touch, but on the next point retreats the length of the strip before counterattacking fruitlessly into Becca's strong finish. It's match point.

The American pushes hard, and makes a long slashing attack that falls just short. Tan is still going backwards, so Becca flicks an immediate remise and takes the victory 45-37. For the bout, Becca is +9, Sada is +9 and Mariel is -10. The USA is on to the gold medal bout.

The Finals

Russian loses a lead to the French in the other semi-final bout, so they come up first against the Chinese squad for the bronze medal match. Just as in their meeting in Tianjin, Russia dominates early, but doesn't pull away. Trailing by as much as 12, Bao chips away at the Russian advantage in round 8 and at least gets it to 33-40 for closer Tan Xue against the Russian anchor Elena Netchaeva. Tan took Netcheva to the cleaners late in the bout in Tianjin, closing in at match point to tie and then win the bout. For the Russians in Vegas, it was a partial Santayana moment: they hadn't forgotten their history, but they were doomed to repeat it.

Tan rips off 7 straight points to tie the score at 40. The hapless Netchaeva removes her mask and stares into the TV lights, despair suffusing her eyes. Tan takes the lead, and closes in on match point. Netchaeva now looks like she wishes some in the crowd would call in a bomb threat and clear the venue. Unfortunately for Russia, all the would-be Unabombers are busy elsewhere, and Tan marches relentlessly to secure the win. Head bowed, Netchaeva leaves the strip and hardly breaks stride while gathering up her bag. Still fully suited up, she heads off through the Tropicana casino towards her room and a chance to recover in private. It's a painful moment for the 2007 World Champion.

The gold medal bout between France and the USA has a moment of levity as the French ladies present themselves for the team cheer strip side all decked out in outrageous Vegas sunglasses. It will be the last happy moment for the French this evening.

Sada leads off with a 5-2 win over Anne-lise Touya. Becca follows with a 5-4 victory over Carole Vergne, Mariel tacks on 2 more against Leonore Perrus and the match is looking good for the USA. Sada drops one to Vergne, but Mariel fences strongly to add three against Touya. Becca outduels Perrus 5-4 and the US leads 30-21. Vergne pushes Mariel in round 7 and takes back three points, but Sada rebounds in round 8 to give the American squad a 7 point lead going into the final contest between Touya and Ward. Becca finishes strongly to hand Touya a 5-2 loss, and the USA dispatches the #2 ranked French squad 45-35. For the bout, Becca is +5, Sada is +3 and Mariel is +2.

It's an excellent finish to the Grand Prix season and cements the US squad in the #1 seed heading into Beijing."