



Bird in Hand

THANKS TO AN INSPIRED ENTREPRENEUR, THE BEST BADMINTON IN THE COUNTRY IS BEING PLAYED IN OUR OWN BACKYARD **BY ROBERT ITO**

ON SUNDAY AFTERNOONS, the Orange County Badminton Club feels more like a large family reunion than an athletic facility. The Thai restaurant adjoining the club is closed for the day, so mothers lay out a potluck lunch of Indonesian noodles and pork fried rice on a small, collapsible table. Young couples fill the courts, shuffling and lunging at the feathery white shuttlecocks as their kids run around in the bleachers.

But when four teenagers start playing a game of doubles, you can immediately tell they're not your typical weekend athletes—and this is not your typical backyard game of badminton. The first thing you notice is the pure speed, the shuttlecock a blur as it whizzes back and forth just inches above the net. When one player leaps in the air to hit an overhand smash, the sound is like the crack of a baseball bat. The return sends the bird hurtling toward the lights; then another player caresses a drop shot that sinks a foot in front of a charging opponent.

Eric Go, Raymond Wong, Jonathan Taryoto, and Mesinee "May" Mangkalakiri aren't just four of the best players in the Orange County Badminton Club, they're four of the best young badminton players in the country. Although few locals know it, Southern California is the mecca for com-

petitive badminton in the United States, and this is the temple. Most of the country's best athletes eventually come to train at the club, migrating from places like Portland, Colorado Springs, and Brooklyn. The pull is nearly impossible to resist—besides being the primary home for the U.S. na-

gym with an international coaching staff, a place where aspiring Olympians could come to live and train.

When Chew first moved to this country in 1972, the former competitive badminton player had more serious concerns

than hitting shuttlecocks. Broke, with a wife and three young kids, he found work at a hamburger restaurant in Monrovia. Three years later, he got a job at a print shop, where he was eventually promoted to supervisor. In 1984, Chew became a naturalized citizen and started his own offset printing company, K&D Graphics.

The company was a huge success, and Chew's thoughts returned to badminton. The sport had turned his life around when he was a boy. "I was a bad kid, hanging out late, no discipline," says Chew, who looks more like a bank president than a lifelong athlete. "But then I played badminton, and I had new friends, good friends."

In 1994, he left the day-to-day operations of the company to his wife and three children and started talking about opening up a badminton

club on what was then a vacant lot in an industrial area of the city of Orange. His mission was equal parts pragmatic and patriotic. He and his family would finally have their own place to play; they would no longer have to cajole unsympathetic local



BADMINTON, ANYONE?
Shuttlecocks fly off the racket at 200 mph

ditional and junior national teams, the club also happens to be the finest badminton facility in the Western Hemisphere.

The man behind the venture is Don Chew, a 60-year-old Thai-born immigrant who spent \$3 million of his own money to build the club. He envisioned a world-class

high school coaches into letting them practice on their basketball and volleyball courts. More important, the club would be a thank-you gift to America. "People don't understand why I'm doing this, but I love this USA," says Chew. "I started with nothing, and now I'm in charge of 32 people, half of them with college degrees." He pauses, then leans forward. "I don't have a college degree."

Like many successful immigrants, Chew wanted to re-create what he treasured from his past. But he wasn't the first to promote

badminton in the area. "Southern California is way ahead of the rest of the U.S. in terms of competitive badminton," says Barbara Kissick, USA Badminton's director of program development. Over the years, clubs in places like El Monte and Manhattan Beach had already spawned their own pockets of badminton excellence. With so few places to play in California, these clubs attracted and nurtured top badminton talent. For example, Mark Keppel High in Alhambra—California Interscholastic Federation champions eight out of

ten years in the '90s—owed its success to its proximity to the San Gabriel Valley Badminton facility.

Of course, the main reason for Southern California's badminton dominance has been its large Asian American population. Many U.S.-born players were introduced to the game by family members who grew up playing it in China, Indonesia, Thailand, or Vietnam. Others—like Chinese-born Kevin Han, a two-time Olympian and the number one player in the States—honed their skills in countries where badminton is respected, and funded, as a legitimate sport. Attend a regional tournament and you'll be hard-pressed to spot a non-Asian face on the courts—or in the stands.

"I have a lot of Caucasians playing on my team this year," says one local coach. "A lot of Caucasians" is a relative term; the team has three white players on its 42-member roster. Other schools in Orange County field all-Asian squads, and some team shirts feature anime-esque characters and faux Chinese lettering. "Most Caucasians think it's a girl's sport," says the coach.

IN PLENTY OF PLACES OUTSIDE THE United States, Chew's dream wouldn't have sounded crazy. After soccer, badminton is the most frequently played sport in the world. When it became a full-medal Olympic event in 1992, 1.1 billion viewers tuned in. One hundred forty countries belong to the International Badminton Federation, the sport's governing body, and in some Asian countries tournaments regularly draw crowds of up to 15,000 spectators.

Badminton even enjoyed a certain degree of popularity in the States before tennis stole most of its thunder. During the 1930s, celebrity enthusiasts like James Cagney, Bette Davis, and Douglas Fairbanks helped popularize the game. In 1949, David Freeman of Pasadena became the first U.S. player to win a world championship, and in 1955, Joe Alston became the first—and only—badminton player to make the cover of *Sports Illustrated*. For the next two decades, Americans were world contenders, winning 23 international titles.

In the years that followed, badminton here fell on hard times. College programs and teams across the country evaporated, replaced by intramural clubs. Locally, Proposition 13 decimated most high school programs. Today, badminton is little more than a joke sport to most Americans, a picnic game akin to potato-sack races or lawn darts.

But all of this meant nothing to Chew. His

OUTRIGGER'S ISLAND OF OAHU



Discover The Heart Of Excitement On Waikiki Beach.

Located at the center of world-famous Waikiki Beach, Outrigger Waikiki offers deluxe accommodations with the relaxation of a beach resort. For more exclusive amenities, we offer the benefits of our Voyagers ClubSM featuring a private lounge, concierge services and more. Enjoy world-class shopping at the Galleria Shops, learn how to surf or have a drink at the legendary Duke's Canoe Club as you absorb the dining, nightlife and ambience of exciting Waikiki. **From \$230* per night.**

For reservations, call any travel agent or 1-800-OUTRIGGER (688-7444).

For timely information and special offers for readers, visit outrigger.com/losangelesmagazine

*Valid through 12/18/01 and based on single or double occupancy. Subject to availability and change without notice. Restrictions may apply.



OAHU • MAUI • KAUAI • HAWAII
AUSTRALIA • GUAM • TAHITI • FIJI • MARSHALL ISLANDS

mind raced with visions of 18 Olympic-size courts and a ventilation system that wouldn't interfere with the true flight of the whisper-light shuttlecocks. He toured clubs in Thailand and Canada for inspiration and ideas and brought in the best wood from Denmark for the gymnasium floors.

Chew finally opened the doors of the Orange County Badminton Club in 1996. The stark, nearly windowless structure would look like any industrial warehouse if it weren't for its bright pink exterior and the huge banner on the side of the building advertising his daughter's Thai restaurant inside. Booth windows in Bebe's Cafe offer perfect views of the action on the courts (probably the only place in Southern California where you can watch Olympic-caliber athletes train for the price of

cal high school that would absorb the teenage members of the junior national team, but there were obstacles from the start. The most immediate problem was that the nearest school, Villa Park, hadn't fielded a team in nearly two decades. Its school district didn't even have a badminton league, and its gym was already booked solid with basketball and volleyball practices. No team, no coach, no league, no place to play—Villa Park was an elite athlete's version of Siberia.

So in 1999, Chew made Villa Park an of-

fer. He would sponsor a team with annual donations of \$5,000 and allow it to practice, train, and hold all home games at his center, free of charge. "The only reason we have a team is because of the generosity of the Chews," says Sherri Smith, Villa Park's then head coach.

But the team's good fortune didn't sit well with some of the other area teams. Coaches from Loara and Garden Grove grumbled that the Villa Park squad would ruin tournament play. "They said some crazy stuff in the news-



SPORTS FAN: Don Chew spent \$3 million to build a world-class badminton club

pad thai). In the back of the building is Chew's printing company, 13 of whose employees are family members. On the second floor are dorm rooms for eight junior national team members.

Impressed by the world-class facilities, in 1998 USA Badminton officials selected the Orange County club to be the Western Regional National Training Center. When USA Badminton closed its center in Colorado Springs this year, Chew's site became headquarters for the U.S. national and junior national teams. The coaching staff includes a silver medalist in the 1992 Olympics and a former head coach of the Thailand national squad. Players spend five to six hours a day doing three-on-one drills (three players blast the shuttle at a lone teammate), wind sprints, and weight training—all in preparation for international events like the Pan Am Games and the Olympics. Today, about 80 percent of the country's top players are based here.

The migration of talent to Orange County should have been an instant boon for the lo-

LIZ LANGE
MATERNITY

346 NORTH BEVERLY DRIVE
BEVERLY HILLS, CA 90210
310 273-0099
958 MADISON AVE
NEW YORK, NY 10021
212 879 2191
CALL OR LOG ON FOR A FREE CATALOG:
1 888 616 5777 WWW.LIZLANGE.COM

Southern California is the mecca for competitive badminton in the United States. Eighty percent of the country's top players are based here.

papers, that it was unfair and all that," says Villa Park coach Don Van. Jonathan Taryoto recalls hearing an opponent complaining to him in the middle of a match: "He was talking to me *during the game*, talking to me about OCBC." Like the rest of his junior national teammates who play for Villa Park, Taryoto doesn't believe his school has been given an unfair advantage. "I mean, it's not like we aren't in high school, too," he says. "We just all happen to go to the *same* high school."

One can't help but feel sorry for the other schools. Villa Park dominated a recent competition in Cypress, sweeping the opposition in straight sets. It is also the overwhelming favorite to win the season-ending CIF Southern Section tournament in late May, a three-week championship series featuring 32 California high schools. With six members of the junior national team—Go, Taryoto, Wong, and Mangkalakiri, as well as Mike Chansawangpuvana and Connie Hwang—on the squad, Villa Park could theoretically fill its entire tournament schedule of singles, doubles, and mixed doubles matches with nationally ranked athletes.

TOURNAMENT PLAY ASIDE, THE real battle for many players and coaches is simply changing people's attitudes about the sport. As its supporters are quick to point out, badminton isn't for wimps. Shuttlecocks explode off the racket at more than 200 miles per hour. Players can run as much as a mile in a typical match. "People in the U.S. go out to a park and put the net way up like they're playing volleyball, and rally like it's just this silly little

picnic game," says Coach Smith. "When I get the kids on the court and show them how it's really played, they're wringing wet, just exhausted."

Unfortunately, perceptions probably won't change on a national level until a U.S. athlete medals in the Olympics. If and when that day comes, the winner will most likely be an OCBC member. It might be Han, a former Chinese-restaurant busboy and this country's best hope in the 2004 Games. It could be a Villa Park alum in 2008, or any one of the other elite players who currently train at Chew's gym.

Looking ahead to the 2012 Games, it might even be Chew's seven-year-old grandson, Phillip, who made the cover of *World Badminton Magazine* and won the under-eight national championship at the age of five. Phillip could hit the shuttlecock over the net when he was only a year old. He's been praised by coaches and international players for his court sense and arsenal of shots. But Chew worries that he may lose his grandson to the lure of more glamorous, lucrative sports. "He loves the Lakers, loves Kobe," says Chew. "I think he loves basketball more than badminton now."

LA

Everybody's FantaSea!




Corporate Events Wedding Packages Bar & Bat Mitzvahs
 Holiday Celebrations Meetings & Seminars Monte Carlo Nights
and all other special occasions

Affordable Luxury!

Our fleet accommodates parties from 10-1,000





FANTASEA YACHTS & YACHT CLUB • (310)-827-2220
 4215 Admiralty Way Marina del Rey, CA www.fantaseayachts.com
 Marina del Rey • and all of Southern California *Our majestic yacht club*