
Interview With Elie

Posted by Cho12495 - 2006/04/23 20:35

Meet Elmira (aka Elie!) Zainabudinova! Read more for the full interview!

Tom

Where are you from?

Elmira:

Almaty, Kazakhstan (next to Russia and China!)

Tom Not that many people know about the country of Kazakhstan, what's it like over there and how does the sport of table tennis fit into the culture? Is table tennis popular there?

Elmira: I would say that Kazakhstan is a very beautiful country with many traditions. Its right in the middle of Europe and Asia, so it absorbed both cultures, mostly Asian though I guess. Kazakhstan has very strong athletes in some sports, like wrestling. They are really good.

Table tennis is very popular. We have many kids playing table tennis. But I guess it's very hard to get to the professional level. When I was there playing there was some support, however there were times when the TT Federation just did not have the money to send the team to the world championships.

Tom There aren't many celebrities or well known people from your country (besides you!), however, one celebrity (although fake) is Ali G. Are there any other well known people from your country?

Elmira: It's actually funny about Ali G. I always hear about him. As soon as I say I am from Kazakhstan, many people think it's an imaginary country. So, I always have to convince people that we don't shoot the dogs on the streets and we don't ride camels in the city and etc..

Tom So are there any other well known people from your country?

Elmira: I would think Vladimir Smirnov, an Olympic skier.

Tom Ok. So Ali G versus Vladimir, games to 11 points, 2 out of 3 games. Who would win?

Elmira: I think Vladimir :) I would beat Ali G only for those things he says about Kazakhstan. It's like I wouldn't even have a choice :) I know it sounds pretty funny for Americans. But many of my friends from Kazakhstan feel the same way I do. It is not very funny for us :(

Tom Boo Ali G ;) So how did you end up in the United States?

Elmira: Because of my sister! She came first and then 5 years later invited me, so, I said ok and came over here in 2000. I played in the NATT San Diego event in 2001 :)

Tom So what made you decide to stay so far?

Elmira: I was going to school to improve English and I like that I can be independent here. I can afford living by myself, which would be extremely hard for me to do in Kazakhstan.

Tom So what do you do in the US now? Are you working somewhere or?

Elmira: I go to college (I was taking English and real estate classes. I just passed the salesperson exam Haha) and I am a part time manager and waitress at a French restaurant on Melrose.

Tom Wow, can you speak French at all?

Elmira: I can't yet, but I am taking a French class in February. It has been my dream for ages to learn French. I actually feel obligated to speak French :) Many people think I am from there or from South America. Anything, but never Russian :)

Tom With that busy schedule, how do you fit table tennis in there?

Elmira: If I can, I try to practice 3-4 times a week on my nights off. Sometimes it gets hard.

Tom So tell us your story, how did you get started into table tennis?

Elmira: When I was 8, my family decided that it's time for me to do something else besides school. So my sister brought me to Rhythmic Gymnastics :) But they said that I was already 8 and it was too late :(

Tom Well I guess the sport of table tennis is glad they told you that answer!

Elmira: Haha! In the Soviet Union, the training was all for free. However they needed the results very badly. That's why they wouldn't take you if you were too old. So, my sister had a friend in table tennis that was playing quite successfully. She brought me to the table tennis center and the coach said that I have to be back on Monday at 10 am sharp. Wow, I still even remember the exact time!

That lady became my coach, and she was pretty much the only coach I,Ãve ever had.

Tom What are your proudest achievements?

Elmira: Kazakhstan Champion in teams, single, doubles, and mixed doubles. Champion of Women's Islamic Games in Tehran. Also, representing Kazakhstan in the World,Ãs & Asian Championships.

Tom Wow so many titles!

Elmira: Not really ;)

Tom So, growing up playing in Kazakhstan, what differences do you see between table tennis in the U.S. and Kazakhstan?

Elmira: Well, people in Kazakhstan knows the sport as Table Tennis:) And not as ,Ãping pong,Ã, which dominates here. Over there it's only very few cities where you can find a table tennis club. If the coaches thought you had talent, they would try to relocate you to the table tennis training center, which is Almaty. It was luckily for me that it was my hometown! Since they bring all the top players to one city, the training is very concentrated. Not like the US, where top players train all over the place.

Tom Table Tennis seems to be ready to take off in the US. What do you think attributes to the success? Or what do you think could really help lift this sport off the ground?

Elmira: I think that parents should see it as an Olympic sport rather than a recreational game. In that case, they would love their children to participate in this sport. Also, there should be more exposure of table tennis on TV. That's why I like the idea of Killerspin broadcasts!Then, the general public would see it on TV and think that "Oh, wow! I never knew it can be this good!" Also more younger players getting involved would really help. It's just hard here I guess, because there are not enough coaches here (for such a big country like the US)

Tom Speaking of TV, You were on the TV program "BEST DAMN SPORTS SHOW, PERIOD". What was that like?

Elmira: That was a lot of fun! It was here in L.A. and I enjoyed it a lot! I think it was my second experience like that in U.S. The whole experience was very fun. I was just a bit ashamed because I didn,Ãt really know those famous guys on the show :) I believe it was a football and a baseball player. Two sports I totally don't even know the rules for.

Tom Haha, it's ok, they probably don't know the rules of table tennis!

Elmira: It was pretty cold in the studio though with the skirt and all. :)

Tom Were they surprised with two lovely ladies, who could probably whoop their butts blindfolded?

Elmira: I think they expected it, although they probably couldn,Ãt say from the way we looked :)

John Sally was asking us where we were from. I think he was surprised we both were foreigners! It's funny because just a few weeks ago one of the producers from the show came to the restaurant and we started talking. He remembered 2 girls playing!

Tom Wow, what a small world!

Elmira: Right! Especially in Hollywood! Everything revolves around here. Plus I really loved that BiBa came down to LA for the show. So she could get the chance to really see LA for the first time.

Tom Are you guys really good friends?

Elmira: We get along very well :)

Tom Let's talk about your game a little more. How would you describe your style? What are your strengths?

Elmira: My style is an offensive game. I always try to attack (sometimes I wish I wouldn't), but that's how I was taught. I would have to say that my forehand Loop and backhand smash are my strengths.

Tom Is there anything you are trying to work on?

Elmira: Foot work! Always so important! And I also try to work on the backhand loop. There are days when it seems easy, other times it's hard. I guess it depends on how new my rubbers are and how good I glued :)

One of the things I really love to do is to play forehand counter loops. I like the "men's" style of the game. I like how they play with loops and counter loops. Rather than women mostly pushing and smashing. Push, Smash, Scream ;)

Tom I agree haha ;) So what other activities do you enjoy besides table tennis?

Elmira: I like yoga, rollerblading, fitness and the gym. I would love biking, but I don't have one :(

Tom So looks like you enjoy being active!

Elmira: I really do, as long as the computer does not get in my way:)

Tom So does all those fun activities you do help your table tennis game?

Elmira: It does a lot! The fitness training helps me to stay in shape. Weight training gives me power for my forehand loop :) "powerful forehand loop" that's how my brother-in-law calls me :) He heard somebody say that one time, and he totally doesn't know what it means :)

Tom Haha. I've seen some of those loops, they are dangerous!

Elmira: They can be sometimes :) Also, Yoga plays a big part in my flexibility and concentration.

Tom So, with all your table tennis experience, what advice would you give to an aspiring player?

Elmira: I think to have a coach in the beginning is crucial (mandatory)! It is very important to get the right technique, because it's very hard to correct in the future. You have to practice a lot in the beginning. Practice drills and multi-ball. I know many people who come to the club and don't like to practice, and just play games only. If you practice a lot, you can significantly improve your game.

Try to watch TOP players playing and learn from their game. And always try to find a practice partner who is a better player.

Tom Table Tennis Fanatics always love to know what kind of equipment you use. Can you give us the inside scoop?

Elmira: I use to play with Donic Persson Power Play blade, Sriver and Sriver G2 FX. However, right now I am testing out Killerspin equipment. I am testing out the Forza 4Z and Nitrx 5Z rubbers on a Stilo Z blade.

Tom So is there anything you would like to add to the interview? Maybe something I didn't cover?

Elmira: I am so glad I am back to table tennis! I had a bit of a break, but Killerspin literally brought me back.

Tom How did they bring you back into table tennis?

Elmira: I was practicing here and there, but I wasn't motivated enough. But now I am a part of the team and I am practicing much more than before. And I started playing tournament again. That's how you know me :) I knew about NATT for years since I played in San Diego in 2001. I was 314 in the ITTF ranking at that time.

Also, one of my passions is that I love learning different languages.

Tom Well then, I will make sure you learn some Vietnamese the next time we meet haha!

Elmira: My first table tennis paddle and ball were Vietnamese! It was Red and Green rubbers and a Red stamped ball. For tournaments, we used Vietnamese balls. They were very bad though, but much better than what the Soviet Union had to offer!

Tom Wow, now I know something interesting about Vietnamese table tennis! Thanks again Elmira for a fun interview. I'll see you at the Western Open in Berkeley, CA soon!

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