

SoCal Classic Tournament Report 2014

Doug Koch 6/24/14

The following are my recollections of the 2nd annual SoCal Classic held June 20-23, 2014 in Oceanside, CA at Melba Bishop Park (never letting the absolute truth get in the way of a good story). There were about 200 players from most of the western states as well as Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Tennessee, and Florida including many of the top players in the country with 5 events (Age & Skill Doubles, Mixed Age & Skill Doubles, and Skill Singles) squeezed into 4 days. Melba has 8 permanent courts with lights but most of the events were completed during the sunlight of the longest days of the year. The weather was great all weekend with highs in the upper 70s, the sun broke through the marine layer early, and the winds were light to moderate. Having the ocean & beach nearby and getting a chance to play both doubles and singles is a big plus. The tournament is very well run with a relaxed SoCal feel. Refs for every match – most of them very experienced. Easy to see where everyone is playing and watch multiple matches simultaneously. It is my favorite tournament of the year!

Northern California participants included Mitch & Debbie Fitzhugh, Matthew Blom, and me from the Grass Valley Pickleball Club, Gayle Barnes from Johnson Ranch, Mark Attwood of Heritage Park, Lydia Brambila, a recent UC-

Davis grad living in Sacramento, Jeff McFall & Kim Crow from the Fresno area, and Jerry Louis from Santa Cruz.



Wednesday:

Took an early flight to San Diego, rented a car, and drove straight to Melba for some practice games with my 50+ Men's Doubles partner Jeff Tanaka. Jeff is a local player with a table tennis background and has great putaway and scrambling ability. Also present were Dan Roditi, Micah Groom, & Ron Chang from Orange County and Brian "The Beard" Ashworth from Billings, Montana.



We played about 3 hours of Men's doubles and then took a lunch break. Second Wave of players started arriving including Surprise, AZ players Steve Wong (owner of Onix Sports) & Gigi Lemaster, Cookie Drake from Cold Lake, Alberta, as well as Erne Perry (who the *Erne Shot* is named after) from Seattle and local players Alex Hamner (the current women's Singles & Doubles national champion) and Prem "The Pickleball Guru" Carnot who was a member of the Grass Valley Pickleball Club along with his wife Wendy Garrido a couple of years back, Chad Williams from St. George, UT and Jaime Knoph from Colorado. Played a bunch of games to about 8pm before heading to the Macaroni Grill for some pre-tournament carb loading.

Thursday:

Chad, Jaime, and I went to Casa Brambila to play on the Brambila's family backyard court. It is a very nice court with lots of space to run down shots. Lydia Brambila and her brother Adrian from Iowa both came to their parents (Leticia & Tony's) home to play in the tournament together. Leticia & Lydia played the Women's Open & Women's 19+. Tony & Adrian played the Men's Open & Men's 19+. Tony & Leticia played the Mixed Open & Mixed 50+. Adrian & Lydia played the Mixed 4.5 Skill & Mixed 19+.



We played for about 3 hours and then went to lunch at a bar in Oceanside Harbor that is famous for having the World's best Bloody Mary and an acrobatic parrot.



Went back to Melba after lunch for the second PB session of the day. I got to play a few practice games with my Mixed 50+ partner Mona Burnett from Surprise, AZ. Mona is one of the top woman in the country. We played 2 games against Dan Gabanek who is a former National Men's Open Doubles champion from Seattle and Kyle Yates who is a 19 year old tennis hotshot that plays with best players at The Villages in Florida. About 50 players (including Debbie & Mitch, Matthew, Jeff McFall, and me) went to Hello Betty's Fish House in Oceanside to enjoy rooftop drinks & food and views of the beach, ocean, pier, & sunset.



Friday:

1st day of the tournament featured Men's Age and Women's Skill events. Mitch & Mark Attwood of Heritage Park played Jeff McFall & Russell Dickey in the 1st round of the Men's 50+. Jeff & Russell had a slight lead throughout the 1st game but Mark made some amazing gets running onto the next court to return angled volleys and crashing into the fence to return a lob that landed on the baseline to save multiple game points and Mitch & Mark won the 1st game 14-12. Jeff & Russell took the 2nd game but Mitch & Mark won the 3rd game and the match 11-6. Jeff & Russell lost their 1st loser's bracket match in an 18-16 nailbiter. Mitch & Mark played Jeff Tanaka & I next and Jeff & I managed to prevail in two straight games. We then defeated the local team of 6'5" Randy Zbinden and lefty Tim Frazee 11-4, 11-7 to advance to the winner's bracket final to play Ron Chang & Jeff Stafford (lots of Jeff's). We started slow and lost the 1st game 11-9, took the 2nd game 11-6, and then dropped the 3rd game 11-3 to send us to the Bronze medal match. Randy & Tim got through the loser's bracket to earn a rematch. We got up 10-2 in the first game, they narrowed it 10-6, we decided to wait 1 more point before taking our timeout. We got the sideout and then took the 1st game 11-6. We got rolling in game 2 and won 11-1 to get a rematch with Ron & Jeff Stafford in the Gold medal match. We started slow in the Gold medal match and got down 7-0 before running off 9 straight to

take a 9-7 lead and took the 1st game 11-8. Second game was tight throughout but we squeaked it out 12-10 to force a 15 point game for the championship. We saved our best game of the day for last and got out to an 11-0 lead before taking the Gold 15-3. My 1st Gold Men's Doubles Medal!



Matthew Blom played in the 19+ Men's with Steve Wong. The 19+ Men's was by far the hardest of the Men's Age divisions with many of the top players in the country. Matthew/Steve cruised thru their 1st match 11-5, 11-4 before winning a tight 3 game match against Wes Gabrielsen of Oregon & Justin Rodgers of Arizona to advance to the winners bracket final against Chris Miller a former National Open singles champ from Seattle and *The Beard*. Matthew/Steve took the 1st game 11-9 but Chris & Brian took the next 2 games to advance to the Gold medal match. Next Matthew/Steve had a real tight match with Tim "The Puppet Master" Nelson & Mike Gates but the *Puppet Master* and Mike squeaked it out 12-10, 11-9 so Matthew and Steve got the Bronze.



Chris/Brian beat Tim/Mike 3-11, 12-10, 10-12, 15-13 in an epic final to take Gold.

Debbie Fitzhugh played the 4.0 Women's doubles with Abby Grubbs from Indiana. The Grubbs family sells the Pickleball Rocks! shirts that can be seen on pickleball courts all over the country and she and her husband Josh had a vendor display setup at the tournament. Abby is a former college basketball point guard who gets everything back and Debbie did a great job putting the ball away. The 4.0 women's used a round robin format and Debbie/Abby cruised to win their 1st match 21-6 on their way to Bronze medals!



Leticia & Lydia Brambila played in a very strong Women's Open bracket. They beat 3 5.0/5.0 teams and even took a game off of Marsha Koch (pronounced "Kuck" no relation) from Toledo, OH and Jessica LeMire from Michigan who were 3rd in Open Women's doubles at Nationals last year. Lydia got most of the balls hit to her but she was a dinking machine and backboard and Leticia hit winner after winner when it was her chance to play and they finished 4th. Mona Burnett & Gigi LeMaster beat Marsha & Jess in 3 games in the winners bracket semis but Marsha & Jess returned the favor in the Bronze match. In the Gold medal match, Marsha & Jess beat the 3-time National Open Womens Doubles champions and local Oceansiders Jen Lucore & Alex Hamner 11-2, 13-11 to force a 15 point tiebreaker but Jen & Alex prevailed 15-6 to win Gold.



I was a referee for 6 matches on Friday afternoon. Met Chad, Jaime, & Tom Tueller from St. George, Utah for some shrimp in a bucket on the water in Oceanside on Friday night.

Saturday:

Saturday was Men's Skill and Women's Age.

Debbie Fitzhugh and Kim Crow got a forfeit in their 1st round Women's 19+ match and then had to play Marsha Koch & Jessica LeMire. Debbie & Kim played very well, dictating play on many rallies, running Jess and her fluorescent orange shoes onto the next court with angled dinks and volleys. After dozens of great rallies, Marsha/Jess won 11-6, 11-5. Debbie/Kim beat Abby Gubbs & Rhonda Smith 15-7 in their 1st loser's bracket match. In their next match, Debbie/Kim got knocked out by Che Cui from Seattle and co-tournament director Treena Negrete (the SoCal Classic photobomb leader) 15-6. Lydia & Leticia Brambila had another great day in the Women's 19+. They beat Che/Treena 11-7 in the 3rd game of the Bronze medal match and played two more good matches with Marsha & Jess to get Silver Medals and the ***Best Dressed*** award for their matching black & purple outfits.



Mark Atwood played with Doug Nichols of Santa Monica in the Men's 3.5 Doubles. Mark & Doug won their 1st round match. In the 2nd round they lost to a local father/son team Mark & Colin Brisebois 11-4, 11-3. Mark & Doug won their next 2 loser's bracket matches 15-12 & 15-7 to advance to the Bronze medal match. They beat Dale Allen & Phil Vartanian 11-6, 11-6 to earn a rematch with the Brisebois. Mark & Doug were really gelling and it was

much closer the 2nd time around but the Brisebois won 12-10, 11-8 so Mark & Doug took Silver medals.



Mitch & Jeff McFall played in the Men's 4.0 Doubles. They won their 1st match 11-3, 11-3 but dropped their 2nd match in a heartbreaker 12-10, 4-11, 12-10 to Michael Nimtz & Pete Axelrod. Mitch/Jeff recovered quickly to win their 1st loser's bracket game 15-2 and then edged Jerry

Louis & Paul Hoggatt of Arizona 15-12 to get a rematch with Michael & Pete in the Bronze medal match. Mitch/Jeff got to the net and had their wall going well and won nearly every reflex volley exchange in route to a 11-5. 11-4 victory. In the Gold medal match, Mitch/Jeff played Derek Gebo, a tall lefty with a lot of wingspan and Craig Hass who is very steady and has nice touch. Mitch/Jeff won the 1st two games 11-4, 11-9 and then completed the double dip by winning the 15 point tiebreaker 15-9. That makes 2 Gold Medals in a month for Mitch/Jeff (they also won the Sonoma 50+ Men's Gold). Rising Stars Alert!



I played with Tommy Wong(Steve's brother) who recently moved from Arizona to Irvine, CA in the Open Men's. Our

1st match was against Tim Nelson & Mike Gates. We got behind 8-3 but rallied to tie at 8-8 before The Puppet Master & Mike pulled away to win 11-8, 11-2. Our next match was against Jeff Tanaka/Tony Negrete. Our drops were a little too high and they attacked well and beat us 15-6. Matthew & Tom Tueller won their 1st round Open match against Dan Gabanek/Kyle Yates in 3 games. In the 2nd round, Matthew/Tom beat the Seattle team of Wally Tran & Vonnie Major, also in 3 games. In the 3rd round, Matthew/Tom lost to Tim Nelson/Mike Gates 11-9, 11-8. Matthew/Tom won their next two losers brackets matches against Dan Gabanek/Kyle Yates and Glen Griffin/Steve Wong before losing the Bronze medal match to Tim Nelson/Mike Gates.



I was a ref for about 10 matches on Saturday afternoon. Saturday night there was a large group that headed over to Casa Brambila for a fun evening with great Mexican food (with Tony's homemade "Gringo Hot" salsa), pickleball on

the backyard court, table tennis, & fusbol. Byron Freso scared us by bringing his own table tennis paddle with an inch of foam (he played on the Guyana national team a few years back).



I've already arranged a training schedule with Wes Gabrielsen for doubles table tennis and with Glenn Griffin for fusbol so we can get revenge from the home team Brambila's next year.



Sun.:

Sunday was Mixed Skill level day.

Mitch/Debbie played in the 4.0 Mixed doubles.

Mitch/Debbie won their 1st match over Doreene

Morgan/Derek Gebo 11-6, 11-8. They got off to a slow start in their 2nd round match and dropped the 1st game 11-4 before storming back to win the next 2 games 11-1, 11-0.

Mitch/Debbie then lost to Jeff McFall/Kim Crow 11-1, 11-6. Mitch/Debbie won 2 loser's brackets games 15-5 & 15-7 to get to the Bronze match. In the Bronze, Mitch/Debbie beat Diana Abruscato & Craig Hass 11-9 in the 3rd to set up a rematch with Jeff/Kim in the Gold medal match.

Mitch/Debbie played well but Jeff/Kim prevailed 11-7, 11-6.



Gayle Barnes & I played in the Open Mixed. Our 1st match was against SoCal players Adina Jones/Bubba Zbinden. Gayle & I got up 6-0 and eventually won 11-1. In game 2, Gayle was about to put away a forehand volley when I reached with my backhand and popped up a volley lob that surprised both Adina & Bubba and landed on the baseline. Gayle & I turned our backs and started to walk back to

serving position when Adina rocketed back to the fence and drilled the ball back under Bubba's armpit, one of the most amazing gets I have ever seen. Gayle turned just in time and hit a good drop shot that Bubba netted. Adina/Bubba won the next two games and the match 11-4, 11-4. In our 2nd match, we played Abby & Josh Grubbs. Josh played 90% of the court and we didn't deal well with it and got down 9-1. We rallied back to 9-7 but then Abby had 2 Erne shots from her sideline/kitchenline position and the Grubbs won. Matthew Blom & Alex Hamner won their 1st match over Treena Negrete & Dan Gabanek 11-4, 11-5. In their next match, Matthew & Alex then beat Gigi LeMaster and Chis Miller 11-7 in the 3rd game. Next up was Steve Wong & Heidi Hancock. Matthew/Alex won the 1st game 11-3 but Steve/Heidi came back to win the next 2 games 11-4, 11-5 to take the match. In their 1st losers bracket game, Matthew/Alex lost to Cathy Parkhurst/Kyle Yates 15-12 to finish 5th in a very tough bracket. I was the ref for the winners bracket final that Wes Gabrielsen/Christine Barksdale beat Steve Wong/Heidi Hancock 11-6, 11-3 with Wes & Christine playing nearly error free. Steve/Heidi edged Tim Nelson & Jen Lucore in Bronze medal match 13-11, 7-11, 11-5 to get a rematch with Wes & Christine in the Gold Medal match. Steve & Heidi started strong and won 11-9, 11-8 to force the 15 point tiebreaker. Wes was doing his paddle switching "Wes Dance" to perfection and Christine & Wes won the gold 15-7.



Props to *The Puppet Master* for his Dr. Seuss outfit.



In the 4.5 Mixed, Adrian & Lydia Brambila won their 1st match against Val Goins & Sally Dobson of Las Vegas 11-5 in the 3rd game. They won their next match against Jane Porphir & Bill Greenwalt 11-1 in the 3rd game. Adrian & Lydia lost their next match to Byron & Marsha Fresno 14-12 in the 3rd game. Adrian & Lydia had a nice run in the losers bracket winning 2 matches 15-3 & 15-7 to get a rematch with the Fresno's in the Bronze medal match. In another nailbiter, the Fresno's won 11-8 in the 3rd game so Adrian & Lydia got Bronze medals.



Monday

Mixed Age:

In the 35+ Mixed, Matthew Blom & Alex Hamner cruised thru their 1st round match 11-1, 11-1. In the 2nd round they edged local player Kim Bennett & Eric Gertler of Utah 12-10 in the 1st game before winning the 2nd game 11-1. Next up was the Pacific Northwest team of Joy Leising and Don “Gumby” Paschal who won in 3 close games.

Matthew/Alex had a great run in the losers bracket going from hot to full boil. They defeated local Leslie Anderson & Wally Tran from Seattle 15-8, Justin Rodgers from Arizona & Nicole Hobson from Nashville 15-7, Scott Stone from Arizona & Cookie Drake from Alberta 15-4, and Kim & Eric for the 2nd time 15-1 to earn a rematch with Joy & Don in the Bronze medal match. It was completely different the 2nd time around with Matthew/Alex winning 11-0, 11-3. In the Gold medal match, Matthew/Alex played local Mike Gates and Stephanie Lane from Nashville. They won the 1st 2 games 11-3, 11-7 to force the 15 point tiebreaker and then completed the ***Double Dip*** 15-7.

Matthew & Alex have perhaps the best male & female volleys in the game. They used poaching signals when returning serve most of the time with devastating results. Unbelievably, it was Matthew’s first Pickleball gold medal ever, a testament to him always seeking the best competition: starting in 5.0, only playing in the toughest

tournaments, and seeking out the most competitive brackets within the tournament.



In the 19+ Mixed, Adrian & Lydia Brambila lost their 1st round match to eventual champions Heidi Hancock & Tim Nelson but then pulled off a major upset beating Jen Lucore & Darin Hurdman 16-14 before losing to Kyle Yates & Cathy Parkhurst.

Mitch & Debbie Fitzhugh played local Romy Obrique and MJ Shin of Illinois in the 1st round of the 50+ Mixed. They started strong winning the 1st game 11-3. In 2nd game playing downwind, the Fitzhugh's legendary strength caused 6 of their returns to go long and Romy & MJ won 11-7. In game 3, Mitch & Debbie got off to a good start upwind and continued strong after the switch to win 11-4. Next up was Dan Gabanek & Che Cui of Seattle. The Fitzhugh's spent the 1st game getting used to Dan great reach and Che's unorthodox table tennis inspired game and lost 11-3. The 2nd game was tight throughout but Dan & Che won 11-8. Mitch & Debbie played the local 5.0/5.0 team of Tim Frazee & Patricia Nissan next. Mitch & Debbie had a lot of great rallies but dropped a close one 15-12. I also played in the 50+ Mixed with Mona Burnett of Arizona. Mona is very steady and accurate and goes after high balls with a vengeance. She is also a good tactician and could quickly analyze our opponents and come up with a winning gameplan. We won our match against the Las Vegas team of Val Goins(who I have played in the Huntsman singles finals the last 2 years) and Sally Dobson

11-4, 11-3. In the 2nd match, we played Tony & Leticia Brambila. We won most of the dink rallies early and built a 10-5 lead. The Brambila's called a timeout, abandoned the dink, and switched to banger mode. I popped up several balls that nearly got Mona killed and they cut the lead to 10-9. Luckily, they played most of the balls in the next 2 rallies to Mona and we won them to get the sideout and won a serve to take the 1st game 11-9. I started keeping my balls lower and we won the 2nd game and the match. We played Che & Dan in the winner's bracket final. Che was in full backboard mode and the rallies were long. Dan had some nice putaways but we were able to hit behind him enough to keep him honest and we won 11-6, 11-7. Tim Frazee & Patricia Nissan beat Che & Dan in the Bronze medal match. In the Gold medal match, Mona & I got up 9-5 but Patricia hit several sharp angle winners to even it at 9-9. 3 sideouts later we won the 1st game 11-9. We took the next game and the Gold 11-4.



Singles Skill:

Monday afternoon had Men's & Women's Single Skill events for those that wanted to play their 5th event in 4 days.

Matthew Blom won his 1st round in the Men's 5.0 singles against Don Pasqual 15-9. In the 2nd round, Matthew lost 15-13 to local 27 year old tennis star Justin Shomaker. Matthew played *The Beard* next. Matthew led 13-9 but started to feel dizzy and light headed. At 13-13, Matthew retired. After getting out of the sun, and eating some food he recovered pretty fast.

In my 1st round 5.0 match, I played the defending champion Chris Miller. After playing doubles 4 days straight, I served the 1st point and Chris returned the ball down on the centerline and I called "I go!" before hitting it. Our ref laughed at me. I played reasonably well but even my deepest and hardest serves and returns did not seem to phase Chris much and he beat me 15-2. In my 2nd match I played Ron Chang. Ron beat me in the Nationals 50+ singles last year before losing to Ian Dickson of Johnson Ranch in the finals. I started strong downwind and got up 8-2 at the turn. Upwind was a little harder with longer rallies and more sideouts but I was able to hit enough passing shots a force a couple of errors to win 15-7. Next I played Bubba Zbinden a 27 year old from SoCal that beat me in the Open Singles at Nationals 2 years ago. I started strong downwind and led 8-1 at the turn. Bubba closed it to 8-5 upwind but I finally got the 9th point and took the match 15-8. Next up for me was *The Beard*. At 2-2, I hit a sharp angled backhand volley that Brian dove and rolled and nearly took out the ref and the net on the next court. It was

sometimes painful to watch Brian, Chris Miller, and Dan Roditi go after balls in singles. They are all big guys that usually dive multiple times a game, bounce and skid and leave alot of skin and blood on the court. We had some great rallies and Brian took the turn 8-6. Upwind I could get sideouts but had trouble scoring and Brian won 15-6. Brian ran me and I got to most of the balls but seemed a half step late, hitting the net tape or hitting out by a few inches.

Wes Gabrielsen beat Dan Roditi 15-12 in the Bronze medal match but 19 year old Florida tennis star Kyle Yates beat Wes 15-9 to take Gold.



Gayle Barnes of Johnson Ranch played in the 4.5 Women's singles. In the 1st round, Gayle played Jane Porphir, a local lefty with good wheels and good groundstrokes. Gayle did a good job keeping her serves and returns deep and had some great gets to win 15-11. In the winner's bracket final, Gayle lost to Julie Haney (a 5.0 doubles player and soon to be 5.0 singles player). In the Bronze medal match, Gayle played Isma Boyle. Isma is a Johnson Ranch alumnus who moved to San Diego and is now living in Saudi Arabia. Isma won the Bronze match and then double dipped Julie in the finals to take the Gold.



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The 5.0 Women's Singles medalists were the same as at Nationals last year in a slightly different order. Jen Lucore won Gold, Stephanie Lane Silver, and Alex Hamner Bronze.



Final NorCal Medal Count:

7 Gold 4 Silver 5 Bronze

The medals also function as bottle openers!



Sunburned and sore,
Doug