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BACK FROM THE DEEP END

STORY MIKAEL ANDERSSON | PHOTO MIKAEL ANDERSSON, BUTTERFLY

By now, you might as well tell it to the wind; Michael Maze is back. If everything goes according to the plan, the international comeback will happen in the DHS Europe cup in Lausanne early February.

Desire and Determination are clearly two of the most valuable qualities for top athletes. There are times when you have to dig deeper though – fight through it – survive the pain in order to reach the top.

Any day of the week the light can also be switched off – injuries happen – careers can end, just like that. This is the story about one year of pain, considerable doubt and how important it is to have the drive to eventually come back again.

I was lucky enough to meet up with Michael Maze a few months ago in Copenhagen. It was a sunny godsend day in late November – turbulent times for Danish Table Tennis just a few days following the firing of the one and only national coach working with Michael Maze

since he was fourteen years old; Peter Sartz. We sat down to talk about the past the present and the future. Much of the discussion came to be about the year 2013, best summoned from a Michael Maze perspective with a four letter word spelled: H – E – L – L. As a relative outsider, I had no clue about the severity of Michaels injuries and the two major hip operations he went through late in 2012 and early 2013.

LET'S START WITH THE PAST. There was a time when I travelled the E6 highway south from my home; the city of Halmstad in Sweden, down to the Brøndby training center just outside Copenhagen almost on a daily basis. On a good day I spent 2 hours, 20 minute door to door. In 1988 I started to work as the national coach in Denmark 1988 a position that I held through stormy weathers for seven long years. The reference used to describe that period of my life is something along the lines of "Seven years as the General and front soldier in Denmark". In retro perspective, the players, my supporting cast of Danish coaches and myself – a young career coach from Sweden battled hard during those years, clearly moved some pieces around and as such, set up Danish Table Tennis for the success that would come not long after my departure.

The first time I met Michael Maze for real was late in 1993. In our (Danish Table Tennis) plans for greatness we had perhaps the most ambitious junior and youth program running in European Table Tennis at the time. We worked daily with coaches' education, scouting of talents and long term planning. To win gold for Denmark was our goal and to do that we had to make changes. Youth thinking was dominating, and when the news came about a left-handed twelve year old talent from the club KVIK Naestved pushing for attention, it was the

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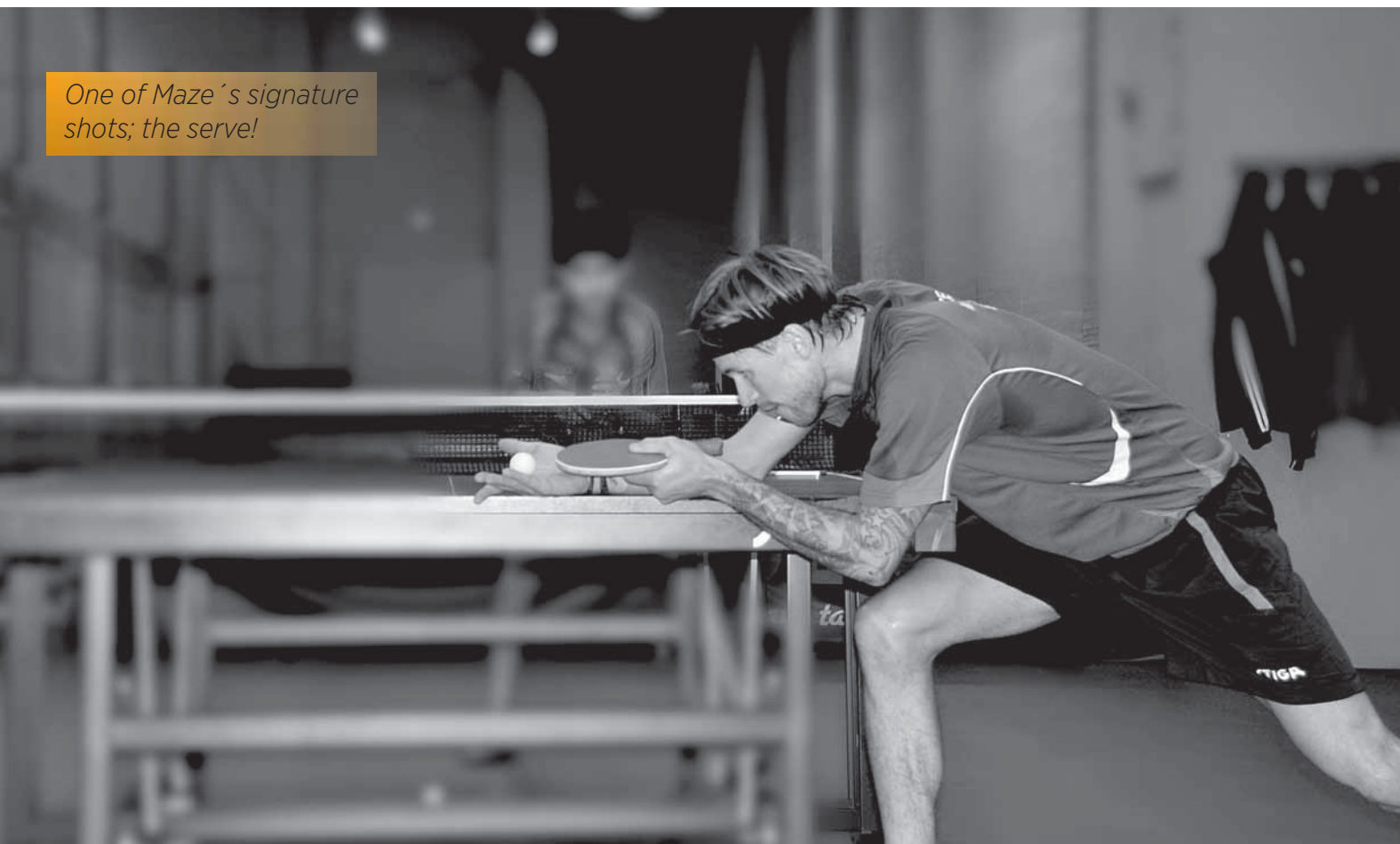
perfect timing for all parties. The only drawback I can remember was that the young kid had a temper more vicious than most. It did happen quite often in the beginning that valuable equipment flew through the venue and that the surrounds took a beating when things once in a while went south.

But when officials called for suspension, we believed in coaching and teaching, and the simple fact that to successfully coach this youngster, you also had to be on your toes. Knowing what to say and what to do. The will to win – the fire and those eyes made sure to keep you engaged. Many of us knew right away that this guy could be the real deal for Danish Table Tennis, and not only that a potential star that the sport of Table Tennis so badly needed.

TYPICAL CHECKPOINTS LIKE national success, promising appearances internationally gave us no other indication. Michael Maze was the real thing, but at the same time, an athlete calling for daily attention, something that my successor – the clever Swede Peter Sartz quickly understood as one of the key points for future success. The rest is pretty much known history. Fans of Table Tennis have over the last twelve to fourteen years seen the Danish lefthander rise, tumble and fall – just to rise again at numerous occasions, one day delivering pure brilliance, just to follow up the next week with head-scratching let downs. Much of the inconsistency

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One of Maze's signature shots; the serve!



can be explained by the injuries – severe problems with both knees – the hip area and lower back. In the last four years Michael Maze has played only twenty-four international matches counting for the world ranking, dropping twenty places on the list – currently parking as nr 28 in the world.

BUT HERE WE MEET AGAIN; late in 2013, almost to the day twenty years since our paths crossed for the first time, to share one day of Table Ten-

nis, the sport that has stayed with us over the years. Michael had committed training time with the vastly talented thirteen year old American Kanak JHA staying in Sweden at the time and he also promised to show me around in his secret haven, training setup in Amager, just south of Copenhagen where he the last four months had set up his private camp with access to his own venue and his physical conditioning coach Thomas Macon working his trade nearby.

TO UNDERSTAND THE ESSENCE OF this story we have to turn back time to London 2012 and the Olympic Games. With most of the quality preparation needed for such an event, destroyed by returning injury problems, Michael still opted to play in London. Taking advantage of a rather favourable draw and an aggressive – fearless style of play he recorded two easy victories against Kalinkos Kreanga and Jun Mizu-

tani to advance to the quarterfinal where best friend Dimitrij Ovtcharov was waiting.

“The whole summer preparation prior to the London Games was clearly a mess. My body just couldn't take any workload what so ever. I tried to play one tough session and then had to rest two days at least before even trying again Michael Maze explained. “In London, sure I was playing, giving it all I had, but my body was almost in shutdown mode by now. I was living on painkillers from morning to evening and I still remember staying in bed the whole day before playing Dima in the quarters. Basically I was asking the Danish doctors on duty just to give me some injection or so – but I guess they were afraid to experiment too much...”

In the following months, after the Olympics, Michael Maze played the LIEBHERR World Cup in Liverpool and also the European Championships in Herning, Denmark losing in the opening round much to the disappointment of the Danish spectators and the national media.

We are now talking December 2012 and the point of no return had arrived; More treatment or surgery. This time the chief doctor in Denmark, Søren Wenge, gave the clear, but for a top athlete, also an ugly ultimatum: Surgery on both hips or you can stop playing and get in line for a hip replacement.

“When the doctors went into the hip area to take a look they were almost shocked. I had loose bone pieces floating around and very little proper function left Michael said. From what they have told me much of my previous injury problems could easily be connected with the hip problems that showed. Overall I am extremely grateful for the work that Søren and his crew did for me.”

IF WE CUT the medical explanations and terms down to one grueling sentence, it would be correct to say that “the bone-saw came out just to open up enough space for the joints and the different parts to



I think the most difficult thing was to be totally helpless really. In the beginning I could not even go to the washroom, or take a shower without someone assisting.

start moving again”. Both hips were operated eight weeks apart and a very detailed rehab plan was put in place for the Danish super star.

All in all; the stakes were now higher than ever. It was all about hanging on to almost a way of life, to stay alive as top athlete – nothing more – nothing less. Twenty four hours routines in terms of walking, resting, sleeping and rehabilitation had to be put in place. Training was not even on the map for the first half of 2013.

Tough call for a guy that always liked the heat of the moment and the adrenaline that comes with.

“I think the most difficult thing was to be totally helpless really. In the beginning I could not even go to the washroom, or take a shower without someone assisting. Also at night, when sleeping I was instructed to keep my leg elevated and moving with the help of a special machine. The whole set up was made to support the mobility in the leg and hip Michael recalled.”

The doctors orders were also strict when it came to walking and the rest time needed.

“What do you do? The doctors told me that I was allowed to walk around 200 meters or so on a specific day and that's the way it was – strict orders and tough, tough from all aspects. It's interesting how your brain actually reacts on the situation and shuts down your own sport, blocks it out kind of thing. You become afraid of even dreaming Table Tennis– I guess because it would be all devastating if you end up not



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making it back. My only thought was that I didn't want my career to end like this... That was one of my sources of strength – a simple thought.”

MOBILITY SLOWLY RETURNED and following a painful recovery the Danish summer of 2013 came with all its beauty.

“By that time I had gained more or less normal mobility in the hip area. My orders were not to return to normal training – but I was back working with my physical conditioning coach on a daily basis just to gain some strength back. In fact I was more or less totally blanked physically having lost all my muscle strength. It was a tough wait – we had to stay patient and really concentrate on the small steps said Michael.”

THE TURNING POINT WOULD eventually come on one good day in August.

“Thomas – my physical condition coach recorded all data during the whole recovery. It all felt fine and we were despite the doctors cautioning us not to rush ahead of schedule. So one day – let's try to go for a jog. I still remember it as a turning point – five hundred meters one way – short rest and five hundred meters back. Then I was thinking maybe this was the light at the end of the tunnel, somehow it felt like that Michael Maze explained.”

Table Tennis came into the picture shortly after that – light work outs

– selected sparring partners – most of the practice happening in the Hollænderhallen, where Michael has his own set up and full access to a four table training venue. Perfect location – away from the sprawling city and with the physical condition studio of Thomas Macon just a stone throw away. The routines were set – the plan hammered out. Short but concentrated table tennis sessions followed by a supervised daily physical work out.

“So far this model is working fine. I am inviting players out here for training and they seem to like it as well. Just a few weeks ago I had Alexander SHIBAEV working out with me prior to the Russian Open. He liked it a lot and now wants to come again, especially since he went all the way to the final in that event. Funny how it works some-time.”

THE TWO PLAYERS JOINING ME this day, Kanak JHA and Michael Maze, are separated by time; 20 years, but also glued together in terms of determination and desire. We are talking almost instant connection between the two players. You can see it in their eyes – the will to become something more than just the average athlete.

Kanak JHA – the American super talent stands up well in the exercises and Mr. Maze, the mentor for the day, is generously complementing his much younger partner: “Very good – excellent change of rhythm and adjustments in the block”. Two hours of Table Tennis is gone and next stop is the physical conditioning studio owned and operated for a selected group of Danish Top Athletes by Thomas Macon – a sought after physical conditioning guru in Denmark.

Both players are guided through the physical work out. Again the young American manages to hold fort.

“I have to say that it is not every day

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Instant connection between two special athletes, Michael Maze and Kanak JHA.





The young american super talent is holding fort with the danish number one.

you meet a thirteen year old that can do the things this guy can do. Impressive stuff, said the two Danes.

FOR MICHAEL MAZE it is another work out in his quest to regain and improve on lost strength. Each moment of the gruelling two hour session is recorded in order to measure the progress.

"You don't want to be too optimistic. But I have to say that it feels good right now Michael concluded. I can do most of things and train properly for the moment. My goal is to start playing com-

petitive matches in January – February and to compete in the DHS Europe Cup in Lausanne 8-9 February."

THOMAS MACON IS ALSO causally optimistic about the future for his client.

"Everything is here he says pointing to the laptop. You never know with severe injuries like this one – but I can only say that it is looking good for the moment. Much better than I originally thought would be possible with the timelines involved."

When we are all said and done I

Invite Michael for dinner – just to finish of a good day in style. Let's go down to Dragør he says. They have some pretty good places open.

Following a short five minutes' drive we all end up in a quiet nice restaurant by the sea. This time of the year not many people come here – but the place is beautiful and very much in a typical Danish way – just fantastic. During dinner we continue to explore the sport that over the years has played such large role in our lives, the discussion now touching more on the future. We

talked about the situation in Denmark and the fact that head coach Peter Sartz after nineteen long years the other day had his walking papers served with the words: You are no longer part of the future of Danish Table Tennis.

"It's of course a very classless treatment of the only national coach I ever had, Michael said. Is it not strange that not one of the officials working for Danish Table Tennis bothered to ask for my opinion or input? But it all started some time back with the firing of assistant coach Hu Wei Xin whom I

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ITTF Senior Consultant Mikael Andersson joined by conditioning coach Thomas Macon and the two tt-stars Kanak Jha and Michael Maze.

“It’s of course a very classless treatment of the only national coach I ever had.

still work with on an individual basis. As it stands now I have to focus on my own stuff and do the best of the situation. Too bad for Danish Table Tennis if we would end up losing the training center in Brondy which can easily happen now. I can tell you that it doesn’t look great for Danish Table Tennis right in this moment.

A BEAUTIFUL DAY SLOWLY gives away for the night-time and we have to start preparing for the drive north, back to Halmstad. It is nice and rewarding to see that Michael Maze is back, relaxed and determined to return to international action.

“Of course I need to take it step by step and for the moment I can tell you that I am no position to set any long term goals for my table tennis. I don’t want to even think about Olympic Games or big events – then you will only end up disappointed if you somehow have to shut down again. The thing that drives me

now is that I over the years have been able to show that I can play and perform on a very high level during those years when my body said yes: Go for it. I had such a period in 2003-2006 and again when I won the European singles championships in Stuttgart 2009. But to break it down to a simple sentence; I just want it to be fun again, said Michael.”

AND LET US HOPE. Here we have an athlete swimming for a long time in the deep end of the pool unable to put his feet down – not knowing what could have hit him from below. Career gone – the life as you know it about to change – you are no longer the sport star that you always been.

Much could have gone wrong – no doubt. So I guess Michael Maze deserves to put his feet down, take a breather, and why not push off for new adventures? In the end, that is what drive and determination will do; keep pushing, even when the sky suddenly comes falling. ■

MICHAEL
MAZE

edgeball MEDIA.

Butterfly

